

Written evidence submitted by the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education, Lancaster University

Response to the current inquiry by the Department for Education into impacts of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services

Response from researchers at the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education, Lancaster University: Professor Robert Barratt; Dr Sue Cranmer; Dr Jan McArthur; Dr Jo Warin.

Introduction. Who we are.

The Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing in Education is one of three research centres within Lancaster University's department of Educational Research. It is a vibrant network of active researchers engaged in exploring questions about equity, diversity, inclusion and wellbeing in education. Our research spans a wide range of formal and informal education environments including schools, higher education, home and the workplace and is aimed at creating an evidence base for positive change.

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/educational-research/research/centre-for-social-justice-and-wellbeing-in-education/>

The Centre has research evidence and expertise relating to several of the **Terms of Reference** identified in the call for evidence for this inquiry. This enables us not only to comment on recent impacts of Covid-19 but, much more importantly, predict long term impacts. Of particular note are the following elements of our research expertise and evidence.

The effect of provider closure on the early years sector, including reference to:

Children's early development

Impacts on young children's attachment relationships

During the Covid-19 pandemic Dr Jo Warin and Dr Joann Wilkinson have been analysing their case study data from the GenderEYE project, funded by the

ESRC, which researches the recruitment and support of male teachers in the early years sector. <https://gendereye.org/> Their data from observations of nine early years settings, staff interviews and focus groups, have thrown up findings that have a considerable bearing on the likely impacts of Covid-19 with regard to the immediate and long term impacts of provider closure and changes on children's attachments. These especially concern young children's developmental needs for consistent and continuous relationships with caring adults and the impacts of the deprivation of key attachment figures. For many children the ongoing relationships they have with staff in their preschools are of crucial importance to their wellbeing. Indeed these relationships can be experienced as second and third families. In most preschools key workers are allocated to individual children and assume responsibility for the child's overall wellbeing making a commitment to a relationship with that child and including many forms of close physical care such as nappy changing. Our observational data has revealed the quality and frequency of positive forms of touch such as hand touching, cuddles and children sitting on practitioners' knees. During the pandemic where preschools have remained open for the children of key workers children the requirements of social distancing between children and their key workers has been emotionally disturbing. Sudden changes in staffing have also created a significant disruption in these all-important trusting relationships. These are experienced as unsettling and a source of stress for children and their staff as well as the children's parents/carers. It will require a high degree of sensitivity and imagination to repair this damage as all children return to early years settings. Whilst social distancing is required to avoid the risk of infection there are risks to the children's attachments too. These will be difficult judgment calls for early years staff.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

Damaging outcomes of exam cancellation

Dr Jan McArthur has research capability on the social justice aspects of assessment (McArthur, 2018). Her expertise allows her insights into the impacts of Covid-19 on the cancellation of exams. Whilst she recognises the necessity for this measure her research informs us of two damaging potential outcomes. Firstly in terms of the principles of good and fair assessment: students should know and understand the purpose of any given assessment. Thus to sit a mock exam thinking it is purely formative and have that stand later as their final

summative result is unjust – whatever the circumstances. Secondly, students should know who is assessing them in advance. Again, this shifted from the anonymity of the formal exams to teacher estimates, impressions and predictions. This fundamentally changes the pedagogical relationship and is unjust to both parties. We know that certain students fair better when grades are based on teachers' estimates which are subject to the influences of social class, ethnicity, gender and a host of other factors. We also know that some students have been better equipped and better supported for home learning to support the next stage of education than others.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including: Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

Dr Jo Warin and Dr Rebecca Hibbin have a research history in evaluating school initiatives concerning young people's mental health and socio-emotional vulnerabilities, for example the use of school Nurture Groups and Restorative Practice approaches (Warin and Hibbin, 2016; Warin, 2017). Their current research concerning children with ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) has revealed noteworthy findings with regard to impacts, and potential impacts, of Covid-19. School staff, primary and secondary school senior leaders (heads and deputies) were interviewed as part of an evaluation of a school-based initiative concerning this group of vulnerable children and young people. Their comments are of central relevance to school support strategies for pupils and families during closures.

Surprisingly positive lessons have been learnt especially strategies for good communication with parents. For example one deputy head explained how school letters to parents at the beginning of lockdown had emphasised the need to focus on children's well-being and emotional resilience rather than "being heavy-handed about getting the lesson plans done". The school had been sensitive to the needs of parents and deliberately avoided putting pressure on parents to produce completed worksheets. The crisis had triggered a new strategy for communication in one secondary school that will be continued in some form after children return to school. A key worker was appointed to every single family and made a weekly phone call to them during the closure. This supportive form of communication had been welcomed by parents who relished the opportunity to talk with another adult about the challenges of being at home continuously with their children. This was especially so for lone parents.

One primary school headteacher said “I learned so much from Covid... It just astonishes me how hard it was to find the right service before Covid” and cited the support of the local mental health network and various forms of community support. She said “the amount of resources that have been made available, it’s mind blowing”. In another school the staff who had undertaken the delivery of the free school meal had learnt much more than previously about some of the children’s lives and the level of deprivation there. This is invaluable learning for school staff and a lesson that will remain with these staff after the pandemic.

In another school the crisis has forced a renewed focus on children’s experiences of transitions and the importance of staff/pupil relationships and peer relationships at such times. This clearly applies to children’s return to school after such a long period of absence from school as well as the specific concerns around those children who are currently moving from primary to secondary. In this primary school, staff welcomed the “Recovery Curriculum” and were especially pleased to see its emphasis on relationships.

However, despite this positive picture of the Covid-19 crisis forcing a shift to wellbeing priorities some senior staff in this study expressed a high degree of anxiety about the way the crisis had swept aside ongoing school projects and policies.

Overall, the data from senior leaders, collected during this ACEs evaluation revealed how the crisis has produced a high degree of proactive commitment to the well-being of children and their families. In particular senior leaders had found the crisis shifted their priorities from academic learning to an emphasis on relationships.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department’s approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

Digital education and disability studies

Dr Sue Cranmer researches at the intersection of disability studies and digital education. In particular, her work focusses on challenging inequalities that manifest and are reproduced in school pupils’ everyday uses of digital technologies (Cranmer, 2020a; Cranmer 2020b). Her research expertise allows insight into the ways that the Covid-19 pandemic has swept away the hard won

rights of disabled children in relation to digital technologies and collapsed the infrastructure of legal requirements.

Connecting Kids

Lancaster and Morecambe is an area of significant social and economic disadvantage and particular vulnerability to impact of Covid-19. Professor Robert Barratt, with other leaders of the Connecting Kids consortium have implemented the 'Connecting Kids' project in Lancaster and Morecambe to enable children and young people to maintain their engagement in learning and connection with their schools.

More than 500 families were identified as not having the technological resource, time and experience to support their child's education at home. The project has enabled 500 children to receive laptops, and broadband. 2236 stationery packs have also been delivered to primary school children who do not have access to basic home -learning supplies. These resources have provided the essential basics for children's wellbeing and learning through the Covid-19 crisis.

Key findings

- 1 The impact of school closure has impacted on the learning and development of early years and primary aged children
- 2 Children have not maintained the same levels of academic and social progress
- 3 Families do not have the capacity to create and sustain a home learning environment
- 4 Schools systems have not been able to sustain and transfer the same level of pastoral support to the home setting
- 5 Families report social isolation, including from school, as a key factor challenging their capacity to protect the well-being of their children

The project has produced evidence of several really significant impact stories that are clamouring to be told, illustrating how the pandemic has both escalated

children and young people's deprivation but, at the same time, produced models of inspirational collaboration and partnership within the community of Lancaster and Morecambe. The stories can be summed up under the following four headings.

1. The digital divide revealed through 'home learning'.

The project has collected evidence of the high proportions of students who had never logged on at home to engage with school learning. For example in one high school only 30% of year eight and nine pupils had accessed the internet. The 'Connecting Kids' project has demonstrated how a single-minded community effort aimed at vulnerable children could provide a pathway to eradicating the digital divide.

A parent at a local secondary school commented, **confidentially**:
"When the school contacted me to ask how we were coping with lockdown I openly said 'we're not!' Trying to get my four kids to do school work on an old laptop I had was really stressful for everyone. The internet kept zoning out and the kids argued about whose turn it was to use the laptop. My oldest son is in Year 10 and was really stressing about getting behind in his GCSEs. In the end, for his own sanity, I told him to stop trying to use the laptop. The school sent paper packs which helped to ease his mind but he still felt that he was missing out. Getting a new laptop and proper internet connection has been life changing. My son's stress levels have dropped. He's been able to do the work set by his teachers, send it to them and email them if he's stuck"

2. Teacher burnout and stress.

The stresses and strains that school staff are under is immense. Several have taken on the role of key workers and engaged in the care of their young students' wellbeing, and sometimes their families too, in ways that go way beyond their customary role as teacher. Some of the school leaders in the Lancaster and Morecambe area have carried an extraordinary burden of responsibility and effort directed at the most vulnerable students in their schools.

3. Connecting with meaningful learning opportunities.

The project has revealed some potential pathways to helping disengaged young people connect with their learning in ways that are sometimes much more meaningful to them than their previous educational experience. For example one of the young people in a Lancaster secondary school described how the lockdown period had led to him devising his own history project. This was something he felt he had developed entirely independently due to the emotional and intellectual headspace created through the Covid-19 conditions and freedom from school-induced stress.

4. The formation of collaborative partnerships creating a resilience infrastructure within education provision.

Within a remarkably short time a partnership developed between Lancaster University, Lancaster City Council, Lancaster & Morecambe College, local schools, and Eden Project International. This was supported further by the involvement of several local businesses with a shared focus on support for the community's local children and young people during the pandemic.

Primary, secondary and further education sectors have collaborated with each other on establishing a prioritisation of need that targeted year 10 pupils. This collaboration in itself was a huge step forwards. A local primary school head teacher has commented, **confidentially**:

“Connecting Kids is a unique and exciting project which is totally responsive to local need. It has emerged and been defined with speed and clarity, responding directly to an unprecedented situation, in a way that I am not aware has not been achieved elsewhere. It's collaborative nature, working dynamically and creatively across a range of sectors - has meant that the project can deliver according to the specific needs of local pupils.”

The Connecting Kids project has sown the seeds of a unique partnership between Lancaster University and its local education community.

Sources: Eden Project Noth working parties (Primary head teachers, Early Years practitioners)

Families

LU WP staff

Conclusion

Taken together we can summarise the educational impacts of Covid-19 as having magnified existing social inequalities and compounded multiple social disadvantages for children and young people. We predict some negative long term outcomes which will require a very coherent set of strategies to mitigate the increased disadvantages that some groups will have suffered, particularly those groups of learners who are already disadvantaged. However, we have also gained insights into some positive outcomes, opportunities and potential pathways for positive change.

References

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