ASCL Association of School and College Leaders

The COVID-19 pandemic may be a thing of the past – its impact in schools is not

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Understanding the problem as a vital prelude to devising effective responses

This paper argues that COVID-19 impact in schools continues to present government with a public policy problem unique in its depth, distribution and persistence. I argue here that it is easy to treat schools' concerns and the research on COVID-19 as fragments and snapshots – these need to be synthesised to provide a robust understanding of the nature of the challenge. I believe that only when it is properly understood can we devise an adequate public policy response. COVID-19 impact is not a thing of the past – it is moving like a series of different waves up through the system. Eleven year olds affected by interrupted learning are entering secondary school with very different problems to those born and young in the pandemic entering primary schools – who are displaying acute developmental needs.

We have a wealth of high-quality research, but each study tends to look at the problems experienced by a specific age group; only when we look across all of these studies do we begin to see the true scope and depth of the public policy problem. Individual schools are reporting major issues, but we need to avoid treating these as scattered snapshots – we must see them as part of the Big Picture. Prior to COVID-19 we became habituated to seeing 'underachievement' and 'disadvantage' in terms of defined groups and places – 'London versus the North', 'working class boys', and so on – and after good analysis, government has been able to target appropriate action and support. COVID-19 impact is completely different. It requires a different way of looking at the data and the current reality in schools. It demands a distinctive public policy response, a distinctive set of remedies.

Although some patterns are visible in terms of region and social groups, the impact has been evident right the way across society – and as well as being widely distributed, it is highly individualised. Similar children in similar contexts have been very differently affected. Some 'turned off' in certain subjects during remote learning, others suffered from isolation and enduring anxiety, some actually benefitted from remote learning. As well as the impacts being widely distributed throughout all young people, and highly individualised, different year groups were affected in very different ways – while those not doing A Levels in 2020 had learned from their experiences doing GCSEs before COVID-19, those aged 18 doing A Levels in 2023 lacked that experience of revision and management of exams at 16. But different impacts occur for each year group, down through the system,

to those born and young in the pandemic, who now appear to be prone to fundamental problems in cognitive and social development.

Looking into, but more crucially across, all the research studies we can see a public policy challenge which is huge in scale, highly differentiated, and distributed in unpredictable ways. Different problems are marching up through the system year by year – this 'rolling process' exemplified by major issues now emerging in early primary.

The policy challenge that this presents is unique in scale, scope, type and persistence. Understanding this is vital. But this paper not only supports more accurate understanding of the challenge, it also discusses remedies, to help with development of policy and effective action in schools and communities.

Not 'back to normal'

It's entirely understandable that the rhetoric of the autumn of 2021 was 'let's get back to normal as soon as possible'. 'Back to normal' meant seeing friends, buying things, eating out, travelling, accessing services. Successive lockdowns had curtailed many things, and 'back to normal' was right for society and the economy. But 'back to normal' might be causing us to seriously underestimate the massive scale and enduring persistence of COVID-19 impact in education. While research and scrutiny – such as the work of the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England – shows persistent problems, the news cycle gives the impression of problems peaking and then subsiding. For example, press coverage of school absence reached a crescendo in mid 2023 and has then subsided. Yet the problem of school absence and the effect of absence on individuals remains very real and very serious. This pattern of rising and falling press coverage can be misleading: it's more about the news cycle than the reality of COVID-19 effect in schools. And it's reality on the ground with which we need to engage.

Analysis of the National Tutoring Programme – which I look at in detail later – shows that it so far has been very difficult to get support to where it is needed. The challenges schools, parents and children are grappling with are extremely unevenly distributed and are widely dispersed. As yet, we have devised inadequate responses to the scale and depth of the problems.
Schools worked strenuously throughout successive lockdowns to gear up on remote learning, to remain open for some groups of young people, to support communities with practical support and guidance, to deal with uncertainty and peaks of infection. That was then. What about now? And what about the next five to ten years?

We have extensive research on COVID-19 impact. Deep and detailed work was done at pace by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), by the Institute of Education at UCL, by other eminent researchers and my own research group (Cambridge University Press &

Assessment, 2021; Carroll & Constantinou, 2023). By 2021 we understood the challenges for young people taking A Level and other Level 3 qualifications, including vocational qualifications. We reviewed in detail what had happened to university applicants. We understood the different challenges facing those who had not taken GCSEs. We had looked at different patterns of attainment and outcomes across the nation. We had information on the distinctive challenge of keeping younger children engaged in education during lockdowns. We knew that those born or very young in the pandemic had an unusual pattern of early social contact and day-to-day experience.

The studies have given us some very worrying facts. It is important to be familiar with them, but even more important, as I go on to do, to see how they add up to a system-level challenge:

> COVID-19 amplified long-term persistent education gaps across a range of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including the UK (Twist et al., 2022).
>
> Primary age pupils were in general a month behind expectations (Howard, Khan & Lockyer, 2021).
>
> Primary age pupils' maths attainment was affected more than reading (Howard, Khan & Lockyer, 2021).
>
> The impact on progress in reading has been greatest in Years 1 and 2 while the impact of the pandemic on mathematics progress is greater across Key Stage 2 (Twist et al., 2022).
>
> Secondary school pupils aged 14 and 15 in 2020 and 2021 missed more school than younger year groups (Howard, Khan & Lockyer, 2021).
>
> Year 3 and 4 pupils eligible for free school meals were estimated to be around seven months behind their more well-off peers for reading in spring 2023. These gaps have not decreased since spring 2021 and remain wider than gaps reported before the pandemic (Rose et al., 2023).
>
> Despite some closing of the attainment gap which opened up in the first two years of COVID-19, significant effects remain; in reading in Year 3 there remains a notably larger proportion of very low attaining pupils than seen before the pandemic (4.9 percent compared with 2.5 percent) (Rose et al., 2023).
> Pupils' mental health and well-being suffered, as did that of staff and parents (Sharp & Skipp, 2022).
> During the first lockdown, pupils on average were studying 2 to 4.5 hours during home learning, a drop on 6 hours per day prior to interrupted learning (Howard, Khan & Lockyer, 2021).
>
> Disadvantaged primary age pupils studied for one hour less per day than advantaged pupils (Howard, Khan & Lockyer, 2021).

Families able to afford private tutoring for their children were likely to spend additional time studying (Howard, Khan & Lockyer, 2021).

Children whose parents' pre-COVID-19 employment situation changed were far more likely to see their social and emotional skills worsen. This happened even in cases where parents were furloughed, pointing to the important negative impact that parental job instability can have on children (Catten et al., 2023).

Evidence on rates of youth suicide is contested – and of course is affected by the problems of interpreting variation in a statistically very small vulnerable group, combined with the interruption of reporting from coroners' courts during COVID-19. Most analyses now report no major impact of the COVID period on child suicide rates (Odd et al., 2021). However, although similarly challenging to interpret, National Health Service (NHS) research suggests a 47 percent increase over pre-pandemic figures in young people being treated for eating disorders (NHS, 2023).

In 2022, 24.3 percent of pupils were 'persistently absent' (more than 10 percent of school sessions, or 19 days or more during the school year) – this is a level which reduced to 20.1 percent in late 2023, but in week 24 of 2024 this 23–24 figure of 20 percent was still substantially above the six years preceding COVID-19 where the figure was around 11 percent (Department for Education, 2023, 2024).

The effects are predominantly negative. Some, such as absence, profoundly affect children. Combined together, they are massive. 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results show the few nations which improved over the COVID-19 period. Singapore bucked the trend and improved. England's results dropped, as did previously high-performing nations such as Estonia (Oates, in press). But there were some less negative elements:

NFER's review work found some evidence that students felt a greater connection with school during the pandemic. The association between school connectedness and well-being suggests that schools may want to explore what practices were introduced during this unprecedented time with a view to seeing if any aspects transfer to more conventional times (Kuhn, 2022).

A minority of students who were well provisioned adapted well to online learning, with it appearing to appeal to their specific learning styles (Montacute, 2021).

Evidence on well-being has challenging composition, with one study indicating that one in three young people reported an improvement in mental health and well-being during lockdown measures – citing reduced feelings of loneliness, securing more sleep and exercise, and experiencing reduced bullying (Soneson et al., 2023). But it is a vital part of the overall picture to understand that impact has been highly

variable and unpredictable: many young people felt their mental health was worse, some reported it had improved. The 2021 Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey highlighted that 40 percent of 6–16 year olds have experienced deterioration in mental health, while 22 percent have experienced improvement. This variation is important for understanding the impact on schools (NHS 2021).

Schools increased their competence in the management of remote learning – although the positive in this is offset by the stress of the steep learning curve which some schools experienced and the negative impacts on specific learners of having slow start-up of adequate and high-quality online learning (Howard, 2021).

The Big Picture

The speed with which high-quality research was produced in England was remarkable. Yet we have spent little time on how this all adds up – the pattern of individual, local and system-wide impacts. As the introduction to this paper states, most of the research work gives us insights into specific year groups or a snapshot in time – but we need to construct an overview of the impact on the system – the different issues affecting primary and secondary schools. And we need to understand what the unfolding picture will look like over the next five or even ten years. This is essential, since children born or very young in the pandemic have now arrived in primary schools – giving us a sense of a problem now arriving – just at the time those who missed A Levels are graduating from university – giving us a sense of a problem abating. How should we make sense of this? What action is needed by schools? What policies should be in place? For an adequate policy response we need to understand the shape and nature of the problem.

What do we know from all this focused research? Each of the studies on COVID impact has yielded important insights into specific problems of specific age groups. The scale of the disruption is obvious, as stated in Levita (2021): "*… COVID-19 has led to an unprecedented disruption of normal social relations and economic activity worldwide – the impact on the public's mental health may affect need for services, the further progress or resolution of the pandemic and speed of recovery afterwards…'* (Levita, 2021, p. 3 and also see Major et al., 2021).

But in working through all of the studies, we begin to understand that the totality of the problems across all age groups presents a very new type of public policy challenge:

All children were affected, some profoundly.
Disadvantaged groups were disproportionately affected.
Regional effects are evident in the data and are shifting over time.
Different age groups were affected in different ways.
The effects on individuals were markedly different.

It is not just about 'learning gaps', interrupted education affected subject learning, school connectedness, social and emotional development and / or cognitive development.

In a recent book chapter on interpreting the 2022 PISA results, I highlighted the importance of understanding the totality of the public policy challenge:

The various lines of educational research on COVID in England provide a valuable and comprehensive insight into impact. However, the studies are predominantly cross-sectional studies of particular age groups and/or phases of education. This tends to obscure a very important characteristic of the enduring impact of COVID education: that the impact is differential in its form and effects as it slides through education – it is different within year cohorts and it is different between year cohorts. While directly-affected children (those born or young in pandemic) may only clear the system in the mid 2030s, the overall impacts in the system may persist beyond even that date.

Those 18 in 2020 and 2021 had taken exams at 16 – their next set of exams at 18 were cancelled. Those 16 in 2020 and 2021 had their exam cancelled but had to complete the next set of exams at 18; they missed the preparatory effect of exams at 16. Different impacts. In turn, right at the other end of the system, those entering primary education in those years were differently affected. These combine with the issues of highly individualised effects of interrupted education. These played out very differently in different children even in the same family: for some it has affected subject learning, for others school connectedness, others their learning dispositions, for some all of these. The impact has played out differently in different regions and in different social groups.

'The problem' is in fact a sliding set of distinctive challenges – wide and deep – moving upwards through the education system. Put succinctly, this 'sliding problem' means that if a school has thought that it has solved the problems of COVID-19 impact on Key Stage 3 pupils, then it is important to think again, since a new problem will be along very soon, with the new intake, differently affected by COVID-19. This is immensely hard on schools.

Different problems at different stages of education

Alongside the formal research, while secondary schools are reporting an increase in reading difficulties among Year 7 pupils, poor personal organisation and challenging patterns of interaction, staff in primary schools are reporting very serious problems of arrested language development, lack of toilet training, anxiety in being in social spaces, and depressed executive function (Buchanan & Inman, 2024). With considerable variation regarding delays in obtaining diagnoses for Education, Health and Care Plans, challenge and difficulty is loading up

in the first years of primary in some localities, although it is good that focused work by some authorities is reducing waiting lists (Adams & Ofori, 2024). Claudine Bowyer-Crane's work not only highlighted concerns about socio-emotional well-being among very young children but also the difficulty that many pupils were experiencing in interpreting instructions from teachers, and concentrating and persisting at tasks (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2020).

The impact of delayed development prior to the age of seven must never be underestimated. We increasingly know that extensive exposure to language, varied social interaction and purposeful activity are vital from birth, and that any significant reduction in the scale and scope of these can have serious consequences for the rate and nature of cognitive, emotional and social development (Benasich et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004). Delayed development should not be seen as a 'gap' or 'deficit' which quickly can be remedied; we know that if development is depressed prior to the age of seven, the effort required to return to an expected trajectory of development involves disproportionately high levels of focused effort from both education professionals and from the child themselves. To add to the sense of how serious this is for schools, an increased number of pupils with issues which demand intensive support can not only ramp up demands on teachers but disrupt patterns and pace of learning for teaching groups as a whole. This represents systemic impact within schools, rather than merely 'a few more pupils with particular needs…'.

There are serious dangers in simply assuming that schools are 'back to normal' – they are not – and assuming they will easily be able to meet the needs of young people affected by lockdowns and pandemic. 'Back to normal' fails to recognise the scale and nature of what schools are facing, and the nature of the support which they need to return to pre-pandemic levels of equity and attainment.

Using the insights from the mixed success of the National Tutoring Programme

The tutoring funding – which I analyse in detail below – shows that provision of effective support is not just a question of securing large amounts of funding. Action needs to reach the acute and chronic needs in a system where the adverse impact is widely dispersed and highly differentiated. The most recent perspectives from individual schools suggest we should be very concerned. But public consciousness is heavily shaped by the media. If we only think of the very public problem of those 16 and 18 year olds who were unable to take GCSEs and A Levels in 2020 and 2021, then we tend to think of a problem which 'peaked' then, and has now diminished as news stories have abated and those young people have progressed into the next stages of education and training. Thinking

only of this makes us feel that things are improving and normality is being restored. But right now, in 2024, diminished linguistic, social and cognitive development of those born and young in the pandemic is a wave hitting the schooling system from the bottom – just as young people moving from primary to secondary present a different problem – deriving from learning gaps in key areas of learning. And all of this is at a scale which is not simply increasing the proportion of children who will obtain lower scores at 11, 16 and 18 by a few percentage points – it has more significant impact than this, serious as that general depression of attainment is: it is not only affecting these children's capacity to benefit from education but also fundamentally affecting school capacity.

Are schools facing a permanently changed reality? Some commentaries suggest they might be: 'Toilet training and high anxiety – how schools are changing' (Buchanan & Inman, 2024). It highlights the significant problems which schools and young people are experiencing currently – from needing to improvise with sign language for five year olds with severely underdeveloped language to older children absent through anxiety. These problems are real, widespread and significant. But I do not believe that we should adapt schools to accommodate this lower level of infant development and widespread absence. On the contrary, children with scant functional speech at five already have lost out on vital development which in former times provides the foundations for learning. Older children with protracted absence through anxiety will likely carry amplified problems as they progress in life. We should urgently apply remedies to these problems and ensure the problems are diminished – hopefully to zero – rather than accept and accommodate them.

Remedies

Early years and parental support can mitigate the problems for younger children, while much earlier identification and support can help older children with anxiety. Well-designed policy and action; well-funded and targeted support. With highly dispersed and individualised impact, targeting support is essential – both for high impact and effective use of public funds. Without concerted action, depth and scale of residual COVID-19 effects will most likely pass as waves through the system, but they may **transform** schooling as they do, as behaviour, attendance and other problems impact on the processes and provision of schools. I am working with one secondary school in one of the most deprived boroughs in England, whose teachers and management have realised that they have inadvertently adapted their curriculum to one which does not require reading to access content. Yes, that improves the chances for the current COVID-19-affected cohorts, but the staff realise that they run the risk of permanently lowering the requirement to develop the skills which are essential for good later educational and professional progression.

There is a gross shortage of work on just which strategies are working in schools – at both granular and strategic levels. Ofsted is engaged with identifying good practice in educational recovery (Ofsted, 2022),

an important development. I have focused on being clear about the nature of the problem facing the nation and problems faced by schools and young people; it is equally important to use evidence to identify remedies. Research on education recovery from New Zealand after the Christchurch earthquake, from the USA following Hurricane Katrina and from interrupted education during conflict all hold important insights. Previously I have written about the importance of remedies such as:

> Understanding how each child has been affected – by using formal tests, teaching team discussions of each child, monitoring development through high-quality formative assessment. Individual attention can improve school connectedness, which in turn reduces the burden from behaviour problems. Assessment for diagnosis of issues is particularly important at primary–secondary transition.
>
> Using oracy (rich question and answer) in the classroom to increase feelings of school connectedness and to provide teachers with more information on pupils' thinking. This can be combined with tight focus on fundamental, threshold concepts in subjects.
>
> Using accelerated learning and focused provision if basic skills and knowledge in literacy and numeracy are preventing access to the curriculum in those and all subjects. Again this is particularly important at primary–secondary transition.
>
> Ensuring thinking about subject content outside contact time, using digital resources to improve the quality of work outside contact time and improving the use of the outcomes of such work during contact time.
>
> Strategies to improve home–school links, and acting swiftly on emerging issues at an individual level so that they do not escalate into more severe difficulties with wider impact on the school.

Learning from practice across the system

At present, we have inadequate capture of effective practice in schools. There has been substantial focus on the effectiveness of the National Tutoring Programme, since this was flagship policy. During COVID-19 disruption to education, government sought independent advice on different means of providing support to young people and obtained substantial additional funds for that support, with tutoring emerging as a front runner. It was a focus of GBP 1 billion of funded support to schools and pupils during and following COVID-19 disruption. However, it has achieved uneven penetration and adoption, particularly among disadvantaged groups (Lucas et al., 2023), despite an aspiration towards universality and particular concern for supporting disadvantaged groups (Department for Education, 2022). Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)

evidence review rates one-to-one tutoring as “high impact for moderate cost based on moderate evidence” with greater effects in primary schools than secondary schools (EEF, 2021). Ofsted’s review of tutoring (63 schools) indicates positive attitudes and high commitment among schools implementing it, but variable quality, particularly in areas such as assessment and evaluation (Ofsted, 2023). NFER’s evaluation (Lucas et al., 2023) gives a picture of lower impact and sustained improvement across the strategy than the EEF evidence might predict, a worrying set of findings. The National Audit Office review states that:

> *By the end of 2021/22, pupils had started 2.5 million courses under the NTP.4 Take-up of the NTP tuition partners and academic mentors schemes in 2021/22 was lower than DfE expected, but school-led tutoring more than made up the shortfall. In 2021/22, the number of courses started was 45% of DfE’s target for tuition partners and 65% for academic mentors. School-led tutoring proved more popular with schools than the other schemes and accounted for 81% of all the tuition courses started in 2021/22. More than 1.3 million pupils (one in five) received school-led tutoring. Overall, 87% of schools took part in some form of tutoring in 2021/22. DfE set out to focus the NTP on disadvantaged children, although schools were free to choose which pupils would benefit most from support. In 2021/22, around half of the pupils receiving tutoring under the NTP were disadvantaged. The proportion was 51% for the tuition partners scheme, short of DfE’s target of 65% for that scheme, and 47% for school-led tutoring (National Audit Office, 2023, p. 1).*

In June 2023, the Committee of Public Accounts concluded:

> *The Department must do more to increase participation to make sure that all pupils get the support they need. Looking ahead, the Department plans to sharply reduce its subsidy for tutoring in 2023/24 and withdraw it completely in 2024/25. There is a risk that, without this central subsidy, the National Tutoring Programme will wither on the vine (Committee of Public Accounts, 2023).*

But the Committee looked well beyond the NTS and considered the scale of the challenge and the response more widely, and corroborates the view of a protracted, moving problem which I present in this paper:

> *We are not convinced that the Department fully appreciates the pressures schools are under as they seek to help pupils catch up. Among other things, we heard evidence of funding constraints, challenges recruiting and retaining teaching staff, and growing mental health needs among pupils. The Department must do all it can to support schools with these wider challenges if education recovery is to be achieved.*
>
> *After further delays and much pushing, the Department finally published its improvement plan for special educational needs and disabilities and alternative provision in March 2023. The timetable for implementing the planned changes stretches into 2025 and beyond. Meanwhile the children affected continue to make their way through the school system, many of*

them without the support they need. We look to the Department to get on with making the necessary improvements as quickly as possible, making clear the respective responsibilities and accountabilities of the education and health systems. We intend to continue to keep a close eye on its progress in doing so (Committee of Public Accounts, 2023).

In conclusion

At present, policy actions do not seem to match the nature of the public policy challenge. Dealing with the waves of problems which COVID-19 impact presents does not provide headline-grabbing stories of brave new initiatives full of artificial intelligence and technology. An evidence-driven response requires strategy and resources co-designed by schools, unions and government. It will require parental support and community engagement. It will require protracted, grinding effort. It will require politicians dedicated to following the detail of what is happening on the ground, analysing data, listening to schools and finetuning strategy. Policy formation will need to be followed by well-targeted and effective implementation which gets support to where it is needed most. It will be a long slog, not a walk in the park.

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