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What is the biggest challenge facing pastoral care in education today and how can this challenge be effectively addressed? The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's well-being.

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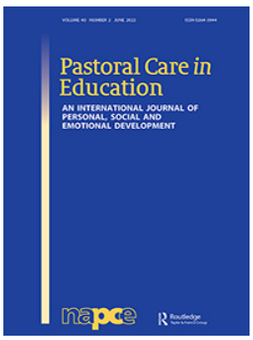

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What is the biggest challenge facing pastoral care in education today and how can this challenge be effectively addressed? The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's well-being

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses one of the biggest challenges facing Pastoral Care in Education today: the impact of Covid-19 on children's wellbeing. The negative effects on children's well-being and mental health are already being widely reported (e.g.; Loades et al. 2020). Therefore, this paper will outline both the impact of Covid-19 on children's wellbeing and how this challenge might be addressed. This paper argues for additional support for children's wellbeing and considers the opportunity for rethinking educational practice and future research directions.

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Introduction – context

Lockdown and restrictions

In March 2020 England went into its first lockdown. This was to decrease or eliminate the number of face-to-face interactions and therefore reduce infection rates. Households were told only to go out once per day for exercise. Parks and playgrounds were closed, social distancing introduced and there were no longer opportunities for playdates (Goldschmidt, 2020). Most schools were shut for five months, except to a small number of keyworker and vulnerable children. Consequently, most children were without their friendship interactions (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021).

Over the summer restrictions were reduced and schools opened again for the Autumn term. However, schools continued to have restrictions in place such as children being placed into 'bubbles'. These bubbles were used to group children together, to reduce the number of contacts and prevented children from interacting with their friends in other classes or year groups. This caused disruption to friendships and distress (Carter et al., Manucript in preparation). We already know that friendships can be fragile and unstable,

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especially in younger children or without the opportunity to nurture friendships in several contexts, both in and out of school (Chan & Poulin, 2007; Rubin et al., 2005). Therefore, restrictions caused further instability to some children's friendships and wellbeing.

Many families struggled to adjust to the challenges of lockdown, particularly those children and families that were vulnerable (Pascal et al., 2020). January 2021 saw the return of a two-month lockdown and once again most children were without their usual social interactions. Consequently, children have been living with lockdown and restrictions for the last two years. This is a considerable proportion of a child's life, particularly young children (0–8 years). It is now important that we examine the effect this extended period of lockdown and restrictions has had upon children's wellbeing.

Educational settings and wellbeing

In this section, I outline the role of educational settings in supporting children's wellbeing. Early Years settings and schools play an essential role in nurturing the holistic development of children, not only in terms of educational knowledge but also in fulfilling the socialisation needs of children (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022; Pascal et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Children need a well-rounded approach to learning and development (Carter, Forthcoming, 2022; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016), including opportunities to focus on areas that cannot be measured (Clark, 2020b). For example, children need time for friendship experiences which are integral to wellbeing (Brogaard-Clausen & Robson, 2019; Theobald et al., 2017).

For both adults and children wellbeing can be difficult to define as it is a social construct and subjective (Bradford, 2012). Rider et al. (2021, p. 1) define wellbeing as 'a person's ability to recognise their own capabilities, manage regular stresses of life, work productively and contribute to their community'. It can be broadly defined for children as an acceptable standard of living, the right to health, feeling safe and experiencing equal opportunities (Bradford, 2012). Therefore, wellbeing is a vague concept used to capture a variety of elements. This vagueness and the fact that it cannot be easily measured can make addressing wellbeing a challenge. Consequently, wellbeing can be overlooked in preference for academic outputs that can be measured and accounted for. However, I would argue that wellbeing should be a priority, firstly, to be valued in its own right and secondly because it is closely linked to school achievement and outcomes which can also impact on children's wellbeing (UNESCO, 2021).

In the next section, I address the variety of ways that Covid-19 may have impacted upon children's wellbeing and then continue by considering implications for effectively addressing this in practice.

The impact of COVID-19 on children's wellbeing

Some children experienced less stress and pressure during lockdowns. This had a positive effect on wellbeing, especially if they had experienced bullying in school pre Covid-19 (Ziauddeen et al., 2020). Some households were able to spend more time together and, in some instances, where parents may have been furloughed, the pace of interactions with their children slowed. This led to more positive interactions between children and adults. Time was spent walking, playing games, doing homework and viewing television programs together (Goldschmidt, 2020).

However, for many children lockdown and restrictions had a profoundly negative effect and for some the impact will be long-lasting (Goldschmidt, 2020; Rider et al., 2021). Pascal et al. (2020) report on families facing numerous challenges during the pandemic including, attachment issues, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and grief. Many parents found themselves placed under enormous psychological stress. Some families found themselves living in a 'pressure cooker' environment, caused by a variety of factors including, financial issues, supporting vulnerable children and juggling the demands of work and home schooling (Save the Children 2021). Therefore, children living with parents under this pressure were adversely affected (Newland, 2015). Indeed, it has been argued that the psychological distress experienced by some children isolated at home was a bigger risk factor than contracting Covid-19 (Hargreaves, 2020).

Research suggests that many children have fallen behind academically during lockdown, and this could have a detrimental effect upon children's wellbeing (UNESCO, 2021). In addition, children are now living with a 'catch-up' narrative. They are told that they are behind and need to make up the lost ground. In England, for example, there are official measures in place for children to catch-up on missed learning (DFE, 2021). These measures place pressure upon children and families. This is particularly relevant to those children in the most disadvantaged circumstances (Pascal et al., 2020) where many children did not have internet access or even a suitable place to work (OECD, 2020).

Yet, less emphasis has been placed upon the social and emotional impact upon children. Parents have reported noting how their children have been set back in their social and emotional development (Pascal et al., 2020). Some parents expressed that they felt able to support their child with academic learning, but they could not plug the gap socially (Carter, Forthcoming; Mantovani et al., 2021). The absence of time to play and interact with friends was particularly upsetting for many children (Carter et al., Manucript in preparation). Even when children returned to settings there were school containment measures in place such as 'bubble' systems and a lack of access to resources due to concerns about cleaning and virus transmission which impeded free play and

interaction with friends (Loades et al., 2020). Considering the arguments outlined above, the impact of COVID 19 on children's wellbeing and mental health is clearly one of the biggest challenges facing pastoral care in education today.

How can the impact of Covid-19 be effectively addressed?

In this section, I turn to how the issues outlined in the previous section can be addressed. Fortunately, despite the negative impact to children's wellbeing, there are strategies that could effectively address this impact and encourage resilience in all children. Brogaard-Clausen and Robson (2019, p. 347) note that theory in positive Psychology indicates that there is the 'potential for the wellbeing of all to be enhanced and promoted'. Thus, additional support for children's wellbeing is essential to avoid long term effects (Pascal et al., 2020) to children's wellbeing, mental health and academic outcomes. Educational practitioners and teachers need to be provided with relevant information about how adults can appropriately support children during the Covid-19 recovery period (Mantovani et al., 2021) or with similar upheavals or crises in the future.

First, children need to be listened to. There is a sense that during the Covid-19 pandemic in some contexts children were 'marginalised and their voices silenced' (Lomax et al., 2021, p. 1). Even before Covid-19, listening to the voices of children had been pushed aside in favour of other agendas such as academic progress and target setting (Clark, 2020b). This can be readdressed by going back to children and spending time tuning into their Covid-19 experiences and asking them what they need and how we can help. They are experts and can be 'knowledgeable commentators on their own lives' when given the opportunity (Clark, 2020a).

Loades et al. (2020) conducted a rapid systematic review on the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents during Covid −19 and results suggested the need for children to have time to reconnect with social networks, friends and to foster a sense of belonging in the family and community. Extra time and provision for children to socialise and reconnect could be in Youth clubs and after school activities. Additional provision would need to be cost-free to ensure accessibility and inclusion. Time to reconnect echoes the call for children to have extended periods of play as Pascal et al. (2020, p. 9) notes *'The best therapy for a child is often being with another child'*.

Poor school attendance is still an issue for many children. Some children have not returned and are being home schooled. Whilst for many children and families this arrangement will be more appropriate, for others a lack of school attendance may be the result of parental and/or child anxiety related to Covid-19. This links back to the essential role that schools and early years settings play in children's holistic learning and development. Consequently, a lack of attendance could impact children both in the short and long term. Time and resources need to be made available to work with individual families and for the value of holistic school education to be communicated to all adults around the child.

This Covid-19 scenario is unprecedented as there is a great deal we do not know about the impact of social isolation on children as we have no comparative data. Therefore, there is a necessity for additional research in this area to support teachers and children during this period of recovery. Many schools are also noting the significance of additional staff training, so there is expertise on how to support children who have experienced trauma during Covid-19 (O'Toole & Simovska, 2021).

This might be an opportunity to 'reimagine and reposition' education post pandemic (O'Toole & Simovska, 2021, p. 58). There has been a great deal of change and adjustment during the last two years in education with some positive change and impact that could be carried forward and/or used to think further 'out-of-the-box'. This could include adapting the curriculum so that children can achieve and be successful without the pressure of a 'catch-up narrative'. Similarly, there could be a whole school approach centring attention upon 'wellbeing'. One way of addressing this is to make sure that 'wellbeing' is valued and woven across the curriculum (O'Toole & Simovska, 2021). A wellbeing focus is already practised in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Curriculum in New Zealand. Here a 'woven mat' metaphor is used to symbolise their holistic approach: Four principles and five strands are woven and embedded across the curriculum. Wellbeing is one of those strands, focusing upon health promotion, nurturing emotional health and keeping safe. The multifaceted nature of well-being is also documented in this curriculum, acknowledging the importance of positive relationships and interactions with the child. The embedded value of wellbeing across the curriculum for holistic development and learning is something that all schools could currently benefit from (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Finally, many families experienced the benefits of slowing down and having time for positive interactions. This is a concept that could be transferred to educational contexts. Clark, 2020b) advocates for a 'slow pedagogy' when working with young children, but I suggest this could be applied through both the primary and secondary school sectors. Time and space is required for teachers and children to reconnect and develop positive relationships and likewise for children to reconnect with friends (Carter, Forthcoming; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that one of the biggest challenges facing pastoral care in education today is the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's well-being. Although, there is an increasing body of research suggesting the effects on children's wellbeing, including loss of friendships, psychological distress (Hargreaves, 2020) and falling behind academically (DFE, 2021) there is still much more to be done. Researchers in the future may wish to creatively engage children so that we can understand their nuanced Covid-19 experiences. This is essential if we are to actively listen to children and genuinely address this challenge in practice.

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