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**Teachers' Experiences during the First COVID-19
Lockdown:
Research Evidence from Interviews with Primary and
Secondary Teachers in England**

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18th March 2021

In response to the UK Parliament [Public Accounts Committee's Call for evidence on 'COVID-19: Education'](#).

Teachers' Experiences during the First COVID-19 Lockdown:

Research Evidence from Interviews with Primary and Secondary Teachers in England

In this written evidence we, Dr Lisa E. Kim and Dr Kathryn Asbury from the University of York, share some of the thoughts and experiences of a group of teachers whom we have interviewed multiple times as part of a longitudinal qualitative research project entitled "*Being a teacher in England during the COVID-19 pandemic*".

To date we have conducted 116 interviews with a sample of 24 teachers from primary and secondary state schools across England at five time points: April, June, July, November 2020 and February 2021. The participants have a wide range of years of teaching experience (ranging from 1 to 32 years) and responsibilities, including members of Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs; e.g., headteacher, SENDCo) and classroom teachers. A diverse range of schools are represented in the sample, with Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles ranging from 1 to 10. The project is supported by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Award (Grant No. ES/T502066/1). More information about the project and its outputs can be found [here](#), including a previous [written evidence submission to the Education Select Committee](#) in July 2020.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers continued to teach and took on greater pastoral care roles for all pupils, particularly those who were 'at risk' due to existing, new or increased social, economic, and welfare difficulties at home. On the basis of our interviews, we have identified teachers' experiences of two key issues associated with the Department for Education's (DfE's) response during the first lockdown, and propose recommendations for any related situations in the future.

ISSUE 1: Government's approach to decision-making and announcements

Numerous government decisions and announcements regarding schools have been made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first major announcement was made on Wednesday, 18 March 2020, namely the call for school buildings to close to most pupils from the end of Friday, 20 March 2020.

Teachers spoke about their initial shock, which they described as feeling "like a rug had been pulled from under you", and their uncertainty about the implications for their schools, pupils, and their work.

Since then, teachers have shared with us that they were, and continue to be, frustrated by four aspects of the government's approach to decision-making and announcements:

- (a) national decisions regarding schools were made without prior consultation with the education community;
- (b) where consultation did take place it was not with a representative group of practitioners;
- (c) national decisions regarding schools were shared with the education community at the same time as the general public; and
- (d) DfE communications were confused and confusing, often contradicting previously published guidance.

One SLT member said in April:

"I would really like the DfE to talk directly to headteachers and to not advertise and not publish policy through social media... Just actually, from a purely professional perspective. That's part of saying, "We hear you. We know you're important. You're part of this effort. We're going to tell you this first.""

One teacher said in June:

"they've [DfE's] got a collective body of people that they like ... who advise them in ways that they like, and they carry on taking that and anybody else who disagrees is ... of no value or importance."

One teacher said in April:

"There's basically been a kind of edict from the DfE every day or two. And ... that often contradicts the previous one, or gives additional information that may or may not clarify or may or may not confuse what they've been given."

The participants said that the government's approach to decision-making and announcements have had various consequences on the profession, such as:

- (a) Stress and anxiety, as schools had little time to examine the implications for their schools and create and communicate implementation plans with staff, before receiving enquiries from parents and pupils;
- (b) Uncertainty and confusion, as schools tried to understand published documents that were often published on non-business days/ hours, close to the dates of due implementation, and subject to constant changes;
- (c) Fear, that decisions and announcements will be made that will require drastic changes from them with little prior warning;
- (d) Decreased trust in the government; and
- (e) Feeling undervalued as a profession.

RECOMMENDED ACTION 1: Communicate with schools prior to national announcements

We recommend that the government should, whenever possible, communicate with schools prior to national announcements regarding education. This is vital to ensure schools' effectiveness in communicating and implementing school-level decisions that benefit all stakeholders. Furthermore, the government's timely communications with schools will also be helpful in supporting the wellbeing of the teaching profession, which may have implications for teacher retention in the long term.

RECOMMENDED ACTION 2: Consult with nationally-representative members of the education community

Teachers strongly appealed for nationally representative members of the education community to be consulted with and to have the opportunity to inform education-related decisions. The members should reflect a variety of characteristics present in the education community, such as the level of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary), socioeconomic status of the schools (e.g., percentage of pupils eligible for Free School Meals), as well as the remoteness of schools (e.g., remote/ rural areas vs city locations). Inclusion of such members will assist the government in making national decisions that can feasibly be implemented on the ground, and providing guidance that is flexible enough to be able to accommodate a diverse range of schools.

ISSUE 2: Distribution of Free School Meals and laptops

Teachers were intensely worried for their pupils and their families during the first lockdown, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of them. They were, therefore, dismayed that there were periods when it was unclear how, and even whether, Free School Meals (FSMs) would be distributed to pupils who needed them. Some teachers referred to the distribution of FSMs during the first lockdown as a “disaster” and a “nightmare”. In response, some schools took it upon themselves to make up and deliver food parcels to families.

One SLT member described this situation in June as follows:

“We’ve also been taking food share parcels, around to families in, in our area as well... The Free School Meals, we’ve literally, for some parents we’ve had to print off [the vouchers] ourselves, and and hand, hand them to them, just because the [voucher portal] system was either over flooded or it didn’t work properly or they haven’t got any internet”

Moreover, lack of technological access was also noted by teachers as a significant barrier for some pupils accessing remote learning. Depending on the context of their school and pupils, some schools provided paper workpacks only while others used a mixture of online and paper workpacks to encourage continued learning. Schools and teachers needed to find local solutions with little training on delivering remote education and providing remote pastoral support, and worried they were not meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils for a variety of practical reasons.

In April one SLT member described a practical barrier some pupils faced:

“if somebody in authority asked them [pupils] the question, “do you have internet access?” they, of course, they would say yes. But in reality what they have is a phone, that’s Mum’s phone that she can get the internet on ... And Mum is terrified of wasting the data because she’s got no money to buy some more.”

One teachers said in June:

“I mean, the government has to recognise it. They have to know that not everybody has the internet; not everybody has a phone... some of our society have been completely cut off.

Schools are doing their best, you know, trying to get access, but even then it's not going to be great."

The participants also reported that the distribution of laptops was very slow and inequitable. For example, one participant during our February 2021 interviews said that they were still waiting for some laptops allocated to them in 2020. Others reported receiving too few laptops to meet their pupils' needs. In response some schools, which had the necessary financial means, reported to have provided school laptops to them. Inability to provide quality teaching and support to pupils as a result of these barriers exacerbated teachers' stress and worry during the first lockdown and beyond it.

One teacher said in April:

"My concern is students that are more disadvantaged that don't have laptops, you know iPads, that haven't got the parental rigour to make them keep up with academic studies...practically for more disadvantaged students, I'd feel happier knowing they're best supported, really."

The most disadvantaged and hard to reach pupils were often those in need of food and laptops to enable learning from home, but the least likely to have these resources. This was a huge source of concern for teachers and they expressed the hope that the government would be more efficient and understanding of the needs and barriers in deprived populations.

RECOMMENDED ACTION 3: Create a more reliable system for distributing Free School Meals, laptops and/or other sources of material support for disadvantaged pupils

Should situations arise again, whereby schools need to temporarily close for most pupils, creating and implementing a reliable system of distributing FSMs, laptops and/or other forms of material support will be necessary. This is important to ensure that the most disadvantaged students are not again the hardest hit and schools are equipped to support their pupils.

RECOMMENDED ACTION 4: Consider barriers that may hinder some pupils from engaging in online learning

For some pupils, lack of access to technological devices and broadband hindered their ability to engage in online learning. Working with schools to navigate these issues, by understanding the needs of local contexts and how these needs might best be met, would be helpful to ensure more equitable access to, and thereby engagement in, online learning. Both pupils and teachers would benefit from a more locally sensitive and efficient solution to receive and provide the resources that underpin high quality remote education.

March 2021