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Recognising and respecting the profession of teaching in a time of national crisis

This is, perhaps, not a typical *Impact* editorial – but we are not in typical times.

School leaders, teachers and school support staff across the country have demonstrated exceptional courage during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, courage which, as Winston Churchill observed, has assured all of the professional qualities inherent in school culture:

‘Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because, ... it is the quality which guarantees all others.’ (Churchill, 2005, p. 169)

As an educator with 30 years’ experience, I believe

completely in the integrity of the school and college workforce, and am immensely proud of the way in which our leaders, teachers and support staff have behaved during the coronavirus crisis.

I am hopeful that others outside of education, in society at large, will recognise and remember the contribution of teachers in keeping the United Kingdom functioning in a time of extreme social challenge and personal change.

The Teachers’ Standards state that:

‘A teacher is expected to demonstrate consistently high standards of personal and professional conduct.’ (DfE, 2011, p. 14)



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› The nation has borne witness to this conduct of our teachers. We should feel indebted to the schools workforce for the critical support that they have provided in caring for the most vulnerable children and those of key workers, to enable those who need care to receive it and for the supply of resources we all need to be maintained. The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, articulated this gratitude on Twitter (28 March 2020):

'At the end of a difficult week, I would like to say a massive thank you to all the school leaders, teachers and staff who have shown immense dedication as they step up to help this country tackle coronavirus. #StayHomeSaveLives'

Since the coronavirus took hold in the UK in March 2020, the similarities in the vocational commitment of medical workers and school/college workers have been evident. The General Medical Council's (GMC) Good Medical Practice (GMC, 2019) ethical code and the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) are remarkably alike. The unwavering dedication of each profession should come as no surprise to the public, as both careers are underpinned by behaviours and attitudes that 'uphold public trust... and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour' (DfE, 2011, p.14), acting 'with honesty and integrity' (GMC, 2019, p. 21). If we consider the preamble in the Teachers' Standards,

the response of school leaders and teachers to the government's directive for schools to remain open for the provision of childcare – whether we agreed with the approach or not – should have been easy to predict. Teachers put pupils first, know their stuff and act with integrity:

'Teachers make the education of their pupils their first concern, and are accountable for achieving the highest possible standards in work and conduct. Teachers act with honesty and integrity; have strong subject knowledge, keep their knowledge and skills as teachers up-to-date and are self-critical; forge positive professional relationships; and work with parents in the best interests of their pupils.' (DfE, 2011, p. 10)

The GMC's Good Medical Practice guidance for 'Processualism in Action' (GMC, 2019, p. 4) gives strikingly similar instruction to doctors in putting their patients first, knowing their stuff and acting with integrity:

'Good doctors make the care of their patients their first concern: they are competent, keep their knowledge and skills up to date, establish and maintain good relationships with patients and colleagues, are honest and trustworthy, and act with integrity and within the law.' (GMC, 2019, p. 4)

The difference is that of public perception of each profession. We expected doctors to respond as they did, i.e. to support the wellbeing of others, because we know that our lives are in their hands and we have learned to trust that they will protect us if we are in their care. The fact that both doctors and teachers put the interests of those they serve first does feel like something of a revelation in the media. The similarity of these public service professions has never been more obvious than it is now, and it needs to be understood and remembered. A change in any previously less favourable social attitudes towards the value of teaching, and the education workforce, is crucial for any subsequent political change in how teaching, teachers and schools are 'treated'. The media portrayal of teaching in the UK through the coronavirus pandemic thus far meets the guidelines for a 'model of cumulative effect' (Simonson and Maushek, 2001, p. 1010) that should optimise the chance of attitudinal change. Let's hope so.

In my capacity as a multi-academy trust (MAT) trustee, the following communication (email) from a MAT chief executive officer

(CEO) to her school leaders is both representative of the educational professionalism witnessed across the UK and a testament to the embedding of our Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011):

'Well, how the world has changed in the last fortnight. We were expecting to break up today for two weeks rest and relaxation. Now, the world has turned upside down and the holiday as we know it has evaporated. Having said that, it is important that you reassure your staff that they will be allocated dedicated R&R time, through the rotas, where they are NOT expected to work. If you are not explicit on this many, being the conscientious staff that they are, will just continue with "non-stop" working, which will not be good for their well-being. I've always known how dedicated, resilient and innovative staff in schools are. I've seen it first-hand throughout my career and particularly in the past two weeks. Even so, over the past few days I've been astonished at just how deep this goes as the staff in our schools have responded at speed to the

Government's call. Through that response, has come a huge selflessness and willingness to go above and beyond knowing that our work is essential at this time of national crisis.

Have you reflected on what we achieved in the last two weeks? Can you count how many decisions we made and explained last week under pressure? How many children, parents and staff did we calm, reassure and inform? We managed to steer a clear course through confusion, frustration and fear and that requires the highest levels of physical, social and emotional energy. As public servants central to communities, school staff are a front-line service and should be supported and encouraged like our NHS colleagues.'
(MAT CEO, 27 March 2020)

This email was sent at the end of the first week of school closure and the first week of key worker and vulnerable children care. It recognises her teams' challenges, their need to be supported, the support they need to give to their staff and their complete dedication in the most difficult of circumstances.

The very public positive school response (and not so well mentioned in the media but equally significant response of colleges) to the coronavirus pandemic should position teaching alongside medicine as a desirable, high-value career. If this change does happen, then the challenges of teacher recruitment

(rising pupil numbers and not enough teachers in an incredibly competitive labour market (DfE, 2019b, p. 10)) should certainly begin to abate. The innovative responses shown by our education leaders to unknown situations may demonstrate the importance of professional learning and teacher expertise. The government should want to provide more generous and sustained funding for effective professional development that extends beyond the Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019a) and National Professional Qualifications (DfE, 2019b). Improving teachers' self-efficacy, making them feel confident in their ability to do their job effectively, can increase teacher retention (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018). At 33 per cent attrition for teachers in England (only) leaving teaching by year five (DfE, 2019b, p. 10), something has to be done. As Chris Baker highlights in his article on pages 30–31, we need CPD that leaves participants both knowing better and doing better.

Laleh Laverick and Emma-Kate Kennedy, in their paper (pages 56–57) on relational supervision, outline an approach that could be used as a way forward for supporting 'doing better' CPD. Perhaps the resilience of teachers, which Anna Lise Gordon identifies in her paper on pages 72–75 as a continuum for trainee teachers, will no longer be questioned in the post-pandemic world, and real issues around workload will be fully addressed to support a work-life balance. A new acceptance of school and college leaders' expertise should be

› witnessed, with the government giving them the autonomy that they have earned and the funding that they require to lead their institutions effectively, including access to the pupil mental health support that Adrian Bethune identifies is often missing in schools, on pages 78–80.


There is no doubt that the call to teachers and school leaders to join the frontline in supporting the community effort against the coronavirus pandemic will change education in the future. Their response should see our teachers, school and college leaders upfront, leading the post-pandemic era. They delivered an effective and safeguarded experience for childcare prior to the Department for Education’s guidance on safeguarding being issued on 27 March 2020 (DfE, 2020). Their professionalism was evident and undoubtable. As Andy Downing stated on Twitter in a @HeadsRoundtable discussion on 29 March 2020, headteachers are ‘doing a magnificent job’, and he quite correctly questions the central control and accountability of schools in the future:

‘System leadership is in the hands of headteachers – and they are doing a magnificent job. @educationgovuk and @GavinWilliamson have left the field and this is a good thing. We must not go back to the previous accountability and centralism.’

The government must remember how teachers and education leaders responded, and how they used their knowledge and expertise and put their pupils first to inform and enable teaching to become a self-governing profession (like medicine). This would give teachers, and schools, the greater autonomy that Jack Worth argues on pages 6–9 is required to provide higher job satisfaction and, by proxy, teacher retention.

The positive representations of teachers on social media, such as on Twitter, with the #TeachersAreHeroes and the following @NHSEngland statement (22 March 2020), should re-establish teaching as a first choice career.

‘Thank you to all teachers and support staff in school on Monday – caring for our children so that NHS, social care and other critical staff can go to work and help in the fight against #coronavirus.’

Public support of schools should provide a window of opportunity, when everything settles, that allows the education concerns discussed within this issue of *Impact* (teacher recruitment, retention and workload; professional learning and teacher expertise; leadership and learning; and resilience and mental health) to be addressed by education leaders and supported through long-term, non-party-political strategic planning and investment that benefits all. Our education workforce has been courageous, and clearly has all the other qualities required for a self-governing profession. 

The government must remember how teachers and education leaders responded, and how they used their knowledge and expertise and put their pupils first.

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