

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility meeting on education recovery

Monday 19th April 2021

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility was pleased to host a meeting on education recovery after the Coronavirus pandemic with the following panellists:

- Catherine Roche, Chief Executive of Place2Be
- Mouhssin Ismail, Principal of Newham Collegiate Sixth Form
- David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges
- Sarah Thomas, Joint Director of Stonecroft Day Nursery

Chair of the APPG Karyn Smith introduced the session and was joined by co-chairs Baroness Tyler of Enfield and David Johnston MP.

INTRODUCTORY SPEECHES

Sarah Thomas, Joint Director of Stonecroft Day Nursery

Sarah emphasised her passion for early years and gave a brief overview of her role at her nursery in North Somerset with 55 children currently on roll. She emphasised that she and her nursery team have invested time and money to ensure that their early years setting conforms to Ofsted specifications and expectations regarding safeguarding, staffing and equipment.

Sarah stated that she was speaking on behalf of a sector which has been underfunded for years and is facing an exhaustive list of criteria with no extra funding. During the pandemic, Sarah's nursery was initially only open to those children from parents who are key workers, and then opened to wider children as restrictions loosened. Throughout the pandemic, financial issues at Sarah's nursery have spiralled, as more staff need to be employed to ensure the necessary staff to student ratio, the necessity of extra PPE, cleaning and other costs which are exacerbating already stretched budgets.

Sarah outlined that there has been lots of research into the value of early years, especially as after the pandemic, some children have been away from routines for months. To help children return to some semblance of normality and adjustment has required an enormous amount of work from dedicated Early Years professionals.

The financial challenges facing the sector have existed for many years, as the amount of funding for early years settings has decreased in real terms whilst requirements have gone up, and some settings can be losing as much as £1 per hour per child, month on month. This has meant that, even prior to the pandemic, there have been concern over the sustainability of the sector.

Early years professionals feel undervalued and forgotten by the government during the pandemic, as well as before it, despite the fact that they are expected to be consistently widening their skill set and CPD.

Greater funding would allow for workers to do this. Early years professionals have skills in noticing SEND traits early, allowing for better development and support for these children, and are also trained in noticing all forms of abuse.

Early years support should be accessible for all children and teaches them crucial values for their next stage of education. It is time to work and support early years to allow all children.

Catherine Roche – Chief Executive of Place2Be

Catherine opened by pointing to Place2Be's work on the impact that poor mental health can have on a child's engagement in learning. She mentioned that children's mental health was an important issue before the pandemic, however this year has highlighted how much school plays a part in children's mental health.

Place2Be promotes and focusses on a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing, so with staff, parents and the pupils themselves, and this combined approach is something to bear in mind when thinking about recovery.

Half of the students supported by Place2Be are pupil eligible for pupil premium, a quarter are involved with social care, and over a third have multiple serious childhood negative experiences. It is therefore clear from the data that there can be a positive impact on a child's engagement with learning and with their social relationships, even for children who are traditionally hard to reach, and this impact can be sustained. Mental health needs to be at the heart of recovery.

Catherine pointed out that lockdowns have undoubtedly had an impact upon children. In primary schools, issues with anxiety and low mood are more prevalent, as are behaviour issues. With secondary age groups Catherine's charity is seeing more young people with depression, anxiety, self-destructive thoughts and suicidal ideation, and there has also been an increase in high threshold safeguarding concerns.

Catherine emphasises that for younger children it is vitally important that they have access to play, as this develops important skills in their social and educational abilities. We also need to ensure that we are equipping class teachers with skills for understanding children's behaviour, as we are hearing a lot about behaviour issues, but need to understand that children's behaviour can be a method of communication.

It is also crucial to support parents, as children with conduct disorders are most likely to drop out of schools, but supporting parents to support their children can have an impact.

Catherine pointed to the role of technology in recovery, as the developments of online learning from this year can be leveraged to be used in a more blended way. Catherine ended by saying that it is incredibly positive to hear commitment to mental health from the government, but we need to join up health and education systems and push forward with a more combined approach.

Mouhssin Ismail – Principal of Newham Collegiate Sixth Form

Mouhssin opened by saying that a lot has been said on attainment gaps, but he has some questions regarding this approach - namely which groups are being compared, and if the impact of the pandemic is homogeneous.

He stated that it is fair to say that students know less than they would have done, but that when we talk about a knowledge deficit, really we mean that mastery of certain knowledge impacts what grades students get, and this impacts more than basic knowledge. This means that the term catch-up is only of the knowledge that that has been lost over the last year. The ability to move onto the next stage of education – which is where the biggest gains can be made for underprivileged students – is impacted more by the ability to perform well in tests than in lack of knowledge itself.

If exams remove some content, then it will allow for a more even footing, as it would prevent those who have had more time in the classroom from doing far better. Using an NTP-like programme can help, but he stated that he has concerns about the quality of these.

There are further issues around learning loss that need to be addressed, including those moving into sixth form with less knowledge. For those starting year 12 in September, they will be coming in with inconsistent grades, but if the syllabus is reduced, this may allow for greater fairness.

Exam grades matter more than knowledge asymmetry for disadvantaged students, and significant gaps at universities can be addressed by students more easily than at state comprehensives. Mouhssin said that he perceives the greatest issues to face students are at transitional periods, including those moving from primary to secondary.

Mouhssin emphasises that no discussion on catch-up can be complete without pastoral support, as schools need greater resources to support young people. Mouhssin ended by saying that changes to pedagogy, extended days, summer schools and other options are not panacea, but need to be blended with more robust solutions.

David Hughes – Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges

David opened by referencing a survey carried out in March to assess the impact of the pandemic on students, which found that about a quarter are performing below expected levels, which is surprisingly low. He points to this as a reason why it is unhelpful to generalise about the impact of the pandemic, and not to think of young people as victims and reinforce negative language.

David made the point that for some courses, the transition to online learning was far more impactful than others, with particular concern for those on practical courses. Equally, he said, that move to online was not just about the loss of learning, but also the loss of experience, including social experiences and extra-curricular activities, which are particularly important for young people without much other social capital. He also states that he is particularly concerned for those on practical courses, as well as students with language or communication issues.

David reiterated Catherine's concerns about the mental health of students and young people, particularly those who have moved on from education during the pandemic, and who are facing a tough job market with less work experience than normal.

To address this, there needs to be more funding for 16–18-year-olds, and this could be achieved through the continuation of Pupil Premium past age 16. Students need far more hours of teaching, and David points out that in the UK college teaching averages of 15 hours per week, whereas in other economically developed countries this figure is more like 25. To address those leaving this year, there should be the offer a guaranteed extra year if they chose to do so. However, these decisions need to be made quickly.

David also pointed out that it is difficult to navigate the various government incentives like Kickstart, as they do not join up particularly well. He ended by saying that there needs to be more money injected into the sector, and that, whilst the £1.5 billion the AoC are calling for sounds like a lot of money, in comparison with job retention schemes it is actually a very small sum.

Karyn thanked the speakers, and highlighted that it is right to point out not just what young people have lost but also what they have learned during this year. Karyn then opened up questions from parliamentarians and the audience.

QUESTIONS

David Johnston raised that when working as a Social Mobility Commissioner, the SMC wanted to also consider the other actors who can play a role. David asked what panellists would like to see from other actors in the sector, including employers, universities and schools.

Catherine – Pointed out that looking at what has been learned from this period is important, especially in terms of how we can use technology to reach more children, and how we can train professionals differently to help reach young people. She would like to see different sectors working together and working more creatively.

Mouhssin – Emphasised the need to be clear on what the desired outcome of specific interventions is. In his experience, companies are doing a lot to support young people, and the corporate world is also doing this. In terms of universities, UCL has helped his school significantly, so there are organisations who are positively involved. However, he emphasised that these resources need to be mobilised together.

David – Began by saying that he would like to see more of an areas-based approach. He reiterated that transitions are a dangerous part of the system, as they are areas where young people can slip through the cracks. In response, the government needs to insist that all providers work together to map every young person through these stages. He would also ask leaders to look beyond their institutional interest and work collectively. He ended by saying that employers and the government need to emphasise the value of training and work experience.

Sarah – Stated that in the early years they haven't seen a massive impact on the mental health of very young children, but schools need to recognise the support that parents need. She pointed out that some families have multiple children under the age of ten, all needing home-schooling, and these parents in particular need understanding from teaching professionals.

Baroness Tyler asked how mental health support work teams are working alongside more established mental health interventions in schools, and if there were more resources for mental health, what should they be spent on.

Catherine – Stated that it very early days for mental health support teams so it is difficult to say what impact they are having and how they are working alongside older interventions.

David – Pointed to the devolvement of health care in Greater Manchester, which has resulted in more funding for mental health support in colleges. He stated that the number of referrals for mental health at colleges has increased massively, and to tackle this he would want training for FE staff for these referrals. David also offered to share his survey on student mental health in colleges.

Karyn comments that MPs are very cognisant of mental health problems from their casework. She asked Mousshin and David to expand on some of their asks of government.

Mouhssin – said everything comes back to the idea of whether or not 'catch up' is possible. If it is concluded that it is not possible, then the parameters need to be changed. Disadvantaged young people need exam results to help them get on with life, and this can only happen by cutting content, as it gives time within the academic year so that young people can sit exams to prepare. But this needs to be done quickly.

David – emphasised that all of this should be understood through the lens of the unprecedented circumstances of this year, however, focus needs to be on those students who have the least time

left in education. He also stated that any decisions need to be made quickly, and changes to be implemented in September need to begin planning in the Spring.

Questions from audience

The role of community and community organisations in education recovery

Catherine – said that youth centres can play an important role in supporting schools and are very important for mental health. To accomplish this, youth workers need to feel well trained and supported in supporting young people and their mental health. Voluntary and community organisations can reach parents and families effectively, and technology can make a huge difference in this area. Sport also plays a huge role with mental health for young people, particularly with summer schools, and sport can help children socialise. But this can only happen if youth workers and other staff are well equipped with mental health training and support.

Support with behaviour in schools

Mouhssin - said that behaviour hubs have been set up, but there are different layers to this. One is that obviously behaviour needs to be good enough to learn, but also lots of children have been through extraordinarily difficult circumstances. As such, there needs to be empathy and understanding, and school practitioners are already doing this.

David – pointed out that he hasn't heard that behaviour is a particular issue, however lots of young people have suffered losses and this requires bereavement training.

Role of higher education institutions in supporting colleges

David – said that he would love to see more of this. This would need to focus on the young people who are risk of dropping out, and every institution needs to work together to prevent this, including universities as they can help motivate students about higher education experiences.

Local authority engagement with parents to encourage childcare offer take-up

Sarah – raised that most parents know about 3-4-year-old offer but not many people know about the 2-year-old funding, so getting the word out about this would be great. Making sure wider community professionals know is key as we've lost so many children's centres, so this information is not as accessible as it used to be. Need to get this information to parents the earlier the better.

Measuring success from government funding and public accountability

David – agreed that the government will always want measures and accountability for spending additional funding, but that he would love to see the government saying, 'this is a pandemic, we will trust schools and colleges'.

Mouhssin - agreed with David that ideally, we need to trust teachers, and pointed out that these successes are difficult to measure anyway. Provided that there can be a state of relative equality in measuring come summer, then he sees no problem with publishing measures of success, but it will have to be based on progression rates rather than grades as CAGs will not be standardised.

Catherine – stressed that accountability is important for voluntary sector. Success could be measured by looking at engagement in learning, as well as progress in all forms of learning. Also, from a mental health point of view, looking at things like wellbeing measures could be helpful.

Sarah – closed by saying that early years professionals want to be taken seriously as educators, and that early years settings desperately need more funding to ensure that there is longevity in the sector.

CLOSING REMARKS

Karin thanked the panellists for everything they are doing in their fields and for joining the session.