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The challenges of language teaching in Polish complementary schools in the UK during the COVID-19 lockdown

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 lockdown in the UK during the spring of 2020 led to the closure of schools and school premises to most students, including complementary school pupils; yet while the lockdown in autumn 2020 allowed state schools to remain open, Polish complementary schools found themselves in an ambiguous position. This paper explores the experiences of eight Polish complementary school heads, focusing on their response to lockdown and the measures they took to provide online learning through the year. The paper also examines how changing lockdown policies impacted the running of their schools. Key findings suggest a creative approach was taken to learning, and that students were eager to respond. Meanwhile, there was increasing cooperation between different schools and support from external organisations. However, the challenges of online learning were also highlighted. Additionally, heads expressed concern about student retention and recruitment, and the potential long-term effects on their school. There was also discussion about the position of complementary schools within the broader education system. The paper argues that these findings highlight questions of inequality between the complementary and mainstream sectors, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

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1. Introduction

Polish accession to the European Union in 2004 led to a large increase in Polish migration to the UK, including families (Ryan et al., 2009; White, 2017). This is reflected in the 2011 census which shows Polish had become the second most common language across England (ONS, 2013). National exams in Polish are available at both GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), and A (Advanced) level, the two key exams of the education system in England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>). However, tuition for these exams is predominantly undertaken in Polish complementary schools, as part of a wider programme that is described below.

While a body of work on complementary schooling has emerged over the past decade, there remains a paucity of work on Polish schools. Yet Polish complementary schools have

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a long history in the UK, with the first schools having been established during 1948–9 (Sword, 1996, p. 38). Operating under the auspices of the *Polska Macierz Szkolna* (PMS) (Polish Educational Society), the complementary schools provide language lessons, including tuition for GCSE and A level Polish exams, in addition to teaching children about Polish history and culture. Established in 1953, the primary aim of the PMS is to assist with the founding and operation of such schools. The PMS website currently notes 117 schools as being registered with the organisation (<https://polskamacierz.org>), although it may be that schools have closed during the pandemic. Alongside providing training sessions and educational information, the centre in London also acts an exam centre for GCSE and A level candidates. However, as will be discussed in section 2, there is an often uncomfortable relationship between complementary schools and the state sector, something which became more apparent during the Covid-19 lockdown.

When the Covid-19 pandemic led to a state of lockdown across the world in 2020, the challenges posed to educational systems worldwide were immense (Daniel, 2020); the UK was no exception to this, with widespread disruption throughout the academic year 2019/20 and beyond. The first UK-wide lockdown in spring 2020 included the closure of all schools, except for classes given to children of key workers and children considered vulnerable (Kim & Asbury, 2020). During the second, 4-week November lockdown in England, however, the regulations were more ambiguous. While state schools and other places deemed educational institutions were allowed to remain open, the position of complementary schools was unclear. While some were seen as educational establishments, others were considered clubs, and therefore to be closed. Throughout December 2020, a system of “tiered” restrictions continued in different regions of England, when most schools were permitted to open, while a third full lockdown from January to March 2021 saw all schools closed, as in March 2020.

The above outline provides an idea of the unstable circumstances that school heads faced throughout the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 (Kim & Asbury, 2020), while other challenges that mainstream schools confronted during the pandemic are further discussed below (section 2.3). This paper argues that Polish complementary schools faced similar difficulties, but that additional problems arose which were particular to the ambiguous position of complementary schooling in relation to the mainstream sector.

The study described in this paper focuses on the first two lockdowns, in March and November 2020. Given that each of the devolved nations of the UK followed slightly different Covid-19 measures, the project focused on complementary schools in England only. With the overarching aim of exploring how Polish complementary schools were impacted during this time, the following research questions were formulated:

- I What measures were taken by schools to continue Polish language teaching online?
- II What challenges did they face in maintaining online lessons?

2 Literature review

2.1 Complementary schools in the UK

Complementary or supplementary schooling encompasses a range of schools which offer additional lessons to support learning of subjects taught in mainstream schooling, and

includes those establishments which provide heritage language learning, also often called *Saturday schools*. Described as schools which “serve specific linguistic or religious and cultural communities, particularly through community language classes” (Creese et al., 2014, p. 941), such schools aim to offer students language tuition, alongside classes or additional activities which pertain to other elements of the life of the country of origin of their students (Lytra, 2012; Zielińska et al., 2014).

Literature on the beginnings of complementary schooling in the UK provides inconsistent accounts, but its origin is often dated to the late nineteenth century, when schools were set up by migrant communities with the aim of teaching language and culture of the home country (Burman & Miles, 2020; Maylor et al., 2010). In the Black community, complementary schools were also set up from the 1950s for reasons beyond those of “linguistic/faith/cultural preservation”: as a way of supplementing the education in mainstream settings which parents felt was failing their children (Burman & Miles, 2020; Maylor et al., 2013, p. 108). Yet there has been a continuing shortage of information available about complementary schooling (Creese, 2009; Maylor et al., 2013; Strand, 2007), with no official database of the approximately 3000 complementary schools currently operating in the UK (Global Future, 2021).

Nonetheless, a body of work has emerged exploring the work of complementary schools (Walters, 2011). Studies often view these schools as places where heritage language learning can flourish, and students are encouraged to explore their linguistic and cultural identity (Creese, 2009; Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Kenner & Ruby, 2013). Through promoting the heritage culture, complementary schools thereby function as sites of “cultural affirmation” (Burman & Miles, 2020, p. 5).

This aim is also reflected in Polish complementary schools, which may be seen as sites of identity formation (Sword, 1996); attendance at such schools allows students to meet other Poles, and to use their heritage language (Zielińska et al., 2014). Considered “Polish diaspora organisations”, schools receive government support through embassies and organisations involved with Poles abroad, such as *Wspólnota Polska*, an NGO under the auspices of the Polish Senate. However, each school is autonomous and unique, being heavily dependent on the resourcefulness of the teacher activists (Małek, 2019; Praszalowicz et al., 2012).

Polish complementary schools in the UK also provide tuition for students sitting national exams in Polish at GCSE, as part of the Modern Foreign Languages curriculum, and at A level. (These exams are taken in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Scotland has a different examination system.) This opportunity often provides an impetus for students to study their heritage language, as it allows them to obtain an additional exam qualification that may facilitate their entry to university, and aid them in the job market (Global Future, 2021, p. 6). As Gruszczyńska (2019) argues, attaining knowledge of Polish can thereby be understood as acquiring linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). This finding is echoed in several studies on language learning at complementary schools in the UK, such as that by Francis et al. (2009) into students’ perceptions of the value of Chinese complementary schools, and a study on Turkish schools (Lytra, 2013); alongside work by Tereshchenko and Grau Cárdenas (2013) on Ukrainian schools in Portugal. Nonetheless, an awkward relationship often exists between complementary and mainstream language education provision; this is discussed in the next section.

2.2 Relationship with mainstream education in the UK

The relationship between complementary schools and mainstream education in the UK system is an ill-defined one, even though the development of each was interlinked. Maylor et al. (2010, p. 9) outline how, from the mid-1800s, minority community groups were involved in establishing not only their own schools, but were also “invested in the project of state-provided education” with the aim for such schooling to operate alongside each other.

In contemporary times, however, such links are more difficult to detect; complementary schooling is largely “invisible” (Burman & Miles, 2020, p. 4), and operates in “marginalized spaces” that are excluded from “mainstream discourse” with limited recognition coming from those outside the community they serve (Global Future, 2021; Kenner & Ruby, 2012, p. 397; Maylor et al., 2013).

Kenner and Hickey (2008, p. 97) argue that although many complementary schools operate on mainstream school premises, any connection between the two schools remains “fragile unless minority languages and cultures are truly valued by the school authorities and wider society”. This is echoed in Maylor et al. (2010), in a report commissioned by The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) investigating the benefits of complementary schooling. Conducted by The Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) at London Metropolitan University and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the report found that while many complementary schools used their premises, most of the schools “had no links with mainstream schools” (Maylor et al., 2010, p. 11).

This minimal awareness of the role played by complementary schools is reflected in an undervaluing of the pedagogical knowledge and practices of teachers working in complementary schools (Burman & Miles, 2020; John Lyon’s Charity, 2012; Kenner & Ruby, 2012), and the fact that mainstream school teachers do not always recognise the benefits to children’s education made by complementary schooling (Kenner & Ruby, 2013). Complementary schools are often run by a small number of people, often volunteers, and suffer from limited funding and staffing (John Lyon’s Charity, 2012; Walters, 2011); however, the quality of teaching is often reported to be high, with staff also working in the mainstream sector (e.g. Creese, 2009; Kenner & Ruby, 2013). Teachers at complementary schools also often display a level of ingenuity in their approaches. In their study of mainstream teachers’ perceptions of teaching practices in a Bengali complementary school, Kenner and Ruby (2012, p. 520) highlight the various pedagogical practices applied in such schools, and draw attention to “the resilience and creativity of complementary teachers in the face of very difficult conditions”.

There is also a range of additional resources on which complementary schools can draw. The National Resource Centre for Supplementary Education (NRCSE) offers teaching qualifications and support, including courses on safeguarding accessible through their website (www.supplementaryeducation.org.uk). Their importance is emphasised by Burman and Miles (2020, p. 4) who write that NRCSE “is the only organisation which provides information, support and advice nationally”. Throughout the pandemic, they continued to run training courses and offered a range of online support.

As noted above, Polish schools are also supported by the Polish Educational Society, which plays an important role in providing appropriate material and practical information.

However, as will be discussed later, the support given through the pandemic was perhaps less valuable than that provided by the NRCSE.

Yet despite this, complementary schools continue to be “undervalued educational settings” Kenner and Ruby (2012, p. 520), and “treated with suspicion” (Global Future, 2021, p. 7). Given their emphasis on language teaching, the side-lining of complementary schools may be due to the way that Modern Foreign Languages have become an increasingly undervalued part of the curriculum (Baker, 2021). Kenner and Ruby (2012) highlight the dichotomy whereby government has recognised the value of complementary schooling, and provided funds for both the NRCSE and the Our Languages project, which aimed to link mainstream and complementary schools, but without providing support to complementary schools themselves (Burman & Miles, 2020).

The literature therefore suggests that the contribution of complementary schools to the education of children remains widely unrecognised.

2.3 Challenges facing mainstream schools during the pandemic

While, to the authors’ knowledge, little research has explored the impact of the pandemic on complementary schools, a growing body of literature has emerged that examines the situation of mainstream schooling during the UK lockdowns. This ranges from the roles of teachers (e.g. Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, 2021; Moss et al., 2020) to the social and educational well-being of students (Andrew et al., 2020b; Holt & Murray, 2021). There has also been work on children with special educational needs (e.g. Asbury et al., 2021; Sideropoulos et al., 2021), while a further strand of work has investigated the ongoing effects and potential long-term impact of the disruption to education during the pandemic, especially on disadvantaged children (Andrew et al., 2020b; Green, 2020). However, while the effect of the lockdowns on complementary schooling has been paid little attention, it may be seen that many of the problems faced by mainstream schools are reflected in the experiences of the complementary sector.

One element was the instability of the situation faced by schools, and the need to deal with the abrupt nature of the March lockdown. Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, (2021) argue that during this time, the most effective teachers were those who could tackle the uncertainty of the situation itself. The most immediate issue was how to cope with the technology, as many teachers were unfamiliar with online learning. There was also the question of whether teachers and students had access to the requisite technology (Kim, Dundas, & Asbury, 2021): Andrew et al. (2020a) note the proportion of students who did not have access to devices or even to a reliable internet connection. Moreover, parents were not always able to support home learning. They faced challenges in maintaining the balance between home schooling and work (Kim, Dundas & Asbury, 2021), with younger children in particular needing greater parental support (Moss et al., 2020). There were differences in how far parents were able to support learning (Andrew et al., 2020a), often dependent on social circumstances (Moss et al., 2020).

The emotional effect of the lockdowns, and the need to consider the mental health of staff and students has also been highlighted, with teachers expressing concern about student wellbeing, both during the pandemic itself and as a long-term impact (Kim, Dundas & Asbury, 2021). Moss et al. (2020, p. 6) highlight how mainstream school heads felt they had “a moral duty” to maintain a sense of community during the long

months of school closure, including undertaking tasks such as delivering food parcels to vulnerable pupils.

Following the reopening of schools in September 2020, schools were then faced with the challenge of re-opening school premises safely. Measures taken by schools included conducting a Covid-19 risk assessment, the establishment of social distancing, and the cost of new sanitisation points (Lorenc et al., 2021). Complementary schools often rent premises from mainstream schools, and as discussed later, any Covid measures implemented by the school would therefore also impact upon the complementary classes.

It can therefore be seen that there were huge challenges facing the mainstream sector during this time, and that additional pressures were placed on complementary schooling due in part to their uncertain status. As explored below, the Covid-19 pandemic has shed further light on the pre-existing challenges faced by complementary schools, but has also highlighted the positive aspects of such schooling.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants and data collection

The participants were eight school heads, from seven different schools based in cities and smaller towns across England; the schools ranged from medium-sized (200–300 students), to schools with fewer than 100 students. Our aim was to explore the experiences of the schools from their perspective. The focus was on heads, as most of them were involved in teaching classes; it was also felt they would be able to provide an overview of the situation which teachers might not have. It was considered that eight schools would be sufficient, given the exploratory and small scale nature of the research.

To select participants, the first researcher initially emailed heads of Polish complementary schools on the list produced by the Polish Educational Society. While a large number were contacted, there were relatively few responses. This may have been in part because the schools had closed due to the pandemic, or because the heads were too preoccupied dealing with the effects to respond to requests to participate. However, having successfully contacted several heads, other participants were recruited through a snowballing technique (see [Table 1](#)).

3.2 Data collection

Qualitative interviews were held in English with seven of the participants: these comprised a single interview lasting between 40 and 80 minutes. An open-ended questionnaire, also in English, was completed by an additional headteacher who preferred to respond via email. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams, apart from one teacher who preferred Skype.

Three of the heads were interviewed over the summer of 2020 and were asked about their experiences during the March lockdown. The remaining data collection was conducted during November, the time of the second lockdown in England. In both sets of interviews, heads were encouraged to speak freely, given the researchers' interest in exploring issues that had emerged from the unprecedented situation of the pandemic.

Table 1. Participants.

Name (Pseudonym)	Number of students/ teachers ^a	School established
Alina	2020: 72 students	1947
Dorota	2019/20: 312 students 2020: 270 students	2012 ^b
Ewa	Nov 2020: 283 students, 17 teachers	
Krzysztof	2020: 200 students, 30 teaching staff (teachers and teaching assistants) 2019/2020: 147 students, 14 teachers 2020: 127 students, 12 teachers	n/a 2014
Magda	2020: 300 students – 150 continued online, 14 teachers	2007
Olga	2019: 64 students	2010
Barbara (co-heads)	2020: 40 students	
Weronika	2020: 38 students, 3 teachers	2019

Notes: ^aMost of the heads also worked as teachers in the school.

^bThe school developed as an offshoot of a larger school which had become oversubscribed. The original school was founded in 1980.

Prior to the interviews, the project was granted ethical approval by IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (then known as the UCL Institute of Education). Participants were requested to sign consent forms and gave additional consent to the interviews being video recorded. To respect confidentiality, the locations of schools are simply given as a region of England (e.g. North, South-East), and participants' names have been pseudonymised.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first researcher; data analysis was undertaken by both researchers. The data was initially transcribed to include pauses and repetitions; however, following Roulston (2014), given that the data were to be analysed for content rather than detailed linguistic analysis, these minor hesitations were removed both out of respect to the participants, who were being interviewed in a second language (English), and for reader clarity. Data analysis was undertaken by both researchers. A thematic analysis was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with an inductive approach taken to coding developed through an iterative process of (re)reading and reflecting on the data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Roulston, 2014). Some of the themes were shaped by the emerging literature on the effects of the pandemic on mainstream schooling (see section 2.3. above), e.g. immediate reaction to the lockdown, technology access and familiarity; while others emerged from the data, such as support available to the complementary schools, or those challenges relating to the November lockdown.

4. Findings

4.1 Response to lockdown

The initial responses to the March 2020 lockdown were mixed. Several heads described the uncertainty and lack of clarity from the government, such as Magda, who explained how the school did not have "any information from the government what to do exactly". Alina also highlighted the absence of guidelines: "there was already kind of rumours, 'Are the places going to close?', 'What's going to happen?' more and more infections". Heads also recalled the shock of having to respond so quickly: Krzysztof admitted "[i]n March we were shocked by the situation and we did not know what to do"; a sensation reflected by

Dorota, who recalled “First, we panicked a little bit, and we went, ‘What are we going to do!’” Some made an immediate move online: Ewa noted how they were able to commence online teaching from March 14th. Others, however, decided to cancel the remaining one or two lessons of term, taking advantage of the Easter break to plan for an online programme to commence in late April. Dorota reported emailing materials to students so they could work individually before lessons resumed after Easter.

While all the heads interviewed found some way of continuing to operate, they also recounted examples of schools which had decided to close throughout the period. They felt this might be partially due to the logistics involved in organising classes in larger schools.

In terms of online provision, teachers showed great ingenuity, reflecting the imaginative teaching approaches found in complementary schools as highlighted in the literature. A variety of platforms were used: these included Microsoft Teams and Zoom, but also more tailored sites such as Google Classroom, Genially, and Seesaw. There was often at least one teacher who was familiar with online teaching platforms and methods, who would volunteer to train the others. Many saw it as an opportunity to learn new skills and take on new roles within the school, such as Barbara, who in addition to her role as co-head, had been a librarian, but drew on her knowledge to help teachers evaluate their online teaching methods. Weronika spent three days training herself to facilitate the move online; for her, it was a question of survival: she felt that “[i]n the first lockdown, it wouldn’t be easy to survive if I hadn’t learnt everything about technology”.

Some heads, such as Magda and Alina, were content for each teacher to use the platform with which they were most comfortable. Alina reported how one teacher had found a way of using What’s App group messages, repeating the same lesson to small groups of students within the same class. Zoom emerged as a favoured method by several schools. Despite the privacy issues that were reported early in the pandemic relating to “Zoom-bombing”, with meetings being interrupted by outside users (Paul, 2020), Dorota felt this had provided an opportunity to teach children about internet safety. There were also additional activities: Weronika was excited at the way she had been able to incorporate YouTube clips into five-minute arts and crafts, or movement activities at the end of her lessons; Olga described a weekly reading session for younger children, whereby an older student read aloud to children, developing it into “a wonderful [...] show”.

Heads were encouraged by the generally positive response from both parents and students to the move online. While some drop in numbers was experienced by many of the schools, those students who chose to continue were highly committed, with many heads noting 100% attendance. Although Olga had anticipated a reluctance amongst parents, she was pleasantly surprised that there were no difficulties with the shift online, explaining: “When I first thought about it, I thought, ‘Ok, there will be a lot of resistance’, but they [parents] told me later that I had so much energy and so eager to go on, that they just went with the flow”. Similar to Olga, Ewa was encouraged by the response when she informed parents of the move online: “I wrote email for parents, and all of them agreed to have online lessons. No question, they want me to manage everything with exams and students. They were so happy!” She described her students as being “really brave”, commenting that they were “really, really engaged”. One advantage mentioned by Dorota and Alina was that they were able to focus on teaching, and less time was

spent on classroom management, or attending to minor incidents – such as children losing teeth – which had occurred during in-person classes.

4.2 Problems with online learning

Despite the efforts made and the predominantly positive response, several challenges arose that echoed those reported in similar studies on mainstream learning. These included technological problems. Weronika and Dorota both mentioned the need for teachers, as much as students, to have adequate equipment and internet connection at home. Another problem was that the online format often proved problematic for students under the age of 10, as indicated by both Weronika, and Ewa, who felt that teaching younger children online could be used “as an emergency, but not constantly” as online lessons “can’t be easy for them”. Magda also felt it was unsuitable: like Weronika, she believed that smaller children benefited from in-person interactions. She felt that “little ones, they really demand those interactions. They really need each other to grow”; the nursery classes that usually cater for 4 and 5-year-olds were suspended. Others did not experience the same problems, however: Olga praised her “fantastic” teacher who had kept the younger children fully engaged during their online classes.

For safeguarding reasons, related to the need for protection against potential online grooming (see Whittle et al., 2013), most heads insisted that parents were present while their children were having classes. Like Weronika, Dorota emphasised the need for this; she also felt this was a way of demonstrating parental commitment. Olga was specific in her instructions to parents:

My school, my requirement is that a parent is with the child all the time. It’s for various reasons: for safeguarding, first. [...] I told them when we started, “I want this to be as effective as possible. If you’re not there, your child can play games, your child can do whatever they want”.

However, attending lessons was problematic for those parents who work night shifts. This echoes Andrew et al. (2020a), who highlight the way that lower-income families, such as those reliant on shift work, were disadvantaged by the move online. Other parents were suffering the effects of an exhausting week combining work and supervising online schooling, and found that Saturday mornings were too much.

Barbara raised the concern that some children were unable to participate in online lessons, as this would have revealed domestic abuse present in the home. This reflects observations by mainstream teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020), and is of particular concern given the observed increase in domestic abuse during the lockdown (Fegert et al., 2020; also see Kim, Dundas & Asbury, 2021).

4.3 Challenges of the November lockdown

The November lockdown provoked confusion. Whereas in March, all schools had been closed, save those classes for specific groups of children, the November regulations stated that educational establishments were allowed to remain open. However, guidelines given by the Department of Education (DfE) suggested that complementary schools did not fall into this category; they were regarded as clubs, similar to music or

sports groups that hired mainstream school premises at the weekend. This led to a feeling of resentment amongst several of the heads that their schools were not being recognised for the educational role they played. Barbara considered this an insult to the work done by Polish schools: she pointed out that it was the state school which gains credit in the league tables for students' achievements in exams that have been taught in complementary schools, something echoed by Weronika. According to Barbara, schools felt "abandoned" during the November lockdown, while Weronika reported some heads feeling "really [...] underestimated" in being described as "a club". Yet other schools, such as that run by Krzysztof, were allowed to continue in-person.

Schools were given conflicting information by the local authorities, depending on whether they interpreted the status of complementary schools as "clubs" or "schools". This was exacerbated by contradictory advice from the DfE itself; Dorota described her own experience in trying to clarify the situation: "I rang the DfE and the lady on the helpline said, yes we can run lessons. This is very controversial because there seemed to be different answers to different people". There was some discomfort amongst heads when they realised that some authorities had interpreted the DfE guidance in different ways, which allowed schools in certain areas to open while others remained closed.

4.4 Sources of support

Heads reported drawing on three main areas of support.

The first of these was the NRCSE; from early in the pandemic in March 2020, they switched to online training methods. These included their usual types of courses, such as safeguarding, but adapted to help teachers work more confidently in an online setting; the organisation also ran supplementary courses to train teachers in online teaching methods.

In regard to the Polish Educational Society (PMS), the heads reported differing experiences. Several complained about the lack of support earlier in the pandemic, with Olga noting that heads had "felt really let down"; while Ewa also complained about the approach of the PMS during the March lockdown: "unfortunately, they didn't help us. We didn't hear from them in this time – nothing!" She explained laughingly that by the time the PMS had started offering advice on how to use Zoom, for example, it was already late August. However, the long-standing problem of understaffing was acknowledged: Weronika expressed compassion for the volunteers who were trying to deal with an unprecedented situation. She noted how, through the year, the PMS did try to provide more structured help and guidance, such as risk assessment for returning to premises, in addition to safeguarding training. The PMS also allowed students to enrol for the rescheduled GCSE exams. While this was useful for several schools, Dorota felt that more advice could have been given at an earlier stage, although she did acknowledge that in the second half of the year, the PMS did "seem to have picked up the pace" in the advice they offered.

A further source of support which emerged through the pandemic was other Polish School heads, who used Facebook groups to share up-to-date information and effective teaching practices. Ewa explained how such groups had already been in existence, but proved invaluable in such an extreme situation. The development of an

enhanced collaborative relationship between the schools was also detailed by Olga: “we organised a help group; we had Facebook groups of heads. This was really good, because I made a lot of connections with heads of other schools, which I didn’t have before”. Weronika also felt there had been a unity among the different schools, finding herself “amazed how powerful” it was. Throughout the lockdown, heads were able to meet through online platforms, which allowed them to provide mutual support in tandem with practical sessions.

The need for support and a sense of camaraderie was also noted in research on mainstream teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2020), which emphasised the sense of pulling together. While complementary schools have previously been seen as “working in isolation”, which provides “few opportunities to share best practice” (John Lyon’s Charity, 2012), the move online thus appeared to facilitate a large amount of knowledge sharing.

4.5 Retention of premises

The challenge of negotiating the use of premises, already an ongoing “pressure” for complementary schools (Burman & Miles, 2020, p. 5), was something experienced by several heads. Olga described the experience of having to move premises just prior to the pandemic; fortunately, she had been able to secure premises at a local mainstream school where she was a governor, and enjoyed a productive relationship with the head-teacher there. However, the relationship between complementary schools and the state school from which they rent premises is not always a comfortable one. Burman and Miles (2020, p. 7) report a mixed picture, that while “some schools pay exorbitant fees to use the buildings just on Saturdays, [...] others have developed more mutually respectful relationships and rent-free arrangements”. Alina set out the complex situation of trying to establish access to the premises; she explained:

We rent the school rooms, not from the school anymore, but there is an external organisation who is dealing with all this. And when the lockdown happened, they sent us an email saying, “we are all being furloughed, so there won’t be much contact”.

Nonetheless, most Polish heads interviewed in this study were satisfied with their relationship with their current mainstream schools, although several, including Magda, spoke of having experienced problems in the past.

Many mainstream schools faced additional expenses from making their premises Covid-19 secure for the return to school in September 2020, such as installing sanitation points and deep cleaning, and several heads expressed concern that this would translate into an increased rent. Krzysztof noted they had already undergone a risk assessment and would be required to pay an additional amount for enhanced cleaning. The different stakeholders involved in such decisions were outlined by Alina: “they [the mainstream school] may ask for some kind of Covid policy, so we’ll probably have to put something like that together, and then approve it between ourselves, within the management board and then communicate to the parents as well”. Olga had negotiated the rent for the coming academic year; she was aware that mainstream schools had also lost income during the pandemic, and rent from the supplementary school would be welcomed.

However, there was also a loss of income for the Polish schools during their enforced closure, resulting from a drop in enrolments. Dorota also noted the lack of additional income that would usually have been generated through fundraising events, and the tuck shop that ran during Saturday morning classes.

The findings thus indicate that problems which had been present pre-pandemic, were exacerbated during this time. However, the challenges of online teaching had been met successfully, with teachers discovering innovative ways of engaging their students in classes.

5. Discussion

The findings suggest that the challenges encountered by Polish complementary schools during the pandemic were in several ways similar to those faced by mainstream schools; however, there were additional pressures with which the Polish schools had to contend.

As with mainstream schools, the primary concern was over the sudden move online in March 2020. Unlike their mainstream counterparts, complementary school heads had the option of cancelling classes until after the Easter break, to allow for additional preparation. Nonetheless, heads experienced similar anxieties to those found in the mainstream sector. Almost all the heads interviewed mentioned the sense of shock experienced at the start of the March 2020 lockdown, and the absence of government guidance. The sense of having to work at speed and to meet unprecedented challenges reflects the experiences of mainstream teachers (Kim & Asbury, 2020). As within mainstream schools, there was limited familiarity with the technology required for the provision of online lessons, and whether teachers even possessed the right equipment at home (Kim, Dundas & Asbury, 2021).

Nonetheless, despite the initial concerns of heads, the Polish complementary schools in the study coped remarkably well during the lockdown. Most found some way of continuing lessons for the majority of their students, as teachers underwent training, and many saw the move online as an opportunity to further their pedagogical skills. The heads' pride in their ingenuity, and that of their teachers chimes with earlier literature that highlights the creativity embedded in pedagogical practices of complementary school teachers (Kenner & Ruby, 2012). The practices developed by teachers at each of the Polish schools demonstrated innovative ways of keeping students engaged with online learning, utilising a range of different platforms, combining lessons with arts activities as mentioned by Weronika, and the reading sessions organised by Olga. Another element is the heads' evident delight in finding themselves able to meet the challenge, and the way they were able to learn new things and adapt their teaching accordingly. This is reflected in the increased spirit of collaboration between Polish School heads that developed during the pandemic.

In their study of teacher concerns during the pandemic, Kim, Dundas and Asbury (2021, p. 6) emphasise the importance mainstream teachers placed on maintaining communication between pupils, parents and staff. This can also be seen reflected in the practices adopted by the Polish schools. In the way they endeavoured to keep parents and students updated with changes to the timetable and transition to online learning, Polish heads can be seen to have adopted an approach similar to that outlined in Daniel (2020), who highlights the importance of teachers in reassuring students during a time of such uncertainty. Moreover, the inequality which was highlighted amongst pupils in mainstream schooling

(Andrew et al., 2020b; Green, 2020), such as an inability to access lessons, or having to disguise situations of domestic abuse – to which Barbara was anxious to draw attention – may also have been evident in children who would otherwise have been able to attend complementary schools.

However, other challenges emerged which were particular to the Polish schools and the status of complementary schooling. One major concern which was not shared by mainstream schools, was over falling student numbers, as experienced by all the schools in this study, adding to their concerns about other Polish schools closing permanently. The threat to complementary school language learning as a result of enforced closure during the pandemic is something which has been highlighted by the Global Future (2021) report, which asserts that the teaching of heritage and “community” languages was overlooked throughout the pandemic.

The report further argues that such languages are perceived as having limited value, and even in a pre-pandemic context, were not valued as highly as those languages more commonly taught in mainstream schools, such as French or German. This speaks to the notion of linguistic hierarchy, whereby one language is seen as more important or valuable than another (Phillipson, 1992). This sense of hierarchy is explored by Weber (2015, p. 79), who draws attention to the classed nature of language education, whereby “the acquisition of foreign languages is encouraged” in schools, but where “the home linguistic resources of many lower-class and migrant students are valued negatively”.

The importance of complementary school language teaching was also undermined by the way that most Polish complementary schools were not permitted to open during the November lockdown. Even though they were engaged in tutoring students in languages that are rarely taught in mainstream schools, they were classed under DfE regulations as non-educational establishments. This chimes with literature that highlights the way in which complementary schools are undervalued, and struggle to be seen as legitimate sites of teaching (Burman & Miles, 2020; Kenner & Ruby, 2012). The pandemic also highlighted long-standing issues over access to premises. Zielińska et al. (2014, p. 413) argue that a lack of independently owned premises for most complementary schools is problematic in the “message” it sends to students that “they do not belong to the place and the place does not belong to them”. This “lack of ownership” and “belonging” (Zielińska et al. 2014, pp. 414-415) is seen as reflective of the place migrant communities hold in society. While many heads discussed having a very supportive relationship with the mainstream schools from which they currently rent premises, they expressed concern over the cost of retaining those premises. Several described the negotiation required to re-open in September, and were calculating the cost of additional Covid measures that would be passed onto them. In a year when enrolment had dropped, and the income from fees reduced accordingly, there was a worry over whether the schools could remain financially viable, which is not a concern that affects mainstream schools.

6 Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised many challenges, during which structural inequalities have been exposed, not least in the field of education. Analysing the experience of Polish

complementary school heads has brought to the fore unresolved issues. Tensions over exam enrolment and the relationship between the complementary and mainstream sector have been heightened and continue to undermine the success of Polish language teaching and learning.

However, it is also important to highlight the positive aspects of Polish complementary schooling throughout the pandemic, and to commend the school heads for finding ways of maintaining language classes during such challenging times. Their creative approach, which has long been seen as characteristic of complementary schooling, has resulted in successful classes.

Yet the pre-existing cracks in the system which emerged further during the lockdown cannot be ignored. To ameliorate the situation, this study supports in particular two of the recommendations made in the Global Future (2021, p. 22) report. The first is the development of stronger partnerships between complementary and mainstream schools. As has been highlighted in previous studies (Kenner & Ruby, 2012, 2013), greater cooperation with mainstream schools has the potential to benefit students and teachers in both settings. The willingness to embrace innovative teaching methods as displayed by the heads in this study suggest their experiences continue to have much to offer mainstream teaching.

The second is the need for official recognition of the status of complementary schools. One key effect of the pandemic has been increased inequality, and this is apparent in the way that complementary schools were not recognised as educational establishments and were thereby forbidden from opening during the November lockdown in England. Burman and Miles (2020) stress the need to address the inequality implicit in the division between complementary and mainstream schooling, which has far-reaching implications. As highlighted by the Global Future (2021) report many children studying for GCSE and A level qualifications in their heritage language have been denied access to these exams during the pandemic. This evokes the question of linguistic inequality; moreover, depriving students of the opportunity to obtain an additional qualification, and obtain linguistic capital raises questions of inequality and educational injustice. This in turn has the potential to perpetuate inequalities for those children coming from lower-income families, which have already been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2020a).

The experiences of Polish School heads during the pandemic underline the need to examine the longstanding challenges facing Polish complementary schools. The role of such schools in offering tuition in minority languages, and thus facilitating children to access their heritage language, cannot be overestimated. However, if such schools are to survive and flourish in the post-pandemic environment, they need greater recognition and support.

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