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Learning through Disruption: Using schools' experiences of Covid to build a more resilient education system

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Contents

Summary of Findings

The Learning through Disruption study set out to identify:

- how primary schools had been dealing with the varied impacts of COVID over the course of the pandemic; and
- what calculations they were making about their most immediate needs during the summer term.

In the light of what our case study school staff and parents told us, we wanted to clarify

- the extent to which variation in primary school and community experiences should inform funding for recovery
- and whether primary schools would benefit from having much more direct control over how any recovery funds should be spent over what length of time.

These were urgent questions to pose in the light of the government's early decisions on the relatively modest scale and scope of education recovery funding to be allocated and the determination to restrict a proportion of the funding for "catch-up" interventions that central government identified as most appropriate, in the absence of any meaningful consultation with schools.

Findings from our qualitative case studies and interviews with staff and parents demonstrate that:

- COVID has affected schools and families in very many different ways.
- Some communities have been much harder hit than others, particularly those where children were already living in poverty but also those where families suddenly faced new financial distress due to COVID.
- Families turned to schools as important sources of support. Schools dealt with: children in need of food and clothing; families living in inadequate housing with inadequate space and resources to maintain learning at home; families with limited digital connectivity; individual pupils facing mental health crises; and children experiencing difficult domestic circumstances, including domestic violence.
- Pupil Premium funding does not adequately reflect the work schools do to support children living in poverty or struggling with difficult issues at home.
- That families are so reliant on schools highlights fundamental weaknesses in our current welfare system that urgently need repair.
- School heads find themselves shouldering significant responsibilities within networks of support that have themselves fragmented. This diminishes system resilience.
- Schools' priorities in recovery differ significantly from the government's – their voices should be heard.
- Policy funding for education needs to focus on building system resilience over the longer term - recovery from COVID is a long-term process not a short-term sprint. The current settlement on offer is not enough to fix the many issues the school system in England faces and which COVID has so sharply revealed

Background

The *Learning through Disruption* research project ran between May-August 2021, with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council[1]. The project was based at UCL Institute of Education and data collection began in May 2021, shortly after primary schools in England had emerged from the spring 2021 national lockdown, and were beginning to assess what kinds of support might be most appropriate in their specific context.

Given the very challenging circumstances that COVID created for education, we wanted to identify the actions individual primary schools had taken in response to local circumstances and what the knowledge they had accrued might contribute to rebuilding a more resilient and more equal education system going forward.

We consider the vital contribution schools have made to keeping education going remain a largely undocumented aspect of the pandemic, yet one from which much can be learned. Schools adapted their responses over time in the light of the evidence they saw at first hand for what worked and what didn't in their own context (See, for instance, Moss et al [2020][2] for survey evidence on English primary schools' response to the first lockdown; and Moss et al [2021][3] for survey evidence on the role teaching assistants were playing during the January lockdown in the different nations of the UK[4]). Equally, the best evidence for what should happen next remains largely at the frontline, where events unfolded. That is to say, both amongst the staff who have grappled with difficult problems throughout the pandemic and found ways to adapt their offer as the pandemic has gone on (see also Montacute and Cullinane, 2021; Nelson and Sharp, 2021[5]); and with the parents who grappled with the difficult task of educating children at home. Without taking this into account, funding to repair the education system may be misdirected or at worst wasted. Yet the immediate response of the government was to commit comparatively modest resources to a variety of "catch-up programmes" (Sibieta and Zaranko, 2021[6]), with little of the resource going directly to schools to spend as they saw fit on their communities' most pressing needs[7]. The intention of this research was to inform public debate on how any money allocated to helping schools and pupils recover from a prolonged period of educational disruption could best be used.

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[1] The project team were: Gemma Moss, Alice Bradbury, Annette Braun, Sam Duncan and Rachael Levy at the UCL Institute of Education. ESRC Grant: ES/W002086/1

[2] Moss, G; Allen, R; Bradbury, A; Duncan, S; Harmey, S; Levy, R; (2020) *Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward.* UCL Institute of Education: London, UK. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103669/

[3] Moss, G., Webster, R., Harmey, S., and Bradbury, A. (2021) *Unsung Heroes: The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown*. London: UCL Institute of Education

[4] The previous studies were: A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Funder: the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/V00414X/1). And The role of teaching / classroom assistants during the COVID crisis. Funder: Unison. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/role-teaching-classroom-assistants-during-covid-crisis [4]

[5] Montacute, R. and Cullinane, C. (2021) *Learning in Lockdown*. Sutton Trust. Nelson, J and Sharp, C. (2021) *Schools' responses to COVID-19: Key findings from the Wave 1 survey*. NFER

[6] Sibieta, L. and Zaranko,B. *HM Treasury: stingy and short-sighted, or prudent and practical?* London: IFS https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15472

[7] Although funding for the National Tutoring Programme was subsequently adjusted to include a school-led tutoring route, it remains an open question whether this really is the best use of funds to aid recovery, something an external evaluation will explore (See https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/national-tutoring-programme).

To review where money might most usefully be allocated, the *Learning through Disruption* project researched:

- how primary schools in England had adapted to meet local needs during the COVID pandemic and its different phases between March 2020- May 2021;
- how primary schools' staff and parents thought recovery funding might best be used to meet key priorities as schools returned to something more like normal functioning;
- what schools identified as the lessons learnt for the future that would help create a more resilient education system going forward.

Our findings are based on 50 in-depth interviews held with a range of individuals linked to each of our case study sites and occupying different roles, including headteachers, teachers, other members of staff with varied responsibilities and, wherever possible, parents. This combination of data enabled us to gain a better understanding of the local dimensions to the pandemic as it had affected different communities and establish how funding for recovery might best be designed to meet local needs.

Methods

We used a case study design to capture the complexity of local circumstances. Our case studies consisted of a purposive sample of primary schools, recruited to reflect both differences in social catchments and likely regional variations in the prevalence of COVID in the community, and with an accent on schools working in areas of social deprivation.

The case study design was based on the understanding that schools' own experiences might well have varied, depending upon:

- the particular impacts COVID had on local communities and the school;
- any mitigation strategies schools put in place to deal with the most pressing issues as they emerged (including but not necessarily restricted to basic pupil and family welfare, mental health, physical health, nutrition, safeguarding and learning and attainment);
- their access to relevant expertise, resources, appropriate funding and networks of support beyond the school at this time;
- how they perceived short and longer-term effects as children returned to something more like normal schooling in the summer term of 2021.

To gain an in-depth understanding of each case, interviews were held with a range of key staff and parents. Documents relevant to understanding each school in its context and how it responded during the different phases of the crisis were also collected. In addition, we also interviewed relevant contacts in key organisations who were identified as valued partners in supporting each school.

The Sample

We recruited a total of seven case study schools, designed to capture maximum variation. The sample included both community schools and schools that belonged to Multi-Academy Trusts. Two of the case study schools had below average numbers of pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM), while the other five had higher levels, and in two cases, much higher levels. Four of the schools had substantially higher than average percentages of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), two of which were operating in contexts associated with multiple deprivation and poor housing.

The schools were located in parts of the country that had experienced higher or lower prevalence of COVID from March 2020 to March 2021. This affected levels of disruption. The number of pupils coming into school during lockdowns varied depending on local factors including patterns of employment amongst parents - schools where many parents were essential workers had higher attendance. The number of parents in the community reluctant to send their children into school during the pandemic were much higher in some communities than others. The numbers of children in school or staying at home affected the deployment of staff.

Among our sample, levels of disruption caused by COVID were not directly linked to FSM. For example, one of the schools that reported least disruption from COVID, with fewest 'bubbles' going home, had a well above-average percentage of pupils entitled to FSM, but because of the nature of local employment, had roughly 50% of pupils on site throughout and was able to mobilise high levels of parental support for learning at home. Other schools had far lower numbers on site. In some cases communication with parents was more fragile and difficult to maintain.

The parents we were able to interview were self-selecting in response to an email sent out from each school. We do not take this group as representative of all parents at each site, but they did contribute valuable insights that we otherwise might have missed, enabling us to see beyond the staff perspective to what it was like managing learning at home.

Findings

This report is organised into four sections: Schools' responses to their communities' needs during the pandemic; the role headteachers and other staff played in managing the crisis; the immediate priorities for recovery as schools resumed normal functioning; and the lessons learnt from the pandemic for primary education in England more broadly.

Section 1: School responses to local community needs during the pandemic

Primary schools are firmly connected to their local communities. This was evident in all of our case study schools. They operate at a small enough scale to be able to respond directly to issues parents raise. Parents recognised that they could turn to schools if they and their children faced particular dilemmas, and many did. This made schools an important resource for families during the pandemic.

1. Community needs varied during the pandemic

In some contexts, COVID exacerbated existing problems, while in others it brought sudden and unexpected changes. One school was hugely affected by the immediate closure of an important local employer, which provided many of the parents' jobs. This change in circumstances for a large section of the school population meant a sudden and unexpected increase in the need for food and support:

> **Our free school meals now has increased and increased […] Those jobs just imploded and many of them were there on temporary contracts (Head S2).**

Another school, with comparatively low FSM figures but many families working in the NHS and frontline services, found pupils struggling with the considerable disruption and uncertainty caused by parents' new working patterns at a time when familial support networks dependent on grandparents were cut off.

Local circumstances made a difference to what schools could do. One school with above average numbers of pupils entitled to FSM reported few problems in their community: incidence of COVID was low, employment was stable, up to half of the school population was on site. Good communication with parents created a sense of a community facing a difficult time together. By contrast, a school with amongst the lowest proportion of families entitled to FSM, reported pressure during the first lockdown from some parents for the kind of synchronous, small-group online provision they associated with private schools, and the levels of home resourcing private schooling implies. Yet this school actually had a very diverse catchment, and were prioritising support for families who had few resources, evident in the comment that some families had 'no computer or they had four children sharing a phone'. Managing such different needs and expectations was not easy:

> **These people were asking for full-day everyday online teaching, face-to-face, via Zoom rather, like teaching all day every day because their child could cope with that, they felt, and it then would be the least disruption on their working from home. (Head S5)**

In each case, schools had to make decisions about what to prioritise and how to respond in the light of the varied challenges the pandemic created in their own community.

2. Addressing food insecurity was the most immediate priority for schools

In the early stages of the pandemic, ensuring all children were fed was seen as the most immediate priority, particularly for schools serving populations with high levels of poverty.

> **it was making sure those basic needs were actually met and families had food on the table' (Head S1)**

All of our case study schools went to considerable lengths to ensure that all their pupils received at least one meal a day, in some cases distributing food directly from the school to the door. That schools felt impelled to react in this way reflects the fragility of support for families living in poverty.

In fact in some school communities, some of those hardest hit were families with pre-pandemic incomes just above the poverty line, who had lost income and who were turning to the school for help:

> **What we've noticed over time was that the people who were coming to our food pantry, and we still run it now, weren't the free school meal parents. […] It was this tier just above, the people who'd been furloughed, the people who had always had a job (Head S3)**

The pandemic has highlighted just how vital the meals provided in school are for children living in poverty. This is an issue that requires wider policy redress. As one head put it:

> **if we've got hungry children, we have to feed them, right, but what we want is a world where our children aren't hungry (Head S1)**

3. Schools provided a vital lifeline for children living in poverty

COVID has highlighted in many ways the extent to which children living in poverty have been disproportionally affected by the disruption to learning in school[8]. Communicating with families during the pandemic has heightened schools' knowledge of the difference poverty make to their pupils' lives.

[8] Nelson, J., Lynch, S. and Sharp, C. *Recovery during a pandemic: the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on schools serving deprived communities*. Slough: NFER

Schools serving high poverty communities were already very aware of the multiple aspects to deprivation. Even so, communicating with children at home raised new awareness of the difficulties families living in poverty faced:

> **One of the things that has really come to our attention more than ever through lockdown is the appalling state of some of the rental properties around here and the dreadful landlords who rip people off. (Head S7)**

For some children, being restricted to temporary and sub-standard housing during lockdown created wholly unsuitable conditions for learning:

> **[They] lived in a flat, which was temporary accommodation, that was infested with rats. And holding all of that was really, really tough because she was in danger and so were her children, and living with rats. I mean, it was just awful. (Head)**

In a context where the threat of domestic violence was also present, this school responded by classing the children as vulnerable and allowing the parent to spend time on-site in COVID secure spaces.

Schools who were already well aware of high levels of deprivation stepped up their efforts, providing clothes, shoes, toiletries and sanitary products; for example:

> **It's taking my children's clothes, going through their wardrobe and bagging up washed clothes for families and distributing clothes for children who were inevitably going to grow through this period but parents didn't have the money to be able to fund. (Head S3)**

Some schools dealing with pockets of deprivation in otherwise affluent communities, became newly aware of the effects of poverty on individual children as families' needs became more visible:

> **We are much more aware of [family poverty] now because during the pandemic we've had to signpost families to foodbanks, we've had to take packs of learning to certain families because they don't have internet access at home, they don't have computers […] the pandemic has first of all enabled us to know our community in different ways, in more meaningful ways and probably more accurate ways. (Head S5)**

Schools recognise levels of poverty that the current welfare system ignores, precisely because they are so closely connected to their communities. As one head commented 'The absolute basic need … I'd never thought you'd be thinking about that'. With or without COVID, responding to child poverty is an enduring challenge. Schools are picking up the pieces from a welfare and social services system that no longer provides a real safety net for families. For those schools, the impacts of poverty on children's lives are impossible to ignore.

4. Schools helped families deal with complex welfare needs

During the pandemic schools found themselves addressing the full range of issues impacting on their pupils during lockdown: the mental health of family members, children's wellbeing, basic nutrition and issues in safeguarding.

> **Really, they were families that we just wanted eyes on every week, so there was somebody who had been suffering domestic abuse, and we just really wanted to see her. So, the food … was a necessity, but it was also a really good reason to go and visit, to deliver and see them." (Head S2)**

Staff spoke of the stress involved in dealing with a range of welfare issues under such challenging conditions. Some recounted harrowing mental health crises; others reported helping families dealing with domestic violence. Some, with very urgent cases to deal with, could not get access to appropriate services and urgently needed CAMHS (Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services). In many instances, schools were stepping in to fill gaps where access to other crucial services had weakened, and where no one else was available to support a child or family in crisis.

> **The threshold is so high to get any support from social services ... Often there is nobody and you just have to work it out yourselves … if your number one value is relationships then you need to mean that and you need to work out how you can help (Head S7)**

In every case, schools did what they could to help. Many committed considerable resources to monitoring how families and children were doing at home, including regular phone calls and visits to the door:

> **Our main priority was making sure that our children were safe and that they were okay at home. In terms of that we were making sure that they were going to have access to food, so for our free school meal children, that they weren't going to be missing out (Head S6)**

Staff demonstrated kindness and agility wherever need became visible. Again and again in our case study interviews, key qualities of human connection, basic decency and care shone through. Schools recognise very profoundly that pupil wellbeing lays the foundations for learning, and that is where they start:

> **Throughout all of this the children's safety and well-being has been paramount […]if they're not well in their minds they can't function, let alone learn. (Head S4)**

Balancing responsibilities to care for pupil welfare with support for learning are crucial aspects of the professional role that very much came to the fore during the pandemic.

5. Schools had to adapt teaching and learning strategies in response to context

At the start of the pandemic, supporting pupils' learning at home and in school was a challenge, particularly where children had limited access to digital devices and the physical space in which to use them.

> **I think from the government's point of view it was, oh we'll just give all these devices out and that will solve the problem, not thinking about actually the root of all this is far deeper (Head S1)**

Schools had to adapt their ways of working, taking into account their growing understanding of the diverse impacts of COVID on their school community, alongside their awareness of the logistical and financial challenges facing both schools and families. One head gave an example:

> **We had families saying 'we're not using that, Miss, because my child will break that. I'm not doing it because if I have to replace it, I can't afford to replace it.' (Head S3)**

Regardless of how well-equipped schools were digitally, or how digitally connected their communities might be, all schools faced the challenges of working out exactly what high quality learning at home might look like, given the different circumstances in which families found themselves. The early assumption that it consisted of delivery of lesson content alone

proved short-lived. Expectations had to adjust and new solutions be devised, as schools examined whether and how online activities, pre-recorded videos, synchronous interactions, hard-copy resources or other solutions worked in practice. Teachers quickly discovered that families faced different logistical challenges including those related to physical space, access to technology, parents managing children of different ages at the same time, parents working, parental confidence and experience with the learning topics and children's willingness to engage.

Arriving at the best solution was a collaborative process of trial and error. Some schools made good use of the feedback from parents on what worked best at home, given their differing needs and circumstances.

> **We tried to be responsive to the pandemic changing. We did that really well. What we became really clear about was the difference within the experiences in the homes of our children.' (Head S3)**

For others, providing paper packs of work, which were either picked up by parents, posted or hand-delivered to homes, was the only immediate and practical response at the start of the pandemic, given the lack of digital resources at home. The shortage of devices and reliance on paper packs was most acute during the initial phases of the pandemic. By January 2021, the number of laptops or tablets that could be shared with pupils had significantly increased, through a combination of government funding, LA organised support, business support and initiatives schools had taken themselves.

Looking across all seven of our case study schools, we can see varied, sometimes contrasting and in all cases evolving approaches. As one head told us:

> **We changed and evolved over that period, absolutely beyond recognition really (Head S3).**

Individual teachers and whole schools made decisions based on what seemed most important at different points in the crisis, what was realistic logistically, manageable for staff and, as the crisis wore on, on what seemed to be working or not working for families so far.

Adjustments to remote learning were particularly effective when schools collected feedback from pupils and parents about how easy parents found it to support the work set, considered how to motivate pupils to do school work at home and recognised whether tasks offered sufficiently differentiated support to meet individual pupils' needs. This was particularly important for students who might otherwise struggle with work set for the whole class.

Some schools prioritised helping families establish routines for schooling over the day, recognising that this might look very different from normal school practice. Others prioritised creating time for children to socialise with each other as well as spend time on school tasks. Throughout, different approaches for children of different ages had to be tried out, including play-based home-schooling for the youngest children that might work online, with decision making often revolving around what materials or resource might be available to families, and what families found worked best for them.

From this process of adaptation over time, it is clear that schools' approaches to teaching and learning intertwined with their overall communications strategy. Parents' reflections indicate that the communication from schools most influenced their experience of and satisfaction with learning over the pandemic. Successful adaptations to teaching and learning under such novel circumstances were enhanced in this way by high levels of two-way communication between families (both parents and children) and school staff.

Section 2:
The role of headteachers and school staff in managing the crisis

Headteachers and school staff together played an absolutely crucial role in managing the crisis.

1. Novel demands in uncertain times require fast action

Headteachers carried considerable responsibility for managing the crisis throughout closure, lockdowns and periods of reopening, with variable levels of support available to them from their local networks and in the face of what many described as unhelpful government guidance.

> We spent the next two days [just before the first lockdown] waiting for government guidance about what constituted a key worker, and it never came. So we made our own decision by the Friday morning. [Before the announcement of the January lockdown] we had zero hours to turn it round. “Close your school from tomorrow apart from vulnerable or key workers.” (Head S4).

Headteachers found themselves dealing with unprecedented levels of anxiety and stress among both staff and families, while simultaneously having to operate in an entirely different way in a very short time frame. Pressures were particularly acute at the start of the pandemic:

> **I guess what everyone felt across the country, was just the unease and the unknown about it. And just for us, as school leaders, to act really swiftly, and to be articulate in the messages that we were giving when actually we weren't so sure ourselves? (Head S6)**

Unclear guidance was an issue that provoked strong negative reactions, particularly given the lack of consultation:

> **…nobody had sent something through, ‘There you go. These are the things you should think about as a school.’ […] Any guidance was released late at night, they didn’t ever show what the guidance changes were. So you had to reread all the guidance where you get told you had to open the school and they give you the guidance 24 hours before (Head S1)**

Hearing major education changes on the news left little time to organise staff, communicate with parents and make plans, yet parents often assumed that schools had been informed earlier. The late decision to close schools in January 2021, after one day of teaching caused considerable dismay:

> **the beginning of January, when we were all sitting there planning and we did our risk assessment for coming back the next day, and then nine o'clock at night, Boris Johnson said, “Oh, no. You're not going back to school, actually.” […] They didn’t tell us. We heard first on the news on that evening (Head S5)**

Faced with so many demands, our interviewees’ primary concerns remained with their staff and their communities and trying to find the best way through:

> **It's heartbreaking when you're a school and you're here to educate and actually, you're not then able to do that. That was really sad. (Head S6)**

The interviews demonstrate the sheer grit and resilience required to lead a whole community through such a difficult experience.

2. Staff wellbeing matters

Adapting to the many new demands of the pandemic took its toll on headteachers and teachers. Heads in the early stages of the pandemic were having to make rapid decisions about how to manage the double workload of teaching children in school and at home, while also managing the needs of a range of staff:

> **[Because of the number of pupils on site] we had to have all staff who were available in school. [But] some were clinically vulnerable, some vulnerable, some pregnant, staff who were just so anxious they didn't want to be in school. (Head S4)**

Right the way through the pandemic there were difficult decisions to make. Many headteachers described putting on a brave face and carrying on, for the sake of their staff.

> **My staff have been absolutely amazing and our community have as well…It has happened and it's been horrific but we've had to, as a school leader, be resilient and had to leave that and drive it from the top. (Head S3)**

Stress came from many different quarters. On juggling the additional necessary roles of 'social worker' and 'mental health nurse', one teacher commented:

> **I can't put into words how hard it has been, and then you get some parents who were complaining that we weren't doing enough!" (Staff S4)**

Some teachers spoke of reaching breaking point:

> **a few weeks ago, it was just too much. We had a development plan for our subjects … and then we had reports looming … I'm very open with the headteacher and deputy … and they were both in the office together, and I just said, look, I just cried … "This is too much, I can't do it" (Staff S4)**

Looking across the interviews as a whole, there is recognition that the pandemic and the stresses it has produced have a legacy that will need to be addressed longer term, for staff as much as for children and families:

> **I think definitely the main one would be mental health, definitely… It's important for the adults, the teachers, the parents … it would be nice to … say, well I don't feel too well today. It would be good to be able to let things out. (Staff S1)**

While research has documented the stress that heads in particular were under (see for instance, Sharp and Nelson, 2021; Moss, 2020; Jerrim, Sims and Allen, 2021), the potential long-term consequences remain to be seen:

> **I suspect at the end of all this, you're going to have headteachers leaving the profession in droves. I fear that that might happen because we're trying to support our staff who are trying to support their children but actually, we're exhausted […] we regularly break down in tears because we're exhausted. (Head A S5)**

Building a more resilient education system depends upon resourcing for staff mental health as well as pupils.

3. Local networks of support are vital but patchy

During the pandemic, all of our case study schools reached out to other organisations for help of different kinds. Schools working in contexts of high and enduring levels of deprivation benefitted from prior connections to a variety of local organisations. As one head said:

before the government stepped in and did any of their vouchers, we were already providing vouchers and linking up with our local charity, [name] who supplied food parcels to our families (Head S1)

Others found themselves having to swiftly identify who might help:

eventually we found our way into the kind of food share, food bank system and we've been getting free food that I go and collect every week to give out to families from a more centralised thing in [city].… We were paying for it ourselves, at one point for a couple of months we were spending about £1000 a month on food parcels for our 25 most vulnerable families (Head S7)

This school was also grateful for donations of digital devices from unexpected quarters:

we've got some laptops donated from the [arts organisation they previously worked with] - somebody from them donated us 20 more (Head S7)

However, this need for creativity and resourcefulness in managing the pandemic reveals just how patchy forms of support have become and how dependent on local connections and charitable giving schools now are.

More formal networks of support included local authorities (LAs), and through them local public health authorities, or Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), as well as diocese. Regular digests and updates mediating the frequent changes in government directives were very much appreciated. Such briefings were seen as a way of getting reliable information, filtered to be useful, in a context where the lack of clarity in government and unhelpful media reporting made finding credible sources of advice crucial.

I have to say [County Council Director of Education] briefings were brilliant, we had them probably twice a week and we still get two emails a week. So he was fantastic … he literally was on the end of the phone. (Head A S5)

Regular contact mattered:

That weekly phone call to check on me if I was okay, I could run ideas past our officer, past the assistant director and that was really helpful. The diocese also did a brilliant job at summarising the guidance for us, so we didn't have to read through all the documents (Head S4)

Several heads mentioned the usefulness of advice from their unions, including regular meetings which provided them with digests of what they needed to know:

To keep on top of knowledge was just overwhelming. I found that level of support [from union group] was helpful for me to be able to know and filter out what I do need to know and what I don't. (Head S3)

Regular meeting with other heads, whichever organisation brokered them, were also useful means of sharing ideas:

what was so useful was just sort of the sharing of the letters that we were sending out to families when there are big changes in government policy, but also just how we were organising our school day, how we were delivering remote learning. (Head S6)

Where they were available schools benefitted from these different kinds of support. Even so, being a headteacher appeared at times an isolated role, highly pressured and operating in a state of substantial uncertainty. Looking across our dataset, our interviews emphasise the considerable burden of responsibility that heads carried.

Section 3:
School priorities for recovery in the summer term of 2021

During summer 2021, schools were clearly aware that they were still dealing with an evolving pandemic, and further disruption was possible. Schools kept various measures in place to encourage social distancing and minimize the spread of the disease (such as wearing masks and staggering entry times). Teaching and learning was still in bubbles, and bubbles were still 'bursting'. However, schools were also clear that this was an opportunity to address the many issues arising from such a prolonged period of educational disruption.

1. Teaching that supports both pupil learning and wellbeing is key

As schools reopened, the most frequently cited priorities were laying the foundations for productive learning through re-establishing school routines, redeveloping the social skills required to learn well in large groups and helping pupils remake friendships. Alongside giving children time to settle back in, staff were assessing the spectrum of likely needs from welfare to learning and planning how to address them. Many staff commented that organizing high-quality and responsive teaching post-pandemic depended on recognizing how learning and wellbeing interact.

> **we're not saying we're going to focus on their wellbeing to the detriment of the academic. We're saying we're going to focus on their wellbeing to ensure that we can focus on the academic. … Every school should be focusing on this. […] how do we know what their experience of lockdown has been. How do we know what's been going behind those closed doors, what stresses etc (Head S1)**

Schools thought in the round about which areas of the curriculum and which age groups seemed to have been affected most and in which ways. They were focused on providing a broad and balanced curriculum as a way of reengaging pupils.

> **We take our children and we still have to unpick what they need to be taught. Rather than trying to just fill a gap, let's unpick where it is so that we can move forward … giving them a wider curriculum, … giving them that musicality. That's been really good, that's been really enjoyable. (Head S3)**

The idea of 'catch-up', imagined as a tight focus on meeting pre-pandemic targets expressed in test scores, was not a priority for any of our interviewees, staff or parents.

> **I think what we need to remember is that part of our catch up isn't just about ensuring that children are retaining and learning, ..it is about … looking after their mental health and wellbeing, we're creating children who are going to grow into adults that can be resilient and .. live a .. successful life in the future. (Head S6)**

This sets those most aware of what had happened to primary school children's education during the pandemic at odds with politicians and the calculations they make about what should happen next.

2. Curriculum priorities vary by school

All of our schools had been monitoring which aspects of the curriculum seem to have suffered most during a year of disrupted learning. The conclusions they came to varied: some schools identified writing, others reading, or maths, as areas where children had fallen behind.

It was interesting. We just naturally expected writing to have the biggest hit and reading but what we found was that it was maths. With maths, it was just the basic fluency and arithmetic of it. (Staff S1)

Others were particularly concerned about the early years and re-socialisation of children back into whole-class activities in school. One teacher spoke of observing that many children were struggling with improvisation, imaginative play and, more generally, socializing with other children, and has been supporting this need with drama work.

[if] they have not been doing any drama or imaginative play at home […] there was a real lack of understanding of what that meant, to be another character, and to take that on. I think for us, in a sense, it's socialisation and cooperation, and those roleplay elements, especially with these younger children (Staff S2)

Outdoor play was prioritized to develop children's relationships and coordination skills.

I think the priority really, for me … was socialisation. It was so clear to me in September, that children really struggled to work as a group and that is in English as well, in all subjects, to work as a group, to share things, to work as a team. (Staff S2)

For early years teachers, with social distancing still in place there were uncertainties about how best to encourage a play-based curriculum. Some thought physical play should be the priority for this youngest age group.

the thing is, children were on the technology so much [more] then they were before anyway. So, I think we're trying to bring things back to realness, tangibleness and use technology more in its place, do you know what I mean. (nursery teacher 1)

Schools with high numbers of EAL pupils were particularly aware that important opportunities for speaking and listening in English had been missed and needed prioritizing in the summer term, especially for children in the early years.

For this term I know that the Early Years department are really working on getting as many talking opportunities in there (Staff S1)

Those schools where under normal circumstances many children might still be classified as 'emerging consolidating their level of English' between Years 1-3 (Head S2), were planning for an extended timeline for recovery, with increased emphasis on encouraging reading and writing in class to support English language development over the longer term. In all these respects schools emphasized whole class responses.

3. High priority areas include pupil transitions

Transitions between year groups and particularly from Year 6 to secondary school were high priorities in school planning, with an emphasis on ensuring that pupils felt prepared for the changes:

Year 6 are my particular worry because the others we still have, we can fill the gaps. … with Year 6 we just want to be very very clear in our handovers to the secondary schools, in terms of their coverage, what they will have really securely, what they will have touched on, and what they won't have at all, just so secondary schools have just a clear a picture as we do. (Teacher S1)

Elsewhere, schools were deciding how best to manage transitions between year groups:

At the transition meetings … it's about this child demonstrates this need, we have put this in place, it has been successful, they would benefit from another

four weeks and then be reviewed… I hate that thing when you feel like children come back in September and it's all starting again for them (Head S2)

Where they identified struggling learners, schools returned to core strategies to support them, such as using early morning time for group work. Some voiced disappointment that the National Tutoring Programme (NTP) seemed to be predicated on hiring in someone unfamiliar with the school, its pupils and their curriculum, in ways that were wasteful of effort and wouldn't effectively respond to local needs:

The reason we haven't engaged with [the NTP] is because I need my children to be taught by people that they know because it's about relationships and my understanding of the national tutoring programme is it's a tutor from anywhere, and online at the moment. And the member of staff tells the tutor what to do anyway, and then does it, and tells the member of staff. (Head S4)

Those schools that were making use of the NTP, did so because they were able to hire tutors they already knew through the scheme:

We used national tutoring programme for the academic mentors and that's been really beneficial […] qualified teachers who are working with individuals or small groups of children. We've used them a lot to help with … reading, writing and maths, where we know that so much hasn't been done at home. I mean, it's a huge benefit to our most disadvantaged children (Head S6)

Such judgements about the areas of need in a specific school, whether focused on pupil groups, or the curriculum, highlight why it is important that schools can spend catch up monies at their own discretion. Taking the lead in deciding how recovery monies should be spent also allows schools to invest for the longer term in ways that strengthen staff expertise.

4. Finding sufficient specialist support for vulnerable pupils is an on-going need

Perhaps a more pressing and immediate concern for schools as they reopened in the summer term 2021 was identifying those children who might need much more specialist support in relation to mental health and welfare. All the case study schools had systems in place to track and keep in touch with vulnerable children and families during the lockdowns as well as after the schools reopened. These were not only children on official at-risk registers and with social service involvement, rather, this included those whose family circumstances had deteriorated to a level of precarity, often as a result of the pandemic.

Safeguarding is of course an integral part of managing a school, but this is also an area where external support and the possibility for onward referrals are crucial. Several of our interviewees spoke about the strains within existing statutory provision:

I know this is across the country, but there's a huge backlog at CAMHS and with SEND pupils. We've got children that should have had ASD [autism spectrum disorder] assessments, this time last year, and they haven't been seen yet. … It's just such a backlog, and with mental health as well. We're quite lucky we have a social worker who works with parents and the school. She comes in once a week and I feel every time she comes in, I bombard her with like, this family and that family, and it's not that she doesn't want to support, it's just that she has had so many families who have been referred to her. (Staff S2)

With CAMHS, the threshold is so high and the waiting list is so long, and so it is frustrating. There's a child in Year 6 who's had suicidal thoughts and has

> **tried to self–harm, and … really asking for help. … I've sent so many emails to CAMHS. (Staff S1)**

In some cases, in response to needs that cannot otherwise be addressed, schools have established and expanded mental health and other specialist family support within their schools. Case study schools have bought in, for example, weekly drop-ins from a multi-agency support team, therapy sessions from Place2Be (a children's mental health charity providing counselling and training in schools) and are employing their own in-house counsellors for a few hours a week. Even so, the question of limited funding and scarcity of provision is felt keenly.

> **What I'd really like the funding for is for a counselling service, mental health support directly into school. Having to put in referral forms and wondering if they ever get to the top of the pile, chasing things up, we'd have a qualified person in school. We also don't have a parent support advisor so I'd very much like that role. We've talked about it but haven't got the funding to do it at the moment. It's just fair funding that we want and the mental health support. (Head S4)**

However, in some important respects school's internal support cannot stand in for statutory provision for those children most at risk where onward referrals are needed. Our data suggest there is a case for increased funding for schools to provide for the manifold educational, poverty and pastoral challenges they are dealing with, but this also needs to be accompanied by readily accessible provision of statutory specialist services.

Section 4: Lessons learnt from the pandemic for primary education in England

In this section we reflect on the lessons schools identified from the pandemic and its impacts on the way they organized, before turning in our conclusion to the broader lessons from our research for the English primary school system as a whole.

1. Some of the changes schools made will endure

One of the unexpected outcomes from the pandemic was schools reporting that they planned to maintain some of the changes made during the COVID crisis, including staggered entry times, lunches in classrooms, online parents' evenings and more innovative use of digital platforms. These 'COVID wins' arose from changing practices which were often long-standing, suggesting that the crisis offered opportunities for innovation in how everyday life in schools is organised.

Several heads saw benefits from the changes they'd made to lunch and play times and the smaller groupings that bubbles had created:

> **We've learned an awful lot of things. So I would never have considered asking children to eat their lunch in their classrooms before, because the dinner hall is for that. But now, it's a dream because our biggest issues in school with behaviour always happens at lunchtime, and we've seen a massive reduction this year… our incidents at lunchtimes reduced by 80% (Head S6)**

Other schools had found benefits from organizing staggered entry times:

> **We will continue with our staggered drop off times for our children on both sites - I'm really pleased we've done that actually […] it works so much better, and staff can see the advantages (Head S4)**

For some schools that had not used google classroom or its equivalents before the pandemic, there were advantages in the digital skills they had acquired:

> **I basically said everyone has an obligation to give one homework a week that is on Google Classroom because I want to make sure that we don't lose that skill. People did hugely improve their skills, without a doubt, and develop them, and think about, in more ways, they're enhancing the learning, and making it more fun. (Head S2)**

There were also wider lessons for home-school communication. During the pandemic, schools found out more about their communities, and at the same time parents became more aware of issues relating to teaching and the curriculum, as they navigated the crisis. Some had found advantages to holding meetings with parents online with higher attendance levels, while others used survey tools to gain quick feedback:

> **We love a survey of our parents and carers now, it's so quick now we've gone from SurveyMonkey to Microsoft Forms, we can get so much feedback so quickly, and that's really helpful. (Head S4)**

In various ways schools had been able to learn from the experience. Making time for collective reflection on what had worked and was worth keeping helped identify unexpected benefits.

2. The inspection and testing regime needs to adapt to help schools recover well

Given the extent of the pressures schools have been under since the first closures in March 2020, and the uncertain course of the pandemic still to come, headteachers' feelings about Ofsted visits, both during the crisis and potentially on the return to school, were strongly voiced. At the very least there was a sense that Ofsted inspectorate had very little grasp of the complex problems schools had been struggling with on so many fronts:

> **The frustrating thing about the [Ofsted] visit is that it went incredibly well, but the letter we received did not reflect the hard work that had gone into, and what schools were doing at that time. (Head S4)**

Some were quite clear that the criteria in place for routine inspections came nowhere close to appreciating what children really needed to get through the crisis well:

> **So, Ofsted could … well f-off as far as I was concerned because I was like, you can come and tell me our offer is not good enough but actually it's probably one of the most thought through offers that children will be receiving. […] Our work was about making sure that our children and our staff were in the best possible state to be able to access some kind of learning. (Head S1)**

The idea of judging schools, through inspection or testing, against expectations of curriculum coverage in normal times, seemed particularly unhelpful given the varied experiences of different communities:

> **When you have all manner of inequalities, some of which are exacerbated by things that hit poverty-stricken people even more like a pandemic, then what a ridiculous way to assess children with a set of national tests that are the same for every single child. (Head S7)**

Rather than being distracted by inspection visits focused on expectations based on normal times, or the use of high stakes testing to monitor school performance, schools preferred to invest in strategies that made sense in their own context.

> **To anyone away from education trying to make these decisions for people and children in the education system- [pause] it's not a blanket or a one size fits all. … they need to … stop thinking that they can pluck these answers out of the air … We know our families, we can make it work. Just give us the tools and the resources and we will pull through (Staff S1)**

Drawing on what they had done over a prolonged period of disruption, many made the case for government trusting teachers more:

> **Why not break that cycle now and allow teachers and educational professionals to use their own judgement? I mean, they've trusted us to create our own curriculum to send home, over the last year and a half. Why can't they trust us to assess children? (Staff S4)**

The pandemic has had the effect of crystalising for schools what doesn't work well in the current system and how things should change:

> **we've used this opportunity to rethink what Year 6 assessments should look like. So, we're not sitting down through SATs this week but actually … we're doing something that's far more comprehensive. (Head S1)**

These reflections need documenting if education is really to "build back better ".

Conclusions

This project set out to inform public debate on how any money committed to helping schools and pupils recover from a prolonged period of educational disruption could best be used. The project began work at a point in time when Sir Kevan Collins had been appointed to the role of Education Recovery Commissioner with a remit to "advise on the design and implementation of potential interventions that will help students catch-up learning lost due to the pandemic"[9]. He resigned in June with the press reporting that his request for a £15billion fund to address the consequences of the extended period of educational disruption was turned down by the Treasury.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), commenting on his resignation in the light of the funding the government had at that point committed to education catch-up funding for England, pointed out that the sum offered 'equates to just over £300 per child in nurseries, schools and colleges, spread over 3 years (so about £100 per pupil per year, or 1.7% of annual school spending per pupil). These figures are well below the £15 billion reportedly recommended by the Education Recovery Commissioner, and much smaller than those being implemented in some other countries (about £1,600 per pupil in the US, and £2,500 per pupil in the Netherlands)' (Sibieta and Zaranko, 2021). These modest amounts have been further compounded by changing the date when FSM is calculated with knock on effects for the amount of Pupil Premium funding schools will receive (Thomson, 2021[10]).

In commenting on the government's plans through this report, our aim has been to amplify the voices of those in schools who know best where support is most needed, and who have witnessed "up close" where the impacts of COVID have been deepest. We used a case study design to better understand the diversity of needs identified and addressed by primary schools during this period of intense education disruption. By comparing mitigation strategies

[9] See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/960070/Terms_of_reference.pdf

[10] Thomson, D. (2021) *How much Pupil Premium funding have schools missed out on?* https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/07/how-much-pupil-premium-funding-have-schools-missed-out-on/

and their relationship to the diversity in the patterns of local need, as well as the resources individual schools can muster, we are clear that **needs vary by setting** and that **more power on how to spend any recovery funds needs to be given to schools themselves**. Finally, to build a more resilient education system out of the crisis we also think other changes are required. In this light we put forward three recommendations that are important in guiding government investment appropriate to the diverse circumstances that schools face and go way beyond short-term 'catch-up' funding.

Our recommendations are:

Recommendation 1: To create a more equal education system, schools operating in areas of high disadvantage need substantially more generous funding to address those aspects of poverty that directly impact on children's education.

Schools are at the frontline in dealing with deficiencies in the current welfare system that place children living in poverty at risk. Findings from this project show that many schools are struggling to meet their pupils' most basic welfare needs as a precursor to ensuring children are ready to learn. This has become abundantly clear during the pandemic, as more families have found themselves struggling with insecure employment and the toll that poverty takes on family life.

Current metrics to determine funding for schools operating in areas of multiple disadvantage are inadequate – the Pupil Premium is not capable of capturing the complexity of local needs that impact on pupils' educational functioning. More generous funding to schools operating in areas of high disadvantage is required if the unequal burdens they carry are to be addressed. Indeed, greater determination to end child poverty in England is an essential part of a joined-up strategy to enable all children to reach their educational potential.

There needs to be a proper funding stream for welfare support for children that matches their needs. As a first step to putting this right, the government should audit the welfare and wellbeing demands schools have had to meet during the COVID crisis. From this starting point the necessary resources to repair other support services (e.g. CAMHS) that are so crucial in supporting our most vulnerable families should be found.

Recommendation 2: To create a more resilient education system, schools need time to reflect on what has been learnt at the frontline during the crisis and share the knowledge gained

In order to recover from this crisis and build a system which is more resilient, schools need to be given opportunities to share what they have learnt and feed this into policy decision-making. A profession-led discussion on what have been the issues that have been most difficult to resolve would establish much more quickly and more certainly where funding needs to be directed. Equally, sharing mitigation strategies that met local needs would help make the system as a whole more resilient in instances of future disruption. Such open discussion between professionals would benefit all concerned, not least the children themselves. It would also help system learning at the centre and in those organisations such as Ofsted, with oversight functions but no direct experience of the impacts of the pandemic in schools.

We see little value in collecting test data in 2021-22 to judge gaps that teachers need to address day to day. Indeed, in the absence of meaningful contextual data that acknowledges the impacts of child poverty on children's educational progress, such test data

will not provide reliable information to judge education quality at the whole system level. Nor will they help close learning gaps.

We suggest as an immediate short-term measure: **recovery funding for teacher-led knowledge sharing in local networks**, organised geographically, and involving all schools whether LA supported or Mats. There are important lessons to be learnt from the ways in which schools have adapted provision for learning at home using digital technology. Joint reflection on strategies that the profession have found most useful in enabling children, parents and schools to continue learning during the pandemic would help future-proof education against further disruption. A fund to support such profession-led CPD should be made available. Such reflections should recognise that not all children have adequate digital access, wherever they are in the country and whatever their families' level of income.

Recommendation 3: To lay the foundations for a sustainable recovery that works for all, education needs a fully costed investment plan for the longer term. This is required much more urgently than short-term "catch-up" initiatives with insufficient funding committed to address real needs.

Spending a little extra money on targeted catch-up programmes in the short term is not a proportionate response. Instead, the government should review its longer-term investments in education with the aim of building a much more sustainable and resilient education system which works for all. This should be the primary goal.

The schools in our study recognise the multiple and varied ways in which the pandemic has impacted on pupils. This includes impacts on physical health, nutrition, welfare and mental health as well as learning and attainment (Moss et al, 2021[11]). The 'catch-up' programmes announced so far do not address this range of needs. Primary schools are planning how to address any gaps in children's learning in an appropriate timeframe, whether over the short, medium, or longer term. They are doing this in combination with rebuilding children's confidence, social skills and wellbeing.

Schools will be better able to devise strategies that ensure all children make progress without the distorting pressure of repeated testing, tied to fixed timelines. A longer term plan that puts children first will help parents feel more confident, knowing that they have access to a resilient education system acting in the interests of pupils and parents and well able to weather any future difficulties.

[11] Moss, G., Bradbury, A., Harmey, S., Mansfield, R., Candy, B, France, R and Vigurs, C. (2021) *Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary and lower secondary children during school closures: A rapid evidence review.* London: UCL, Institute of Education. IPPO. https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3837