

Donna Provoost and Katie Bruce

Doubling Down on Children and Young People's Aspirations Post-lockdown

Abstract

Children and young people experienced the Covid-19 lockdown differently from adults, and we need to consider these impacts as part of the recovery measures. Prior to Covid-19, cracks in our social system were already evident. At that time, children and young people told us what they wanted in order to create better future. The aspirations they shared are even more relevant post-Covid-19. Their views shaped the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, and our best approach to supporting child wellbeing as part of the recovery is to double down on implementing this strategy. This will ensure that the recovery response is child-centred, holistic and aspirational.

Keywords children, youth, wellbeing, child-centred, Covid-19

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All children in Aotearoa New Zealand have the right to access the resources that support them to thrive, like healthy food, access to healthcare, a warm, dry home, quality education and safe places to play. During our Covid-19 lockdown, New Zealand's 1.2 million children and young people under 18 – about a quarter of the population – were considered mainly in terms of what supports were needed for education and learning. There was also some recognition of how disruptive it was for parents trying to work from home while also dealing with their children. But, overall, there was very little focus on children and young people themselves.

The post-lockdown recovery phase is the time to double down on children and young people's aspirations. Children and young people will inherit the system we rebuild and they will also inherit the financial burden of our post-pandemic recovery. They deserve a say in what it looks

like, and to benefit from the recovery measures.

Existing inequities

Prior to Covid-19 and prior to our unprecedented national lockdown, cracks in our social system were already evident. Child poverty, youth suicide and ongoing colonisation adversely affected the lives of many children, young people and their families and whānau in Aotearoa New Zealand. This pandemic laid bare the vast spaces between our different everyday experiences, and no more so than for our children.

The period of lockdown was particularly hard for those families in poverty, facing the challenges of parenting alone, with inadequate or overcrowded housing, or dealing with mental health issues and disabilities. Even more so post-lockdown, these underlying issues need addressing as job losses and reduced income increase for many families and whānau.

For recovery, we need to consider the policy responses that will create a better environment in which children and young people can grow, develop and thrive. Reorienting how policy is developed can be part of this. This can be done by being child-centred and considering the interests, rights and wellbeing of children and young people in all policies and funding. Greater attention needs to be paid to what children and young people have to say for themselves, and stronger partnerships with their family, whānau, iwi and community contexts and supports.

Children and young people want a better future

Children are the experts on their own experience and we already know a lot about what children and young people want for the future. In 2019 the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki together published *What Makes a Good Life?*, a report which shared the views of over 6,000 children and young people on what wellbeing meant to them (Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki, 2019). Their ideas and experiences fed into the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2019). In addition, prior to the 2017 general election the Office of the Children's Commissioner

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asked children and young people for their ideas on what were the biggest challenges facing Aotearoa New Zealand, and what they wanted government to do about them (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2017). From these reports, clear themes emerged about what children and young people would like to see policies address.

- *A more equitable New Zealand for all.* Children and young people want more action to reduce and even eliminate child poverty. Children and young people want 'the basics', such as a home, an education and a safe community. But they want more than just a minimum standard of living. They want the systems that support them to be inclusive, accessible and affordable. A social welfare system that is adequate and meets these needs should be a priority of our pandemic recovery.
- *A fairer New Zealand for all children.* Some children and young people are

doing it really hard. Many children and young people face significant challenges, such as racism, bullying, discrimination, judgment, violence, drugs and a feeling of continually being let down. These children are more likely to experience ongoing disproportionate effects from the pandemic and the implications of the lockdown. These children and young people will require more support.

- *To be accepted, respected and listened to.* Children and young people told us that they want to be accepted, valued and believed in, and they want people to support their hopes for the future. Children and young people will have ideas and suggestions for how to get Aotearoa New Zealand moving in the next 6–12 months that are about building a positive future, not just rebuilding the past.
- *To have help for whānau and support crew.* Whānau are a critical factor in children and young people's wellbeing. In general, for children and young people to be well, their whānau, friends and communities must also be well. Wellbeing is about relationships, not just about things. Some of the silver-lining stories that have come out share acts of kindness and compassion for others in our communities, and the time families have had together. These need to be part of the new normal after lockdown so that we learn from the positives as well as the challenges.
- *A clean and sustainable environment.* Children and young people care deeply about the environment, on a local, national and global level. They want action to clean up the environment and have its ongoing protection be a central focus for government.

These themes point not only to what policy areas children and young people want to see change, but also to changes in the approach of agencies in how they engage with and support them, their families, whānau and communities.

Children and young people's aspirations

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy started from a position that a change in approach was needed to bring about change in wellbeing for Aotearoa New

Zealand's children and young people. The strategy set out a holistic and aspirational approach to wellbeing. While this platform laid out a new direction, it has not been implemented with any urgency at all, and, to date, is yet to be embedded in the policy and funding mechanisms of government.

Rapid and responsive policy were the order of the day for the emergency period, March–May 2020. Those advocating for increased flexibility in how individualised funding for disability supports could be spent saw changes that were previously deemed too hard happen on a temporary basis overnight. The welfare responses for Covid-affected businesses and individuals have reflected the high trust and accessibility that the Welfare Expert Advisory Group recommended the government adopt across the welfare system last year (Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2019).

The pandemic and its impacts have happened rapidly, and forced us to act quickly. But the issues we are addressing because of Covid-19 and the lockdown already existed. The willingness to do things differently and to accelerate action shows us that these things are possible. Nothing need stay in the 'too hard basket'.

But we have also seen some downsides of the rapid policy development. In a crisis

we revert to what we know. Assumptions are made about the size and the nature of the issues that the policy is aiming to address, and very little room is made for partnership, for a Treaty of Waitangi analysis and for child-centred policymaking. Iwi and community networks were excluded as Civil Defence Emergency Management became the funding mechanism to reach communities. There is little opportunity for consultation, co-design or partnered responses when relationships and networks are not invested in outside times of crisis.

Perhaps we do not need a new plan for addressing the pandemic recovery. Instead, we need to apply urgency for action on the well-researched and planned Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, developed and published, but not yet implemented. Policy advisors need now to double down on the wellbeing approach. By investing in genuinely transformative actions for communities and government agencies to progress the strategy, we will have assurances that we are heading in the right direction.

We can be child-centred and adapt as we go
The approach outlined in this short article encourages starting with what we know

will improve child and youth wellbeing to address the underlying issues that the lockdown deepened and widened. This shock to our social and economic routines also brought some reflection on and focus to what is important to us as New Zealanders. This is also true for children and young people, and the full diversity of their experiences and aspirations must be central as we rebuild.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner is currently asking over 1,000 children and young people about their experiences during lockdown – not just about the bad, but also what was positive about this time.¹ These new experiences of what is possible will influence their ideas and aspirations for the future.

Children and young people must have a say in building a response that is not just shovel-ready, but future-ready. This will demand that the recovery policy and investment plan is child-centred, builds on the positives we have learned, and implements the holistic vision of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy fully, in partnership with iwi and communities.

¹ Results to be shared on www.occ.org.nz from early August.

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