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The effects of Covid-19 on school education.

By Stephen J. McKinney

The Covid-19 pandemic had a sudden and dramatic impact on many aspects of everyday life throughout the world. In Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom, many adults moved from a designated workplace to working at home. Others were placed on furlough or lost their job. The pandemic created some very pressing challenges in school education. The vast majority of school children were no longer in school and schools only remained open for small numbers of children of key workers. School children returned to school in Scotland on the 10th of August 2020, under strict guidance about hygiene and social distancing. This is an appropriate point in time to reflect on the impact and consequences of this mass enforced absence from school and the subsequent return to school. A number of very serious issues affecting children and young people were highlighted during the lockdown: an increase in mental health problems; the heightened dangers for children who suffer domestic abuse; the continued effects of digital exclusion; the effects of the absence from school; the move to home education and the rise in food insecurity. This short article will focus on two issues: absence from school during the lockdowns caused by the pandemic (and continued absence for some children in the transition from lockdown) and food insecurity for children and young people.

Before the pandemic there were 250 million children not attending school throughout the world. The global spread of the pandemic meant that by mid-July 2020, 1 billion children were out of school in more than 160 countries. An estimated 40 million children were unable to access early childhood education in their pre-school year during the pandemic. Around 40% of developing countries were unable to support learners at risk during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Many people across the world lost their source of income (temporarily or on a longer-term basis) as a result of the effects of the lockdowns and there has been an increase in the number of people who experience poverty and, in some cases, severe poverty. In these circumstances of strained family incomes, there is a greater risk of a high drop-out rate from schools in some parts of the world and a greater probability that more children will not complete primary and lower secondary school education. This is expected to be especially marked in sub-Saharan countries, Haiti, Jordan, Nepal and Pakistan.

In Scotland, the easing of lockdown and the transition to the return to school has been very focussed on the curtailment of the virus, the health and safety of children and adults and a creation of a safe learning environment. The initial and provisional figures for school attendance indicate that at the 28th of August 2020 there were 100,000 children absent from school. This means that the attendance rate was at 84.5% which was down from the 95.8% attendance of the 17th August 2020. While there is limited data about the authorised and unauthorised absences in this period, and the attendance figures are expected to stabilise, it is recorded that only 22,821 of these absences were Covid-19 related. Attendance and absence data are collected every two years and the average for school attendance in 2018-2019 was 93%. A higher level of absence was anticipated by the Scottish Government in the transition back to school, though perhaps not on this scale, and the advice is to engage with

these parents and carers to discuss their concerns and support attendance. The guidance is that the use of measures to enforce attendance should only be used as a last resort.

One of the very concerning effects of Covid-19 was the rise in food insecurity for children and young people. There were alarmingly high rates of food insecurity around the world, including the UK, in the pre-Covid-19 era and this became exacerbated by the pandemic. There are three stages of food insecurity. Stage 1 is mild food insecurity and is characterised by worrying about the ability to obtain food. Stage 2 is moderate food insecurity, and this includes compromises on the quality and variety of food, the reduction of portions and skipping meals altogether. This can lead to hunger and malnourishment, as people opt for cheaper processed foods. Stage 3 is severe food insecurity which means the people experience hunger which, over a period of time, can lead to serious malnourishment and malnutrition. There were 795 million people who were undernourished around the world pre-Covid-19. Before Covid-19 the expectation was that this figure would rise to 2 billion by 2050.

In many parts of the world, free school meals are provided to children from households with limited income to ensure they have at least one meal a day and to address potential malnourishment. There is a long history of free school meals provided in Scottish schools: initially meals provided by charitable bodies, including the Christian Churches, and now by the state. State-funded free school meals in Scotland is a means tested benefit. The Scottish Free School Meals Campaign led by the Child Poverty Action Group (in Scotland) successfully lobbied the Scottish Government to provide free school meals for all children attending primaries one to three in Scottish schools on a universal basis. This means free school meals are available for all children and are not means tested. These free school meals were launched in January 2015. Glasgow City Council extended the provision of universal free school meals to primary four for all children in the Council schools in August 2018. This universal provision of free school meals for children in primaries one to three (and primary four in Glasgow) and the provision of means tested free school meals continued during the period of lockdown with meals in school, vouchers or cash to buy meals. The means tested free school meals extended into the summer holidays. The impact of the pandemic on family incomes across the country precipitated a sharp rise in the number of children receiving free school meals. The figure rose by 53,000 to 175,000, a rise of 30.29%. This will be compounded by another expected rise in the uptake of food parcels from food banks. The Trussell Trust had announced an 18% increase in the use of their foodbanks in the UK in the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 and expect this to be even higher for the next reporting period as a result of the effects of the lockdown. The Trust distributed 1.9 million three-day emergency food parcels (720,504 for children) in this last reporting area. Scotland was the second highest area in the UK for accessing three-day emergency food parcels.

As stated earlier, the pandemic has had a dramatic impact on many aspects of everyday life in Scotland. It has had an effect on many households and household incomes, and as a result, on many children and young people who are dependents. It has had a serious effect on those children who were already the most vulnerable. The serious social problems of child mental health problems, child abuse, digital exclusion and food insecurity all pre-existed Covid-19 and have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic. The most vulnerable children and young people have become more vulnerable and many more have become vulnerable.

A full list of references is available on request.

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