

Above and beyond

Schools supporting their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

British education has faced an upheaval during the Covid-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, schools often went beyond traditional interpretations of what was needed for educational provision. This article explores how those interpretations have been challenged by the response to Covid-19. It discusses the various ways in which, during the crisis, schools have supported their communities and the most vulnerable in them. It looks at how schools themselves have transformed from local hubs into comprehensive community support networks. It suggests that through the provision of emergency childcare, material resources and locally varying forms of support beyond traditional remits, schools have significantly enhanced their communities' ability to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. It concludes by suggesting a number of positive consequences accruing from this support, including strengthened school-community relationships and mutually enhanced teacher/parent recognition.

Keywords: school-community relationship; community support network; remote learning; lockdown; pandemic

Our education system faces an unprecedented crisis. That crisis stems, first, from the need to recover from this devastating and deadly pandemic and, second, from the insidious influence of a political leadership determined to dismantle the system's core principles: free, accessible, child-centred, teaching and learning 'for all' (Swann, 1985, p1). Over the last eleven years, a succession of Conservative governments have constructed and manipulated our education system to suit a communal fallacy. Namely, that a monolithic 'knowledge' should underpin learning and that our system, centred around this concept, is accessible and meritocratic. However, for critical scholars and practitioners, such claims challenge what we feel to be the truth.

The Covid-19 pandemic has disturbed this conceptual status quo and thrust educational crises to the forefront of national attention. The valiant efforts of schools and teachers to serve their communities in response to the government's dangerous mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic have challenged misconceptions about education. Through the immeasurable impact of school closures, the real nature of the work that schools and teachers actually do and of what our curriculum requires –

in short, how our education system currently works – has been recognised across the nation.

This article will explore the ways in which schools have stepped up to support their communities during this time of unprecedented national emergency, and how these responses have affected a national shift in perceptions regarding education. It will suggest that schools' responses engendered a transition in their status: from their traditional state as local hubs, providing various services for pupils and families on site and positively influencing and impacting communities off site in an outward ripple effect, to amorphous support networks. It will argue that during the pandemic schools morphed into these centralised support networks at the heart of each community; evolving to respond to specific local requirements; proactively supporting the local community through targeted service outreach and liaison; centralising support channels for childcare, mental health, necessity provision, and even more, all under one roof.

It will outline some of the ways in which educators went above and beyond their traditional remits to provide comprehensive support and establish these vital lifelines within their communities. Conclusions drawn in this article are the culmination of professional conversations held with the author and observations made by her. They are rooted in the findings of studies into education provision during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Much more than the curriculum

In 2008, Michael Gove made reference to an unspecified 'permanent body of knowledge', which he felt should act as the basis of all learning. In 2013, he subsequently masterminded a 'nightmare' (Edwards, 2013, p429) revision to our National Curriculum, which drastically impacted our national educatory culture and underpinned it with an educational paradigm wherein knowledge, learning and education have been constructed as ideologically synonymous. The objectified 'education' conceived within this culture is understood as a knowledge-based product that can be supplied to learners through a unilateral system. Commodified 'knowledge' or 'learning' is produced by educators and supplied to its recipients, the educands. Learning is misconceived as a static, bipolar event, rather than a fluid, continuous and complex process suggested by important pedagogic research (for example, John Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1951; Bloom, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978). This Govian educatory framework discounts the diversity of learner identities and erases the agency of the learner within the learning process. Furthermore, it conceives education as inextricable from historically Eurocentric models of schooling and heavily implies elite 'credential' academia (Collins, 1979, p6) as the ideal eventual outcome.

Despite this prevailing misguided educational culture, practitioners and schools understand very well that 'knowledge' is not a one-size-fits-all product and that children

are not passive recipients. Real education in schools would be more accurately understood as a complex continuum of intertwined and discrete forms of development. These extend far beyond curriculum 'knowledge', and include cultural, interpersonal, moral, ethical, emotional, psychosocial and physical forms of development, and many more besides.

In reality, schools are not simply 'spaces where children go to be educated', but environments where indefinite forms of development and learning occur, and children acquire the essential skills required for 'self-actualised' personhood and effective societal citizenship (Maslow, 1943, p370). They constitute multifaceted community hubs, which exist in a symbiotic state with their local contexts. They are fed and bolstered by their localities, just as their localities are simultaneously fed and bolstered by them. Schools are, at heart, comprehensive ecosystems made up of local families, children, leadership, governors, teachers, teaching assistants, student teachers, volunteers, pastoral, administrative, catering and janitorial staff, and an ever-fluctuating group of outside individuals and agencies. Karamat Iqbal argues that schools who successfully recognise and harness the power of community relationships, or 'contextual intelligence', invariably reap the rewards of improved pupil progress and long-term community outcomes in a causal sequence (Iqbal, 2018).

As part of their daily work, schools nurture the rounded development of their pupils by offering a multitude of continuously evolving services. These are designed to suit schools' distinctive social contexts, and address the needs of respective cohorts, or of particular pupils and families. Such services supplement the narrow focus of the National Curriculum and enrich learning by exposing children to a broad range of non-academic interventions and opportunities. They enhance the lives of their pupils from inside the school on site, and have wider implications for schools' communities at large.

Examples of provision on site in supplement to curriculum delivery include:

- providing a safe, nurturing and stable environment for all children
- encountering arts and culture, trips and excursions, weekly assemblies, local partnerships, cultural exchange, aspiration-raising opportunities, guest speakers and visitors, charity work
- exercise and leisure: PE, playtimes, sports competitions, extracurricular clubs, school events and parties
- creating inspiring school spaces through displays, resources, on-site added-value features such as adventure playgrounds, learning buses, libraries and sensory rooms
- acting as free libraries, fostering a love of reading in children through class novels, free access to books, reading fairs and competitions
- social support, friendship and social skills interventions, conflict resolution and de-escalation

- healthcare, including first aid and support of pupils with health conditions.

Provision on site with wider impacts across communities include:

- behaviour and emotional management
- referring and supporting pupils with special educational needs and disabilities
- counselling, mentorship and mental health support for pupils and families
- food providers for pupils, including free school meals and free fruit and milk for all Key Stage 1 pupils
- safeguarding and child protection
- inter-agency liaison
- financial assistance and subsidisation: free uniforms, subsidising trips and resources for families in need
- filling cultural gaps, supporting newly arrived families, English as an additional language (EAL) provision, refugee support, support with applications in English – for example, for a passport, for citizenship or to secondary school
- additional childcare: breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday clubs.

Under normal circumstances, schools invest in their pupils through diverse services such as those listed above. However, beyond their investments in improving outcomes for residents through their on-site provision, schools also interact with their wider local communities. They bring together disparate societal groups, promote community cohesion, stimulate the local economy and use ‘contextual intelligence’ to respond to local needs. A few ways in which schools do this include offering employment and training opportunities for community residents, as well as spaces for local businesses to operate and expand their clientele. Martial arts or dance classes, church gatherings or book clubs are regularly housed in school halls, and local partnerships with food, arts and entertainment providers are commonplace. Additionally, many schools offer opportunities for students in later key stages to contribute to their local economies through voluntary exchanges, work experiences and entrepreneurship schemes. Schools encourage inter-community relationships and provide regular opportunities for disparate groups to come together through the PTA, governorship and children’s friendships. Many also fundraise and engage with local charities regularly, and support low-income families through inter-organisational liaison or the subsidisation of educational costs, including trips, uniform and resources. It is also very common for teachers in schools with limited budgets to purchase toys, resources, Christmas and end-of-year gifts, and even essentials, such as ‘breakfast boxes’ for pupils experiencing food poverty, out of their own pockets.

Such comprehensive provision makes up the reality of the services provided by our schools on a daily basis. However, with the official declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic

in March 2020 came an extraordinary upheaval of our education services. Formal assessments were cancelled, schools were closed to many pupils and schooling moved online, converting parents into proxy educators.

The hardest thing I've ever done

During this period, the government's poorly managed transition to remote learning, defined by delayed action, insufficient and conflicting guidance, and deficient provision of support or resources severely hindered schools' capabilities to facilitate effective learning during lockdown. In tandem, existing educational misconceptions regarding teaching, learning and the curriculum heavily disadvantaged parents, whose expectations did not match the challenging realities that they faced. One summarised the work of supporting their children's home learning as 'the hardest thing they have ever done as a parent' (Mistry and Malone, 2020, p3). These factors led to a litany of issues for both educators and parents, summarised by: unrealistic expectations; inconsistency of approach; unreadiness of proxy educators; accessibility of laptops; lack of guidance; and use of 'technical language' (Mistry and Malone, 2020, pp2-4). From my correspondence with parents, additional issues included complaints regarding live lessons, dissatisfaction with the limits of online differentiation available, difficulty of work set and in making use of unfamiliar methods. Despite these unavoidable frustrations, from the onset of the pandemic schools acted quickly and decisively in areas within their control to administer vital relief to their communities through services and resources.

In its study of school responses to Covid-19, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found that 'since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, schools have been playing an important role, over and above their usual remit, in ensuring the safety and well-being of their vulnerable pupils' (Nelson and Sharp, 2020, p3). School responses to Covid-19 saw an almost universal expansion of services beyond traditional provision to encompass emergency childcare, active intervention for vulnerable families, mental health and wellbeing support, essential resource distribution, inter-organisational liaison and proactive targeting of undefined, emerging local needs. One Teach First trainee summarised this during a conversation with me, where she observed that: 'I think that the local community ... are relying on [schools] as hubs to provide access to essential services and support that they do not necessarily know how else to access' (personal communication via email, 15 February 2021). As directors of this process, senior leaders across the country worked to manage the welfare and workloads of staff and their learning communities, while managing a transition for schools from their existing positions as local hubs into comprehensive crisis support networks.

In their most meaningful crisis response, schools reopened hurriedly to provide

emergency childcare, against prevailing medical guidance. Skeleton crews of staff selflessly put themselves at risk and welcomed back the children of essential workers, those identified as vulnerable and the children of parents experiencing difficulties. At the school where I teach, local needs rapidly outgrew the initially recommended social distancing limits, forcing staff to compromise their safety even further. One Teach First trainee corroborated this when detailing a colleague's class bubble, with '16 out of 30 [children] in school' (personal communication via email, 10 February 2021). Schools were pushed well beyond their limits in accommodating vulnerable pupils, but staff adapted valiantly, week on week, to support as many families as possible. The 'unsung heroes of the pandemic' are truly our incredible teaching assistants, who were largely responsible for this on-site activity and supported 88 per cent of the country's vulnerable and key worker children in schools during lockdown (Moss, Webster, Harmey and Bradbury, 2021, pp3-4).

Above and beyond

To support their most vulnerable families, schools implemented all kinds of measures 'above and beyond' (Powell, 2020) their usual remit. Vulnerable pupils were rapidly identified and staff immediately put measures in place to monitor their welfare and engagement with learning. In general, the NFER (Nelson and Sharp, 2020, p11) found that vulnerable pupils engaged with online learning far less than their peers, but that despite this, 'schools have done much to support [them] during the pandemic' and that this had 'generally supported their learning' (op. cit. 2020, p11). In monitoring the welfare of vulnerable pupils, schools conducted daily phone calls, actively managed inter-organisational liaison to coordinate necessary support, and 39 per cent even undertook daily in-person welfare visits.

Amazingly, 95 per cent of British schools (*ibid.*, 2020, p3) also became essential suppliers for their communities, establishing vital lifelines of food, food vouchers and household necessities for their families and communities. Some teachers even went shopping for vulnerable or isolating family members. Half Acres Primary Academy in Castleford, West Yorkshire, organised a donation drive for pantry and household essentials to equip care packages, which school staff delivered to vulnerable community members. Staff from Abbotsbury Primary School in Morden, London organised a rota to hand-deliver food vouchers to vulnerable families. In addition to crucial services like these, schools and local authorities across the country lobbied for additional support from the government for their families, including for free school meals over the school holidays and for extensions of the digital resource scheme.

For pupils not in school, teachers employed a wide array of online resources to provide the best interim teaching possible. In addition to supplying the online

curriculum via portals like SeeSaw and Microsoft Teams, teachers scoured the internet for free, accessible resources to supplement the limitations of remote delivery. In many cases, staff physically prepared learning packs and additional materials that could be sent home. Many schools offered textbooks, library books and resources to families with limited IT access for the duration of lockdown. In one typical case, one art leader even prepared biweekly materials packs for parents to collect and drop off, to vary the media pupils could choose from at home.

In particular, schools attempted to supply their communities with the digital resources necessitated by lockdown. Laptops and routers made available to eligible pupils under the government's 'free-laptop scheme' met only 37 per cent of need. In response, some schools distributed existing laptops, while others provided iPads or dongles out of their own budgets (Sood, Tarah and Mistry, 2021, p3). Sadly, despite such efforts, thousands of children and young people still went without adequate means to access the online curriculum. For those pupils who could get online, teachers became the first support in navigating the confusing world of remote learning. Staff rapidly prepared varied, engaging content and provided real-time tech support to pupils and the more digitally averse of parents.

Throughout lockdown, many schools worked to keep lines of communication open with families, maintaining daily informal conversations and conducting phone calls. Staff tried to mitigate the catastrophic impact of Covid-19 on mental health through the curriculum and supplementary provision. For example, at Half Acres Primary Academy, activities supporting mental health during lockdown were delivered as part of the curriculum, including valuable lessons on mindfulness, dealing with stress and hopefulness. A Teach First trainee noted that in their school, colleagues had offered, free of charge, 'counselling support for students, which is not within the normal remit or provision that the school would be expected to provide' (personal communication via email, 15 February 2021). In one school in Surrey, teachers provided an online 'feelings indicator' to log pupils' daily wellbeing. Pupils, required to select a score between one and ten, were monitored and invited to informal meetings with parents to discuss negative feelings. Many schools also offered targeted services for the adults in their communities, including Zoom quizzes, PTA events and weekly parent forums. Parents stated (Mistry and Malone, 2020, p4) that they 'really valued this interaction' and particularly enjoyed the 'sense of community they felt with their school and class teacher' from such regular communications.

Changing perceptions and momentum for change

Thanks to the 'commitment to community' (Betz, 2020, p5) from staff to provide for pupils and families during the pandemic, there is suggestion from some of a

‘momentum for change’ (Ulferts, 2020) within the education sector. School-community relationships have been strengthened, and a ‘newfound respect’ (Now Teach, 2020) has been forged between parents and staff. Twenty-five per cent of parents surveyed by Now Teach (2020) indicated ‘that their respect for teachers had risen’, while UCL’s Institute of Education found that teachers had ‘gained a better understanding of their community’ and ‘increased awareness’ (Moss, Webster, Harmey and Bradbury, 2020, p20) of the barriers their pupils and families face. Parent surveys, such as Now Teach’s, also show that misconceptions about education as an ‘easy’ profession have been challenged. Additionally, parent perspectives about teaching and learning (Trafford, 2020) imply that the concept of an objectified curricular ‘knowledge’ which is ‘given’ to children, has too been shaken. These changing perceptions have broadly shone a light on many educatory misconceptions and arguably even the government’s own problematic, even ‘scandalous’ (Mills, 2020), attitude towards the sector. This author hopes that these changes in perspective and the current educational ‘momentum’ that some are feeling (Ulferts, 2020), might allow for lessons learned during the pandemic – outlined below – to become parts of our daily practice.

It seems that, specifically for parents, the proxy educator role has revealed valuable insights into the reality of British education and the daily role of the teacher. In becoming proxy educators, carers have realised how challenging education can really be, and recognised that from the onset of school closures, teachers, ‘the only people [parents felt they] could ask advice and help from’, actually did go to great lengths to provide comprehensive support (Johnson, 2020, p4). One Education Policy Institute discussion summary (2020, p3) concluded that the pandemic had shown parents ‘how dedicated teachers are to their children’. For teachers, the pandemic has taught them to recognise parents as ‘equal partners’ in the learning process (Johnson, 2020, p4). Under lockdown, parent voice became a vital asset in ensuring effective provision, and parent feedback a valuable tool in pupil assessment. The pandemic has forced educators to reflect, and has reminded them that collaboration with parents and carers is fundamental to providing a rounded and successful education. In addition, it has challenged professional complacencies by giving teachers important insights into their pupils’ intimate home lives. One teacher summarised this by saying: ‘I thought I knew the communities I served and what their needs were ... but I had much to learn’ (Ferlazzo, 2021). Such increased awareness has led to deeper understandings of pupil needs and has heightened our respect for and empathy with parents.

More abstractly, the pandemic has had wider implications for education. Rhetoric in the media regarding education has shifted. Events like eleventh-hour school closures, the A-level results scandal and the free school meals furore have garnered significant public recognition for the work schools do and the services they provide. It appears that a new respect for educators and schools has been gained, and misconceptions regarding

teaching and learning have been at least partially challenged.

Most encouragingly, educators across the country have felt the support and gratitude emanating from their communities. An Association for the Study of Primary Education bulletin (Johnson, 2020, p3) found that senior leaders observed ‘without exception ... a strengthening of their primary school community’, with one respondent stating: ‘I don’t think we’ve ever been closer to our families’. I, for one, felt this in my communications with parents, who voiced their gratitude to myself and other staff in daily communications and in parents’ evening feedback. In London, parents nominated members of staff for awards, via the *Wimbledon Times* on Facebook, for their support of children and families during lockdown. Communities in Buckinghamshire and Manchester wrote letters to share that they ‘appreciate the great work teachers do more than ever’. Such heart-warming responses from communities really highlight the significant impact of schools’ services in the past year, and demonstrate the meaningful invigoration of school-community relationships that the pandemic has catalysed.

All in this together

The Covid-19 pandemic forced a drastic shift in our provision of education. School closures, remote learning and socially distanced learning protocols have resulted in a significant setback to formal learning opportunities, with a disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged. We as schools have had to work to adapt to this new reality, while also responding to the diverse needs of our communities. Acting as frontline responders, we have attempted to fill gaps in welfare provision catalysed by not only the pandemic, but years of austerity, social defunding and budget cuts.

Since our emergence from lockdown, schools are now scrambling to address budget deficits, address learning losses, deliver interventions, prepare for SATs in 2022, generate progress data, produce online provision for children at home and mitigate the extensive psychosocial toll on our communities. Staff have had to rapidly adapt to the socially distanced classroom and the huge impacts of this on best practice teaching and learning, including group or partner work, interventions, resources and close one-to-one in-lesson support.

Before the pandemic, schools existed as community hubs, interacting within their local contexts in diverse ways and delivering far more comprehensive forms of learning or service than were generally acknowledged. Covid-19 has catalysed an evolution beyond this, transforming the school into a centralised community support network. These networks have provided a centre-point for communities during this crisis, providing the best education possible under the circumstances and adapting operations to suit local needs. They liaised between agencies, charities and their communities, disseminated critical resources, provided emergency childcare and innumerable

other services and forms of support. As community support networks, our schools have supported countless children and families in coping with life during a time of unprecedented generational hardship, and in many cases have proven themselves absolutely vital lifelines for the most vulnerable.

It is clear that staff across the education sector have exceeded both their traditional remit and limited notions of the services that schools provide to support families and wider communities during the pandemic. Thanks to these exceptional efforts during this unprecedented crisis, bonds between schools and the families they serve have never been stronger. Teachers and parents have gained valuable, eye-opening insights into each other's lives, and found common ground in their mutual devotion to the children of their communities. Intra-school communities have been bonded by their mutual struggle and a real camaraderie has been fostered between staff members, while extra-school communities have been brought closer through the concerted efforts of staff.

The wave of gratitude felt from our parents and pupils upon our return to school, our strengthened community bonds, the camaraderie between staff are all small marvels that we can be thankful for in the wake of such loss. The true value of what we as educators do has been felt by those who needed it most and we, as schools, have been reminded of why we provide the services that we do, and why we continue to go above and beyond for our families. We do it for our communities and for our pupils, because we have chosen the charge to invest in them through education. Through such service, we, like other community institutions and essential workers, have presented ourselves in the face of this acute crisis and helped to hold the nation together. We have recognised that, like the moniker of my whole-school's lockdown WhatsApp group chat, we truly are 'all in this together'. We have been reminded that our society is at its root just an extended network of interconnected communities, sustained by key workers and local support hubs, and that our schools make up a fundamental component of this network.

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