

Responding to COVID-19, Briefing Note 3: Resetting educational priorities in challenging times



Introduction: Rebuilding, reconnecting and reimagining a more resilient education system

This briefing note is intended to prompt discussion on how to repair the fragilities in the education system that COVID has revealed. Over the length of our research project¹ we have seen a gulf open up between government policy announcements and primary schools' experiences of the crisis on the ground (Bradbury, 2020). Our data show teachers, head teachers and system leaders have not felt listened to by the DfE. Our respondents have expressed little confidence in decisions taken by government or the ways in which these have been communicated. The very different priorities that have emerged during the crisis for government and for teachers have set an agenda for change.

This briefing note considers three critical issues:

- How the education system recognises the needs of our most disadvantaged communities and funds the schools that work with them
- The stresses in our testing and accountability systems that COVID has exacerbated
- The need to better support locally-responsive decision-making at times of crisis



Key Findings

Project findings are based on a survey of 1,653 primary school teachers in England, conducted through Teacher Tapp between May 27-29th 2020; a follow up survey conducted by ILC between July 3-31st 2020; in-depth interviews with teachers, head teachers and system leaders; documentary evidence of the wider public debate on education and COVID-19; and a rapid evidence assessment of the relevant literature.

Finding 1: The burden that poverty places on disadvantaged communities and the schools that work with them needs to be more fully recognised.

The COVID crisis has revealed very clearly how much material poverty impacts on children growing up. 68% of all head teachers and 78% of teachers working in the most deprived areas said their highest priority was “checking how families are coping in terms of mental health, welfare, food” (Moss et al, 2020) when communicating with families during lockdown.

Our respondents knew many children in our most disadvantaged communities would go hungry during the crisis if schools did not help families access food. They knew that many children were without access to the internet, a private space to study at home or outside space, all elements that might make a difference to their experience during lockdown. Teachers knew that home itself might not be a safe environment and worried about families they thought were struggling with mental health issues. They remembered these incidents in interview:

‘it was things like one girl saying ‘I just need to get out of the house. I just need to see people’.

All these contextual factors impact on children’s learning. Yet our testing and accountability system pays little attention to them. This needs to change.

One way to make a difference would be to replace Free School Meals (FSM) as the main metric used to calculate additional funding. This is too imprecise a guide to provide schools with adequate funding. Any revised approach should ensure schools have the necessary funding to cover the costs of providing children with lunches over the summer holidays, and/or the additional staffing for welfare support required to keep children safe in communities under strain. This funding should act as a threshold with additional funding provided, over and beyond this, to support high quality teaching in communities under pressure.

Combined with local area measures this could help map where more specialist support and early intervention services are required in a given area to work alongside schools.

Recommendation 1:

New measures should be developed to better capture the social and material effects of poverty within a school’s local community.

Measures should focus on those aspects of deprivation in a neighbourhood that impact most on children’s learning.

The measures of social deprivation should be used to contextualise assessment data and inform Ofsted judgements.

Finding 2: Assumptions built into current assessment and accountability systems need to change

Throughout our study, the government's emphasis on meeting test targets as usual, regardless of the changed conditions in school, has won little support from our respondents. As COVID continues to disrupt education, such a policy emphasis on testing may well be counter-productive, not least because it sets government at odds with the profession. As one respondent told us:

'The government needs to stop the testing for all primary aged children and accept that it is no longer relevant to put children through that stress'.

Another commented:

'This situation has proved that assessments and constant testing is of no use and that the children and teachers are happier working in a less stressful environment'.

The current test architecture ties teachers to delivering particular areas of subject content in a set sequence and time frame. Accountability measures emphasise tracking progress between test points, exerting pressure on schools to keep up. Such a system holds teachers responsible now for what might be achieved later. In fact, assumptions about teaching and learning embedded in the testing and accountability system – that how well a pupil performs in this content area at this time will wholly determine what will happen next – do not stand up to research scrutiny.

Research reviewed for this study shows that pupil progress does not always follow the smooth linear trajectories predicted (Allen, 2015). Pupil needs vary and different contextual factors come into play in shaping outcomes (Prior, Leckie and Goldstein, 2020). Assumptions built into Progress 8 about the pace at which those furthest ahead or behind move on have been subject to critical review (Leckie and Goldstein, 2017). A test and accountability system that ignores these findings does a deep disservice to schools, to children and to parents.

At a time of crisis it also creates unsustainable pressure within a system already near to breaking point. As one teacher commented

'This system has been on the brink of falling apart for a few years now and it's heart breaking to see'.

Teachers in our dataset recognise that reinstating statutory testing and inspection too fast may well hinder, rather than support, the process of re-engaging their pupils with purposeful learning; that pushing pupils too fast into catch up programmes designed to boost test scores is of limited use; and that pupils would benefit more from whole class quality teaching that can take account of the complexity of children's needs and lets them benefit from being with their peers (International Literacy Centre, 2020). This is indeed a moment to take stock. As one of our respondents commented

'I think OFSTED inspections should not run until we have had some time to figure out what works. I think teachers should be trusted to assess their children and fill in the gaps with how they feel best.'

This echoes a finding from our systematic review of the literature on learning disruption: that such an unprecedented set of circumstances may well require a period of cool reflection and research if the appropriate lessons for education are to be learnt (See Harmey and Moss, 2020). Adequate criteria to judge individual school's responses to the COVID crisis have yet to be developed. Any such criteria will need to recognise and understand the many local factors that have impacted on decision-making and the different needs to which teachers have had to respond. In the aftermath of such a crisis, inspection visits have to change their purpose and rationale, if they are to help the system learn.

Recommendation 2:

Statutory testing and inspection processes should be suspended for the whole academic year.

Any OFSTED visits to school should be used to listen and learn from those most directly involved in finding solutions on the ground.



Finding 3: A resilient education system depends upon fostering collaborative and reflective dialogue amongst all those involved

COVID has revealed just how far current governance structures in education are geared to high level direction from central government based on limited consultation or dialogue with the sector. Such a centralised approach to decision-making has not worked well during the crisis. One senior leader told us:

'We feel dictated to with directives that are sometimes conflicting or impossible to implement'.

Many of our respondents regarded government guidance as both ill-informed and poorly communicated. When asked directly, almost all of our respondents (79%) considered communications with schools to be handled either badly or very badly. When asked how the government had done on 'practicality of advice', a similar number (80%) responded 'badly' or 'very badly'. Not a single respondent picked 'very well'. As one teacher commented,

'The lack of prompt guidance and ever changing guidance has definitely hindered rather than helped schools at an already difficult time'.

Another told us:

'Government has abdicated most responsibility to schools'.

By contrast, where they exist, strong local support structures have played an important part in facilitating good local decision-making. Local Authorities and MATs have both been important in bringing schools together. As one respondent said:

'We got incredible support from the local authority, incredible support from them ..., even though we're not a local authority school, we're a multi academy trust school, they took an executive decision that all the schools in

this authority would be included and used. Huge amounts of regular feedback and updates, they were really supportive in terms of risk assessments, template letters. They were really helpful. They immediately issued schools with phone numbers and dedicated staff that they could ring.'

But in a fragmented education system, access to such good support has been patchy. Stronger local support systems would have left fewer schools struggling to solve complex local problems on their own.

The central government's capacity to develop appropriate advice has been hampered by its lack of consultation with and connection to those working at the front line. This has reduced the flow of useful knowledge round the system. By consulting more widely during the crisis, the government would have generated more constructive guidance, better attuned to the dilemmas facing schools on the ground. The fragilities of a system that lacks the means to foster deliberation and reflection between all those most directly involved in managing the crisis has been exposed. This needs to be put right.

Recommendation 3:

We need more durable, more deliberative and more transparent ways of connecting all those involved in managing the many different aspects of education across a fragmented system.

Stronger, locally responsive networks would allow policy decisions and national guidance to develop from a much fuller awareness of what the every-day realities of school life are.

Such networks would also help schools collaborate on finding local solutions to novel dilemmas posed by the crisis.



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Project Details

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Base: The International Literacy Centre, UCL Institute of Education.

Research Team: PI: Gemma Moss. Co-Is: Alice Bradbury, Sam Duncan, Sinead Harmey and Rachael Levy.

Website: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/duty-care-and-duty-teach-educational-priorities-response-covid-19-crisis>

¹ Findings from the research project, 'A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the COVID-19 crisis' Funder: UKRI/ESRC Urgent COVID Response Call, project no. ES/V00414X/1. Researchers: PI: Gemma Moss. Co-Is: Alice Bradbury, Sam Duncan, Sinead Harmey and Rachael Levy. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/duty-care-and-duty-teach-educational-priorities-response-covid-19-crisis>