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The value of relationships in moving through recovery following the Covid-19 global pandemic

UKSG eNews 500

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The abrupt closure of schools, colleges and universities due to the global pandemic of Covid-19 led to extraordinary work across the entire education system to support learners and local communities. The **Open University Business School** is leading research on how schools have strategically managed online learning during Covid-19 and if and how new experiences during lockdown have created long term sustainable changes in relation to the way education is managed and delivered. One of our key research questions investigates whether changes and new ways of doing things, implemented during Covid-19, are going to have a long-term effect on the vision of education to come. 60 one-to-one interviews with

school leaders have been collated during the pandemic sharing the lived experiences of how leaders have led the continuity of learning. The lockdown challenges of moving to online learning, adopting the use of digital technology and the involvement and engagement of stakeholders have been substantial challenges for educators, which has led to new opportunities and successes in the way we support learning.

During the pandemic, there have been lots of first response action and quick decision-making that has had to be done in reaction to Covid-19. There has been little time for thinking and reflection, but once we reach a certain level of stability, we need to look back as part of our professional learning to look at what has worked or not worked and what could have been done differently. Learnings needs to be drawn from all stakeholders for a sharing of practice across the whole country. Emerging from the qualitative research is how the dedication and resilience of educators has led to adaptive leadership responses which evolved to reflect the changing context during the pandemic.

A central theme that emerged from the interviews is about relationships and how people supported each other and built strong collaborative relationships in multilateral strategies with teacher voice at the core. The **OECD** urged people at all levels to collaborate under one common aim: “stepping up collaboratively...out of [your] comfort zone” (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p.7). Strong, collaborative relationships have been prominent in the interviews with leaders using phrases like ‘it was a case of all hands on deck’ and a sense that ‘we’re all in this together’ in dealing with the pandemic. Practitioners and school leaders have been trying to build a shared understanding about what needs to be done and the use of language is important in creating coherence. When asked who was responsible for putting learning online, school leaders acknowledged the buck stopped with them. The accountability for decisions required explanation and context. It was important to meet with people online to talk through decision-making and establish a platform for partnerships. The pandemic has seen a structured approach for managing stakeholder communication with the use of forums with all stakeholders involved from pupils and parents to staff and people from the local community. The use of digital technology has made it much easier for people to come together and be more available than if they had been required to travel and meet face-to-face. The establishment of student and stakeholder forums have provided an opportunity to create a context for building knowledge and listening to lived experiences and putting students first. There has been challenge in managing the balance between clarity of purpose from leaders and the marshalling of all the great innovations that have been done by practitioners and marrying them into a system. Leaders have shown how they have enabled staff to create and to go forward and reach people. This professional learning has been critical and leaders have highlighted this as one of the most important things that teachers can and should do.

The pandemic has seen professional learning taking a collaborative approach that is practitioner centred with different stakeholders working together with different perspectives, not only to share practices but to also reaffirm the fundamental purpose of what they are doing and understanding why they are doing what they are doing and having a common goal. This collaborative approach is still developing and evolving, but there is a real sense of purpose, from the research, in using technology to make the world a smaller place for communication and including teaching staff at a higher level of communication. This raises awareness of teachers as citizens of the world who are training future citizens of the world. The pandemic has brought opportunities for digital learning including building skills and capacity and also engaging more creatively around pedagogy and quality of feedback. Leaders have reported that all the best examples of improvement during the pandemic have been grounded in ethos and enabling everybody to be involved and participate and to generate some evidence base for what they want to do and to take time to listen to people, which takes time to do and to build a shared coherent understanding of what is needed in the community. Integrity of leadership during the pandemic has been rooted in values and ethos-based school improvement to aspire and be authentic. The pandemic has seen a system improvement of top-down versus bottom-up management by leaders, allowing staff to step up and build a community and reach out to people.

A key part of moving through recovery, following the Covid pandemic, is continuing the multilateral relationships, keeping the connectedness, collaboration, communication but also the compassion. Leaders have recognised the benefits of capitalising on what digital devices and connectivity afford but at the same time recognising that education is a human enterprise and a human touch must still be there. From the pandemic, there is a shared understanding and acknowledgement of the challenges and it is important to consider how we can continue to embody the ‘can do’ spirit which was evident during the lockdown and maintain the collaborative agility in making decisions and the connected relationships and cooperation.

Everyone in the education system needs to work together to learn from dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and build improved systems and accelerated learning for all students. A concern highlighted by school leaders is a return to the status quo and the forces of conservatism sending us back to where we were rather than using the pandemic as an opportunity to leverage change.

Reference

Reimers, F. M. and Schleicher, A. (2020). A framework to guide an education response to the Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 24 Jun.

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