Written evidence submitted by the International Literacy Centre, UCL, Institute of Education

to the Education Select Committee Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, July 2020.

This submission comes from the International Literacy Centre at UCL, Institute of Education and a team of researchers working on an ESRC/UKRI funded research project designed to explore

- primary teachers' responses to the Covid-19 crisis
- their priorities during lockdown and as schools re-opened
- any lessons learnt for education going forward.

The primary source of data on which we report is a survey of 1,653 primary school teachers in England, conducted for us by Teacher Tapp between May 27-29th 2020.

The sample was weighted to reflect the demographic characteristics of state primary school teachers in England. Analysis of responses by proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in each school, grouped into quartiles, was enabled by linkage to DfE administrative data.

The submission sets out key findings, based on what our respondents told us about how they planned and prioritised their work with children and their families during the crisis. From our findings we make recommendations for developing a more resilient education system, capable of meeting the uncertainties the pandemic may still bring next academic year.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 has revealed some difficult home truths about the depth of child poverty in the UK, and the important role that regular attendance at school plays in keeping many children fed as well as safe. Many witnesses have highlighted these points and made the case for getting children back to school as soon as possible.[1]

Schools play a vital role in supporting children's health, welfare and social well-being. Yet this risks being obscured in public debate if the damage done from loss of schooling is calculated only in terms of children's academic progress, without regard to the wider context that shapes how children learn. The Covid crisis has brought into sharp relief how much this wider context creates difficulties for children when they are not at school, especially for children growing up in poverty, with little access to outdoor space, few material resources to draw on and limited access to technology.

Too narrow a focus on a form of "catch-up" that prioritises data-tracking and test preparation, with the threat of penalties for those schools that haven't caught up fast

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[1] See for example the submissions from the Children's Commissioner (CIE0150) and the open letter published by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health on 17th June
https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/open_letter_re_schools_reopening_2020-06-17.pdf

enough, or fines for parents who do not get their children back into school straightaway, will not create the best conditions for schools to reopen, nor set the grounds for a fruitful recovery that truly narrows the attainment gaps associated with social disadvantage. This matters in a context where schools may well find themselves dealing with further disruption from Covid over the winter and possibly on into the spring.

In making our submission we draw on what our survey data tells us about
- what primary schools have been doing during this initial phase of the crisis;
- how they anticipate handling re-opening in the best interests of their pupils; and
- what they think needs to change to enable education to become more resilient going forward.

This has been complemented by our analysis of the public debate on Covid-19 and its impacts on education using a variety of sources, including the evidence presented to the Education Select Committee, coverage in the educational press, and discussion and commentary from across the profession and in the research community.

Our submission addresses this Inquiry theme:

> What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?

In considering this question we take particular notice of the uncertain course of the pandemic, and the likelihood of an upsurge in cases in the winter, for which planning should be undertaken now.

Contingency planning for a future national emergency in education could be thought of as laying by resources to be drawn on in an hour of need, with planning undertaken centrally, and resources perhaps most efficiently commissioned ahead of time by central government. A stock of online curriculum materials, such as those provided during the early part of the crisis by external agencies such as BBC Bitesize or currently under development by Oak National Academy provide one model. In a similar light, funding for the National Tutoring Programme in the coming year will offer additional resources that schools will be able to draw on.

These are all important initiatives. However, in our submission we consider what the Covid crisis has taught us so far about how schools themselves have responded to meet the needs of their local communities[2]. In doing so we recognise the importance of the following observations that the EEF report, *Covid-19 Support Guide for Schools*, makes

> "Every school will have been affected by Covid-19 differently and school leaders are best placed to understand the needs of their school communities. The right way to support pupils

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[2] The full survey report can be found here
https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103669/1/Moss_DCDT%20Report%201%20Final.pdf

will differ between schools and must be informed by the professional judgement of teachers and school leaders. …

For many pupils, compensating for the negative impact of school closures will require a sustained response. It is highly unlikely that a single approach will be enough." (EEF, 2020a, p3)

Building resilience into the education system depends upon strengthening the capacity of schools to make good decisions locally about how to meet *their* communities' needs. These needs will vary. We draw out from our survey data some of the principles that guided local decision-making during the first phase of the crisis, and identify what may be important in strengthening schools' capacity to respond to the potential difficulties that lie ahead.

Our submission includes a series of recommendations. There are indeed lessons to be learnt from schools' experiences of responding to Covid-19 during and after the spring lockdown which we hope will benefit future planning, including into the autumn term, and help create a more resilient education system going forward.

2. MAIN FINDINGS FROM OUR SURVEY

Eight key messages for policymakers to help build a more resilient education system going forward:

1) 'Schooling' is about much more than learning.

In communicating with families during the first part of the crisis, our teacher and head teacher respondents were very much motivated by concerns for pupil and family well-being as well as for supporting pupils' learning.   Schools made up gaps in local support for families in need. Primary school head teachers in particular put in an enormous amount of effort, checking that pupils weren't going hungry, distributing packed lunches, putting families into contact with food banks and ensuring they could access food vouchers. They were more likely than other staff to be carrying out the practical jobs of delivering hard copy resources and checking student welfare on the doorstep. They also shouldered most of the responsibility for liaising with the local authority and social services.

Recommendation 1. Teachers recognise that pupil and family welfare provide the necessary foundation upon which high quality learning depends and this guides their actions. **The pro-active role schools play in restoring pupil health and well-being, as well as ensuring that children's learning is maintained, should underpin schools' plans for managing a return to full education.** Schools may need appropriate levels of funding and resources to access external sources of advice on dealing with bereavement, trauma and anxiety, where required.

2) The duty of care falls unevenly across schools

Monitoring and responding to the effects of poverty and hardship were inevitably a higher priority for schools in the most disadvantaged areas, and teachers and schools working in the most deprived communities were more involved in tasks not traditionally regarded as

teaching (running a food bank, delivering food parcels or meal voucher distribution). Schools in the least deprived areas, without families in 'crisis mode', were more able to prioritise supporting home learning and checking on school work in their communications with parents.

Recommendation 2. Primary schools' priorities varied in line with the level of need in their local communities. In the most deprived areas, particularly if other welfare services are stretched thin, schools have acted as crucial support hubs for children and their families during the crisis. **The important role schools have played in sustaining their communities needs to be fully recognised and funded. We support proposals to target increased funding for schools, early years and wider children's services on areas of disadvantage and see this as a matter of urgency** [3]**.** In particular, restoring funding to wider children's services will enable schools to work more effectively with others.

3. Teaching during lockdown had to adapt quickly

Teachers adapted their teaching quickly to meet the needs of children learning at home. Teachers prioritised tasks that would be engaging and motivating as well as purposeful, and in the case of younger children, fun tasks that could engage the whole family. During the first phase of lockdown, maintaining prior learning took priority over ensuring that the school's plans for further curriculum coverage were met[4]. Teachers working with the most deprived communities placed a higher priority on ensuring those without access to the internet still had opportunities to learn (63%) compared to teachers working with the least deprived communities (47%). A quarter of our respondents delivered hard copy resources to the doorstep to ensure children's learning was maintained.

Recommendation 3. The Covid-19 crisis has drawn attention to the unequal access to remote learning as a substitute for face to face teaching, particularly for children in the most deprived communities (NFER, 2020b; EEF, 2020b; CEPEO, 2020a). Yet research is not clear on the benefits of online learning for younger children, or what constitutes quality teaching in this context[5]. **We recommend caution in turning to online resources as a panacea in either the short to medium term. Schools should reflect on what has worked best for them in their context and when and under what conditions materials derived from other sources e.g. BBC Bitesize, EEF or Oak Academy, have proved useful.** This is a particular necessity, given that online resources are still not equally accessible to all pupils.

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[3] Education Policy Institute (2020) *Preventing the disadvantage gap from increasing during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Proposals from the Education Policy Institute*. Available at https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EPI-Policy-paper-Impact-of-Covid-19_docx.pdf

[4] The NFER (2020a) found this approach increased the engagement of the most disadvantaged pupils.

[5] EEF's rapid evidence assessment of remote learning ((2020b) cautions "Few high-quality studies have looked at remote learning in school-aged education, and many of the included reviews combine evidence from school-aged education, university education and adult learners." The CEPEO briefing note is more closely focused on school-aged resources and may be more useful.

4. The literacy activities teachers set reflected the balance of the curriculum

Teachers set children a range of core literacy curriculum tasks during lockdown. These varied by age, with phonics, handwriting, spelling, punctuation and grammar tasks (SPAG) and reading for pleasure most frequently set in KS1; and reading for pleasure, reading comprehension and open-ended writing tasks most frequently set in KS2. Tasks to stimulate speaking and listening at home were almost twice as likely to be set in KS1.

Recommendation 4. We know that reading for pleasure, and high frequency reading of fiction in particular, is closely linked to higher attainment from studies based on young children and teenagers' reading habits (Sullivan and Brown, 2015, Jerrim and Moss, 2019). If school closures continue to be a pattern into the autumn term, **we recommend that primary schools find ways to support children's reading for pleasure and encourage parents to read texts regularly with children of all ages, choosing books that they enjoy** (Levy, Preece and Hall, 2018; Preece and Levy, 2018). We also **recommend that schools reflect on the balance of closed, worksheet-based tasks and opportunities to set more open-ended literacy and language tasks that foster creativity and imagination.**

5. The effects of lockdown differ according to the social circumstances of the school

Teachers in all settings were worried about the well-being of at least some pupils and parents, however, teachers working in the most deprived communities were more concerned than their counterparts about the impact of the Covid crisis on their pupils' learning. Some 71% thought lockdown would have had an adverse effect on their pupils' academic progress compared to 45% in the least deprived areas. All teachers are aware of the difference it makes to pupils not being in school.   Even in the least deprived areas only 33% of teachers thought home schooling had worked well for *most* pupils. This falls to 9% in the most deprived areas. Teachers recorded difficulties in keeping children positively engaged and willing to do school work at home[6]. This is hard to remedy when teaching children at a distance, especially if conditions at home are less than ideal.

Recommendation 5. Schools are well placed to assess their pupils' learning needs as they return to school and can do so informally as part of on-going classroom activity. With the prospect of pupils changing class teachers, successfully managed transition plans will build in handover conversations between staff, identifying continuities in programmes of study and areas of learning that will benefit most from consolidation and revisiting. **We recommend that schools plan for sustained support for children's learning over the medium to long term.** A return to productive learning for all pupils will benefit from planning in this way, rather than a quick sprint to catch up. External pressure from inspection or to meet test requirements at the end of the year are likely to be least helpful to those schools working in the most disadvantaged areas, where sufficient time to revisit and consolidate prior learning may be most beneficial**.** [7]

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[6] See also NFER (2020c) *Schools' Responses to Covid-19. Key Findings from the Wave 1 Survey.* Available from https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4097/schools_responses_to_covid_19_key_findings_from_the_wave_1_survey.pdf .

[7] See CEPEO (2020b) for their assessment that the potential of testing to cause harm outweighs any likely benefits and should be delayed.

6. The social and emotional needs of children and their families will be at the forefront of teachers' minds as schools re-open.

Teachers' priorities as schools begin to reopen are for children's well-being and for schools to provide a safe return to settled routines. Our respondents thought parents would broadly share their priorities. The disruption to schooling will have had disproportionate effects on children who have faced stressful conditions at home: overcrowding, no access to outside space, family members with poor mental health, not enough food. All of these factors make a difference to what children can do. To learn children need to feel settled and safe. Those teaching in schools in more disadvantaged areas felt that parents would be more concerned about their children staying safe as schools re-open; those in the least disadvantaged areas thought their parents would be more concerned about pupils catching up.

Recommendation 6. **We recommend that schools consider carefully how best to rebuild relationships with parents in the coming year, taking into account local circumstances and developing new ways to listen to parents' concerns.** In many ways this is about building trust between schools and local communities at a time when further disruption is possible. Effective two-way communication will be key. Useful lessons may have been learnt from parents' experience of supporting children's learning at home. Resorting to fining parents for absence is a poor substitute for persuading them that schools offer a safe and secure environment.

7. Many teachers have gained a better understanding of their community through the crisis

Teachers have gained a different perspective on home-school relationships through their experience of the Covid crisis. Almost half of teachers working in schools with high levels of disadvantage felt more aware of how poverty and overcrowding impacts on pupils' lives; two-thirds of the same teachers were more aware of how difficult it is for their pupils to learn at home.   By contrast, almost half of those teaching in the least deprived schools have been reassured that parents are well able to support their children's learning, while a quarter say they are more aware of how demanding parents can be. These differences highlight why a system that does not recognise the effects of social disadvantage on learning is in itself unfair.

Recommendation 7. **We recommend that differences in the social circumstances that affect children's learning be more directly taken into account when assessing the contribution schools make to children's academic progress.** We are aware that the consequences of the pandemic may be multiple for many families, including financial difficulties that the crisis may bring in its wake, and worries about protecting elderly relatives or family members with health issues. (In some cases staff may be facing similar difficulties and this will also need to be factored in.) **Finding better ways of recognising the impact that the material disbenefits of poverty create for learners should be part of a wider review of inspection, testing and league tables post Covid-19.**

8. Teachers do not want to return to 'business as normal' in September

This was one of the clearest survey findings. Looking forward, our respondents would like greater recognition of the role primary schools play in building community resilience. They think this should be both recognised and funded (71%). They would like a review of primary education, starting from a broader definition of curriculum values and purposes (72%). A majority of primary teachers (75%) agree that "If testing and inspection goes ahead as normal next year, schools serving the most disadvantaged communities will be unfairly penalised". Given the opportunity to choose between investing in online teaching (2%), a rapid catch up programme (3%), a recovery curriculum developed locally to meet their communities' needs (22%), the opportunity to re-imagine primary education differently (28%) or recognising the difficulty of education on its own fixing structural inequalities in society (44%), a total of 94% of teachers want substantial change to education post-crisis, not a series of short-term quick fixes.   To help bring about a more resilient system, better able to function in the interests of all, means doing things differently.

Recommendation 8. The Covid crisis has laid bare some of the deep inequalities in our society and the significant impacts of poverty on education. In the short term we consider that **schools are best placed to devise locally appropriate plans for recovery, following assessment of their pupils' needs**. Such assessments should take into account welfare and well-being as well as education. **We recommend that schools are given greater freedom to choose how to spend the monies government has committed to setting education right.** While it is appropriate to protect schools from commercial interests that may seek to exploit the situation and offer poor quality products with little intrinsic merit to what may seem to be a captive market, a one-size fits all approach to national programmes focused on tutoring or catch-up is likely to be less effective than finding local solutions to local problems. Greater local autonomy will also resolve problems associated with scaling up national programmes at speed when a sudden sharp increase in demand is likely to put at risk the quality of the programmes themselves (EEF, 2020c). Longer term, and to address the more deep-seated issues our respondents have raised **we recommend that testing, inspection and league tables are suspended in the primary sector for the coming academic year.** This will allow time for a thorough review.

3. CONCLUSION

Our recommendations are based on primary school teachers'

- immediate responses to the Covid crisis in England,
- their priorities for action in the medium term, and
- their longer term reflections on what needs to change to create a more resilient education system going forward.

Our respondents were asked about key topics in public debate: the place for remote learning; how best to rebuild children's education after a prolonged time out of school; how the interactions between social disadvantage and education can best be addressed. Their answers are rooted in the local landscape and the diverse dilemmas that Covid-19 has posed

individual primary schools. Not all the dilemmas schools have faced can be easily resolved. In our findings we have highlighted how intractable some of the issues are, particularly those associated with social disadvantage and its impacts on learning at home.

We are aware that many head teachers have used their substantial experience of teaching, learning and assessment, as well as their deep knowledge of the nature and needs of their school communities to make the best decisions they can, guiding and leading their staff for the benefit of children and their families. This level of locally-based and pedagogically informed leadership is a tremendous asset to the working of primary schools across the country.

 Working with heads and teachers to draw on knowledge gained could be crucial to a more successful resumption of schooling in the autumn. We are aware that the English education system has become somewhat fragmented, with schools and their immediate support networks configured differently, depending upon whether they work within an LA, a large MAT, or a smaller cluster of schools. This diversity in networks can be a strength: LAs, professional associations, MATs and free schools, the teacher unions and a variety of other organisations with a watching brief for education have often set the pace in the crisis[8]. Yet this can also create weaknesses, if lessons learnt are retained within individual networks and not shared.

To build a more resilient education system, able to successfully face the uncertain prospects for the autumn term, depends upon adequate funding and the capacity of schools to respond to local circumstances. Submissions to the Education Select Committee should certainly encourage us all to think more deeply about in whose interests the current system runs and what else we can do to make it work better in the interests of all our children. Those with the greatest understandings of local needs should be the ones we turn to first.

> This submission is based on evidence collected by the UKRI/ESRC funded project, *A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the Covid-19 crisis.* Reference number: ES/V00414X/1. The project team are: PI: Gemma Moss. Co-Is: Alice Bradbury, Sam Duncan, Sinead Harmey, Rachael Levy.

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[8] See the varied contributions from these different organisations: https://neu.org.uk/supporting-learning-during-coronavirus ; https://bigeducation.org/learning-from-lockdown/ ; https://www.ascl.org.uk/Help-and-Advice/Leadership-and-governance/Health,-safety-and-safeguarding/Coronavirus-essential-information ; https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/ ; https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/07/17/calls-on-government-to-make-early-years-central-to-covid-fightback-with-a-new-best-beginnings-guaratee/ ; https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/resources/coronavirus-resources-for-mental-health-and-wellbeing-toolkit-1/

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