FORUM

The Resilience of Maintained Education in England in the Face of a Worldwide Pandemic

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ABSTRACT The author has drawn on interviews conducted with 24 education professionals in Norfolk to present an overview of teachers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The teachers address the immediate aftermath of school closures from a logistical and emotional point of view. They also discuss the different strategies that schools have adopted for remote learning, and how both staff and students have been affected. Throughout the exploration of responses runs a thread of concern around well-being, as well as the possibilities for education change in the future.

It is January 2020 and the school year is in full swing. Plans are being made to prepare the Year 11 cohort for their upcoming examinations; departments are reflecting on previous action plans and deciding next steps; and exciting school trips are being organised.

Fast-forward just three months to March 2020: the staffroom is full of conversations about schools closing. From 'not a chance' to 'maybe just until Easter and then open again', there is a myriad of opinions, assumptions and plain-old guesses. Not many predict that schools might close for the rest of the academic year.

Before I go any further, I should clarify what schools being 'closed' actually means. The work of schooling differs now from anything known before. Most children are being taught from home as most colleagues are working from home. But we are still teaching; children are still learning; and schools remain open for any vulnerable children or the children of those labelled as 'key workers' under government guidance. Schools have not so much 'closed' as been turned upside down – forced by an unprecedented worldwide pandemic to reconfigure themselves, shift their expectations, and

continue with their purpose of education amidst nationwide disorganisation and confusion.

On 31 January 2020, the first confirmed case of the dreaded COVID-19 virus hit the United Kingdom, and yet there was still a widespread struggle to accept the impact the virus would have on our country. Government advice regarding social distancing and isolation was becoming more frequent, and countries around the world drifted slowly and then suddenly into lockdown scenarios, giving us an insight into what was to come. The United Kingdom was contemplating the dynamic interplay between public health and the economy. Lockdown had the potential to damage the economy; the alternative would lead to alarming levels of risk. The outlook for schools was even more challenging, given that it was thought that children rarely showed severe symptoms. To keep schools open allowed people to continue working and children to get an education. To close schools meant millions of people would be unable to work and children would miss out. So, we ended up with a middle ground.

At the time of writing, with lockdown gradually being lifted, schools are slowly reopening in one way or another. This means that people can get back to work and the economy can start to recover – after all, young people are unlikely to get very sick from the virus anyway. On the other hand, social distancing in schools is bordering on the impossible, and although children may not show symptoms and become ill, their families and staff in schools might. Right now, the country is divided. Parents are attacked for sending their children into danger or judged adversely for keeping them home and not trusting schools. Teachers are pitted against one another and called cowards on one side and heroes on the other. Schools are working hard to adhere to government guidelines without personal protection equipment, and are trying to create extra space for more classes of a smaller size. This article is not the place to share my personal opinion; what I will say, however, is that I truly believe that no one has the correct answer. The situation is unprecedented and impossible in many ways – we will only know what was the right thing to do with hindsight. A brief timeline may provide useful context here (see Figure 1).

The field of education in the United Kingdom is remarkably resilient. I aim to highlight the positivity, hard work and compassion that education staff have demonstrated throughout this time. Our voices may not have been loud during this pandemic – we have been busy working hard to support the young people of the country through what will undoubtedly be a transformative experience for us all. But recognition and celebration are necessary, and this is what has driven me to interview a number of people working in schools between the end of March and early June 2020. All of the 24 people I spoke to are based in schools in East Anglia. Amongst them are beginner teachers, senior leadership, support staff and chief executive officers of education trusts. By including a diversity of voices, I hope to provide an authentic and fascinating insight into the experiences and opinions of those 'on the front line'. I chose to

anonymise my interview participants in order to facilitate honest and necessarily critical viewpoints about decisions which have or have not been made.

Timeline of Covid-19

First case recorded in the UK — 31st Jan 20

First reported British death from the virus — 1st Feb 20

First contraction of the virus from within the UK — 1st March 20

Risk level raised from moderate to high in the UK — 12th March 20

Shops, restaurants, cinemas told to close; those classified as 'high-risk' are told to self-isolate for 12 weeks — 16th March 20

Schools announced as closing on Friday 20th March; exams cancelled — 18th March 20

Schools closed to all children except those whose parents are classified as 'key workers' and vulnerable children. — 20th March
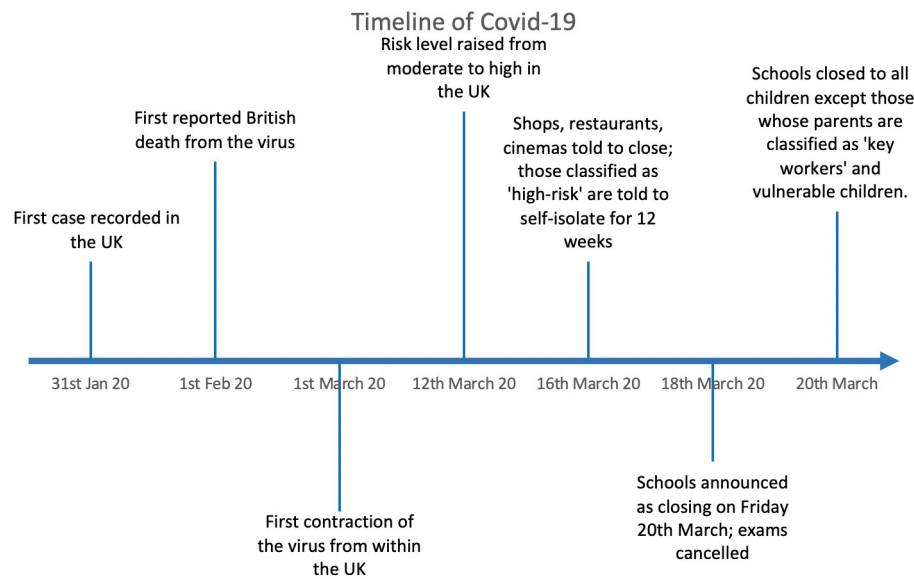
Figure 1. A COVID-19 timeline.

Many of the interviews took place towards the end of March and beginning of April 2020, and so may not present a complete picture of what is an ever-changing experience.[1] The struggle to educate young people remotely in a worldwide pandemic is ongoing. Attitudes and opinions are shifting constantly. My article illuminates something of what it is to work in education at this most challenging point in our careers. Primarily, it promotes hope – hope that schools will not be forever marred by the experience; hope that children will not be left to flounder; and hope that recovery will prompt effective and valuable changes in our education system.

In what follows, I will quote only occasionally those I have spoken with. Nonetheless, the ideas and perspectives in this article have been directly shaped by the collective voice of the interviewees.

Overview

The primary theme to emerge from all of the interviews was concern around the well-being of the young people we teach. Sometimes, this presented as a concern for young people's mental health; sometimes, it was a concern over their learning and future. Either way, students were consistently at the forefront of all the conversations. Noticeably absent was any mention of Ofsted, league

tables and other forms of judgement from within schools. This is perhaps a reflection of renewed priorities in education.

We have shifted from seeing our students daily to communicating remotely. This rupture in physical connection has had an inevitable impact on relationships, as well as on expectations of one another and ourselves. Resilience is a value echoed across schools in the United Kingdom, but never has it been more relevant than in recent weeks. The pressure on schools to transform the delivery of education in such a short space of time is comparable only to the pressure on young people to develop self-motivation and independence quickly. Rather than giving up or making do with half-hearted actions, staff rallied to create a system which would protect the vulnerable and fulfil our responsibility as educators as successfully as we would in a normal setting. Not only did we remain positive by adopting a 'get on with it' attitude impressively quickly, but we also started considering the possibilities that this huge upheaval could provide.

The impact of the virus seems to be encouraging conversations around cultivating compassionate instruction and learning through placing more emphasis on *cura personalis* as opposed to the attainment of a final grade. This does not mean reducing the quality of teaching. It means preparing a student for life after school by increasing their cultural literacy and independence rather than by equipping them with a variety of skills to pass an exam. The cancellation of exams and the requirement to teach through a screen have resulted in a reassessment of priorities in education. What is the purpose of student learning? What role do we, as teachers, play in students' learning journey?

Alongside a renewed reflection on education is the insight we are getting into the lives of our students and colleagues – the myriad of contexts in which students learn and teachers teach, which are usually hidden from view. For example, the disparity in resources is revealed not only between, but also within schools, and among students and staff. Who has access to a stable Internet connection, laptops, or simply a place to work? More teachers seem to be more aware of this gap than ever before. This inevitably affects the work teachers can do themselves, as well as their expectations of students.

The preceding overview summarises how the pandemic has taught us to consider both student learning and our own teaching. What follows is a thematically structured exploration of attitudes drawn from first-hand accounts by teaching staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will address how those working in education have processed the experience, as well as how we are dealing with and learning from the experience both logistically and emotionally. It is organised into four main areas: initial closures, teaching from home, emotional impact and looking to the future.

The 'Closure' of Schools

> There was a sombre atmosphere and it was nothing like the day
> before a half term.

The overwhelming response to schools being 'closed' was one of relief. This was closely followed by a mad dash to plan, prepare and organise. Anxiety had been mounting among staff and students alike as schools in other countries closed and media speculation intensified. Despite widespread conjecture, there was a distinct lack of clarity around what a school closure would actually look like. The announcement, when it came, brought relief. But anxiety remained, coupled with the pressure to act quickly and the lack of clear expectations. How do we teach our entire cohort of children in their homes? How do we teach each year group remotely and organise everything within a few days?

The responses with regard to this time period differed according to the role of the member of staff being interviewed. Those in positions of leadership immediately mentioned organisational issues of staffing and content delivery. The initial reactions from teachers and support staff focused on vulnerable children and time management. Beginner teachers were in an entirely unique position, feeling cheated out of their professional development and unable to use resources they had created or say goodbye to classes and colleagues.

After asking about their initial reactions to the closure, I was curious to hear about the final few days in school, not least because I had had to self-isolate and so missed the last week myself. The consensus of my colleagues with regard to those last few days was how impressed they were with students' handling of the situation. One head teacher commented that he was 'very moved and touched by their reaction to the enormity of the situation rather than being silly'. Other staff mentioned the 'sombre' atmosphere at 3.15 p.m. on the day of closure and the genuine concern shown for each another, coupled with uncertainty about when we would all return.

Emotions were running high amongst stressed and busy staff. There was significant confusion about the next steps, compounded with uncertainty around staff rotas and return dates. All of those interviewed agreed that the logistics of implementing a remote curriculum for an unknown time span were the focus of those last emotionally charged few days. Some schools prepared for the long haul, with memory sticks full of resources for Year 11 students, as well as timetables for online learning. Other schools concentrated on creating short-term plans whilst waiting for more information. Regardless of the actions taken, there was a real sense of camaraderie, as well as unease, among students and staff.

The 'New Normal': teaching from home

> I miss teaching in the classroom; I miss standing in front of my
> students and delivering a lesson.

When asked about their experiences of teaching and working from home, the most frequent response was to cite 'a huge increase in emails'. Our inboxes have been inundated with updates from staff, questions from students and queries from parents. Beyond this common experience, one chief executive officer of an Academy Trust has seen 'a range of approaches [to remote teaching] across 13 schools'. Colleagues' responses reflect this divergence in approach. Some teachers are 'continuing with the curriculum and creating printed booklets for those without Internet access'. Others explained their school's decision to move away from the curriculum and set project-based work, 'allowing for more creativity and freedom of choice'. There were question marks across the board about whether introducing new content was viable or if it was more suitable to focus simply on revision and retrieval.

This decision was largely dependent on Key Stage. Most schools were happy to introduce new content and continue existing plans for Key Stage 3. Key Stage 4, on the other hand, posed a more difficult decision, especially with regard to Year 10.[2] There is content they need to know if they are to keep up with the GCSE syllabus, yet to teach new content in the current circumstances is difficult. Recapping previous knowledge would better suit the situation.

If we are to believe the media, it seems that teachers have been delivering live lessons using a number of online platforms. In reality, however, there is an enormous imbalance across schools. Some are forbidden from using any live interaction with students. Others can use video-calling under strict parameters. Such techniques have been heavily criticised due to concerns about disadvantaged students who may not have access to the Internet or to a device to work on. Schools have loaned students laptops and desks to offset some of these issues but, realistically, it is extremely difficult to ensure that all students are able to work in a suitable environment.

Regardless of the logistical choices made by schools, some form of teaching from home has continued throughout the last few months. However, a number of staff expressed the view that, although they are working long hours, they are not 'teaching'. A head of department explained that 'students need a subject specialist in front of them and no distractions'. Unable to deliver live lessons, teachers are setting activities for students to complete independently. This leaves many feeling 'more of a facilitator than a teacher'. Despite feeling this way, is there an alternative right now?

Alongside the question of how much 'teaching' is taking place, there are also problems with 'planning for kids you don't know'. Many departments have chosen to split planning, with each teacher taking responsibility for a year group. This means that teachers are planning for students they may never have taught, thereby rendering responsive teaching impossible. A newly qualified teacher I spoke to was particularly concerned about being 'unable to monitor progress as easily' and the long-term negative impact this is likely to have.

Despite these concerns, there are colleagues who, rather than feeling like facilitators, have relished the increased emphasis on student independence. One teacher commented: 'It finally feels like I'm doing my job and not just

entertaining the students'. She did also acknowledge that many of her students receive excellent support at home, which has helped with their motivation to learn remotely.

The importance of cooperation between students, teachers and parents was reiterated across all of the interviews when colleagues were asked who had responsibility for learning during this time. All of the staff argued that students were largely responsible, whilst also acknowledging that the more support there is at home, the more likely students are to engage and complete work. One member of staff shared her experience of working with her children at home and claimed that if she did not work in education, 'my kids would behave very differently'.

An excellent summary of who has responsibility for learning came from a colleague who said: 'it is the teacher's responsibility to set and clarify; the student to engage and ask questions; and the parent to track and monitor'. The home environment is crucial for young people's learning, but there can be issues with this, as one staff member explained: 'I have had numerous emails from parents unable to access the work themselves'. This therefore reduces the responsibility of parents and increases the onus on young people to utilise skills they have already developed. Such realisations have helped us reflect on the critical need for clear instruction and increased independence in the classroom.

There seems to be a significant division of opinion when considering how much work students should complete at home. There are those who believe that the current pandemic will be playing a significant role in what is happening in the homes of our students, and so schoolwork is likely not to be a priority. Critics ask how realistic this view is if we are to return to school and minimise an inevitable gap in learning. Instead, these colleagues think that students should be keeping up with the work they would be doing in school, at least in terms of the amount of time spent studying.

This alerts us to a major issue with regard to teaching remotely: that of sustaining home–school contact. This is especially important when students do not return work or when the school is unable to get in touch with a student. A colleague in a pastoral team said that she is 'making numerous phone calls every day' to check on those students known to be vulnerable or who have not replied to inquiries from form tutors and subject teachers. There are many reasons for disengagement, with a major one being the struggle to access schoolwork without support. Learning support staff are finding remote teaching particularly difficult as they are used to working closely with individual students. Although they work extremely hard to stay in touch and offer ongoing support, the expectations of their role change frequently. One learning support assistant I spoke to said that she 'is constantly uncertain and there are new instructions all the time'. Despite this, she has continued her commitment to the students she would have seen in school. She emails them regularly, even if just for a chat about their lives and not specifically their learning.

A major part of working in education is safeguarding. 'Keeping a virtual eye on students', as one behaviour lead described it, has been extremely

challenging. We must also remember the importance of monitoring our colleagues' well-being. A head of department said that 'staff well-being has become more of a priority'. A head teacher explained that although his role has not changed much, his 'relationships with staff are more important than ever before'. It has been heartening to hear that colleagues have had positive experiences and have been supported by leadership teams and fellow staff members throughout.

The stress of teaching from home should not be understated. The lack of opportunity for feedback and for responsive teaching adds to the pressure we already feel in helping students 'catch up' on their return to school. This is paired with a real sense of helplessness when students do not send in work or reply to emails and phone calls. The nature of working from home will also differ because of circumstances. Some colleagues have families or other responsibilities that could prevent them from being able to work as they usually would. There seems to be a gulf between teachers who feel they are 'working harder than ever' and those who have 'so much time to complete CPD [continuing professional development] and create amazing resources'. Beginner teachers are particularly stressed, with their tasks feeling like 'busy work' rather than the real thing. They have been removed from placement schools. This has removed their opportunity to practise the most important element of teaching: building relationships with students.

All in all, it seems that teaching from home is significantly more complicated than putting a few things on an online platform and emailing a couple of kids. The shift to remote teaching has been seismic. The speed and success with which it has been done is remarkable, regardless of the form it has taken.

The Forgotten Ones

It feels like all of their hard work will be forgotten.

The impact of COVID-19 extended to the cancellation of SATs, GCSEs and A levels. For the purposes of this article, I will discuss GCSEs, as the staff interviewed worked primarily with Key Stages 3 and 4.

The sense of sadness for Year 11 students was shared repeatedly. Colleagues were 'absolutely gutted for them' and concerned for their future: 'They will always be known as the class of 2020'. There was also widespread agreement that the GCSE summer was a rite of passage, carrying with it a sense of achievement that comes from the culmination of five years of secondary schooling. The impact on these 15-16-year-olds will undoubtedly be long-lasting. For some students, the summer could be catastrophic for their mental health. As one colleague said: 'I am most concerned for their well-being'.

Contact with Year 11 students changed dramatically when exams were cancelled. Revision was no longer necessary and many schools shifted to project-based work, preparing students for their next steps. There is a clear

obstacle to this, however, for post-16 education is multifaceted and there is a distinct possibility that students could view the work set for them as irrelevant, and therefore disengage. The work set therefore needs to offer students learning that will both sustain interest and provide enrichment.

The decision to employ centre assessment grades has placed enormous pressure on teachers and been met with mixed feelings. On the one hand, many have welcomed the trust placed in teachers' judgement. Are we foolish enough to believe that this is the reason behind the decision? It is rather more likely that this was the easiest option under the circumstances. And, as others have argued, it could be seen as unfair on teachers to shoulder this responsibility. Teachers will be the ones to face the backlash from unhappy parents or students.

Consider those students who have put in limited effort all year. They may have poor mock-exam grades and very little work in their exercise books. Even though they might demonstrate verbal understanding and teachers know they can show off their knowledge in an exam, without the evidence to prove it, we cannot give them the grade we think they might have achieved. Instead, we must give the grade they have demonstrated in their written work. Regardless of how well we know our students, we are essentially grading on the physical work we can see.

Another example of how the knowledge and understanding teachers have of students can affect their grades is evident with those students in receipt of the pupil premium or with special educational needs. Some colleagues think that these students could benefit from the amended process as we can grade based on what they are truly capable of, without the pressure and negative impact of an exam situation. Other colleagues, however, have spoken of the unconscious bias there may be when assessing these students, as well as the impact of potential poor performance in lessons deriving from an inability to concentrate or from missing homework due to complicated situations at home.

The one thing that we can all agree on is how difficult it has been to have the year group leave school under such circumstances with no opportunity to say goodbye or celebrate appropriately. There is a real fear that they will feel forgotten. This fear extends beyond the school leavers to the staff working in education during the pandemic. We have been given the government label of 'key workers', suggesting that there is some value placed on us and the job we do. Yet the public seem to have no idea of what we actually do. Many colleagues commented in frustration that schools being 'closed' translates in the public discourse as teachers being paid a full wage to sit at home doing nothing. The media have reported on the discordance between unions and government, with unions expressing concern over staff health and the government insisting that it is safe enough 'to reopen schools' (see Adams et al, 2020; Marsh, 2020).

In the beginning, there was a realisation amongst parents of just how tough teaching young people can be. This led to praise for teachers, which quickly fell flat when parents turned to social media asking for advice on how to homeschool, perpetuating the false idea that schools were not still providing

a service. The majority of my interviews took place early in the pandemic; there have since been changes, with schools reopening to a larger percentage of students. As a result, teachers have been branded cowards for sharing health and safety concerns around returning to the classroom. One headline demanded: 'Teachers Need to Show Some Courage and Get Back into the Classroom' (Williams, 2020).

When asked how they felt about returning to school without personal protective equipment, colleagues responded with 'scared', 'anxious' and 'uneasy'. In spite of this (and in spite of the 'coward' claims), many teachers expressed a strong desire to return to school: 'I wish I could do more', said one. Another commented: 'Although the push on schools to reopen seems dismissive of the health of staff, when the time is right for the economy, we will have to do it somehow'. Many teachers also acknowledged how fortunate they felt to be in a profession where working from home and receiving a full wage was possible. There was a real sense of guilt amongst colleagues, despite the hours and effort they were putting in.

Some staff did mention feeling that there was 'a greater sense of what we do having importance', but it is perhaps accurate to say that we 'still seem to be at the bottom of the list when it comes to appreciation'. Thankfully, teaching is not a profession you join and remain part of if you are looking for gratitude and recognition. Instead, as always, we have taken satisfaction from the achievements of students and colleagues, the expressions of thanks from parents, and emails from students excited about a piece of work they have completed.

Teaching is certainly not the only profession that people should be proud of right now, but it is one of them. I have never been more proud to work in education. If we are to lead by example, the resilience, collaboration and sheer work ethic we have demonstrated during this challenging time is an ideal model to share with our young people. No matter our role, we are forging ahead, making difficult decisions, putting our own worries to one side for the benefit of students, and looking ahead to what the future can bring. Once a teacher, forever a learner.

Looking Forward

When prompted to think about the future, it is testament to the resilience of the profession that everyone I spoke to had an answer already. Colleagues were already reflecting and adapting and preparing for what is to come. There were hopeful comments about the potential for the national narrative of education to change, but this was felt to be dependent on the nature of our return: 'how they get us back to school will dictate what happens'.

The biggest concern was for the inevitable increase in the attainment gap. The existing causes of the gap will be exacerbated as those from less advantaged homes and families struggle with remote learning and the digital divide. The Children's Commissioner (2020) is already proposing ideas for how this might

be addressed quickly. One school has enrolled staff in transactional analysis training with the view to easing the transition for vulnerable students.

It was refreshing to hear colleagues acknowledge that the attainment gap was a problem prior to the pandemic. What we actually need to focus on at this point is increasing independence and the scholarship of our students. The consensus seems to be that preparing young people for life after school is crucial. But this seems to clash with the orientation of our current education system. Finding a way to marry the two perspectives would surely be the holy grail of education.

Maybe students will come back and learn from the experience, taking more responsibility for their own learning. Or perhaps a lack of structure and boundaries will mean they return less focused than before. Nobody knows. We are facing something entirely unprecedented and all we can do is try to prepare for and deal with the consequences.

A shift to more use of online platforms has been mentioned, albeit briefly. It is surprising that not more teachers see this as viable. They regard it as useful for homework but certainly not as a replacement for teaching. Funding has a huge part to play in this. Without equipment and training, a digital shift will be impossible.

Most teachers are concerned about their well-being in the coming year due to the amount of catching up there will need to be. The guidelines from the government about how teaching should have been taking place have been consistently vague. Although this allows freedom for schools, the lack of uniformity raises questions about how we will be judged when we return to whatever our new normal turns out to be.

For many, the hope is of an increased acknowledgement of the role of schools in the life of a young person and also within the local community, with a desire to develop stronger bonds between them. Regardless of what the future holds for the forgotten ones, one thing remains certain: it is fallacious to think of returning to a pre-lockdown normal. The purpose of education is being reassessed by those in the profession.

Notes

[1] Most of the interviews were completed via phone or video call and lasted around 45 minutes. The participants did not have knowledge of the interview questions beforehand. A small number of the participants were interviewed via email. They were sent a list of questions and invited to respond in their own time.

[2] By this stage, it had been confirmed that Year 11 would not be sitting GCSE exams and that centre assessment grades would be used instead.

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