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## In Response—Reply to John Paul Donnelly

In John Paul Donnelly's (2021) *In Response* article, he draws attention to the Scottish Government (2020) report on the additional challenges people with disabilities and their carers have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Donnelly (2021) also writes about the Glasgow Disability Alliance (GDA) and the ways this organisation responded quickly to the pandemic to support its members. For example:

- At the start of the first lockdown, GDA funders made a quick decision to allow the redirection of resources;
- GDA employed temporary workers to phone, write to and gather data from GDA contacts;
- GDA adapted its services to fill in the gaps emerging during the pandemic, that is check-in calls developed into a specialist well-being service;
- GDA worked with the Connecting Scotland team to develop an accessible approach to tackling digital exclusion.

Like the examples we found involving schools, the local authority and support services, Donnelly's (2021) response also points to the ways changes can be made quickly and effectively to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities. We noticed that Donnelly (2021) described living with a disability through lockdown as a "nightmare"—and so we were pleased to read about the ways GDA managed to support people with learning disabilities through this most difficult time.

As Donnelly (2021) points out, twenty years ago the technology was not available, which made possible a "new normal" for schoolchildren with learning disabilities during the pandemic. We reiterate both our own and Donnelly's (2021) calls to tackle digital exclusion for children/young people with learning disabilities. We also note the praise Donnelly (2021) gives to schools and teachers who listen and respond proactively to the needs of children with learning disabilities.

As authors of the article "*Decommissioning normal: COVID-19 as a disrupter of school norms for people with learning disabilities*," we really hope this paper and Donnelly's (2021) *In Response* paper inspire leaders of inclusion and SEND to:

1. keep developing the innovative practice they established during the pandemic, which broadened and deepened social inclusion for children with learning disabilities by increasing power/agency for children and their families, enhancing relationships with key stakeholders and improving the timeliness of reviews; and
2. remember that radical systemic change can happen quickly if the need and will exists.

Crucially, as Donnelly (2021) points out, changes made to services for children with learning disabilities should be informed and shaped by the views of children with learning disabilities and their families. We noted, as did the SEND consultant we interviewed for our article, Donnelly's (2021) comments about participatory budgeting. It is extremely pleasing to read of GDA's recommendations for a more inclusive accessible roll-out of participatory budgeting. From an English perspective, James\* (the SEND consultant we interviewed) hopes that families' views on the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) personal budget will also lead to reform of the system. In reply to Donnelly (2021), James\* writes:

Participatory budgeting has far more potential in respect of education provision than the personal budgets used in England for genuinely reshaping education provision overall. While personal budgeting has worked well for social care and short breaks its application to education provision is much more difficult and as a consequence has been much less used. (James\*, the SEND consultant)

In response to the questions Donnelly (2021) asked, we make the following points:

### Question 1

How did Decommissioning normal: COVID-19 as a disrupter of school norms for young people with learning disabilities get brought into the provisions. Did you all work with a young person with learning disability that was still at school to see how they cope with online programmes and how has social distancing been like in schools for people with a learning disability especially? If some young person is in a mainstream secondary, because not all young disabled people will go to additional needs school or do you work for an organisation like GDA or any other disability organisation?

All the authors of this paper have worked as schoolteachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs). Each author now draws on their expertise in inclusion and SEND and applies

this to their current work in a university. In the university, some of our time is spent working with teachers who are wanting to qualify as SENCOs, and some of our time is spent conducting research that we hope will have a positive impact on the inclusion of people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

At the start of the autumn 2020 (6 months into the pandemic), one of the authors of this paper spoke with a local authority leader who said they were noticing that some of the new COVID-19 lockdown practices were having an interesting and unexpectedly positive impact on children with learning disabilities. Keen to know more, we decided to speak with three leaders of inclusion and SEND to find out whether they had noticed anything similar in their localities. What these three experts told us shone a light on the importance of partnerships with parents during the pandemic. So that was when we decided to speak with Kezia\* (a child with a learning disability) and Sara\* (her mother) and a SEND consultant who had expertise in working with the families of children with learning disabilities.

Kezia\* was attending mainstream school. She has recently started college. Following our initial data collection in autumn 2020 (when it was revealed during a period of homeschooling that Kezia's\* artwork was improving because she was able to complete the work herself), we are delighted to report that Kezia\* achieved a GCSE Grade 5 in Art and Design (equivalent to a C/B) in summer 2021. More recently, we have heard from other mainstream headteachers and SENCOs who have also told us about positive changes they are going to make to partnership with parents having learnt some very useful new ways of working because of the pandemic.

When we shared Donnelly's (2021) paper with Sara\*, she sent us this reply:

I am delighted that John Paul has read the research paper and found out about some of our experiences of education as a family and as a young person with a learning disability during COVID-19. Like the families John Paul talks about in his response, we too found lockdown very hard and home-schooling was far from perfect. However, we wanted to also talk about the positives too and how my daughter's potential was discovered through the different ways of working during the pandemic. I think John Paul raises some very important questions about how the findings of this research can be used in educational settings and with other parents, so that education for young people with learning disabilities can be perceived differently. I hope our story might offer some hope to others, that with a change in approach

great things are possible. Thank you John Paul for reviewing this article. (Sara\*, Mother of a child with a Learning Disability)

## Question 2

How did you all focus on the methods, who was doing what, who set up the interviews and stuff?

We wanted to interview people (rather than asking them to complete a questionnaire) because we could ask a question and then follow it up with other clarification questions if needed. We felt this would help us to gain the most in-depth data.

We shared the work between the three authors, meaning that we each took an equal part. For example, one author completed the application to gain ethical approval to conduct the research (this is quite a long document), whilst the other two authors conducted interviews with three people each. The authors who did the interviewing emailed the participants to ask them whether they would agree to participate. We would like to formally thank the people we interviewed for their time and input, and we would like to give the final response to Carl\* (the local authority service director for schools and learning) who first alerted us to some of the unexpectedly positive outcomes of lockdown for children with learning disabilities:

Thank you so much for your review of the paper and it provides a great insight. I hope that your advocacy for people with disabilities and the paper have jointly helped to give young people a voice. The whole system needs to hear this! (Carl\*, the local authority service director for schools and learning)

NB. The names of those with an \*asterisk\* are for reasons of research ethics pseudonyms.

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