



Silver Linings? Teachers' Reappraisals of Children's Education in England During the First COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown

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Abstract In many countries around the world, including in England, efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the closure of schools for the majority of students, with remote learning replacing face-to-face teaching. Rightfully, there has been much media and academic attention focused on the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's educational opportunities, attainment, and mental health. However, such discourse backgrounds concerns about children's mental health and wellbeing, and the narrowing of the school curriculum, which were growing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter, which draws upon interviews conducted remotely with 30 teachers across

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England during March and April 2020, highlights some of the ‘silver linings’ of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some teachers noticed an improvement in student behaviour, and were able to explore innovative teaching approaches and provide additional support for students; one spoke of regaining a joy in teaching without the focus on outcomes which had dominated teaching prior to the pandemic. These comments provide a springboard for discussion about the type of educational recovery which should take place once the immediate threat of the COVID-19 pandemic has subsided.

Keywords Learning behaviours • Innovative teaching • Covid-19 • Holistic educational approach • Teacher interviews • Lockdown

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 and Education in England

The COVID-19 pandemic has been described as the ‘loss and trauma event of our time’ (Miller, 2020, p. 560). For children, some of the most vulnerable members of society, this loss and trauma is likely to have devastating effects on their health and wellbeing moving forward (Fore, 2020). It is undeniable that the lives of children ‘have been turned upside down by coronavirus’ (UNICEF, 2020, p. 1), despite children and adolescents being ‘largely spared the direct mortality impacts of COVID-19’ (UNICEF, 2021). Schools in 188 countries were closed in 2020, impacting on more than 1.6 billion children (UNICEF, 2021). In England, schools closed on Friday 20 March to all but the most vulnerable children and children of key workers (BBC, 2020), with schools required to implement remote teaching for the majority of students in their care (Andrew et al., 2020).

The pandemic had many notable impacts on education in England. All examinations were cancelled on 31 March, replaced by an algorithm which clearly disadvantaged ‘very bright pupils in poorly performing schools’ (Timmins, 2021, p. 20) and was itself eventually scrapped. Remote learning was difficult for some children to access, with school leaders reporting that 28 per cent of pupils had limited access to IT (Sharp et al., 2020, p. 7). Teachers’ working lives were abruptly changed overnight, leading to

feelings of insecurity and vulnerability (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Furthermore, as an indirect result of measures imposed to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus (including the requirement for schools to teach remotely), many children faced increased food insecurity, decreased access to health services and reduced protection from domestic abuse (UNICEF, 2020). Although the majority of children returned to school in September 2020 (Ofsted, 2020), it was uncertain how long the first lockdown would last, which created additional instability and pressure for teachers, children and families.

It is interesting, therefore, that when we interviewed teachers during the first pandemic lockdown in March and April 2020 about remote learning, some chose to highlight or foreground positive aspects of the crisis. Teachers constructed both themselves and their students as receiving some benefits from the requirement to teach remotely. It is this unexpected puzzle that we explore, drawing from qualitative interviews conducted with 30 teachers working across England in both primary and secondary phases. In this chapter, we argue that positive perspectives on the requirement to teach remotely by teachers provide a signpost to intransigent problems in the education system, which require significant attention in order to build a more equitable and inclusive education system post-pandemic.

Previous educational research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted some unexpected positives to have emerged out of the challenges faced in this unprecedented time. One of the key positives of the pandemic for education was that it showed the importance of teachers and face-to-face learning (OECD, 2020; Hargreaves, 2021) when previously online and blended learning had been promoted as a route to increasing efficiency, consistency and student attainment (Hargreaves, 2021). International research has shown that despite a lack of formal training, teachers were highly capable and willing to deliver lessons online, demonstrating their agency and commitment (Gudmundsdottir & Hathaway, 2020), and that many parents were satisfied with the provision provided during lockdowns (Carpenter & Dunn, 2021). As a result of interviews with three primary headteachers in Scotland, Ferguson et al. argued that the lockdown reoriented these leaders' pedagogical focus towards 'pupils and families' wellbeing and care, rather than on performative acts of learning' (2021, p. 1), which reinforced their professional identities as caring practitioners. Similar findings emerged from Beauchamp et al. (2021) who found that headteachers in England, Scotland, Wales

and Northern Ireland had pragmatically focused their attention on developing and consolidating positive relationships with students and parents during the pandemic lockdown.

Our own research focused on teachers' peer relationships during the first 2020 lockdown in the UK, and highlighted some positive impacts of the requirement to teach remotely. Some teachers who participated in the study identified as having increased commitment and motivation, alongside a more secure sense of collective identity within their schools, as a result of the challenges experienced during the initial lockdown (Spicksley et al., 2021). The material presented in this chapter indicates that there may have been positives for children as well as for teachers, and therefore builds on our previous findings.

Education in England Before and During COVID-19

One of the unforeseen outcomes of the pandemic was the destabilisation of the high-stakes testing regime throughout all stages of compulsory education in England, from Phonics testing in primary schools to GCSEs and A-Levels in secondaries. The dominant media and political focus on the damage caused to children's health and wellbeing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has the effect of backgrounding criticisms of the education system prior to COVID-19. In 2018, NatCen published data which revealed that emotional disorders had become more common in 5–15-year-olds, increasing from 3.9 per cent in 2004 to 5.8 per cent in 2017 (NatCen, 2018). The high-stakes testing regime in English schools has been associated with this rise in mental health issues amongst young people, with the House of Commons Select Committee arguing in 2017 that the English assessment system can 'negatively impact teaching and learning, leading to narrowing of the curriculum and 'teaching to the test', as well as affecting teacher and pupil wellbeing' (HC, 2017, p. 3). This testing regime has been criticised for its narrow focus on children's academic attainment, to the detriment of supporting their development as active citizens within a cohesive society (West, 2010). Furthermore, high-stakes testing has a significant impact on teaching and learning, as '[t]est readying promotes in pupils a necessary mimicry' (Yarker, 2019, p. 429) which not only damages pupils' knowledge and understanding, but also has a negative impact on teachers' commitment and motivation (Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

Concerns about the impact of high-stakes testing in England have been compounded by criticisms of National Curriculum content following reform in 2014. The discourse of Conservative education ministers post-2010 privileged traditional educational methods, concomitantly positioning progressive, child-centred pedagogical approaches as failing children, and particularly disadvantaged children (Exley & Ball, 2011). This emphasis on the mastery of core subjects as a route to social mobility generated a National Curriculum in 2014 which emphasised mathematics and English to the detriment of foundation subjects, such as music and art. In her role as Ofsted Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman wrote to the Public Accounts Committee in 2018, advising as follows:

Where we do have clearer evidence of a decline in the quality of education are in the narrowing of the curriculum in schools and an endemic pattern of prioritising data and performance results, ahead of the real substance of education. (Spielman, 2018, p. 2)

Prior to the formation of the Coalition government in 2010, the Cambridge Primary Review—led by Robin Alexander—had called for a more holistic approach to primary education (Alexander, 2010). Alexander was fiercely critical of the emphasis on core subjects within the 2014 Curriculum, arguing that the reforms evidenced an ‘impoverished take on culture, knowledge and values’ (Alexander, 2012, p. 369). The emphasis on English and maths to the detriment of foundation subjects appears to go against the goals of education, as enshrined in Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Education must develop every child’s personality, talents and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child’s respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment. (UNICEF, 1989)

Criticism of the 2014 Curriculum was not restricted to the primary phase of education. In a policy paper for the left-wing think tank class, Terry Wrigley (2014) argued forcefully for a ‘richer vision’ (p. 41) of education, with schools aspiring towards ‘greater innovation’ (p. 41) in their teaching and learning practices. As an example of how a world-class education system could thrive without high-stakes testing, Wrigley pointed to

Finland, where cross-curricular approaches to learning are emphasised, and there is no national testing of students until they reach the age of 19.

Increased high-stakes testing and a more traditional curriculum focus were also accompanied in Conservative policy by an emphasis on discipline (Exley & Ball, 2011; Cushing, 2021). Tom Bennett, who had worked as a nightclub bouncer before becoming a teacher, was hired as the government's 'behaviour tsar' to 'help teachers clamp down on disruptive pupils swinging on chairs, playing on mobiles and passing notes during lessons' (Dathan, 2015). Schools such as ARK King Solomon Academy and the Michaela Free School were repeatedly praised by government ministers for their emphasis on discipline and zero-tolerance approach to behaviour (Duoblys, 2017). Such policies built on entrenched discourses of state schools, and in particular inner-city comprehensives, as 'unruly places' (Reay, 2007, p. 1191). This discursive emphasis on behaviour not only positions children as unable or unwilling to self-regulate their behaviour, but also positions teachers primarily as managers of children who 'work within a system of surveillance, compliance, coercion and control' (Cushing, 2021, p. 23).

The Conservative emphasis on discipline, attainment in core subjects as a route to social mobility and high-stakes assessment methods are underpinned by a discursive reliance on the future as a disciplinary mechanism (Edelman, 2004). Political promises of future wealth and happiness act as a justification for increased discipline, a narrowed curriculum and the ubiquity of testing in the present. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there was a growing awareness that increasing mental health problems in younger generations is a direct result of constructing 'childhood as the time to accumulate the skills and abilities necessary to compete in a tough adult job market' (Harris, 2017, p. 25).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, had the effect of destabilising the future, which had previously felt so certain and immutable. As Gary McCulloch suggested:

it may be that neoliberalism, the dominant social and economic influence of the past generation, will now face its greatest test. How can a free market contend with the forces set loose by a pandemic that respects no private interests? (Peters et al., 2020, pp. 3–4)

Rightly, the COVID-19 pandemic engendered much debate on educational futures (Peters et al., 2020; Tesar, 2021). Where previously there

was a sense of certainty, the rapid shifts brought about by efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 created in many 'a rapid tension, insecurity, as well as predictions and ideas—looking back, analysing current conditions or contemplating the future' (Tesar, 2021, p. 1). While the COVID-19 pandemic caused some to experience 'emptiness and sadness about the loss of their normal lives, which can even lead to a loss of meaning in life' (de Jong et al., 2020, p. 1), for others, the interruption of COVID-19 led to significant reflection on the state of education in the present, and a renewed desire to improve education in the future (La Velle et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2020).

In this paper, drawing from the voices of 30 teachers interviewed during March and April 2020, we show that alongside navigating the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 crisis, teachers were also encouraged to reappraise education during this period. This reappraisal was a result of the unexpected positive aspects of the crisis which emerged when remote teaching.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design in order to provide detail of individual experiences, alongside an exploration of the collective professional and contextual issues affecting primary and secondary school teachers. This strategy facilitated the collection of rich, in-depth qualitative data presenting participants' perspectives on, and experiences of, lockdown-imposed changes to teachers' relationships and senses of identity while educating children remotely. The design also enabled teachers to share their views on how lockdown was affecting their pupils. The study involved 30 practitioners from primary and secondary schools over a three-week period during the first national lockdown in the UK (March–April 2020).

Sampling and Participants

Initially, personal contacts were used to raise awareness of the project, and this was followed by a snowball sampling strategy to achieve the required number of participant teachers. Potential participants were sent an email inviting them to take part in the research, which also included a participant information document outlining key aspects of the research, such as

Table 1 Characteristics of sample

	<i>School phase</i>		<i>Gender</i>				<i>Leadership responsibility</i>	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>		<i>%</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Primary	16	53	Male	12	40	Leader	10	33
			Female	4	13	Non-leader	6	20
Secondary	14	47	Male	5	17	Leader	9	30
			Female	9	30	Non-leader	5	17
Total	30	100		30	100		30	100

purpose, proposed schedule, time commitment, how the data will be used and ethical issues. They were also sent a consent form outlining issues related to confidentiality and anonymity, right to withdraw, avoidance of harm, data storage and disposal, and publication of material. Those willing to participate were asked to sign and return the consent form to the lead researcher. A sample of 30 participants was achieved (Table 1).

The teacher participants (13 female, 17 male) all worked in different schools across England and comprised 16 primary and 14 secondary practitioners. Those who taught in the secondary phase taught a variety of subjects including mathematics, English, modern foreign language and art. A total of 19 participants, across both primary and secondary phases of education, identified themselves as having leadership responsibilities.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to discuss aspects of their experiences in an open and supportive environment. They explored specific aspects of remote educating and teacher-peer relationships, including:

- Changes to roles since the partial closure of schools
 - Benefits to professional relationships, family dynamics, shared activities and enhanced learning opportunities
 - Challenges of peer relationships, stress, wellbeing, family dynamics, physical space, work-school balance and resources

- Influence of remote working on wellbeing
- Support given during the lockdown period from peers and school leadership
- Strategies for dealing with remote teaching

Interview questions were designed to capture teachers' perceptions and experiences of professional trust, collegial relationships, interpersonal dynamics and communication, as well as ways to seek help, exchange social resources and address instructional and emotional concerns. Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Adopting this approach enabled each participant and a single researcher, who carried out all interviews, to have a visual contact with each other, building a rapport prior to the interview itself.

Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded using the facility on Teams and then transcribed. Participant names were not used; rather, a unique code chosen by each teacher was added to the transcripts, providing anonymity. The first stage of analysis was focused on processing the large amount of data into a manageable dataset which all members of the research team could work with. Data were analysed using both inductive analysis (Saldaña, 2016) to reduce the extensive text into core units according to question and constant comparison methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to compare similarities and differences found between responses. Data and salient themes also underwent an iterative process of data reduction and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994), by using an analytical matrix.

After this initial stage, a process of holistic coding or 'lumping' was used, as a 'preparatory approach to a unit of data before a more detailed coding or categorization process' (Saldaña, 2016, p. 166). This approach to coding involves separating large chunks of data into sections organised by one overarching theme, rather than splitting text line-by-line or into individual sentences. During this stage of initial holistic coding, it became clear that perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic were not entirely negative, which was 'surprising or puzzling, given what [we] expected' (Bazeley, 2013, p. 110). One of the strands of our data analysis therefore turned to 'investigate a puzzle' (Bazeley, 2013, p. 110), the puzzle being how and why—in this uniquely challenging and difficult time—teachers were able to reflect positively on their experiences. Two codes identified, *Benefits for children* and *Benefits for teachers*, were at this point revisited

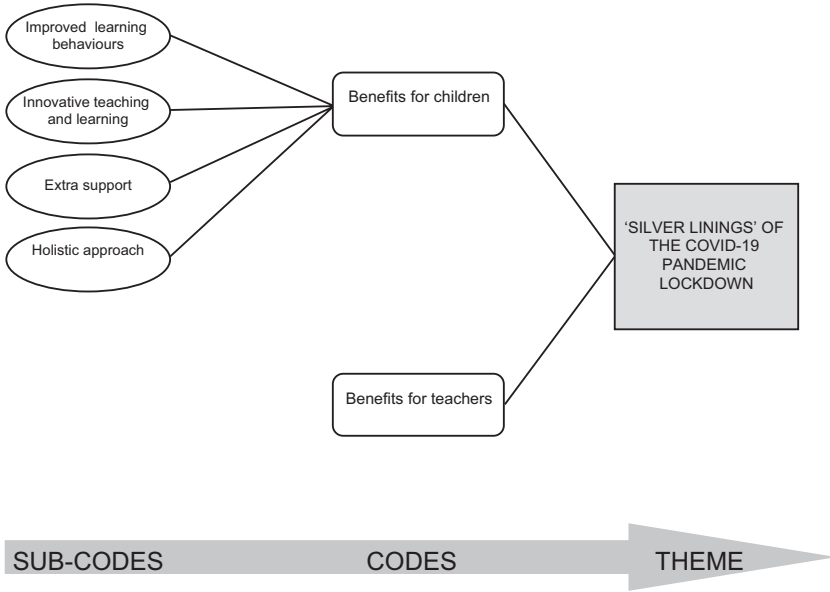


Fig. 1 Sub-coding and coding of the ‘silver lining’ strand of data analysis

and extensively sub-coded to identify patterns in the ways that teachers spoke about the benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, both for themselves and for their students (Fig. 1).

Research Ethics

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Worcester’s Arts, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Panel, and ethical guidance from the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the University was followed throughout the study. Signed consent forms were required from all participants. If a teacher wished to withdraw from the study, they were able to contact the lead researcher and request this without explanation. All data were stored, and destroyed, in accordance with University policy and the GDPR (2018).

FINDINGS

The structure of this section is aligned with the four sub-codes identified during analysis (Fig. 1) under the code *Benefits for Children*. The qualitative findings presented below indicate the different ways in which teachers constructed positive benefits for children during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in 2020. It should be emphasised that these findings are selective, as they only show findings from the analysis strand which explored the 'silver linings' theme, and focuses specifically on benefits for children, in line with the focus of this edited collection.

Improved Learning Behaviours

A number of teachers working in the primary phase of education noticed an improvement in their students' behaviour when the move to remote learning was implemented:

It's quieter as I said and I feel calmer, happier, more in control. Some of the children seem to be focusing a lot better. Their homework has certainly been better than usual. (Harry, Primary Non-Leader (M))

Pupil behaviour has improved. It's odd because we're not there to keep an eye on things, but we aren't getting anywhere near the same issues with behaviour as we used to. (Peter, Primary Leader (M))

This improvement in pupil behaviour came as a surprise to Lily, who had expected that more challenging behaviour would arise as a result of remote teaching:

I was worried at first that they might all be messing around and I would be talking and no-one would be listening, but they have all kept up with their homework and must have listened to be able to do it in the first place. I teach Year 5 so they are the youngest year group to be taught in this way at the school and they're coping really well [...] Some lessons centre on a video clip or some slides and then the children break away from the whole class into pairs to do some work, then they come back at a given time. It's been excellent for their organisational skills which will serve them well when they go up to the senior part of the school. (Audrey, Primary Non-Leader (F))

Instead of seeing a deterioration in pupil behaviour as a result of online learning, these teachers saw an improvement in their students' attentiveness and learning behaviours. Harry, Peter and Audrey's reflections suggest that for some children, working from home away from the busyness and distractions of school had a positive impact on their learning behaviours and concentration. Lily argued that the requirement to learn remotely would also ensure that students developed organisational skills which would be useful to them as they progressed into secondary education, which requires a greater degree of autonomy.

Innovative Teaching and Learning

The requirement to teach remotely enabled some teachers to develop innovative approaches to teaching and learning. Maria argued that under normal circumstances, such innovation would not be possible:

It's a different model to the one we usually have but it's been good for us. It would have been too big a leap of faith in normal circumstances so we've used this as an excuse to try new things. (Maria, Secondary Leader (F))

A number of teachers spoke about how using online resources had enhanced their lessons in different ways:

One positive of using the online resources is that we have been able to find similar tasks at varying levels of difficulty. This is important for the younger ones where we have a variety of academic levels in a class and the children are not put into sets. (Timothy, Secondary Leader (M))

There have been lots of resources available free in lockdown from museums and other venues so we've made the most of those [...] I was worried about using too much online resource at the beginning but I think we have found some really good resources. I don't know how much will be available after this but we would like to use it again. It's enhanced what we have teaching and we've had some 'specials' which have been recorded and available to all year groups. The best one was on World War I when we had some materials from a museum website and made it look as if we were in the trenches. (Grace, Secondary Leader (F))

I'm proud of what I've done over the last few weeks but I don't think it enhances the learning as much as actually teaching in person. However, I do

think that combining some of these things with the teaching in person might enhance the experience for some students. Not everyone can draw or paint but everyone should be able to appreciate art in some way and that's where I think the technology can play a part. (Christopher, Secondary Non-Leader (M))

I think we have enhanced the learning as much as we can given the circumstances but the best thing for physics is to be at school, learning with other students and getting support from staff. I do think though that we have come up with some ways of delivering certain concepts which we will keep, like the use of video to enhance the text. (Ava, Secondary Leader (F))

Although there was often an acknowledgement by teachers that remote teaching could not provide a viable or sustainable long-term replacement for face-to-face teaching, these teachers indicated an increased appreciation for online resources and, in some cases, a desire to incorporate them into their teaching moving forward. In some cases, as Christopher suggested, the integration of technology with face-to-face teaching could increase student engagement.

Innovative approaches to teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown were not, however, restricted to the use of online resources. Creative pedagogical approaches implemented by teachers in his primary school were encouraging children to learn outside and with their siblings:

For some of the children I teach, they are getting something out of this that they never would have done if we had been in the classroom. They have had a chance to learn with their family, including older and younger siblings, they have used the outdoor space if they have one to enhance learning, and teachers have had to be creative about their lessons to facilitate learning. (Peter, Primary Leader (M))

In some ways there has been enhancement from being able to work with family on their school work, learn from siblings in some cases, work outside rather than in a classroom. (Isaac, Primary Leader (M))

In one secondary school, older students had been paired with younger students, which enhanced learning opportunities for both age groups:

We have also asked some of the A-level students, who are generally very good, to find tasks that they could use with the younger ones. We're work-

ing on the basis that teaching someone else can consolidate what you already know yourself. It seems to work! We link up an A-level student with a small group of Year 7 and 8 students and they have group tutorials with them online. It's been great and we have given the older ones credit for this. (Timothy, Secondary Leader (M))

In another secondary school, the requirement to teach remotely had opened up opportunities for cross-curricular learning:

I've done some really exciting tasks for some of the younger groups that involve cross curricular aspects ... like maths, that's worked well, and English, and even some science which students have been able to do outside in some cases. There are the obvious links with geography, but I have done some more with art. So, how this works in practice, is that instead of having one piece of work for one subject, we have a bigger piece of work that covers more subjects and ticks the assessment boxes for a number of curriculum areas. Some students have loved this approach and have welcomed the opportunity to use skills across a number of areas and do something that they can really get into, but some would rather stick the more purist approach so they know where they stand [...] I think it's worked well for the younger year groups but it's less possible as they get towards GCSE. (Susan, Secondary Non-Leader (F))

These teachers' stories indicate that rather than feeling restricted by the requirement to teach remotely, some teachers and schools had embraced the opportunity to revise taken-for-granted assumptions about teaching, learning and the curriculum. Under normal circumstances, such experiments may not have been possible.

Extra Support

Several teachers noted that some children had received specific, targeted support during lockdown:

There are one or two students who are struggling and we've set up a peer mentoring scheme between older and younger children to give some extra support. (Grace, Secondary Leader (F))

Some of the students are getting enhanced opportunities from the free additional tuition. (Aiden, Secondary Non-Leader (M))

It was not only targeted support which teachers believed enhanced teaching and learning for some pupils during this period. One teacher noted how children had benefitted from his school's asynchronous delivery of lessons during the lockdown:

One way in which this situation has been a benefit is that students can access the lessons at any time so if they don't feel engaged when the lesson actually happens, they can always watch it again later when they're in the mood. (Camilla, Secondary Leader (F))

Asynchronous lesson delivery enabled students to access learning at a time which suited them, or to revisit learning if required, providing additional support to students who may need additional consolidation when learning new concepts. The specific circumstances of the lockdown had also enabled some parents to become more engaged in their children's learning and provide support:

We have been using some online resources and they have been well-received. There are some students who have parents actively engaged in their education and they have probably benefited from extra support, but not everyone has that. I know of one family who go through all the material together at the end of the day to make sure it's all been covered and understood. In all subjects. (Lily, Secondary Leader (F))

Teachers who spoke about the additional support which some children received tended to emphasise that not *all* children benefitted from such support. Whereas some parents could provide support for their child's learning, as Lily noted, 'not everyone has that'. Decisions still had to be made in schools about how to allocate resources; Aiden added that such support was 'not given fairly to everyone'. However, it was clear from a number of interviews that not all children were suffering academically as a result of remote teaching being implemented.

Holistic Approach

One teacher, Mark, spoke about having the opportunity to take a more holistic approach to children's learning during the period of remote teaching:

I feel a bit freer than before. The changes we have made during this time have made me think more about what life is about and that is coming through in my teaching. I'm not focusing as much on outcomes any more, which we were programmed to worry about, but more on the educational experience of the children [...] I've re-focused my teaching on the enjoyment of the children and that has taken away much of the anxiety I felt about outcomes. I think this has taught me that there really is only so much that we can do, even when we try really hard, and so you have to remember that. I went into teaching because I wanted to help children and give them the opportunity to enjoy learning, as I did as a child. I have started to focus on that again now. (Mark, Primary Leader (M))

For Mark, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown had a positive impact on his commitment and motivation, reminding him of why he became a teacher. His changed perspective on teaching, with a renewed commitment to enjoyment in learning, may also have benefitted his pupils at this challenging time.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this chapter add to a growing field of research concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. In line with other educationalists (Peters et al., 2020; Tesar, 2021; La Velle et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2020), our research has indicated that this unprecedented time led to reflections on education prior to the pandemic and reappraisals of what is possible within education.

Teachers' surprise that student behaviour improved during remote teaching points to students' capacity to self-regulate their behaviour and remain committed to learning even during challenging times. These findings may indicate that discourses on poor student behaviour—which had been evident within education policy and cultural discourse for many years (Reay, 2007), but had become arguably more entrenched since the formation of the Coalition government in 2010 (Exley & Ball, 2011; Cushing, 2021)—have been interpellated by many teachers as an immutable aspect of their professional identity, shaping the ways in which they develop relationships with children.

The pandemic challenged these assumptions for many teachers, highlighting the capacity, stoicism and resilience of the children they work with. Rather than constructing their students as unruly bodies to be

managed, teachers who reported an improvement in student behaviour instead pointed to the useful organisational skills which their students had developed as a result of the requirement to learn from home. They thereby constructed their students as dedicated, hard-working and able to take responsibility for their own learning and development. This reappraisal of students' attitude towards school could lead to improved teacher-pupil relationships in the future—relationships built on trust and respect rather than coercion and control.

The political climate post-2010 has also led to a narrowing of the curriculum and an emphasis on traditional pedagogies, including a move away from cross-curricular approaches to teaching and learning (Exley & Ball, 2011; Alexander, 2012; Wrigley, 2014). High-stakes testing (the use of which has significantly increased since 2010) has been deployed as a disciplinary tool, which has the effect of suppressing innovation for fear of compromising attainment (Au, 2007; Yarker, 2019). For some of the teachers who participated in this research project, the requirement to teach remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown offered an opportunity to transgress these boundaries and experiment with more innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

The requirement to teach online increased a number of teachers' confidence using technology and encouraged them to incorporate technology into their lessons moving forward. However, as Grace suggested, the high-quality online resources which were made freely available during lockdown by prestigious museums, theatres and universities are likely to be put behind paywalls or made unavailable once the worst of the pandemic is over and these institutions return to a state closer to that of the pre-COVID world. This is an issue that was also noticed by Radhika Gorur, speaking about the role of the university moving forward:

In a pleasing response to COVID 'lockdowns', many podcasts, articles, museum collections and research papers were freed from behind firewalls. Why are these not always freely available to the public? Universities should seriously consider making all their research open access post COVID—prioritizing society over publishing houses. This is another way for universities to demonstrate their commitment to equity and the health of the planet. (Gorur in Peters et al., 2020, p. 5)

The education white paper 2016, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE, 2016), was primarily focused on geographical inequalities, arguing

that the next priority for government must be to ensure that students living in areas of multiple deprivation receive the same educational opportunities as those elsewhere. Areas such as Yorkshire and the Humber were criticised for having a high percentage of schools with underperforming school leadership; the problem of unequal attainment across geographical areas was therefore reduced to a simple issue of management efficiency. London's recent educational improvement was attributed to the success of the London Challenge, an intervention which ran between 2003 and 2011, which supported school improvement in the capital. As such, the attainment differential between regions was assumed to be located within schools, an outcome of differential access to high-quality teaching and leadership.

Such an assessment belies the cultural inequalities between regions; in London and the South East, for example, there were 54 museums in 2011, compared with just 29 in central England (Newman & Tourle, 2011). Such inequalities could be partially addressed by making access to museum collections, theatre productions and university research and teaching more equitable. One of the positives of the COVID-19 lockdown was that it made evident the possibilities of increasing access to cultural artefacts and resources. The challenge moving forward would appear to be *retaining* this access for our children in the most culturally deprived areas of the country, once lockdowns are over and some sense of normality resumes.

Perhaps one of the most encouraging themes emerging from these research findings was the renewed commitment that some teachers appeared to feel towards their students' wellbeing and enjoyment of learning. This was most clearly expressed by Mark, who claimed to have re-focused his teaching 'on the enjoyment of the children'. However, this holistic approach was also evident in the additional support afforded to some children through additional tutoring or the creation of peer support networks with older children, and through the emphasis in some schools on outdoor learning and on lessons involving siblings. The findings from this research therefore support those of Ferguson et al. (2021) and Beauchamp et al. (2021), whose research with school leaders during the pandemic indicated a re-orientation towards care and building supportive relationships within children and families.

There appears, therefore, to be a growing body of research which suggests that an effect of the pandemic has been to re-orient teachers away from attainment and towards wellbeing. Considering the well-documented

problems of mental health decline in children prior to the pandemic (NatCen, 2018), this reappraisal of the meaning of education amongst practitioner could have a highly positive impact on education moving forward.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused specifically and exclusively on *positive* benefits of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown for children, as constructed by teachers during the first school closures in England in March and April 2020. As such, the findings presented here are selective, and should not be considered representative of the entirety of teachers' responses to the pandemic identified in this research project. Alongside these positive statements made by teachers, many negative perspectives on the pandemic were shared—many worries about children's wellbeing, health and academic attainment, and criticisms of the way in which the pandemic was responded to at both a national level by the ruling Conservative government and a local level by school leaders (see e.g. Spicksley et al., 2021).

There are further limitations to this research study that should also be highlighted. This small-scale project employed a convenience sample; results should not, therefore, be considered as generalisable to the entire teaching population. The study was primarily focused on teachers' relationships with their colleagues, with the findings presented in this paper an unexpected puzzle which we chose to investigate further. If the study had more explicitly focused on the benefits and challenges experienced by children during the COVID-19 pandemic, different findings may have emerged.

Despite these limitations, it is worth emphasising that the findings presented in this chapter make a contribution to the growing field of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children. Although it is clear that many children have been disadvantaged by the necessity to limit the spread of COVID-19, the silver linings that teachers foregrounded in these research interviews signpost the way to a more individualised, equitable and supportive education system in the future. The findings from this research study provide a springboard for debate about bold ways in which education could be reimagined, in a post-COVID world.

Much of the discourse concerning education during the COVID-19 pandemic has been negative, focused on how access to online learning has been stratified according to student income (Holmes & Burgess, 2020;

Baker et al., 2020), and how children's mental health has been damaged by a lack of social contact (Young Minds, 2020). However, by talking to teachers who were teaching remotely, some positive aspects of the lockdown were highlighted. Our findings have implications for educational researchers, policymakers and school leaders moving forward, as access to face-to-face teaching stabilises and as vaccines (at least in the UK) are increasingly enabling some sense of normality to resume.

Our findings suggest that for some children, forms of remote learning can improve learning behaviours and facilitate independence and responsibility; this raises questions about how best to incorporate blended learning opportunities into students' teaching and learning. The affective feeling of being released from the demands of high-stakes testing during the short window in which we researched (March–April 2020) also seemed to engender more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, including cross-curricular work and outdoor learning, which teachers reported as having a positive impact on both their students and their own sense of commitment and motivation. This finding raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the high-stakes testing regime in England. For all its challenges, for some children and teachers the very early days of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown offered a glimpse into an educational future with more freedom, and increased focus on the holistic development of the individual child. These findings suggest that a return to normality post-pandemic is, perhaps, not what is needed in education. Instead, the new normal should embrace some of the innovations which developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as many of these innovations emerged from teachers' professional capacity and intent to offer high-quality learning experiences grounded in the needs of individual children.

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