

Well-being and burnout in teaching:

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on teachers and school leaders

Teacher resources: 3



JANUARY 2021

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Understanding the issues

In late March 2020, schools in England closed to all but vulnerable children and children of key workers, at the start of a national lockdown designed to arrest the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We asked teachers and school leaders to tell us about their experiences during the three-month lockdown.

Many of our participants said they were working even harder than usual, as they adapted to various forms of online working.

Others found that the usual pressures experienced in school had evaporated, and that some aspects of their mental health improved significantly, despite the challenge of working from home and moving to remote teaching.

As we have repeatedly found throughout our project, teachers' experiences depended largely on the attitudes and expectations of their senior leadership. Senior leaders have perhaps faced greater challenges than ever before, including coping with rapid changes in both the pandemic situation and in the official sources of guidance.

“we’ve had an email across the MAT to see if anyone would step in as foster carers”

Senior leader

“it all seems to have changed... they’re doing it day to day.”

EYFS teacher

The impact of COVID-19

Food and family support

Welfare became the number one priority across the schools and colleges we were in contact with. Reports in the media which focused on 'lost learning' and the need for 'catch up' did not reflect the concerns of the teachers and leaders we spoke to. Rather, the main business of school during lockdown was to keep an eye on the well-being, physical and mental, of members of their communities.

This shift in perspective seems to be a crucial one in understanding what schools are actually about, restoring a pastoral and community role which many teachers see as having been eroded over the last decade or more, and which may have lasting consequences after the pandemic.

One senior leader reported that their multi-academy trust had received an email from the local authority, asking if anyone was prepared to become an emergency foster carer, such was the predicament within the region.

Providing food became more than just a matter of preventing hunger: it became a medium of care. Deliveries to doorsteps afforded opportunities to connect with children and their parents.

“The welfare team are working hard to make sure that families we know do go hungry are not, as and where we can.”

Secondary teacher

The impact of COVID-19

In-school activities with pupils

Much of the early activity happening in schools was reported to be improvisatory, as teachers hurriedly found activities for mixed groups of children.

Teachers working with groups of pupils in school have found it a challenge to find an activity which all ages can join in. One teacher told us she had children from year 7 to Year 11 together in one group.

Activities were often practical or hands-on, such as crafting, outdoor games or wildlife walks.

It was reported that pupils bought into the activities, on the whole, and were generally pleased to be in school with other people around them.

In some areas, a number of schools formed hubs, to pool resources.

“it’s trying to think of what we can do for them that is nice. It is interesting.”

Secondary assistant head

The impact of COVID-19

Which children were attending?

Few of the children on the vulnerable list have attended, in line with national figures. This was described frequently as a real concern.

One teacher reported what she thought was a surprise: that children who previously were persistent non-attenders have been turning up to school during lockdown. She guessed that they might feel less intimidated by the smaller groups, and also that they perhaps wanted a change from being at home.

Some school leaders told us they were stretching the definition of 'vulnerable', to include children about whom they had concerns, for example because they were living in a household with many siblings in a small space.

Equally, 'key worker' children could be a flexible concept and decisions were sometimes made at the discretion of the school.

"...some persistent absentee children are now attending every day, which is an interesting flip..."

Secondary teacher

The impact of COVID-19

Keeping track

Teachers report not knowing what work pupils have done, and there being no way of keeping a check on this. With tracking in schools and colleges normally a priority, the collapse of these processes initially felt odd to many teachers, while it became apparent that teachers could only do their best.

It was felt that checking on welfare became a greater priority than checking whether children had done the assigned work.

The usual pedagogical approaches and curricula were replaced. A common feeling amongst teachers was that they had to be creative and quick off the mark in terms of preparing new resources and new ways of engaging with their pupils. This included remote, online engagement, and skills which teachers had to learn almost overnight, but also making packs of paper resources to send or take out by hand to pupils' homes. Visiting homes provided the opportunity to see and check on pupils.

"I don't know where my classes are up to or what they're doing."

Secondary teacher

"Some parents have really engaged and have been really grateful that we've contacted them... some have found it a bit, oh, why are you ringing me? What do you want?"

Secondary teacher

The impact of COVID-19

Health and safety in school

Staff are generally said to be better at remembering the social distancing rules and hygiene measures than pupils. The very youngest children cannot adhere to social distancing.

Schools vary in terms of how much space they have. Some are more able than others to follow social distancing rules. Suggestions of doing more teaching in outside spaces, whilst a 'nice idea', as one teacher put it, were generally thought not to be a long-term solution.

Teachers reported that social distancing was possible when pupils were sitting at desks which had been appropriately spaced. However, during breaks and lunchtimes, and when pupils were moving around the room, they felt less confident that safety could be assured.

Teachers with underlying health conditions, or where someone in their household was shielding, were highly anxious about attending school in person, and much of the teacher unions' work during lockdown was linked to supporting teachers whose schools were making this process awkward for them.

“you don't want to be, I'll just sit in my office and I won't get my hands dirty - I've gotta be seen to be going around with bleach and whatever as well. And so actually when you're in school, it's a lot of time just, sorting out the phone, sorting out hampers, cleaning.”

Primary headteacher

Well-being needs to be embedded in the systemic and structural processes at the heart of a school's life.

Need advice?

Support for teachers

Your teacher union can give you advice about what to do if you feel that work is negatively affecting you, either mentally or physically. This includes any impact you are feeling from COVID-19, whether you are in school/college or working from home.

Contact your workplace rep, or the national helpline:

[NEU 0345 811 8111](tel:03458118111)

[NASUWT 03330 145550](tel:03330145550)

This work is part of an ongoing project at the University of Leeds, part funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account.

Go to our website for more resources and information:

<https://leedsteacherwellbeing.leeds.ac.uk/>

During March, April and May of 2020, we invited teachers from a range of sectors to talk to us in a series of online conversations.

We also spoke to teachers and senior leaders in the autumn of 2020, to reflect on an extraordinary year.

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