

What might the Covid Pandemic mean for the SERA Leadership in Scottish Education Network (SERA LiSEN)?

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We are living through unprecedented times and times which will test our leadership capacities at all levels of the system to the full. This crisis needs to be understood from a global perspective and within broader social parameters - the quest for social justice, amongst other imperatives. Over 1,383 million children and young people (CYP) world-wide were affected by school closures in May 2020 (UNICEF Office of Research, 2020c) with over 90% not in attendance at school in early spring (Lee, 2020), heightening inequalities and disrupting the social relationships of CYP (Armitage & Nellums; Editor, 2020b; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

UNICEF stresses the importance of providing opportunities for children to catch up with their learning either through remedial programmes, accelerated tuition or additional teaching time (UNICEF Office of Research, 2020b). However, they observe that only a fifth of low income countries had implemented measures to train teachers on the use of online platforms (UNICEF Office of Research, 2020b). Globally, access to digital technologies is highly unequal (Armitage & Nellums) with fewer than half of households in the majority of countries having access to the internet, affecting rural areas in particular (UNICEF Office of Research, 2020c). Even in the more prosperous countries represented in the OECD, access to the internet varies according to socio-economic status (OECD, 2020). Around 15% of Scottish teachers expressed concerns about CYP's lack of access to

technology to support home learning during lockdown (Educational Insitute of Scotland, 2020).

For CYP living in poverty, the home environment may not be conducive to learning (Armitage & Nellums; Barnard, 2020; UK Government, 2020; UNICEF Office of Research, 2020c; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Around a quarter of parents participating in a UK survey considered that they did not have adequate resources to support home learning during lockdown, citing lack of teacher support or inadequate learning space within the family home (UK Government, 2020), putting a strain on family relationships (UK Government, 2020), compounded by a lack of access to outdoor spaces and leisure activities (Editor, 2020c).

Around a sixth of Scottish teachers responding to an EIS survey were concerned that the learning needs of CYP were not being met adequately during lockdown, citing lack of one-to-one support of the kind normally offered by learning support assistants, challenging family circumstances and lack of access to resources in the family home. A similar proportion were concerned that the socio-emotional needs of CYP with Additional Support Needs were also not being met adequately (Educational Insitute of Scotland, 2020). A survey conducted by the Child Poverty Action group highlighted that the concerns of parents were not solely around learning but around the emotional support which would be offered to CYP on return to school (Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), 2020).

Companionship, play and peer interaction are essential for psychological wellbeing (Liu, Bao, Xiaolin Huang, & Lu, 2020) and the development of key social skills and emotional resilience (Music, 2017). Increasingly, concerns are expressed about the impact of Covid-19 on the socio-emotional development of CYP (Editor, 2020a; Orben, Tomova, &

Blakemore, 2020), although access to social media may have served to mitigate these effects to a degree for adolescents (Orben et al., 2020). For some children, confined to their homes, potentially exposing them to abuse and neglect (Lee, 2020; OECD, 2020; UNICEF Office of Research, 2020a, 2020c; Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020), compounded by the lack of access to key adult supports and services (Armitage & Nellums; Golberstein, Wen, & Miller, 2019; Lee, 2020; UNICEF Office of Research, 2020a, 2020c; Usher et al., 2020), with schools less able to provide a safeguarding function (Armitage & Nellums; Lee, 2020), difficulties may have been exacerbated.

It is important to recognise that Covid-19 restrictions were experienced differentially by CYP and that it presents not only as a time of challenge but also as a time of opportunity and for learning. What is absolutely clear from the above is the need for an holistic approach which draws fully on the school and its community, working in partnership with parents and external agencies to identify and address the needs of the community and clear, considered guidance from government, consulting fully with stakeholders.

Leadership programmes, and headship programmes in particular, have always stressed the need for emotionally intelligent leaders (see Crawford (2009)) who are listening, flexible, adaptable and responsive to the changing needs of their school communities and are grounded in their values. The pandemic has brought this into sharp relief. It has provided an opportunity to stand back, take stock, to identify what is really important to the school community and to consider what can be learned and built upon in the future. Parental engagement in children's learning emerged as key as did digital learning.

A survey conducted with past and present Into Headship students at the University of Strathclyde¹ paints a very clear picture of dedicated senior leaders reaching out to their school communities and, in particular, to the most vulnerable children and families. They recognise a significant number of challenges in so doing, but what is particularly heartening is the degree to which they considered that Into Headship had helped to prepare them to cope with the demands of the pandemic.

This pandemic will challenge leadership at all levels of the system. Whether the system comes out proud is a measure of the quality of leadership and capacity building that has been put in place across the system and the commitment of all to serving our school communities. Individually, and collectively, we can make a difference.

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¹ This survey and related research will be the focus of future articles

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