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Covid Kids

The response of schools to coronavirus

Joanna Williams

THE COVID-19 REVIEW

How Britain responded to the Coronavirus

Part Five

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Summary

In response to coronavirus, schools closed to all but the children of key workers on March 20th 2020. The majority of children did not return before the end of the academic year, meaning they spent over five months out of the classroom. Schools remained closed to most pupils for such a long time because of government social distancing requirements and the teaching unions' insistence that the health of all teachers should be guaranteed. It is still not clear whether schools will open to all pupils, full time, come September.

Differences in how schools responded to closure quickly became apparent. Whereas some (predominantly private sector) schools were able to offer a full timetable of online interactive classes, other children had little or no contact with their teachers. Likewise, not all children had access to a laptop, printer or parental input. Concern was expressed about growing educational and social inequality.

In addition, there was much discussion about children's mental wellbeing. Clearly, expecting children to abandon daily routines, friends, jobs, hobbies and clubs to spend time alone, with only a screen for company, left many feeling lonely, isolated and unmotivated. For some, this led to feelings of depression and anxiety. In response, teachers offered children individual emotional support or pointed to external counselling services.

In the longer term, there have been calls to reassess the

purpose of schooling so as to challenge social inequality and mental health problems directly. Suggestions include cutting the content of the syllabus, delaying or reducing the number of public exams, and holding classes in friendship and mental wellbeing.

Children have missed out on education and socialisation. It is vital that their lives are able to return to normal as soon as possible so as to make up for lost opportunities. If some children return to academic teaching, while those from more deprived backgrounds are given a reduced curriculum combined with therapeutic interventions, educational inequality will be exacerbated further. Repeatedly telling children they will develop mental health problems may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Recommendations

1. Children and young people do not appear to be severely affected by coronavirus. There is little evidence that children play a role in transmitting the virus to adults. As such, government needs to drop all requirements for children to practice social distancing with immediate effect.

2. Playgrounds, swimming pools and leisure centres should be reopened as a matter of urgency for children and they should provide free entry for children throughout the summer months.

3. All schools should reopen fully, to all pupils from the start of the new academic year, with no social distancing in place.

4. Any narrowing of the curriculum to focus on only core subjects should take place for as short a period as necessary. Schools should aim to have all children ready to be taught the full curriculum by January 2021.

5. Classroom preparation, be it cleaning or rearranging desks, should take place in the remaining weeks of this academic year or over the summer holidays.

6. From September, there needs to be an immediate focus on bringing all children up to speed with missing subject knowledge as quickly as possible. Time could be taken from PSHE lessons; an extra 45 minutes could be added to the school day for the next academic year; five teacher training days could be dropped, and each school holiday could be shortened by one day. In addition, teachers may need to adopt a more didactic pedagogic style.

7. Where there are concerns about friendships, some of this extra time could be added to breaks and lunch in order to allow children to play.

Introduction

Much about Covid-19 was and remains unknown. However, it was recognised, almost from the outset, that children were the least likely part of the population to display symptoms if infected with Covid-19 and, like younger adults, were extremely unlikely to die from the virus. So, more than any other age group, restrictions placed upon children were determined by political, social and cultural imperatives rather than medical need.

In the UK, schools were effectively closed on March 20th 2020. Prior to the government's announcement, schools were struggling to deal with a high proportion of staff absent on sick leave and large numbers of children being kept at home by concerned parents. In the days leading up to the closure, there had been commentary pieces in national newspapers and a social media campaign calling on the government to instigate a lockdown and, in particular, to shut schools. A petition demanding the government close schools gained close to 700,000 signatures.

Throughout the period of lockdown, schools remained open to the children of key workers or to those deemed vulnerable or at risk, that is, in possession of a statement of special educational needs or having an assigned social worker. However, whereas the British government expected 20 per cent of children to attend school under these guidelines, fewer than 2 per cent actually turned up. This

low rate of attendance was driven, in part, by parental fears of children catching or transmitting coronavirus. There was also concern about social shaming. Parents were reluctant to appear to be putting others at risk or to be potentially stigmatised as having a child who fell into the vulnerable or at risk category. There was also evidence of schools having over-interpreted official government guidance, for example by insisting that children could only attend school if both parents were key workers rather than just one. In the first days of closure, there were reports of children being turned away from schools.

There were certainly good arguments for closing all schools for a short period of time, or for closing certain schools in areas of the country that were especially badly hit by coronavirus. But the decision effectively to shut all schools meant the vast majority of children were out of the classroom for over five months. What is more, the message to the nation's children was clear: that coronavirus represented an unprecedented threat that meant an end to all semblance of normal life. Children were told explicitly that the best thing they could do to save themselves and protect their families was to stay at home.

Following the announcement that schools would close, the decision was taken to cancel GCSE and A level exams. Grades were, instead, awarded on the basis of mock exams, coursework, teacher predicted grades and evidence from class work. Again, this caused initial confusion, with some schools continuing to set work for pupils to complete in order for them to improve the evidence teachers would have available to support grade predictions while others interpreted the guidelines more strictly. Although some youngsters welcomed not having to sit exams, others were disappointed at missing out on a challenge they had been

so focused on achieving and what may have represented an important opportunity to improve upon their past performance. There was concern that boys in particular were more likely to have achieved high grades with last minute cramming than with continual assessment. Cancelling exams had the effect of bringing forward the end of formal education for a cohort of 16 and 18 year olds. Many were left with little guidance from schools about how they should fill their time in the months ahead or plan for their post-school future.

For pupils in other year groups, teachers set work to be completed at home in lieu of classroom lessons. However, as this report illustrates, there were considerable variations in both the volume and nature of the tasks set. This prompted growing concern about educational inequality much of which fed into what became an impassioned national debate about the point at which schools should reopen.

This report explores the debate around school closures in the UK with a particular focus on the discussion of children's mental health. In particular, it asks whether the well-meaning concern of many head teachers and educationalists and union leaders over the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health may have inadvertently had counter-productive consequences. Many seem to have confused the natural emotional response of many children to the pandemic – feeling anxious or miserable – with longer term mental health problems. Sadly, their attempt to empathize with children may well have made a difficult situation worse. It overlooked a simple truth: that for most children, feelings of loneliness and sadness are normal and temporary emotional states. Treating them as deeper mental health issues, and expecting schools to provide large scale therapeutic interventions, detracts from the core

purpose of education: the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next.

It is now clear that the virus poses minimal risk to children's health. On top of that, the concern with children's mental health overlooked the primary cause of the problems: school closures caused isolation, lead to loneliness and unhappiness and exacerbated inequality. The most obvious solution to mental health concerns – to reopen schools to all children, without social distancing, and allow their education and socialisation to resume – was overlooked at every turn.

This report recounts the key issues in the school closures debate through the interventions of commentators, government ministers and key public figures such as the head of Ofsted and the Children's Commissioner for England. It draws upon press coverage, published research, communications between schools and home, such as headteachers' newsletters, as well as comments from teachers and parents. Many school newsletters are publicly accessible via a school's website or social media account. However, in order to avoid drawing unwarranted attention to particular schools, teachers or parents, for the purposes of this report all names of schools other than those cited in newspapers, have been changed.

1.

Initial response of schools

The announcement that schools were to close had been widely expected. However, teachers, parents and pupils were still shocked at the abrupt end to the school year. Schools had just two days in which to ascertain how many children would continue to attend on site; make initial arrangements for children to continue with their education from home; communicate with parents and pupils; clear premises of pupils' possessions and arrange final assemblies for those who would be leaving school for the last time.

The initial response of most schools was driven by concern for the health of pupils, members of staff, and the families of all those within the school community. This concern was accompanied by shock at the speed with which events had occurred and uncertainty at what might happen next. Although the initial lockdown was intended to be reviewed after three weeks, few expected schools to reopen again so quickly. Indeed, the decision to cancel exams scheduled to take place in May and June hinted at a far longer closure. This meant planned school trips and annual rituals would be missed. Pupils in their final year of primary or secondary school would miss out on leaving events and support with transition to the next stage of their education or into work or training.

South East Grammar

'The closure of the school with just two days notice meant that we had to very hastily rearrange our last day celebrations for students leaving the school in Years 11 and 13. Students gathered in the school hall to enjoy their breakfast and look at over 300 photographs covering the years at the school. Staff gave farewell speeches and students gradually said their goodbyes before leaving. The overwhelming emotion was one of shock accompanied by so much uncertainty.'

South East Primary

'This is a letter that we never imagined that we would write, a letter about our school closing indefinitely and for the foreseeable future. Now, more than ever is the time for our pupils to consider and show our school values of respect, care, courtesy and consideration. We have been overwhelmed with their continuing ability to show these values even under challenging circumstances. Our learning on resilience and independence has never been more necessary and we are confident that our pupils will continue to show their skills in this area, while developing their ability to work and think more independently at home. We know that they will do us and themselves proud! It is an opportunity for all children and families to be creative and resourceful, skills that will only support them for their futures. Children of [our school,] this is your chance to shine and we know that you will.'

North West Comprehensive

'It's very odd. For many students, staff and I'm sure for you as parents, this won't feel like a break. No-one is going anywhere so it's largely going to feel like it's felt for the past couple of weeks. Except some of us will eat more chocolate which we'll need to burn off by doing laps of the lounge. One warning from me as we do move towards Week 3 of lock-down. At some point, we're all going to have to start

cutting each other's hair. That's not an enormous issue for me personally of course but for some families, it's going to be the breaking point. Be kind!'

Eastern Secondary
'We have come to the end of the strangest of school terms. I would like to start by thanking everyone in the [our school] community for their support, care and understanding over the last few weeks whilst we have all made the rapid adjustments required of us.'

Continuing education

Schools made arrangements for pupils to continue with education remotely, either through independent study, online lessons or a combination of the two. Head teachers of primary schools in particular were conscious of making demands upon parents to play a new role in relation to the education of their children. However, as will be discussed later in this report, there was huge variation in the quantity and nature of work set.

South East Grammar
'Our advice to students has been to carry on studying; there is still a possibility (perhaps quite remote) that they could end up taking examinations this year and to avoid studying and revision in the months up to these potential autumn papers would put them at a great disadvantage.'

'The expectation is that students should be working for at least 3 hours each day. Teachers are endeavoring to set an appropriate amount of work, but obviously students all work at a different pace, so inevitably some students will be working for slightly longer or slightly less than others – please bear this in mind.'

South East Primary

'A weekly timetable will be uploaded onto the website and shared via Dojos, with links to where work is available. All of this will be available from 4pm today on the website, along with a video from your class teacher.'

'Every class teacher will be available live online for two hours per day which they will stipulate at the start of the week. We have asked that each teacher has direct conversations with all children in their class at least twice a week. We hope that you can support us in ensuring that you/ your children reply to messages sent directly by the teacher. If we have not heard from a child for 3 days we will message you to check that you are ok, and if we do not hear back, senior management will follow up with a phone call.'

North East Primary

'We appreciate that it is very difficult to work with your children at home and we know many of you are struggling, just do what you can and please don't put too much pressure on you or your children, this is all very different.'

Online learning

The closure of schools prompted a rapid acceleration in online learning. The use of technology to enhance the learning experience has long been an aspiration but the continued assumption that a majority of children would attend a physical setting for several hours each day meant that such initiatives had been used largely to supplement rather than to substitute for classroom teaching. With the lockdown, all this changed. At its most basic, schools simply used email or their institution's website to communicate with pupils and parents and to set work for pupils to complete. This could be worksheets to download, print and complete by hand or, for older pupils, questions requiring typed

answers to be completed and submitted online. For some subjects, most notably maths, children were often directed to established interactive websites that had previously been used for homework or revision. At the other end of the spectrum, schools offered fully interactive online lessons where teachers and pupils could work together in real time. Platforms such as Zoom, Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams were used to conduct lessons in this way. Many pupils experienced some mixture of all of these approaches.

In their initial communications with home following the announcement of the national lockdown, some schools suggested that children should keep working and expect 'business as usual' albeit from home, while others expressed more concern with pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Most schools recognised that education had to continue in a new form but that some children would be worried about coronavirus and anxious about new expectations in relation to their learning. Schools worked hard to get the balance right between setting pupils work to complete but not overburdening them and increasing anxiety.

North West Comprehensive
'We do not wish to overwhelm students or to flood them with too much work; equally, we do not want them to not have enough.'

South East Grammar
'We do recognise that this is an extremely difficult and challenging time for everyone. We do not want students to feel anxious about their learning and we know that there might be some tasks that they struggle with. Their teachers will of course give regular help and feedback to support them. This may not always be instant, so please bear with them. We anticipate that as we settle into our new online

learning routine, students will begin to feel more confident about the whole process.'

Eastern Secondary
'We do recognise that many students and parents will find it difficult to achieve 5 hours home learning in a day. We would always encourage you to put the physical and mental well-being of your child and family first, and achieve what is possible.'

'Hopefully you will have by now seen a number of the home learning tasks which staff are setting on Go4Schools. Please treat the completion dates as a guide, and please do not send completed work to staff unless they have specifically requested this. We do realise that some parents may be feeling overwhelmed by the thought of "home schooling". We do understand this and would suggest you take a pragmatic approach.'

Foregrounding the stress of online learning did not act as a spur to review the format and structure of lessons but instead became a reason for simply setting less work for children to complete. While some children no doubt welcomed this lowering of expectations, others were left with little sense of purpose or structure to their days – which could be as stressful as having too much to do.

Despite the best efforts of many teachers to harness technology so as to allow children to continue with their education, few argued that online learning was an adequate substitute for classroom teaching. In the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, online learning was considered to be better than nothing but it was recognised that 'there are elements of the classroom experience that simply cannot be replicated in the virtual equivalent, however good the distance learning package.'[1] There was

much concern that children from homes without access to a laptop or reliable WiFi were unable to access even the most basic forms of distance learning. The Department for Education announced funding to provide disadvantaged pupils with free laptops and routers and to waive data charges for educational websites[2] although the extent to which this happened in practice was disputed.

At the end of April, after almost six weeks of schools being closed to all but a tiny proportion of children, the Head of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, appeared before MPs on the Education Select Committee. She described home and online learning as 'imperfect substitutes' for school:

> 'Children are losing education and it's not just the children who are disadvantaged or academically behind, it's children without motivation. And it would be unrealistic for anyone, including me, to expect the vast majority of children to have made the same progress they would have made if they'd been in school, which is why I truly believe that it's in children's interests to be back in school as early as possible.'[3]

Mental health concerns

In their initial communications with home, schools expressed concern that children would be anxious about coronavirus and the possibility that they might become ill themselves or that family members might become ill or even die. This reflected national discussions and was backed by survey data. A study conducted by a team at the University of Oxford at the beginning of April, just three weeks after schools closed, suggested that one child in five was so worried about coronavirus they did not want to leave their homes.[4] A similar study conducted at the same time in the US found that despite being at lower risk of becoming seriously ill, a majority of teenagers were worried about

coronavirus and the effect it might have on themselves and their families. 'Teens of colour' were reported to be most concerned about both the health of family members and potential loss of jobs and income.[5]

It was hardly surprising children were worried following weeks of round-the-clock news coverage and the unprecedented measures put in place in response to the virus. Closing schools, shops and leisure centres, instructing people to stay at home in order to 'save lives' and 'protect the NHS' sent a very clear message to young people that not only did coronavirus pose a huge threat, it was one that adults had little capacity to resolve. This message was reiterated through daily government press conferences and repeated on social media. It became apparent that children especially had no useful role to play and, if they appeared in public at all, would risk spreading the virus to vulnerable family members.

Teachers and other adults responded to children's initial concerns about coronavirus by offering reassurance that it was normal to feel worried and anxious. Headteachers wrote newsletters home with a message to that effect and sent links for sources of support with mental health problems, such as the NHS's 'Every Mind Matters' website which provides 10 tips for those who may be concerned about coronavirus. One central London primary school offered parents the opportunity to take part in an online workshop with the school's wellbeing practitioner on how to manage anxiety in children.

North West Comprehensive

'Over the next few weeks we will all experience extra pressures that will affect how we think and feel. It's important to recognise that all of us have mental health and, just like our physical health, at this time it's important to look after

it. Young people may be feeling anxious or worried at the moment about all the changes and uncertainty that have arisen as a result of the coronavirus. They may be worried about their loved ones, falling ill themselves, concerned about what they are missing at school and generally missing their friends and family. For those young people in years 11 and 13, the uncertainty around their exams and general ending of their current school career may be causing them to worry.'

'But these are unsettling times. We must all keep looking out for our children, and how they are reacting. We must all watch out for their emotional and mental health needs, even if they seem to be coping well for now.'

Some schools went further and directed children and families to sources of support with bereavement.

North West Grammar

'Sadly, during this time we may be affected by the very worst aspects of COVID-19. Many people will be touched by bereavement and will not be able to grieve as they would in regular times. It is very important to us that we are able to reach out to [our school] community in their time of need and offer any support that we can. We have developed a Bereavement Resource File on the Learning Support page of the VLE for students, with the link below for yourselves. The file includes videos, lists of helplines and further advice and guidance when coping with yours or your loved ones grief.'

Writing in a *Children's Guide to Coronavirus*, Children's Commissioner Anne Longfield noted:

'When we feel scared, it's our body's way of telling us we need to take extra care to protect ourselves. And there are some important things we all need to do to stay safe, like wash our hands and stay at home. Feeling worried is one way our bodies remind us to do these things. So being worried is

normal! But there's no need to worry too much. We want to help you understand what's going on and how you can do your bit to help.'[6]

Theatrefolk, a children's theatre company, produced a series of plays designed for teenagers to perform through online platforms. In one play, *Wellness Check* by Christian Kiley, 'three characters struggle with wellness in uncertain times. A teacher tries too hard by calling themselves "Friendly." A high achieving student has memorized the wellness check questions but isn't doing so well.'[7]

A picture book, *Coronavirus, A book for children*, was produced to help even the very youngest children understand the sudden changes that occurred.[8] One page reads:

> 'The grown-up or grown-ups who look after you might also feel worried. Sometimes they might feel worried about work. Sometimes it might be hard to buy the things that you all need, and that might worry them too. If you are worried, talk about your worries to a grown-up who looks after you. If you are still going to school, maybe you could talk to a teacher. Or maybe you could talk to a teacher or someone else in your family on the phone or using a computer or tablet.'

The frequent repetition of the word 'worry' here is striking. The danger is that in trying to offer reassurance, worrying becomes normalised as the appropriate emotional response children are expected to demonstrate.

Rather than reassuring children that they stood little chance of becoming ill and sending them out to play or, for older teenagers, giving them a useful role in response to the pandemic – perhaps delivering food parcels to the elderly, cleaning public spaces or working on farms – children were instead told that coping was in itself problematic and that

being worried and anxious was normal. In this way, children were offered a therapeutic, rather than a practical response, to dealing with coronavirus.

Reopening schools

Discussion as to when schools should reopen to all pupils began almost as soon as schools closed. Indeed, some argued that schools should never have closed in the first place.[9] The argument made by government ministers, teaching unions, individual head teachers and teachers was that schools would only reopen when it was considered safe for them to do so. In the absence of a vaccine it was assumed that science would reveal when schools should reopen. Education Secretary Gavin Williamson insisted schools 'will only reopen when the scientific advice indicates it is the right time to do so.'[10] He echoed the words of Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, who argued: 'A return to school is not a matter for debate – it is a question for science.'[11]

Unfortunately, the science on coronavirus, children and schools was anything but settled. It was known that children were far less likely than adults to display symptoms of coronavirus and that, if they did become ill, were far less likely to become seriously infected or to die. The statistician Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter, claimed the risk coronavirus posed to the young was 'staggeringly low'.[12] One global study, conducted in partnership with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH), claimed there were no known cases of children having passed Covid-19 on to adults.[13]

Initial research confirmed that the risk of coronavirus spreading in schools was extremely low. One Australian study analysed 18 infected teachers and pupils in 15 schools.

Between them, the infected group came into contact with 863 people yet only two of this number went on to become infected themselves. The scientists who conducted this study, based in Australia's National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, said the findings 'suggest that children are not the primary drivers of Covid-19 spread in schools or in the community'. Nonetheless, in the UK, this was not interpreted as meaning it was safe to reopen schools. The chairman of the British Medical Association, Chaand Nagpaul, pointed to a separate study conducted in Berlin, which looked at the amount of virus children carried and claimed this showed that children were 'just as likely to be infected as adults and may be just as infectious'. Nagpul argued that 'Until we have got case numbers much lower, we should not consider reopening schools.'[14]

Others disagreed. Alasdair Munro, clinical research fellow in paediatric infectious diseases at Southampton, said:

'The German study examining viral loads did not find children were "just as likely to be infected as adults". It made no comment on this at all, but did find substantially lower numbers of children positive for SARS-CoV-2 in the cohort. In addition, the study did not demonstrate children are "just as infectious" as adults. The study made no firm conclusions, but did find viral load increased with age… Whilst not the sole indicator of how infectious an individual is, this certainly does not indicate children are as infectious as adults.'

Similarly, Saul Faust, professor of paediatric immunology and infectious diseases at Southampton University and University Hospital Southampton, said:

'The BMA …have not presented a balanced representation of their members' views. Society has to reopen, children need to return to school as there are negatives for many of [them]

having to stay at home and we need to be able to study transmission dynamics in all ages to help us learn how to manage this virus.'

He added, 'Slowly opening schools in a controlled way will be of low risk to children's health and less risk to teachers than the risk to many other workers when on public transport.'[15]

This disagreement between scientists was exacerbated by the establishment of an 'independent' SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) committee to act in parallel with the government's scientific advisory team. Following the announcement of some limited reopening of schools to children in Reception, Year One and Year Six of primary school from 1st June, the Independent SAGE group declared this was 'too soon'. This message was repeated by many, including Labour's Deputy Leader Angela Rayner, who incorrectly attributed the comments to the government team.

School attendance contains an element of risk: children may be injured on the way to school, may suffer an accident during the course of the school day or may pick up a virus or infection from a classmate. However, the risks children face in attending school are offset by the risks of *not* attending: missing out on education, socialisation and the development of an independent life outside of the home. Science can never tell us what degree of risk is acceptable: these are moral and ethical concerns. Deference to 'the science' provided a means for everyone from the Education Secretary to union leaders to head teachers to avoid assuming responsibility for making a decision about reopening schools.

When it became increasingly clear that a vaccine for coronavirus was a long way off the need for an honest discussion about appropriate and competing levels of risk became more urgent. Sadly, opposing sides simply became ever more entrenched in their views.

2.

Longer term consequences of school closures

Although the initial period of lockdown was scheduled to last for three weeks it became clear early on that this would simply be renewed and that schools were unlikely to be reopened quickly. For children, staying at home with some online or distance education was to become a 'new normal'. This prompted discussion about the longer term consequences of keeping children out of school.

Inequality of opportunity

It became clear very soon after the announcement of school closures that different schools were offering their pupils very different experiences of online learning. Many fee-paying schools and, later, some high performing state schools were able to provide close to a full timetable of interactive online lessons and expected children to attend, from home, for the length of the traditional school day and, in some instances, wearing school uniform. Meanwhile, many state schools struggled to offer any online interactive lessons at all and merely emailed home instructions or worksheets.

Research exposed the growing educational divide. At the end of April, the Sutton Trust published data suggesting that only 23 per cent of pupils were taking part in live and

recorded lessons every day. Independent school pupils were twice as likely as state school pupils to have regular online lessons.[16] At the same time, 6,500 teachers were surveyed through Teacher Tapp to ascertain the extent to which schools were supporting their pupils[17] and 1,508 parents were surveyed by Public First to explore learning in the home.[18] The polling found that over half of students in independent primaries and secondaries were taking part in online lessons every day. This was two and half times as often as their state school peers. Some parents with children at state schools were reported to be frustrated at the lack of school work their children were being set. One mother told *The Times*: 'All the children are really interested in what their teachers want them to do, but the youngest one [in Year 5] is the only one being set enough work to fill three hours a day.'[19]

Explanations for this discrepancy tended to focus upon the need for independent schools to ensure a level of service that justified the fees being charged. In addition, it was suggested that independent schools were more likely to have online learning platforms already in place and staff and students who were experienced at using the technology. At the point at which schools closed, three-fifths of teachers in independent schools and over a third of those in state schools in the most affluent areas had access to an online learning platform to set and receive work, compared to under a quarter of those in schools in the most deprived areas. This difference was exacerbated by inequalities in access to technology in the home. Private schools and state schools in more prosperous areas assumed (perhaps erroneously) that all pupils had access to a dedicated laptop for the duration of the school day.[20] Fifteen per cent of teachers working in schools serving more economically

disadvantaged communities reported that a third of their pupils did not have access to a device suitable for accessing online lessons or adequate internet access.

The amount of time children spent engaged in learning activities during lockdown was not just determined by schools. A survey of 4,000 parents conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies revealed that pupils from better-off households were spending almost a third more time on learning activities than those from the poorest fifth of families. They calculated this as being equivalent to a week and a half of extra home learning by 1st June.[21] Of course, many children did not return to the classroom on 1st June. By mid-June, a study conducted by University College London reported that two million children had done almost no home learning during lockdown.[22]

Differences in school provision and the home environment led to variations in the quantity and quality of work produced by pupils. Whereas half of the teachers surveyed from independent schools reported receiving more than three quarters of work back, this fell to just over one quarter in the most advantaged state schools, and only 8 per cent in the least advantaged state schools.[23]

This led to concerns about a growing educational inequality and a widening of the attainment gap between children from the wealthiest and least well off families. The Education Endowment Foundation produced a rapid evidence assessment examining the potential impact of school closures on the attainment gap. They found that school closures would widen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, potentially reversing progress made to narrow the gap since 2011. Their research suggested the gap would increase by a median of 36%. However, they point to a high level of uncertainty

around this average with estimates ranging from the gap widening from between 11 and 75 per cent.[24]

The impact of this growing educational inequality and widening attainment gap was expected to have a long term impact on pupils' lives, compounding social and economic disadvantage many years into the future. A team of Norwegian researchers assessed the cost of closing primary schools during lockdown and argued that it was more difficult for parents, often mothers, to work if their children were not at school and that this then had an impact on their earnings and family income. In terms of the pupils themselves, they argued, perhaps pessimistically, that younger pupils may never fully make up for the time lost in school, at huge cost to their future life chances and earnings potential.[25] A German study likewise predicted that missing a significant part of the school year could permanently damage a child's future life chances and deepen inequality across society. The researchers suggested that affected pupils would see their lifetime earnings fall by 4 per cent. The director of the centre that conducted the research said, 'Each school year of additional learning increases life income by an average of around 10 per cent … Students who lose around a third of a school year's study time will on average receive approximately 3 to 4 per cent less income over the course of their professional lives.'[26]

Although research pointed to the potential longterm impact of school closures on children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, few headteachers remarked upon this in communications between home and school. One reason for this was the fact that, as many teachers pointed out on social media, schools had not in fact closed. As well as setting work for pupils to complete at home, most schools operated a rota system with staff taking turns to

work on site with the approximately 2 per cent of children in attendance. However, as schools were quick to specify, the children of key workers and those considered vulnerable were to receive child care rather than formal teaching.

Passing exams

Government plans to reopen secondary schools emphasised the need for pupils in Years 10 and 12 who would be sitting exams in the following academic year to have some 'face-to-face' contact with their teachers before the end of term in order to supplement online learning. In this way, schools demonstrated a particular concern for and interest in pupils about to sit exams.

> *South East Girls*
> 'With Year 9 we will confirm with students their option choices and they will only carry on working in subjects that they will study for GCSE. This may mean that they start new GCSE topics, but it may also mean that they continue with what they have been doing as it links/feeds into GCSE work.'
>
> 'We will continue with Year 10 in a similar fashion to now but will remove any non-examined subject from setting work. We will suggest that they spend a maximum of 4 hours per day but aim for 3. Where possible work will be set in 30-minute blocks, but where longer is required they should rearrange their time accordingly.'

A teacher from London Academy explains how this works in practice:

> 'The real focus is on our Year 10s and Year 12s. We are teaching the GCSE and A Level course as normal. Our Year 12s will do their mock exams in the second week of May and will have to submit their papers online within 10 minutes of the allocated exam time on the day. Then I am expected to mark and return them with detailed feedback.'

'All in all I would say that my school (while understanding of kids who are sick or who have genuine I.T. problems) is rigorous and demanding yet understanding of pupils' individual circumstances. Overall I would say we are an ambitious school and we want to keep our 'outstanding' reputation and so a work ethic is expected from teachers and students alike athough we are all aware that lessons online cannot completely replicate classroom conditions.'[27]

A teacher from Midlands Grammar explains that although schools may be concerned with children's mental health, pupils themselves were more worried about academic achievements:

'We have a pastoral team who focus on the more 'vulnerable' children and we have to send out questionnaires each week to children in our forms asking how they are; do they need any help/support etc. Most of the responses seem to be asking about how they are going to get their grades to get into university; but it is a grammar school with much focus on exams and academic achievement.'[28]

Clearly, passing exams is an important outcome of schooling and a means of assessing learning. But one problem with only providing 'face-to-face' contact to pupils who will be taking exams is that the message goes to other children that their education is less important. This is reinforced when all non-publicly assessed subjects are also removed from the online timetable. Education comes to be reduced to passing exams and doing so in the most efficient way possible. The risk here is that, as happened for the summer 2020 cohort of school leavers, exams are abandoned, the entire project of education is rendered meaningless.

Not all schools adopted this approach. Some did manage to prioritise education and learning in a non-instrumental way. A teacher from London Free School told me:

'Aside from 'stay healthy', the main message from [our school] is ensuring that children are learning. This means that, where possible, teachers are expected to conduct live lessons online. There's an emphasis on setting work regularly to compensate for school being closed. There is also a broader discussion among staff about what should happen with the current Year 13s and Year 11s. We plan to run programmes for the current Year 11s on their chosen A levels. This will act as an introduction to the subjects they intend to study in September. There is also a plan to put in place extra curricular online forums for the Year 13s, to prevent them aimlessly drifting into computer games. For example, I'll be running a weekly Politics Review for Year 13s.'

Social welfare

When schools first closed, concern was raised about the social welfare of pupils. In particular, it was noted that parents might struggle to feed children who would normally receive a free school lunch (currently around 13 per cent of pupils).[29] In response, the government ruled that 'Schools should provide meal options for all children who are in school, and meals should be available free of charge to all infant pupils and pupils who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria.'[30] This could be achieved through the provision of food directly to families in their homes or through national or local voucher schemes. In order to cover costs, 'The government will continue to provide schools with their expected funding, including funding to cover benefits-related free school meals and universal infant free school meals, throughout this period.'[31]

There was also concern about at-risk children in dangerous home environments. Amanda Spielman told MPs that she expected to see a rise in the number of children needing some form of social care in the wake of

the Covid-19 pandemic.[32] She said:

> 'We have every reason to think this [pandemic] is putting more pressure on a lot of families – we've all seen the reports around increased domestic violence. We know some families will be under significant financial pressure – and financial strain does not help families' situations. So, yes, it seems very likely that there will be more children needing social care.'

Spielman's concerns were echoed by Anne Longfield, the children's commissioner for England, who said she feared hundreds of vulnerable children not in school might be at home, 'often exposed to a lack of food, cramped conditions, neglect, or are experiencing difficulties due to domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health problems.'

A survey conducted on behalf of the educational technology company Impero suggested a majority of teachers were more worried about child safety than attainment during the lockdown period. Forty per cent of those polled said they were most concerned about the safeguarding and protection of children compared to 30 per cent who were most concerned about disruption to learning and development. Almost three quarters of teachers said they had contacted 'at risk' pupils to provide information on where to get help if they have a safeguarding need. More than two thirds reported having flagged concerns about pupils' safety to local authority social care teams.[33]

In response, many schools went beyond both looking after children on site and setting work for the majority to complete at home. They played a broader role in relation to the social welfare of the school community.

South East Girls
'In the past two weeks we have delivered the food donations you made at the end of term, and perishable goods from

our kitchen, to the [town] food bank; donated 70+ pairs of science goggles to NHS theatre and ICU staff; been asked to lend both of our school minibuses to move medical staff and patients around (with some of our staff volunteering to drive) and for lockers for the extra staff being drafted into hospital, and [teachers] have commenced production of 400 face visors for local hospitals and health workers. On top of that we've tried to carry on educating our students as well as possible, adapting as we go, and learn about the challenges of remote learning. This has taught us a lot in a very short space of time, although we have much, much, more to learn yet!'

Steve Reddy, Director of Children's and Young People's Services, Liverpool City Council
'I think many of us have grown further in our admiration for those who work and teach in our nurseries, schools and colleges. We now recognize even more the important role nurseries, schools and colleges play in our lives, and in our communities. They are much more than places of learning! They have become care providers, meal voucher distributors, PPE manufacturers, providers of sanitary products – in short, they continue to be the beating heart of local communities.'

Although this broader focus on safeguarding and welfare may have been vitally important to vulnerable pupils and their families, it rapidly extended to cover the health and wellbeing of all pupils.

South East Girls
'This aligns closely to the key message which I stressed when I wrote to you at the end of March which is about our young people finding the fine balance between the focus on and positive routine of core study aligned with some creative time. Time in which your daughter or son's well-being is at the forefront. The daily structure in place, to engage in and be stimulated by their academic work and also participate in

meaningful family activities, will continue to provide them with reassurance in these uncertain times.'

London Girls

'Welcome to week three of online learning. I hope you are now feeling more confident using Teams and GCSEPod but you are still ensuring you balance work with rest. I am extremely proud of how well you have adapted to this way of learning and how hard you are all working. Let me remind you we would like you to spend no more than three hours completing school work each day and approximately one hour on each subject.'

'It remains vitally important that you do not worry about your work or get anxious about your assignments. Staff are here to support you so please post a message on your subject Team if you need any help or guidance from your teacher and we will get back to you when we can.'

London Multi-Academy Trust

'Kindness is an undervalued attribute yet has the power to change minds, to change outcomes for the better and to make ourselves and others feel appreciated, loved. Whilst we are physically apart it is vital for us to feel emotionally connected to our school communities as well as our local communities and family members.'

'Kindness and empathy help us relate to other people and have more positive relationships with friends, family, and even strangers we encounter in our daily lives. The added benefit of helping others is that it is good for our own mental health and wellbeing. It can help reduce stress and improve your emotional wellbeing. In short, doing good does you good!'

One government-backed response to help schools with the move towards online lessons was the establishment of Oak National Academy. Yet one of the leading contributors to this badly needed resource felt obliged to admit:

'We don't have anything on wellbeing. We knew from the start that there was no way Oak could replace a school. We make and host online lessons. We don't have relationships with children, and it would make no sense to pretend we are more than what we are. We're not in children's communities and don't know their situations. We're not the right people to try and support their wellbeing – only their schools can do this. Our hope is that if we can make life a little bit easier for teachers then it will free up time for them to support their pupils' wellbeing without burning themselves out.'[34]

The focus on social welfare extends the remit of schools vastly beyond educating children. Some schools and teachers have undoubtedly always done more than teach; however, this was often informal and for the purpose of ensuring children could benefit from education rather than an end in itself. At best, this simply adds to teachers' workload and at worst distracts from and even comes to replace the unique purpose of schools in relation to the education of all pupils.

Mental health

With many children out of school for an extended period of time, focus shifted to the potential mental health problems caused not by anxiety over coronavirus but by the restrictions placed on people's behaviour. With lockdown, children lost contact with friends and classmates; lost all semblance of normal routine; became isolated within the home and were expected to spend far more time than usual online.

A team of researchers based at University College London surveyed 60,000 people about their perceptions of life in lockdown. They found that the youngest people interviewed, those aged between 18 and 24, had the lowest levels of life satisfaction, while the highest was recorded in the over-60s. In a report on the research, young people were

interviewed by The Guardian. 'I'm sad about missing out on the stuff that everyone normally gets to do,' one teenage girl said, 'I didn't have a proper leavers' assembly, I didn't get to properly say bye.' Another suggests, 'I guess you've got the hope that the future is not confirmed yet, you don't know how long it's going to last – but that's also what's confusing about it all. It's the knowledge that I'm losing my teenage years.'[35] A separate study suggested that 7 in 10 parents thought their children's mental health had been impacted by school closures and lockdown.[36] For children with pre-existing mental health issues who found routine medical appointments and cancelled and all semblance of routine abandoned, lockdown was devastating.

As schools remained closed to a majority of children, head teachers sent home newsletters expressing concern for the mental health of pupils.

South East Independent
'We very much hope that all our families remain fit and well and are managing during these challenging times. We have been impressed by the motivation, resilience, spirit and creativity shown by our pupils over this half term, but I am also aware that some pupils will have struggled with the limitations and uncertainty of the situation.'

Many supplied links to websites of local and national sources of support such as the NHS and the Samaritans. Often head teachers spoke of the importance of striking the right balance between setting schoolwork for children to complete and not wanting to over-burden them with additional sources of stress and anxiety. In this way, fear of adding to mental health problems became a justification for lowered educational expectations.

Numerous charities and public figures raised concerns

about the mental health of young people during lockdown. The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge launched a mental health awareness campaign to help people during the coronavirus outbreak. This included narrating a film in support of the NHS-backed 'Every Mind Matters' campaign to encourage people to look after their mental and physical wellbeing. Leading UK educators and mental health experts wrote to the government urging immediate action to support the mental health of children and families affected by Covid-19 lockdown. The letter – initiated by parenting expert and author Nadim Saad and co-written with educationalist Sir Anthony Seldon and parenting expert Tanith Carey – proposed an action plan to address and mitigate the anticipated mental health pandemic brought on by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The letter pointed out that children, being in their emotionally formative years, were most vulnerable to mental health issues brought on by lockdown. Yet rather than calling for the reopening of schools and an end to social distancing for young people, it called instead for the immediate provision of key guidance and support at home and in schools to improve the emotional intelligence of young people, enabling them to better manage their mental wellbeing.

Commenting on the letter, Nadim Saad, author of the *Happy Confident Me Journal* series for children and founder of the Happy Confident Company, said:

'A week ago, my 13 year-old told me 'I don't care about school anymore'. She is dyslexic and after a lot of hard work, she'd beaten the odds and recently became a straight A-student. The current crisis has deeply affected her motivation. And this is happening in homes all around the country. I firmly believe it is our role as parents/adults to help our children

express difficult feelings and make sure they come out of these extraordinary events stronger and more resilient. But many parents and children aren't yet equipped with the necessary skills to understand and manage their mental health and well-being and the government simply isn't doing enough to support them.'

Tanith Carey, parenting expert and author of *What's My Child Thinking?* and *What's My Teenager Thinking?* added:

'As we know from existing figures, many young people were already struggling with their mental health before the Covid-19 pandemic. The resulting trauma, financial uncertainty, family stress and heightened anxiety means existing mental illness among children and teenagers is likely to have worsened during lockdown, especially as they will have had even less access to help. As the next generation, whose wellbeing is vital to the future of the planet, our children will need more help to come through this crisis, so they are ready to cope with the pressing challenges the human race still faces.'

All young people were portrayed as being at risk of mental health problems during the lockdown period. The NHS Confederation, an umbrella group for NHS leaders, claimed:

'Even those children and young people who appear to be coping relatively well today are still absorbing distressing headlines and misleading social media content, as well as potentially being exposed to the anxiety of adults around them. This leads us to think about not only those who are struggling to cope now with the changes to their daily routines and the loss of freedom, but also the longer-term consequences of being isolated from support structures, the many who will face sudden or unexpected bereavements, and the challenges that will be faced on return to normality.'[37]

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families published a guide for schools and colleges with advice as to how best to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils and students during periods of disruption. The guide advised:

> 'There are other ways that children and young people can be encouraged to take care of themselves. For example, through exercise, practicing breathing or mindfulness techniques, healthy eating, talking to someone, writing a journal and getting enough sleep. Encourage pupils to identify their own self-care strategies.'[38]

The mental health charity Mind published similar guidance aimed at young people directly:

> 'You might be feeling overwhelmed, sad, or confused about the outbreak of coronavirus and feel worried about yourself, or your family and friends. This is completely normal – things keep changing as we learn more about the virus, schools have closed, and people are now self-isolating to protect themselves and others.'[39] In May, Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, spoke out about her concerns for the mental health of children: They might have felt anxious about their own health, their family's health, their grandparents' health. But also the fact that their whole routine has been altered.' She added: 'Childline has had a real upturn in calls and what they say is that the majority of those are Covid-related.'[40]

A play by *Theatrefolk* again captures the mood of the times. In *Commence*, a play by Christian Kiley:

> 'a group of students have an online meeting with their principal while they're all under quarantine. They want to regain normalcy and recoup what they've lost as seniors: prom, school play, graduation. But nothing is normal.

Everyone is losing things. It's a scary and uncertain time, like a fire has destroyed memories that haven't happened yet.'[41]

The impact on young people of the mass cancelling of long-anticipated rites of passage such as exams and school leaving ceremonies, as well as having plans for holidays, jobs and parties abandoned at the same time that teenagers were unable to meet with friends to commiserate and support each other cannot be underestimated. But it cannot be assumed that all children will respond to lockdown and school closures in the same way. For some parents and children, this concern could be misplaced. A London Primary parent told me:

'I received an email from my son's primary school informing me of a video to help parents manage child anxiety during this time. It sounds like a caring thing for the school to send out. But is there a demand from anxious parents for this? The school did report, before the lockdown, that parents had called up worried about sending their children to school. But now, post-lockdown, I don't know of any child in my son's class that is freaking out! Or any parent either. Currently the situation is the opposite; the kids love being at home and learning through lots of technology and videos! The only parent I know with a real problem is a family where the child's father is in hospital and the mother is self-employed and running out of care help and wages. Can the school help with that? Nope.'

Research published in May 2020 and conducted by a team of academics at the University of Sheffield found that young people were 'significantly more anxious' than prior to the start of lockdown with the youngest teenagers reporting the highest rates of anxiety and older teens reporting lower levels of overall wellbeing. The survey suggested that anxiety and depression were up to 10 per cent higher among

black and mixed race participants than white and Asian respondents. The lead researcher, Dr Liat Levita, added an important caveat to her team's findings:

> 'We should also be careful in painting an overly bleak picture. Not everyone will experience this period negatively, and we found that some of our teens are enjoying being at home with their parents more than ever, and are not more anxious or worried than before.' She points out: 'The crucial questions are how long this lasts and what support young people need for the world to feel safe and more predictable. This requires a public health approach, not necessarily a rush to a mental health service.'[42]

The need not to 'paint an overly bleak picture' is important and needs to be kept in mind when the rhetoric of 'trauma' and 'crisis' is employed. Kathryn Ecclestone, co-author of *The Dangerous Rose of Therapeutic Education* and retired professor of education, told me:

> 'Some children and teenagers are likely to be fed up, isolated, aimless, bored and some anxious and miserable. Some are (according to one parent I know) 'going feral,' meaning they are less easy to discipline and are perhaps taking part in semi-legal activities where they wouldn't have previously. Some started lockdown seeming fine and have since become withdrawn and sad. But others seem fine – they are experiencing lockdown as a long holiday…the parks and countryside have had many families out enjoying picnics and cycling for weeks on end now!'

'But,' Ecclestone cautions:

> 'the language used to describe the current situation is really important. The cultural zeitgeist of a mental health crisis among children and young people has dominated public and political discourse for about 15 years now so it is no surprise

that highly alarmist, hyperbolic narratives about the effects of lockdown have continued and embellished this trend.'[43]

Not only is there a risk of exaggerating the difficulties some young people may be experiencing but problems are caused by assuming all young people are struggling with mental health difficulties when some are clearly not. There is also a danger of confusing what might be a short-term emotional response – feeling anxious or miserable – with longer term mental health problems such as depression, although there is undoubtedly a link between the two. As Ecclestone indicates, confusion between short term emotional states – particularly the anxiety and turmoil surrounding adolescence – and more serious mental health problems requiring specialist clinical interventions pre-dates coronavirus.

There are problems with applying mental health labels to children's feelings and medicalising essentially normal emotional responses. One problem is the assumption that the instinctive reponses of parents or carers are not sufficient to care for most young people and that an array of specialist skills and professional interventions are required. This disempowers parents and may leave them feeling unable to help their own children. A further problem with medicalising transient emotional states is that it can entrench problems for the longer term.

Some decreed that the prolonged period of isolation would inflict permanent damage on children's mental health. 'Some teenagers will return to school 'traumatised',' warned Alicia Drummond, founder of Teen Tips, who went on to warn that anxiety could become 'hardwired' into children's brains, causing long-term mental health problems:

'The thing about adolescence is that it's a big period of cognitive restructuring anyway and what we don't want is

for those patterns of anxiety to become hardwired because we already know that a lot of the long-term adult mental health problems start in childhood and adolescence.'[44]

Likewise, the Church of England's chief education officer, The Reverend Nigel Genders, said: 'Remaining at home for a prolonged period will affect the mental, spiritual, physical and social wellbeing of children. We are particularly concerned about the impact on children from the most disadvantaged families.'[45] While it was vital to hear expressions of concern, being too certain ('*will* affect') could suggest there is one emotionally correct response to the difficulties experienced during lockdown.

Several researchers were also quick to claim certainty in mental health outcomes for children. One report by the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group of Modelling (SPI-M) and New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag) warned of the wider impact of lockdown to children's physical and mental health, education and development and was headlined as providing evidence of 'life long damage inflicted on children by lockdown.'[46] The report's authors said:

'A cohort of children have experienced a shock to their education which *will* persist and affect their educational and work outcomes *for the rest of their lives*' (my emphasis). They continued: 'The current lockdown may lead to an increase in adverse childhood experiences, for example: domestic violence, poor parental mental health, child neglect or abuse.'[47]

An article published in *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* in June, suggested that reduced contact among teenagers and their friends could have damaging long-term consequences.[48] Prof Sarah-Jayne Blakemore from the University of Cambridge said:

'Owing to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, many young people around the world currently have substantially fewer opportunities to interact face-to-face with peers in their social network at a time in their lives when this is crucial for their development. Even if physical distancing measures are temporary, several months represents a large proportion of a young person' life. We would urge policymakers to give urgent consideration to the well-being of young people at this time.'

Another review of 60 pre-existing, peer-reviewed studies into topics spanning isolation, loneliness and mental health for young people aged between four and 21, published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, noted that 'Children and young people *are likely* to experience high rates of depression and anxiety long after the lockdown ends' (my emphasis).[49] Such a deterministic approach can influence the way people respond to children and potentially make mental health problems a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Pre-existing narrative of vulnerability

One reason why long term mental health problems would be assumed to be an impact of school closures is that the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown emerged at a time when children were already assumed to be vulnerable to mental health problems. Statistics compiled by NHS Digital suggest that in 2017, 1 child in 9 aged 5-15 had a mental health disorder (either emotional, behavioural, hyperactive, or other). This was an increase from 1 in 10 in 2004. When young people up to the age of 19 are included in the statistics this increases to 1 in 8. The greatest increase was in emotional disorders, including anxiety and depression.[50]

Several explanations have been proposed for the growing number of young people reported to be experiencing

mental health problems. Some argue children are under greater pressure today as a result of a more intensive and exam-focused school curriculum. A 2019 Mumsnet survey of 1500 parents suggested that two thirds thought exam pressure was affecting their child's mental health. One in 10 of those who took part in the survey, with children aged 13 or over, said exam pressure had affected their own child's wellbeing 'severely' and 9 per cent said their child has sought healthcare advice.[51]

Questions should be asked of such surveys. Parents who opt to complete questionnaires about child mental health issues are perhaps more likely to have a personal interest in the matter and this may inflate figures. Likewise, 'wellbeing' is a subjective notion and not all parents may judge their child's mental state according to the same definitions. Nonetheless, such survey data is taken seriously because it accords with a dominant narrative expressed by schools, commentators and politicians and echoed by the media. Then Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, criticised the 'regime of extreme pressure testing' in schools and 'reports of children crying, vomiting and having nightmares.'[52] This may have fed into a reluctance from some schools to set children too much online learning to complete for fear of adding to existing pressures.

The internet and, in particular, social media is also said to contribute to mental health problems in young people. Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, has warned that a child mental health crisis is being fuelled by social media use and 'addictive' computer games.[53] However, as the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health noted in 2018, 'little research has been done into the benefits and harms from social media and mobile phone screen use.'[54] In particular, there is little consensus as to how social media

use triggers mental health problems. Some suggest there are pressures inherent in social media, such as the need to maintain a certain public image, pressure for affirmation through 'likes' or 'fear of missing out' engendered by the capacity for comparison with others. Alternatively, mental health issues may arise simply because of the amount of time children spend alone with a screen. This is time away from either physical activity or interacting with other people in face-to-face situations. Ironically, during the coronavirus lockdown, concerns about 'screen time' were quickly dropped in favour of encouraging children to spend more time online – for schooling, socialising and entertainment.

It is difficult to come up with an objective measure of mental health. It is also difficult to compare cross-generational experiences of childhood. For example, is it really the case that school tests are more 'high stake' and therefore stressful today when all children sit the same exams aged 16 and close to 50 per cent of young people go on to university compared to thirty years ago when children were divided into 'O' level and CSE streams aged just 14 and only 25 per cent entered higher education? Likewise, it is surely impossible to compare the stress this generation of teenagers experience through their use of social media and mobile phones with the lives of children who were evacuated during the Second World War or remained at home and faced the threat of bombing.

Kathryn Ecclestone tells me:

'Children's short term difficulties need not morph into longer term mental health problems *unless we keep telling them this will happen*. There is a real danger that predicted mental health problems become a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, it is also highly likely that during the period of lockdown, some children with pre-existing serious psychological

and emotional problems may have suffered unduly from isolation, a bad home environment with no respite from that, for months on end.'[55]

The problem with confusing short term emotional states with mental health problems is further exacerbated by the tendency among some commentators and researchers to conflate issues with children's social and emotional development with mental health. A vocabulary of mental health and mental wellbeing is often reached for when it would be more accurate to describe the problems being considered as relating to the socialisation of young people into public life and their capacity to forge relationships with others. As Ecclestone notes:

> 'the cultural, clinical and political narratives around mental health need to differentiate between normal difficulties, bad and uncomfortable, even distressing, responses and feelings, and mental health problems that need attention. The first does not necessarily lead to the latter but our cultural assumption is that it does.'

The social isolation of lockdown was a challenge for all young people. But as restrictions began to be gradually eased but schools remained closed to the majority of pupils, younger teenagers without established friendship groups arguably suffered most. Whereas parents could arrange 'play dates' for young children in parks or gardens and older teenagers with established friendship groups could make their own plans to meet, many younger teens for whom a limited amount of independence had been hard fought for and newly won found they were once again dependent upon parents for their social lives.

Coronavirus poses little physical risk to children's health but an extended period of lockdown and school closures

had an impact on the social development of all children with potentially harmful consequences for the mental health of some. The most obvious solution to prevent such problems from occurring would be to get young people back to school and back out into the world as soon as possible. This did not happen. Again, as with the damage to education, solutions mooted were often short term therapeutic interventions rather than a lifting of restrictions. One problem with this approach is that it normalises mental health difficulties as the 'correct' response to lockdown and in so doing risks transforming short term issues into longer term difficulties.

One explanation for the increase in reported mental health problems among children is that there is now greater awareness and less social stigma to revealing difficulties. According to this explanation, young people have always suffered from mental health problems but whereas in the past concerns were repressed, they are now more likely to be reported and diagnosed. However, it may also be the case that the routine emotional upheavals of childhood and adolescence are today pathologised as mental illnesses. So, rather than simply worrying about friendships – which all children do from time to time – a child may be diagnosed with social anxiety disorder; rather than feeling reluctant to attend school, a child may be diagnosed as school-phobic.

In the past, there may have been more of an assumption that children were resilient and would cope with even out of the ordinary experiences such as evacuation, illness or grief. In contrast, today's children are taught from the earliest age that life is stressful and that they may not be able to cope with even the most mundane events that occur in the life of every child such as the transition from primary to secondary school, without special support in place. Teachers, parents and popular culture provide today's children with a

vocabulary of mental health and then encourage them to interpret their experiences through this framework. In this way, children may quite genuinely come to see themselves as stressed, anxious or depressed. In turn, the more children report such feelings, the more they become subject to discussion and pre-emptive action to teach children coping mechanisms such as mindfulness or to build resilience. Yet each new intervention further reinforces a narrative of vulnerability.

For most children, feelings of loneliness and sadness are best understood as temporary emotional states and not longterm mental health problems. The solution is to get schools reopened, social distancing expectations removed and life for young people back to normal as quickly as possible. For a small proportion of children, there may be a risk that temporary emotional states could develop into more serious mental health problems. Such children would need professional guidance from trained psychologists. There are risks to treating all children as suffering from mental health problems and, in particular, to using schools to provide large scale therapeutic interventions. Not only does this detract from education, the core purpose of the school, but it also risks providing children with a framework through which to interpret their feelings and emotions. Telling children they have experienced trauma may make it more likely that they come to see themselves as suffering from the repercussions of a traumatic event. This could make children less, rather than more, mentally resilient.

3.

The future of schooling

The national debate about reopening schools to all children became passionate, angry and, perhaps inevitably, highly politicised. It became caricatured as a battle between health and education. Those arguing for schools to reopen, first commentators, then government ministers and some heads of academy chains, were criticised for putting the lives of children, teachers and the broader community in jeopardy. On the other side, those arguing for schools to remain closed for a longer period of time – most notably the teaching unions but also some head teachers, teachers and parents – were criticised for neglecting their professional duties and doing a particular disservice to children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The teachers' unions accused the government of 'recklessness' and issued a joint statement on reopening schools:

> 'We all want schools to reopen, but that should only happen when it is safe to do so. The government is showing a lack of understanding about the dangers of the spread of coronavirus within schools, and outwards from schools to parents, siblings and relatives, and to the wider community.'

The suggestion here is that the government, in arguing for a partial reopening of schools, did not have the same understanding of the scientific evidence relating to children

and coronavirus as members of the teaching unions. What's more, whereas the unions wanted to protect members of the wider school community, government ministers did not.

As the 1st June date for partial reopening came nearer, the heads of the teaching unions became ever more vocal in arguing against a return to the classroom. Mary Bousted led the way in emphasising the drastic measures that schools would have to undertake in order to ensure children observed social distancing measures and that teachers and pupils would run no risk of catching coronavirus in school. She went so far as to suggest that children should be doused in disinfectant at the school gates. Teaching unions instructed their members not to engage with plans to reopen and even threatened to sue schools that make teachers return. They want schools to remain open only to vulnerable children and those of key workers, until the coronavirus infection rate is lower and the test and trace rate is much higher.[56]

The leaders of local councils and regional directors of children's services fell in line with the message of the teaching unions. Steve Reddy, Liverpool's Director of Children's services, wrote a letter distributed to all parents of school-age children in the city stating that Liverpool schools would not be re-opening.

> 'Uniquely, it appears, school staff will not be protected by social distancing rules. 15 children in a class, combined with their very young age, means that classrooms of 4 and 5-year olds could become sources of Covid-19 transmission and spread. While we know that children generally have mild symptoms, we do not know enough about whether they can transmit the disease to adults. We do not think that the government should be posing this level of risk to our society.'

Again, we see one very particular interpretation of 'the science' that emphasises dangers rather than the very small

likelihood of transmission, yet this same science is used as a means of avoiding taking moral responsibility for the decision to keep schools closed.

Such messages understandably reinforced parental fears about the dangers of sending their children back to school or led to new fears about the psychological distress of the 'new normal'. A poll of 3550 parents conducted by Exemplar Education suggested parents were nervous about sending their children back to school. Two thirds of the parents polled said they thought lockdown should remain in place until at least June and almost one third said September should be the earliest period lockdown should be lifted. Similarly, a survey by Mumsnet found that only one parent in five thought schools should reopen and fewer than half would send their child back immediately.[57] However, other surveys on attitudes towards the lockdown revealed a significant difference between what people told interviewers and how they actually behaved when their actions were recorded anonymously. When some schools did open to selected year groups at the beginning of June, attendance stood at between 40 and 70 per cent.

In direct opposition to the teaching unions, former education secretary Michael Gove urged teachers to end their opposition to schools reopening more widely, asking them to 'look to your responsibilities'. He said that if teachers really cared about children they would want them to be in schools, because 'teaching is a mission and a vocation'.[58] In addition, the heads of academy chains, responsible for teaching a third of a million children, backed the government's plans to reopen schools arguing that the impact of remaining closed would be calamitous and irreparable, particularly for poorer pupils.[59]

It was left to individual head teachers to communicate

plans for school reopening to parents. Most stuck to facts or relayed information from other sources:

West Yorkshire Primary
'I am sure you will have heard in the news that schools have been asked to extend their opening to children in Year 6, Year 1 and Reception. However [local] Council state that this can only happen when schools feel it is safe to do so. We also await further guidance from the Government expected on Thursday 28th May as to whether the scientific evidence states it is safe for us to extend our opening to the above named year groups.'

South Yorkshire Primary
'Due to the limitations of the school building and staffing, at this time, we are unable to open the school to additional children in Y1 or Y6, as suggested in the Government announcement on 10 May 2020.'

'From 1 June 2020, the school is planning on opening for a wider group of Keyworker and F2 children, so attendance figures we hope will be significantly increased in a couple of weeks' time. It is disappointing for staff and parent/carers alike that we are unable to welcome back all of the children at this time. We look forward to seeing them all again hopefully in the not too distant future.'

Others went further and expressed their own views on reopening to more pupils. A letter home from the headteacher of St George's Church of England Primary School in Kent, Mr Fisher, was widely shared online and gained national press coverage:

'I can be truthful here and categorically tell you there is no such thing as social distancing in a school; it does not exist and would never exist. The reason childhood illnesses spread in a school is surprise, surprise, we are all in contact with

each other. I can put two children in opposite classrooms and they will still get chicken pox because that's how it is in a school. This virus we are lead to believe is a super spreader. …We can always make things safer, we could perhaps reduce slightly the risk, but as soon as you open the school as far as my many years can tell you, the risk will be there.'

'So that leaves us all in a quandary doesn't it? How long can we go on like this for? … There will be some of you that say, 'let's just get on with it,' I respect that, but get on with what? There is not a reliable test, a vaccine, an idea about what to do next, there is just the possibility that things will be ok; that's all we have at the moment and 'ok' is not good enough when it comes to the precious gift that is your child.'

'What is missing from this discussion is a sensible, rational debate around better solutions, such as repeating a year and coming back when we have more science to support us. Believe me, I would rather any child repeats a year than go back too soon and have to lose a child; why is this not in the national debate; because it will cost money! So parents, what can you do next? Well, all I can do is pass on to you information when we have it and you can make your own decision. Parent power is quite something when it is applied nationally; perhaps you too have some great ideas that can be brought before our politicians. I am only interested in my community and the families I serve…'[60]

In this highly emotive letter, Mr Fisher presents himself as having the best interests of pupils and their families at heart standing against a government that does not. The threat of 'losing a child' is posed. Although this letter is styled as 'brutally honest' it omits evidence that may have offered parents some reassurance. Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter at the University of Cambridge estimates that the risk to children of catching and then dying from coronavirus is one in 5.3 million. (Based on two deaths out of a population

of 10.7 million under-15s in England and Wales).[61] When St George's responded to the government's call to open to more pupils Mr Fisher ensured, 'In all cases the staff will be wearing PPE- a face covering, an apron and gloves, the government does not believe this is required, however I feel we need to protect each other just as we protected our nurses.' Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the risks Fisher described with opening the school and the unnecessarily dramatic response of teachers, a survey of the school's parents suggested that 'just 15% of you agreed that it is the right time' to send their children back to school. Instead of offering words of reassurance that school was safe, Fisher declared:

> 'This is fine and you will not face penalties or fines if you do not come back at this stage.…We can only do what the government suggests and social distancing in school is a myth, despite our best endeavours.'[62]

From the beginning of June, schools did reopen to a limited number of pupils. The children of key workers were still to be provided for and in addition children in reception, Year One and Year Six could return to primary schools although, as documented above, this did not happen immediately in all parts of the country or in all schools. The government's initial announcement, made at the beginning of May, stated that all primary school children would be back in the classroom before the end of the summer term, with children in Years 10 and 12 having some 'face-to-face' contact with teachers in secondary schools. However, such proposals met with recalcitrance from the teaching unions and came up against the obstacle of the '2 metre rule' for social distancing.

The demands to have all primary schools back up and running and for children to be made to observe social

distancing requirements proved to be fundamentally incompatible. It was simply impossible to fit children into existing school buildings. One demand had to give. Rather than removing the need for children to keep two metres apart (and acknowledging that even the World Health Organisation only recommends distancing by one metre) the government chose to back down on more children returning to class before the end of the summer term. It announced that it would be up to schools to determine whether they could safely reopen.

Schools that reopened to a limited number of pupils did so with social distancing measures in place. Such precautions varied from school to school. Many schools reduced class sizes and kept children in 'bubbles' of 15. Often, furniture was rearranged so children sat at desks alone and widely spaced from others. Soft toys and furnishings were removed from classrooms. Children were allocated their own pens and pencils which would be on their desk when they entered the classroom and they would not be permitted to share. At some schools, teachers wore full personal protective equipment, including apron, gloves, face mask and visor. They checked children's temperatures at the school gate and sent home any children who appeared to be unwell. The impact of such measures on the mental health of children was rarely commented upon. Without any future relaxing of social distancing on the horizon, schools began to raise potential problems with any expected return to normal in the autumn.

What happened to education?

As we saw in chapter one, discussion of the impact of school closures focused on a broad range of concerns most notably equality of opportunity and social mobility. The idea

that education might be important for its own sake, that knowledge and understanding are valuable irrespective of exams or social mobility or future earnings potential, was missing from much of the discussion as to what was lost when schools were closed. Likewise, although there was a great deal of emphasis on the role that schools play in safeguarding the most vulnerable children in society and providing social welfare, discussion of the important role schools play in socialising young people and encouraging independence away from the family home was notably absent from discussion. Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, did express concern about 'a generation of children losing over six months of formal education, socialising with friends and structured routine' although this was not until 10th June, by which point most children had already been out of the classroom for three months.

The initial decision to close all schools, the reluctance from unions and some teachers to reopen schools, and the government's decision to open shops and leisure centres before getting all children back into the classroom shows that education – as opposed to social welfare – is considered to be of little value in today's society. It has become an expendable project that can be dropped and selectively restarted, almost on a whim. The low value placed on both education and socialising a generation of children undoubtedly hindered the reopening of schools. Compensating for social inequality through the provision of free laptops or free meals, or reducing the content of the curriculum in future years, were mooted as alternatives to reopening schools to all pupils.

From the point at which schools closed, there was discussion as to how teaching might change in the future and what education could look like once schools reopened. Coronavirus

was viewed, by some, as an opportunity to reassess society's priorities and values. It was seen as providing a 'pause' or, as the BBC put it in a series of radio programmes, a 'rethink' with education as a particular focus for change.[63] Towards the end of the lockdown period, this 'rethink' chimed with the growing Black Lives Matter protests and the call from activists to decolonise the school curriculum.

Some insisted that 'schools must never return to normal'.[64] Arguments for a 'new normal' in relation to education were premised on the assumption that, 'No adult or child will be untouched.' This is undoubtedly true: fear of coronavirus and the practical upheaval of lockdown impacted upon the lives of everyone. However, as noted above, it cannot be assumed that these changes were universally experienced as wholly negative. Nor can it be assumed that such changes would inevitably lead to longterm psychological damage. Yet the conclusion drawn by teacher Niamh Sweeney, writing in *The Guardian*, is that: 'When we come out of social distancing and isolation, children and young people and their families will need help to manage mental health, self-esteem, friendships and relationships.' Quite why such 'help' will be needed, the specific form it should take and exactly who among us will be robust enough to provide such help are not spelled out. This does not stop the author drawing a clear conclusion about the future of education:

> 'We cannot continue with a toxic exam system that is based on rote learning and an out-of-date curriculum chosen by whoever happens to be the education secretary, and an exam system that has been responsible for a dramatic rise in child and adolescent mental health illness.'

In cancelling all public exams (SATs, GCSEs and A levels) and instead awarding pupils scores based on teacher assessment,

the government signalled that what had been, for many teachers and children, the sole purpose of school, was easily disposable. In a climate in which many educationalists already saw all forms of testing as stressful and exams as particularly burdensome in measuring and ranking both schools and pupils, the capacity easily to cancel exams for one year was seen as an indicator for the future. Abolishing, or at very least significantly diluting public testing on a more permanent basis became a particular focus for those apparently surprised that closing schools had revealed educational inequality. A headteacher from a Birmingham primary school told *The Times*:

> 'Home learning works well for those who need it least… We are discussing how we talk to children about their time at home without rewarding those who have completed a lot of work when those who have not are blameless.'[65]

The implication here is that rather than getting children back to school so teaching can resume, or putting extra support in place to help children who have fallen behind once schools reopen, there will instead be an assumption that no child learnt anything in their time away from school.

Not content with exams having been cancelled in 2020, Labour's then Shadow Education Secretary, Rebecca Long Bailey, backed the teaching unions and urged the government to consider making special dispensation in exams scheduled for 2021 in order to compensate for the time pupils will have missed from school.[66] Yet again, we see that the vulnerability of children and the likelihood of mental health problems is used to justify lowering academic expectations:

> 'When they do go back to school, you're not just going to have children who need to catch up, you're going to have

children who've probably had severe psychological trauma from what's happened – particularly if they've lost family members, but even just being on lockdown for this period of time it's going to be difficult for them to get back into the swing of things. So they're going to need that extra help.'

Long Bailey continued:

'But in terms of catching up, to expect teachers and students to put that much pressure on themselves to catch up on this time, it's just not feasible – and the assessments that kids have to take, there has to be allowance made – whether it's a GCSE or an A-level – to not have to force them to make up for that lost chunk of time.'

Rather than arguing for getting children fully back to school, an increase in the school day, extra tuition or a reduction in holiday time, Long Bailey and prominent education commentators argued for schools to have a renewed focus on child welfare. Writing in *The Guardian*, former-teacher and education journalist Laura McInerney argued that education was never the sole focus of schools and, in the future, resources should be increased so they can be more focused on welfare.[67] She argued that the government 'must accept that schools cannot return to a situation where slashed budgets mean leaders scrimp on soap and mental health services are impenetrable. Austerity has had its day.' The reference to 'austerity' is a nod to the policies of the previous Conservative government; its inclusion in an article about post-lockdown education suggests that debates about the future of schools have become increasingly politicised.

Therapeutic education

The widespread assumption that both coronavirus and lockdown will have damaged children's mental health

lent weight to arguments that schools should be reoriented around therapeutic interventions to support children's emotional wellbeing. Karl Rogerson, the headteacher of a primary school in Birmingham, drew up a new timetable for when his pupils would return to class. Instead of extra lessons in English and maths, he planned to offer grief and anxiety classes as well as advice on how to be sociable. He argued that helping anxious children was as important as catching up on missed work. He explained that he and other heads are doing this out of concern that a 'generation may have been traumatised' by being locked in their homes amid daily bulletins of death tolls. 'Children may need to be taught anew how to follow school routines, how to play again, how to hug each other once it is safe, and to use toys to cuddle if they feel worried.'[68] Desmond Deehan, the executive head of two schools in southeast London, likewise said that a 'recovery curriculum' would focus first on mental health.[69]

Rogerson echoes Long Bailey's concerns about psychological trauma: 'The thing about trauma is that it does not come out straight away. We will give them space to open up about their experiences and feelings.' In order to allow children such space, headteachers and psychologists called for schools to prioritise play once they reopened.[70] A group of 'mental health experts' wrote a letter to the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson expressing concern that after six weeks of lockdown children would be suffering from loneliness and isolation. They urged the government to prioritise play over formal lessons once lockdown restrictions were eased as a means of relieving stress and anxiety among children.[71] They wrote: 'At this time, many children's emotional health will be suffering due to loneliness and isolation. As experts in children's mental health and development we urge the government

to prioritise children's social and emotional wellbeing in all decisions related to the easing of lockdown restrictions and the reopening of schools.' They recommended schools should be given resources and guidance on how to support children's emotional wellbeing. This focus on play and mental wellbeing was further backed by Cathy Creswell, professor of developmental clinical psychology at Oxford University and lead researcher in a government-backed study of the experiences of 10,000 families during the lockdown. Cresswell said schools were right to focus on happiness and a sense of security when pupils return.

There is no doubt that children suffered emotionally and socially as a result of school closures and the enduring isolation of lockdown. The most straightforward solution to this concern, particularly once the negligible impact of coronavirus on children was recognised, would have been to ensure the speedy reopening of schools, to all children, and without social distancing measures in place. Yet neither child psychologists, politicians, teachers, educationalists nor teaching unions made the case that this should happen. They insisted upon the opposite: that schools should remain closed to a majority of pupils and that those who did return should be met by teachers in full personal protective equipment and empty classrooms. This prevented children from experiencing any return to normality for an extended period of time. Not only were most children kept out of school but, upon eventual return, this same group of experts argued, children would need not education but a range of therapeutic interventions, predominantly centred around play, to help children recover from trauma and learn how to interact with others once more.

It was widely recognised that not all schools provided the children with the same educational opportunities during

lockdown and not all families were equally able to teach children at home. There was growing concern about the impact of educational inequality and growing attainment gaps between children from rich and poor families, those at state and private schools and even between those in the north and south of the UK. Yet the proposed solutions: plans to focus on play instead of teaching, therapy rather than subject lessons and happiness rather than attainment, will do little to solve educational inequality. Whereas private schools and some high performing state schools are likely to offer a return to a rigorous academic curriculum, schools in more disadvantaged areas or with a more economically deprived intake seem more likely to focus on pupils' wellbeing. The risk is that this reinforces and exacerbates educational inequality further. In addition, treating children – en masse – as if they are victims of trauma may normalise and make permanent what would be otherwise temporary emotional states. The primary concern of schools is education; schools clearly also play a role in the socialisation of children but this is incidental to and arises from teaching. Making socialisation explicit, through, for example, lessons in how to make friends, not only risks being counterproductive, it also detracts from educational goals and reinforces inequality.

Conclusions

As in many other areas of life, coronavirus and our society's response to the pandemic, exposed longstanding problems and inequalities. Wealth disparities, for example, clearly predate the emergence of Covid-19. However, it took a national lockdown to shine a light on people's very different home circumstances. Whereas some families had access to gardens, computers, unlimited WiFi, frequent food deliveries and a parent with time to spare, others did not. Such inequalities also became apparent in relation to schooling. Whereas some children continued to receive a full timetable of online interactive classes, others did not.

The decision to shut schools to all but a tiny proportion of the children of key workers was unprecedented. In the past, schools have remained open throughout major national flu outbreaks and even world wars. Closing schools effectively removed children from society and kept them within the home. When lockdown began to be lifted, shops, pubs, theme parks and zoos all opened before all children were allowed back to school. By September 2020 and the start of the new academic year, the majority of British children will have been out of the classroom for over five months.

There are many reasons why this situation came about, most are spelled out in the pages of this report. Above all else was the complete failure of any group – be it politicians, teachers, union leaders, academics, psychologists or

educationalists – to make a clear and consistent case for the importance of schools as an institution whose primary focus is education. When some nodded to the need to reopen schools, it was often on the basis of feeding children on free school meals, safeguarding vulnerable children, or helping those without access to technology. The problem with this is that each role could be fulfilled by other services: impoverished families were provided with meal vouchers and laptops, and telephone helplines and websites offered children counselling. The case for schools, as opposed to online resources, went unheard.

Schools are the only institutions in society that are specifically tasked with the goal of education; specifically, passing knowledge from one generation to the next. This is not reducible to passing exams, social mobility, child welfare or therapy. In the process of receiving an education, of being taught, children are disciplined into behaving in such a way deemed acceptable for participation in society. The closure of schools to almost all children represented an abandonment of the project of education and an abandonment of any desire to socialise a generation of children by adults who had previously exercised collective responsibility for their development into adulthood. The inability of anyone to articulate the case for education meant that union representatives, politicians and some headteachers were free to argue that schools should remain closed to the majority of pupils. Confusion about what schools and, more specifically, what education is for is a longstanding issue that predates the coronavirus pandemic. The ease with which schools closed and the difficulty in reopening schools to all simply exposed this underlying problem.

A narrative of children as emotionally vulnerable and readily susceptible to mental health problems also predates

coronavirus. Mental health provided an acceptable narrative through which concerns about the impact of lockdown on children could be expressed. Yet worries about children's mental health were also a reason for schools and teachers not to engage in online learning. Fear of overburdening children and adding to stress and anxiety often became a reason for setting little work for children to complete and leaving them without structure to their days. An irony here is that, for some children, the pointlessness of days with so little routine could be far more troubling than having work to complete. Yet 'therapeutic education' has been in the ascendance for many years.

With months out of school, many children have missed out on a great deal of valuable learning opportunities. They will have gaps in their subject knowledge when they return to the classroom. Yet the debate about changes to education once schools reopened reflected concern with children's mental health rather than their academic attainment. There were suggestions that schools should offer lessons in happiness, play, friendship and mental wellbeing in preference to a return to subject teaching. This could further undermine the role schools play in relation to education and reinforce the inequality so many professed to be concerned about. It could also reinforce in children's own minds the idea that they have been permanently scarred by their experiences.

To best serve all children it is vital that schools are fully reopened for the start of the new academic year. This will mean Abolishing social distancing requirements for young people. In addition, children need to return to education – not welfare, therapy or happiness classes. Children will form friendships and learn how to play if given time and left alone to get on with it. To compensate for class time lost, it would be far better to teach children more, and

more effectively, than to lower expectations, change exams and reduce syllabus content. This could mean extending the school day or shortening holidays during the next academic year. Teachers may need to adopt a more didactic approach to classroom interactions. Longer term, in order to avoid schools being closed down so easily in the future, it is necessary to make the case for schools as institutions uniquely concerned with education. The importance of education as an end in itself needs to be made anew.

Recommendations

1. Children and young people do not appear to be severely affected by coronavirus. There is little evidence that children play a role in transmitting the virus to adults. As such, government needs to drop all requirements for children to practice social distancing with immediate effect.

2. Playgrounds, swimming pools and leisure centres should be reopened as a matter of urgency and children and they should provide free entry for children throughout the summer months.

3. All schools should reopen fully, to all pupils from the start of the new academic year, with no social distancing in place.

4. Any narrowing of the curriculum to focus on only core subjects should take place for as short a period as necessary. Schools should aim to have all children ready to be taught the full curriculum by January 2021.

5. Classroom preparation, be it cleaning or rearranging desks, should take place in the remaining weeks of this academic year or over the summer holidays.

6. From September, there needs to be an immediate focus on bringing all children up to speed with missing subject knowledge as quickly as possible. Time could be taken from PSHE lessons; an extra 45 minutes could be added to the school day for the next academic year; five teacher training days could be dropped, and each school holiday could be shortened by one day. In addition, teachers may need to adopt a more didactic pedagogic style.

7. Where there are concerns about friendships, some of this extra time could be added to breaks and lunch in order to allow children to play.

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The Covid-19 Review

There will be plenty of official inquiries into the Covid-19 pandemic and the British Government's response to it. This series of reports is intended to help those sitting on these inquiries, as well as the public, MPs, peers and experts, to ask the right questions.

To ensure proper accountability and independent scrutiny, these reports are inspired by the need respectfully to examine some of the roots and handling of the crisis and how we can best prepare for future outbreaks.

The authors do not doubt the huge efforts of all involved in addressing the pandemic, from the frontline medical staff, to all those in care homes and the ancillary services, through to our political leaders. Nor do we doubt that, throughout the crisis, they acted with the best of motives.

But there are clearly alternative approaches and different national rates of success in responding to Covid-19. What is important is that we learn the right lessons from this outbreak so that, next time, it really will be different.

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THE COVID-19 REVIEW

How Britain responded to the Coronavirus

In response to coronavirus, schools closed to all but the children of key workers on 20 March 2020. The majority of children did not return before the end of the academic year, meaning they will have spent over five months out of the classroom. Schools remained closed to most pupils for such a long time because of government social distancing requirements and the teaching unions' insistence that the health of all teachers should be guaranteed. At this stage, it is still not clear whether schools will open to all pupils, full time, come September.

In this report, Joanna Williams argues that children and young people do not appear to be severely affected by coronavirus. There is little evidence that children play a role in transmitting the virus to adults. However, children have missed out on education and socialisation. It is vital therefore that children are able to return to normal as soon as possible so as to make up for lost opportunities. If some children return to academic teaching, while those from more deprived backgrounds are given a reduced curriculum combined with therapeutic interventions, educational inequality will be exacerbated further. Repeatedly telling children they will develop mental health problems may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The author offers a series of recommendations, including for government to drop all requirements for children to practice social distancing with immediate effect. Places such as playgrounds, swimming pools and leisure centres should be reopened for children as a matter of urgency and they should provide free entry for children throughout the summer months.

Joanna Williams concludes that all schools should reopen fully, to all pupils from the start of the new academic year, with no social distancing in place. The report recommends that any narrowing of the curriculum to focus on only core subjects should take place for as short a period as necessary. Schools should aim to have all children ready to be taught the full curriculum by January 2021. From September, there needs to be an immediate focus on bringing all children up to speed with missing subject knowledge as quickly as possible.