

Written evidence submitted by Dr Kathryn Asbury and Dr Lisa Kim

## **The Impact of COVID-19 on Education: Research Evidence from Interviews with Primary and Secondary Teachers in England**

The following submission relates to the following [terms of reference](#), as specified by the Education Committee:

- The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families
- The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)
- What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Education:  
Research Evidence from Interviews with Primary and Secondary Teachers in England**

This parliamentary evidence submission is based on the interview data collected for a longitudinal qualitative research project entitled “*Being a teacher in England during the COVID-19 pandemic*”. This project is led by Dr Lisa E. Kim and Dr Kathryn Asbury (Department of Education, University of York) with assistance from Suzanna Dundas and Rowena Leary. The project is supported by an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Award (Grant No. ES/T502066/1).

We are interviewing 24 teachers from primary and secondary state schools across England at four time points: April, June and July 2020 (completed); and November 2020 (planned). The teachers have a wide range of years of teaching experience (ranging from 1 to 32 years) and responsibilities (e.g., executive headteacher, SENDCo, classroom teacher). A diverse range of schools are represented in the sample, with Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles ranging from 1 to 10. Preprint research manuscripts based on sections of data collected in April and June are currently publicly available [here](#) (Kim & Asbury, 2020) and [here](#) (Asbury & Kim, 2020).

Managing current challenges and planning for the future are effective strategies to ensure the resilience of the teaching profession, who are a vital component of the education sector. Based on teachers’ reported experiences since partial school closures on 20th March 2020, we recommend the following five calls for action:

**1. Communicate with schools prior to national announcements**

Government announcements of national decisions (e.g., school closures in March and ‘reopening’ in June) were communicated to schools at the same time as they were communicated to the general public. As a result, teachers were confronted with parents’ and pupils’ queries about the implications of these government announcements without having had the time to process or discuss them in the context of their own schools. The absence of time to prepare a school strategy prior to the announcements led to a time lag between government announcements and school announcements, which inevitably created stress and anxiety for all stakeholders in schools. Teachers experienced this stress particularly as they were not able to emotionally and logistically prepare for the drastic actions they had to take in a very short space of time. These reports are concerning as prolonged experiences of stress can lead to burnout, which can lead to greater intentions to quit the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2020), as well as reduced confidence in their ability to do their job as a teacher (Kim & Burić, 2019). As one participant put it:

*“I would really like the DfE to talk directly to head teachers 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."”*

We recommend that the government communicates 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. This is particularly critical given that the OECD have identified effective communication systems as fundamental for educational continuity during the coronavirus pandemic (Reimers &

Schleicher, 2020). Furthermore, the government's prior communications with school will also be helpful in supporting the wellbeing of the teaching profession, which may have implications for teacher retention in the long term.

## **2. Consult with nationally representative members of the education community**

Teachers reported feeling that the government's decisions were informed by consultations with a narrow and non-representative 'in crowd'. One participant said,

*“they've 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.”*

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.

## **3. Create a more reliable system for distributing Free School Meals and laptops**

Teachers reported that the Department for Education (DfE)'s approach to providing Free School Meals since lockdown has been difficult to work with and often ineffective, with some participants referring to it as a “disaster” and a “nightmare”. Specifically, teachers reported that their schools did not receive the vouchers in time to pass onto pupils' families. Then, when the approach changed to families receiving their vouchers via email, some families struggled because they did not have internet access. Thus, many schools took it on themselves, early in lockdown, to provide and deliver food to families. One participant described this situation 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”*

If partial school closures are likely to be a feature of the 2020-2021 academic year (e.g., for bubbles affected by the coronavirus) then a flexible and agile solution to providing Free School Meals will be required.

In a similar vein, participants referred to logistical difficulties with the government's scheme to provide laptops to some disadvantaged students to enable them to access online learning. One participant during our July interviews said that the laptops have still not arrived for their school. Some teachers noted that their schools themselves had to provide some students with laptops. As with Free School Meals, if blended learning is likely to be a feature of the 2020-2021 academic year, this problem needs to be addressed quickly so that the most disadvantaged students are not again the hardest hit.

#### 4. Prioritise pupils' social emotional health over academic achievement

Teachers were concerned about their pupils who were experiencing new or exacerbated psychological and welfare challenges brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. Teachers reported that when pupils transition back to school, their priority will be to ensure the social and emotional wellbeing of their pupils. Next, they will assess the pupils' learning levels so that strategies can be developed to mitigate any learning loss. When asked what goals and hopes teachers have for the educational system in the next academic year, one participant said:

*“that they don't push assessment too much, and they don't, you know, that they take into account the fact that the children have missed however many months of schooling... and that they kind of realise that the emotional health of the children is more important at this stage.”*

The pandemic has created new emotional needs in students (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). The social and emotional health of pupils is fundamental for their capacity to learn and for their future success. Thus, the government is recommended to consider not pushing state examinations and standardised testing in the 2020-2021 academic year in the same way as usual, and to allow schools to address more fundamental issues without the pressure of 'catching up' for assessments. On that note, several teachers expressed appreciation for the recent Ofqual consultation and for decisions such as a decision to cover three rather than four modules in History GCSE. This was an area in which consultation appears to have been effective and teachers report feeling heard.

#### 5. Value the teaching profession

Teachers reported that they believe their profession has been highly unappreciated by society, policymakers, and the media during COVID-19 to date. One participant said,

*“I don't think people really appreciate the fact that we've [schools have] been open every single day, bank holidays included. And so I feel that that is something that's very much lacking and nationally, I feel that we've had a bit of a tough deal in that situation.”*

Participants reported being labelled by some as “lazy”, with much of the public falsely believing they have not worked since 20th March 2020. Teachers reported that their views and experiences have not been considered by the government, which added to their frustration. This is a worrying finding as teachers' views of how much their profession is valued is positively correlated with the quality of educational instruction (Schleicher, 2018).

Furthermore, teachers reported that it was not clear whether they were considered as key workers. Moreover, they often compared how other key workers (e.g., NHS staff and supermarket staff) were shown to be appreciated while they had been taken for granted and a target of media abuse or 'teacher bashing'. Teachers are the social fabric that hold the educational system together. Thus, it is important that their roles and contributions are recognised, especially during this time when they are required to go beyond their usual roles. In addition to engaging in consultations with teachers prior to national announcements, we recommend that teachers are nationally recognised for the important work that they are doing, for example on World Teacher's Day (5 October 2020). These steps are likely to help in building bridges between policymakers and the teaching profession.

### References

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