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Lessons from lockdown: The educational legacy of COVID-19

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On the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2020, schools across England closed to all pupils, except for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nuffield Foundation, 2021). These closures were unprecedented and have impacted upon entire school communities, calling into question assumptions about equity in, access to, and the purposes of education. In *Lessons from Lockdown: the educational legacy of COVID 19*, Breslin explores the impact of these disruptions on schooling in England on children, their families and the school system as a whole. He debates what the legacy of the pandemic might be for schooling

The book is based on data from focus groups, interviews, and written submissions and was conducted with young people, teachers, parents, school leaders, and policy influencers over the course of ten weeks in the summer of 2020. Breslin describes the book as “part ethnography... part quasi-journalistic account of the experiences of lockdown” (p. 189). The

inquiry on which the book is based focused on three broad questions eliciting participants' reflections on their experiences at the beginning, during, and at the end of, what turned out to be, the first lockdown.

Breslin begins by setting the historical context of the pandemic – what happened and the policy decisions that were made by the United Kingdom (UK) governments about education. He explores parental engagement with schools and teachers during the pandemic and the hidden silver linings of “new ways of engaging with parents” (p.19). He examines the differential effects of the pandemic on children living in poverty – this is woven into discussions throughout the book and, in particular, in a discussion on catch-up narratives. Curriculum and examinations are considered in the context of the issues, for example the GCSE grading crisis, that arose during the pandemic and the opportunities these issues have offered to reflect on assumptions about education more broadly. He continues by discussing issues of wellbeing, the role of school leaders, the role of the inspectorate, and the role of technology during the pandemic. Each chapter concludes with a summary, key messages, and recommendations. Breslin concludes by proposing six broader conclusions for policy in terms of wellbeing, the achievement gap, curriculum and assessment, digital connectivity and literacy, community relationships, the teaching profession and schooling as a whole. In summary, Breslin “captures the story of lockdown” (p. 177), considers the dilemmas posed in relation to the lived experience of the entire school community and sets these dilemmas within a broader historical context, He proposes how the education system might reimagine itself based on the dissonance these learning disruptions have caused.

When I started to read this book, I wondered if it was written too early – in the knowledge that it was written after the first of a number of lockdowns. One of the strengths of the book, however, is that it offers a historical account of what happened and sets it in a broader political and policy context. Breslin weaves in media releases, policy shifts, his own knowledge, and testimonies to provide an important historical account of what happened to the UK education systems, with a particular focus on England, during the spring and summer of 2020. He “captures the story of lockdown” (p.177) well. This is not, nor does it claim to be a rigorous ethnography. This does not matter, however, as its strength lies in the broad networks Breslin drew on to create a very rich account of what happened and consider the broader implications for education. It is set distinctly in the UK context, yet this does not render it irrelevant to those not familiar with the education system. The issues related to wellbeing and equity and access to education during the pandemic have had universal impact on children’s education. The book will be of value to school leaders, policy makers, and researchers alike.

(530 words)

Nuffield Foundation (2021) Impact of COVID-19 on mainstream schools in England retrieved from <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/impact-of-covid-19-mainstream-schools-england>

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