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A toy bear in lockdown, child-parent attachment and hegemonic peer-orientation

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Abstract

Towards the end of the first COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the authors conducted a small-scale study to gain insight into children's responses to the pandemic restrictions. As it was not possible to interview children ourselves, we recruited parents to read a set of digital stories about a toy bear in lockdown to their children and to record the ensuing conversations. The recorded conversations were returned to the authors to be transcribed and analysed. One intriguing finding was the strength of children's feelings of loss in regard to their friendship groups, despite the fact that the lockdowns enabled them to spend more time with their immediate families. This article examines the phenomenon of the importance of peer-orientation over family-orientation as it appeared in the data. Hegemonic thinking and attachment theory are used to further explore this phenomenon and discuss how the current educational trends towards personal independence over family bonds might have led to some of the feelings of loss and anxiety highlighted in the data.

Keywords

Hegemony; peer orientation; young children's parent-child attachment; critical hermeneutics

Introduction

The speed and impact of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, has been well-documented. In early 2020, countries began to close their borders, lock down cities and close schools. On March 25, Aotearoa New Zealand went into Level 4 lockdown, the strictest of the government's alert level system. By April 9, home learning became the norm and continued until after May 18, when the country moved down to a less restrictive Level 2 (Cameron, 2020; Education Review Office [ERO], 2021; OECD, 2021). Teddy bears began to appear in windows as something cheerful for children to look for as they undertook their daily walks and became a comforting motif in a time of uncertainty. Continuing this motif, Carol Mutch created a set of digital stories about a toy bear in lockdown based on her own lockdown experiences, which gained wide popularity (Evans, 2020; Kelly, 2020). Curiosity about how children were engaging with the stories led the authors of this article to develop a research project to gain insight into children's understandings and experiences of lockdown, using the stories as a catalyst.



This article draws on a small case study of four families who read and responded to these books with their children (whose ages ranged from 3–11). Data were gathered during and after the first national Aotearoa New Zealand lockdown, in 2020, where parents were asked to read the stories to their children and record the conversations. The *Bear in Lockdown* stories surfaced a range of interesting observations about children’s insights into the pandemic and life in lockdown. Elsewhere (Mutch & Romero, in press), the authors have highlighted that rather than being solely passive victims of their circumstances, the children in our study displayed autonomy, responsibility and empathy. For this article, however, we are exploring the observation that parents and children appeared to be grappling with children’s loss of contact with their friendship groups. This ingrained peer-group orientation led to an inability to find comfort and develop an identity within the home, leading to stress and anxiety. Over time, however, the hegemony of the peer-group orientation was superseded by reconstructing close familial bonds. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how engaging with the *Bear in Lockdown* stories uncovered an interesting issue that might otherwise have remained unrecognised and unexplored.

Literature review

Children’s picturebooks have a long history (Kiefer, 2008), and an examination of the form over time reveals the ways in which they have reflected society’s values, attitudes and norms (Keifer, 2008, Pantaleo & Sipe, 2008). A picturebook can be defined as “an artifact of culture” (Keifer, 2008, p. 9) that contains visual images and (mostly) words but “it is the interdependence of what the pictures show and the words tell” (Mourão, 2016, p. 27) and the “synergy between images and text” (Deichmann, 2001, p. 36) where meaning is made. Contemporary picturebooks offer a wide range of layouts, content, language and themes (Pantaleo & Sipe, 2008) and can hold taken-for-granted assumptions about the form and function of what a book is and what it does up to scrutiny (Nikolajeva, 2008). Tesar (2012, p. 35) notes that picturebooks are “powerful instruments that shape children and their childhoods” in different ways, including reproducing hegemonic representations. Studies of children’s picturebooks, for example, include analyses of hegemonic gender portrayals (Deichmann, 2001; Trevino, 2019), ethnic stereotypes (Sung, 2009; Yi, 2020), whiteness (Anvin, 2021; Flanagan, 2013), masculinities (Taylor, 2019) and heteronormativity (Morgan, 2020; Scieurba, 2017; Sunderland & McGlashan, 2013). In our study, we were taken with the ways in which participants, adults and children interacted with text and visuals and began to scrutinise themes within the narrative, including pinpointing children’s peer-orientation, which we came to view as a form of hegemonic thinking.

In our study, the picturebook form entailed a series of digital stories combining both colour photographs and text. Using digital means enabled the stories to be widely accessible when schools, bookshops and libraries were closed. The books could be accessed on different devices (smartphones, iPads or laptops) and each story unfolded by scrolling a single page view at a time. Our families reported reading the stories on a shared device sitting closely together. While much research (see for example, Allcott, 2021) suggests that digital books do not replace the sensory qualities of a hard copy book and can lead to skim reading, a recent literature review on reluctant readers (López-Escribano et al., 2021) notes that “when e-books are properly selected and used, children develop literacy skills equally well and sometimes better than with print books” (p. 1).

Rose (2016) reminds researchers to consider the varying sites of such visual forms—the site of production, the site of the image, the site of its circulation and the site of its audience. The picturebooks in our study were produced digitally in the context of a pandemic, about a fictional character in a lockdown setting, available through an educational website for children, to be read by themselves or mediated through parents or teachers. The text in the digital picturebooks was deliberately sparse, requiring the reader to view the text and image together. What we found was that children’s engagement with these stories revealed unexpected responses, including a peer-oriented discourse which produced

heightened feelings of sadness and loss until they were able to be resolved by moving towards a more family-centred stance. It is this response that we explore further.

Theoretical framework: Hegemonic thinking

In this article we define hegemonic thinking as the ideologies that inform behaviours and orientations that lead to both systemic and interpersonal oppression. Gramsci (1971/2014) uses the term hegemony to refer to the social, political and economic dominance of one group over all others. Hegemony functions on two levels, the first being the dominant group's control over the state's judicial, military and legislative apparatus. The second, more important dimension of Gramsci's schematisation of social dominance is his assertion that hegemony requires that the masses give *spontaneous consent* to the dominant group. Spontaneous consent is "historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production" (p. 12). Because educators, philosophers, intellectuals and public figures exert significant influence on how people view the world and how it works, Gramsci (1971/2014) implicates society's intellectual classes in manufacturing spontaneous consent and producing hegemony. This assertion makes hegemony a concept of which educators must be keenly aware (Daus-Magbual, 2016). Bowles and Gintis (1976) apply similarly layered theories of hegemony to show how education, as an institution, consolidates the power of dominant groups over time.

Applying Gramsci's philosophy to the study of education, hegemonic thinking is conceptualised here as the entrenched notion that a dominant group must exert authority over all others. Hegemonic thinking thus influences education beyond capitalist reproduction. The denigration of non-Western lifeways accordingly underpins historical and contemporary examples of hegemonic thinking applied to education and include the sanitisation of colonialism and genocide in mainstream history and social studies curricula, the subjugation of Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, the prohibition of Indigenous languages, forcing Indigenous students to cut their hair and adopt Western dress (Cajete, 2018; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014), the over-policing, surveillance and pathologisation of ethnic minority students (Bristol et al., 2018) and school-based practices and policies that stigmatise survivors of sexual assault (Rahimi & Liston, 2011). Each of these phenomena are founded in an oppressor-oppressed dyad. Such exploitative relationships require broad social approval. In education, spontaneous consent to hegemonic conditions necessitates the approval of policy makers, educational leaders, teachers, boards, parents, community members, and students themselves, to agree that there is no other option. Subverting hegemonic thinking in education therefore requires an examination of the foundational values of schooling and an interrogation of what happens when, for example, in the case of a global pandemic, schools are forced to close. We argue that subverting hegemonic thinking requires what Vossoughi & Vakil (2018) call *critical wondering*, a willingness to think (and eventually, do) things that might seem unthinkable in an effort to move towards reciprocal and responsive ways of being. But first, we examine the specific ways hegemonic thinking arose in this study. We examine an under-researched manifestation of hegemonic thinking in education: the ways in which schools and society appear to compel children to derive a sense of personhood and worth from their peers rather than their family grouping.

The hegemony of peer orientation

A contemporary dimension of hegemonic thinking in education is the essentialised belief in the importance of peer orientation, or that one's identity comes from relationships with colleagues and co-workers instead of one's family. Neufeld and Maté (2019) point to recent social, economic and cultural shifts that have meant children and young people in industrialised nations primarily learn life lessons and find emotional support from school-based friend groups rather than their parents or families.

Pointing to literature in attachment theory, psychologists argue that an attached parent-child relationship is integral to the development of healthy coping mechanisms, social skills and self-esteem (Clark & Ladd, 2000). Attachment theorists contend that prosocial traits emerge out of secure attachment, a bond developed in infancy, in which the dependent child develops an understanding that their needs will be met by their parents/carers. Secure attachment is developed through soothing behaviours, reassurance and parental availability (Bowlby, 2014). Secure attachment is further linked with altruism and peer popularity (Dodge et al., 1994). A failure to develop secure attachment, via parental rejection, absence or abuse, has been linked to anti-social behaviour, low self-esteem and a diminished ability to abide by social mores (Carson & Parke, 1996; Moccia et al., 2020). Despite five decades of psychological and clinical literature supporting attachment principles, Neufeld and Maté (2019) argue that secure attachment has been systemically disincentivised in contemporary Western society. They claim that fads like free-range parenting, self-soothing, or the idea that children should “cry it out” or “toughen up” when their needs are unmet, produce and promote the notion that children, even infants, should be independent of their parents and able to fend for themselves.

While it might be argued that children appear more dependent than prior generations, when the pendulum swings towards a focus on independence, it has noteworthy implications: young peoples’ cognitive and emotional development becomes vulnerable to common school-based factors like bullying and under-resourcing, while adults become prone to economic stressors that render them ill-prepared to provide nurturing home environments. A lack of dependable parental support perpetuates a dynamic in which children must seek secure relationships within their peer group (Parent et al., 2021), in or out of school (Neufeld & Maté, 2019), with varying results. Peer relationships are unable to replicate securely attached parent-child bonds, as same-age peers cannot guarantee the same level of physical and emotional safety as a parent or engaged caregiver. Same-aged children are also ill-equipped to provide emotional comfort, as they only have a similar level of emotional maturity and life experience, thus necessitating the dependable presence and guidance of a parental figure in early childhood (Bowlby, 2014).

Neufeld and Maté (2019) are careful to not blame individual children and parents for functioning according to the dictates of prevailing social structures but rather wish to highlight this as a contemporary phenomenon worth investigation. Their observations prompted the authors to recognise peer-orientation as a form of hegemonic thinking. Cultural shifts and social messages that encourage people to forfeit their authority over child-rearing and family bonding foreclose the possibility of secure parent-child attachment and place the onus of mitigating the pitfalls of that decision on various functions of the state. In other words, an insecure parent-child attachment is an important precursor to manufacturing the “spontaneous consent given by the great masses” (Gramsci, 1971/2014, p. 12). Developing the cognitive, affective and experiential tools to reconstruct individual and collective identities centred around secure parent-child attachments rather than peer-orientations in a time of dislocation can therefore be interpreted as an act of disrupting hegemony and hegemonic thought. Emerging out of a set of picturebooks—and the family bonding sessions and spontaneous conversations they inspired—this study highlights how the pandemic has made it vital to rethink the importance of family in a young child’s development.

Methodology

Bear in Lockdown stories as a catalyst

As the Bear in Lockdown stories gained popularity, teachers and parents reported their usefulness in enabling young children to discuss and process their reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic (Evans, 2020). For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to focus on the aspect of peer orientation that arose from an analysis of the recorded transcripts of parent-teacher conversations.



Figure 1. Points in the plot of the Bear in Lockdown books that reflect Bear's peer-orientation. (Mutch (2020)

*Note: The page selections in Figure 1 are sequential (left to right) but not contiguous.

Figure 1 provides a selection of different points in the book series where the theme of friendship provided impetus for children and their parents to talk about friendship and loss. In these examples, the protagonist, Bear, says goodbye to his friends to join the human's bubble (a term used in Aotearoa New Zealand to describe the restricted social interactions allowed under lockdown conditions). Bear feels the loss of his friends keenly, especially when he sees that human children are reconnecting virtually through their on-line schooling. A plot twist has Bear's best friend Alligator escape from the toybox and self-quarantine in the bathtub before he reunites with Bear.

Study methods

This study's dataset was sourced from 10 participants representing four families who volunteered to record themselves reading the books as a family. The sets of full family recordings varied from discussion of between two and four of the books in the series, taking approximately 10–20 minutes per story. The ages of participating children ranged from 3–11. The project received ethical approval from the University of Auckland and adult participants (parents) were informed of the research purpose, process and dissemination of findings. Parents were told the purpose was to see if the books precipitated an insight into young children's understanding of the pandemic and lockdowns. Parents completed consent forms to take part in the study and children registered their assent by circling the appropriate emoji (😊 😊 😊), after parents explained what they were being asked to do, using a script we provided. Parents then recorded themselves reading and casually discussing the book's events and themes with their children. Parents were encouraged to continue recording during interruptions and distractions. The researchers clarified that children were not expected to produce a "correct" response, such as ensuring

children understood specific plot elements or epidemiological terms. The recordings thus captured each family reading session in full, preserving them as a rich source of qualitative data. At the same time, the researchers acknowledge the limitations of this provisional study, as its small participant base consisted of working parents who were active doctoral candidates. Though the participating parents spanned a diverse range of socioeconomic, gender and geographic backgrounds, their familiarity with academic research procedures and high levels of education make them a sample that is not representative of the diverse population of Aotearoa New Zealand. Their responses did, however, illuminate intriguing questions for future research on hegemonic thinking and peer-group orientation, especially in a COVID influenced environment. The recordings were returned to the researchers who transcribed the conversations and undertook iterative hermeneutic analysis (Ricoeur & Pellauer, 2013). A key observation that emerged from this data was the tension between peer-group orientation and the efforts of children and parents to construct supportive home environments in a broader context marked by urgency and uncertainty. The section that follows foregrounds this analysis with a discussion of Paul Ricoeur's writings on critical hermeneutics, which enabled us to situate the data sociohistorically and theorise its broader significance.

Analytical framework

Critical hermeneutics is a field of inquiry that is concerned with interpretation (Ricoeur & Pellauer, 2013). As a research methodology, critical hermeneutics involves an interpretive synthesis of writing, art and utterances that analyses texts within their social, cultural, historical contexts. Interpreting a text (or image) involves a reciprocity between the interpretation of the text coalescing with an interpretation of self (Ricoeur, 1971). A text takes on new meaning when it is read by a new interpreter and an interpreter's very existence can be altered by their encounter with the text, which clearly complements the aim and nature of this study. Simms (2003, p. 43) notes:

Texts propose a world which readers appropriate to understand their own world, and consequently to understand themselves. Texts are the medium through which readers arrive at self-understanding; they are the bridge between the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the world.

Critical hermeneutics allowed us to ground our analysis of family reading sessions in sociological, historical and philosophical considerations, requiring that we think deeply about what, ultimately, these interactions *mean*. In this manner, we hermeneutically examined a key observation that emerged from the data: the tension between internalised peer-group orientations and the efforts of parents and children to create supportive family dynamics in response to feeling of loss during the pandemic. The digital picturebooks brought this tension to the fore. Our approach led us to consider how the pandemic, the loss of school-centred routines and peer groups, and discourses related to peer-orientation and secure attachment were manifested in the interactions between parents and children as they read the *Bear in Lockdown* stories. Hermeneutic analysis differs from other qualitative analysis techniques, such as thematic analysis, where the focus is on data reduction (Saldaña, 2016) and is more closely aligned to discourse or conversational analysis, where the focus is on peeling back the layers of particular portions of text or utterance to reveal perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Mutch, 2013). Thus, we have selected illustrative sections of transcript for further elaboration rather than presenting a set of condensed themes.

Findings and discussion

Disrupting hegemonic thinking through picturebooks

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that social relations based around peer-based orientations for children and adults can be subverted overnight. Early research suggests that Covid-responsive school closures have a marked effect on young people's stress and anxiety, primarily due to disruptions to their established social worlds (Corbett, et al., 2021; Muzi et al., 2021; Parent et al., 2021). Our study's qualitative data—in which children and their parents reflected on their own lockdown experiences by engaging with the images, texts and events of the *Bear in Lockdown* books—contain vocalised expressions of stress and anxiety among the participating children. The study, however, diverged from Corbett et al.'s (2021) analysis, which found that children's stress was often linked to parental stress or generalised worries about the pandemic. Rather, the negative feelings expressed by this study's participating children were mostly associated with the loss of contact with their friends, and usually in the school environment.

When asked, "how did you feel?" during the lockdown, one child responded: "Bored. I wanted to go to school with my friends and learn." Another child responded to a picture of Bear preparing for Easter with the observation that they would have preferred to spend Good Friday "in school with our friends" instead of locked down at home. When the child's parent noted that schools are closed on Good Friday, the child persisted, lamenting, "but ... we could have hung out with our friends". Participating children rarely mentioned missing their teachers, activities or lessons. When they did mention school, children often framed it as an important place because it was where they could see their friends.

Children's peer-oriented identities were further demonstrated in their reflections about the end of lockdown, at which point they returned to school. One participant's friend group was so eager to see one another that they defied the school's social distancing rules to share a hug:

P: Do you remember catching up with any of your friends after a long time?

C: Yeah.

P: What was it like? You guys hugged didn't you.

C: [laughs] Yeah! We weren't supposed to.

P: But you did hug.

C: Yeah. What do you expect?

This exchange, and the levity that underpins it, suggests that concerns about missed learning did not factor into participating children's desire to return to school. This study's participants simply wanted to see their friends again. Their other concerns, such as boredom and even becoming infected with COVID-19, were not voiced as frequently as those related to missing their friends.

Corbett et al. (2021) suggest that, during the pandemic, the perceived stress levels of children and their parents are linked. They also suggest that safe and loving home environments can help manage the stress and anxiety of children and parents alike. This dynamic was displayed in our study's reading sessions, particularly in interactions where parents and children positively recalled the times they spent baking, gardening, cleaning, playing board games and going on walks together. On return to school, some children also found stability in establishing routines, which contrasted with the discomfort of the unstructured and uncertain nature of lockdown. Parents also seemed aware of how the loss of peer-oriented socialising affected their children, which inspired them to provide structure and support at home. One participant described a parent-initiated regimen of cleaning and recreation as follows:

... during lockdown, me, Mum and [my sibling] did a kind of chore. We would clean up, study, play a board game, watch TV, clean, eat, brush our teeth, and then sleep.

Participating children seemed to appreciate their parents' efforts to create daily schedules. This is reflected in the following conversation, where parent and child agree on the importance of cleaning and assigned domestic duties:

Parent: We had a list of chores, didn't we? Remember we had the white board and we got people to do different jobs?

Child: Yeah.

P: We might have to do it again.

C: No!

P: Yeah! All the jobs need doing again now.

C: [laughs]

P: If we go into a long lockdown again.

C: Yeah, if we go into a long lockdown again because it's something to do.

Here, the child agrees that cleaning is valuable because "it's something to do". Underlying this interaction is the notion that children who attend school view the home as a place where they need to find "something to do". The study's parents seemed aware of their children's uncertain standing in the home. Participating children often expressed appreciation of reciprocity, kindness and being trusted with responsibility. This sentiment is expressed in one child's reaction to Bear doing chores around the house:

They're so kind to the bear and the bear is so kind to them. The humans are doing some jobs for him and not making him bored and being kind to him. And the bear is doing some chores for them.

This response demonstrates the accountable and responsive nature of what children judge to be positive behaviour in lockdown. For this child, Bear's most admirable trait is that he is kind and helpful. This child's particular conception of justice is also noteworthy, as they do not expect Bear to be kind and do chores simply because "the humans" tell him to do so. Rather, the child admires the fact that the humans reciprocate Bear's kindness and that their home life is marked by an observable sense of equality.

Participating parents demonstrated an understanding that assuaging their children's stress would involve creating a relaxed, trusting and relatively egalitarian environment rather than replicating the structures and patterns of school-based learning. This idea was observed in the recordings themselves. As a four-book series, parents often quizzed their children at the end of the first two books, ostensibly to ensure that they understood the themes, events or vocabulary used in each story. By the third and fourth books, parents would gradually divest from this and settle into a more rhythmic pattern of interacting with the children. The following conversation, for example, occurs in a scene where Bear gets a flu shot. What follows is a naturalistic discussion where parent and child are equal partners; the parent even acknowledges the child's desire to bring the conversation to a close:

C: I don't like flu shots.

P: Do you remember we did that too? Do you remember where we went and what happened?

C: I had to get a flu shot on my arm and it didn't feel nice.

P: Did it not?

C: No.

P: You giggled!

C: I know but I giggled because it feels sore.

P: Yeah. It does feel a bit sore, doesn't it? Do you remember we just drove through in the car this time, didn't we?

C: I don't like flu shots.

P: No.

C: I don't want to talk about it.

P: You don't want to talk about it. Okay, we'll go on to another page.

This exchange departs from the earlier portions of this family's reading session, where the parent had stopped reading to ask the child if they understood terms like "cross-contaminate" or New Zealand's COVID-19 Alert Level system. The recordings enabled us to observe a shift in relational dynamics, as if the act of reading the book gradually fostered a more relaxed atmosphere in which parent and child were more receptive to one another's individual needs and aspirations. These conversations show that during lockdown, children's feelings of stress and anxiety are largely focused on an insecure longing for lost friendships. This loss, however, is accompanied by opportunity, as it affords families a chance to reclaim and restore securely attached relationships with one another (Bowlby, 2014). By establishing routines, demonstrating a willingness and availability to meet their children's various needs, and simply engaging with their children on an equitable relational plane, this study's parents and children alike demonstrated a burgeoning ability to assuage some of the anxiety caused by the loss of direct peer contact.

Mirroring the enhanced opportunity to strengthen the parent-child bond in lockdown, children in our study (from different families) spontaneously took on an *in loco parentis* role of their own. They focused on their toys' safety and comfort by fashioning personal protective equipment (PPE) out of plastic scraps and old curtains to keep them safe from COVID-19.



Figure 2. Two children respond to the Bear in Lockdown stories by making PPE for their toys.

Conclusion

The serendipitous creation of a set of digital stories about a toy bear in lockdown set in motion the opportunity to gain insights into children's understandings, emotions and experiences during the first national COVID-19 lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand. From rich conversations between children and their parents as they companionably read the stories, we chose to further explore the frequent references children made to missing their friends. Using hegemonic thinking as a theoretical framework and hermeneutic inquiry as an analytic tool, we examined the data in fine detail. From our findings, we argue that children's lives in our study appear to have turned outwards towards a peer-orientation that has lessened their self-identification and sense of attachment with their family groupings. When faced with a disruptive event, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, the children in our study felt anxiety at the loss of their friendship groups. The participating adults saw the need to re-establish a strong attachment between their children and themselves. This is an important finding as attachment researchers in other COVID-19 contexts have highlighted that insecure or anxious attachments are a risk factor for developing mental health issues, such as depression, binge-eating, self-harm or problematic social media use (Moccia et al., 2020; Muzi et al., 2021; Parent et al., 2021). On the other hand, secure attachments are seen as protective factors against anxiety, depression and loneliness (Parent et al., 2021).

We acknowledge that the small sample size and the self-selected family groupings who answered our call to participate do not represent all sectors of society in Aotearoa New Zealand. ERO (2021) for example, reported that during lockdown, some Pacific students felt happier at home than at school. However, we offer our research as a provocation. The finding that our participating children faced feelings of loss and anxiety at missing their friends calls for more research across a broader range of settings to investigate why the sudden loss of direct peer-to-peer contact is so impactful for children. For now, this research suggests that supporting children during the pandemic is not just a simple matter of improving the quality of remote learning or intensifying efforts for students to engage in learning. Nor is encouraging children to be resilient and embrace the precarity associated with the pandemic a helpful way forward. Supporting children and their parents could instead involve recognising the importance of engaged and empathetic familial relationships and interactions that cultivate secure attachment. Parent et al. (2021, p. 3) suggest that "in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which can be interpreted as a chronic situation of perceived stress, it is imperative that research examines the relative importance of [children and] adolescents' parent and peer attachment relationships". They note that young people in their study reported putting more effort into, and gaining comfort from, their relationship with the people in their bubble (Parent et al., 2021). While the hegemony of peer-orientation encourages children to build their identities around their friends, in and out of school, it also means that children do not have adequate frames of reference for valuing the lives they lead at home. Engaging hermeneutically with this study's data revealed that the act of caring for children during lockdown led to them being recognised as valued contributors to their families. The study's participants showed how this process began with establishing familiar routines and trusting children with important tasks. Parents also showed how rebuilding secure attachments can begin by simply listening to children, honouring their wishes, and relaxing the expectation to evaluate and monitor them against some externally imposed rubric.

Further, schools pre- and post-lockdown can support the development of family-oriented identities among children as they continue to enhance seamless family and community involvement in school activities. Workplaces and government agencies can also support secure attachment by disincentivising overwork and promoting flexible work arrangements. This study, therefore, suggests that helping children cope with the pandemic and its associated lockdowns requires a societal shift away from a focus on peer-orientation to the enhancement of secure attachment bonds between children and their parents and whānau. Our findings provide some insight into the degree to which discourses, policies

and practices that overemphasise peer-orientation at the expense of secure familial attachment might have compromised some young children's ability to cope with the pandemic. Thus, helping children cope with lockdown is not a matter of telling them that they must simply be strong or resilient, at least until school re-opens. Rather, subverting the hegemony of peer orientation and coping with the oppressive circumstances exacerbated by COVID-19 will involve assuring children that they belong and are unconditionally valued members of their families, communities and society.

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