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Imagining a 'New Normal' Free from Judgement and Blame: creating sustainable partnerships with students and parents

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ABSTRACT This article is a reflective piece. It asks questions to support discussions in staffrooms and team meetings about what a 'new normal' could look like in schools. The author advocates a better partnership between teachers, students and parents in which they adopt a more equitable relationship built on mutual respect and trust – a partnership where they really examine what 'good' learning looks like. The author would like readers to consider the harm done by current derisive discourses around 'lazy teachers' and 'incompetent parents'. The widespread and overwhelmingly negative attitude to children being at home for this extended period and the assumptions about the 'damage' it has done to children and young people are not conducive to building positive, healthy partnerships. The author writes as an educator and as a parent, drawing on her experiences of school closure during the current pandemic.

My hope is that we can build better partnerships as teachers and students and parents. When school returns to a 'new normal', we have a chance to redesign learning experiences and attitudes to learning and to each other as partners in the learning process. We all want what is best for the child, but we probably differ in what we think that looks like. I am under no illusions about the immensity of this task. I could not even manage to agree with my ex-partner about what the new home-learning arrangements should look like, so I know it is not easy. But maybe this is the point: that we do not have to agree. Maybe we just need to listen and understand the perspectives and competing claims over the time of the child and young person. Wallace (1993) argues that the less groups interact, the more their perceptions of each other are likely to be

inaccurate, and that consequently there will be a greater divergence of values and beliefs.

Personally, I have enjoyed this period of school closure as an opportunity to observe my two children closely, in a way that is not normally possible. I have not been methodical in my observations, but I would argue that I now have a much better understanding of the ways in which my children learn and what their characteristics as learners are than I did before our enforced imprisonment together. I am not going to paint a rosy-hued picture; some days were better than others. But we found stability, helped by the purchase of a laptop for the Year 9 child – a luxury I am aware is not afforded to every family. And I am ready for my children to return to school and to a 'new normal'.

Planning the perfect school day at home was never part of my agenda. Although I am a teacher, I was not falling for that! I love the stories of those who tried and then gave up after the first day. Home is not school, and we can't recreate school at home. That said, I do know of families who did just that, even down to collective worship times, because their children needed such a structure. That approach was never going to work in my house. I did expect to be able to *help* my children though, but it seemed even that was too much to expect in the beginning. This was perplexing for me at the start of lockdown. Had school and home become two such very separate cultures that to try to mesh them into one was not going to work? Why have we allowed this notion that school is a place to learn and home is not? Why is some knowledge considered more valuable than other knowledge? And why can't we agree on this? This is not a case of educators versus parents or even parents versus children. Instead, it is to do with the different ideological perspectives which frame what learning looks like and, more importantly, what valuable learning looks like (for a comprehensive examination of these conflicting ideologies, see Schiro, 2013).

Learning Does Happen at Home

From a scan of my Twitter feeds, it was clear that there are different opinions out there. Some people were terrified for these 'poor children whose learning is going to suffer' without school for a few weeks. Others were commenting on the same things I was noticing. These people were mainly parents and grandparents, and probably the wealthier, unworried about paying bills, and the healthier, unworried about getting ill. They commented that many children seemed happier not because they were doing nothing, but because they had time and space to do things, and to do the things they wanted to do – things that support independence, such as cooking, cleaning, housework, do-it-yourself and exercise routines, and tackling the home learning that was offered from schools in a way that suited them, and all the while improving their digital skills. Yes, there has been some trial and error in how that has happened, but generally many children and young people found their groove and hopefully

know more about themselves as learners than they did before. I realise that this may all sound complacently middle class and that other children did not engage in this manner, but before we give way to hysteria regarding the plight of those children, maybe we should spend time with them and their families. Maybe we should stop valuing those behaviours we designate as 'wholesome' over other behaviours (Gillies, 2005) and hold off from judging those families who haven't behaved in the way *we* decided they should. Home learning might not always look like school learning, but that does not mean there has not been any learning (Maddock, 2006). Maddock (2006, p. 156) writes about the three types of learners that emerged during her ethnographic study of children learning at home: (1) the child the teacher knew; (2) the child the parent knew; and (3) the unknown child, the child who was 'becoming' – becoming who they wanted to be.

Children are agents in their own learning. They are not passive in the learning process, so to understand what has been happening to them at home, we need to listen to them. Maddock offers her advice for how to do this:

> The observer must hear children's commentaries, and privilege their perspectives. Only through adopting such a stance did the children's snippets of data, the paraphernalia of their lives, the minutiae, the seemingly random little bits and bobs of information which were important to them, begin to make more sense. (Maddock, 2006, p. 160)

Space to Listen

So, in this new normal, we need space to communicate with openness and kindness. No one has been unaffected by COVID-19. None of us are immune to the anxieties and worries which surround the pandemic, and some have been directly affected through the loss of loved ones, increased domestic violence, isolation due to shielding, loss of income, and so on. The government did a very successful job in scaring us all to 'stay home and save lives'; now, however, it says that it is time to 'stay alert' but go back out there – especially to school. The Secretary of State for Education says that teachers have a duty to go back into schools, unions have a duty to persuade them to do so, and he has a duty to make it happen (Groves & White, 2020). And, according to Michael Gove (2020): 'Why not, when teachers and children will be safe?' The government and media rhetoric around this have fuelled further teacher vilification. Teachers are 'not doing enough', either in terms of home learning, according to Andrew Adonis (Gibbons, 2020), or in terms of jumping to come back to unsafe working conditions that in any other workplace are not allowed.

A Discourse of Derision

Teachers worked incredibly hard under exceptionally challenging personal and national conditions. They switched overnight to providing home and distance

learning, finding suitable work that can be tackled semi-independently whilst being mindful of the inequitable access to digital devices and support. At the same time, teachers still went into schools and cared for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. They checked on vulnerable children who chose not to attend school. They have delivered food parcels to families most in need. School leaders also have the unenviable task of fulfilling a responsibility to their workforce and ensuring they are well. And let's not forget that many teachers have their own children to look after and homeschool, even as they face their own anxieties about the pandemic and deal with the care of – and worry for – their elderly parents and relatives.

Teachers do not deserve to be vilified. It is insulting and no doubt will exacerbate the teacher recruitment and retention difficulties. We have clapped for our NHS heroes but have ignored all the teachers who have gone into schools to support their children and families.

However, it is not only teachers who have suffered from this discourse of derision (Ball, 1990); parents have too. If we are to believe the government and the press, we must get children back into schools and away from those parents, from whom they are at risk. The hyperbole around 'lost school time' has been extraordinary. Teachers, too, have joined in on social media. There is fear for those 'vulnerable' children; fear for the regression of learning; fear for the mental health and emotional well-being of children not being at school; and fear for the lack of routine and structure, and the general 'undoing' of all the work of schooling. This blaming of teachers and parents has done an excellent job of shifting the gaze from the policymakers who are responsible for the situation we find ourselves in. It may come as no surprise that three-quarters of all teachers are women (Department for Education, 2020) and the parent mainly responsible for childcare and education during this pandemic is the woman. We have a situation where the predominantly male press and government are fuelling these myths of failing female parents and irresponsible female teachers, and it is easier for us to defend our own position by falling into the trap of blaming the other group. It becomes slightly more challenging when you are a female teacher and parent. But then we just think we are rubbish at our job and rubbish at parenting!

The castigation of parents is aimed mainly, but not exclusively, at working-class parents and is rooted in the discourse of poverty (Goodall, 2019). It conveniently blames individual parents for social and educational inequalities, and so avoids directing attention at systemic inequalities. It suggests that children need saving from their parents, who can't, or won't, work within the school's value system. As Gillies (2005, p. 838) suggests, there is a 'drive to equip working class parents with the skills to raise middle class children, based on a long running pathologisation of working-class parenting and a normalisation of the experiences of the middle classes'.

This deficit model of parenting is persuasive, but totally insulting to parents. I was shocked to hear that officials at the Department for Education had phoned schools in deprived areas asking them why all their 'vulnerable'

children were not in school. Why would they be? Parents had been told to keep their children at home as it was not safe to attend school. Most parents care. They care deeply about their children, and this policy basically said:

> It is best we look after your children for seven hours a day as you can't be trusted to do it. After those hours, you can have them, though of course they are at risk of catching Coronavirus with us in school and passing it on to your family, but that is still better than them being with you full-time.

Either parents can manage, and their children are safe with them, or they can't. Why were these parents judged adversely for not caring when they did not send their children to school, even as other parents were being told to keep their children safe at home? Tom Hunt, the Conservative Member of Parliament for Ipswich, is quoted in the *Guardian* as asking whether parents of vulnerable children should be allowed to decide about their children attending school: 'It could be the case that sometimes these parents are part of the reason why the child is vulnerable' (Weale & Adams, 2020).

However, if home life really is so bad for these children and young people – and I am not disputing that for some it is – what about evenings and weekends and school holidays? It is not acceptable just to say that these children are safe for some of the time. Either they are safe enough always or they are not. Schools should not be responsible. A comprehensive system of support should be in place outside of school. Yet, with all the cuts to services (see Britton et al, 2019), it is left to schools to take on the role of child and family welfare and support.

What Does Real Learning Look Like?

A second concern I have with this narrative of 'lost school time – and a 'failed generation' – is with those teachers who have lamented the loss of their efforts thus far. The concern seems to be that by the time children are back in full-time education, everything taught this academic year will have been in vain, for the children will have forgotten it. This is probably true. But what does that tell us about the current state of teaching and learning? If learning has been 'forgotten', perhaps it had not been learnt in the first place. Is it time to focus on what learning looks like? And could it also be time to re-examine what we value as learning? As a result of our performativity culture in schools, only learning in mathematics and English really counts. Of course, with the new Ofsted framework, we will see more effort afforded to other areas of the curriculum because 'Ofsted wants to see it'. But what do we, as educators, parents, and children and young people want to see?

Might Children Be Happier at Home?

Is the profession worried about returning after lockdown? Yes. Do they think children need time and space? Yes. Will they give it to them? Probably not – not unless the Department for Education and Ofsted 'allow' them this space. Because that accountability culture is not disappearing. In fact, I am sure that it will become even tighter, especially considering the recent announcement of 'catch-up' funding for schools (Whittaker, 2020). That student well-being teachers are worried about? Well, that will probably get worse because something that is not discussed in any report that I have seen is that children and young people could possibly be happier precisely because they are *not* at school. At home they are not being compared constantly. In school, such constant comparison is a result not only of peer pressure but also of the ranking systems in play, from 'the red table' in primary to the setting hierarchy in secondary. Please let's not pretend that our current schooling system is not harmful for many individuals and that being away from this sometimes toxic culture might not offer a respite (Danby & Hamilton, 2016). Schools which have been housing vulnerable children have reported that those children are happier than ever and are more willing to come to school than they were before. This is probably because the timetable has gone. 'Normal' learning has gone. And the other children, who often give them a difficult time, have gone.

The New Normal

For this 'new normal', I would like to see a more equitable partnership between children, teachers and parents, one where there is space for meaningful reciprocal conversations which allow for all the partners to learn and understand one another's perspectives without bias. No longer can we have schools knowing what's best, and holding a deficit view of parents and parenting. Yes, teachers are experts in that they have studied the profession, and worked in the job for some time and have wider experiences to draw on, but parents know their children better than teachers do. Of course, the children really know what it is they like and dislike, and how they learn best (not in terms of learning styles, but whether it is by being alone or in groups, playing competitive games or silent study). We need to really listen to children (Leonard, 2015). We need to harness the confidence parents and children have after managing without school and encourage open discussions and exchanges, and not rush to a 'business as usual' approach. Let's not just return to the old normal and continue working our way through the national curriculum, highlighting the topics covered, making grids of assessments and blindly following expectations, and turning more and more children off learning – especially those 'vulnerable' ones. Instead, let's use this opportunity to have a real think about what it is we want from schools and from our curriculums (Boyle & Charles, 2016).

The Department for Education has said that it will be setting up a pupil–parent panel to support policymaking, which is excellent news (see *Schools Week*, 2020). If even the Department for Education is advocating it, we can all do it!

Perhaps we can contribute to this panel and be the agents of the change we want. If we are to produce lifelong learners, we must no longer view learning as something done to people in school, but instead realise that we all have an equally valuable role to play in it – especially the learners themselves.

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