Short Article

What are the ASPIRE Principles and Why Do They Matter for Post-Pandemic Education?

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Although they were less likely to fall ill, the pandemic exacerbated difficulties for many young people across the world in terms of mental health, connection with others and widening gaps between the privileged and disadvantaged. Many governments were keen for students to 'catch up' on curriculum targets but others advocated for social and emotional issues to be addressed as a priority. Negative emotions inhibit cognitive pathways and learning is more accessible with higher levels of wellbeing. Referring to six principles of positive education, summarised by the acronym ASPIRE, this invited paper explored what happened to high school students worldwide in lockdown and what they need in education in a post-COVID world.

ASPIRE is an acronym for Agency, Safety, Positivity, Inclusion, Respect and Equity. These principles, when threaded through everything that happens in a school, can enhance both wellbeing and learning. They are based in the positive psychology literature [1-3] and also aligned with healthy child development.

Agency

This can be defined as having a voice and choice about what concerns you, the opposite of having actions and decisions made by others. Self-determination is now accepted as a pillar of wellbeing [4] and comprises autonomy, relatedness and competence. What happened in the pandemic was out of the control of young people and for some this had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Others however found a role in having a greater say in family life, such as supporting younger siblings. What is promising is that in many countries young people are taking a lead in post-COVID recovery with several initiatives highlighted in the article. Schools with a strong commitment to the pupil voice have reported positive outcomes, including more pro-social behaviour, stronger relationships and improved attainment and attendance [5].

Safety

Safety embraces physical, emotional and psychological safety. Although measures were taken to protect physical wellness for everyone in the pandemic, safety was compromised in many other ways with less access to avenues of support. This included increases in family violence, child abuse, on-line bullying and models of misogynistic behaviours. Going back to school was positive for some young people at risk but constant failure in an academic milieu undermines emotional safety and many students did not return to school after lockdown. When the pillars of 'learning to be' and 'learning to live together' are on offer in schools there is more opportunity for achievement. Social and emotional learning with an appropriately safe and solution-focused pedagogy also has the potential to address issues that undermine safety, such as bullying, addictions, social media use, toxic masculinity, and racism.

Positivity

Young people are increasingly unhappy across the world and since the pandemic are even more at risk of poor mental health [6]. It therefore makes sense to focus on helping young people feel better about themselves, other people and the world around them. Although important to acknowledge negative emotions there is also a wealth of interventions that promote optimism, hope, gratitude, resilience and coping skills. The quality of relationships, especially language makes the most difference. Strengths based conversations focus on what is going well and the qualities that students bring to learning and life.

Inclusion

Many young people experienced a sense of loneliness during the pandemic as they did not have their peer group around to help them explore and develop their sense of identity. Social media use increased and although that enabled positive connections for some it also had a negative impact in teenagers comparing themselves negatively to others and perhaps getting involved in closed groups who promoted conspiracy theories or right-wing ideology. Having a sense of belonging is critical to wellbeing and resilience but this needs to be inclusive of all, not exclusive. A sense of belonging at school means being accepted, being supported and making progress in learning. Prilleltensky [7] writes about 'mattering' which he defines as being valued but also being able to contribute value. As students lost social confidence in the pandemic they need opportunities talk with their peers about things that concern them and regain friendship skills. In Circle Solutions, students are regularly mixed up out of their usual social groups to talk with those they don't know. This has far reaching impacts for promoting class cohesion, supportive networks and resilience [8-10].

Respect

Respect is for individuals, their ideas, their rights and their culture. It is encapsulated in the Golden Rule-treating others as you

would wish to be treated. In some contexts, respect was enhanced in the pandemic as the role of health and key-workers was acknowledged and parents trying to teach their own children at home developed a new respect for teachers. In schools respect is demonstrated in courteous communications, in acknowledging context, in not jumping to judgement and listening well. It means treating everyone with dignity, regardless of their background or position. It also means respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities that students have. When we have a 'one-size' fits all education system with homogenous expectations we may lose respect for those that do not 'fit'. This is having negative repercussions across society and requires a rethinking of what education is for.

Equity

The pandemic exacerbated inequality across the world, not only for those in poverty, but also related to gender and geography. Access to on-line learning was restricted to those who could afford good technology, had space to use this and were living in areas with reliable internet. Girls often found themselves looking after others rather than maintaining their education. Equity is not the same as equality-it refers to fairness and flexibility-being able to offer students the resources and support that give them the same opportunities as others. That is clearly not happening in many countries. The barriers to equity include a lack of investment in state education, a competitive ethos and the inflexibility of the curriculum, focused predominantly on academic knowledge rather than the skills and understanding that facilitate a life lived well. Equity therefore needs to address issues of citizenship, ensuring that everyone is aware of issues of power and influence and what is needed to build a fairer, more cohesive society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and be valued for what they contribute.

Conclusion

A report for UNESCO notes that the pandemic has not only revealed vulnerabilities across the world, but also human resourcefulness and potential. They ask that world leaders commit to strengthen education as a common good. In education, as in health, we are safe when everybody is safe; we flourish when everybody flourishes. The ASPIRE principles show how education might lead the way.

References

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