

Written evidence submitted by Lee Elliot Major and Andy Eyles

Covid-19 and Education Inequality: a missed opportunity?

Lee Elliot Major and Andy Eyles

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Summary

- The extent of learning losses suffered by disadvantaged pupils during the pandemic warranted a more targeted approach to catch up funding in England by the government in 2020. This was a missed opportunity to ‘level-up’.
- In particular, the £1billion catch-up fund directed for general school funding and the National Tutoring Programme should have prioritised schools with high proportions of pupils on free school meals, or been specifically directed to help poor children.
- We estimate that the National Tutoring Programme would need to reach at least ten times the current numbers of pupils being supported to help all disadvantaged pupils across the country. A number of studies confirm the positive impact tutoring can have on disadvantaged learners.
- Looking to the future, any attempts to improve education prospects in the wake of the pandemic will need to be highly targeted to benefit the most disadvantaged pupils. This is our opportunity to think big: doubling pupil premium funds for disadvantaged pupils and establishing an expanded national tutoring programme as a permanent fixture of the education system.

Lee Elliot Major is Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter where he is based at the Graduate School of Education and Centre for Social Mobility. He is an Associate of the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics.

Andy Eyles is a research economist in the education and skills programme at the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics. He is also a PhD economics student at University College, London.

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Introduction

This short submission considers the specific question of whether the government effectively supported vulnerable and disadvantaged children in England when responding to the unprecedented closure of schools to most pupils following the 2020 pandemic. We first present evidence on the extent of learning losses suffered during the Covid crisis. We then review the government's response, in particular its approach to catch up funding.

Our main concern is for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils. These can be defined in a number of ways. Just over 1.2 million school pupils in England qualify for free school meals. Our research meanwhile found that a quarter of pupils in England – around 2 million children - received no schooling during the first lockdown. Ofcom estimates that about 9 percent of children in the UK - between 1.1 million and 1.8 million - do not have access to a laptop, desktop or tablet at home. More than 880,000 children live in a household with only a mobile internet connection.

Lockdown learning divides

In March 2020, the UK's schools were shut down for a period of three months to combat the spread of Covid-19. Although most of the nation's children did not receive in class teaching during this period, the learning experience of those from different socioeconomic backgrounds differed greatly during the first bout of school closures.

Our research draws on our own survey evidence, national longitudinal studies, and the wider economics literature. It shows that the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to lead to a significant decrease in social mobility (specifically a 11.4 percentage decline), strengthening the relationship between long term outcomes and people's social or income backgrounds. This is driven by both employment losses and large reductions in learning hours, and, crucially, the fact that these shocks disproportionately affected pupils from poorer backgrounds (Elliot-Major et al, 2021). The evidence shows that pupils eligible for free school meals, those educated at state schools, and, more generally, those from less affluent backgrounds, suffered learning losses at a much greater rate than their more affluent peers.

Taken together with other studies, the evidence reveals that differences in the capacities of schools to provide online lessons, differences in resources at home, and the resultant differences in time spent learning, have exacerbated pre-existing educational inequalities. Only 38% of pupils enjoyed the equivalent of full schooling during the first lockdown with schooling hours falling by 58%. Children from the top 20% of income earners lost 50% of normal teaching time compared with 62% for those from the bottom 20%. A quarter of pupils – around 2 million children - received no schooling at all during the first lockdown.

Long term effects

In line with estimates from the economics literature, which suggest that learning time is a key input in the production of knowledge (Lavy, 2015), the Covid induced differences in learning hours has led disadvantaged children to fall further behind their peers. An analysis of Key Stage One test results has shown that, relative to previous cohorts, the disadvantage gap in reading and maths for Year 2 students is wider than it was in previous years when cohorts were unaffected by school closures (Rose et al, 2021).

The extensive research literature on returns to schooling suggests that those who perform the best at school and accrue more educational qualifications reap the rewards from doing so. The large discrepancy in lost learning hours between those from the bottom and the top of the family income distribution puts those at the bottom at greater risk of not realising their educational potential. Arguably, the damage done to children by classroom closures creates one of the biggest risks to the future of health and prosperity of the country.

Assessing the Government's Response

Responding to these unprecedented challenges, the government had to respond on several fronts. This included key decisions on when to close and open schools during the period, what guidance to provide to schools for online learning, the supply of computer laptops for children, a new assessment regime to replace exams, and the provision of school meals for children during school holidays.

Here we assess solely the approach to the £1 billion of funding announced on 19 June 2020 to help pupils and young people catch up on missed education because of the pandemic.

This catch up fund represented the flagship programme attempting to address learning loss, particularly among disadvantaged learners. It included a one-off £650 million catch up premium allocated to all schools during the 2020-21 academic year, alongside a £350 million National Tutoring Programme “to provide additional, targeted support for those children and young people who need the most help”. There was also a separate 16 to 19 tuition fund.

Catch-up premium

The one-off catch-up premium allocated an additional £80 per pupil in England aged 5-16 in state-funded schools. With some guidance, schools were free to use the catch-up premium in the ways they saw best. This meant that the same funds were distributed to schools serving advantaged pupil intakes as those serving highly disadvantaged communities, at a time when poorer pupils were suffering disproportionate learning loss. It was also unclear whether schools were heeding the guidance for allocating their funds on effective catch up approaches.

The challenge of any general funding allocated to schools is that it can exacerbate educational inequalities rather than narrow them. In education this is called the Matthew Effect – “to those who have shall more be given”. Without strong counter measures educational advantage tends to lead to further advantage. This is one of the reasons why we have pupil premium funding targeted for disadvantaged students.

One review found that less than 30 per cent of the funding and support through catch-up has been focused on disadvantaged pupils so far (Subieta and Cottell, 2021). We believe that funding instead should have been prioritised to schools with high proportions of children on free school meals, or specifically directed to help pupils on free school meals in all schools.

National tutoring

We have long championed the creation of a permanent national tutoring service to help to ‘level-up’ the playing field (see Elliot Major, Tyers, & Chu, 2020). We welcomed the creation of the government’s National Tutoring Programme.

Implemented well, one-to-one or small group tuition is one of the most reliable ways of helping learners to catch up. Randomised trials in England have demonstrated the effectiveness of undergraduate tutoring. More recent randomised control trials in other countries have found that small group tutoring not only raised test scores, but also had positive effects on factors related to future success in the labour market (Resnjanskij et al, 2021). A small randomised trial in Italy meanwhile, instigated at the time of Covid school closures, found that individual tutoring to disadvantaged pupils, delivered online by university students, had strikingly large effects on test scores (Carlana and La Ferrara, 2021). The evidence demonstrating positive effects for poorer pupils, in our view, made it all the more important that the programme was targeted to help the most disadvantaged children in particular.

The first year of the programme should be seen as an establishment phase, providing lessons for rollout over future years. No one no one should underestimate the time it takes to establish such an initiative, in order to recruit tutoring organisations, ensure standards and reach children in all parts of the country.

However we believe an opportunity was missed in failing to create an explicit target to focus these efforts on the most disadvantaged pupils. Highly targeted approaches will be required to address the stark educational inequalities exposed and exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. Again, this could have been achieved by prioritising schools with high proportions of children on free school meals for example, or supporting only pupils on free school meals in all schools.

According to the National Audit Office, 44 per cent of pupils who have accessed the tutoring sessions to date are eligible for the pupil premium. Pupil premium funds are allocated to pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at any point in the last six years. More data on the make-up of pupils supported during the first year, and the impact of the tutoring, will be needed. We welcome the announcement that the next phase of programme will have an explicit target to reach at least 65 per cent of children on pupil-premium funding.

Widening scope

The National Audit Office also found that as of February 2021, 125,200 children had been allocated a tutoring place, and 41,100 had started to receive tuition. There is a target to reach 250,000 pupils by the end of the academic year. If this final target is met, it is likely that less than 125,000 pupils on pupil premium grants will benefit from the programme.

The government hopes that the programme will support 524,000 pupils in 2021-22 and 650,000 for the following two years, so funding will be reduced over this time. Even these more ambitious targets fall far short of the total numbers of pupils – ranging from 1.2 million to 2 million - in need of support.

We still believe that there is scope for the current national tutoring programme to support larger numbers of pupils. This could include the wider recruitment the university students and graduates across the country as set out in a proposed national tutoring service (Elliot Major, Tyers, & Chu, 2020).

Final words

This must be seen as just the start of a hugely ambitious drive over the next decade to level up the education playing field. Our research shows a whole generation could be scarred by this pandemic. This is our opportunity to think big: doubling pupil premium funds for disadvantaged pupils and establishing the national tutoring programme as a permanent fixture of the education system. Any attempts to improve education prospects in the wake of the pandemic will need to be highly targeted to benefit the most disadvantaged pupils.

Finally, our evidence suggests that there will need to be a dual approach to level up outside and inside the school gates. That means ensuring all pupils get the basic entitlements from internet access to basic meals. The evidence is clear: we have to combat inequality in all its forms to safeguard social mobility.

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