Personal principles for a roadmap to educational recovery in the 'Covid decade'

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ABSTRACT

The Government's roadmap to recovery from the educational deficit caused by Covid-19 appears to pivot, primarily, on 'catch-up' plans and 'discipline hubs'. Despite continuous teaching online and in Covid-restricted classroom formats, teachers have been urged to act like 'absolute heroes' and abide by their 'moral duty' to keep schools open. However, neither appeals to 'heroic' duty nor Nolan's *Seven Principles of Public Life*, are likely to provide the conceptual underpinning required of a roadmap to meet the complex challenges of children's new learning needs or enhance their wellbeing. This article offers an alternative approach to educational principles for navigating the unchartered territory of the 'Covid decade' now unfolding.

Introduction

A typical school year for teachers could be summarized as a cycle consisting of long stretches of standard teaching activities punctuated by high points of professional accomplishment and low points of pressure and exhaustion. From the students' perspective, the school year is structured by classroom learning interspersed with exams, school trips, birthdays and other memorable events, with a deep need for continuity, security and belonging. The serious disruption of these usual rhythms of the school year by the impact of Covid-19 has forced us to pause and reflect on educational principles that could underpin the roadmap to recovery. As we write, England is emerging from Covid-19 lockdowns and plans have been drawn up for a government 'education recovery package' focused on academic 'catch up' and the restoration of 'discipline and order' apparently lost due to school closures (gov.uk, 2021a; 2021b). Since the first lockdown in March 2020, teachers have been called upon several times to act as 'absolute heroes' and 'put the interests of all our children first' (Williamson, 2020) by 'getting more children back into classrooms' (Woodcock, 2020).

However, as the pandemic developed, it became clear that 'putting the interests of children first' represents an oversimplification of a complex situation that goes beyond the 'moral duty' (Johnson, 2020) of getting children back into classrooms. For example, the essential nature of the pandemic is that it arises in waves and is projected to be with us for years to come. This has profound implications for the long-term safety of the children, teachers, families and the local community in which they live. Similarly, notions of academic 'catch up'

on ‘the basics’ in order to improve ‘children’s life chances’ (Williamson, 2020) also seem simplistic and inadequate. They ignore the complexity of children’s lives turned upside down and the deepening of chronic educational and societal problems. For example, a gradual decline in mental health amongst children and young people was accelerated due to Covid-related anxiety, bereavement and isolation, with record numbers of children seeking NHS help with depression, eating disorders or mental health crisis (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2021). The 2020-21 financial year witnessed a 27% increase in incidents of children dying or being seriously harmed as a result of lockdown-related rise in domestic abuse (gov.uk, 2021c). Due to financial insecurity and job losses, record numbers of children now live in poverty: a month after the first lockdown, four in ten households using food banks were families with children (Trussell Trust, 2020). Between January 2020 and January 2021, an extra 300,000 pupils became eligible for free school meals (FSM), with the total eligible for FSM in England now at 1.74 million or one in five school children (gov.uk, 2021d). Physical isolation from friends, increased screen time, locked-up leisure centres and cordoned-off playgrounds contributed to a marked drop in children’s physical fitness (Ofsted, 2020). The predicted long-term impacts of the pandemic pertaining to widening structural, geographic and health inequalities, pressure on revenue streams across the economy, rising unemployment and low levels of public trust have combined with greater awareness of the importance of local communities and mental health to mark the 2020s as the ‘Covid decade’ (British Academy, 2021).

In this wider context, improving children’s life chances goes beyond academic ‘catch up’ and ‘essential’ skills that schools are now expected to deliver. The rhetoric of ‘heroic’ duty does little to address the mounting pressures on teachers already suffering from pandemic-related disruption, excessive workloads and policy U-turns. Despite appeals to ‘moral duty’, a recent poll by the National Education Union revealed an education workforce not only exhausted but also demoralised by the lack of respect on the part of government and media (Adams, 2021). The existing frameworks aimed at helping schools to ‘navigate’ the educational ‘moral maze’ (ELC, 2019) may be insufficient in addressing complex problems that we may encounter on the road to educational recovery. The two main frameworks in question include the *Seven Principles of Public Life* (also referred to as the *Nolan Principles*, gov.uk, 1995) and a *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education* authored by the Ethical Leadership Commission (ELC, 2019). The next section examines their prescriptive nature and highlights the need for an alternative approach that would encourage reflection on some fundamental questions about what we do as educators, instead of giving us pre-prepared answers.

The *Seven Principles of Public Life* for 'navigating' the 'moral maze'

The *Seven Principles of Public Life* were introduced in 1995 to apply to all those who work as public-office holders and are, therefore, 'servants of the public and stewards of public resources' (gov.uk, 1995). In 2019, the Ethical Leadership Commission (ELC) embedded these principles in a *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education* developed to guide the behaviour and professional development of teachers and school leaders.

The *Seven Principles of Public Life* include: *selflessness*; *integrity*; *objectivity*; *accountability*; *openness*; *honesty* and *leadership*, which are framed as follows:

> the principle of *selflessness* means that holders of public office 'should act solely in terms of the public interest'
>
> *integrity* entails that holders of public office refrain from acting or taking decisions 'in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends'
>
> *objectivity* is based on acting and taking decisions 'impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias'
>
> *accountability* entails that holders of public office 'must submit themselves to the scrutiny' over their decisions and actions
>
> *openness* is predicated on acting and taking decisions in an open and transparent manner
>
> *honesty* pertains to holders of public office being truthful
>
> *leadership* means exhibiting all these principles in their own behaviour, actively promoting the principles and being 'willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs' (gov.uk, 1995)

However important these principles are, they have been framed as generalised 'prescriptions'. As such, they offer limited support to educators working under conditions of uncertainty and conflicting viewpoints. For example, consider the principle of *objectivity* as applied to a headteacher's decision to move all teaching online following a sharp rise in Covid infections in the community in the run-up to Christmas. This decision is likely to have been made with public interest in mind (i.e. *selflessly*) and justified in terms of an *honest* goal of ensuring that pupils will not need to self-isolate on Christmas Day. However, headteachers who planned to switch to remote learning in the run up to Christmas 2020 were threatened with legal action by ministers who expected schools to remain open (Ferguson, 2020).

Or consider the launch of 'behaviour hubs' which exercise *leadership* in restoring 'order' in schools and advising teachers to 'sweat the small stuff', i.e. focus on the minutiae of discipline such as pupils forgetting equipment or not paying attention in lessons. This approach arises from an *objective* claim that poor behaviour 'holds pupils back' (gov.uk, 2021e). But is

'sweating the small stuff' justifiable when a child forgets equipment or does not pay attention in lessons because of serious, anxiety-provoking events at home? Principles framed as universal prescriptions regardless of circumstances, do not sufficiently account for the specific, concrete situations that affect the ethics of everyday decision-making. They also obscure the 'politics' of decision-making, particularly when opposing viewpoints clash. What ministers referred to as 'heroic' duty entailed everyday logistical challenges such as delivering teaching packs to children with no internet access at home and managing the school's test and trace, as well as teaching face-to-face without the protection of a Covid vaccine.

In addition to the *Nolan Principles*, the *Framework for Ethical Leadership in Education* incorporates Aristotelian virtues as a basis of training in 'ethical awareness' and creating an ethical climate in schools. The aim here is to ensure that values and virtues are 'embedded' in everyday practice and a school can claim: 'We think about ethical behaviour carefully here' (ELC, 2019, p. 14). The *Framework for Ethical Leadership* poses questions for teachers and leaders to assist them in ethical decision-making, such as:

> What should I do? What is the right action? (p.18)
>
> How well am I doing as a trusted educator? (p. 14)
>
> What kind of role models are we to the children in our care? (p. 12)

Aside from leading questions such as 'How well am I doing as a trusted educator?' (which assumes that 'I am doing well' and 'I am trusted' in the first place), the *Framework for Ethical Leadership* lapses into normative statements, for example that: 'all teachers should be: positive, responsible, conscientious, intellectually curious' (p. 31) and that educational leaders 'should be dispassionate, exercising judgement and analysis for the good of children and young people' (p. 10). Two key problems with these statements are, first, that they take 'the good' of children to be something already defined and uncontested and, second, that they do not encourage engagement with the reasons why 'all' teachers should be positive or why they should act as 'absolute heroes' when caution might be a safer stance to take. The emerging 'Covid decade' is highlighting the importance of local communities (British Academy, 2021) and, consequently, we need to probe deeper into how we can effectively begin to manage collective wellbeing in a long-term crisis. The next section outlines an alternative, more nuanced approach to educational principles which has been developed through our work with teachers and school leaders.

An alternative approach to educational principles

Now, more than ever perhaps, each of us needs to be able to make our own judgement calls in complex and new circumstances. How we do we prepare ourselves to do that? How do we find a way to be fair and consistent? How can we give ourselves a basis for justifying our actions to ourselves, and to others if need be?

Having thought-through personal beliefs to which to turn when the moment calls can provide our own roadmap – the one we believe ourselves – by which to navigate. A personal roadmap will be different for each of us and we will not find it in any article or book on education in a library or staffroom. We will have to make it for ourselves. So instead of principles given to us by someone else, good though these may be in one way, we take the view that our professionalism, by which we mean our commitment to work for others and not ourselves, demands principles of a different nature.

A personal principle could be characterised as:

> An understanding, or a view, about a fundamental aspect of professional activity that we can use to direct and shape our actions and behaviours, and which we are able to articulate and to defend with reasoned arguments.

A principle of that sort would have to be the result of us asking ourselves questions about what we think about the key matters that we deal with. The more fundamental the questions, the more helpful the answers. Of course, this is not a new idea, far from it. The Socratic method of asking oneself more and more refined questions to get to the bottom of what one believes has been around for a while and is frequently applied to educational thinking (Paul and Elder, 2019).

Looked at this way, there can be no definitive list of the aspects of professional activity that need to be thought through. That is for each of us to decide based on our own circumstances. What follows, however, are some questions - quite fundamental ones - about schools and about teachers and teaching which we have found useful when discussing educational principles with groups of teachers studying leadership and management at Master's level. Against each set of questions are the kinds of 'post-it note' responses that our Master's sessions on 'Principles' have generated (see Table 1). We have chosen seven areas ('domains'), as a contrast with the *Seven Principles of Public Life* (gov.uk, 1996). What follows will be seemingly naïve, but that is in some ways the point, and we make no apology for it.

	Domain	A range of responses
1	What/who are we here for anyway? Who are we working for, actually? Whose needs are of greatest importance in what we do? If we have to choose, whose interests should come first?	It's the kids, of course! The parents are the customers. The school - or is it the Head, or the Governors?
2	What about us? What's our remit? What's our purpose? How do we see ourselves?	Transmitters of knowledge Professionals who educate children Child custodians Parent substitutes
3	What is this organization we work in? Who owns it? Who runs it? Who pays for it? What is its nature?	Schools are all separate from each other. Schools are connected and form a collective enterprise. Schools compete - parents choose. Parents compete – schools choose. State-funded schools are public property. Schools are businesses using public money.
4	What is the process we are part of? How do we know what to do day-to-day?	Teaching is the business of teachers - teachers decide what and how. Teachers don't decide the curriculum. The Government does. Heads and Governors decide the curriculum. Examining bodies decide the curriculum.
5	What are we seeking to do? How do we know if we succeed? Who has the right to decide?	We work so the school is high in performance tables. We want a popular school. We aim for parental satisfaction. We want a successful Ofsted inspection. We want happy children. We want children who love learning.
6	How do we get to these goals? What kind of thinking and behaving gets us there? How does success happen?	Effective school leadership More money Performance appraisal Performance review and staff development More accountability to stakeholders Strong management
7	What internal rules do we follow? What background thoughts guide our actions?	Just get through… Support colleagues and their thinking. Have my own values and keep to them. Act in line with the organisational culture. Do what is good for my career.

Table 1 Seven domains underpinning personal principles

Each of us could think of different responses in each of these domains and further, or better, that is more useful for ourselves, areas of our professional life to clarify our beliefs about. What matters here is to go through the process to the point where we have a satisfactory - to ourselves - view so that we know what we believe and could justify it to others.

Suppose we take the third domain, the one about schools. How do we think about schools in the current educational system? The responses we make to the kinds of questions we could ask ourselves have real, everyday implications for school leadership teams and school governors over, for example, matters such as the admission arrangements for the school (for own admission authority schools). Schools can, in practice, act more exclusively or more inclusively. And changing admission numbers might create a problem for the adequate supply of places. When taken with views over other fundamental matters, our responses in an area like school admissions have implications for matters such as exclusions, and the enthusiasm with which Fair Access Protocols are followed. Do we think effective practice should be shared between teachers in different schools, or are such matters trade secrets? That might depend on whether we see schools as competing or collaborating, and that depends in turn on the answers you might give yourself to questions in this domain. And so on for the other domains, or for different ones of someone else's devising. Gaining clarity gives us a basis for behaviours that can be articulated and defended if necessary. That is to say, it gives us personal principles.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned the lives of children, teachers and school leaders upside down. Practices, routines and assumptions previously taken for granted now pose a myriad of new challenges, from the no-longer-obvious 'given' that schools remain open during term time and close for summer holidays, to the assumption that thinking about 'ethical behaviour carefully' (ELC 2019, p. 14) amounts to simply following the *Nolan Principles*. The predicted long-term impacts of the pandemic highlight the importance of local communities and public trust (British Academy, 2021). Public trust, in turn, relies on how we think about schools, both in relation to school admissions discussed above and in every aspect of the school working *as* a community, *in* the community. Navigating the unchartered territory of the 'Covid decade' calls for an educational recovery that is not just about 'catch up' in order to go back to 'normal'. Asking fundamental questions is likely to generate diverse, even contradictory, answers. But at times of crisis, a shared understanding of the collective good for a school and its community can emerge through open conversations that seek consensus through respect for a plurality of views rather than through the positional authority of individuals. Just as tackling the pandemic has required our collective effort, a school's decision-making under conditions where the consequences of decisions can only be known after the event, cannot be the domain of one 'solitary' individual (Arendt, 2005).

Ultimately, the Covid-19 pandemic is reminding us all of our vulnerability. However, the recognition of our own vulnerability enables us to better understand the vulnerability of others. It is from such an understanding, which goes beyond appeals to 'heroic' duty or prescriptions for the 'virtuous' teacher or leader, that we can properly exercise our duty as educators. Therefore, what it means to care and to be trusted as 'servants of the public' (gov.uk, 1995) is about engaging with fundamental and complex questions that get to the heart of our personal educational principles.

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