

The Pandemic Has Snatched a Generation of British Children. Adults Have Turned a Deaf Ear to Their Tormented Cries

Professor S Enoch



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Invited Editorial

The Pandemic Has Snatched a Generation of British Children. Adults Have Turned a Deaf Ear to Their Tormented Cries.

The greatest cataclysm to emerge from the pandemic is perhaps the fact that children and young adults at university have cruelly been denied access to their rightful education.

The British Government's decision in March 2020 to shut schools and cancel high-stakes exams was met with reassurance by some, disquietude by others. Children who had been preparing for GCSEs and A-Levels for 18 months were abruptly robbed of their chance to compete at a national level. Given the evolving nature of the pandemic, this did not appear unduly imprudent. However, children could only watch with incredulity and abhorrence when adults started to throng pubs, bars and restaurants in July, places in which donning a face mask seems futile, whilst they were not allowed to sit exams in a socially-distanced manner or attend school to try to recuperate some of the time that they had lost.

Following five months of uncertainty and fruitless perturbation for children, schools resumed in September 2020, but they were obliged to close again if the positivity rate became inordinately high or the number of teachers in self-isolation prevented the school from functioning. Students were also apprised to self-isolate if a member of their class must self-isolate, even if he or she does not test positive for the virus. This vacillation arguably had a pronounced effect on children who, each night, wondered if they would be allowed to return to school the next morning or if they would be sent home from school during the day. More recently, many councils across the country proposed the early closure of schools for Christmas. And universities throughout the UK instructed students to leave at the beginning of December. While adults flocked high streets and shopping centres to purchase trivial Christmas gifts or savoured a glass of mulled wine in a crowded pub, children were left to educate themselves. Isolated, unsupported and adrift. Adults were outraged at the thought that their prerogative to socialise might be denied. Yet, their indifference towards the education and wellbeing of their children was neglectful at best, callous at worst.

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It is not unwarranted to argue that undergraduate students in British universities have suffered a significant injustice during the pandemic. First-year students were encouraged to move into halls of residence which, for the majority of them, was their first taste of living away from home. They had no option but to accept enormous student loans in order to cover their tuition fees and accommodation fees, thousands of pounds that went directly to the universities. The universities swiftly decided that they were unable to deal with the (clearly expected) spike in COVID cases which hit in October 2020, and the majority of face-to-face

teaching at a higher education level for all years ground to a halt. Some classes were delivered online, but to consider monotonous and uninspired pre-recorded lectures with limited student-tutor interaction as a substitute for attendance lectures can only be regarded as nothing more than a humourless joke. Add to this the long-term side effects of staring at a flickering computer screen for months on end: repetitive stress injuries; sleep disorders; dry eyes; myopia; blurred vision; headaches; and obesity. And then the devastating sequelae of prolonged loss of contact with friends and peers: low mood; anxiety; depression; mental health problems; and suicide. These are scientific facts. They are not speculations.

While those who are responsible for educating the next generation use their state-funded salaries to finance their social lives and appear oblivious to this gross injustice, students are helplessly abandoned in halls of residence that can only be described as glorified prisons. It cannot be denied that these young people are seen simply as cash-cows. The blame shifts, as in a circular firing squad, between teaching unions, policy makers and politicians. Their lack of vision and imagination prevents them from finding pragmatic solutions. More and more barriers are erected. Online petitions abound with misguided reasons and inane rationale for keeping schools and universities closed are circulated. Debates centre on how to keep children away from school and students away from universities rather than on what needs to be done to ensure that they can return to a productive learning environment.

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We, as a society, have callously ignored the repercussions of denying uninterrupted learning for our children and young adults. The apathy, torpor and selfishness of the adults are abominable. The rebound of the economy and the rights of the educators have taken greater precedence than the education of the youngest generation. Their privilege to a fair education and to their social and emotional development has been snatched away. Cold-heartedly. Parsimoniously. Pitilessly.

The pandemic has left behind a trail of devastation with calamitous consequences. But the blatant apathy towards children and young adults is perhaps the most iniquitous. If a measure of a civilised society is how well it treats its young and most vulnerable, these past few months are a damning indictment. It is still not too late to correct this grotesque unfairness. Yet, if we do not change course and prioritise the educational and emotional needs of our children and young adults, we, as a society, will need to hang our heads in utter shame for not heeding to their tormented cries.

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Let us start the New Year with more compassion, consideration and care for our children and young adults, and pave the way for them have a fruitful education.

Professor S Enoch

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The World Journal of Medical Education & Research (WJMER) is the online publication of the Doctors Academy Group of Educational Establishments. It aims to promote academia and research amongst all members of the multi-disciplinary healthcare team including doctors, dentists, scientists, and students of these specialties from all parts of the world. The journal intends to encourage the healthy transfer of knowledge, opinions and expertise between those who have the benefit of cutting-edge technology and those who need to innovate within their resource constraints. It is our hope that this interaction will help develop medical knowledge & enhance the possibility of providing optimal clinical care in different settings all over the world.



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