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Swansea is a very diverse city with over 140 languages and dialects spoken amongst our school population. We refer to learners who have a first language other than English/Welsh as English as an additional language - EAL learners. Our EAL learners are a hugely diverse group and include settled families, economic migrants, Roma, asylum seekers, refugees and so on. Some will have navigated the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic well whilst others have encountered significant barriers.

The Welsh Government has developed a 'Stay Safe. Stay Learning.' programme, which has been informing the work of education in Swansea throughout this period. During the period of school closure, schools have been providing distance learning and we are now moving towards a blended learning approach. Welsh Government guidance expects teachers to take action to address any disadvantages that learners and families may face, including consideration of the language of their home and the provision of differentiated approaches to learning.

As part of their plans the Welsh Government have a strategy to counteract digital exclusion. A 'digitally excluded' learner is a student with no access to an appropriate internet-connected device to enable them to take part in distance learning. Local authorities, including Swansea, have been working closely with schools to offer digitally excluded learners repurposed school devices and 4G MiFi connectivity.

Within local authority continuity of learning plans, the Welsh Government expects an inclusive and equitable approach to be taken. Vulnerable groups, including EAL and Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) learners, are a strand and we are expected to implement actions that mitigate against barriers that these groups of learners may face. Much of my work falls into this area.

On the face of it, overall policies and guidance should work to support the needs of the EAL learners however; the barriers on the ground are multi-faceted and very complex. There is also reliance on policies and guidance being appropriately implemented at school level. As an example, the provision of devices and Mi-Fi has gone some way to mitigate against connectivity issues for migrant families however,

this has only worked where schools have appropriately scoped need in the first place. Sending an email with a Google form will not work for many families.

Aside from digital exclusion, there are significant challenges in terms of delivering inclusive distance or blended learning for migrant families. Families themselves have struggled to understand the overwhelming volume of frequently changing information, and where to go for help.

Providing equipment and internet access is a step in the right direction but you still need to be digitally literate to work the technology and access the platforms that schools use. You still need an understanding of the curriculum and teaching methods to undertake the activities. These issues can apply to any family but the key difference for EAL and GRT families is around communication. A number of families have limited or no proficiency in spoken English or may not have literacy in English. Others may not have well-developed skills in their first language. We have many families who are experiencing this multitude of barriers alongside more general issues such as poverty. When all of these factors are taken into consideration then the enormity of the obstacles that need to be overcome to provide an inclusive education almost seem insurmountable.

Where our schools have been most successful in being inclusive, they know the needs of their families and learners exceptionally well. This is the key starting point. They have supported communication through phoning families individually, using first languages where necessary. They have clearly identified those who are digitally excluded, provided the equipment and supported families to set devices up and to access digital platforms. They have communicated that pupils can still learn the curriculum through their first language. They have provided learners with differentiated materials using multimedia approaches and translations where possible and appropriate. Where there have been multiple barriers to access, paper based learning has been delivered to houses. When this very individualised, bespoke approach to parents and learners is realised we go some way to providing inclusive education. It takes dedication, resource and thorough understanding of cultural and language backgrounds as well as a sound knowledge of EAL pedagogy.

Whilst the pandemic has shone a spotlight on inequalities and posed significant challenges at all levels, there are positives to be taken forward. Ideally, schools will embody the work that they have been undertaking to address these inequalities into their long term, day-to-day practise. We have all been catapulted into using digital technology and pushed into exploring what is out there and the capabilities within different applications. This has paved the way for innovative, better and more efficient ways of working and improved means of supporting parents and learners. Collaborations and partnerships have been developed which will be sustained and embedded. We need to seize the progress made in this short period of time and capitalise on it to continue to move forward in counteracting inequalities and improving inclusion.