

# ***‘I no longer trust our son’s school’***

## **Parents resisting the return to face-to-face teaching**

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### **Abstract**

Not all parents across England are happy about sending their children back to school, following the lifting of lockdown measures in March 2021. Our qualitative research, listening to accounts from eighty-five such families, finds that these concerns stem from Covid-related anxiety, most commonly linked to protecting members of the household at greater risk of severe illness. The experiences of these parents resisting the return to school sheds light on the fragmented nature of our education system – the uneven, haphazard practices across different schools – and how once again this differentially impacts certain students and their families. Particular difficulties for students with a special educational needs diagnosis (SEND), or those from multi-generational households, are underlined. Whilst some parents feel bullied into compliance, others are pressurised to deregister in a spate of what we term ‘Covid off-rolling’. Several families have been able to fully embrace a permanent move to genuine home education, further raising criticisms of our competition-driven, performative, neoliberal education system with its narrow curriculum offer. A comprehensive education system with critical pedagogy at its heart is what is called for.

**Keywords:** home education; SEND; inclusion; return to school; pandemic

I no longer trust our son’s school and do not feel they have his best interests at heart ... They only seem to think of their own image and the safety of the children seems to come last.

Over this past year, the global nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen an estimated 1.6 billion students, spanning 134 countries, experience disruptions to their education, most drastically in the form of enforced school closures (UNICEF, 2020). With concerns about ‘lost’ learning, widening educational inequalities and implications for children’s mental health (Coe, Weidmann, Coleman and Kay, 2020; Young Minds, 2020), for many the return to school is welcome. In England on 8 March 2021, as the ‘second wave’ of Covid-19 infections subsided, national lockdown measures were eased and schools reopened to all students. Our research explores the less-heard voices of those parents who were unhappy with an ‘enforced’ return to the classroom; parents who – to varying degrees – resisted or refused to comply.<sup>1</sup> Their stories are impassioned, sometimes harrowing and, crucially, shed light on aspects of our current education system. What can we learn by listening to the lived experiences of these families?

In its details, this paper draws from qualitative data gathered through reflective surveys and interviews, listening to the thoughts and experiences of eighty-five families in England who were unhappy with their children returning to school. Open-ended questions were used, allowing a parent to digress, to highlight what they feel is important, and thus to raise issues and influence the analysis (Kvale, 2008; Strauss, 1987). The parents' accounts are analysed via an inductive thematic approach, to draw out the most prominent concerns (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Here four pertinent themes are detailed, with supporting data extracts, to keep the parents' voices front and centre: who is resisting and why; difficult choices; SEND students disproportionately impacted; and silver linings – positives emerge. Ways in which these accounts and themes reflect critically on the state of our neoliberal education system are also drawn out, as are suggestions for more inclusive policy and practice.

## **Who is resisting and why?**

I am classed as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV).<sup>2</sup> I have five children, two have additional needs, one with cerebral palsy and a chromosomal deletion that has led to multiple infections and thus, as a consequence, sepsis. The other has the same deletion but moderate to severe autism with the same immune system issues.

My five-year-old son has a severe eating disorder ... leaving him in poor health ... so Covid is likely to be fatal to him.

Mum, clinically vulnerable (CV) with type-one diabetes; sixteen-year-old, with lung condition making him CV too ...

Across England, many families live day-to-day with a complex array of needs within their household. The pandemic presents a distinct worry for such families, with increased anxiety surrounding their greater risk from the virus, exacerbating mental and physical wellbeing issues. These genuine concerns interplay with deliberations about the return to the classroom. One CEV parent imagines the ramifications of their children feeling responsible for bringing the virus home from school:

We were concerned that if they did catch the virus and bring it home, the consequences for me could be catastrophic. We were worried that this would severely affect their future mental health, if they felt responsible for my either being very sick or, at worst, dead.

Whilst such hypothetical concerns and worries doubtless echo across many households, the lower likelihood of infection, and reduced probabilities of severe illness, could reassure and appease many young and otherwise healthy families. For those households with individuals at greater risk of severe illness – which the data tells us are not only

those with CEV and CV status, but also older people, older men in particular and some members of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) community (Aldridge et al., 2020; Jordan, Adab and Cheng, 2020) – such concerns are understandably not so readily allayed. As is always the case with such intersecting classifications, some individuals inevitably fall into more than one of these overlapping at-risk categories and are thus, rightly, even more anxious. In our research, the overwhelming majority of families unhappy with schools reopening – those who would prefer to keep their children at home whilst the pandemic persists – are indeed concerned with protecting members of their household at greater risk of severe illness, whether that is due to pre-existing health conditions, or pertinent age, gender and ethnicity factors. Families in minority-ethnic, multi-generational households, or wherever older relatives are present, naturally feature then:

I am Indian by background. I live in a multi-generational home as a consequence of my culture, you know this is much more common in our culture. So I live in a house with me, my husband, my one daughter who's fifteen and my mother who lives with a lot of long-term conditions and therefore needs support. I'm her registered carer as well as working full-time. So that's our home family situation.

I am sixty-four-years old and have special guardianship of four of my grandsons ... I am alone with the boys.

Additionally, children with underlying health conditions may need frequent medical care, so their families worry about reduced access to health services, with increased demand from the pandemic. Again, anxiety levels rise:

She's a poorly child under consultant care. Infections that other children seem to shake off become a real big issue for her ... I cannot cope with the worry of her being so unwell during the pandemic, when healthcare is more difficult to access ... My gut feeling is that school is not safe for her.

Despite the noted success of the vaccination programme (Landler and Mueller, 2021), some adults have medical conditions that preclude them from being vaccinated and there is as yet no vaccination roll-out for children. Thus for many vulnerable families, the exposure, risk and worry endure. Households with vulnerable children will certainly face ongoing concerns (Ryan, 2021). Moreover, understanding of long-Covid is still developing (Mahase, 2020) and there may be further implications for vulnerable children (Ludvigsson, 2021). Families used to living with underlying conditions are attuned to being on the look-out for unknowns and potential risks:

We're all neurodiverse, there's little known on how Covid or long-term Covid may impact us physically and mentally.

I do feel that CEV children have been forgotten in this though. The government keeps trying to send them back to schools where they are not safe. They are CV/CEV for a reason.

It is frustrating waiting for a children's vaccine to be available.

## **Difficult choices**

Whilst much health support for these families may require scientific advancement or medical breakthrough, support from the education sector ought to be straightforward and readily accessible. With the additional stress such families are under, where interactions with schools have been positive, the sense of relief and gratitude is palpable:

We have had lots of support from the boys' school and sixth form who fully supported our decision to keep them at home.

I must also mention the two schools have been very supportive, which has made all the difference.

Luckily my son's head has been totally supportive – and not pressured us at all; just had to keep in regular contact with school, and they couldn't have offered any more than they have.

While some parents are able to do what they feel is best for their family, with open dialogue, understanding and support from schools, this is far from universal. With decision-making left in the hands of leadership in individual schools, or groups of schools such as academy chains, the experience for parents is haphazard, uneven and incoherent. Schools may decide to not authorise absences for these families resisting the return to school, with some such schools going further still, making threats of fines, court proceedings and even social service involvement or de-registration. Thus, for some parents wanting to keep their children home, stress is heightened yet again as they come under pressure to comply or face these very real consequences. These parents face difficult, complex and even harrowing choices:

My husband has ongoing health issues – a suspected autoimmune condition and COPD putting him in the CV category. My seven-year-old son has not been back since March as we feel the risk to my husband's health is too great. It is not something we would choose to do – my son loves and misses school and all his friends, it is very hard to juggle home schooling (with no help from the school) and working, and we had been fast-tracked for prosecution (with a criminal record, massive fine and potentially a jail sentence) by the school/local authority – I have felt guilty for not sending my son to school every day and all in all it has been a very stressful time.

There is a spectrum of school response then, from unswerving support, through hand-wringing – ‘I discussed my situation with my son’s primary head teacher who could only say that he sympathised with my situation but it was mandatory my son come to school’; reluctant application of low-level penalties with no escalation to outside agencies – ‘thirteen-year-old daughter stayed home. School said had to mark it as unauthorised, but put no pressure’; ‘the schools refused to fine us in the end but also denied any home-schooling help’; to unrelenting pressure to comply, where all procedures are swiftly set in motion and parents essentially feel bullied – ‘You can’t keep them off. We will prosecute if you don’t send them in’.

The bully tactics I have seen are inhumane. I’ve seen other parents be threatened with not just fines and court but social services and having their mental health attacked.

Several parents use war metaphors, referring to the ‘battle’ or ‘fight’ with schools. The lack of empathy and kindness recurs too – ‘I was met with no compassion’ – as does the idea that this is a complex path to navigate, dealing with a range of agencies in addition to the schools, which is altogether a time-consuming, relentless struggle:

I have been near breaking point so many times, and not from the home schooling ... it’s been from the constant pressure, threats from schools regarding attendance, fines etc. I should be able to keep my child safe and just concentrate on her schooling, not have to keep fighting them and asking for help/researching my next step in the ‘battle’ of calls and emails.

One parent of a year eleven child recounted that the school also used the withholding of assessment data as a tactic to apply further pressure – ‘she was given a blank report card. Like zero predicted grades’. The school leadership claimed to be unable to use previous work to make any predications at all – despite the fact that much of this work was recently completed, under lockdown, alongside other students all working remotely. That such tactics and threats carry weight is indicative of the central role of high-stakes testing within our neoliberal education system.

Several parents did acknowledge the difficult position schools are in within a competitive education system, where league-table rankings and Ofsted ratings must be maintained – ‘It was clear that the school was being put under pressure to ensure attendance’. One parent who had reached an impasse with the school leadership reached out to her daughter’s teachers individually for support with learning. She was impressed that the majority of staff were willing to help, even if it meant bending the rules, to work informally – ‘almost all of them were like, you know, just contact us directly’.

Where pressure was brought to bear, after exhausting all options, some parents felt left with no choice but to comply – ‘I’m CEV ... I sent my son to school against my

better judgement ... I fought to let them allow me to home school, but they wouldn't support it'; 'only sent them in when school got nasty'. Other families were in a position to stand their ground – 'I decided to pull my little one out of school regardless of the threats of fines'.

One thing is clear, where schools were not supportive of these families' wishes to keep their children out of school, anxiety and fear were rife, whether the parents continue their resistance or eventually comply:

I escalated concerns and I said this is causing me sleepless nights, causing my blood pressure to go through the roof, it's causing anxiety for my daughter.

It's absolutely exhausting. Absolutely, I mean I'm sure I've had ulcers because of it.

As a parent, it has been very scary and a very awful situation to be in, to choose between the health of our family and our children's education.

I am exhausted but must do whatever to keep my child and myself safe. I will not be forced into putting my child at risk by anyone. Fines and court threats mean nothing to me, not when it's life or death.

One school explicitly told a mother from a multi-generational household: 'We don't care about the grandparents, we only care about your daughter and your daughter needs to be in education'. This mother in fact acknowledges that it is unsurprising that the school focus would be on the child, yet succinctly surmises her own clear choice: 'I have to weigh up two family members and I am not going to choose education over life. Idiotic thing, right?'.

## **SEND students disproportionately impacted**

Eldest is ADHD, dyslexic and dyspraxia. Twelve-year-old is ASD.

It is important to delve into who the students are who are over-represented within these families resisting the return to school. Children with SEND are by far the dominant grouping here. This may well be in part due to the fact that, in many instances, SEND and CEV exist in tandem, giving rise to deeper complexities and hurdles when it comes to being in school:

My daughter has Down's syndrome amongst other health issues and is CEV. I have nearly lost her a number of times from pneumonia stemming from a normal cold, the last time leaving her with asthma, constant chest infections, low oxygen levels etc. So I dread to think what catching Covid would mean.

There are particular issues surrounding being in school for children considered both SEND and CEV, which go beyond fear of severe illness alone. For some parents, concerns

with school safety under Covid are directly connected to the SEND characteristics of the student cohort. They express apprehension around the ability of students with particular needs to understand and abide by additional Covid safety measures:

My son has an EHC [education, health and care] plan and I am not sending him in to school as it's not safe ... My son's school is a SEMH [social, emotional and mental health] school and I fear he is at more risk going to school, as many of the kids are very antisocial, not listening to the rules.

My daughter goes to a SEN school for complex needs and, no matter how hard they try, there is no way they can put in proper safety measures with children that can't understand them, with a virus that is also airborne so, no, my child is not safe in school, especially when she is CEV.

For many SEND children, the pandemic has made it increasingly difficult to receive in person additional support, creating a barrier to meeting their learning needs, as well as disruption to children's established routines:

Both of these children have special educational needs and require a lot of support to access education. None of this is happening currently due to school saying they can't because of social distancing. I understand that, but social distancing is not happening in their schools.

Furthermore, for some students, disrupting their routine presents a problem in itself:

My son is thirteen, autistic and [has] sensory-processing disorder, who needs rigid routine within his specialist school. There is no routine he is used to since coronavirus – he can't have his usual sensory inputs, like going for a walk round school to calm down (I understand why he wouldn't), and there is no way we would be able to test him if he was symptomatic, so that would mean the whole household isolating for ten days, and my mainstream year six daughter missing more school. My son would have isolated four times from September to December if he had been in school, he wouldn't have coped with being in and out of school – without any warnings, and behaviour would have gone backwards, and us and school have worked hard to improve behaviour.

In this illustration, the family is articulate in detailing their rationale for contesting the return to school specifically only for their child with SEND. Their case is based on knowledge and understanding of their own child's needs and an appreciation of how they deal with change. Several families acknowledge provision was in place to meet their child's particular SEND needs prior to the pandemic:

We are probably going to have to deregister them, which is a real pity because one is autistic, and we really worked hard to get her the additional resources she needs at school.

The process of applying for and obtaining an EHC plan is detailed and often arduous, even before taking into account the efforts involved in ensuring this plan is fully implemented, with all additional support in place. The fact that some parents would forfeit their child's long fought for EHC plan and associated additional provision through de-registration is thus extremely powerful. It emphasises the lengths parents are prepared to go to, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their family. Many parents with SEND children are used to pushing back, to support their child's education. This long-suffering, exhausted yet defiant tone can be heard as one parent bemoans: 'Special needs does not mean second-class citizen!'

### **Silver linings – positives emerge**

For many families, the experience of enforced home learning during lockdown actually revealed some positives. With anxiety amongst young people a growing concern prior to the pandemic, and the emergence of a global virus adding to these worries, some families were relieved to find their children's wellbeing improve with time away from school. For some, there was speculation this may be connected to the removal of possibilities of bullying or the subsiding of social anxiety. For others, the children simply felt safer at home in these unfamiliar, unsettling times:

His mental health is better out of school during Covid.

She's better at home. Her moods are more stable.

She was having awful anger issues and wasn't sleeping, nightmares and very gobby and upset a lot. Since she hasn't been, she's better behaved – two meltdowns, that's all – sleeping better, no violence, no upset.

Once again, a considerable proportion of those noting that their children are less anxious, more pleasant and calmer when out of school in the pandemic are parents whose children are classified as SEND. One such mother describes her decision to keep her child off and to continue to home school as 'quite clearly the very best one for my daughter's overall wellbeing'. Another mother, whose eldest daughter has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), notes that while away from school 'she's not been a bit of bother. But when she's at school, she's horrid when she gets home'.

Some families go further still, remarking that their child is not only more content but also in fact 'doing much better' – indeed, thriving in educational terms. A mother of an SEND and CEV child states that her daughter 'is doing way better at home than she ever did at school'. Another parent, noting their children's considerable educational achievements during remote learning, feels sufficiently boosted by this observation that, should needs be, they would readily make the change to more permanent home schooling:



Both schools (one SEN and one mainstream) have commented on how well the children have done with virtual learning and improved in things they were working on in school ... I now feel so confident in my parenting and educating my children that, should support be removed and I still feel it is unsafe, I would have no issues deregistering my children and doing EHE [elective home education].

Indeed, some parents made the choice to deregister their child permanently, 'preferring home schooling':

For my fourteen-year-old, he had to travel forty minutes on a bus each way to and from school. This made us very uncomfortable so we deregistered him and he is now home schooled. Both my boys have flourished under the remote learning ... I am now at the point where we think we will deregister my youngest.

For some parents, the concept of full-time home educating may have been brewing already: 'We deregistered our son from school, something we had considered pre-Covid'. For others, enforced home schooling had acted as a taster, a period in which they could test the reality of alternative approaches to educating:

My son has learning disabilities. I was already considering home schooling before the pandemic due to bullying and my son not being given the correct support ... remote learning for a year, and seeing how much happier and better they are doing with their work at home, has made me realise that I am capable and this is what's best for them.

Furthermore, some parents of SEND children make the argument that they are better able to provide one-to-one support themselves, using suitable personalised learning styles – 'far more tailored towards that child themselves' – as they are uniquely invested in their own child's education: 'I could better support these children'. Flexibility with timings and pace are also raised as particularly beneficial for SEND children needing help – 'there's time, not in a rushed and pressurised way, which has helped in making the children a lot happier'.

Even with the exposure to home educating gained over lockdown, the transition to a more permanent set-up could be bumpy. In part, this is due to the very different nature of these two all-too-often-elided states and the fact that enforced home schooling under a pandemic, when schools are shut en masse, bears only a passing resemblance to embracing deregistration as an informed, pressure-free, lockdown-free, choice.

It's quite unsettling that lockdown schooling has been referred to as home schooling because ... I think that that's portrayed a misconception that home schooling is just at home ... We weren't really truly home educating; it was very much 'lockdown' educating.

Naturally, those who had been home educating already prior to the pandemic could be sceptical of some of the newcomers, 'some home-ed people have been lovely and very helpful, others rude and dismissive of parents who are temporarily home educating'. Despite the misleading nature of lockdown learning and the hesitancy on the part of some individuals, the existing elective-home-education community proved to be a source of support and of inspiration for several families. This was crucial to making home schooling feel enjoyable and perhaps less of a daunting task:

I just think that unfortunately it's created a lot of misconceptions about home schooling as well. Which is a shame but at the same time ... there's always a ... silver lining, so I do think that the people that have come out and realised home-schooling's for them, it's really increased.

I have had great support and encouragement and almost leadership when reaching out for home-schooling help.

I'm actually really impressed by the good organisation and community knowledge of the elective e-home-education (EHE) community and it's inspired me to consider home education for our family ... it's definitely made me realise what high-quality education is possible at home.

There is a general consensus of positivity and resilience amongst parents who are choosing to home educate their children, with the perception being that the children are safe, healthy and are being educationally and emotionally fulfilled. Moreover, there is an emphasis on just how social genuine home education is – 'home education provides ample socialisation and, in fact ... with wider mixed-age groups' – with an abundance of outings, clubs and collective activities, when no lockdown is happening. There is also recognition of the greater flexibility in curriculum and the associated freedom to follow your own interests:

Their home-educated life was very much outdoors.

Children are a lot happier ... they're able to pursue a lot of their education in things that they are interested in.

This breadth of curriculum and enriching excursions and activities is attributed to the supportive, collective nature of the established and growing elective-home-education community:

As for the kind of networking we have at the moment, it's more community-based in the fact that more experienced home educators and ... the less or the new ones – we all kind of formed a community and that community is very diverse; it's not a case of a community that is a certain section or a certain part of the society – it's very diverse, from all different walks of life and for many different reasons for choosing this elective

education. People have come in to support one another and to advise one another and to help one another. So that's been really kind of a nice community thing.

Everybody's able to pool in with their skills to help one another, so that's been really good.

It would be foolish to assume that this past year, under such extreme circumstances, every parent not returning their child to school is equally enamoured with embracing home education. There is another strand of families who also deregistered their children. These parents' actions stemmed from exhaustion, from the endless threats and pushing back, which for them comprised the reality of resisting the return to school. Parents bemoan the lack of school support and the relentless, time-consuming nature of continued resistance:

I have chosen to home-ed my year six child as the school felt unable to help us.

If you look into the deregistration numbers, they will be through the roof ... It is primarily because they do not want the headache of taking on a system, right.

## **The case for a comprehensive system and for critical pedagogy**

While the nature of the qualitative data presented here is deeply personal and inherently subjective, the accompanying analysis illustrates how it is that tentative themes may be drawn out. Moreover, the intensity and passion with which these eighty-five families recount and reflect on their experiences is stark.

Parents feel strongly about the educational predicaments in which they find themselves during the pandemic. In doing their best to protect family members at greater risk from exposure to Covid, these families have been forced to agonise over decisions, make difficult choices and even deregister altogether, perhaps forfeiting hard-won SEND support. Moreover, by choosing to deregister, families may also be sacrificing sought-after school places:

The area in which we live has exceptionally oversubscribed primary schools, in other words if you give up your school place, you will never get back in again. We had two choices, attend school full time and run the extremely high risk of catching Covid or deregister and give up our school place, one that we would never get back. This is life-changing. We asked and begged to see if we could home school. It was refused. It was like our rights had been taken away from us. Our freedom to prevent our son from catching Covid.

It did not have to be this way.

First, it is worth noting that the increasingly market-driven, deeply non-comprehensive nature of the education system is evident here, reflected through the uneven appeal of

schools, in turn largely indicative of the uneven distribution of students across these schools, whether by socio-economic status, prior attainment or SEND.

Second, regardless of the particulars of the system, there is a simple path, which could arguably have been made available to all parents with vulnerable family members, as one parent articulates, 'I feel every parent during a pandemic should have the choice to remain on virtual learning'. Indeed, many schools allowed for this course of action, supporting each family's respective decision and thereby avoiding unnecessary angst. This was not excessively onerous, since schools already had an obligation to provide remote learning to any students who were ill or isolating – all that would be required is to provide access to these same online materials.<sup>3</sup> Surely all schools could have acted in this accommodating, understanding and compassionate manner, maintaining and enhancing strong school-home relationships in the process? Why was this not the case?

Here the presence of competition within the education system, and its being far from a comprehensive ideal, are once again key. With the current neoliberal education system in England, where inroads made by marketisation are entrenched, the tell-tale signs of performativity and the standards agenda abound. The endless benchmarking, the Ofsted ratings, the league-table rankings, and attendance and exclusion figures – these are all hard to miss. This is inevitably accompanied by academic triage, where some groups of students – those who can most readily enhance these hallowed metrics – are prioritised over others (Ball, 2017). As this neoliberal education system has morphed to cope with changing circumstances over the pandemic, what is clear from the research here is that, once again, some students are, it seems, worth less. While some minority-ethnic students feature – specifically those arguably more likely to be from multi-generational households – it is overwhelmingly those with SEND who are disproportionately sidelined. These students are no strangers to being devalued, overlooked and marginalised.

With pressure to maintain their standing, and protect their attendance figures, some schools it seems were unable to resist the opportunity for Covid off-rolling. One parent wanting to continue with home schooling and keep their daughter on-roll had this swift first response from the head teacher: 'If you think it's better for her to be home schooled, then that's your choice, but she would have to come off the roll'. As with so many concerns surrounding the murky process of off-rolling, clear evidence is hard to come by and so shadowy suggestions are all we have. When informal pressure is applied, outside of any official process, parents may be coerced into believing they have no choice but to deregister, which then absolves the school of its responsibility for the child's education and protects attendance figures. Might there in fact be hints here that even more sinister motivations exist? Anecdotally, there are indications that this pressure to deregister, or fall into line and return children to school, is disproportionately applied to SEND-

designated students. Could it be that it is not only attendance figures which are being massaged and protected? Is it possible that, under the cover of the pandemic and with cuts to funding, some schools are looking to rid themselves of students whose academic attainment may fall short of the all-important metrics? Rather than persevere with a SEND student, where additional provision may be required by an EHCP, might some of these students be being perceived as less resource-efficient and, crucially, further from important attainment benchmarks? Are they targeted for Covid off-rolling to protect two metrics at once then – attendance figures and attainment scores? Certainly, a more inclusive system would need to tackle factors which lead to the practice of educational triage and ‘off-rolling’ – so a move away from the focus on ranking, comparing and benchmarking is necessary.

What positives can be taken from the analysis of these accounts, to improve this fractured, neoliberal education system? The positives from elective home education which are most applauded include flexibility in the pace of teaching and learning, more scope for tailoring to individual needs, a richer curriculum and a less-pressured environment. Given that opting-out cannot be a plausible, collective solution to the failings of the maintained system, is it possible that we can learn from these desirable aspects of home schooling to improve our mainstream education system? Any move to take seriously embedding these desirable features within the education system would once again require the downplaying of metrics and of associated high-stakes testing:

A lot of people have realised that the schooling system ... with its particular target-driven education, a lot of people are seeing that the children are too pressured within the school environment.

The whole education system, with this obsessive ‘learn to the exam’, has shown its fundamental flaw ... This crisis has brought this to light, I think, and the GCSE/A-level system must be scrapped completely in favour of actual education. It would be a lot less stressful for a lot of families and kids.

What is needed then is the reversal of inroads made by marketisation and a move towards a more comprehensive education system. While systemic factors must be addressed and policies altered to bring this about, at the classroom level, I believe we must think seriously about what ‘actual education’ means and embrace critical pedagogical alternatives, to address marginalisation in all its forms (Macrine, 2020; Wenham, 2021).

## Notes

1. This work is supported by the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute, University of Bristol, with funding from QR SPF (Quality-Related Strategic Priorities Fund), UKRI Research England.

2. Individuals categorised as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) or clinically vulnerable (CV) are at greater risk of severe illness from Covid-19. They may also be required to shield by the government.
3. This is not intended to oversimplify the issue or downplay the complex position in which many teachers found themselves. Where the nature of 'remote teaching' is concerned, naturally providing work/materials is one thing; providing an actual teacher to 'teach' is another. Teachers were asked to 'teach' remotely and also to teach live during the pandemic, but this is no long-term solution. In our research, all that these parents were seeking in the short-term was access to any form of remote learning.

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