

Written Evidence Submitted by the School of Education, University of Birmingham

The impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services – Inquiry

Introduction

- 1.1 The School of Education, University of Birmingham is one of the largest research-led schools of education in the UK employing over 100 academic staff. We are a leading provider of teacher education in the West Midlands, and have departments and research centres specialising in Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and social justice including the Centre for Research in Race and Education.
- 1.2 This evidence draws on expertise from across the School of Education and new research conducted with our partners. Foremost is evidence emerging from a partnership initiative with Birmingham City Council that aims to develop our understanding of the short- and medium-term effects of school closures on the learning and wellbeing of pupils, and to support schools and the City identify strategies to support pupils and promote equity¹. This initiative has included survey and telephone interviews conducted during May and June 2020 with parents from 300 families and pertaining to over 500 children². We also draw on evidence from the National Literacy Trust's tenth Annual Literacy Survey, conducted in partnership with the University of Birmingham, relating to children and young people's reading, writing and engagement with audiobooks in 2020 (January to March 2020, 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18 in the UK), and findings from their survey of children and young people during the COVID-19 lockdown (May to early June 2020, 4,141 children and young people)³.

2 Summary

- 2.1 There is evidence that the move away from conventional schooling for most children has increased variability in the nature and quality of school provision, and the needs of children and parents.

¹ Birmingham Education and Covid-19 Initiative: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/impact/policy-commissions/education/index.aspx>

² Education and COVID-19 parent/carer survey: https://bham.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cLRyewzEWEZvf9z

³ The National Literacy Trust, <https://literacytrust.org.uk>

- 2.2 There is sufficient evidence to cause concern that this has increased existing educational inequalities particularly those associated with economic status, ethnicity and SEND⁴.
- 2.3 In the coming year, a return to school for many children is anticipated in combination with shielding for particularly vulnerable children, some social distancing measures, and localised lockdowns imposed at short notice.
- 2.4 To address widening inequalities in these circumstances we recommend:
- 2.4.1 Local Authorities be empowered to provide a stronger localised mid-tier of organisation to address variability in education provision and access, and promote equity by guiding capacity building and sharing; coordinating rapid responses in the case of lockdowns; developing better local understandings of inequalities; and targeting resources where need is greatest.
- 2.4.2 The support needs of families and communities should be recognised alongside their capacities to support learning, and a stronger emphasis placed on including families and communities in education partnerships.
- 2.4.3 A national drive to develop pedagogy appropriate to new online infrastructure consisting of accredited training based on standards supported by government and developed with professional bodies, Local Authorities, and Teacher Education providers including universities.
- 2.4.4 An emphasis on mental health, wellbeing and relationships in addition to academic performance to support children returning to school.
- 2.4.5 Where sectors rely on small private providers, notably in Alternative Provision and Early Years, Government should act to prevent loss of sector capacity as a result of short-term falls in income where there is evidence this capacity will be required in the coming year and beyond.

3 The effect of provider closure on the early years sector

- 3.1 Our research further indicates that a significant proportion of parents do not know whether their provider is still operating. Research from the Early Years Alliance⁵ indicates that a quarter of providers report that they might not be in operation in 12 months' time.
- 3.2 A loss of providers at this scale would represent a huge loss of child development expertise in the sector, and uncertainty about childcare will make it difficult for families to return to work.

⁴ Please see also specialist response on Autism from Professor Karen Guldborg of the School of Education, University of Birmingham

⁵ <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/news/2020/06/new-report-shows-scale-crisis-early-years-sector>

- 3.3 Less than half of parents normally accessing Early Years provision reported to us that their provider had supplied practical guidance or resources.
- 3.4 We expect some children's early development to have been impacted by this variability in the support Early Years providers give families.

4 The effect of cancelling formal exams

- 4.1 There is recent evidence that just 16% of predicted A level results were correct in 2016⁶.
- 4.2 The cancellation of public exams and subsequent OFQUAL decision to award GCSE and A level results based on predicted grades is likely to disadvantage students from BME backgrounds⁷.
- 4.3 This use of predicted grades is expected to further marginalise those from BME communities affecting access to higher education, degree attainment and future social mobility.

5 Support for pupils and families during closures

- 5.1 Our evidence supports claims that there has been considerable variation in the amount of schoolwork children have done during lockdown. Based on parents reporting to our survey, 15% of children appear not to have been doing any school work on a regular basis, 1/3 of children have been doing 1-2 hours a day, 1/3 have been doing 3-4 hours a day, and 15% have been doing more than that.
- 5.2 Our view is that this variability in children's engagement with schoolwork has been influenced by variation in the approaches of schools to remote learning, and the resources families have to support learning.
- 5.3 There is significant variation in the approaches to remote learning adopted by schools.
- 5.3.1 Based on parents' reporting to our survey, over half of children have not been getting feedback or marking for schoolwork they have done, and only half report regular contact from school.
- 5.3.2 Parents felt 85% of children were doing well before closures, but parents believe half these children will fall behind because of closures.
- 5.3.3 The diversification of education providers and the reduced statutory role of the Local Authority has contributed to the variability of offer, as schools work alone or use diverse networks and partnerships to identify resources and strategies to support remote learning and wellbeing.

⁶ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/8409/Predicted-grades-accuracy-and-impact-Dec-16/pdf/Predicted_grades_report_Dec2016.pdf

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/fears-that-cancelling-exams-will-hit-black-and-poor-pupils-worst>

- 5.3.4 These variations and their potential effects highlight the need for coordination and quality assurance at the local level, which the Local Authority is best placed to provide.
- 5.4 Children and families' experience of remote learning has been influenced by the resources available to households to support it.
- 5.4.1 In most families, parents have been supporting children to do work set by school, and trying to augment this learning themselves. However, the parents of almost half of children reported to us that they are not confident about the support they can give.
- 5.4.2 The parents of over a quarter of children reported to us that they have never or only occasionally been able to provide equipment and materials.
- 5.4.3 The parents of over a quarter of children said their children have never or only occasionally had use of dedicated space without disturbances.
- 5.4.4 Being unemployed or furloughed, as opposed to working from home during school closure, influences parents' capacity to support learning from home.
- 5.5 In terms of children and young people's mental health, we are concerned that some parents reported to us that their children were struggling with motivation, engagement and lack of routine. It is notable that some respondents reported their child experiencing improved mental health at home. However, children with SEND and BAME children appear particularly vulnerable.
- 5.5.1 The civic role of schools changed rapidly in lockdown to support young people's mental health and safety in their communities and schools' responses varied widely. Some schools were active in distributing devices, food and finding routes to offer pastoral support.
- 5.5.2 Parents reported to us that 65% of children were perceived to never or occasionally be positive about learning at home. This included lack or limited fun and interest when learning at home, lack or limited engagement with work set and, lack or limited opportunity to socialise with friends.
- 5.5.3 Children have been reading more (35% rise) and enjoying reading more (28% rise) during lockdown. This has helped to support children's mental wellbeing – more than half (59%) of children said reading in lockdown made them feel better and half (50%) said it inspired them to dream about the future⁸. However, lockdown created barriers to reading for some children including a lack of access to books due to school and library closures, no quiet space at home and less support from teachers and peers. Schools should increase children's access to high-quality books during re-opening by providing access to books in print or digital format and time and space for reading.

⁸ Figures based on findings from the National Literacy Trust's tenth Annual Literacy Survey and dedicated COVID-19 survey undertaken in partnership with the University of Birmingham.

- 5.5.4 BAME children appear particularly vulnerable with respect to mental health and wellbeing. BAME children were not disproportionately likely to be perceived by their parents to never or occasionally be positive about learning at home. However, it is of concern that 21% of all BAME children were perceived by their parents to be very lonely, bored and upset about their schoolwork, compared to 10% for all children.
- 5.5.5 Parents of children with SEND are more likely to report a lack of support, differentiation of learning activity and personal contact. Parents of children with SEND were more likely to report their children ‘never’ found learning at home interesting (24% vs 15% for all children) and ‘never’ engaged enthusiastically with the work set for them (38% vs. 21% in the general group).
- 5.5.6 A higher percentage of children with SEND were also reported to be upset or worried about their work ‘most of the time’ (14% compared to 7% of the total group), as having fun ‘never’ (29% vs. 19% in the total group) and as being lonely ‘most of the time’ (15% compared to 9% of the total group).
- 5.5.7 Resources should be directed to provide support, differentiation of learning activity and personal contact for children with SEND as a priority.
- 5.5.8 There is good evidence of the connection between children’s wellbeing and access to cultural experiences⁹. In Birmingham in 2018 over 30 arts and cultural organisations worked with all but 49 of the 465 schools in Birmingham (Arts Connect, *Cultural Landscapes*, 2019). School closures in March halted this work and it is likely to remain severely disrupted into the middle of 2021. We expect this loss will further impact children’s wellbeing even as lockdown is eased.
- 5.5.9 There are examples of good practice during closures, such as Arts Connect in Birmingham distributing the *Let’s Create* resource packs to every child in care in Birmingham and to nurseries in areas of high deprivation and helping the Reading Agency distribute 12,500 book packs through Birmingham Education Partnership to Birmingham Schools. *Birmingham Creates*, the Birmingham Cultural Education Partnership, worked with local arts and cultural organisations to produce ‘Sofa School’, a weekly arts podcast for children aged 5-11 to support creativity at home (including dance, story-telling, drama, music and art activities¹⁰).

⁹ <https://culturallearningalliance.org.uk/evidence/>; <https://www.artsconnect.co.uk/young-peoples-cultural-journeys-the-report/>; https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/510798/D_CMS_The_Culture_White_Paper_3_.pdf

¹⁰ <https://artsconnect.podbean.com>

6 The financial implications of closures for providers

- 6.1 The Alternative Provision sector includes small, civil society and independent providers whose immediate financial position is precarious¹¹.
- 6.2 These providers face a loss of income in the summer months followed by projected increases in demand from September 2020.
- 6.3 The Department for Education should make available a short-term emergency fund for organisations offering Alternative Provision to enable them to survive immediate financial constraints continue to support students in the coming academic year.

7 The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups

- 7.1 While policy has prioritised ‘vulnerable pupils’ and children of key workers, we are concerned that a wider set of pupils are being disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, including those from low-income households, from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, who are new migrants or refugees/asylum seekers, and with special educational needs and disabilities.
- 7.2 Our evidence indicates a series of effects experienced disproportionately by disadvantaged groups of pupils during lockdown. This supports others’ evidence of gaps having opened between the most disadvantaged and advantaged groups of pupils, including the Educational Endowment Foundation¹².
- 7.2.1 Parents of children with SEND were more likely to report that the material sent by schools was ‘too hard’ compared to the total group of children in the survey.
- 7.2.2 Parents of BME children were more likely to report a perception that their child had fallen behind, were less likely to report teaching work provided by the school, and more likely to report not being able to provide material to complete schoolwork or space to work without disturbance.
- 7.2.3 Our qualitative evidence suggests that reasons parents were unable to support their children’s learning included not understanding work set by the schools grounded in low English proficiency, work responsibility, having several children all needing to use a single laptop or device, or having several children and having to prioritise those most in need of support.

¹¹ Please see also response on Alternative Provision from Laura Day Ashley and Josie Pennacchia of the School of Education, University of Birmingham.

¹² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-school-closures-on-the-attainment-gap/>

7.2.4 Parents of BAME children responding to our surveys were also more likely to report being provided little to no support from schools for home learning, and limited to no feedback from schools.

7.3 This evidence suggests that relations between families and schools are of even greater importance in addressing inequity in current circumstances, but that a focus on attainment gaps may hinder this aim by stigmatizing disadvantaged families by suggesting a deficit in learning while at home that requires a remedial response.

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

8.1 Contingency planning should seek to address the increasing educational inequalities that the recent crisis is producing by addressing the variability and quality of provision in the case of lockdown or continued social distancing preventing a full return to schooling.

8.2 This can be done by bridging the digital divide; promoting quality pedagogy in remote learning; enhancing local coordination; and providing financial security during lockdown for private, community and independent providers in Alternative Provision and Early Years where there will be future demand for their services.

8.3 Significant concerns have been raised about a digital divide that is most pronounced with respect to devices and broadband access. A computer for each pupil and home broadband access are part of a modern public education infrastructure and should not be treated as optional private goods.

8.3.1 There is also a divide in school provision between those providing regular live online contact and/or lessons, and the majority (around 90% of children in our survey) which have not.

8.4 IT and broadband are educational tools that require skilled teachers and quality pedagogy to facilitate learning.

8.4.1 Content focused, passive, and individualised modes of digital education offer limited opportunity for quality learning and exacerbate the educational divides we see increasing during lockdown between educationally advantaged and disadvantaged children.

8.4.2 Interactive forms of digital education that foreground collaboration, enquiry and creativity, underpinned by robust pedagogy and designed and facilitated by skilled educators have the potential to support quality learning for all and work against the trend towards increased inequalities that remote learning has produced so far.

- 8.4.3 This will require government to work with Teacher Education providers to develop and provide appropriate training to prepare teachers for remote learning and support for wellbeing in our changed educational landscape.
- 8.4.4 The benefits of creative writing should be recognised and the practice promoted by schools. During lockdown the percentage of children and young people who say that they write outside class on a daily basis has recovered from its lowest recorded level in 2019, and 41% of children said writing makes them feel better¹³.
- 8.5 There is a need for local coordination of efforts to target resources and build capacity including a skills workforce and effective local partnerships. The Local Authority remains the most resilient structure in the event of a future lockdown, and more able to coordinate across diverse agencies.
- 8.5.1 Future local coordination should include ensuring SEND-support provision is in place as schools reopen and in the case of future localized lockdowns.
- 8.5.2 Local coordination could also usefully incorporate the cultural sector to promote learning and wellbeing.
- 8.6 We recommend promoting parental involvement in schoolwork at home through renewed emphasis on education partnerships of equals and school-community dialogue, and by developing and using pedagogies that recognise and incorporate the richness of pupils' different experiences, capacities and skills, and avoid starting from assumptions or assessments of a 'lack' of learning.
- 8.7 As the impacts of COVID-19 on learning and wellbeing is assessed, a whole child approach is needed. An over-emphasis on measured attainment 'gaps' risks narrowing the offer to particular children even further and reducing learning and wellbeing to performance in particular assessments.

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¹³ Figures based on findings from the National Literacy Trust's tenth Annual Literacy Survey and dedicated COVID-19 survey undertaken in partnership with the University of Birmingham.

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