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Research Briefing Paper

The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Young People's Mental Health

Margaret Wood, Feng Su and Andrew Pennington

The effect of Covid 19 Pandemic on Young People's Mental Health: a Study of Year 9 and 10 Students in Some York Secondary Schools

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to deepen our understanding of what young people regard as factors having an adverse effect on their mental health and wellbeing and those which might strengthen and improve it, following the disruptive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives. In this paper, we explore the following questions: to what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected secondary school students mental health and wellbeing in England? What did secondary school students value most for their mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic? What might be the implications for schools and school leaders for the post-pandemic future?

THE STUDY

The study took place during the second half of the summer term 2023. A qualitative multi-method research design was used consisting of an online questionnaire survey and follow-up focus group interviews. In addition, the research team undertook a systematic review of relevant literature (academic peer reviewed papers, reports from government and independent agencies) to locate the issues and concerns in a national and international context. The research took place in three York secondary schools identified following discussion with the City of York Council Inclusion Adviser. The research team subsequently made contact with the three identified schools via letters of invitation explaining the nature of the research and meetings to discuss arrangements for the research in each setting. Participating schools were given the opportunity to comment on a draft of the survey questions. 605 Year 9 and 10 students (aged between 14 and 15) responded to the online survey and 16 students in two of the schools took part in the follow-up focus group interviews. These used a semi-structured format of prepared questions but with scope and flexibility to respond to participants' ideas and comments through additional follow-up questions as appropriate. Detail of the survey questions is given on the Appendix. Ethical approval for the study was granted by York St John University and the research was conducted in accordance with this approval and the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines.

MAIN FINDINGS

In the study, the majority of participants (over 75%) reported that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions between March 2020 and December 2021 had affected their daily routine and school life with consequent effects on their mental health and wellbeing. Whilst the same proportion of boys and girls reported some effect on daily life (43%), a much higher proportion of girls (41%) reported a big effect than boys (28%). Overall 85% of girls reported an effect on their daily lives against 71% of boys.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was evidenced by participants' strong feeling of learning loss, isolation due to remote learning, and challenges due to individual personal or family circumstances. During the lockdown, participants were in the final year of primary school education. The majority of them had to study at home unless their parents were workers whose work was critical to the COVID-19 response, including those who work in health and social care and in other key sectors identified by the UK government.

Participants were also asked whether COVID-19 continues to affect their daily routine and school life now. Almost 30% of participants reported that they were still affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reporting of a continuing effect was greater amongst girls (37%) than boys (24%). The effect was mainly associated with the nervousness and fear when participants returned to in-person schooling from January 2022.

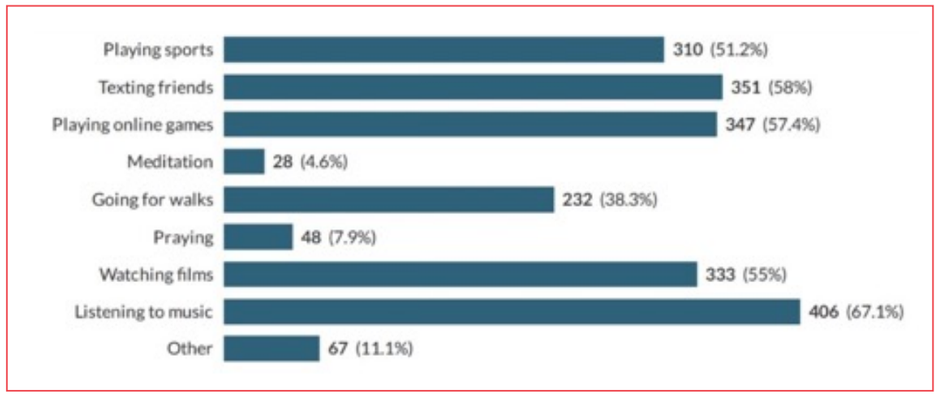
The study also found that the COVID-19 pandemic affected participants' friendships at school. 43% of participants reported such an impact. Subsequent small group discussions identified that this effect was largely a negative one. The gender differences in this effect are marked: over half of girls (54%) reported an impact, against a third of boys (34%).

Participants were specifically asked if COVID and related events had an impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Almost 40% of the participants responded that there was some or a very big impact. Again, gender differences are marked. More than half of girls reported an impact (55%) against a quarter of boys (25%). A fifth of girls reported a very big impact (21%) against just 5% of boys. The data show that the main causes of the impact included the isolation experienced during the COVID lockdown periods, changes to their life routines, anxiety and experiences of COVID infections amongst family and friends.

The survey responses showed that participants had received support from their schools during the COVID pandemic. Over 70% of respondents to the survey indicated that they had received some or enough support from their schools. At the same time, 27% of respondents stated that there was not enough support for them during the pandemic. Fewer girls felt that there was enough support from schools (64%) than boys (79%). The findings suggest that schools played an important role in maintaining children's education by moving classrooms online due to the lockdowns. Whilst online and distance learning was not ideal for many children, respondents appreciated that, given the circumstances, schools had done everything that could have been asked of them. In order to facilitate online learning, many schools had loaned IT equipment to children such as laptop computers and tablet devices and sought to maintain some form of contact with students. The majority of participants (80%) perceived the support they received from school was good or very good, whilst 21% of respondents suggested the support they received was not very good and schools perhaps could have done more. There was little gender difference in this reported view (girls 78% OK or better against 81% of boys).

MAIN FINDINGS

The survey sought responses on what activities participants found useful to cope with the challenges of the pandemic restrictions as shown below.



Whilst some activities are clearly popular options (sports, texting friends, films and music) other activities mentioned often by participants included reading and having a pet.

There are some interesting differences in the activities identified by boys and girls to aid in coping with pandemic associated challenges: boys were more likely to find playing sports and online gaming most useful, whilst girls identified online contact with friends and listening to music in much higher numbers than boys.

Here are some ways of coping with challenges. Please tick those that apply to you and add any others.	Male	Female
Playing sports	215 (66%)	88 (34.5%)
Texting friends	143 (43.9%)	193 (75.7%)
Playing online games	241 (73.9%)	90 (35.3%)
Meditation	10 (3.1%)	11 (4.3%)
Going for walks	105 (32.2%)	119 (46.7%)
Praying	21 (6.4%)	19 (7.5%)
Watching films	158 (48.5%)	161 (63.1%)
Listening to music	185 (56.7%)	204 (80%)
Other	29 (8.9%)	28 (11%)

Analysis of the survey and interview data, which probed aspects of young people's daily lives during and post-pandemic, provided evidence of the challenges experienced by young people relating to learning in the pandemic era. This era was characterised by 'lockdown' periods which involved the prohibition of social activities and association, the closure of schools and the pivot to remote home-learning. Young people told us about the challenges they experienced related to isolation and denial of opportunities, compounded by anxieties provoked by the sudden and significant change to social life, learning modes and routines.

The analysis evidenced the social and emotional impacts of a number of other factors too including anxieties about family members' employment security, health and circumstances at home during the pandemic on young people's mental health. Significantly, transition back to in-person schooling brought its own challenges. It is concerning that Covid-related events had impacts for over 70% of the young people in our study and 20% reported continuing worries about the effect of these events on their lives. A higher proportion of girls reported continuing worries (29%) than boys (12%). The analysis suggests that there are implications about young people's agency and support for mental health and wellbeing in the post-pandemic future from these young people's accounts. One particular message that emerges from this study is that in the return to in-person schooling, the dominant emphasis on 'catching-up' to make good the learning loss, appears to have been too restricted and narrow and in need of an accompanying focus on: the restoration and regeneration of friendships and social bonds that lie at the heart of schools as communities and human flourishing; and sports/physical activity, arts and cultural pursuits . The study reaffirms the continuing importance of listening to young people's perspectives and especially so in planning education provision during and following periods of crisis and significant disruption.

IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

In the post-pandemic future the 'new normal is no longer normal', as one of our participants put it, and is likely to be marked by increased frequency of crises, both global, national and local, embracing health, environmental, civic and infrastructure disruptions. In such a 'new normal' our research suggests a number of areas that educators and policy makers might give attention to. Firstly, a reinvigoration of children and young people's voice and engagement in the planning of provision in times of crisis. Any attempt at even the most basic governmental communication with young people about the pandemic restrictions (most notably school closures) was lacking. The government (national and local) response to such future emergencies might be improved and enhanced by understanding young people's experience of pandemic restrictions through young people's full and proper engagement in the processes of review of what happened and using this knowledge and insight to inform future planning of services and provision. This might be further developed by creating opportunities for young people's involvement in planning for future crisis situations at governmental and institutional levels.

IMPLICATIONS AND ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Secondly, our study suggests there is a strong need to give more emphasis to maintaining social bonds of family and friendship during and in the aftermath of emergencies such as the pandemic. These factors emerge as of great importance to young people who feel their loss and restriction acutely. From our work we would suggest that such social bonds may be a strong protective factor against mental health difficulties, both in preventing them emerging and acting as mitigation where they do. This is particularly so in the return to education and the reopening of schools, when we suggest more time and emphasis might be devoted to nurturing and rebuilding social bonds rather than an unremitting focus on lost academic learning. We would suggest that 'catch up' programmes and funding need to give a more balanced focus across a range of domains.

Thirdly, we would suggest that the experience of the pandemic and associated restrictions throws the question of the deterioration of young people's mental health into sharper and more urgent focus. This suggests that work to develop a properly funded and consistent level of early intervention support and help for young people with mental health difficulties is needed. Our experience is that schools are providing this in the absence of other services which have been reduced or removed as part of the government imposed austerity programme of the last 10 years. Our evidence suggests that this response by schools and the support provided is welcomed and appreciated by young people. However, our review of the wider literature suggests that it lacks a consistent approach, does not always have clear links and referral mechanisms to other services and is subject to individual schools finding the funding. A coherent programme of support based on schools needs to address these issues in its design and execution and seek to marshal and coordinate the resources of a range of agencies concerned with health and wellbeing at a local level, both statutory and third sector. More broadly, drawing on the literature and our data, we suggest there needs to be a thorough and honest examination of the causes of increasing mental health difficulties, particularly in relation to the pressures and expectations placed on young people by the current testing, assessment and discipline regimes in schools. We also feel that there may be a link to be made here with the work to understand and address issues of increasing absence from school and deteriorating standards of behaviour post-pandemic. Efforts to focus support and programmes of activity on the kind of mental health and wellbeing concerns raised by our survey participants, for example anxiety, nervousness, isolation and difficulties in socialisation, may address some of the underlying factors in poor attendance and behaviour.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSIONS

1. How the findings of this study might inform interventions for pupil wellbeing and mental health?
2. What steps can be taken to help ensure implementation decision-making in schools regarding mental health and wellbeing interventions is based on the strength of the evidence?
3. How can researchers and educators make sure that the views and opinions of children and young people are prioritised in evaluations of interventions and services that affect them?

APPENDIX

Survey questions

In the survey, participants were asked to respond to the following questions on a 3-point Likert scale. Space was also provided with each question for an optional free text response .

- How much has Covid affected your daily routine and school life during the lockdown? (Scale - big effect, some effect, no effect)
- How much has Covid affected your daily routine and school life now? (Scale - big effect, some effect, no effect)
- Have Covid and related events (lockdown, school closures, online learning etc.) had an impact on your mental health and well being in any way? (Scale - big impact, some impact, no impact)
- If you have come across some challenges for your mental health and well being since the start of Covid, please describe them. (free text response)
- Has Covid had an impact on your friendships at school? (Scale - big impact, some impact, no impact)
- Do you think school has provided enough support for you during Covid and afterwards? (Scale - enough support, some support, not enough support)
- What do you think of the support the school provided? (Scale - very good, OK, not very good)
- Do you have any worries about Covid that may affect you now and in the future? (Scale - lots of worries, some worries, no worries at all)

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