

Detecting wellbeing issues among fragile learners & others

Lengthy school closures will have had an effect on every child's wellbeing, says Crispin Chatterton. So what should teachers look for if they suspect a problem – and should they assume all is well even if those signs are absent?

This is a new academic year like no other: most teachers will be desperate to return to school and some kind of normality after months of lockdown and limited contact with their pupils. But that enthusiasm will be tempered by nagging concerns as the Covid crisis persists – how will we keep pupils and ourselves safe, how 'normal' can teaching be in a time of class bubbles and social distancing, what happens when the local or school infection rate spikes?

Children, being children, won't for the most part echo those concerns. Teachers tell me that the vast majority of pupils cannot wait to begin school. They miss their friends, their teachers and the comforting daily routine of school life.

Yet that welcome exuberance is only part of the story. Although most coped with lockdown remarkably well, teachers also suspect it wasn't without emotional and educational costs, particularly for the youngest children. The problem is that it isn't always readily apparent who has really struggled and what the consequences for their wellbeing and learning will be. Teachers will understandably be concerned about children who have recognised learning or attitudinal issues – but they will also worry that many more pupils outside of this group may have been adversely affected by the lockdown.

As one headteacher, Jill Wilson of The Gleddings prep school in Halifax, told me, "It's impossible to guess how individual children have coped. Each child's circumstance will be so different. I have some pupils who have not seen another child for the best part of five months and others with two or three siblings who haven't lacked company. Some of our children, even

though they come from relatively fortunate backgrounds, will have struggled during lockdown but others won't. The only way we can assess their wellbeing is scientifically – through the evidence."

Jill has used GL Assessment's PASS (Pupil Attitudes to Self and School) psychometric measure to assess pupils' wellbeing for several years. This year, she plans to test Year 3s and above much earlier than usual – at the end of September rather than in the summer term – because she wants a clearer understanding of how lockdown has affected children's deeper attitudes to learning and school.

One common observation she and other teachers have made is the damaging effect the months away from school have had on simple study skills. How to sit still, how to behave in class, how to listen and how to work together. "The 21st-century child," says Jill, "is not a good sitter and not a good listener." Lockdown has only exacerbated their tendency to be easily distracted. Fortunately, it doesn't take long to relearn these skills if teachers put in place the right strategies to inculcate them.

Fragile learners who may have just about managed to keep up with the class but who have persistent low self-esteem and confidence issues are a different story. Michael Browning, Head of Year 7 at Garden International School in Kuala Lumpur, one of the largest international schools in Malaysia, says it's easy to overlook fragile learners if attainment data isn't cross-referenced with wellbeing assessments that seek to uncover a pupil's emotional state of mind. And lockdown has only made that task harder.

"Tracking the more vulnerable students has been more challenging during this period of



online learning, so I put a lot of effort into celebrating success and recognition of effort to really encourage these students." He says initial results are encouraging and attainment and progress do not appear to have suffered.

Other issues, however, may be harder to detect. What about the child who didn't have any previous problems pre-pandemic but has been deprived of much personal adult supervision and input because their parents were both working flat out during lockdown – how has that affected their wellbeing, will they still be motivated to learn? Or take the case of the pupil who has diligently completed all their remote assignments and classes online but hasn't actually retained much in their long-term memory. Or the boy or girl whose parents may have been working in healthcare or other exposed settings during the pandemic and has internalised their existential fears?

The uncomfortable truth is that not every child will exhibit easily observable behaviour to indicate that he or she has been badly affected by lockdown. Previously robust learners may be as vulnerable as their fragile peers. Nor will their problems manifest themselves in identical ways – each will be different.

Yes, most children are extremely resilient, but most are equally good at masking what is bothering them. The emotional impact of lockdown on children's ability and motivation to learn and on their overall wellbeing will simply be unknown unless and until we take the time to ask them. If a child's wellbeing isn't assessed alongside their academic performance post lockdown, then how can schools be certain to sustain either?