



Research evidence to support primary school inspection post-COVID

Authors: Gemma Moss, Alice Bradbury, Annette Braun, Sam Duncan, Rachael Levy and Sinead Harney, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society

Introduction

This policy briefing is intended to inform discussion on how Ofsted inspections might best resume at an appropriate time, given the extensive disruption COVID has brought and continues to bring to English primary schools. The briefing draws on findings from a series of research projects based at the IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society and conducted between May 2020 and September 2021, using surveys, systematic literature reviews and case study methods¹.

The research projects have highlighted just how much schools' experiences have varied. They also show just how resourceful and resilient schools and their communities have

been in navigating a way through the many difficult dilemmas the pandemic has raised, even when there have been no obvious roadmaps to follow.

The research evidence we present and the recommendations that follow are intended to inform conversations in the field about the best ways forward in education. They build on the knowledge and experience that primary schools have acquired from dealing with the pandemic first hand.

Key points from systematic literature reviews of the research evidence on harms to pupils from the pandemic and their mitigations:

¹ The projects were based at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. Funders were ESRC and DfE/ IPPO. For full details of the projects, their dates and research staff see the Appendix 1.

1. The impacts of the interruption to schooling that COVID has brought are multiple and on-going².

- 1.1 Studies find harms to: *physical health* (high); *nutrition* (high for children in families with the least financial resources); *mental health* (still uncertain – some research is now suggesting these may be the most long lasting and most difficult to repair (Blanden et al., 2021); *learning* (mixed, with the evidence on repair appropriate to different ages groups still coming in); *increased exposure to risk factors at home* (a priority for assessment as vulnerable children return to school).

Children living in poverty in households with the least material resources to fall back on were most likely to suffer harms across the spectrum highlighted above (Nelson, Lynch and Sharp, 2021). Few of the most immediately suggested catch-up strategies are based on evidence of what works to address the *precise patterns of disruption the pandemic created*. Fewer still considered the potential interaction between harms. This disconnect has led to monies being poorly allocated to external suppliers (NAO, 2021) when locally designed school-based strategies may have been more effective.

- 1.2 Impacts on individual primary schools and their communities vary depending upon:

- **The severity of the disease in the immediate area** and its impacts on livelihoods, health and bereavement.
- **How well-equipped households were to deal with the consequences of school closures** – materially, in terms of access to digital resources, adequate space in which to learn indoors, or space to physically exercise outdoors; financially, in terms of being able to cover family eating/heating costs; and socially, in terms of access to networks of support, particularly when dealing with stress, anxiety, or mental ill health issues.

- **The numbers of children and families living in potentially dangerous circumstances at home**, putting themselves or other family members at risk, whether from domestic violence or neglect, or sub-standard housing with significant overcrowding and associated health risks.

When inspections resume, information on how this broad range of issues affected individual schools could usefully form part of preparatory briefings pre-inspection.

2. Learning loss or learning disruption: how to assess plans for recovery

- 2.1 Early estimates of the long-term impacts of school closures on learning, based on surveys of time lost or tasks set/returned, have over-estimated losses, compared to more recent assessment data collected at different time points through the pandemic (Renaissance and EPI, 2021)
- 2.2 From their evidence review, OECD caution against assuming that closures must have had a large negative effect on pupil progress and achievement (Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin, 2021).
- 2.3 The research evidence on education recovery from other periods of extended and unplanned disruption caused by natural disasters (Harmey and Moss, 2021) finds that: **local knowledge is key to good recovery planning**; that **children and staff benefit from an emphasis on wellbeing and care**; and that **relaxing curriculum delivery timeframes to accommodate responding to a broad spectrum of children's needs minimises long-term effects**.

² See Moss et al., 2021a. <https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=3837>

Key points from practitioner surveys and school-based case studies:

Each school has their own unique 'COVID story'. Primary schools have accrued considerable in-depth knowledge first-hand at the frontline. Understanding their responses begins with a positive focus on what they were able to do, in extremely challenging circumstances (Moss et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2021b).

3. Schools' experiences during the COVID pandemic varied hugely due to differences in local community circumstances, levels of infection and pre-existing social contexts.

3.1 Each school has a different 'COVID story'. Schools dealt with different levels of digital exclusion, different home learning environments, and different welfare needs among the school population. They encountered unexpected impacts on parental employment, changing patterns of poverty, and unanticipated social and cultural dimensions to the resources families could muster as they found ways through such demanding times.

3.2 Traditional metrics of school context cannot easily pick up what mattered most during the pandemic. For example, one case study school with a well above average Free School Meal (FSM) rate had stable parental keyworker employment, relatively low levels of infection, leading to 50% of the pupils on site throughout. Another case study school with a similar FSM rate saw parental employment devastated by the complete closure of the largest local employer, leading to sudden high demand for food banks and social support. With more multi-generational households struggling, and a higher rate of COVID cases, many more of the predominantly EAL pupils were off-site. Younger age groups returned to school needing time to enrich their access to spoken and written English.

3.3 An appreciation of each school's local context is integral to being able to accurately assess the value of what

schools were able to do during the crisis. Different conditions required different responses. Schools that were well connected to their local communities and to other schools via different networks of support benefited from the capacity to work with others to find solutions. Schools' capacity to respond also depended upon how many staff were ill or self-isolating, and the impact of the crisis on staff wellbeing and mental health.

4. Primary schools play a vital role as community hubs within their local networks of support.

4.1 Primary schools' priorities during the crisis were shaped by their knowledge of the local area, and their communication with parents. Many dealt with urgent requests that parents raised with schools when they found no help forthcoming elsewhere. When schools prioritised providing food in the early stages of the pandemic, this was because they knew this was the most pressing need among their communities.

4.2 How schools responded, both in terms of the problems faced but also the resources they were able to muster, was hugely contingent on local circumstances. Some schools already ran foodbanks, others knew the local organisations that did. Some schools were able to tap into local networks and charities to support families with laptop provision or wifi connectivity, while others relied on donations and ad hoc connections at a time when the government scheme was unable to ensure supply. Resources available and accessible in each area varied considerably.

4.3 Schools were differently placed to take advantage of their local networks in a system that, as it stands, cannot guarantee uniform levels of support, either for families or for schools themselves. Schools benefitted most from external support that was able to meet immediate local needs. For instance, one Local Authority was able to



negotiate at scale a more efficient supply of free school meals than was available through the voucher scheme. Schools praised local support networks that kept in regular touch with them and helped them navigate often confusing and rapidly changing advice from the government.

5. **Viable remote teaching offers were shaped in interaction with families.** Schools adapted and responded to the challenges of supporting learning at home in interaction with pupils and parents, adjusting inputs to what worked in their context. **There was no set 'good practice' response, at any point.** For example, in the case of home learning, some schools successfully used printed packs to overcome the problem of digital access; others found that parents did not engage with paper packs and had to change course. **Interviews with parents suggested that some wanted more tasks to be set, but others wanted fewer, due to the difficulty of parents managing home learning routines in households with different numbers of siblings and different demands on parents' time, particularly if they were working at home.** Some schools realised children needed more time to socialise with each other and created breakout rooms for this to happen. Others provided a broader range of learning tasks to keep children motivated and engaged at home. **Schools adjusted their teaching offer in the light of emerging feedback from families. Families valued clear communication and regular contact with schools.**

Through a process of listening to schools' experiences of the impacts of the pandemic locally, **inspection can usefully highlight what schools have learnt from dealing with the complex issues that COVID raised for them.**

The quality of any adjustments made need to be assessed in this light. Without this sensitivity to context, attempts to prescribe best strategies are likely to be both misplaced and ineffective.

Research and inspection priorities

Research evidence is still emerging on the likely impacts from the pandemic on children's learning; on their physical and mental health; and what proved to be the best ways of supporting learning remotely. Findings can be unexpected. One research project found that providing real books was more effective at supporting children's reading than online books (<https://ickle.leeds.ac.uk/>). Oliver et al. (2021) found that some autistic children benefited from being at home. More evidence is needed of longer-term impacts on different groups of children, for example for children with SEND (Gillespie-Smith and Christie, 2021). There are many lessons still to be learnt about the best ways forward.

Some research is beginning to suggest that the initial estimates of impact on learning may have over-estimated losses and underestimated children's capacity for recovery (Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin, 2021). The research evidence on the economic impact of the crisis on children is much clearer: the number of children living in poverty in the UK has risen significantly to 4.3 million (JRF, 2022). Some studies conclude that the impact on children's wellbeing, mental health and social and emotional skills is likely to be far more significant and complex than the impact on learning attainment (Blanden et al., 2021). Given such uncertainties, accounts from the schools themselves of the different ways in which they have responded to the challenges they faced, including the recovery strategies they have adopted, could usefully be collected and form part of the evidence base used to develop the resilience of the education system going forward.

Recommendations

When inspections resume, we recommend that all parties recognise that:

1. The **process of understanding what constitutes a quality adjustment to challenging conditions during a pandemic is ongoing**. Understanding how and why school responses varied over the course of the pandemic is a necessary first step in being able to articulate what good practice looks like in adapting to circumstances beyond the school's control. Factors to take into account might include, but not be restricted to: levels of COVID in the community; staffing capacity; levels of poverty and unemployment that impact on basic welfare; housing; digital connectivity; access to other forms of community support where needed; and resilience of local networks of support to schools. Any lessons learnt locally could usefully be shared and tested within the wider school community.
2. **Additional information, over and beyond that routinely provided in pre-inspection conversations may well be needed to identify the various contextual factors that will have shaped the school's experience of COVID**. Judgements about the quality of education should be informed by an understanding of the range of urgent priorities that will have shaped decision-making locally and the adjustments schools
3. Some schools will have experienced bereavements amongst staff or families; some staff, particularly heads, may have had to deal with extreme crises in households involving mental health, domestic violence, and/or protecting vulnerable children in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. **In some cases, these experiences will have left deep scars**. This should be borne in mind in initial conversations.
4. Identifying the challenges schools faced during COVID could usefully feed into discussions on appropriate funding for schools post COVID. Additional funding is likely to be particularly necessary for schools working in high poverty contexts. **Recovery funding should look beyond attainment gaps to focus on the material needs in families and communities that prevent children from learning well in school, including mental health and basic nutrition**.
5. Research studies of the impacts of the pandemic on schools, pupils and parents continue to report their findings. By keeping such evidence under review, any insights can be used to inform recovery and will benefit from being regularly shared across the field.

Appendix 1: The evidence base

	Funder	Title	Date
1	ESRC	A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the COVID19 crisis	May – Sept 2020
2	DfE/ IPPO	Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary and lower secondary children during school closures: a rapid evidence review	May – June 2021
3	ESRC	Learning through Disruption: Rebuilding primary education using local knowledge	May – Sept 2021

Researchers: Gemma Moss, Alice Bradbury, Annette Braun, Sam Duncan, Sinead Harmey, Rachael Levy (IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society), **Rebecca Allen**³ (Teacher Tapp)

Appendix 2: References

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Thorn, W. and Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2021) *Schooling During a Pandemic: The Experience and Outcomes of Schoolchildren During the First Round of COVID-19 Lockdowns*. Paris: OECD. <https://doi.org/10.1787/1c78681e-en>

Authors: Moss, G., Bradbury, A., Braun, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S and Levy, R. International Literacy Centre, IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society

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For further information see: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre>

³ Teacher Tapp survey, conducted for Project 1. See Moss et al., 2020.