

Reimagining literacy education post-covid

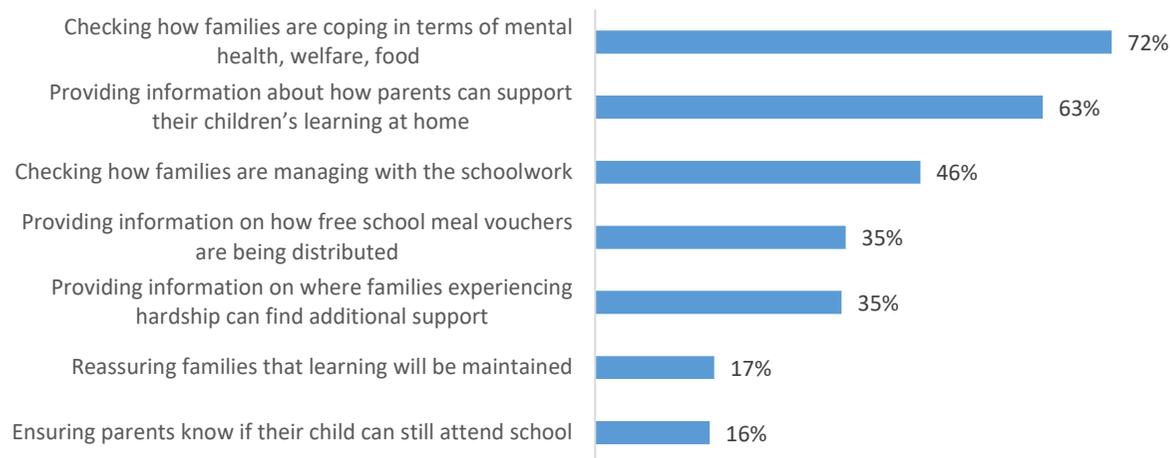
COVID has had a hugely disruptive impact on education during the last year. Right from the start, it has been difficult to predict how long the pandemic would last and what might bring it under control. Ideas of “getting back to normal” have gradually moved further and further into the future. We still don’t have a clear idea of what the “new normal” will be. For COVID isn’t only a virulent disease. It has also wreaked enormous economic damage on communities- the full effects have yet to be realised.

This has created a challenging set of conditions for schools. Throughout they have been operating stop-start: never fully closed, with varying numbers of vulnerable or key worker children on-site; but never fully open either, with varying numbers of children expected to be learning remotely at home. Put that together with the effects of testing, and bubbles being sent home too, and we have nothing like normal patterns of school attendance. Nothing like a normal school year.

All of this has led to a lot of speculation about what the long-term effects might be. At UCL Institute of Education, a research team funded by [the ESRC/UKRI](#) and based in the International Literacy Centre has been documenting primary schools’ responses to this period of disruption, in order to understand what learning during a pandemic looks like from the point of view of those [at the frontline in schools](#).

A duty of care and a duty to teach

The concerns that have been uppermost in teachers’ minds are twofold ([Moss et al, 2020](#)). **First, schools recognise that they have a duty of care to their pupils and families that stretches way beyond the responsibilities for curriculum delivery** that has dominated government thinking. From survey responses we collected in May 2020, we found that teachers’ primary concern was pupil welfare and supporting families experiencing hardship with the means to access food and other forms of support that would keep them going (Moss et al, 2020, p 5).



Question: Thinking about YOUR school community, which of these had highest priority in communicating with families during lockdown? Please tick just THREE responses.

Not surprisingly, these concerns were most strongly felt in schools operating in areas of greater social disadvantage. One striking outcomes of the pandemic has been teachers' increased awareness of how deeply poverty impacts on what pupils and their families can do. These are reflected in our survey when we disaggregated the data by the % of pupils on Free School Meals (FSM)

Statement	Q1 (affluent)	Q2	Q3	Q4 (deprived)
I am reassured most families have the resources to support pupils' learning at home	46%	24%	12%	6%
I am more aware of the impact of poverty on pupils' lives	16%	22%	39%	48%

I am more aware of how difficult it is for my pupils to learn at home	45%	52%	65%	64%
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Question: How has lockdown changed your perceptions of your school's community?

Secondly, teaching had to adapt to the new conditions in which it was taking place. In practice, this is not so much about producing a simulacrum of teaching in school and using it as the basis for teaching remotely. Rather it is about recognising that, for instance, siblings cooped up in a single room without separate access to a quiet space, a desk and/or a computer, with a working parent unable to give each child their undivided attention, have to be taught differently if learning opportunities are to be maximised.

In this context, it is not surprising that in the early stages of the pandemic last summer, only 13% of our respondents were 'Ensuring we cover our school's planned curriculum', compared to 44% who were 'Revisiting prior learning areas'. Giving children activities they will enjoy gets renewed emphasis, in recognition that children themselves need to be engaged by the tasks they are set, if they are to persist with them. All of this suggests a very different dynamic to learning during a year of disruption, one which contrasts with the government's continuing emphasis on sticking to the normal curriculum delivery timetable come what may.

Perhaps this is the main lesson to bring back to whatever happens next. **There are good reasons not to panic about children's literacy learning during lockdown.** Yes, some may not measure up to the test requirements expected in "normal" years. Doing things differently means we should indeed be expecting different outcomes. But they may not be worse.

Early data from the USA suggests that in literacy, up to a third of children may have made **gains in reading during prolonged absence from school** ([Kuhfeld et al, 2020](#)). We should be looking out for that. In part such gains underline the case that self-directed reading can itself have positive effects. Looking back at the tasks teachers were setting children last summer, it is the open-ended tasks – reading for pleasure or open-ended writing tasks – that may have had most effect, not the worksheets or phonics drill, which many parents found hard to support.

Statement	EYFS/ KS1	KS2
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Reading comprehension tasks	50%	78%
Reading for pleasure	75%	78%
Shared reading with a family member	59%	30%
Phonics, SPAG or handwriting activities	77%	60%
Open-ended writing activities	60%	73%
Tasks to stimulate speaking and listening at home	42%	23%

Question: Tick the literacy activities you asked your pupils to undertake at home last week

When children are locked down at home, **reading for pleasure** is easier to support if there is a good supply of books. Our most disadvantaged children may grow up in households where the books the school sends home are the only resource. Think what could have been achieved if the government had made getting books into households rather than laptops? Far easier to do at speed than broadband access, no problems of sharing in a crowded space, and think of all the ways in which teachers could have supported that activity, with the creative energy they could have brought to bear to helping families engage, whatever the collective level of literacy skills in the household. Freed from the shackles of the linear delivery system built into the current national curriculum, everyone would have benefited – and learnt a lot too.



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