Restoring the balance: Policy recommendation justifications for collective responsibility in the post Covid-19 era

Jill Porter, Hilary Emery, Harry Daniels[1], Ian Thompson and Alice Tawell
Excluded Lives Research Group[2]
Department of Education, University of Oxford
October 2020

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed stark inequalities in our society, not least in school education. We argue here for a strategic approach to policy-making that will ameliorate the long-term impact of Covid-19 on the lives and education of young people, rather than a proliferation of guidance to get "back to where we were." Young people's varied experiences have led to new and diverse forms of risk and an exacerbation of inequalities in their access to education in schools and special schools, colleges and PRUs. This in turn has a negative impact on the life chances of an expanding group of young people. Our particular focus here is on those who are at risk of exclusion, either through formal, informal or self-exclusion.

Drawing on a series of cross-disciplinary conversations with strategic leaders and practitioners (*Seeking a balance* and *Getting the balance right*), we argue here for a holistic approach, one that takes account of the needs of the child and recognises the challenges they have faced during lockdown and after the full reopening of schools (see Daniels et al. 2020 for a more complete report). We consider the implications for the curriculum, for behaviour policies and the wider culture of the school. In order to ensure all children vulnerable to formal, informal or self-exclusion remain in school and do not become missing from education, we need to intervene upstream to provide earlier targeted intervention. This, in turn, demands new ways of working, a commitment to taking collective responsibility alongside thoughtful and creative policy making. Above all, we need to shift the balance from a school culture where decisions are determined by the pressures of high performance, zero tolerance and funding limitations, to one where decisions reflect a concern for: well-being; safeguarding and attendance; attainment; and, inclusion.

1. *Policies are needed which foster a nuanced understanding of vulnerability. They should: a. recognise the diversity of children and young people including those whose pre-existing vulnerabilities have been overlaid with COVID-19, and those who have become vulnerable due to COVID-19, and b. embrace the risk factors, and children and young people's views on their needs, moving from a focus on vulnerable children and young people to focusing on vulnerable contexts.*

Policies need to be extended to encompass a broader range of risk factors. The criteria of 'vulnerability' adopted during the pandemic (i.e. being assessed as being in need under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, and/or having an EHCP) do not reflect the broader and more varied range of risk factors that have been identified by practitioners, managers and strategic leads across education, social care, youth justice and public health services [3] as well as a range of empirical studies[4]. It also does not recognise the cumulative impact of multiple low-level risk factors, which individually do not reach threshold level for support. Rather than focus on "vulnerable children" we can instead recognise vulnerable contexts.[5]

My mummy and daddy still need to work. ..I am scared they will get ill and I won't see them again.
8 year old

"*Because it might go for a long time and I miss people*" 9 year old.

Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) *Coronavirus and me*

For someone young, when the whole world changes overnight it can be very scary. Nobody has tried to explain it in a child-friendly way which would have eased young people's anxiety' Young Person

NCB (2020) *Coronavirus: children and young people's views on what it means to be 'vulnerable'*

We include here contexts in which children have been traumatised through bereavement, through the process of shielding members of their family or through their own chronic health condition, being isolated from the social support of one's peers, the loss of social skills, living in troubled and violent households without the respite of school, being unable to access the support and provision needed and those who enjoyed not being in school and consequently struggle with the return to school. Studies of children experiencing social isolation suggest the psychological impact of these experiences, for some young people, could last up to nine years[6]. There is also a growing concern that some children, particularly those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), will

---

[3] Daniels, H., Thompson, I., Porter, J., Tawell, A. and Emery, H. (2020). *School exclusion risks after COVID-19.* http://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Daniels-et-al.-2020_School-Exclusion-Risks-after-COVID-19.pdf [Accessed 24.09.2020].

[4] RCPCH. (2020). *COVID 19 summaries of key findings on children and young people's views.* https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/generated-pdf/document/COVID-19---research-studies-on-children-and-young-people%2527s-views.pdf [Accessed 24.09.2020].

[5] Virokannas, E., Liuski, S. and Kuronen, M. (2020). The contested concept of vulnerability – a literature review. *European Journal of Social Work*, 23(2), pp.327-339.

[6] Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., Linney, C., McManus, M.N., Borwick, C. and Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid systematic review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009

not return to school[7],[8]). Risks from these vulnerable contexts will evolve as the pandemic continues, with localized outbreaks and class or school quarantine closures as well as individual absences with teaching, learning and relationships repeatedly disrupted. It is therefore imperative to look to the long term impacts and adopt a strategic approach to policy making.

A more nuanced understanding is therefore needed that reflects the challenges and experiences of young people with policies designed to ensure that needs led provision is a hallmark of new ways of working, rather than "adopting a one-size fits all". This calls for a greater engagement with young people taking account of their views [9] and what it means to be 'vulnerable' [10]. This will allow us to understand where each child is starting from and the continuing effects of local shutdowns and national pandemic actions with identification and intervention upstream from points of potential conflict and breakdown to offset the risk of school led exclusion or self-exclusion. Notably this has implications for the wording and enactment of policies so that they support flexibility in practice.

Without a more nuanced understanding of vulnerable contexts, more children go "under the radar" for targeted support. In order to identify children subjected to those contexts and monitor the effectiveness of strategies we need better live data in a form that can be shared across agencies, locally and across Government departments. We need for example data that will draw attention to children at risk through patterns of attendance, absences, and exclusion, analysed by types of school/setting.

> *The responses highlighted to me that the needs and voices of the most vulnerable children and young people had been forgotten in the pandemic, with many of society's most vulnerable children and young people left with no support at all. If we learn anything from coronavirus it must be to make a change, listen to and prioritise these groups of children and young people.* Louise, Youth Colleague, Buckinghamshire
>
> Barnardo's (2020) *Mental health and Covid-19: In our own words*

Our concern is underpinned by a commitment to upholding the Rights of the Child (*Every* child) to Education and to having a voice in the decision-making around that access. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities. School closures, differential educational access and issues of trauma and deprivation have affected and negatively impacted the lives of a diverse group of children, but with some groups significantly over-represented. This includes children with SEND

---

[7] Skipp, A. and Hopwood, V. with Julius, J. and McLean, D. (2020). *Special education during lockdown: Returning to schools and colleges in September.* https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Special-schools-during-lockdown.pdf [Accessed 24.09.2020].

[8] DfE. (2020). *Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak* https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-38 [Accessed 24.09.2020].

[9] Barnardo's. (2020). *Mental health and Covid-19: In our own words*. Essex: Barnardo's.

[10] National Children's Bureau. (2020). *Coronavirus: Children and young people's views on what it means to be 'vulnerable'.* https://www.ncb.org.uk/news-opinion/news-highlights/coronavirus-children-and-young-peoples-views-what-it-means-be?mc_cid=360f99f3d7&mc_eid=e1b5d18699 [Accessed 22.09.2020].

and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups. What is needed is a sharper focus on valuing *all* children and young people and what they bring to education.

> 2. *Policies are needed which recognise and promote wellbeing as fundamental for all children and young people to enable them to attend consistently, engage with learning to catch up and attain; and ensure continued safeguarding, including mitigating the risks of exploitation.*

Understanding the challenges that young people encountered during lock-down, including their exposure to contexts that lead to vulnerabilities of mental and physical health, requires a re-assessment of the singular narrow focus on attainment. We argue here for a more holistic approach, a better balance in how we make judgements about children's contribution to society. In line with the Timpson Review (2019[11]), we need policies that reflect a more nurturing, child centered approach, that recognize the core requirement for pupil well-being, a precursor for advancing young people's life chances and opportunities. Schools cannot achieve this in isolation. It requires good communication with parents and the local community as well as other services and a collective responsibility to bringing about change. The crisis has led to questions about the role of pedagogy and pastoral care in the development of a nurturing education system that values and includes all children and young people. This calls for policies that stem from creating a system of values and beliefs (rather than targets and outcomes) and a collaborative rather than competitive culture (within and across all services, including schools, MATs and LA teams). Seeing school as a community and therefore building strong relationships with families is an important marker on the road to recovery.

A significant aspect of well-being is child safety and protection from abuse. The pandemic has revealed new vulnerabilities when children are not in school. While safeguarding is widely recognized as everybody's responsibility, schools play a vital role in raising issues of concern and triggering support from other agencies. Policies are needed that promote a contextual approach to safeguarding- one that is responsive to the experiences of young people subject to harm outside the home as well as recognising the need to reach into the range of contexts where children encounter abuse[12]. Evidence informed guidance, with a focus on prevention and early intervention will support schools to adopt a holistic approach to contextual safeguarding.

Contextual safeguarding has particular implications for the interpretation and understanding of behaviour that more typically leads to exclusion and foregrounds consideration of child protection. Rather than adopting zero tolerance approaches to behaviour, which in themselves are associated with young people feeling less safe in school [13], policies need to foster a holistic approach that

---

[11] Timpson, E. (2019). *Timpson review of school exclusion*. London: Department for Education.

[12] Firmin C. and Lloyd J. (2020). *Contextual safeguarding: A 2020 update on the operational, strategic conceptual framework* IASR https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/a-2020-update-on-the-operational-strategic-and-conceptual-framework/ [Accessed 24.09.2020].

[13] McNeely, C. A., Nonnemaker, J. M. and Blum, R. B. (2002). Promoting school connectedness: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Journal of School Health*, 72(4):138-46.

actively seeks to understand the young person's views and experience and to take a joined up contextual approach to safeguarding and wellbeing. Policies should support schools in building on existing mental health support, designated safeguarding leads within schools and local youth initiatives outside school (for example violence reduction units).

The singular focus on attainment ignores the place of relationships in what it means for young people to attend school. Research has identified the fundamental role peer relationships play in getting on in school[14]. The pandemic has disrupted peer relationships leaving many children feeling isolated and inconsequence disconnected from school. This calls for a better balance in the priority given to social and emotional aspects of learning, understanding trauma and a focus on relationship building at all levels.

However, for some children their experiences have been positive be it through small groups in schools, on-line learning with virtual teaching and feedback or home schooling. We need to identify the elements of best practice in these initiatives and implications for teaching and learning, including what is needed for their sustainability.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of reviewing and developing curricula and assessments that can be adapted to meet diverse academic and social needs, and are culturally responsive, in order to foster a sense of connectedness. In our conversations with strategic leaders, The Black Lives Matter protests were highlighted as one example which has led to children and young people wanting and expecting that the curriculum and its assessment will reflect broader and more balanced perspectives, ones that reflect their lives and heritage. Policies are needed that support all schools to review their culture and values within pedagogy, curriculum (including the arts and the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement) and pastoral care.

> *It [lockdown] has shown me the importance school has for children's wellbeing and that the job we do as teachers is so much more than being an educator. It would be amazing to have the government, media and general public realise this*. SENCO
>
> *Education professionals... want time and space to be able to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils, and support and training to deal with issues such as anxiety, stress, bereavement or trauma.. Staff also noted they would like support with their own mental health*.
>
> Education Support (2020) *Covid-19 and the classroom. Working in education during the Corona Virus pandemic*

ACLUNC. (2010). *Discipline in California schools: Legal requirements and positive school environments*. https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/discipline_in_california.pdf [Accessed 24.09.2020].

[14] Kiefer, S. M., Alley K. M. and Ellerbrock C. R. (2015). Teacher and peer support for young adolescents' motivation, engagement, and school belonging. *RMLE Online*, 38(8), pp.1-18.

Porter, J. (2015). *Understanding and responding to the experience of disability*. Routledge: London

These changes put new demands on school staff. These extra demands come at a time when staff have experienced unprecedented pressures as front life staff coping with their own experiences of Covid-19 alongside coordinating online and distance learning and the new demands of home life.[15] Teachers need to feel empowered and skilled with clear messages about expectations, effective training, and access to on-going support. Given their experiences, school staff may be differentially placed in recognising the emotional and social needs of pupils and embedding support as an integral part of subject lessons. There is a need for more focused attention on relationships as well as behaviour and social, emotional and mental health needs within Initial Teacher Training and embedded in the Early Career Framework. Targeted CPD will help them to more confidently interpret and understand trauma related behaviours, adopt a holistic approach to investigating underlying factors, make reasonable adjustments/endeavours, and ensure that their decisions comply with the Equality Act. Collaborative working within and between schools as well as targeted Continuing Professional Development will play an important role. To be effective requires policy decisions to promote a whole school approach that enables schools to understand how the DfE pillars of wellbeing, attendance, attainment and safeguarding are aligned and work together to support consistent, sustained support for mental health and wellbeing.

3. *Identify and resolve policy and practice contradictions and acknowledge the way legislation is enacted within and across government departments and services at all levels*

In putting forward a series of policy directions we are mindful firstly that guidance can be read in many different ways. For example, good attendance at school is rightly seen as a high priority, but equally a child may attend but not be able to engage if they feel anxious or depressed. In this respect a policy decision to fine parents can be seen as solving the wrong problem. Secondly, they can have unintended consequences, making some pupils more vulnerable to a range of exclusionary practices due to the exaggerated effects of league tables and performance pressures on school. We argue that the standards versus inclusion/wellbeing debate is a false dichotomy. What is needed is an understanding that improving standards rests on improving inclusion and ensuring wellbeing, and for this to be reflected in policy guidance.

Mapping policy across the legislative landscape and joining up the associated guidance will help to iron out inconsistencies, contradictions and perverse incentives, and ensure a more holistic approach to recovery, and education more broadly. A key aspect of policy formulation is the need to promote multi-agency working. Professionals should be encouraged to work across professions to address needs and respond effectively. This must involve the progressive alignment of priorities and forms of accountability which all too often in the past have resulted in perverse incentives which inhibit collaboration and deflect attention. Policy should encourage the sharing of problems

---

[15] Tsakalaki, A., Billington, J. and Hewitt, C. (2020). *Responding to the needs of 'vulnerable' children during the COVID-19 outbreak. The views of families and practitioners.* http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/vunerable-children-covid-19/ [Accessed 24.09.2020].
Education Support. (2020). Covid-19 and the classroom: Working in education during the Coronavirus pandemic: The impact on education professionals' mental health and wellbeing
https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/covid-19_and_the_classroom.pdf [Accessed 24.09.2020].

and collaborating to develop solutions, rather than practices where the main incentive appears to be oriented to passing challenges on to someone else.

Accountability systems for schools should also be revisited. It should be clear how schools are to be held to account. The breadth of the inspection frameworks cannot be covered in the time allowed leading to inconsistencies and often an emphasis on curriculum and behaviour to the detriment of wellbeing. Exam and statutory assessment pressures are driving behaviours in ways that militate against effective practice for all, and need to be revisited to. The current system encourages perverse incentives and workarounds. Efforts should be made to remove excessive performance accountability pressures in favour of an increased focus on wellbeing. We are not arguing for the introduction of wellbeing indicators or measurement as this can easily lead to performativity (and league tables) rather than being fully embedded within the values of the school.

Lastly, but not least, the pandemic has revealed the importance of having a strong middle tier between government and schools which builds and sustains effective relationships, ensures continuity over time, and helps to coordinate support through their knowledge of the local offer. Developing collaborative support and challenge across services and partners is vital to ensuring partners (including Local Authorities, Multi-Academy Trusts, youth offending and police services, social care and health services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) engage, share data and are resourced. This provides the means to resolve the existing fragmented, performance dominated system and bring existing disparate education structures and partners together. It is important that each element of that middle tier between schools and central government is well understood in terms of its role, responsibility and relationship.

Conclusion

Thoughtful and creative policy making can make a substantial difference to the lives of children and young people and the professionals who support them as they strive to make progress in challenging times. Policies need to reflect the varied experiences of lockdown that have led to new and diverse forms of risk for many more children and young people than those previously defined as vulnerable and encourage schools to engage with and listen to them. Wellbeing and attainment are inextricably linked and we need to achieve a better balance in the attention all schools give to them. The key message is the need for policies that promote intervening upstream. To do this we need to ensure that the necessary infrastructure, resourcing and professional training and on-going support is in place, enabling schools and related services to identify needs and provide effective early intervention and support. Local and national monitoring of attendance and exclusions as schools return will be essential to enable rapid and effective early support.

> *Many of the risk factors associated with abuse and neglect have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.*
>
> *An ambitious recovery and rebuilding plan is needed, so no child who has suffered is left without support, and childhoods are not derailed by the pandemic... [we need to] ensure schools are equipped to recognise and respond sensitively and consistently to students who may have experienced abuse, trauma, or adverse experiences during lockdown.*
>
> Bentley et al. (2020) *How safe are our children?: An overview of data on adolescent abuse*

Intervening upstream will help achieve the aim of providing an equitable and high quality education for *all* children and improve wellbeing, safeguarding as well as attendance and attainment. It will prevent children missing out on their Education through formal, informal and self-exclusion. This requires working collaboratively with a shared commitment to bring about change and putting the future lives of young people first.