



Exploring the Covid-19 Pandemic's Impact on Children and Adolescents: Understanding the Ethical and Educational Dimensions of Loss

Jeff Frank¹ · Gottfried Schweiger²

Accepted: 20 January 2023 / Published online: 27 January 2023
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2023

The goal of this special issue is to think philosophically about the ethical and educational dimensions of loss as it relates to how children and adolescents experience the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. While it is obviously the case that children have lost much due to the pandemic, many educational policy makers and practitioners focus narrowly on “learning loss,” as if this captures the whole—or the most important aspects—of what young people have been going through because of the Covid-19 pandemic. When schools closed in-person instruction, students moved to remote learning, which for many students was less effective and less engaging than in-person instruction. Some students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, faced additional challenges, such as lack of access to technology or a quiet place to study. Also, due to the pandemic, many students have faced social and emotional difficulties that have made it hard to focus on learning. Often, learning loss is measured in superficial ways, and often it fails to account for the lived experience of children and adolescents. Education and the lived experience of children and adolescents were already marked by inequality, and the pandemic both worsened and brought to light this inequality in ways that will be explored in this issue.

The losses experienced by children and adolescents during the Covid-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on their well-being, mental health, and social life. Some of the losses beyond learning that have occurred include: Children and adolescents rely on in-person schooling and socialization with peers to develop important social skills such as communication, cooperation, and empathy. The loss of these opportunities has had a negative impact on their social and emotional development. Extracurricular activities such as sports, music, and art programs provide children and adolescents with opportunities to pursue their interests and passions, as well as to develop new skills and friendships. Children and adolescents often rely on their peers for social support, but the pandemic has made it difficult for them to maintain these relationships. The pandemic has led to increased isolation and loneliness for many children and adolescents, as they have been unable to participate in their usual social activities and have been separated from their peers and family members. These losses and changes have all had a negative impact on their mental health

✉ Jeff Frank
jfrank@stlawu.edu

¹ St. Lawrence University, Canton, USA

² University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria

and well-being. In sum, the pandemic has disrupted the normal routine of children and adolescents, which for many has led to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. Thus, the measures taken to contain the pandemic had a major negative impact on many children's and adolescents' well-being, mental health, and social life. Even though these measures were taken to protect the health of others, it is necessary to acknowledge and not deny these losses and to provide support and resources to help children and adolescents cope with the challenges they are facing.

Authors in this special issue expand our understanding of loss both through explorations of the lived experiences of young people and adolescents over the course of this pandemic and through criticizing dominant ways of conceptualizing what has been lost because of Covid-19. Our hope is that by bringing together authors who employ different approaches to doing philosophy and philosophy of education, we will expand our collective understanding of Covid-19's impact, thereby opening and disclosing new ways of appreciating and supporting students through what remains for many of them a challenging time. Though setting a goal of "getting back to normal" as soon as possible makes some degree of sense, the rush to get back to normal should not keep us from pausing and reflecting on the problems and tensions that the pandemic unearthed and made more apparent. This special issue will sit with these problems and tensions, drawing out questions and opportunities that deserve attention and further reflection. Young people have lost much because of the Covid-19 pandemic; we should respect this loss by opening it up to philosophical thinking, not by narrowing it down to what can be measured and charted against a standard of learning that, if not met, constitutes—and circumscribes—loss. Papers in this special issue question this narrow definition of loss, inviting readers to consider the vast impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had.

Discussion of Individual Papers

This Special Issue contains six articles devoted to different aspects of childhood and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles are quite diverse in their approaches, methods, and theoretical backgrounds; what ties them together is that all are about trying to better understand losses from the pandemic and how to deal with them.

Jeff Frank's contribution opens this issue with an argument that a narrowly understood learning loss is not sufficient to understand the role of schools during and after the pandemic. Rather, in the spirit of Jonathan Lear, schools should also be understood as places of mourning and radical hope. The experience of inequality among students, which occurred and was reinforced by the pandemic, should be taken into account, as well as the possibility of restoring a deeper meaning to education that is also experienced by students.

The question of what it means to perceive fear, grief, and loss and to help children manage and learn from these experiences is the focus of Cara Furman's contribution. She describes how her preschool-age son "wandered" through the pandemic and how he did so by playing with Transformers figures. The time of the pandemic is a paradoxically fruitful and inactive time of mourning and growing, a time of wandering (like the biblically described wandering of the Israelites after the exodus from Egypt in the desert before they came to Israel). For Furman, "wander time" also expresses the need to rethink the use of time and what it means that time seems to go unused or lost. It seems particularly important for dealing with radical experiences such as a pandemic to give children enough time and space and material for such a wandering.

Gottfried Schweiger's text also deals with other losses of adolescents during the pandemic and thus aims to broaden the focus on education. The focus on learning loss, after all, carries with it the reduction of seeing adolescents only as students and reducing this phase of life to learning and thus preparing for adult life. The own value and specificity of the adolescent life world is thus in danger of being lost, which is an expression of a preference for the adult world. The pandemic also showed a culmination of the fact that too little attention was paid to the special nature of adolescent experiences, leisure activities and social relationships. In particular, the fact that youth is a short phase of life and one in which formative experiences are made.

Jay Zameska's paper applies one of the grand ethical theories, luck egalitarianism, to learning losses from school closures and asks whether children deserve compensation for their losses. He argues that educational inequalities among children did not arise in the first place because of school closures, and that the question of compensation for such inequalities is therefore not unique to the pandemic. Rather, luck egalitarianism requires that all children have equal educational opportunities, in any circumstances, because they cannot be responsible for educational inequalities. Given the reality of deep educational inequalities (especially along gradients of socioeconomic status or based on racial discrimination), Zameska's text makes a seemingly radical claim whose implementation would transform how we approach schooling. Above all, he shows that the losses from the pandemic should not be viewed in isolation, but as a deepening and exacerbation of larger social problems and inequities. It would therefore be wrong to return to business as usual after the end of the pandemic. Zameska's conclusions are echoed by other articles in this special issue that also address school inequalities, especially the articles by Lorella Terzi, Elaine Unterhalter and Judith Suissa and Julian Mohring.

Terzi, Unterhalter and Suissa address the relationship between poverty and education from the perspective of the capabilities approach. The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified what scholars have long pointed out: that poverty and education are intertwined. Terzi, Unterhalter, and Suissa argue that the normative framework provided by a capabilities approach is a superior way to think about how education can help overcome inequities for children living in poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic, they argue, has shown that children experiencing poverty have received too little support to shape their capacities, for which appropriate infrastructures are needed both inside and outside schools. Therefore, it would also be short-sighted to propagate education as a way out of poverty without taking into account how children can use and realize these opportunities.

Like Zameska and Terzi, Unterhalter and Suissa, Mohring reminds readers that some of the hardships widely experienced by children and adolescents during the pandemic were, in fact, deeply familiar to those less economically and socially privileged. Mohring's contribution draws on interviews with emerging adults in a German vocational training institute to explore issues of precarity and vulnerability. Their qualitative research, explored through theoretical lenses offered by Judith Butler and Axel Honneth, remind readers that not all young people experienced the pandemic as a "change" in the same way.

The editors would like to extend their heartfelt gratitude to the contributors, reviewers and editor Amy Shuffelton. We cannot thank Shuffelton enough for her exceptionally thoughtful approach to supporting this issue and shaping it into the form we share with you now.