

A Retrospective Study investigating Students, Staff, and Parents' Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Introduction

It is now just over two years since Covid-19 came into our lives. 'Bubbles,' masks, social distancing, handwashing whilst singing Happy Birthday, and the pros and cons of different vaccines suddenly became part of everyone's conversations.

In an effort to mitigate the spread of coronavirus, schools were among the first facilities to close in March 2020. Closing schools will undoubtedly have had an impact on children and young people, mentally, physically, and socially. According to Almeida *et al.*, (2022) this may have included a possible increase in screen time, irregular sleep patterns, diminished exercise, and for some, less balanced diets, in addition to anxiety and depression. Evidence also suggests that parental stress surged, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic, with some parents reporting increased anxiety, depression, agitation, and sleep disturbances which may have related to added pressure of working from home whilst teaching their children, worries, related to unemployment and financial difficulties, and fears of getting sick or dying or of this happening to loved ones.

Over the last two years, research about the psychological impact of COVID-19 on children and young people has been emerging. Numerous studies have observed sharp increases in rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicide attempts. Before the pandemic, England's Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey found that one in nine children and young people were affected by a mental health condition. By October 2020, eight months since the virus first reached the UK, this figure had risen to one in six children. At this point, young people were reporting high levels of loneliness, disrupted sleep, and anxiety about leaving the house due to fear of catching or spreading the virus. However, certain young people appear to have been hit harder by the pandemic: Research suggests that the presence of mental disorders before the pandemic, having special educational needs, and being female is associated with a greater increase in mental health symptoms throughout the pandemic.

Interestingly, other studies report that different people have been affected by the pandemic in different ways; whilst many young people felt their mental health was worse, others reported it had improved. The 2021 MHCYP survey reveals that whilst 40% of 6-16 year olds have experienced deterioration in their mental health, 22% have actually experienced an improvement. This makes sense; for people with a positive home life and financial stability, spending more time at home will have been easier and more enjoyable than for those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds, rely more heavily on school meals and resources, or have strained family relationships. Children who have a particularly negative experience at school, for

example due to bullying or high academic pressure, are more likely to have experienced relief, rather than anxiety, when the lockdown was announced.

In addition to an impact on emotional wellbeing and mental health, the pandemic clearly also had an impact on children's education. A significant number of children in the UK were away from school for up to six months in the first lockdown, and two months in the second. During the first lockdown, schools remained open for the children of 'essential workers' and 'for those children who absolutely need to attend' (Cabinet Office and Department for Education 2020). Those children 'who absolutely needed to attend' included those with Educational and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) for their Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and 'vulnerable children' and young people on the child protection register (i.e., children in families with intervention for abuse and neglect). Teaching unions in the UK, however, called for only those in absolute need to send their children to school (Holt and Murray, 2022).

At West Heath we faced a problem as all our students have EHCPs, so we had to make a very difficult decision of allowing only the most vulnerable or those with keyworker parents to attend. From memory, we started with around ten students in April 2020 (and a very limited staff team) and gradually built up from there over the summer months until we were running at full capacity again in the autumn of 2020. However, the pandemic continued to rear its ugly head, and by January 2021 we were facing the second lockdown when yet again we had to restrict the number of students we could have in school.

For those students unable to attend school, education had to undergo a rapid shift into electronic platforms. Despite many parents taking on a new role as teaching assistants, needless to say most of our students really struggled with this, some not managing to engage at all. Those attending school fared better, although with the large numbers of staff being absent with Covid every week, a significant number of cover lessons had to be put in place, which was less than ideal. Exam arrangements were in chaos, and the education system was put under immense pressure with teacher-based assessments replacing all national examinations during 2020 and 2021.

In April 2020, at the start of lockdown, I undertook a survey to see how our young people were coping with being at home. At that time, 53% of the sample said they were missing being at school, with a further 17% saying "maybe". 50% said that boredom was the most difficult thing about being at home all the time, but 77% said they had started a new hobby and the majority felt they were managing to keep fit and healthy. 57% felt they were getting enough support from school with a further 33% saying "maybe"; those that said they wanted more support included a request for phone calls from teachers/tutors. Whilst generally things seemed to be going well therefore, several students said they wanted to get back to school as soon as

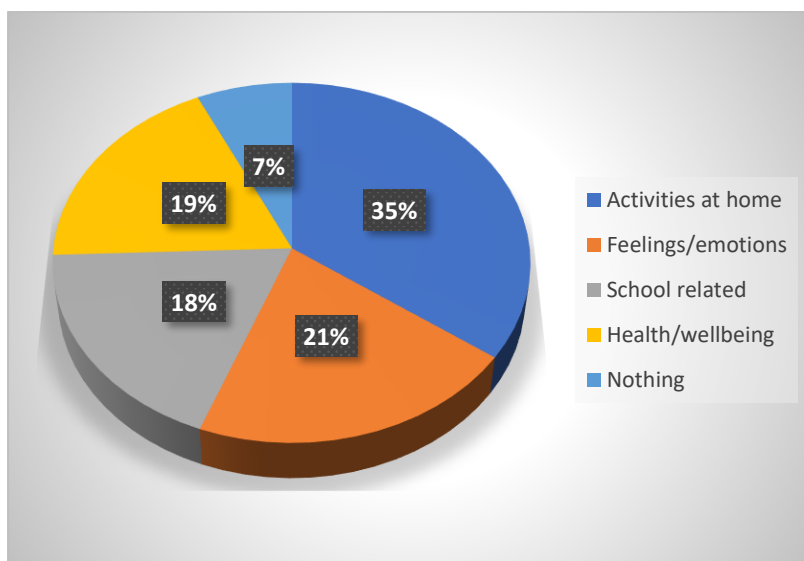
possible and there was a clear message that West Heath is a very important part of our students' lives.

This was obviously very early days of the pandemic and none of us knew what lay ahead. Fast forward to April 2022. In an attempt to find out how our students and staff feel now after two extraordinary years, I sent out a questionnaire comprising some open-ended questions. A similar questionnaire was also sent to parents/carers to gain their views.

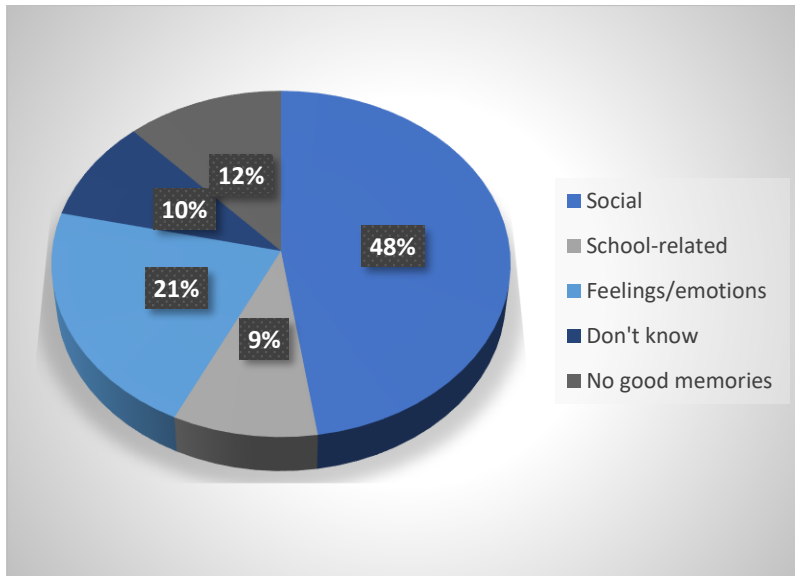
Part 1: Analysis of students' views:

A total of 43 students responded to my request out of a potential 139. However, although the sample was lower than hoped for (I was reliant upon tutors for support and inevitably some were more proactive than others!), fortunately this was spread throughout the school, so we had some responses from HEART, Upper School, Middle School, and Lower School.

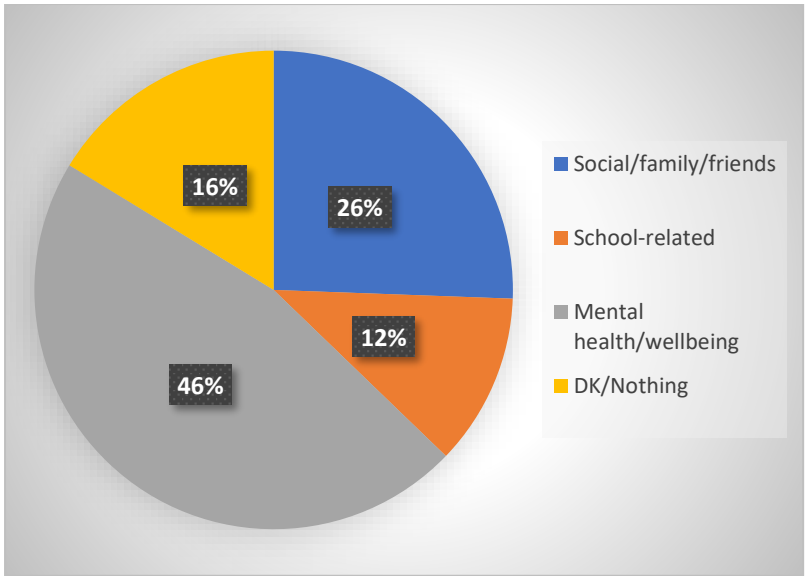
The answers to Question 1 (What can you remember most about lockdown) can largely be grouped into four distinct themes: Activities at home (35%); feelings/emotions (21%), school-related (18%), and health/wellbeing (19%). The remainder claimed they could not remember anything (7%). Examples of activities at home included: Playing video games, watching TV, and facetimeing friends. Examples of feelings included: Being bored, feeling trapped, being depressed/stressed, not dying, and feeling lonely. Responses about school included: Hating doing work at home, online learning, and not being in school. Responses about health/wellbeing included: Isolating, more sleep, relaxing, and nice weather.



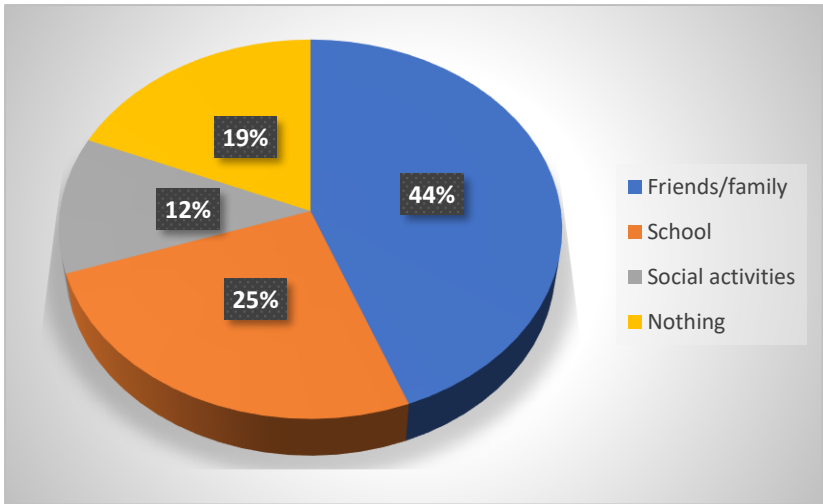
Question 2 looked at “best” memories. Again, these fell into three main themes: Social (family/friends) (48%), school-related (9%), and feelings/emotions (21%). Social included responses such as “talking to friends,” “playing computer games,” “doing quizzes with the family,” “focussing on hobbies” and “watching TV.” School-related responses included “having less school,” and “not going to school,” and feelings/emotions included responses such as “getting a dog,” “more sleep,” “good weather” and “not having to go out.” The remainder of the respondents either didn’t know or couldn’t think of any good memories.



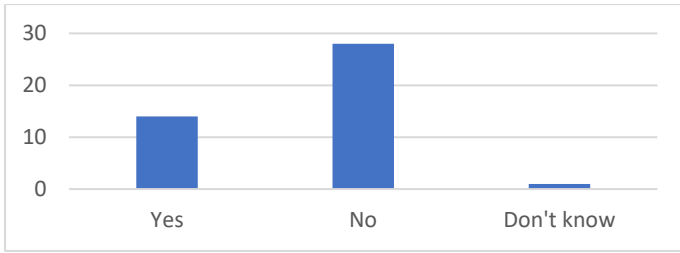
Question 3 asked about “worst” memories. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 46% gave responses around mental health/wellbeing, with answers such as “being stressed”, “catching Covid (twice)”, “being stuck indoors”, “being in solitude”, “feeling trapped”, and “getting bored” being the most common responses. Responses around social activities/family and friends were the next most common answer with 26% citing things like “not being able to see friends and family”, “losing friends”, “being stuck with my family” and “unable to go to the shops”. School-related responses only made up 12% of responses with the most common answer being “online learning”, whilst the remainder of respondents answered, “don’t know” or “nothing”.



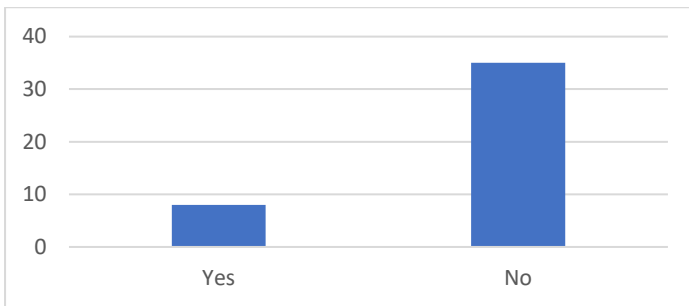
Question 4 asked our students what they missed the most during lockdown. As can be seen, 44% said their friends and family, however, interestingly 25% responded that they missed school, 19% said they missed nothing, and only 12% mentioned that they missed social activities.



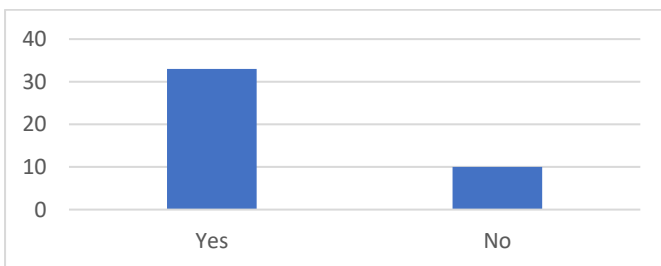
Question 5 asked if students had felt anxious about the pandemic. Surprisingly, the majority (65%) responded 'no', whilst only 33% responded 'yes', and 2% 'didn't know'.



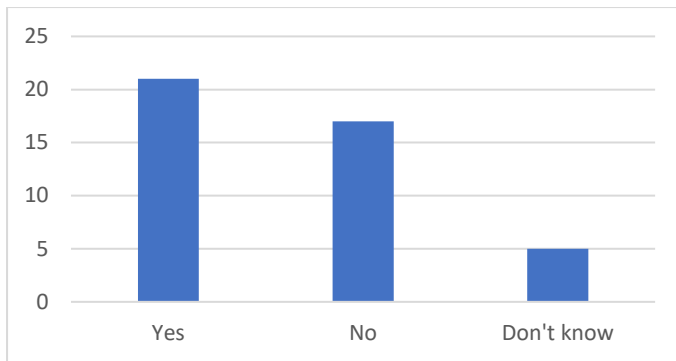
Perhaps reassuringly, when asked in Question 6, whether they still felt anxious about Covid, the majority (81%) answered in the negative, whilst only 19% responded in the affirmative.



Moving on to education, Question 7 asked if students felt their education had suffered because of Covid, and, as expected, the majority (77%) answered 'yes' whilst the remaining 23% answered 'no'.



However, when asked in Question 8 whether students felt they had caught up with their learning now, 49% responded 'yes', whilst 40% responded 'no', and the remainder weren't sure.



However, interestingly when those who had answered 'no' in the previous question were probed as to what else they would like to happen, the majority (42%) said 'nothing', whilst 18% said they didn't know. Only three students said they would like more catch-up lessons.

Part 2: Analysis of Staff Responses

Moving on to the staff, again it was a disappointing response rate – only 61 out of a potential (approximately) 180 staff (34%). Of those, 34 had been staff who had been onsite during the lockdowns and 27 who had been based at home.

For those staff who had been onsite, Question 2 looked at the positives of school during lockdown. The majority of answers (55%) involved something to do with students, and answers included:

“Staff were doing their best to supply the students that were both on and offsite with the best education resources and methods that were available. For the students in school. it was a positive experience, and every effort was made to make them feel safe.”

“I have fond memories, taking students out on many walks. There was a real sense of everyone wanting to do their bit.”

“I thought the staff pulled together more and were more willing to help each other out, they were happy to put themselves forward and can up with original ideas and activities. It was a positive time.”

“I really enjoyed my time while working through lockdown and my memories are all positive, I got to know and engage with students I would not normally work with as well as working with staff from different areas in the school.”

“For quite a lot of the time it was really pleasurable. We were able to operate a very flexible and creative programme that meant that students were under minimal

pressure. There was quite a lot of fun to be had, and the opportunity to engage with learning in a more indirect way, with a focus on personal social and emotional development.”

Question 3 looked at the negatives around working during the pandemic, and answers mainly centred around the impact on mental health, and difficulties around teaching, for example:

“The anxiety of working throughout the pandemic.”

“The negatives revolved around the stress of supporting in classes that had either minimal or poor cover materials, staff members becoming sick and staff levels reducing further. There was also the worry at this stage of passing on the virus to vulnerable family members as vaccines were only in their early stages.”

“Very uncertain times with multiple staff absences and having to isolate if in contact with staff testing positive. Pupils not attending school during this time missed out on their learning and socialising with peers, making it harder for the group to gel. Felt very uneasy about leaving my own two children at home whilst I had to attend work, which had a very negative affect on my daughters Mental Health and feel like this maybe wouldn't have happened if I had of been there to support her.”

“Students behaved as if school was an extended Youth/Holiday Club - with little intention of completing any schoolwork.”

“Scant evidence of any teaching or learning.”

“It was calm but a little sad. Students that were in were lonely for their friends who stayed home. They did not enjoy lessons on their own. Some staff and students were understandably anxious, and this created an uncomfortable feeling in general.”

“It was challenging to get the students to do academic work. It took time for the VLE to be of the appropriate quality. Students offsite missed the interaction with the staff. The mental well-being of the staff and students declined.”

Question 4 then addressed the views of those staff who had been working remotely during lockdown, firstly looking at the positives which included:

“I felt safe working from home away from the risk of infection.”

"The positives were that I was able to keep myself and my family safe, reducing anxiety."

"I quite enjoyed it. The positives were not having to rush to work and get home late. The biggest positive was the relationships with the students' parents, I got to know them really well over the phone and they were so appreciative of the support and the opportunity to talk about things that they were finding difficult. Talking to the students to support them when not in school WAS ALSO REALLY NICE."

"Working remotely allow peace of mind by keeping isolated when the virus was spreading fast."

"More time in the morning as no travel time. Less money spent on petrol. Got more work done with fewer interruptions. Was able to keep an eye on my vulnerable teenage daughter."

However, the negatives of working remotely included:

"No face-to-face communication with students making it hard to build relationships especially with new students to the school."

"It was incredibly hard to switch off and I found myself working much longer hours. Parents would call the mobile quite late and expect a response."

"Technical issues at times made logging on a challenge for some students."

"Balancing home schooling with my children and working remotely from home. Long hours."

"Feel lonely, so boring, no propose of life and all days look same."

Question 6 asked staff what they found most difficult during the pandemic. Answers focused on isolation, financial worries, the impact on those with mental health difficulties, uncertainty, fear of dying, not being able to see friends and family, for example:

"The isolation from family and friends."

"Husband being on furlough and paying the mortgage and bills."

"The impact on those with mental illness particularly OCD around contamination and the negative impact upon their mental health."

"Not being able to grieve."

Question 7 asked if the pandemic had had an impact on levels of anxiety/emotional wellbeing and, if so, in what ways. Unsurprisingly, the majority listed anxiety as the main impact, for example:

"Yes - now far more anxious and worried about things I would have done routinely pre-pandemic."

"Yes, I am very anxious in social situations."

"The uncertainty certainly made me more anxious and stressed, worrying about family members and their health."

However, interestingly some staff said it had had a positive impact, for example:

"a total rethink of what is important in life, this has been a positive impact."

"It had a positive impact on my wellbeing, requiring me to slow down and take joy in the small things such as reading a book or calling a friend."

"Yes, but in a positive way, I am very grateful for everything, and I really appreciated the little things in life far more."

Q8 asked what steps staff had taken to address their emotional wellbeing. Answers included exercise, mindfulness, yoga, walking, reading, hobbies, for example:

"I spent a lot of time cycling to clear my head."

"Went outside for walks/bike riding."

"Lots of walking. Being with Family at every opportunity once we were allowed."

"Reflection and meditation."

"Music, literature, and philosophy. Nature is also a source of great comfort and stimulation. My wife embodied the serenity I sought. This was consoling at a difficult time."

Question 9 explored whether staff felt that the school had done enough to support them: Encouragingly 77% said "yes", however, for those who said 'no', Question 10

asked what additional support they would have liked. Answers included: More reassurance and consideration, welfare checks, and more guidance as to what was expected from those working at home, for example:

"I would have liked to have been more reassured the school was doing everything to protect us such as maintaining hygiene more rigorously, making sure people are accountable for wearing masks, social distancing and testing."

"The early lockdown to the July 2020, I never had any real support. Maybe I did not ask for it but certainly none was offered. A welfare check would have been nice. It would have been nice to have guidance as it was really hard to know what was expected of us. I did find working from home a lot more stressful as there was no real support."

"The school could have put in a rota system for staff, to lessen the time in groups and anxieties about the virus."

Turning to education, Question 11 asked staff if they felt the students' learning had suffered during the pandemic. Interestingly only 75% said they felt education had suffered, 8% said no, and 11% weren't sure. However, the comment below encapsulates those that felt education had suffered:

"This has been an incredibly difficult two years, and even as we're beginning to enter a period which feels closer to what we might call "normal", it's apparent that the effect on students' learning and on their capacity to engage will be long lasting. It will take great skills, patience, flexibility, and determination in order to get back to a position in which learning is fully and consistently at the levels our students are capable of".

However, when asked in Question 12 whether they felt our students' emotional wellbeing had suffered, the vast majority (97%) answered in the affirmative with responses focussing on anxiety, social skills, anger, and loss of confidence. For example:

"Yes. I think not being in school will have had a very negative impact on a lot of our learners, I believe many struggled with their mental health and anxiety."

"Absolutely, they lost structure and support, therapy and social engagement."

"Students definitely suffered emotionally during the pandemic. Being stuck in and not being out would have 100% had an impact on them emotionally. With that and the stress of the pandemic."

"I think it brought a lot of anxiety and more challenging behaviour to the surface due to more kinds of pressure within their family life deepened."

Part 3: Analysis of Parents/Carers Responses

Moving on to the questionnaire sent to parents/carers, this again had a disappointingly low response rate and only 33 parents responded out of a potential 139. Nevertheless, those that were kind enough to respond gave some valuable insights into their thoughts and experiences during the pandemic.

Question 1 asked how they felt their child coped during lockdown. Interestingly, a significant percentage reported that it was a positive experience, particularly for those who struggle with school normally, for example:

"She was very happy in lockdown. It reduced demands, need for socialising and the pressure to go to school and conform to social habits and expectations that she finds challenging. Although it damaged the rituals and habits we had formed over 10 years to support transitions and attendance and it's been very hard to re-establish as she discovered that she is calmer and happier at home without the pressures listed above."

"He said " being indoors and not seeing anyone is my skill set" he seemed to love it."

"He actually enjoyed it. He enjoyed the calmness of it all away from crowds and noise."

Others, however, reported very negative experiences, for example:

"Not very well at all high levels of anxiety and lots of dangerous behaviour."

"Felt more isolated and OCD symptoms and mental health got worse."

"Lockdown happened at point when he had just settled into West Heath having been off school for two years with depression and anxiety. Being unable to attend school during this previous time had had a profoundly negative effect, a downward spiral deepening his anxiety and undermining his self-esteem. In this respect, being unable to attend school during lockdown was a big setback that prolonged his isolation and undermined his recovery, rather than a totally new experience. In many ways he was used to lockdown having been in an anxiety induced isolation for several years. He was unable to engage with remote learning during lockdown, which continued to erode his self-confidence."

Similarly, there were mixed responses to Question 2 which asked what impact the pandemic had had on their child's levels of anxiety. Some reported a positive impact on anxiety, for example:

"He was calm and relaxed."

"None - we treated it as an extended holiday."

"This didn't impact her anxiety as she feels less anxious at home."

Others reported a significant increase in anxiety:

"Extremely high levels of anxiety due to OCD and mental health issues."

"Their anxiety increased due to social interactions with peers being non-existent."

"It went through the roof as her dad is a high risk and she thought he would die."

Question 3 looked at the impact on their child's learning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, with the exception of a few parents, the majority were unanimous in reporting a detrimental impact, for example:

"They suffered hugely from a lack of contact with teachers."

"He was unable to access learning, home learning was stressful."

"He lost more than a year of learning, and his handwriting is worse now than it was 3 years ago".

"He finds it very difficult to learn online so it had a negative effect."

"This was the biggest impact as it was very difficult to engage him to work. You had to sit with him and really encourage, which was extremely difficult as I worked throughout lockdown. I did set aside some time to do 1:1 but was limited to approx 1 to 2 hrs a day at most and I struggled to get him engaged in many of the topics set. The only work he would do self-directed was My Maths. I therefore think he missed out on lots Yr 7 work, so will now be behind".

Similarly, when asked about the impact on social skills in Question 4, whilst a few parents didn't feel it had made any difference, the majority reported a negative impact:

"Huge impact on social skills."

"Hugely it took a while to learn social skills that they previously had."

"It had a huge impact on her social skills, and she has not recovered friendships because of this. She no longer participates in extracurricular activities, and she has lost her social network from the stables."

"All real-life friendships deteriorated and ended as they mis-interpreted tone of voice in text messages and couldn't have any face-to-face meet-ups with friends."

Question 5 asked parents if they felt West Heath had done enough to support their child during lockdown: Of those who responded, 55% said 'yes' whilst 33% said 'no'. Those who responded 'no' were asked what else they would have liked (Question 6). Answers included:

"To have been able to continue to attend, as other schools continued to provide provision for children with EHCP."

"For me personally as a working mum, perhaps online classes or 1:1 occasional classes online with a tutor would have helped. Whilst that too would have been difficult and stressful getting him to attend and listen, it might have encouraged him more to stay connected and take some more accountability for working."

"I think they did a minimum which I pleaded for & got with Mimi's support."

"I would have liked more schoolwork but understand this was not possible as my child was a new student. The school has since offered an extra GCSE year which we are grateful for."

Question 7 asked if parents/carers thought their child had missed being at school and the majority (73%) said 'yes'. The things that they felt they had missed mainly centred around friends, routines, and therapeutic support (Question 8):

"Access to therapies, peer relationships and new opportunities to learn and have fun."

"Friends and face to face support."

"Routine, familiarity, friendship."

"Interaction with the other children and staff and the therapeutic support."

"Seeing familiar faces being able to talk to peers and trusted adults."

Question 9 asked whether parents/carers feel that, since the restrictions have been lifted, their child's levels of anxiety around Covid remain high. The vast majority responded 'no' (76%), but some felt it was still having an impact. Similarly in Question 10, most parents (70%) feel that their child's learning is now back on track, which is reassuring, however, it does mean that 30% of our parents/carers do not which is concerning.

Finally, other comments from parents and carers included:

"I think West Heath have been a supportive school and my child attending school through the second lockdown did really help"

"I do feel it has affected her education, but I do feel her mental health was deteriorating before covid. I also feel if she was in the right school and had the right support, she may have been able to deal with covid slightly better. I am thankful that she is now at West Heath school and is getting the right support. So, thank you all the staff in Heart space."

"I'm grateful for all the support we have received."

Conclusions:

So, what, if anything, can we conclude from this data? Unfortunately, responses from all three samples were quite varied so it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions; furthermore, it must be remembered that these were relatively small samples which may not have been representative of the whole potential target audience. Nonetheless, can we ascertain whether the impact of the pandemic was as severe as research suggests for our students? Based on the findings from the MHCYP (2021) which suggests that the presence of mental disorders before the pandemic, having special educational needs, and being female is associated with a greater increase in mental health symptoms throughout the pandemic, our students should have been particularly affected. However, the data from our students suggests that, whilst some of them clearly experienced a deterioration in their mental health, others have actually experienced an improvement, particularly those who had an enjoyable time at home. In fact, as reported, 78% had good memories and actually enjoyed the experience, and 19% claimed they had missed nothing during lockdown. However, one thing the students did feel strongly about is that their education has suffered (77%) and that the online learning experience was not enjoyable.

Our parents and carers also reported mixed experiences, so it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the impact of Covid on them. However, in accordance with Almeida *et al.*, (2022), I think it is fair to make the assumption that some of our parents experienced a surge in stress particularly those that were trying to teach their children as well as working from home. Nevertheless, I think we should take comfort in the fact that most parents felt we had done our best to support their children during incredibly difficult times.

Finally, in contrast, the main message from our staff demonstrates that many of them were significantly affected by the pandemic overall, particularly with regards to their wellbeing, although there were some positives reported as well. Staff wellbeing is definitely something that we should be paying even greater attention to moving forwards. Perhaps to remind ourselves of this it is fitting that, whilst we will hopefully never have to experience anything again as significant as the last two years during the pandemic, I conclude this report with a poignant comment from a member of staff at West Heath:

"The experience of the Covid pandemic has had a profound effect on the wellbeing of our staff and students. It has left a mark on all of us. It has been exhausting always having to give the best of ourselves, without having the opportunities to recharge and replenish ourselves. We have worried about our own families' health as well as that of our students' and our colleagues'. Our way of life changed completely overnight, and we are still coping with the aftermath."

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June 2022

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