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## An ethic of care in two community focused schools in Wales

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### ABSTRACT

The relational dimension of schooling has been identified as an important aspect of educational professionals' everyday practices, yet little is known about how mainstream schools go about the day-to-day act of fostering positive and trusting relationships with children and parents. This paper draws on data generated from a case study involving two schools in Wales which sought to understand how schools foster positive relationships with parents and children. Interviews and focus groups with staff, parents and pupils at two community focused schools in Wales revealed that an ethic of care was crucial to the formation of quality trusting relationships between staff, parents and pupils. It will be argued that the caring relationships which school staff grafted with parents and pupils through day-to-day acts were inextricably bound with their wider social contexts and location in areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage. In this sense, these schools' wider social contexts informed how they interpreted and enacted policy agendas around both academic performance and community schooling. It is therefore suggested that the fostering of a relational dimension of schooling is crucial to the development of a community focused schools' agenda in Wales.

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Ethic of care; community focused schools; relationships

## Introduction

The relational dimension of schooling has been identified as an important aspect of educational professionals' everyday practices with children (Connolly and Smith 2019; 2003; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017; Wyness and Lang 2016). Relationships characterised by an ethic of care between professionals and young people in social care (Holland 2010) and alternative educational settings (Hobbs and Power 2013; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017) have an important positive role in young people's lives. However, scant attention has been paid to how educational professionals go about the day-to-day work of fostering quality relationships with children and parents in mainstream schools in Wales, and even less so on the precise characteristics of such relationships. This omission is striking given that quality relationships between teachers and children have a beneficial impact on children's wellbeing and academic outcomes in

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school (Holt et al. 2023; Te Riele 2006; Wyness and Lang 2016). Moreover, since parent–teacher relationships can play a crucial role in parental school involvement and engagement with children’s learning, which in turn positively impacts on children’s academic progression (Goodall 2018), attention to the features of parent–school relationships is important. It is therefore important to recognise the significance of the affective and relational dimension of schooling in children’s experiences and outcomes in education (Wyness and Lang 2016). Exploring how schools foster relationships with parents, families and children is crucial in developing our understanding of how schools can support children’s learning and educational engagement.

The focus of this paper is the relationships between school professionals and parents and pupils in two community focused schools in Wales. Our focus on the relational dimension of schooling stems from the findings of a project which sought to identify the characteristics of effective family and community engagement. This paper comes at a time when education policy in Wales has placed renewed emphasis on the role of families and communities in children’s education (Welsh Government 2022b). In Wales, the Welsh Government has expressed its commitment to developing community focused schools, where emphasis is placed on the connections and networks between schools, families and local communities (Welsh Government 2022b). In recognition that children’s academic outcomes are dependent not only on what happens inside schools but also beyond the school gates, community focused schools have been regarded as an important means of reducing the impact of poverty on educational outcomes thus narrowing educational inequalities (Welsh Government 2022b). In 2022, this commitment was manifest in the Welsh Government’s pledge to provide substantial financial investment to expand the number of Family Engagement Officers<sup>1</sup> in schools in Wales to help tackle the effects of inequality and poverty on school engagement and educational outcomes (Welsh Government 2022b). Whilst Community Schools have a long history in England and Wales (C. Taylor 2001), the renewed commitment to expanding community focused schools in Wales signals more of an emphasis on the connections between schools, families, agencies, organisations and the wider community. This includes the sharing of schools’ facilities to support family and community engagement in activities and services (Welsh Government 2022a).

In focusing on two schools in South Wales identified as pertinent examples of ‘good’ community focused schools, we wanted to identify the features of staff–parent and staff–pupil relationships in order to understand what made these schools ‘good’ in this respect. In examining this, we found that the relational dimension of schooling was paramount to the everyday work, ethos and culture of the schools. This article offers original insights regarding the precise mechanisms through which schools develop and foster relationships with children and parents which has yet to be defined in research and policy.

### **Theoretical framework: an ethic of care and person-centred learning**

In this paper, we draw on insights provided by both social work research and research on alternative education which have highlighted the importance of an ethic of care in everyday educational and social work practice (Barnes 2012; Holland 2010; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017; Vogt 2002). The concept of an ethic of care was first investigated by Gilligan (1977) as an embodied practice that focuses on the complex

issues of individuals' needs and differences when considering issues of justice and care for and towards others (L. Taylor 2020). Conceptually, an ethic of care is a useful way of framing the fundamental values and actions of professionals working with children, families and communities located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, and has been used to highlight the importance of care to everyday education and social work practice (Holland 2010; Te Riele 2006). Holland (2010) argues that caring relationships, characterised by partiality, fairness, reliability and everyday acts (of care, concern and interest) have positive implications for young people's lives, particularly in terms of their wellbeing. Tronto (1994) similarly claims that care is multifaceted and is typically characterised by responsibility, responsiveness, attentiveness, competence and integrity. Such insights resonate with research on alternative education,<sup>2</sup> where the relational (and therapeutic) dimensions of schooling are prominent (Hart 2013; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017; Thomson and Pennacchia 2016). Research in these contexts has illuminated the importance of quality relationships between pupils and staff, characterised by an ethic of care, for young people's engagement with schooling and learning (P. Smith 2019; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017). In identifying the features of caring relationships, Hart (2013) has argued that relationships between staff and pupils characterised by kindness and fairness were important in supporting pupils' resilience within Pupil Referral Units.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Te Riele (2006) has argued that the formation of quality relationships between staff and young people rest on key characteristics including staff being supportive, helpful and understanding, and young people having a sense of 'equality', respect and reciprocity between themselves and staff. It is argued that these characteristics improve young people's engagement with school and foster positive learning experiences amongst them (Noddings 2003; Te Riele 2006).

Notwithstanding these important insights, provided largely through social work research and research on alternative education, a deep examination of the characteristics of caring relationships in mainstream schools is distinctly lacking. Given the Welsh Government's commitment to expanding community focused schools where relationships with parents, families and communities is a major concern, attention to the relational dimension of schooling is important. Beginning this exploration will help us to understand what makes a 'good' community focused school, to inform the development of this policy agenda and good practice in schools more generally. This paper addresses that lacunae by illuminating the features that enable relationships to develop between staff and parents and staff and children. Crucially, it highlights the significance of schools' local contexts in their approach to fostering such relationships.

Fielding's (2006) concept of a 'person-centred learning community' is also instructive in guiding our examination of the day-to-day practices which took place in these schools. For Fielding (2006), a 'person-centred learning community' is one in which functional relationships exist for the sake of the personal; for example, the pursuit of children's academic progression, test scores and performance targets is justifiable only in the extent that pursuing such ends enable the person to 'flourish' (Fielding 2006). Relationships are therefore central to a 'person-centred learning community'. It is through a commitment to fostering and harnessing relationships (between staff and parents and staff and children) through flattened hierarchies, acts of care in teaching and pedagogic practices, student-led approaches to learning, that the person-centred approach is enacted. As with an ethic of care, this person-centred approach emphasises the importance of

relationships between children and staff and staff and parents to ‘human flourishing’ (Fielding 2006; Wyness and Lang 2016) and to children’s engagement in learning and education more generally (Te Riele et al. 2017). In our analysis, we use both concepts of a ‘person-centred learning community’ (Fielding 2006) and an ethic of care (Barnes 2012) as a framework for examining the relationships that we witnessed between staff and parents and staff and children in our research.

In addition, we have found A. Braun, Maguire, and Ball’s (2010, 2011) work on policy enactment invaluable for making sense of how the schools in our research enacted the community focused schools’ agenda. Borrowing A. Braun et al. (2011) contention that policy is process and is enacted, often in creative ways in schools and classrooms, we consider how these schools’ local social contexts inform their culture and ethos and their enactment of the community focused school agenda. The two schools in our research were located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage; some of the families and children that these schools worked with had experienced considerable material and social hardships. This impacted, not only on children’s engagement with schooling and their emotional and social wellbeing (Wyness and Lang 2016) but also on the ways in which parents engaged with and related to these schools. Staff at both schools produced an ‘institutional narrative’ (A. Braun et al. 2011) centred on the local families as being socio-economically disadvantaged and this was regarded as having important bearing on their interactions and engagement with children and families. As we will see, these contexts, or ‘situated necessities’ (A. Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010) informed how the schools enacted their identities as community focused schools and their approaches to engaging with children and parents.

### ***A case study of two community focused schools in Wales: Pentre primary school and Bryncoed community school***

The focus of our research was two community focused schools in Wales: one primary (Pentre Primary School<sup>4</sup>) and one secondary (Bryncoed Community School). Together, these formed our case study of community focused schooling in South Wales. Both schools were identified by the local authorities as examples of ‘good’ community focused schools, based on their inspection reports by the school inspectorate body for Wales, Estyn (Estyn 2015, 2018).<sup>5</sup> Whilst Estyn does not use the term *community focused* schools in this report, it has nevertheless helped inform the Welsh Government’s community focused schools’ agenda (Welsh Government 2022b). Estyn defines community schools in the following way:

A community school is defined as one that has the best interests of learners, families and the community at its heart. These schools reach out to engage families and work with the wider community, knowing the difference this can make to the success of all pupils in the school, particularly those who are disadvantaged by poverty. (Estyn 2020)<sup>6</sup>

The two schools at the centre of our research were identified as good examples of community focused schools based on several characteristics. These included, but were not limited to, their caring and inclusive ethos, strong relationships between staff, families and pupils, highly effective leadership and good communication and engagement with parents (Estyn 2015, 2018). Involving these schools in our project therefore

enabled us to elucidate the precise mechanisms underpinning one particular feature of community focused schooling, namely, parent, family and community engagement (Estyn 2020). In examining this, we hoped to add value to the current definition of community focused schooling by highlighting how schools forge strong caring relationships with parents and pupils in their everyday practice.

Both Pentre Primary and Bryncoed Community School are situated in communities which experience relatively high levels of socio-economic disadvantage (StatsWales 2019). The primary school is located at the top of a hill in the area of Pentre and is surrounded by a large area of local authority housing. According to the Welsh Government website 'My Local School,' 50.6% of pupils were eligible for Free School Meals,<sup>7</sup> which is well above the national average (23.8% in January 2022/23). The majority of pupils are White British, and most speak English as a first language. Bryncoed Community School is also located at the top of a hill and draws its pupils from the area of Penybont. According to the website 'My Local School' the school has higher than national average numbers of pupils eligible for Free School Meals, at 33%. Around 60% of its pupils live in one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas in Wales. It has a higher than national average number of pupils with additional learning needs (roughly 37%). Both schools are located less than 10 miles from the city centre, and geographically close to recreation locations (the town centre, parks, libraries and beaches).

In this paper, we focus on three of the four participant groups that were included in our research; staff, parents and pupils.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, we sought the views and perspectives of staff members ( $n = 14$ ) who worked in the primary and secondary school to explore the nature of their relationships with parents and children. These staff included Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers, teachers and teaching support staff such as Additional Learning Needs Coordinators (ALENCO), behavioural support, care experienced pupil<sup>9</sup> lead, and those who support pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Secondly, children were invited to take part in the research. In total, 10 children were involved in the research from the primary school and 20 from the secondary school. Finally, a small number of parents (five at the primary school, and five at the secondary school) took part in the research. All of these parents had children currently in either the primary or secondary School. Some of them had children with additional learning needs and therefore had significant involvement with their school through communication with specific members of staff, as discussed in detail below. All of the parents and pupils who took part in the research were identified by the schools.

The research was guided by the principles of 'close-to-practice' research. Close-to-practice (CtP) research can be defined as research that is useful and relevant to those who seek to improve practice (BERA 2018). Close-to-practice research is an iterative process. This allows for the development of ideas and feedback and creates opportunities for reflection on practice and interpretation/analysis of data. Within this broad framework, interviews and focus groups were used to explore with staff, pupils and parents in both schools the characteristics of quality relationships between staff, parents and children. Staff at both schools were interviewed either individually or in pairs with the researchers. In the primary school, parents were interviewed in small groups and at the secondary school, as part of a focus group. The pupils at the primary school were invited to take part in a group discussion focused on the theme

‘what is good about your school?’ and to draw pictures to help them depict their ideas if they wished. At the secondary school, pupils were invited to take part in group discussions facilitated by the research team. Pupils were invited to share their views on their community school, paying particular attention to their views on how they feel their school supports pupils socially and emotionally and to describe what they think makes a good community focused school.

All fieldwork was conducted in the schools, with individual or group interviews being conducted with staff, parents and pupils during the school day. Each interview with staff and parents took between 20 and 40 minutes and was recorded using a digital voice recorder. In all respects, the research was designed to comply with current ethical standards (BERA 2018), including informed consent, anonymity, privacy, right to withdrawal, and respect for the individual. Ethical clearance was granted from the lead university and all participants (children and adults) were asked for their consent to take part in the research. The remit of the research was verbally explained to children who were given the opportunity to verbally assent their participation in the project.

The data were analysed thematically, through V. Braun and Clarke’s (2021) iterative six step analysis process, with a view to explore the mechanisms underpinning family and parental engagement. The two main themes identified were pastoral support for children (meeting children’s social and emotional needs) and relationships with parents and families. Within each of these main themes several sub-themes were identified, including partiality, honouring promises, treating people as individuals, a sensitivity to families and children’s social contexts, and a concern with meeting their social and emotional needs. Collectively, these sub-themes revealed that the staff were foregrounding the relational dimension of schooling in which an ethic of care and person-centred approaches were crucial to their interactions with children and parents.

We acknowledge that the conclusions drawn are bounded by the limitations of case study research (Wyness and Lang 2016). We are not claiming that our findings represent all schools located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Wales, or that the practices identified were typical of community schools in the UK more widely. Nevertheless, in illuminating the ways in which these schools took a person-centred and relational approach to schooling, we hope to provide valuable insights into the way in which schools enacted one key feature of the community focused schools’ agenda, namely, the relational dimension of schooling and an ethic of care.

### ***Pastoral support: social and emotional dimensions of schooling***

Like all schools in Wales, Pentre Primary and Bryncoed Community School are subject to performance agendas (S. Ball 2004; S. J. Ball 2003) where schools are evaluated and judged, at least partly, in terms of the academic performance of their pupils. According to S. J. Ball (2003) the performances of organisations or individuals are taken as measures of productivity, outputs or displays of quality. The schools in our case study were subject to such scrutiny and it was striking that the local social contexts in which these schools were situated, characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, had significant bearing on the ways in which professionals enacted this policy agenda (A. Braun, Maguire, and Ball 2010, 2011). The school staff we spoke to routinely reflected on the



way in which their schools' local social and economic contexts had bearing on their pupils' academic outcomes:

The cycle of poverty has had a massive impact on my interest . . . [the pupils] have got to be a level 4, level 5,<sup>10</sup> but how are we going to close that gap if the better schools are always going to be getting level 5, something has got to change. Our baseline is so low as well coming in. (Deputy Head, Primary)

These schools' wider social contexts framed the enactment of performance agendas (A. Braun et al. 2011) in that the day-to-day work of the schools was often aimed at ameliorating the impact of wider social and economic disadvantage on children's academic outcomes and their social and emotional wellbeing. For these schools, addressing children's social and emotional wellbeing was important in helping them progress academically. Indeed, one of the most striking features of these schools' everyday activities was the emphasis they placed on the pastoral elements of schooling and addressing children's emotional and social needs (Wyness and Lang 2016). Pastoral education has been identified as particularly important in schools located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, where poverty bears heavily on children's educational experiences and outcomes (Connolly and Smith 2019; Wyness and Lang 2016). The primary school Deputy Head teacher's reference above to 'closing the gap' alludes to the way in which social contexts impact children's academic outcomes leading to attainment gaps between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. The Deputy Headteacher at the secondary school echoed the views of the primary staff in emphasising the social and emotional as well as academic needs of children:

Our job in pastoral care is to put the belief into it and the mainstream class teacher has to do the 'achieve'. If you believe it, you achieve it. It's well divided. Because wellbeing underpins outcomes every single time. If you haven't got a child who is regulated, emotionally resilient, they are not going to achieve their potential, so staff know that. The mainstream class teacher is to deliver the curriculum, they recognise the value of pastoral work to ensure that those children are ready for learning. (Deputy Head, Secondary)

This excerpt exemplifies the dual discourses of academic success and emotional and social wellbeing that currently characterises education policy (Department for Education 2021; Welsh Government 2010). It also hints at the 'therapeutic ethos' which has permeated education in recent years (Eccleston and Hayes 2009), captured in the Deputy Head teacher's insistence, above, that 'if you believe it, you achieve it.' In schools, the 'therapeutic turn' (Madsen 2014) has been characterised by the language and culture of psychotherapy in curriculum, pedagogy and practice. It is epitomised by programmes which emphasise the social and emotional aspects of learning (Eccleston and Hayes 2009). The motto quoted above evokes positive psychological approaches to learning which emphasise the role of positive thinking in educational achievement. Whilst such slogans may provide a source of motivation for some pupils, they do not address the wider social and structural causes of educational inequalities, which contradictorily, the schools in our research were sensitive and responsive to. In placing responsibility firmly on individuals to overcome adversities in their circumstances to achieve academic success, ironically, such slogans may undermine the very intentions of pastoral schooling by deflating pupils' sense of self-worth where academic attainment is low (Reay 2020).



Notwithstanding the problematic implications of positive psychological approaches implied by such slogans, it was clear that these schools recognised the value and importance of pastoral support in children's academic outcomes. In both schools, the discourses of academic success and emotional wellbeing were not positioned in opposition to each other, but rather, as enabling each other. There was a strong sense in which addressing pupils' social and emotional wellbeing through pastoral support was crucial to supporting their academic outcomes. Moreover, these schools appeared to foreground the emotional wellbeing of children in a context in which the schools' wider social and economic circumstances bore heavily on their engagement with schooling (Connolly and Smith 2019; Wyness and Lang 2016). Here, we gain insight into the ways in which schools' 'situated contexts' (A. Braun et al. 2011) inform how they enact policies. These schools' emphases on the social and emotional dimensions of schooling were manifest in a commitment to the affective and relational aspects of schooling, in which a person-centred approach was key to supporting children's academic progression and their social and emotional wellbeing.

### *Person-centred approaches; Meeting the child's social and emotional needs*

Having identified pastoral support as being crucial to both schools' everyday practices, we then sought to identify the features of positive relationships between staff and parents and staff and children. It became clear that these schools foregrounded the relational dimension of schooling, where caring relationships between staff and children were key to professionals' everyday work. Parents' accounts, from both schools, were laden with references to the care, support and nurturance they felt the schools offered children on a daily basis:

They're brilliant with him [child]. If he needs time out in class he's allowed to go up to Pastoral or go and see Mrs Lacey,<sup>11</sup> 5 minutes and then they'll take him back . . . whereas in Primary,<sup>12</sup> it was 'you're going home, you're going home'. (Parent 1, secondary school)

I have a looked after child,<sup>13</sup> with Primary, [I] went through a nightmare, they didn't know how to handle it, he'd [child] come with trauma to me and he then came up to [Bryncoed Community School] and they've been so supportive. . . (Parent 2, secondary school)

Parents' references to the daily acts of care towards children offered by staff is evocative of Tronto's (1994) assertion that care is multifaceted, involving attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, integrity and competence. The above quote (parent 1) exemplifies the responsiveness and flexibility that is required in prioritising the pastoral needs of the child. In a striking illustration of 'attentiveness', parents at both schools expressed a sense that they felt that the school got to know their children, recognised their individual needs and provided them with tailored emotional, social and behavioural support. This emphasis on tailored support is reminiscent of Noddings's (2003) contention that young people need to be treated as persons by teachers, in ways that recognise their uniqueness and personal needs:

They treat the adults and the children as individuals, not as a statistic. (Parent 3, secondary school)

I think here, they treat every child as their own. At [Primary school] they treated every child the same, and you can't do that. With everyone, you're not the same as me (referring to another member of the group), what you don't like I might like, vice versa, you can't make a child do everything that perhaps that group will do. (Parent 4, secondary school)

They treat every child individually and will do their best for each child (Parent 1, primary school)

Treating children as 'individuals' and offering them tailored, person-centred support, required knowledge of children's needs which required time to get to know and understand their personal and social situations. Noddings's (1984) discussion on ethical caring is instructive here. Noddings (1984) emphasised the importance of 'engrossment' where the capacity to offer care requires the care giver to be deeply attentive to a person and get to know and understand their needs. Knowledge about children's circumstances was acquired by staff through intensive one-to-one relationships between staff and children. This was often enabled by the presence of key staff with specific roles in the schools, to whom children could go for emotional, social or behavioural support. During the research, the frequency with which parents at both schools named individual staff members was striking. It revealed the person-centred approach to schooling described by Fielding (2006), where relationships between staff and children were important to the work these schools did.

Mrs Lacey – she works brilliant with Rhys. ... When Rhys was in year 7 I dealt with Miss Rodger a lot more, but since then, and I find that Rhys, he will, if he's got that relationship with somebody, he is a very respectful little boy but if he's had a disagreement with one of his teachers he'll go and see Mrs Lacey and he's comfortable to talk to Mrs Lacey about what's just happened. ... (Parent 1, secondary school)

And then at Christmas they introduced us to Miss Maddison and since then it's been brilliant. Any time there's been a problem, he can just go to her]. (Parent 5, secondary school)

Here, we capture the ethic of care that characterised the relationships between children and staff which enabled staff to get to know and respond to children's social, emotional and academic needs. These acts of care, characterised by responsiveness and attentiveness (Tronto 1994), were crucial to children's capacity to engage with their schooling and their academic progression more generally. This emphasis on care and support was also reflected in the children's voices:

Teachers care here. (Secondary school pupil)

They care for you and listen to what you say because if you have your say it's nice that people listen to you. (Secondary school pupil)

In her discussion of care experienced young people's experiences of 'care relationships', Holland (2010) highlighted the importance of 'benevolent partiality' (Holland 2010, 1673) where young people feel that adults show genuine interest, concern and care, fostered through multiple everyday acts. Resembling this, the care relationships that the pupils and parents described as existing between staff and pupils were also characterised by partiality. They felt a sense that teachers had genuine concern for children and were responding to their needs. In demonstrating partiality towards pupils, the staff were

enacting a particular conceptualisation of fairness based on equitable treatment. They recognised that pupils' needs are diverse and therefore required different treatment (E. Smith 2012) and in doing so, were reconciling possible tensions between fairness and partiality. This conceptualisation of fairness was reflected in parents' comments, from both schools, that staff are 'for' children (meaning being interested and concerned about them):

P2: Miss Lewis is for my boy, and he'll go straight to her. And they're comfortable to go straight to them and they're going to know what's happening. (Parent 2, secondary school)

Because they're all for the kids in this school. (Parent 2, primary school)

It could be argued that prioritising children's pastoral needs could unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities amongst socially disadvantaged learners by stifling their access to academic qualifications. It could also increase the risk of institutionalising vulnerable learners through encouraging dependency on staff. However, we did not get a sense of excessive dependency, but rather, of staff providing valuable pastoral support for children and their parents which ultimately supported their children's engagement with education. As Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) have argued, learning to develop trusting and supportive relationships is an important aspect of social learning and an end goal in its own right. In this sense, an ethic of care has potential to empower not institutionalise learners through fostering their confidence, self-worth and life skills which may ultimately support their engagement in academic study and educational and life transitions more generally (P. Smith 2019). Indeed, as we discussed above in the quotes from staff, addressing children's pastoral needs was regarded as integral to supporting their academic development.

In our encounters of the relational dimension of schooling we witnessed the schools' efforts to address children's wider social, emotional, academic and material needs. This was revealed in the various acts of care enacted by staff including visiting families to deliver food at times of crisis and going out to families' homes to deliver educational resources for socially anxious children, as this secondary school parent recalled:

Miss Brookes has been fab, absolutely fabulous. She comes and gets Lucy when it's her exam days so she can't play up because she knows it's a teacher coming to the door. She sends work home every week for Alice and Alice does work quite happily. She does it at home, she just doesn't go to school. (Parent 3, secondary school)

These daily acts of providing material and academic support for families and children had a wider implication; they were an important mechanism of building trust with parents which was crucial to their identity as community focused schools.

### ***Building trusting relationships with parents; non-judgemental relations and sticking to promises***

One of the most illuminating findings from our research was the lengths that both schools went to in order to engage with parents through both organised activities as well as intense and frequent acts of informal communication. Staff at the primary school were mindful that the schools' local social contexts not only impacted on children's academic progression but also parents' engagement with their children's education. The

primary school delivered a range of activities and events, including ‘celebration events’, cookery classes and concerts, aimed at encouraging parental engagement with their children’s learning. Both schools also used a variety of methods of communication with parents on a day-to-day basis. These included face-to-face conversations, phone calls, letters, social media and for some families, home visits. Interviews with staff at both schools were laden with references to the daily communication efforts that staff engaged in; they spoke at length about the times they had personally phoned families, went to their homes or had parents come into the school to talk to them. These daily acts of communicating with parents were often a means of providing families with practical or emotional support at times of family or personal crisis as well as sharing information about pupils. This approach to parental engagement reflected the view, expressed by the staff we spoke to, that children’s academic progression was intrinsically bound with meeting theirs and their parents’ social, emotional (and sometimes practical) needs. It required a sensitivity among staff to the wider social and emotional needs of parents. In parents’ descriptions of their interactions with staff, we encountered numerous examples of Holland’s ‘everyday acts (of care)’ as well as examples of the features of care relationships as described by Tronto (1994). This included responsibility, attentiveness (to children and parents’ needs) and integrity to act in families’ best interests. The following excerpts illustrate the emotional support parents had received from members of staff with whom they had frequent contact, often provided through phone calls or discussions at the school gates:

P4: I can go in and say the worst thing and you’re not judged because you’ve opened up. Like a couple of weeks ago I went in [to school] and cried, I felt so ashamed I walked out, I thought ‘my God’ . . . . After I did that, I walked away, had a coffee and I thought ‘oh my . . . poor Sarah’, she had it all bless her. But she [Sarah-ASD support officer] rang me within the hour and checked I was ok and do you know I felt like I could just open up and you build it up so much . . . .And after that then, I had conversations, conversations, other people rang me ‘are you ok, is everything alright?’ I felt good, believe it or not . . . (Parent 4, secondary school)

When I phone up the school Miss Brookes always says, are you ok, how are you getting on?  
(Parent 3, Secondary school)

One parent at the secondary school recalled a time when staff had supported her in gaining a grant to have a bedroom built for her child who had autism. When reflecting on this, the parent also mentioned the social and emotional support she had received from the school revealing that the support provided by the school was not only practical or material, it was also emotional:

I’ve been supported beyond, more than I can believe . . . They’re there [referring to the staff member at the school], they’re someone to talk to. (Parent 4, secondary school)

Fielding’s (2006) notion of a person-centred learning community is instructive here; these daily acts of phoning a parent to share information or offer support or advice were not only functional in that they served the purpose of sharing information between staff and parents about pupils, they were also personal; the means of providing emotional and social support to parents. If encounters between staff and parents had been purely functional, there would have been limited opportunity for trust to build between parents

and teachers. It was through these person-orientated modes of encounter (Fielding 2006), characterised by care, attentiveness, kindness and nurturance, that trusting relationships developed between staff and parents. What's more, it was crucial that parents felt that these acts of care and kindness were born out of a genuine concern for their child's and their own wellbeing, as opposed to being merely functional for retrieving or giving information. This authenticity helped to build trusting relationship between parents and staff and was further built through everyday acts such as the school phoning parents to enquire about their wellbeing, as illustrated in the parents' quotes above.

Addressing both children and parents' emotional, social and practical needs was not the only mechanism for developing trust. Also, important to parents was a sense that they were being viewed or treated non-judgmentally. The sense of not being judged by staff at the school was raised repeatedly in the focus group with parents at the secondary school:

P1: And I don't think [staff] they'll ever judge

P3: (simultaneously) They don't judge, no.

P2: And you're not judged

Similarly, a parent at the primary school also felt that her school didn't judge her. She compared the primary school favourably with her children's previous primary school where she felt she was being judged because of her children's difficult behaviour:

They [her children's former primary school] judged me, they made it feel like it was my fault, the way they were (Parent 2, primary school)

Parents at the secondary school also spoke about the way in which they felt that the school honoured their promises to help or support children. These non-judgemental interactions between parents and staff, and the sense that staff 'stick to promises' was an important means of building trusting relationships between parents and staff. Once again, this illustrates the partiality, fairness and integrity and everyday acts which Holland (2010) and Tronto (1994) have argued are key features of caring relationships. Indeed, some of the parents made comparisons between their experiences of their child's primary school and the secondary school, where they felt that in the former, promises to support their child had not been kept:

At [primary school], they sit [child] in the middle and they wonder why he's hysterical and I'd be called in and I'm thinking 'really?!' They said, 'we won't do it' and they did it. It was like, you're giving me empty promises here, you're saying you'll do this for me and you'll put this in place but actually you're not doing it. You're just saying it to make me feel better but generally you're not helping my child at all (Parent 4, secondary school).

Clearly, the relational and affective dimension of schooling featured prominently in staff members' practices, and the emotional and practical support they offered parents was crucial to the fostering of trusting relationships with them. In this way, the schools' ethos and culture, or 'collective consciousness' (A. Braun et al. 2011), as community focused schools were intrinsically bound with their social contexts. It was these contexts which framed how staff interacted with parents and in turn how parents interacted with the school.

## Discussion

This paper set out to identify the mechanisms through which schools foster relationships with children and parents. Our attention to this comes at a time when the Welsh Government has placed an emphasis on relationships with pupils, families and communities as part of its community focused schools' agenda. This agenda has been regarded as playing an important role in tackling the impact of poverty on attainment and reducing social inequalities in Wales (Welsh Government 2022b).

We found that an ethic of care was central to the everyday practices of these schools and their capacity to form quality relationships with children and families. At the very core of these schools' approaches to schooling was a 'person-centred' approach (Fielding 2006) whereby attention to the social and emotional needs of children (and their families) was integral to the daily work of professionals. Our examination of the relational and affective dimension of schooling revealed some of the key features of care relationships. These included tailored emotional and social support, attentiveness, responsiveness, partiality (including genuine concern for and interest in pupils' and parents' personal and social situations), fairness, the honouring of promises and being non-judgemental. Crucially, the formation of caring relationships required prolonged and consistent interactions with children and their parents to enable knowledge to develop around children and parents' personal and social circumstances, through a deep sensitivity towards it.

The caring relationships which school staff grafted with children and parents through day-to-day acts were integral to their success as community focused schools and were inextricably bound with their wider social contexts and location in areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage. To echo A. Braun et al. (2011), the enactment of policies is always nuanced by environmental, social and cultural contexts. As we have seen, these schools' wider social settings informed how they interpreted and enacted policy agendas around both academic performance and community schooling (Wyness and Lang 2016), indicating that consideration of schools' local contexts (including their cultural, social and geographical environments) is therefore important for the future development of the community focused schools' agenda across Wales. The schools' geographical location in areas characterised by deeply entrenched socio-economic disadvantage meant that they addressed the academic, social and emotional needs of pupils in particular ways. These situations called for sensitivity to the social, emotional and sometimes practical needs of parents and families firstly, in order to meet children's academic needs. This was reflected in stories of staff visiting children's homes to provide not only educational resources for socially anxious children, but also practical support in the form of food or resources, and emotional support for parents. In foregrounding the relational dimension of schooling in this way, the schools were able to address both community focused schooling and performativity agendas which have characterised education policy in Wales.

In emphasising the relational dimension of schooling, we wish to highlight its distinction from a therapeutic approach to schooling. Whilst the therapeutic ethos presents a somewhat pessimistic construction of the learner as vulnerable and weak (Eccleston and Hayes 2009), the relational dimension of schooling illuminates the importance of everyday acts of care that underpin relationships between learners, teachers and families.

For sure, such deficit representations were at times alluded to in our research, through comments from staff that implied the vulnerability of pupils where emphasis was placed on meeting their pastoral needs. However, we have illustrated the crucial role of relationships, characterised by care, attention and partiality between children and school staff, to the everyday practices of educational professionals. This commitment to an ethic of care enabled staff to develop positive relationships with pupils which are an important aspect of social learning in their own right (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014) and are important for fostering pupil engagement and success in learning (P. Smith 2019; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017).

In illuminating the relational dimension of schooling, we are not implying that enacting an ethic of care could enable schools to reduce the impact of poverty on children's educational outcomes, or that the solution to reducing educational inequalities lies solely in daily relational practices. Such an assertion would overlook the deep and intractable ways in which poverty impacts on pupils' educational outcomes. It would represent a wholesale diversion of responsibility for educational inequalities away from the structural and economic causes to individual pupils, parents and teachers. Nevertheless, our research indicates that an ethic of care may be an important and necessary, if not sufficient, condition for pupil wellbeing and progress. What's more, we are not suggesting that the pupils and parents who took part in our research needed *more* care because of the social and economic circumstances in which they were located. Instead, we recognise both the interdependent nature and universal need for care (Barnes 2012; Holland 2010; Noddings 1984) and echo Holland's (2010) contention that an ethic of care normalises and de-stigmatises care and transcends notions of vulnerability and weakness that are present in dominant discourses of care. Yet we have highlighted the way in which the commitment to an ethic of care amongst professionals in schools was born out of a sensitivity towards pupils' wider social contexts. This sensitivity enabled staff to understand and respond to the needs of pupils and their parents, thus fostering their engagement in education.

In providing this account of the relational dimension of schooling in these two schools, we do not wish to present an overly positive picture of the practices and experiences that took place there. We are mindful that the children and parents we spoke to were selected by the schools and therefore may not represent the views of all children or parents at either of these schools. These schools may (or may not) be exemplary of other schools in similarly disadvantaged areas in Wales or the UK. We were also aware of the challenges both schools had faced in developing trusting and positive relationships with parents and the duration of time it had taken them to do this; staff spoke about the challenges they had in the past, and continue to have, in engaging with some parents. In the current context of public sector funding cuts which have impacted education and social services in England and Wales (Ferguson and Lavalette 2013), it is crucial to consider the implications for teachers where schools are under pressure to meet both their pupils' academic as well as their social and emotional needs (and sometimes also their families). As our staff participants alluded to, their roles and responsibilities frequently transcended those of the teacher to include those traditionally occupied by social services. This raises questions not only regarding the sustainability of daily acts of kindness which characterised the ethic of care being enacted by staff in these schools, but also the impact of this on



teachers' mental health and wellbeing. Such questions are important in a context in which teacher attrition has been a significant challenge for education sectors in England and Wales in recent years (Doherty 2020; Faulkner-Ellis and Worth 2022). It is crucial therefore that teachers are afforded the time and space to invest in the relational dimension of schooling in their daily professional lives, and to practice an ethic of care, for the long-term sustainability of the community focused schools' agenda and benefit of communities, parents and children.

Nevertheless, the practices we witnessed here highlighted the importance of the personal and relational dimension of schooling in meeting the dual agendas of improving academic attainment and supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing. The relational dimension of schooling we witnessed may have beneficial implications for the social and emotional wellbeing of all children, not just those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. We recognise, as Holland (2010) has done, that the multifaceted nature of care relationships we have described here are difficult to define in policy texts or guidelines. Aspects such as partiality which require interest, concern, kindness and care, are difficult to advocate. This challenge should not inhibit schools from seeking ways to instil care ethics into everyday practice. If anything, it highlights the importance of dedicated support staff whose roles and responsibilities lie with the social and emotional wellbeing of pupils, and we hope that policymakers consider the value of significant financial investment into developing and supporting such roles. What's more, schools should be encouraged to embrace the Welsh Government's (2023) recent guidance for schools on how to support positive engagement with families, in which a person-centred approach is emphasised and where families are listened to and valued. Indeed, family engagement characterised by an ethic of care and a person-centred approach to schooling should be an integral feature of initial teacher education programmes in Wales and the UK more widely. The voices of the pupils, professionals and parents we spoke to illustrate that investment in such pastoral roles in schools and the fostering of the relational dimension of schooling is crucial if the Welsh Government is committed to expanding community focused schools for the benefit of all children in Wales.

## Notes

1. Family Engagement Officers are dedicated staff members who work directly with families and communities to support their engagement in learning (Welsh Government 2023).
2. Alternative education or 'education other than at school' (EOTAS) as it is referred to in Wales, typically includes, but is not limited to, Pupil Referral Units.
3. Pupil Referral Units offer specialist provision for pupils not able to attend mainstream schooling due to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.
4. All names are pseudonyms.
5. To protect the identity of the schools in our research, the full bibliographic references for Estyn (2015) and Estyn (2018) are withheld.
6. See Estyn (2020) for the full definition.
7. At the time of the research (2021–2022) Free School Meals were provided to pupils in Wales whose parents or guardians receive some form of government financial support (for example, Income Support, Job Seeker's Allowance, Universal Credit).
8. A fourth participant group consisted of external organisations and charities. Since this group formed a very small part of our research as we interviewed only one or two people from these bodies, we have not included the data from these interviews in this paper.

9. Care experienced pupils are those who have had social service involvement and may or may not have been removed from the family home.
10. Level 4 is the level at which children aged 10/11 are expected to achieve in English and Maths in Primary Schools in England and Wales. If they reach level 5, they are exceeding this expected level.
11. Mrs Lacey was a member of staff whose roles and responsibilities included behavioural support. Mrs Lacey had frequent contact and communication with parents regarding pupils with whom she worked.
12. When parents at the secondary school referred to 'primary' they were not referring to the school in our research.
13. A 'looked after child' is a child who has been removed from the family home and has been placed in local authority or kinship care.

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