Written evidence submitted by Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, UCL Institute of Education

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

House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry

Written evidence submitted by the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 years)
Department of Learning and Leadership, UCL Institute of Education

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 inquiry focus on, “Support for pupils and families during closures”.

The evidence that we offer in this submission builds on two sources: A) the outcome of our new very recent research with HHCP stakeholders, specifically addressing the concerns of the House of Commons Education Committee; B) our combined expertise in researching education in early childhood and primary education.

Section A) - Outcomes of Survey of Stakeholders and HHCP Advisory Board Meeting¹

Three headlines from the research

1. As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, teachers are going to extraordinary lengths to support children’s education, wellbeing and mental health.
2. Early years and primary teachers are experiencing much higher levels of work-related stress as a result of the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 context.
3. There are serious difficulties in monitoring and maintaining high quality education, a situation that impacts more on vulnerable children and their families.

The respondents to our survey are affiliates and advisory board members of the HHCP. Advisory board members are selected for their in-depth knowledge about early years and primary education: their combined expertise

¹ See Appendix 1 for a brief account of the methods used for the survey.
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 sampling strategy resulted in access to great depth of knowledge and experience.

The findings from the survey are reported for each survey question, for ease of reading, although the data analysis compared multiple questions to develop the findings. Survey questions one to four covered basic information about respondents and have been omitted for this reason.

### Survey Question 5: Support for children and families during closures

The survey results revealed that primary schools have provided a wide range of different types of support for the children of critical workers; for vulnerable children attending school and early years settings; and children who are being educated by their parents at home. For children attending school, the teachers we contacted have provided individual plans and timetables for learning (taking account of the limits of social distancing). This work included schools staying open during the Easter holidays. Similarly, nurseries and other early years settings have stayed open for critical workers’ children and vulnerable children, providing childcare and supporting families.

For children at home, schools have provided online learning though a range of applications (see analysis of Q7 below) where age-appropriate. More appropriate and accessible resources for early years children, such as videos demonstrating educational tasks, have also been provided. Schools have set up social media accounts and distributed videos of staff to help children feel they remain connected. Online support includes teachers commenting on children’s work and interacting with children and families. Where families have not been engaging with schools, teachers have been contacting parents to check that all is well. Nurseries have also been providing home learning programmes and contacting parents regularly via digital applications.

Additionally, some early years settings are planning ahead for children who will be making the transition into nursery. This planning includes online home visits and virtual tours of the new settings that children will start in.

### Q6: Support for vulnerable children

Schools have also provided a range of services for families who are seen as vulnerable, including food banks, free school meal vouchers, gift vouchers and packed lunches, or have directed children to nearby schools where they can eat a free lunch. Packages of items such as toys, resources, stationery, books and games have been distributed to families. In some cases, weekly food and care packages are being delivered to families who receive free school meals; in one case, furniture has been provided for families in need. Schools have also provided support with accessing benefits and bereavement services, and also continued their safeguarding role through virtual child protection meetings. Teachers have engaged in home visits and
regular phone calls to families, sometimes on a daily basis. Nurseries have also delivered food parcels, baby supplies and medicines, and similarly been in regular contact with vulnerable families.

Schools have provided counselling or arranged external support for parents in cases of bereavement. One-to-one support for parents has been provided by some early years settings, to build parents’ confidence in their ability to teach their child. Virtual support groups for young parents have also been set up in some cases.

For children with SEND, schools have provided specific plans and programmes of work, and additional video resources or discussions over applications such as Zoom. Services such as speech therapy have been conducted online in some cases. Schools have been liaising with local authorities in relation to supporting children with an EHCP, as well as looked after children. Our respondents also noted that vulnerable families can be reluctant to use education and childcare provisions due to health risks. There are therefore further levels of exclusion that may occur as schools reopen.

Q7: Communication with Pupils and Parents During Lockdown

A very wide range of communications media were being used by teachers in early years settings and primary schools to try and ensure equality of young children’s access to education. If we take digital applications alone, the following packages were explicitly mentioned by respondents: Google Classroom; email; Facetime; Zoom; Twitter; text messages; school websites; Seesaw; Tapestry; MS Teams; ClassDojo; MS Office 365; Ping; Instagram; YouTube. Traditional forms of contact, that in nearly all cases had to be used in addition to digital forms, were mobile phone calls; physical letters and/or physical visits to the outside of pupils’ homes to leave resources and offer brief advice. Consistent with evidence on effective pedagogy using digital tools the respondents were having to use both digital solutions and traditional means of communication to try and support children and their families.

The responses suggested a great deal of concern about the communication methods and, it appeared, little space or time to consider how the pedagogy in the homes might be “monitored” and supported. In addition to the repeated mentions of the severe and multiple challenges that all communication means created, there were occasional references to wider principles of pedagogy. For example, a headteacher from an infant school noted an emphasis in their work with parents on encouraging “offline work, play and creativity” [underline added].

Q8: Communication Issues During Lockdown

The most serious issue identified by respondents was the variation in access to digital media experienced by different families. Seven respondents explicitly raised points about what we might call the digital divide, and nearly all respondents were using a range of digital means combined with traditional communication means to try and ensure equal access to education. The
explicit responses about the digital divide included comments such as these from an experienced head teacher (with experience in early years and primary schools): “[education is] challenging for those families who are less confident with using devices or do not have the access. To overcome this, staff have regularly telephoned as well as providing Learning Resources in packs and delivering these”; an Assistant Head Teacher and Reception Class Teacher who said, “families without access to technology take home school iPad and laptops if needed” [Answer to Q5].

Q9: Challenges during lockdown

Maintaining effective communication with students and parents was cited as one of the major challenges brought about by the lockdown, and this is especially the case with vulnerable and hard-to-reach families. On the one hand, schools are overwhelmed with enquiries from students and parents struggling with home-schooling. On the other hand, lack of contact from certain parents exacerbates the challenge of effectively monitoring students’ learning and wellbeing. Lack of face-to-face interaction with students was commonly cited as a key disadvantage of the enforced transition to home-based education.

Ensuring that students receive consistent education under lockdown is another significant challenge faced by schools. Some teachers experience difficulties negotiating teaching approaches and methods with parents. Parents’ feedback has become the main source of information about students’ learning progress. Parents’ competence and capacity to support their children’s learning at home vary, as do their views on the optimal amount of homework and which learning activities are most appropriate. Some parents feel more comfortable implementing structured tasks as opposed to play-based activities, and not all families welcome two-way video conferencing during online lessons. There is concern that certain areas such as writing are being side-lined, due to a lack of resources to support the teaching of writing, and a lack of confidence from parents.

The challenge of delivering consistent home-based education is further exacerbated by the uneven distribution of resources and expertise. The above-mentioned digital divide applies not only to families, but also to teachers. Some schools do not have enough staff capacity to support remote teaching, while others struggle to provide appropriate training and supervision to help staff deliver effective online learning experiences to students. Respondents also report there is a lack of knowledge and experience around supporting remote teaching for younger children under five years old. Accessing effective IT support has also proved an issue for some.

Teachers have serious concerns about the impact of bereavement on children, and about children’s overall mental health and wellbeing. The challenge of dealing with grief and loss at the level of both individual and

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2 The HHCP has previously given evidence about the teaching of writing to the House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into Primary Assessment.
community has been particularly intense for settings in areas with a higher death toll. Poor housing and health in disadvantaged areas exacerbate these challenges.

Covid-19 poses threats not only to physical health but also to mental health and wellbeing of families. Our respondents commented on the increased levels of anxiety among parents and students facing an uncertain future, including due to the cancellation of public examinations and lack of clarity regarding university admissions assessments. Experiences of loneliness among students and increased levels of stress in parents struggling to support their children's learning at home were commonly mentioned.

**Q 10: Opportunities and different ways of working**

Some respondents have reported improved engagement with students as a result of transitioning to online teaching. One respondent commented on the benefits of online learning for students who have attendance problems and those who do not thrive in a physical classroom. Another respondent observed that the accessibility of some services is enhanced in the virtual space - for example, online spaces can provide a safer space for stigmatised parents to make their voices heard. For some, there is a new sense of partnership between schools/teachers and parents.

Our survey also highlighted new learning opportunities arising from the transition to remote teaching. Students, teachers, parents and carers, including older generations, have been prompted to embrace online and other forms of technology-enabled learning, develop new digital skills, and engage with a wider range of resources, including online training, quizzes, and games. One respondent has noted a resurgence of interest in certain learning areas, namely arts and music, and their potential to provide relief from mental strain and relaxation in times of stress. Some schools and early years settings are intending to continue to use new ways and modes of learning as an additional support when normal teaching practice resumes.

A number of respondents commented on the positive effects of lockdown on the levels of cohesion and cooperation between families, schools, and local communities, as reflected by an increase in volunteering for example. Schools and education specialists are developing partnerships with businesses, including those specialising in online learning and communication solutions, such as Microsoft and ICAM. Schools are providing training in the use of distance learning and communication technologies to ensure staff's ability to support students' learning and wellbeing remotely.

**Q11: Plans for partial reopening of schools**

At the time of the survey, plans were in place for the partial reopening of primary schools but were not yet confirmed. Respondents commented on the difficulties of planning the return of some pupils to schools in small groups (known as 'bubbles') in terms of physical space and staffing. Schools and nurseries have had to survey parents to ascertain the numbers of children
that will be returning, as well as responding to guidance as it is released. Risk assessments have resulted in changes to cleaning systems and the physical space of schools, and in additional expenditure on signage and PPE. There was criticism of the guidance from government from some respondents; one headteacher commented ‘The amount of documentation has been overwhelming and often late in the day’. Schools that had planned for each bubble to attend for half a day had to change plans when the government advised there should not be a rota system. Reopening has also been a time of increased pressure and stress for school staff.

Section B) – Key aspects of support for pupils and families during closures

One of the main concerns of the HHCP for pupils and families is the extent to which a high quality of education, and particularly pedagogy, can be maintained during closure. We recognise the research evidence that has shown that gaps in schooling impact negatively on pupils’ learning outcomes. However, such research evidence has not to date been carried out in relation to the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A vital component of high-quality education is the pedagogy of the interactions between children, parents and other family members. Put simply, the better the quality of interactions, the better the learning. In normal times, early years settings and schools can offset, to some extent, any limitations of children’s development at home. In the lockdown context of COVID-19 this ability to offset limitations is severely reduced due to the lack of formal education taking place. The work by early years settings and schools to support parents is admirable but the context means that this can only be a relatively small part of what is possible during normal schooling.

Much has been reported in the media about the potential for the COVID-19 lockdown to widen the attainment gap between children in different socio-economic groups. While COVID-19 may indeed prove to exacerbate this gap, it is vital that government action is based on robust evidence of what support is most likely to help parents. Part of this robust position should include acknowledgement and consequent actions to mitigate deficit models of the education provided by families who are economically disadvantaged. Research evidence shows that high quality education and pedagogy is evident in all social groups, just as low-quality education can be a feature of all social groups.

In our view, parents’ confidence in what they can do to support their children’s learning needs to be protected and enhanced. This requires two things: 1. Explicit messaging to acknowledge parents’ natural abilities to help their children learn (e.g. nearly all children learn to talk, in part as a result of their parents’ support); 2. Straightforward guidance on how parents can best support their children’s education.
One way to provide straightforward guidance is on the basis of principles to inform parents’ interactions with their children that can be applied to multiple educational contexts. This reduces the reliance on online resources which depend on families’ access to digital devices and software. The best support is likely to include locally provided bespoke support for families. Initiatives such as the West London Zone show that bespoke support for children and families is practically feasible for the most vulnerable children.\footnote{HHCP is a partner with the IOE Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunity (CEPEO) on the five year evaluation of the West London Zone.}

**Authors of this response**

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**Affiliates and Advisory Board Members of the HHCP who responded**

- Julie Allen MBE, Headteacher, Birkwood Primary School
- Sonia Blandford, CEO, AfA 3As Ltd
- Stephanie Booth, SENCo and teacher
- Kimberley Buchanan, Assistant Headteacher, Greenside Primary School
- Rachel Cowper, EYFS Leader, Dean CE Primary School, Cumbria
- Fiona Crean, Headteacher, Belmont Infant School
- Jocelyn Elmer, Lecturer, Cardiff & Vale College
- Wendy Forbes, Education Consultant, Forbes Education Ltd
- Julian Grenier, Headteacher, Sheringham Nursery School and Children’s Centre
- Paul Jackson, Headteacher, Manorfield Primary School
- Liz Moorse, Chief Executive, Association for Citizenship Teaching
- June O’Sullivan, CEO, London Early Years Foundation
- Christine Parker, Senior Tutor, Pen Green Centre
- K. Roberts, Head of School
- Amanda Seager, Headteacher, Trinity First School, Frome
- Ross Young, Researcher and Educational Writer, The Writing for Pleasure Centre

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\[^{3}\] HHCP is a partner with the IOE Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunity (CEPEO) on the five year evaluation of the West London Zone.
Appendix 1: Research methods of survey

A HHCP Advisory Board (AB) meeting was held on 6th May 2020. Participants agreed to the meeting being recorded and this was professionally transcribed. Points made during the meeting, in addition to the responses to a questionnaire survey, informed this report. Some AB members also responded to the questionnaire survey.

A questionnaire survey of affiliates of the HHCP was constructed using Opinio software. Following the biographical information, the substantive questions were as follows:

Q5. What kind of support have you and your workplace provided to children and their families during the COVID-19 crisis and lockdown?
Q6. If extra support has been provided by your workplace for children considered to be vulnerable what is the nature of this support?
Q7. How has your institution communicated with pupils and parents through the coronavirus lockdown?
Q8. What issues have arisen as a result of the changes in communication with children and families?
Q9. What have been the major challenges faced by your institution in supporting students’ learning and wellbeing during the lockdown?
Q10. If new opportunities (e.g. different ways of working) have arisen as a result of the lockdown situation, what have these been?
Q11. Finally, what preparations have been made by your workplace for children returning to school?

The survey was distributed via email to the affiliates and AB members only. Of the 29 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 all but two respondents to be named as such on the response document and some declined to include the name of their institution.

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