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## **Learning from Lockdown**

**By Stephen J. McKinney, Stuart Hall and Kevin Lowden**

The lockdown measures introduced in Scotland in January 2021 have had a major impact on the schooling of the children and young people in Scotland. Many of the primary and secondary schools have remained open but only for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. This commenced on January 5 and is expected to last until at least mid-February. The vast majority of the school population have moved to remote learning at home, supported by their school, their parents/guardians and various media (including the BBC). This remote learning commenced on January 11. This is the second time the schools have closed as response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The previous time the schools closed was in March 2020 with a full return in August 2020. A previous article in *Open House* (Covid-19 and Schools, *Open House*, 290) focussed primarily on the higher levels of school absence during the pandemic and the increased impact of food insecurity on children. This article is focussed on the implications of the latest lockdown for the learning of the children and young people, their health and wellbeing and the position of young carers.

The Scottish Government has highlighted the detrimental effect of young people being out of school during the last lockdown in 2020. This has affected their educational developmental and mental health. There are particular concerns for educational outcomes for young people, and the mental health of adolescents and especially for vulnerable young people. The Scottish Government have been anxious to keep schools open where possible because of the serious anxieties about the increase in educational and social inequalities caused by the closure, or partial closure, of schools. In the period leading up to Christmas, there was an increase in school absences, mainly due to young people self-isolating in relation to Covid-19.

There has now been time to undertake research and reflect on the impact of the first lockdown in 2020 and the subsequent restrictions on the education of young people. Education Scotland has just published *What Scotland Learned: Building Back Better* (January 2021). This publication draws on extant research and input from a wide variety of stakeholders in education. The publication is focussed on six key themes: Relationships, Leadership, Health and Wellbeing, Learning and Teaching, Communities and Successes and Achievements. We will draw on this publication for some key points and expand on the discussion drawing on other sources. The section on Learning and Teaching addresses some of the serious difficulties faced by teachers and schools as the schools closed down for the majority of the young people at very short notice. There was little time to prepare for the move to online and remote teaching. The publication recognises the serious challenges faced by parents who struggled to balance working at home with supporting the education of the young people. The lockdown highlighted some of the pre-existing effects of inequality. Some young people did not have access, or continual access, to equipment that would allow them to engage in online learning, or the household could not afford to pay for the internet.

There have also been some very useful insights into some of the successes. Lessons can be learned from other parts of the world where radio, tv and even phone tutorials are used for education in the home and have been used in previous pandemics. There have been successes in the move to online and remote learning. Many teachers have been able to upskill with considerable alacrity and efficiency, often with the support of formal and informal networks.

Many young people have assumed greater responsibility for their learning and have become more autonomous learners.

The mental and physical health and wellbeing of young people under the lockdowns and restrictions has become an increasing cause for concern. The Scotland Youth Parliament Survey of 2020 lists a number of the factors causing young people mental stress. These include worries about the virus, the loss of their connection with extended family and friends, negotiating home life that is also a learning environment, anxiety about public exams and about their future. Some young people who had received support for mental health issues through the school have experienced a reduction in the service. The lockdown and restrictions have exacerbated the daily challenges faced by disabled children, children with additional support needs and vulnerable children. It has also created enormous difficulties for that group of children and young people who are often absent from, or receive limited attention, in the public and academic discourses on education: young carers.

Young carer refers to a young person who is under 18, or 18 and still at school, and has caring responsibilities for a family member or members, of a friend. The Scottish government estimates that there are 44,000 young carers in Scotland. The person, or persons, cared for are likely to be ill, have a disability, a mental health condition or suffer from drug or alcohol addiction or related health problems. The caring can involve physical personal care, household chores and mental support and may involve caring for younger siblings. The Scottish government provides a small annual grant for young carers, though notes that many young carers do not perceive their role as being that of a carer. It is a way of life for many of them. There has been a reduction in social services during the pandemic and consequently more pressure on young carers to assume further caring responsibilities. A survey conducted by Dr Blake-Holmes from the University of East Anglia between April 2020 and June 2020 demonstrated that many young carers feel a strong sense that school provides a welcome routine and respite from the caring responsibilities. This has been disrupted by lockdowns and school closures. Some young carers felt higher levels of stress as they struggled to balance the demands of home learning with caring (including caring for younger siblings) and finding a quiet space to study. Many young carers had to deal with the deteriorating mental health of the adult person(s) they care for. Some young carers are more socially isolated and disadvantaged than other young people and this has been intensified during school closures.

There is much to be learned about the continuation of education and home learning for young people during the period of the pandemic. There are issues about the effectiveness of remote and online learning and the equity of the learning experience for young people. There are questions about the flexibility and agility of all of the teaching profession to adapt to new learning environments and the implications for the future education and preparation of teachers. Arguably, there has emerged a greater awareness of the extent of poverty and child poverty in Scotland and the consequences of the lockdowns and restrictions for those who experience poverty. This greater awareness now needs to be deepened and more nuanced and incorporate a greater understanding of children and young people who are disabled, children with additional support needs, vulnerable children and those who are young carers.

A full list of references is available on request.

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