

# Year of struggle

## Reflections on secondary education in Norfolk through the pandemic

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### **ABSTRACT**

This is a companion-piece to my account (published in *FORUM* 62/3) of how the Covid-19 pandemic affected teachers in Norfolk schools. I give a brief overview of the past academic year, then draw on interviews with 21 secondary teachers to highlight certain general themes, before considering particular characteristics of each of the past three terms. Finally, I present teachers' overall reflections. The experiences of staff I interviewed seem to exemplify certain general aspects of teaching through the pandemic: of intensified workload, pressures relating to caring for students, and recognition of the ways in which the pandemic exacerbated existing social and educational inequalities. Staff responses suggest that the discourse presented in parts of the media about a 'lost generation' of students is particularly misleading and unhelpful.

**Keywords:** Secondary education, Covid-19 pandemic, secondary teachers, student well-being, teacher well-being, workload

The academic year 2022-2021 has arguably been the most unusual and challenging year students and staff in education will ever have to face. The Covid-19 pandemic continued to sweep the globe and change the lives of billions of people.

Teachers met the return to school in September 2021 with a mixture of anxiety and excitement. Returning was at once completely the same and entirely different to previous September starts. Whilst leaders were tasked with updating risk assessments, preparing remote learning, and organising cleaning protocols, learning happened, progress was made, and relationships blossomed. The next few months saw new terms entering the educational lexicon: bubbles, isolation, and close contact. Classrooms seemed to get colder every week, and staff and students had to isolate regularly – disrupting teaching and learning. As a result, the pressure placed on staff and students alike has been, at times, insurmountable – and yet, we have forged ahead. Again and again, we overcome obstacles in creative and imaginative ways to ensure the education of young people remains as consistent as possible.

Towards the end of the autumn term schools were groaning under the pressure of rising covid cases, and thus rising anxiety levels. School seemed to be the only place in the country where close contact in small spaces was allowed without masks. At times,

it felt like schools were criticised by parents, the media, the government – even by teachers themselves – for not providing an adequate education for those isolating, and staff taken to task for being work-shy and not wanting to go into work in what many saw as dangerous conditions. Ultimately though, everyone wanted the same thing: young people to be safe and educated.

This tension, between keeping everyone in schools safe and ensuring students were receiving a high-quality education, meant that as we broke up for Christmas, there was significant uncertainty around the return in January. A staggered return was suggested, as well as a requirement for testing all students before their return. Leaders worked through their Christmas break to meet the necessary guidelines – only to find out on 6 January (for many, the first day back) that schools would not open to all students.

Schools were faced with another term teaching on site the children of key workers and vulnerable children, whilst teaching everyone else remotely. Hard and fast information about exam announcements for 2021 remained elusive and there were no clues as to when everyone could return to school.

Eventually, in early March, we did return. These few weeks at the end of the spring term and moving into the summer term were challenging, anxiety-inducing and strange, with compulsory mask wearing and regular testing happening in secondary schools. Students were noticeably quieter and more subdued in these weeks and building rapport and conversation in lessons was difficult. But as cases dropped and rules relaxed, masks were allowed to come off, classroom windows no longer opened to lashing rain but to weak sunshine, and mood started to lift. School started to feel normal again.

At the time of writing, schools still feel mostly normal. We are breaking up for the summer shortly: bubbles are still bursting if a student tests positive and entire year groups are having to isolate. More cover than normal is required as teachers' NHS apps ask them or their families to self-isolate.

This piece of writing hopes to offer a reflection on the impact of Covid-19 on state secondary education in Norfolk. All 21 practitioners interviewed are based in East Anglia, and most were previously interviewed for a reflective piece in March 2020. I hope to use this collection of voices to offer insight into the last academic year. I offer no suggestions or judgements – merely a gathering of experiences and opinions about what we have been through and where we are going. The common thread holding everything together is the clear passion, devotion and care for young people in education evident from those interviewed. We are joined together in one goal – to improve the lives of young people.

### **Some general themes: changing roles, communication, well-being**

Finding times when participants and I were available to conduct an interview face-to-face (albeit remotely) was next-to-impossible, so of the 21 interviews I carried out, only 5

were conducted verbally. Most colleagues were given the interview-questions via email and replied via email, with any additional questions followed up by the same means. This is significant: it speaks to the increased workload on staff this year as compared to the workload during my first round of interviews in March 2020. That being said, answers across the board were very similar.

A primary theme to emerge from the interviews was the shift experienced in job roles. Rather than roles changing formally and explicitly, over 90 per cent of the people I spoke to, said their day-to-day responsibilities and activities had been required to change as a direct response to the pandemic. One teacher I spoke to, said his day-to-day responsibilities had changed in the sense that there was increased pressure on making sure students were catching up on missed work, and marking or monitoring work more regularly than usual. A leader commented on the increased number of (virtual) meetings she experienced to ensure staff were feeling supported and confident in what needed to be done.

Linked to this is another common theme: communication. People I spoke to admitted that although communication and collaboration had always been a constant feature of their practice, its importance had been emphasised during the pandemic. Effective communication was paramount, not only with colleagues but with parents and students as well. Remote working meant not being in the same building, so organising work, meetings and checking in on staff and students meant communication needed to be not only carefully organised, but consistently successful. In other words, that there were clear expectations and plans made, with lots of opportunities to clarify any misconceptions before agreeing on anything.

The theme of communication was closely linked with well-being. Again, although the well-being of staff and students has always been a priority in schools, during the pandemic it has increasingly taken centre stage with Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs becoming appreciated even more. It is now recognised in all roles in a school that if an individual does not feel safe, they are unlikely to perform to the best of their ability. One teacher commented that though they vaguely remembered a discussion around this in their teacher training, it wasn't until this year that they fully understood what the issue meant in a school setting. More teachers have been privy to information about the students they teach than they were before, either through spending time with them in school as a vulnerable or key worker child, or through conversations around missing remote work. A consequence was that teachers obtained more nuanced insights into the lives of those they teach, which in many instances increased understanding of the pressures on young people, and of the need for patience. It is interesting to note that the interviews from March 2020 expressed a desire for students to be treated more holistically in schools after the pandemic, and that does indeed seem to be happening.

Colleagues felt like they were merely surviving during the first lockdown in March

2020. This year however, working in school has felt more structured, with an emphasis on planning for the long-term. The constant uncertainty led schools to plan and prepare effectively for multiple eventualities. The damaging narrative of the ‘lost generation’ of students is not shared within schools. Staff working in education understand that the ‘attainment gap’ is a feature of education we are already aware of and working on – there is optimism that an effective curriculum and high-quality teaching has always been and will continue to be the answer, regardless of the pandemic.

The main conclusion I have drawn from my conversations with people is that the pandemic has exacerbated existing social and educational issues rather than creating new ones. In order to help people fully appreciate the highs and lows of the academic year, I felt it was best to present the year chronologically, and to shift focus with the shifts in attitudes and opinions as the year moved forward.

### **September return: bubbles and distancing**

Returning to school in September is always an exciting, but busy, time. This past year, that return was only slightly different in that priorities had shifted considerably. Bubbles were created, classroom rotas organised, and cleaning procedures planned. Despite the assumption that children were at risk of falling behind, there was a significant amount of framework put in place to prepare students for coming back to school.

Preparations varied across schools. Those who were part of a large multi-academy trust (MAT) were fortunate in that a central team could offer support in the organisation of risk assessments and cleaning protocols. Similarly, a central resource bank could be created and shared for remote learning. For those schools who were not so fortunate to have a form of central support, the workload in September was significantly increased, with one teacher commenting that in the first week of term she worked the highest number of hours she has ever worked.

Another contribution to the increased workload in some schools was the desire to diagnose students immediately on their return by assessing their academic progress. One classroom teacher I spoke to, described the numerous assessments given to students, and the impact on his own workload as a result. Others, however, shared their experience of schools starting afresh like a normal September, and used responsive teaching and formative assessment to identify and address gaps as they arose. Another impact on classroom teaching in the pandemic was the requirement on staff to maintain a safe distance from students, which inevitably meant more teaching from the front. For some teachers, this was positive and transformed their practice, allowing them to truly position themselves as the expert in the room. Others lamented the lack of collaboration amongst students, who could no longer work in groups.

Based on these conversations with colleagues, it seems as though gaps were

widening more in terms of social assurance and mental health than in academic terms. Everyone I spoke to, praised the time and effort put in by pastoral teams to help students and families struggling through the lockdown in 2020, and expressed confidence in the school's commitment to continuing that work upon the return. One pastoral key stage four (KS4) manager I spoke to, shared her experience of the extreme anxieties among young people returning. Students not previously on the radar of the pastoral team now needed a significant amount of support. A similar issue arose with attendance-patterns, with some parents feeling uncomfortable sending their children back to school.

Some positive experiences of the return in September included the impact of the 'bubbles' created. For a number of the schools whose staff I spoke to, the year group bubbles contributed to a calmer atmosphere between lessons and during break times. One school has even chosen to keep some of the Covid-19 arrangements into the next academic year because of the positive change to the atmosphere around the school and the increased sense of calm and order.

Schools managed to remain 'open' throughout the autumn term, albeit with entire year groups having to isolate at times. By December, people in schools were becoming ill with Covid-19 and anxiety was intensified as staff members worried about working closely with others with no protection. When we broke up for Christmas, it was with some trepidation for the term to come, no-one I spoke to expected schools to close in January, but there were a number of people who expressed their hope that the government would mandate this for the safety of staff, their families, colleagues and students.

## **The winter lockdown: teaching and supporting students remotely**

Despite the fact that some colleagues were hoping for schools to remain closed from January onwards, there was still widespread disappointment when the announcement was made. It was disheartening to have worked so hard through the Christmas break setting up testing centres within schools to then discover they would not be used.

A number of different approaches to remote teaching and learning were used across different schools. The Oak National Academy lessons were 'lifesavers' for many teachers who used them either as stand-alone lessons or as complements to work students were already doing. virtual continuing professional development (CPD) sessions and threads on Twitter shared best practice with online resources and programmes which could be used to maximise the effectiveness of feedback for students. It seems that the focus was very different to spring 2020 when the priority was simply getting work to the students. This time, there was more emphasis placed on feedback and progress. The huge push on monitoring engagement resulted in the increased popularity of live lessons – everyone I

spoke to, taught some kind of live lesson, and over half were expected to deliver live for every lesson on their timetable.

A popular approach was to take the register and set students up in the first 10 minutes, before leaving them to do the work set and returning for the final 10 minutes to discuss what had been done and offer feedback. The teacher would be expected to remain online for the duration of the lesson to field any questions. For colleagues who lived alone or with a partner, this was found to be manageable, though it could prove difficult to sit in front of a laptop all day long. For those colleagues who were trying to take care of their own children's learning at the same time, this was an extremely challenging expectation.

Other approaches took more of a middle ground, offering one live lesson per week per subject. Other lessons could be recorded by the teacher and uploaded. Either way, it seems as though some kind of video material was required: a significant jump in demands on people's time and technology usage from last year where booklets seemed to be the primary mode of teaching.

Booklets and physical resources were still used during this lockdown. The approach to the creation of resources varied across schools. Most people I spoke to used resources which were already created, either because they already used them in school or because they had been created in preparation for a remote eventuality. One school created resources from scratch during this time. Despite the huge workload this involved, a teacher shared how valuable he found the experience of creating resources of such clarity that any student or teacher could pick them up and work with them.

A couple of staff commented on the minimal amount of work produced by students because of their constant expectation that they would be returning to classrooms. Rather than motivating them, the lack of certainty meant some students did not see the importance or value of remote learning. This lack of motivation extended beyond education. One pastoral manager described her experience of making over 30 phone calls a day to contact students, and the increase in acknowledgement of suicidal thoughts amongst the young people she was working with. Strong relationships to support students were built with families and healthcare professionals, but the pastoral manager herself had to rely on support from colleagues in school. Her comments highlight the lack of targeted, dedicated support for staff whose role includes these kinds of very difficult conversations.

This is important to consider. So much of the focus has been on student well-being and staff workload; rarely has staff well-being been addressed or discussed. The lack of regular physical contact with colleagues, coupled with reduced CPD and department meeting-time, all exacerbated the struggles a number of staff experienced with their own mental health and well-being.

## **Spring return**

On 8 March, 2021, almost a year after schools closed for the first time, students returned wearing face masks and undergoing regular Covid testing. It wasn't until 17 May that masks were no longer required, though many young people chose to continue wearing them, thus reflecting the danger they felt themselves to be in.

The return in spring felt wholly positive, with several people commenting on the fact that it felt like they could finally begin considering long term plans again as opposed to simply surviving and acting on contingency plans. The testing sites and mandating of masks were a nightmare to set up for many schools but once up and running became like second nature. Staff overwhelmingly commented on the fact that, despite feeling completely unsupported by government expectations of what a school could feasibly arrange in such a short space of time, schools succeeded, and proved yet again the value of schools to a community.

Students were outstanding in their approach to the return. Although there was a huge range in the amount of work completed by students in any one year group, the overwhelming majority of young people came back to school ready to learn. There was a distinct impression that education was valued and that school had been missed. Behaviour was improved too, with rules followed rigidly – a few people I spoke to said it was as though the young people wanted routine, whilst also acknowledging that a very real fear of covid could also have played a part in their compliance.

For teachers, workload increased yet again, with progress checks or assessments taking place as soon as students returned to school. This was a feature across all schools this time because it was mid-term and impossible to know which students knew what. This increase in workload was coupled with the announcements of the evidence required for the teacher assessed grades for exam years. A number of staff I spoke to expressed real concerns around the sustainability of workload at this point. Some I spoke with remembered feeling they would not be able to get everything done without working long hours seven days a week.

## **Reflection during the summer term: a 'lost generation'?**

I began interviewing people in the summer term, around the time the exam guidelines were announced. Teachers were told they needed to provide evidence of the likely exam grades of their students and workload skyrocketed, particularly for certain subjects. One English teacher I spoke to had to mark five assessments across three weeks alongside his existing teaching.

There was a definite split in opinion when people were asked about exams, with some labelling them 'draconian' and others being fully in support of the need for formal examinations. The one area of consensus was that teachers can be trusted to give grades;



however, there was also acknowledgement that the related workload required of staff is unrealistic. This did seem to depend on the school or academy trust however, with some trusts organising the assessment process in such a way that the workload of staff increased only slightly while in others, staff were completely overwhelmed.

All in all, the past year has overwhelmingly been described as ‘exhausting,’ ‘stressful’ and ‘odd.’ There has definitely been an impact on the practice of the colleagues I have spoken to. Some simply realise how lucky they are to work in a MAT where a core curriculum approach helped with remote resourcing and consistency, and others feel as if their ability to communicate at work has become stronger as a result of having to contact colleagues, students and parents remotely.

Among those I interviewed, the majority of reflections centre on student learning and well-being, with some positive takeaways being that students seemed more focused and possessed of a renewed sense of the importance of education. Less positive conclusions were that the time spent away from a classroom environment has resulted in students having difficulty concentrating and focusing for a length of time. It seems to me that students who valued education pre-pandemic are likely to have a strengthened viewpoint on this, whereas students who struggled in a classroom before will now struggle even more. Thus, these outcomes are not a result of the pandemic but have instead been exacerbated and highlighted by it.

An overwhelming message to come out of the interviews, and something everyone agrees on, is the damaging nature of the ‘lost generation’ discourse we have seen in the media. It has been unhelpful and has resulted in increased anxiety for students, staff and parents alike. Students are repeatedly being told they are behind where they need to be, which in turn puts pressure on staff and parents to reassure young people. Those of us working in schools want to remove the stress that comes with a damaging narrative from the young people in front of us. The entire country has been affected by the pandemic in one way or another, and the ‘lost generation’ discourse only achieves one thing: to add pressure to an already stressful situation. Every person I interviewed shared this view and labelled the discourse as ‘scaremongering.’ Staff across the board agreed that the continued focus on a strong curriculum and quality-first teaching is the way forward.

Another issue less reported in the media is the increased workload staff in schools have experienced. Some colleagues said they just need to battle through until the end of the year. One leader I spoke to acknowledged that many staff would feel like this and described her plan to prepare for any long-term effects of the past year by ensuring measures were in place to offer support when the staff member needs it. We have no way of knowing what the long-term impact on staff may be, and therefore preparation needs to address potential future needs as well as current ones.

We cannot comment on what the future will be, and this is true for the future of



education too. It is interesting that in my original interviews over a year ago, everyone had some kind of idea of what the future would hold, whether that was to do with the impact on schools, exams, students, or teachers. This time, when asked what the future of education may look like, people were much more vague and less hopeful for change. Small changes like holding meetings remotely to save time and money were mentioned but unlike in the first round of interviews no-one expressed a desire or prediction for huge alterations to our current education system. Personally, I feel as though any changes to education will be within schools or trusts. Already, I have noticed the increased focus on staff well-being and the sense of camaraderie in departments and schools where more of us are aware of the different directions our colleagues are pulled in both personally and professionally.

Perhaps this speaks to the fact that the biggest effect of the pandemic in education has been an emotional one: we appreciate and understand our colleagues, students and their families a little more and want to protect young people from a false narrative. Above all, we have been reminded of our reasons for working in education: to prepare the young people in front of us for a successful future. The pandemic has not changed anything fundamentally: it has emphasised things we already knew and which we are already working on. Everything else is background noise.

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