

## Editorial

**Graham Connelly**

[g.connely@strath.ac.uk](mailto:g.connely@strath.ac.uk)



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Since I wrote the editorial for the June issue, countries around the world have continued to be in the grip of the virus causing COVID-19. Many of us in the northern hemisphere experienced a welcome brief respite in the restrictions imposed by our governments and health authorities over the summer months, only to be followed by a 'second wave' bringing rising infections, hospitalisations and deaths. As I write, the UK passed the symbolic number of 50,000 deaths attributed to COVID, including almost 5,000 in Scotland. Worldwide, the virus is responsible for more than one million deaths.

With older people and those with underlying health problems being most at risk from serious COVID illness, young people have also been considerably affected by the pandemic's malignant clutches. In most countries, schools, colleges and universities closed for long periods. Examinations and work placements were cancelled or disrupted. Normal family relationships have been badly affected: grandchildren have been separated from grandparents; children living in residential care settings have missed out on physical visits from family, friends and social workers. Research commissioned by the Children's Commissioner for England in September reported that '49% of children chose "not being able to see my friends or relatives" as one of their top three causes of stress during lockdown' (Children's Commissioner for England 2020, p. 3).

The longer-term effects for health, wellbeing and job opportunities of COVID are at best uncertain and at worst bleak. In August, an OECD report said COVID-19 was responsible for 'harming health, social and material well-being of children worldwide, with the poorest children, including homeless children and children in detention, hit hardest' (OECD 2020, p. 1). Limitations in access to play spaces,

reduction in physical activity and extra-curricular activities, increased risk of physical abuse and sexual exploitation, and inadequate access to child protection systems are among the damaging consequences of the pandemic.

With work and education moving online for many people, digital means of communication offer ways of mitigating the negative effects of isolation and loss of regular schooling, and these have even offered exciting new opportunities, but differential access to IT equipment and internet services, and the different needs of individual children, mean that many children and families have felt isolated and the pandemic has emphasised inequalities both within and between countries. The OECD (ibid.) reports that while in 87% of countries, school students have access to the basic pre-requisites for home study, those 'in Mexico (34%), Chile (30%) and the United States (27%) are most likely not to have a desk and place to engage in home learning, and these countries also report the widest inequalities between children in households with lower and higher socio-economic status in this regard' (p. 17).

CELCIS's Kenny McGhee and Autumn Roesch-Marsh of the University of Edinburgh conducted research during lockdown into the 'digital divide for care experienced young people in Scotland' (CELCIS, 2020) and identified three particular issues: lack of access to hardware like laptops, tablets and smartphones; lack of consistent reliable access to broadband and Wi-Fi; and for some young people, gaps in their digital literacy or confidence. The article by Iain MacRitchie included in this special collection also gives a real insight into the lives of some of Scotland's most disadvantaged children struggling to maintain their connections with schooling.

More positively, it's marvellous to be able to welcome the recent passing into law of the Children (Equal Protection from Assault) (Scotland) Act 2019<sup>1</sup>. This Act removes the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' from the Scottish statute book, giving children the same legal protections as adults. It brings Scotland into line with many countries that provide children with full legal protection from physical assault with no defence of legitimate punishment. Scotland is so far the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2019/16/enacted>

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only UK nation to have met the requirements of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in this regard.

## **Special issue on COVID-19**

The November issue of *SJRCC* is a collection of articles which together encapsulate our continuing special series on COVID-19. We began the series earlier in the pandemic with the intention of providing a real sense of how children in care and their carers were experiencing the crisis. We are extremely grateful to colleagues from around the world who took time out from demanding commitments to write such powerful articles conveying the raw experience of children in the time of COVID.

The collection includes a selection of articles previously published on our web pages, some of which have been specially updated by the authors, as well as some previously unpublished articles. As usual, we conclude the issue with book reviews. We hope that readers will welcome having access to a varied collection of articles reflecting the contemporary issues for our sector arising from COVID-19, in a form which can now be downloaded as a single compendium.

All the articles in the special series can be read on the journal web pages. As always there's an open call out for authors to consider writing for us on any issue relating to residential care and care experience more generally. As well as papers from researchers for peer-review, we welcome shorter articles reporting practice or essays on contemporary issues. We particularly welcome articles from authors with personal experience of the care system.

## **References**

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## **About the author**

Dr Graham Connelly CPsychol is the editor of the *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care* and an honorary senior research fellow with CELCIS and the School of Social Work and Social Policy in the University of Strathclyde. Graham's research interests have ranged over alternative care internationally and more particularly the education of care experienced children and adults. He is a non-executive director of Kibble Education and Care Centre and a trustee of MCR Pathways.