COVID-19: A Catalyst for Change

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17. COVID-19: A Catalyst for Change

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Abstract

The final chapter summarises what preceding chapters have revealed about teachers and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and why the crisis has been a catalyst for change. Discussion proceeds, organised into two overarching themes drawn from the content of the book: *Complex Lives & Shifting Identities* and *Care & Co-Dependence*. These lead to four recommendations for the transformation of teaching post-COVID: 1) Develop and nurture the professional autonomy of teachers; 2) Incorporate reflexive practice into teacher development; 3) Cultivate cultures of care and empathy for all; and 4) Work collaboratively to achieve transformation. Together the four recommendations function as pillars for long-term systemic and cultural change in education, which place care and empathy more centrally on agendas and ensure this extends to teachers and leaders as well as students. Calls are made for more concerted reflexivity and collaboration and for teaching professionals to be enabled to work with autonomy and flexibility. The recommendations seek to capture valuable lessons from the pandemic – which emerged through the chapters within the book - in order to address the effects of neoliberalism in education and ease the recruitment and retention crisis.

Introduction

In 2020 Morin's (2020) maxim 'expect the unexpected' proliferated. For teachers this meant rapidly adapting their lives and practices to ensure they remained effective during the COVID-19 pandemic whilst guidance was often emergent. In this book we have presented examples of the 'pandemic pedagogies' utilised by teachers in a variety of educational contexts in several different countries. These often incorporated digital technologies to facilitate remote teaching and learning which was necessary to limit the spread of the virus.

Through the accounts of educators featured in the preceding parts of the book around *Priorities*, *Alliances*, and *Re-imaginings* we can see that over time some teachers were able to experiment and find innovative solutions to the challenges posed by the unforeseen predicament, even enhancing their practice and rekindling the joy of teaching. For others outcomes were less positive, echoing Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot's (2020) finding that teachers worked harder than ever before during the pandemic, leading to stress and burnout.

As discussed in our introductory chapter, neoliberalist systems of schooling are characterised by outdated and inappropriate notions and practices which fail to serve children well and have detrimental impacts on teachers' well-being and professional agency (Lakes & Carter, 2011). This, we suggest, has contributed to a retention crisis (alongside factors such as unfavourable working conditions and stagnating pay - as Weale (2022) reports of the English context). Whilst the attrition challenge paused during the pandemic, as teachers sought to remain in relatively stable employment during a social and economic crisis where few alternative options presented themselves, the issue is now returning to pre-pandemic proportions (this at least is the situation in England – see Worth, 2023).

Teacher recruitment difficulties also resolved themselves temporarily in England during the pandemic (ibid). People from different walks of life had reason and time to reflect on their ambitions and/or experienced the loss of existing employment, so may have had a different sense of risk around career change. Additionally the experience of supporting their own children's learning during lockdowns seems to have spurred an attraction to the profession for some (Adams, 2020). But again, increased interest in teaching careers was short-lived and 2022 saw a substantial dip in people registering for ITE (Initial Teacher Education) courses in England, taking registrations to below pre-COVID levels (Worth, 2023).

Without substantial change the resourcing challenge seems insurmountable. Benhenda and Macmillan (2021) report how the most recent OECD TALIS Survey (OECD, 2018) revealed that 15% of teachers aged 50 or under were intending to leave teaching within the next five years. Of course the pandemic might have dampened this exit figure but the intent is still of great concern with implications for the profession and individuals. Lower quality teaching and lower student achievement are the consequences of frequent staffing changes (ibid). In turn, this makes attracting high quality teachers to schools more difficult (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). This is particularly pertinent in schools with higher levels of disadvantage and helps educational inequalities to persist (Gershenson, 2021) because teacher turnover is especially problematic in those settings (Allen et al., 2018).

Teachers are not interchangeable and so recruitment and retention of teacher talent is not just about numbers. The quality of teachers and their teaching has been found to be the most important factor in student outcomes, with differences in student performance being greater within schools than between schools (OECD, 2005). It is therefore necessary for effort to be focused toward improving working conditions to retain experienced teachers. In the report 'Teachers Matter' (OECD, 2005) the point is made that the quality of teaching is not just linked to the quality of teachers, although this is clearly important, but is determined by the environment in which their work takes place: 'able teachers are not necessarily going to reach their potential in settings that do not provide appropriate support or sufficient challenge and reward' (ibid, p. 7). Managing attrition will reduce the need for recruitment activity - and the associated time and cost this entails - but even where recruitment is required change is still needed for the profession to be appealing, accessible, and sustainable for a broad range of individuals.

As Collet-Sabé & Ball (2022, p. 1) comment, 'the COVID pandemic has been both a catalyst for the end of things traditional and a disruption in which fundamental

questions about the continuation of things, indeed of our species, have been raised'. There is diversity in opinion around what should happen with regard to teachers and teaching post-COVID. Responses have ranged from calls for a return to pre-pandemic 'normality' and for pupils to be supported to swiftly catch up on so-called 'lost learning' (EPI, 2021) to proclamations that the 'death of the school' should be a consequence of the pandemic – in other words, there should be a radical re-organisation of education in its wake (see for example Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022; Robinson, 2020). Others call for 'lessons to be learned' and for some changes to be made within existing structures of schooling. Nóvoa & Alvim (2020), for example, call for a 'metamorphosis', stating: 'we do not want the disintegration of the school but, rather, its profound transformation in the context of new relations with society and knowledge, always valuing teachers and a humanist vision of education' (ibid, p. 38).

This book has provided opportunities for scholars to present their ideas for how the profession and practices of education might be re-imagined as a result of the experiences of teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Robinson (2020, p. 7) commented, the pandemic 'pressed pause on many of our social systems', it is also a chance, he said, to press 'reset'. Through their chapters our contributors have given platform to the voices of teachers, who continued to practice during the unprecedented and challenging experience of the COVID-19 crisis. Moving forward without 'adequate inclusion of teacher perspectives', job-related stress may, Robinson et al. (2022, p. 1) write, lead to further 'teacher shortages, deterioration of teacher mental health, and ultimately worse outcomes for students'.

In this chapter we present a call for action, drawing from the preceding chapters to present a series of proposals for teaching post-COVID. Together these express what teachers need and deserve if the profession is to be attractive, professionally empowering, personally fulfilling, and effective post-COVID. We stress the timeliness and importance of these recommendations and consider some of the limitations around what we propose. First we lay the groundwork by discussing two key themes which emerged within and across the chapters to make visible the deliberations that led to our proposals.

Complex Lives & Shifting Identities

Teachers' lives can be considered complex (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). This is manifest in the frequent requirements for teachers to make decisions about how to prioritise their time and efforts. Whilst this might be said of many professionals some dilemmas are consequences of the specific working contexts and patterns that most teachers experience. For example, in many countries childcare that facilitates early starts to the working day is not available and, as Brown's chapter explored, this leads to some teachers who are parents (most often mothers) working reduced hours in an attempt to make combining family and job roles manageable.

There are emotional as well as practical challenges faced by teachers, including trainee teachers (as explored in Woodhouse's chapter), implicit in trying to balance professional and domestic lives. Woodhouse and Brown both highlight expressions of guilt by mothers in particular. Woodhouse's sample of student teacher mothers reported feeling that they were not doing well enough as parents during their ITE studies. She found that that ITE providers do not routinely consider parents'

challenges, such as the need to plan ahead for childcare. Consequently, Woodhouse concludes, student teacher mothers have to be particularly well-organised, resilient, agentic and determined if they are to complete their ITE programme successfully and enter the teaching profession. Brown and Woodhouse's chapters both focus exclusively on the experiences of female teachers (as does Steffan & Potočnik's on menopause) but teaching continues to be a female-dominated profession (OECD, 2023), so supporting this demographic is important in efforts to retain teachers.

The day-to-day 'rhythms' (as Cameron & Abrams put it in their chapter) of teachers altered profoundly during the pandemic as they were required to manage conflicting roles and recalibrate their lives. Jones et al.'s (2022) survey results suggest that the nature of the work of teachers changed significantly - there was 'a large reduction in teachers' daily instructional minutes […] which were replaced with increased planning, paperwork, and interactions with colleagues and parents' (p1). Chapters in the part of this book about *Alliances* also note the increased prominence of the relational aspects of teachers' work during the crisis (we discuss this further in the following section). Furthermore, chapters throughout the book support the thesis that COVID brought dilemmas about priorities into sharp focus as teachers had to make often urgent, painful, and sometimes profoundly life-affecting decisions about, for example, whether to prioritise: time for the children in their classes or their own offspring; their students' well-being or their own; the meeting of state-prescribed targets or the more broadly defined learning, engagement and enjoyment of those they teach.

Coleman et al., in their chapter, propose that the pandemic shifted all aspects of educators' lives, furthermore for some it offered 'a moment, a space, in which we might think of ourselves, others, and the world differently' (Collet-Sabe & Ball, 2022, p. 1). Forde et al.'s chapter discusses how issues that were already over-stretching teachers (e.g. poor management, heavy or misaligned workloads) were exacerbated during the pandemic. It also rendered the complex, sometimes 'messy'[1], lives of teachers more likely to be visible to others as digital learning provided a window into home-spaces and interruptions from family, pets, delivery workers etc. could not always be averted (Dunnett's chapter provides an insightful deconstruction of the sociomaterial aspects of teaching from home). This increased apparency/scrutiny of teachers as whole and complex people brought issues of identity to the fore, as Atay reflects on in his chapter. He proposes that the move to online learning could be experienced as empowering, but also not without difficulty, especially for teachers (and students) from historically marginalised groups.

As a punctuating moment in recent human history the pandemic was an opportunity for some to pause and reflect (Robinson, 2020). As the background noise of face-to-face socialising fell away teachers like many people may have had chance to consider their own lives and what is important to them, engaging in the identity work classically defined by Sveningsson & Alvesson (2003) as the ways human beings are 'engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness' (p. 1165). Caza et al. (2018) propose that identity work is an ongoing process which can

[1] This word was used by participants in our research with teachers during COVID (Marsh-Davies & Burnett, 2021)

be accelerated and brought to the fore by significant or traumatic events such as a change in work contexts. A pandemic requiring the closure of schools, displacing teachers and requiring them to work in new ways, is an apt example. Whilst Alvesson & Wilmott (2002) consider an employee's sense of self 'a significant medium and outcome of organizational control' (p. 622) they also propose it as a possible space for 'forms of micro-emancipation' (p. 624). In other words, by considering issues of identity we might observe instances of social change, which no matter how small, can signal a loosening of control and indicate transformation. This chimes with Atay's proposal and is indicative of the impact of the pandemic for some teachers' identities.

Reflecting on identity might sound like a trivial, abstract or even indulgent activity (Mykhalovskiy, 1996) but it has concrete consequences for the lives of teachers including choices around whether to continue in the profession – thereby it also impacts upon pupils' educational and life chances (OECD, 2018). We propose therefore that it is crucial to acknowledge and explore how COVID has changed the social role[2] of a teacher and how individual teachers find consonance with this. Beauchamp & Thomas (2008, p. 175) suggest that identity can be seen as 'an organizing element in teachers' professional lives' – an opportunity to think about oneself and changes that one might wish to make to their lives and practice. Hong & Cross Francis (2020, p. 208) agree with the impactful quality of identity work, stating that teacher identity is a significant concept with regard to 'efforts at unpacking teachers' professional lives, understanding teaching quality, motivation to teach, and career decision making'.

Looking beyond fundamental career decisions to the day-to-day activities of teachers, identity is also relevant. Coleman et al. propose in their chapter that a teacher's values and standpoint are entwined in their pedagogies and practices – for example, whether they feel proficient in face-to-face or online teaching can form part of their professional identity. So the forced engagement with digital technologies during the pandemic - which became the primary source of connecting with students for many teachers - led to some educators' professional identities being shaken, they say, as previously confident academics felt like novices due to this new sense of deficiency. This loss of confidence and changed perception of self is also noted in Laidlaw & Wong's chapter, as illustrated in their participants' struggles to relate to and engage students who would not use video in online sessions, and speaks to the 'precarity' (to borrow Coleman et al.'s eloquent phrasing) that the pandemic brought for teacher identity.

Other chapters present accounts of teachers (only eventually, in some cases) finding new confidence with technology, including experimenting with new ways of teaching (Hordatt Gentles et al.) and connecting (Honeyford et al.), finding new ways to balance roles (Woodhouse), and experience renewed joy in teaching (Forde et al.), as well as having chance to reflect on the purposes of teaching (Moorehouse & Tiet). No clear conclusion emerged from the chapters about whether the pandemic made teachers' lives less or more complex, or somehow easier to manage – it's likely that 'all of the above' were the case, dependent on the intricate web of circumstances in

[2] Here we are drawing upon Burke & Stets (2009) definition of a social role as 'a set of expectations tied to a social position' (p. 114).

which individual teachers' found themselves - but the message that the COVID-19 crisis has had profound implications for teachers' lives and identities resonates throughout this book. This suggests a need for ongoing reflexivity from practitioners around what it means to be a teacher, as well as careful consideration of how to adjust their practices and organise their lives to remain cognisant of their priorities. This will require support from teacher educators, school leaders and policy-makers in terms of appropriate mechanisms and resourcing. As we discuss below, no teacher works in isolation and individual efforts are unlikely to lead to comprehensive change.

Care & Co-dependence

As Cain et al. write, post-COVID (2022), 'teaching is inherently a social practice, and care is integral to successful teaching' (p. 4). In this section we reflect on these two associated aspects of teaching (i.e., teaching as relational and care as a crucial part of the role), which emerge in this book as central to the pandemic experience for many educators. Chapters have pointed to ways in which teachers collaborated with and supported one another during the pandemic. The act of opening up teaching and learning resources for other practitioners to share, for example, was highlighted in Hordatt Gentles et al.'s chapter, and can be viewed as a simple act (when facilitated by digital and social media) with great implications in easing the daily burden of fellow teachers.

Honeyford et al.'s chapter builds on the experience of conducting an online writing and book club for young teens and reveals the careful considerations of the authors around how to collaboratively design, deliver and reflect upon the unique summer 2020 session. Co-author Kelsey reflected at the time '*we are our own built-in support system. We are a team. And that makes this achievable and exciting, instead of overwhelming'.* This is a sentiment mirrored in Cameron & Abram's chapter where a participating teacher describes weekly professional learning sessions during COVID with the intent *'to just come together as a staff, to build camaraderie, and to also develop whatever skills need to be'.*

Hargreaves' (2019) review of research on collaboration found that teachers who work in collaborative cultures tend to secure higher student results compared to colleagues who work in cultures of individualism. This highlights the paradox of neoliberal attempts to demarcate individual teacher performance for the ends of simplifying data (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). The experiences reported in this book of how teachers collaborated with one another gladly and effectively during the pandemic suggest that cultivating cultures of 'collaborative professionalism' (see Hargreaves, 2019) in teaching could reap benefits and enable transformation.

Through the preceding chapters we have also heard about teachers negotiating new relationships and dependencies with broader stakeholders. Pokherel & Mehta (2021) propose that the COVID experience has forged a strong connection between teachers and parents. Practitioners working in new ways with families is evident in Boyd et al.'s chapter and their example from early childhood education and in the chapter by Hylton-Fraser & Hylton where they discuss the importance of parental involvement in children's learning.

Accounts of relationships with leaders highlighted in the book illuminate contrasting experiences. We hear examples of these being strong, supportive and pivotal for educators during the pandemic (as in Boyd et al.'s chapter) but also ambivalent, even detrimental (Kinkead-Clarke & Abdul-Majied). The ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) that Boyd et al. draw upon in their chapter illustrates the importance of congruence between the approach of early childhood leaders, the early childhood service, and the home learning environment and highlights the co-dependencies entailed in ensuring that learning was effective during lockdowns. A holistic community approach to supporting teachers, and learning, is important beyond the early childhood phase and beyond the pandemic period (Iyengar, 2021).

As we have already touched on, pupils' perceptions of their educators changed during the pandemic as teachers became humanised and more relatable, visibly having similar lives and problems to them, and teachers gleaned a more holistic sense of the circumstances of their students' lives (Gourlay et al., 2021). Coleman et al. claim that academic teachers continue to have greater responsibility for student care post-COVID. They suggest that due to pandemic-induced anxiety and students' declining self-efficacy it became a central part of a teacher's role during the pandemic and continues to be so. Forde et al. report that, as the focus moved to the nurturing aspects of the role, some teachers rediscovered their positive emotions around teaching. They proclaim that this return to the core principles of education contributed to enhanced teacher well-being and motivation during the crisis and may form part of the solution with regard to retaining teachers in the profession going forward. Likewise, Moorhouse & Tiet, looking at the context of ITE, suggest that it is vital for teachers to incorporate care as part of their teacher identity, from the very beginning of their training.

In their chapter Cameron & Abrams present examples of care emerging from their data as significant in teachers' experiences of the pandemic and something they do not wish to lose from their roles going forward. But foregrounding care as a key aspect of the work of teachers is not without costs. There are worrying examples in the book of teachers sacrificing their own well-being to ensure their pupils' (see Forde et al.'s chapter). Furthermore, care is a gendered notion which can undermine professionalism by being framed in opposition to it and considered 'women's work' (Poole & Isaacs, 1997). As Kinkead-Clark & Abdul-Majied discuss, in their chapter about early childhood settings, where care is seen as the main or only part of a role professional status remains elusive. This is echoed by Boyd et al. They report that in Australia early childhood practitioners were not recognised as essential workers during the pandemic when other teachers were. They say the early childhood field is at a disadvantage, as anyone is perceived as able to rear children, and caring for children can be done by teenage babysitters. But, they stress, early childhood educators were not just carers during the pandemic - they provided important early learning experiences for children, they supported families, and worked hard to provide an environment that was safe and hygienic – and this continues post-COVID.

Cameron & Abrams, through the research reported in their chapter, observe that teachers have modified their practices since COVID-19 '*to meet their students' needs and, eventually, their own needs*'. They propose that caring for students is

related to an educator's own well-being and call for future research and practice to focus on the relationship between students' needs and teachers' needs. Their findings hint at a move from self-sacrifice as an aspect of teacher role identity (Jin & Cortazzi, 2016) to a recognition that: 1) caring, as part of a teacher's work, can be enriching – good for their well-being as well as that of their students; and 2) looking after themselves means teachers are more likely to remain present and able to provide care and consistency for their students (OECD, 2018). A cultural change in this direction seems promising for teacher retention (as well as student outcomes) but for impacts to be realised this needs to be acknowledged by every stakeholder in the 'ecosystem' of learning - and working practices need to be adapted accordingly.

Call for Action

Whilst undoubtedly difficult the pandemic also provided an opportunity to shine a light on the achievements of teachers and the complexity of their lives. It highlighted the tensions that many teachers experience between professional and personal concerns due to heavy workloads and inflexible working conditions. For many, it was a time when their dedication to learners and their families was reinforced as they gained new understandings of those they taught. Many of the chapters speak of reaffirmations of long held beliefs, of reinvigorated commitments, and of renewed enthusiasm for the work of teaching. At the same time they spotlight the difficulties entailed in managing the complex demands of the personal and professional lives of teachers, and to incompatibilities between what matters to them and the demands of contemporary educational systems. Drawing on these rich insights we make four recommendations for teachers and teaching post-COVID:

1. **Develop and nurture the professional autonomy of teachers**

As the chapters of this book have illustrated, the COVID-19 pandemic led to many teachers working with more autonomy and flexibility around what and how to teach, where and when to work, and how to combine their teaching roles with other concerns, such as their own well-ness, caring for others, and enjoyment of life. The pandemic disrupted educational policy agendas and practices situated within the dominant and widely circulating discourses of globalisation and neoliberalism (see Adams and Povey, 2018; Goodson 2014). With the break from some of the mechanisms which control the work and lives of teachers (for example fixed working hours and spaces, classroom observations, school inspections, and a target-driven curriculum) some found their practice re-invigorated, as they worked with greater creativity and collaboration, ultimately resulting in improved well-being and enjoyment of teaching.

The 'age of the autonomous professional' (Hargreaves, 2000) was prevalent in developed nations during the 1960s to the mid-1980s where teachers 'enjoyed unprecedented autonomy over curriculum development and decision making' (ibid, p. 158). However, this changed in many jurisdictions in the late 1980s-2000 as demands increased for teachers to teach in prescribed ways, develop new skills and to comply with new initiatives. This approach left teachers with less personal resource for engagement with the more creative and moral purposes of education (Adams and Povey, 2018). Instead, the focus on 'quality' judgements diverted

teachers' attention toward an endless quest for progress which involved teachers competing with both themselves and against others in the profession (ibid).

For newer teachers the COVID-19 pandemic arguably provided a taste of the autonomy (re)experienced by their more seasoned colleagues. The insights provided by chapters in this book reinforce the necessity for teachers' professionalism to be protected, and for their autonomy to be ensured and acknowledged within teacher education and curriculum policies (Nóvoa and Alvim, 2022). Part of such autonomy is for teachers to be trusted and to be confident and supported in their decision-making. This requires teachers to be adaptable in response to finding solutions to the challenges posed by their day-to-day lives as teachers. Whilst the pandemic provided plenty of opportunities for teachers to demonstrate this skill, it also highlighted the importance of autonomy being situated within a more flexible school environment so that capacity for initiative, adaptation and change (ibid) are enabled.

Running parallel to this is a need for more flexibility in working patterns. Flexibility is important in enabling teachers to combine interests and responsibilities beyond the school gate with those at work. Working part-time is often considered to be effective in providing work-life balance and enhanced well-being (Shiri et al., 2022) but Brown's chapter suggests otherwise for the teaching profession. Beyond rigid part-time hours, what is required post-COVID are creative context-specific solutions offering genuine flexibility that work for, not against, teachers and are arrived at through negotiation with them. Research in this area is limited and will be required in order to iron out the practical challenges that this may present and make adoption of flexible working straightforward for teachers and their settings.

2. Incorporate reflexive practice into teacher development

Through our second recommendation we wish to add to calls (from Husu et al., 2008 and others) for emerging, and more experienced teachers, to have the time and tools to engage effectively in reflexive practice (commonly cited as originally propagated by Dewey, 1933, and Schön, 1983). This would build on much existing work in initial and continuing education. Here we expand on why it is so crucial to continue and expand this beyond COVID.

As explored throughout this book, COVID raised questions about what it means to be a teacher but of course there is no singular purpose of teaching, which leads us to be concerned by neoliberalist efforts to shape visions of education through narrow market-driven values (Gilbert, 2021). Being reflexive about the purposes of education should be a 'situated practice' (Stîngu, 2012) by the individual teacher in relation to their context including phase, setting (structural and cultural components), and regional political and socio-economic factors. And, as COVID has shown us, what it means to be a teacher shifts over time, as well as from place to place. For example, Cameron & Abram's chapter suggests that the pandemic brought a movement toward a culture of 'caring not scoring' (hinting at a loosening grip of neoliberal agendas), as they noted 'a seismic shift in cultural practices' in the charter school they observed, 'away from the charter's protocol to use benchmark-based assessments to embrace in-the-moment intuitive assessments and acceptance of well-being'.

Moorehouse & Tiet provide insightful discussion of the value of reflexive activity for new teachers within their chapter. They write of the pandemic as a 'reality shock' that led teachers to ask 'what if tomorrow never comes?' and to react by intuitively aligning their practice to their personal values. These centred on care, truth, vigour and connectedness. Moorehouse & Tiet urge teachers to enact a habit of reflection and questioning (Grayling, 2003) and work with 'openmindedness' and 'wholeheartedness' (Dewey, 1933). More research around the purposes, forms, and outcomes of teachers' reflexive practice post-COVID would provide both a wider evidence-base and specific examples/ideas for actions to aid teacher reflexivity which holds promise as a valuable means of developing, motivating and retaining education professionals.

3. Cultivate cultures of care and empathy for all

In the preceding sections of this chapter we explored how the pandemic has heightened the significance of care for teachers, and in teaching, but that this can be at the expense of teacher well-being and/or professional integrity. Here we develop an argument for cultivating cultures of care and empathy post-COVID for all involved in the process of education and propose approaches to change that are mindful of these difficulties.

In 2011 Barr called for teacher development activities to focus more on training teachers 'to recognise and exercise their cognitive and emotional empathic capacities' (ibid). It may well be that, for many teachers, the pandemic required them to draw on these qualities more than at any other moment in many of their careers. While remote learning rendered this challenging, the chapters of this book present many examples of considerate and empathetic practice. Cultivating empathetic cultures closely relates to our prior call for increased opportunity and support for individual teachers to engage in reflexive practice. It also connects with our call for increased and concerted collaboration in support of teaching and learning (which we discuss further in the following section). It furthermore requires professional autonomy (our first recommendation) – for teachers to be able to choose how to respond to specific instances of student need and provide appropriate support. In short, our four recommendations work together as pillars for transformation in education, prioritising care and empathy and ensuring that these extend to attitudes toward teachers and leaders, as well as to students. The co-dependency of student and teacher well-being should be explicit and safeguarded in such cultures.

DeCampos et al. (2017) propose that cultural initiatives must be coupled with structural change in order to be successful. Teacher and school performance in neoliberalism is often reduced to blunt data which can dehumanise the experience of education (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017), 'remodelling learners as a compliant proto workforce' (Humphreys, 2017, p. 41) and subduing teachers into serving market-driven strategies of accountability and competition (Loh & Hu, 2014) rather than allowing them the freedom to innovate and adapt to support learning and well-being in specific contexts. For cultures of care, empathy, and inclusion to thrive we concur with DeCampos et al. (2017) that corresponding structural change is simultaneously required. This entails carefully reconsidering, amongst other things, quality standards, school inspection foci, and how teachers and pupils are assessed in the post-COVID era.

4. **Work collaboratively to achieve transformation**

As Niesz (2007) reflects, the way Western schools are organised serves to limit opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively. She discusses the Japanese model which incorporates time to discuss practice and plan lessons with other teachers within the working day. Looking beyond networks within schools, and writing before the pandemic, Niesz (2007) postulates that 'communities of practice, in which learning and teaching are interwoven in social networks, may someday lead to a movement to put thoughtful professional expertise back into schooling' (ibid, p. 605).

Ritchie (2012, p. 120) proposes that 'education has increasingly become more technical and instrumental, with a primary focus on the economic outcomes of education [...]. These changes push teacher education away from social justice teacher preparation and toward preparing teachers as technicians to raise students' standardized test scores'. He presents insightful examples which demonstrate the importance of collaborating in networks beyond and between schools to support teachers to 'enact critical pedagogical practices that seek to make school a place that is equitable, democratic, collaborative, just, and humane' (ibid).

Stank et al. (2001, p. 31) define collaboration as 'a process of decision making among interdependent parties … [it] involves joint ownership of decisions and collective responsibility for outcomes'. Collaboration can be a vehicle for change (Senge et al., 2007) but building collective capacity for change entails careful considerations around culture and reciprocity (Jones & Harris, 2014). Furthermore, infrastructure 'that connects people together in a meaningful, productive and compelling way' (ibid, p. 475) is required. This reinforces our call for changes to culture and systems to be considered as equally important and mutually reinforcing.

The chapters of this book have shown that working in collaboration with others (for example parents, colleagues, other education professionals and students) enabled learning to continue during a pandemic which presented imminent danger to life and closed schools. Collaboration can also be a pathway to achieving transformation post-COVID. Like Sharrat & Fullan (2009) we recognise that this will require motivation and organisation. Having opportunities to be reflexive with regard to the purposes of education, being empowered to act with autonomy and flexibility, and having a supportive network are, we propose, *all* vital in enabling change.

Final reflections

In this chapter we have argued for change to the structures and cultures of teaching in order to support autonomous, reflexive, caring and collaborative teachers. Of course none of this is new and change is not a simple process (Hayes, 2022). It is also important to recognise that this book offers only a partial view. Our chapters do not represent all phases of education or geographical regions and inevitably feature only those teacher participants with the time, motivation and capacity to contribute, even during a global health emergency. By foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of teachers, we have largely excluded those of others (perhaps most notably, those they teach). The teachers' voices are filtered through the words of the

researcher-author/s, many of whom have a similar standpoint to our own, informed by Western-centric academia and inspired by critical studies of education and organisation. The research methods utilised to capture data were also shaped by the preference and circumstances of the researcher during the pandemic. And we cover a limited range of topics – we don't consider in any depth important issues such as the remuneration of teachers, budgets for education, and safeguarding of children, for example, which for others might have been the starting points for contemplating teaching post-COVID. Additionally, we are not blind to the unequal distribution of privilege and capacities for change in the global educational context, which we see largely as enduring consequences of national histories and policy contexts. This speaks to a need for allies for teachers, both from within and outside of the education profession – and across national boundaries.

Educational institutions 'have a unique opportunity to positively and proactively change as a result of COVID-19' (Zhao & Watterson, 2021, p. 10). The pandemic has shown us that change in working environments, patterns and practices is possible and can be made to happen quickly when there is a necessity, a will and support. We should not lose the momentum of this catalyst for change if we wish to combat the ill-effects of neoliberalism and avoid the loss of valued teacher talent. Fullan (2020, p. 27) proposes that 'the change transition – pandemic and beyond – will play itself out over the next decade' and as Sir Ken Robinson (2020, p. 9) stated shortly before his death, 'to create a new sort of world, and a new kind of normal that generations to follow will add to and shape for themselves … it starts with education, it always has done'.

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