

Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, UCL Institute of Education – Written Evidence (LBC0112)

Introduction

This submission has been authored by the research team of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0 to 11 years) (HHCP). The HHCP is a research centre in the UCL Institute of Education. The mission of the HHCP is to improve children's learning through better pedagogy. Our expertise is particularly suited to address the issue of the long-term impact on schools and early years settings of the pandemic.

The evidence that we offer in this submission is based on: the outcomes of recent research with education professionals, which explored their hopes and fears for the future; and our combined expertise in researching education in early childhood and primary education.

Outcomes of Survey of Educational Professionals

Headlines from the research

- Positive changes as a result of the pandemic include educators' development of new skills and ways of working, and an increased focus on individual children's needs.
- Teachers have significant concerns about the need to balance support for pupils' emotional welfare and academic 'catch up' in the coming years.
- Some educators in early years fear the impact of COVID-19 will be closure of their early years settings. This could leave many parents without childcare with a resulting impact on children's development.
- Respondents hoped that the crisis would provoke a re-evaluation of the purposes of education.

Methodology

The respondents to our survey are education professionals working in schools and early years settings. The survey was circulated to the affiliates and advisory board members of the HHCP, and also made available on social media. Advisory board members are selected for their in-depth knowledge about early years and primary education: their combined expertise in terms of years of experience is very extensive. Affiliates of the HHCP are similarly recognised for their expertise and alignment with the mission of the centre. As such, while the number of survey responses is small (see Appendix 1), our recruitment strategy resulted in access to great depth of knowledge and experience.

Key themes

Our discussion of our findings is based around the three key questions raised by the committee.

A. Positive changes resulting from the pandemic

Education practitioners across the early years and primary sectors highlighted three main new opportunities arising from the pandemic. First, that teaching staff were able to learn new skills with digital technology and explore new ways of delivering teaching, such as through online platforms e.g. Class Dojo; school websites; or recording storytelling videos. Second, there was a transition to time-saving routines and practices, such as holding staff meetings online, communicating with families remotely, creating online lessons plans and student feedback online. Third, the crisis brought wellbeing and mental health to the foreground of discussion of children's learning. A reduced number of students in school and lack of pressure from Ofsted created opportunities for practitioners to focus more closely on individual children's needs and interests, resulting in better support and closer, more nurturing, relationships with children.

B. Major concerns

Educators cited the following issues as the main challenges of providing learning in the context of the pandemic. First, it was a challenge to meet the academic needs of students while simultaneously responding to concerns about families' mental health and wellbeing. Provision of quality online learning is hindered by families lacking digital access; teaching staff lacking software, knowledge, and skills; and students lacking the stamina needed for prolonged screen-based learning. The respondents highlighted the difficulties surrounding the provision of physical learning materials and resources, both within settings and for use at homes, in a COVID-safe manner. This concern relates also to the finding in our submission to the Education Select Committee, that early years and primary teachers experienced much higher levels of work-related stress during the crisis (Wyse et al., 2020).

A second major challenge was the safeguarding of vulnerable children. Individual risk assessments are needed to identify those in need of extra support. The needs of vulnerable families were being addressed by maintaining regular contact via emails and phone calls; providing learning packs to meet a range of needs, including mental health; in-person home visits to check families' wellbeing; delivering food parcels and FSM vouchers. Maintaining regular contact with families, especially hard-to-engage parents/carers, and identifying and responding to concerns remotely was a further issue mentioned.

Third, ensuring that health and safety standards are met for those attending the settings was challenging. Across settings, attention and resources were required to introduce and maintain new cleaning and hygiene procedures. This problem was exacerbated by conflicting advice from the government. Early Years practitioners specifically felt there was a lack of recognition of the challenges faced by the early years settings that had to deliver both face-to-face and remote teaching, and lack of appropriate government provisions and guidance.

Thinking ahead to the future, respondents based in primary schools report that their major concerns relate to the emotional impact of the crisis on children and a potential narrowing of the curriculum due to increased pressure to 'catch up' missed learning. Teachers fear that there will be a negative emotional impact on children, as well as an academic impact. Children undergoing transitions – from early years to primary school, transition within the primary school, or from

primary to secondary, were mentioned as a particular concern, given the need for transition procedures to be handled very differently. There are also concerns about the effect of potential further lockdowns in the future, and the potential for pupils to be 'labelled and stigmatised as the "corona cohort"'.

Several respondents from primary schools feared that a narrow focus on 'catching up' would limit schools' ability to focus on children's health and mental well-being, which are seen as more important. The return to testing – for example in Year 2, where children will sit the Phonics Screening Check they missed in Year 1 – is seen as unnecessary. A narrowing of the curriculum to English and Maths was also raised as problematic, given that 'some children need the non-core subjects to be able to thrive at something'. The move towards more online teaching is a further long-term concern, for those who fear it will replace face-to-face interactions. In all types of early years settings (including nursery classes in primary schools), a similar concern with a narrow focus on 'catch up' was noted. There are fears that 'developmentally inappropriate practice' would be used 'under the guise of "catch-up"'. There is a need to balance the well-being of children with catching up; one respondent commented that 'A recovery curriculum needs to be more than filling gaps in maths and literacy'.

Further concerns from primary teachers relate to provision for children with SEND to 'catch up', and the potential for other children to be mislabelled as SEND due to missed teaching during lockdown. Parental anxiety is also an issue, with the potential for children to be kept at home until age five (statutory school age) mentioned as a long-term consequence. Staff concerns relating to health and safety were also noted.

In reference to early years settings, the concerns raised by those working in maintained nursery schools and private nurseries related to fundamental issues of sustainability of these settings. Respondents from private nurseries have concerns about the number of children attending, and the resulting impact on finances, which may lead to closure. As one respondent summarised, 'If children don't return we will have to close'. Reasons for lower numbers include parents' changing work patterns and unemployment, as well as anxiety about the virus. Viability concerns also relate to staffing, the need for redundancies and furlough for practitioners. It was felt that these issues need to be balanced with parental need and children's learning, in an uncertain time when there will potentially be further lockdowns, which 'will devastate the sector'. The 'unclear guidance' and the need to keep on top of risk assessment guidance and health and safety regulations, 'whilst making school enjoyable and workable', are further compounding factors. Maintained nursery schools are also at risk of closure, given their existing concerns about funding, and the potential for reducing numbers. It was also noted that settings may also face the issue of keeping children on who should be starting school, if schools close again, with an impact on these children's development.

Longer-term, respondents from both private nurseries and nursery schools raised fears about the impact of closures on parents and children, mentioning 'untold economic distress for so many parents living on the edge', and also how children's development will be affected. Closures and reduced numbers of children on roll will lead to fewer jobs for early years practitioners and teachers.

Lower enrolment would result in 'having to compromise quality and all the extras we do to support families'. Related social concerns such as child poverty, domestic violence, abuse rates and mental health were also mentioned. An overall lack of recognition of the vital role of the early years sector was noted, despite their contribution during the crisis; as one respondent explained, '[We have] Been left in the cold despite being operational throughout this crisis, including holidays and taking children from other settings'.

C. Hopes for Changes for the Better

Many respondents from primary and early years settings commented on the need for a re-evaluation of the purposes of education in England. For example, a respondent from a maintained nursery school said, 'I hope the crisis will cause a rethink about what is important for children in education, with a particular emphasis on awareness of children's anxieties, well-being, and mental health.' A teacher from a primary academy hoped that 'we will renew our approach to education towards teaching and learning and away from 'delivering'.' This hope for change is reinforced by findings from another project based on surveys with teachers during the crisis (which involves the HHCP co-director), which similarly found a strong desire for broader change among education professionals (Moss et al., 2020). These views correspond with critiques of education policy in England that note a trend of increased government control of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment at the expense of children's and teachers' agency (Ball, 2017).

Respondents working in early years settings noted the risks to high quality education presented by the uncertainties of funding for early years education. For example, a respondent from a maintained nursery school hoped that, 'The EY sector will get more investment and recognition as being crucial to lifelong chances for children and families. Also, the absolute critical part it plays in the overall economy and getting parents back to work'. This echoes findings that nursery schools in particular play a key role within their communities, providing a far wider range of services than simply education (Hoskins, Bradbury, & Fogarty, 2020). Some of the risks related to the early years workforce and funding were clearly identified in the Education Committee's report *Tackling disadvantage in the early years* (2019).

In line with a strong trend in recent research, practice and policy, there were frequent comments about the importance of mental health and wellbeing. While children's needs were usually noted first (as can be seen in the quote above) there were also comments about the need to support *teachers'* health and wellbeing too.

Conclusion

In terms of building resilience for the future, the problems of financial viability for private nurseries and nursery schools need to be addressed to ensure that children continue to benefit from high quality early years education and care. While our discussion here is based mainly on small-scale research, the issues raised reflect wider concerns in the sector (NDNA, 2020).

Schools will require additional support to help them deal with the emotional impact of the crisis on children, as well as the announced funding for 'catch up' programmes. There are also long-term potential impacts of the numerous challenges listed above in terms of teacher morale and retention, which was already a significant issue before the crisis (DfE, 2018).

Our perception is that the COVID-19 crisis has heightened public awareness of the importance of early years and primary education, but this has not been matched by pro-active thinking by government to instigate some fundamental changes, for example to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Teachers' and other professionals' roles at the forefront of children's education and care have been extremely challenging; as we noted in our previous submission (Wyse et al., 2020), teachers are going to extraordinary lengths to support children's education, wellbeing and mental health. This needs to be recognised by government, and practical steps need to be taken to act on the voices of professionals in relation to the future for education in England.

Authors of this response

This submission was prepared by Co-Director Dr Alice Bradbury; Founding Director Professor Dominic Wyse; and Research Associate Dr Yana Manyukhina.

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Appendix 1: Research methods of survey

A questionnaire survey of affiliates of the HHCP and other education professionals was constructed using Opinio software. The questions were as follows:

1. What have been the major challenges faced by your institution in supporting students' learning and wellbeing during the COVID-19 crisis?
2. If new opportunities (e.g. different ways of working) have arisen as a result of the crisis, what have these been?
3. Thinking ahead to the autumn term, what are the major issues of concern for you?
4. What do you fear will happen in the future as a result of the crisis?
5. What do you hope will happen in the future as a result of the crisis?
6. Please note the most important things you think we have learned as a result of the COVID-19 crisis

The survey was distributed via email to the affiliates and AB members, and also distributed via social media. Of the 58 responses received, 18 addressed the questions that are featured in this report.

Researchers in the centre each analysed all the responses to at least two survey questions. Main themes for the findings were identified on the basis of frequency of responses. At least two members of the team checked each analysis section and all members of the team critically evaluated the whole response document.

The research was approved following ethical review by the UCL Institute of Education ethics process. Permission was given by respondents to be quoted anonymously.

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