Does COVID-19 offer English school leaders the opportunity to rethink schools?

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COVID-19 has closed schools, forced examinations to be adjusted or abandoned across the world and led to concerns about the negative educational and social effects on children and young people (Cullinane and Montacufe, 2020; Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020). While it has become common to speak of the "new normal" that will emerge after the lockdown, it remains to be seen what this will look like. How much scope is there to use the disruption as an opportunity to rethink schools for the longer term and to respond to Netolicky's call (2020: 393) to "consider humans before outcomes, students before results and well-being before learning"? This article presents some of the findings from two surveys of school leaders in two English regions undertaken during summer 2020. Deliberately shorter than a conventional research paper, its intention is not to examine government policy or guidance relating to the epidemic but to draws on the limited research published on leading schools after COVID-19 to highlight and contextualise the survey findings. This allows us to offer a relatively immediate snapshot of leaders' views on the effects of the pandemic and its implications for how schools should be rethought.

Methods

In June 2020 two online surveys of school leaders were distributed to all schools in the two English regions with which we and our colleagues work as researchers, initial teacher educators and local authority advisers in order to maximise the response rate before schools closed for the summer. The short surveys were completed by 45 primary school leaders in the West Midlands (WM) and 124 primary, secondary and special school leaders in the North East (NE) of England, although 82% of responses came from leaders with some responsibility for primary provision. The surveys were designed to collect leaders' immediate responses to the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown quickly, using as a model the school barometer surveys undertaken in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Huber and Helm, 2020). Both surveys included questions about how schools could be rethought and it is on the responses to these questions that we focus here. Due to its relatively small sample, only descriptive and thematic analysis were applied to survey data. The analysis included here offers a cross-section of contemporaneous views and does not claim to be representative.

Findings

Both groups of school leaders were asked how they would rethink schools in the light of their experience of the COVID-19 lockdown. Responses were left open in the WM survey and then used to create choices for leaders to select from in the subsequent NE survey. Having more trust in schools and reducing accountability pressures was the option that attracted the most responses: 87% of the NE school leaders who answered the question (n=94) saw this as a priority. They were also concerned with focusing more on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (67%; n=72) and adults in schools (62%; n=67); and broadening the curriculum (39%; n=42). Leaders with at least some secondary responsibility were under-represented in these responses. Other options, which included offering more online teaching or training; changing the structure of the school day or term; and rethinking schools' role in safeguarding and safety were regarded as less important. Here we explore some of the clarifications that leaders offered of these key survey themes, which suggested that the pandemic and lockdown had both validated and intensified views they already held.

Localising accountability and curriculum

Expanding on the survey's identification on increasing trust in school, one primary headteacher in NE called for accountability to be reduced and the curriculum to be reduced and contextualised more effectively to reflect schools' locality:

> "I would like to see more local freedom for schools to develop their own curriculum relevant to their setting and pupils, with only a very small core national curriculum."

Her view seemed to be influenced by the reductions in teaching time, increases in flexibility and distillation of the curriculum that followed lockdown. Her call for a more locally relevant curriculum was echoed by other leaders in NE, such as a primary leader, who identified a mismatch between the needs of the community and accountability frameworks:

> "Recognise that schools are hubs of community first so the inspection framework does not match the societal demand from and of schools."

This identification of schools as community hubs was also made by a special school leader who felt that the restrictions had reinforced the central place of schools in their community, which should be extended to enable schools to offer a broad range of provision for children and adults:

> "Schools are very often community hubs and should operate as such at all times - including school holidays so that they routinely have a broader range of staff expertise and staff working different hours etc so that childcare, catch-up programmes, sporting facilities etc can be used for community benefit."

Finally, a primary headteacher suggested we should learn from other countries where learning is less pressurised, which had a positive effect on children's development and wellbeing:

> "Be brave, learn (and act on) lessons from European countries where children don't start formal learning until much later than in the UK and they raise happier, less stressed, well-rounded children who are consistently ranked at the top of the world education league tables."

Wellbeing

This last leader's views appeared to have been prompted by the increased pressure and focus on children's (and adults') mental health and wellbeing following lockdown. These themes were also apparent in the responses from the WM leaders. One identified the mental health benefits of children enjoying school without the stress of testing:

> "A higher priority [should be] given to mental health through outdoor time, creative expression, exercise and play. Our keyworker children have been so happy in school without pressures of SATS/phonics screening tests and have flourished."

A deputy headteacher echoed this in her concern that too much emphasis had been placed on the negative academic outcomes of lockdown, rather than the psychological disbenefits. She felt that the crisis offered policy-makers an opportunity to focus on children as individuals, not only on their results:

> "There has been such a heavy focus on children falling behind academically from the government but very little as to how their mental wellbeing has been affected by this. I think there needs to be a complete mind shift towards thinking of them as children rather than numbers."

NE leaders were also asked about job satisfaction. Almost one-third (32%; n=35) of leaders said they were unlikely or very unlikely to choose to become a school leader if they had to make the choice today; almost the same proportion (31%, n=105) were unlikely or very unlikely to choose to become teachers. Less than half of those who would not choose to be leaders (14; 40%) were satisfied or extremely satisfied in their job, compared with almost three-quarters (72%, n=80) of the sample as a whole. If these findings were replicated across the country, it suggests a leadership capacity crisis in schools is likely to succeed the COVID-19 crisis.

Discussion

Analysis of these snapshot surveys indicate that the COVID-19 lockdown has reinforced and intensified school leaders' views about the need for change and that they were clear that the severity of the crisis has offered them an opportunity to rethink schools. Here we highlight four interdependent issues, familiar from the literature exploring the pressures on school leaders, which indicate how we might start to rethink schools.

The first issue is trust. The survey indicated that almost 9 in 10 leaders believed that policy-makers' trust in schools and their leaders, which recent research suggests has been eroding for some time (Stone-Johnson and Miles Weiner 2020), needs to be rebuilt. Leaders were clear that it would be counterproductive to return to inflexible accountability measures which reinstate pressures on children, young people and adults in schools after the pandemic, particularly since schools' fitness to take on responsibility for looking after vulnerable children and the children of keyworkers during the pandemic was not questioned. Leaders want accountability to be more trust-based. The second issue relates to the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Some leaders suggest that the pandemic has increased anxiety in some young people, adding to longstanding concerns about their mental health (Abdinasir, 2019; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018), while others benefitted from the reduced pressures which followed lockdown and the cancellation of examinations. This suggests that much more intensive and responsive pastoral support structures need to be developed to identify pressure points early and take young people's mental health needs more seriously in school. The third issue extends this to the mental health of leaders and adults in general in schools, which the pandemic has undermined. The responses about job satisfaction and career choice in the survey reflect calls to strengthen support systems for leaders and other adults in schools (Harris and Jones, 2020) to tackle this and other stress and workload issues (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010) and to protect and extend school leadership capacity. Finally, many of the survey respondents called for the introduction of more local and community-focused approaches to curriculum and learning in schools (Kerr et al., 2014; Harris and Jones, 2020). This would build on schools' increasingly central place in many communities throughout lockdown and reflect Fotheringham, Harriott and Healy et al.'s (2020) identification of the supportive role played by horizontal collaboration and communication during the pandemic. Their national survey found that school leaders regarded local responses as more effective and coherent than national regulations and guidance, reflecting views expressed in the two regions we surveyed. Although more research is needed into both the longer term effects of COVID-19 on school cultures and the potential for this to stimulate change, taken together the issues highlighted here represent potential starting points for rethinking schools in England and other countries post-COVID-19.

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