

Written evidence submitted by Professor Alison Kington

Call for Evidence:

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

Introduction

The relationships that develop within a school community are central to the overall school climate. International research recognises positive relationships and school climate to have a positive influence on the emotional health and wellbeing of students (Riekie, Aldridge & Afari, 2017; Tobia et al., 2019), student motivation (Scales, 2020) and achievement (Lindfors et al., 2018; Roorda et al., 2011). In addition to influencing student outcomes, supportive collegial relationships have a positive influence on teachers' professional development (Day et al., 2007; Forde et al., 2006; King, 2014), their sense of self-efficacy (Aldridge et al., 2016; Canrinus et al., 2012; Uitto et al., 2016; Veiskarami et al., 2017) and their resilience (Le Cornu, 2013; Johnson et al., 2014). It is acknowledged that, in comparison to similar professions, teachers experience high levels of psychological distress (Titheradge et al., 2019), and those who can talk with peers about feeling stressed experience an improved sense of wellbeing (Kidger, et al., 2016). Mawhinney (2010) asserts that lunch times spent in the school staffroom are beneficial, as teachers chat together, share ideas and 'spontaneous collaboration' can ensue (p.975). In terms of teacher commitment and retention, it is often these caring relationships and informal friendships that enable teachers to build resilience and sustain commitment during challenging times (Eldor & Shoshani, 2016; Spicksley & Watkins, 2020). As the quality and commitment of individual teachers is increasingly acknowledged by researchers and policy makers as being central to raising standards in our schools (Johansson et al. 2015; Rivkin et al. 2005; Department for Education, 2010), it is important to recognise the importance of collegial support to teachers' work and to the outcomes of their students.

The closure of schools in England in March 2020 due to Covid -19 pandemic required that students engaged in remote learning while teachers delivered lessons online. This requirement also meant that social interactions and collegial relationships which enable teachers to flourish were unexpectedly disrupted, potentially leading to social isolation amongst a profession where positive relationships are key to resilience and commitment, and ultimately to the outcomes of young people. Therefore, the main aims of this research are to understand and critically analyse the perceptions and the experiences of primary and secondary school teachers as they adapt to teaching remotely during the COVID-19 crisis, what support, if any, they are able to access, and how, if at all, their new role of 'isolated' educator is influencing (positively or negatively) the relationship with colleagues and their well-being.

The current study

This study has employed a qualitative research design in order to provide detail of individual experiences, alongside an exploration of the accumulative, contextual issues affecting primary and secondary school teachers. This strategy facilitated the collection of rich, in-depth qualitative data in order to present participants' experiences of, and perspectives on, changes to the teacher peer relationship while remoted educating.

The research was conducted during summer term 2020, with data collected during the initial 10 weeks of online teaching. Online interviews were conducted with a sample of participants (n = 30) to explore teachers' experiences of remote educating and changes in teacher peer relationships. The preliminary findings which relate to the Call for Evidence are presented below.

Preliminary findings (and discussion in relation to inquiry terms of reference):

1. *The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical work' is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers*

Several teachers in this study had continued face to face contact with children of key workers, with some feeling they had made personal sacrifices to ensure that these vulnerable children were supported. One early career teacher was staying with her colleague:

'She and I decided to stay in the flat as we both had to support children of key workers. We both miss our families and it would have been lovely to go back and be pampered all this time' (Secondary teacher)

It's interesting to note that the teacher chooses to say 'support', rather than 'teach'. This suggests that the role has shifted from teaching to supporting, with the relational and emotional aspect of teaching being more significant during this challenging period. Teachers perceptions is that the service they are providing for key workers is more akin to childcare than schooling:

'I have been in once or twice to supervise children of key workers' (Secondary teacher)

As such, children who don't have the opportunity to be 'home-schooled' could be losing out on any meaningful education.

There have been examples of collaboration between schools to ensure there is provision for children of critical workers:

'As we are in a village, we have teamed up with two other village schools to look after children of key workers and then the rest of us are planning lessons across the three schools ... We're so small that there aren't many and certainly not enough to have a few children in each school' (Primary teacher)

The collaboration between three small rural schools illustrates the adaptations that some schools and teachers have made to ensure the education of children of critical workers. It also suggests that different school contexts may have required different responses from school leaders.

2. *The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people*

Some teachers acknowledged possible benefits that some children may have gained from this experience – the opportunity to learn outdoors and possibly learn in a 'vertical' manner with older or younger siblings.

'For some of the children I teach, they are getting something out of this that they never would have done if we had been in the classroom. They have had a chance to learn with their family, including older and younger siblings, they have used the outdoor space (if they have one) to enhance learning, and teachers have had to be creative about their lessons to facilitate learning.' (Primary teacher)

Teachers stories suggested that for children who live in small homes or have limited access to technology – this crisis will have exaggerated this inequality, and they are not always in a position to be able to resolve this.

'However, some just don't have the resources, their parents are working full time from home, they don't have siblings, and they may not have a garden. These differences are not new, just exaggerated given the circumstances.' (Primary teacher)

'My high achievers have done okay and probably haven't been affected so much, but the ones that I have in lower ability groups are finding it so hard. A lot of them don't have the support at home either. If parents are working themselves, they don't have time to sit down and read a play with their child.' (Secondary teacher)

Teachers were aware that the lockdown will exacerbate differences between pupils – those who are able to work independently will carry on learning, whereas those that need additional support will fall behind as they aren't able to access it.

3. Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

- ***The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning***
- ***Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education***

Some schools managed to maintain communication with parents online, but teachers recognised the limitations of this compared to face to face contact.

'As a small village school, we work with the community a lot, know all the parents and they all know us ... A key change has been that we can't have the communication with families that we would usually. We can online, but we're used to seeing them each day in person' (Primary teacher)

Some teachers had spent time speaking with parents who were seeking reassurance and clarity regarding decisions made by DfE about the calculation of GCSE/A level results.

'I've been in contact with students and their parents a lot trying to get them not to worry about results. It's tiring but it has to be done' (Secondary teacher)

It was also recognised that some parents may not have access to the technology required to stay in touch with schools. This could potentially have a negative impact on parents with low reading ability or with English as an additional language. One teacher pointed out that pupils are made invisible by remote working. Those who want to get in touch will, but those who

are vulnerable may avoid contact and teachers and schools have very little power to contact them during this time. For vulnerable and at-risk children this is problematic. Some teachers talked as though they had taken on an additional role of counsellor for their students.

'For those children who enjoy my lessons, I have become a constant support through this. They rely on me for more than just the lessons, also for someone to talk to and give advice. I guess they don't get that at home for whatever reason' (Secondary teacher)

The Department for Education (2018) assert that schools and teachers play an important role in supporting pupils' good mental health and wellbeing, but this crisis may suggest that policies which support teachers in this endeavour should be made a priority.

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

In practical terms, teachers recognised that not all pupils have the resources needed to engage in remote learning. Although this primary school was able to provide equipment for pupils, the teacher recognises that some activities will still be inaccessible to some pupils.

'Some didn't have a laptop, so we have given out the school ones ...I'd like all the pupils to have enough resources to be able to do all the tasks we set' (Primary teacher)

'the children were sent home without exercise books, so we have done a drop-off so that they don't have to use random bits of paper' (Primary teacher)

If schools are likely to be in cycles of national or local lockdowns for the foreseeable future, it would be advisable for school leaders to ensure all children have access to the essential resources which are necessary to engage fully with online learning. It is interesting to note that several countries, Italy and Japan, for example, had already shut their schools in an effort to control the virus, although teachers in this study felt that school leaders and policy makers were caught completely unprepared for the eventuality.

'There has been no preparation so it's all appalling. It's not like teaching at all.' (Secondary teacher)

While some teachers felt supported by their school, others felt there was poor communication and that they not kept up to date with developments. This was a cause for anxiety and stress.

'They could have done more to help support teachers. My colleagues are supportive, those in Geography I mean, but the school as a whole has been a bit rubbish. They've not said very much at all about the recent announcement that some students will be returning after half term.' (Secondary teacher)

Teachers wanted strong leadership, but some felt it was lacking, while others had little faith that their school would make any contingency preparations.

'We're quite a large school and do need leadership at the moment as it's not going to be easy to bring children back, even in the limited year groups. I'm still waiting for them to step up' (Primary teacher)

'the reality is that we are dealing with everything on our own now' (Primary teacher)

'It's been a negative experience in relation to relationships with colleagues. I used to speak with them a lot but now we try to catch up as often as we can, but it's not the same. Part of it is the school's fault as there is no infrastructure to allow that to happen. I'd like to think this might change because of this, you know, in case it happens again, but I don't think it will' (Secondary teacher)

It seems that it would be beneficial for teachers and school leaders to have contingency plans in place to facilitate peer support for teachers. As collegial support is important for teachers' resilience, it seems unreasonable to expect them to work in isolation during this particularly stressful period.

Teaching remotely requires a different set of skills than teaching in a classroom. For some teachers the professional learning is like that undertaken by trainee and early career teachers, meaning that more experienced teachers are suddenly being returned to this space of inexperience, vulnerability and pressure. School leaders should to recognise this and try to be supportive, or at least acknowledge this, in order to manage possible insecurities and anxieties.

'I've never felt like this since I started teaching. I'm completely isolated and have no support. This doesn't feel like teaching anymore. I was going to apply for a leadership role before all this happened, but I don't know if I want to stay a teacher at the moment' (Secondary teacher)

Perhaps understandably, some schools released their student teachers when the schools were closed

'We don't have the student teachers around either. That's a really important part of our job, to train them and support them in entering the profession. We're not able to do that at the moment.' (Primary teacher)

If schools are to be in a lockdown cycle for the foreseeable future, it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that student teachers should have some part of their initial teacher training dedicated to online delivery, otherwise the opportunity to train a whole cohort of new teachers about how to deliver classes online may be lost.

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Details of researchers

Alison Kington, Maxine Watkins and Katie Spicksley are members of the Social Psychology of Education Research Group, University of Worcester. The group is united by an interest in how social psychology can be applied to teaching, learning, and other experiences in educational contexts, using a range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches and techniques. Members are involved in a wide variety of projects covering issues such as professional identity, career phase, classroom interactions, teacher-pupil relationships, social and learning transitions, and peer/friendship interactions.

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