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**Anti-Standardization and Testing Opt-out Movements in Education:
Resistance, Disputes and Transformation**

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Researching the Prospects for Change that COVID Disruption has Brought to High Stakes Testing and Accountability Systems

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Abstract: This paper explores the disruption that COVID has brought to the normal functioning of performance-based accountability systems and asks whether this has created new possibilities for those organising against the use of high stakes testing in education. Drawing on a sequence of research projects¹ exploring primary schools' responses to the pandemic in England during 2020-21, this article considers the ways in

¹ The two projects were: *A Duty of Care and a Duty to Teach: Educational Priorities in Response to the Covid-19 Crisis*, Funder: UKRI/ ESRC. Reference number: ES/V00414X/1. *Learning through Disruption: Rebuilding Primary Education Using Local Knowledge*, Funder: UKRI/ ESRC. Reference number: ES/W002086/1. The researchers were: Gemma Moss, Alice Bradbury, Annette Braun, Sam Duncan, Sinead Harmey, Rachael Levy, UCL Institute of Education; Rebecca Allen, Teacher Tapp. Figures in the paper stem from Moss et al. (2020), with acknowledgements to Rebecca Allen.

which the pandemic creates new conditions for dismantling high stakes testing and accountability regimes, and the role of research in making the case for change.

Keywords: performance-based accountability; COVID-19; education policy

Investigar las posibilidades de cambio que la interrupción de COVID ha traído a los sistemas de evaluación y rendición de cuentas de alto riesgo

Resumen: Este documento explora la interrupción que COVID ha traído al funcionamiento normal de los sistemas de rendición de cuentas basados en el desempeño y se pregunta si esto ha creado nuevas posibilidades para quienes se organizan contra el uso de pruebas de alto riesgo en la educación. Basándose en una secuencia de proyectos de investigación que exploran las respuestas de las escuelas primarias a la pandemia en Inglaterra durante 2020-21, este artículo considera las formas en que la pandemia crea nuevas condiciones para dismantlar los regímenes de evaluación y rendición de cuentas de alto riesgo, y el papel de la investigación en la defensa del cambio.

Palabras clave: rendición de cuentas basada en el desempeño; COVID; política educativa

Pesquisando as possibilidades de mudança que a interrupção do COVID trouxe para sistemas de teste e accountability de alto risco

Resumo: Este artigo explora a ruptura que o COVID trouxe ao funcionamento normal dos sistemas de *accountability* baseados em desempenho e pergunta se isso criou novas possibilidades para aqueles que se organizam contra o uso de testes de alto risco na educação. Com base em uma sequência de projetos de pesquisa que exploram as respostas das escolas primárias à pandemia na Inglaterra durante 2020-21, este artigo considera as maneiras pelas quais a pandemia cria novas condições para dismantlar os testes de alto risco e os regimes de responsabilização e o papel da pesquisa na defesa da mudança.

Palavras-chave: *accountability* baseada no desempenho; COVID; política educacional

Researching the Prospects for Change that COVID Disruption has Brought to High Stakes Testing and Accountability Systems

The COVID pandemic has had a profoundly disruptive effect on education in many different parts of the world. In the interests of controlling the spread of the disease, many governments closed schools or severely restricted who could attend. Even while taking these actions in the interests of public health, governments were also aware of the likely negative consequences of school closures for pupils. Yet few had adequate disaster plans in place to enable them to react swiftly enough or effectively enough to mitigate the impacts they foresaw.

This paper considers whether this has created an opportunity to change the nature of the public conversation about what matters in education in England through the combination of high levels of disruption to education, a government struggling to put in place a coherent plan to deal with them (Timmins, 2021), and the actions primary schools took independently in response to community needs. The focus is on primary schools as in the English system they remain most connected to their immediate local communities. The paper reports on two different research projects: the first began at a time when primary schools in England were most affected by lockdowns (May 2020) and the second finished after schools had begun to reopen and take stock of what needed to happen next (September 2021). Both projects focused on the actions schools took during the pandemic to deal with the situation as it unfolded and what they

felt they had learnt from this extraordinary experience. Findings were placed into the public domain as they emerged, using different outlets both to promote discussion within the profession and, where possible, to influence policy decisions (Moss et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2021a). The paper analyses the different dynamic to knowledge making that the pandemic led to for practitioners, policymakers and researchers.

Performance-Based Accountability and the Disruption COVID Brought to English Schools

This section sets out some of the key characteristics of the performance-based accountability system in England and the way this impacts on what schools do. It goes on to summarise the disruption to English schools COVID caused from the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and over the next eighteen months. The focus is on schools in England as they are managed separately from schools in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Education is a devolved matter in the UK, creating clear differences in policy priorities and modes of governance. Only England uses high stakes testing and a punitive accountability regime in a quasi-market system that encourages the dismantling of local authority control over the sector (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016).

The key elements in the English performance-based accountability system (PBA) that impact on primary schools are: frequent testing in the primary sector (5 test points over seven years), tied to tight specification of what is to be taught; school performance, benchmarked against expected standards for pupil performance at each individual test point, with pupils' progress between test points treated as a measure of school quality (See Leckie & Goldstein [2017] for a comprehensive account of the limitations of the methodology used.); and an inspection system designed to pass judgement on schools' performance and trigger intervention from outside in the case of schools judged inadequate. Publicly championed as a means to raise standards, high stakes testing and accountability in the English context can lead to individual schools closing or being placed under new management. This makes achieving the pupil performance targets that punctuate the school year a high priority for schools. Recognising this pressure, policymakers have increasingly used the test architecture to directly influence what should be taught, when, confident that schools will comply by, in effect, teaching to the test (Moss, 2017).

The ultimate sanction in the accountability system, school closure, has been used to push schools out of local authority control into Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), a form of provision directly funded by the [Department for Education](#) (DfE). In combination with other changes to the school system, promoting MATs as relatively autonomous providers has weakened and fragmented local and community-based management of schools (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018; Sims et al., 2015). This is the backdrop against which the impacts of COVID on English schools unfolded.

The COVID pandemic brought high levels of disruption to schools across the UK (Major et al., 2021). All schools in England were closed during three national lockdowns of different lengths. Some experienced further closure periods as part of a pattern of local lockdowns that followed national ones. During lockdowns only children of key workers, or children judged vulnerable, were allowed on site (Timmins, 2021).

Control measures that were applied to schools to minimise the transmission of the disease meant that children were taught in smaller groups called 'bubbles'. If one pupil in close contact with others caught the disease, then everyone in that class or 'bubble' went home to self-isolate for a fixed period. In order to minimise opportunities for the disease to spread, schools altered their normal patterns of activity during the school day, minimising contacts between larger groups, and encouraging social distancing (Sibieta & Cottell, 2020).

The prevalence of the disease in England, the intensity in the regional pattern to its spread and its ongoing capacity to affect unvaccinated younger age groups, even after lockdowns had ended, led to extensive impacts on attendance (Roberts & Danechi, 2021). Disruption continued long after it was judged safe for the original disease control mechanisms in English schools to be relaxed (September 2021). This creates a series of problems for policymakers committed to running an education system to a fixed timetable tied to a test architecture with little capacity to flex.

Dealing with Uncertainty: The Policymakers' Response

On March 18th 2020, at a point when there was no clear idea how long the pandemic would last, the government announced all schools would close, all school inspections would cease and all primary assessments and secondary examinations timetabled for the summer would be cancelled. (See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-colleges-and-early-years-settings-to-close>). In the primary sector, the normal testing and inspection regime and the accountability measures associated with it were effectively put on hold.

Following the announcement, the government's attention focused most immediately on finding alternative arrangements for the all-important end of stage examinations in the secondary sector. (See Timmins [2021] for an account of the controversy surrounding the arrangements made.). But other matters pressed in. On March 31, 2020, in response to public clamour, the government launched a troubled voucher scheme to ensure that pupils eligible for free school meals but not in school would stay fed (See Davies [2020] for an account of the difficulties the scheme ran into). In April, attention turned to the numbers of children without access to online learning at home, leading to promises that the DfE would supply laptops and tablets to at least some pupils without (See Davies, 2021).

Yet despite the suspension of testing and inspection, the government continued to double-down on its commitment to performance-based system management. Fears over potentially widening attainment gaps fuelled by early research reports of learning losses (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; EEF, 2020) led to increasingly strident demands that schools' remote teaching offers should replicate the quantity and quality of lesson content normally provided in school. This became mandatory in October 2020, when the government issued a 'temporary continuity direction' ordering schools 'to provide immediate remote education where a pupil or group of pupils cannot attend' that 'should be equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive if in school' and include 'either live or recorded direct teaching time, and time for pupils to complete work independently', even though the government had yet to ensure all children had digital access (Roberts & Danechi, 2021, p 16).

Anticipating losses in attainment data once schools reopened, the government began urging schools to ensure students "catch-up" as fast as possible. On June 19, 2020, as schools began preparing for a summer reopening that never came, the government announced a catch-up fund to be split between a centrally organised and run National Tutoring Programme (£350 million), and funding made available to schools for pupils who had fallen behind (£650 million). In a speech to the House of Commons, the education secretary, Gavin Williamson, added: 'And when we're looking at making this significant investment of £1 billion ... I'll be asking Ofsted to look at is how this has been implemented, and how children have been supported in their catch-up plans.' (Whittaker, 2020). Extra money had been coupled with obligations for schools to demonstrate that their actions had led pupils to catch up to where they would have been if the disruption had never happened. In effect this places the onus on those schools where pupils might have fallen furthest behind to catch up fastest.

Performance-based accountability in England operates on a low trust basis. Nothing changed during the COVID crisis. The belief that any deficits in pupil performance must lie at the school's door and that, left to their own devices, schools could not be trusted to act well, fuelled many of the policy decisions made. Gaps in attainment and how to close them framed the political discussion about school's responsibilities during the pandemic.

Dealing with Uncertainty: Researching School-Community Interactions

The research projects upon which this paper is based took a different approach. Early news coverage had shown that some primary schools had begun hand-delivering food to families' doors when lockdowns began (Hall, 2020). At a point when policy discourse stressed the need to maintain teaching at all costs, schools were clearly attending to other issues. This raised the possibility that the disconnect between a policy agenda, defined by a performance data lens, and school priorities, defined by realities on the ground, might create momentum and support for wider system change. In effect, the logic to PBA - that data-driven direction from afar has greater value than school knowledge derived locally - had potentially been disrupted by the unprecedented turn of events. Under these conditions it seemed particularly important to research what schools were doing at a time when they had no clear roadmap to follow.

Methods

The two projects reported on here used different methods to understand primary schools' responses to the crisis. Both projects focused quite specifically on primary schools as they remain closely tied to local neighbourhoods and operate at a small enough geographic scale to be able to respond to local needs as they became apparent. The aims were to identify the challenges schools faced, how they dealt with them, and whether this set an agenda for longer term change. The projects adopted a place-based approach, putting local perspectives first.

Methods adopted in the first project included: a survey conducted through a dedicated mobile phone app (Teacher Tapp) that collected data from a representative sample of primary school teachers in May 2020 (See Moss et al. [2020] for full details); a systematic review of the literatures on learning loss and learning disruption caused by other natural disaster (Harmey & Moss, 2020; Harmey & Moss, 2021); and documentary collection of the storylines emerging from: guidance issued by the DfE; press-reporting on the impact of the crisis on schools; and research addressing COVID and education. Here we report on the survey findings.

The Teacher Tapp Survey was sent out to 2,292 primary school teachers enrolled on the app and 72% ($n=1,653$) replied. When they sign up, teachers input their school's unique reference number. This means that while responses remain anonymous, the data can be explored with reference to a variety of school characteristics, including the percentage of pupils on Free School Meals (FSM), the most widely used indicator of pupil poverty in the English system. (See Moss et al., [2020] for full details of how the analysis was conducted and the main findings.) The Appendix contains the full list of survey questions. Here we focus on answers to five questions, analysing differences and commonalities in teacher responses by the % of pupils in their school on FSM, and, where relevant, by the age of the pupils teachers taught.

The second project used a qualitative case study design to better understand variations in schools' experiences and how this influenced their priorities in summer 2021. Seven schools were recruited, using the principle of maximum variation to ensure geographical spread and differing rates of COVID. Schools were approached via different brokering organisations (teacher unions/ MATs/teacher support networks/ LAs). For participating schools, online interviews were first arranged with the headteacher in summer 2021. An email explaining the study with an invitation to

participate was then distributed to staff and parents. We collected 44 in-depth qualitative interviews from the participating schools: headteachers (10) other staff (21) and parents (13). The number of participants and their roles varied from school to school.

Interview questions covered the same general themes as the survey, adjusted to reflect the timing of the study. Participants were asked to say a bit about their school, the main challenges they had faced at different points in the pandemic, how they'd tried to resolve them, any current priorities, and anything in the wider educational and policy environment they thought might need to change as a result of their experiences. The semi-structured interview schedule gave respondents the opportunity to cover topics of significance to them in their own terms.

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was used to identify the dimensions to the crisis that respondents considered significant, whether focused on teaching and learning, mental and physical health or any other concerns; how priorities evolved and the local factors driving responses. Analysis compared accounts given by participants from the same school, and between schools. This revealed a consistency to the stories voiced by staff in the same school (similar challenges, similar solutions), but considerable variation between schools in the objects of their attention, linked to the particular impacts the pandemic had had on their school community. Responses from parents were more idiosyncratic, with the main reference point the individual child, or immediate family context, though one common theme for parents was the importance of good communication with the school (See Duncan & Levy, 2021).

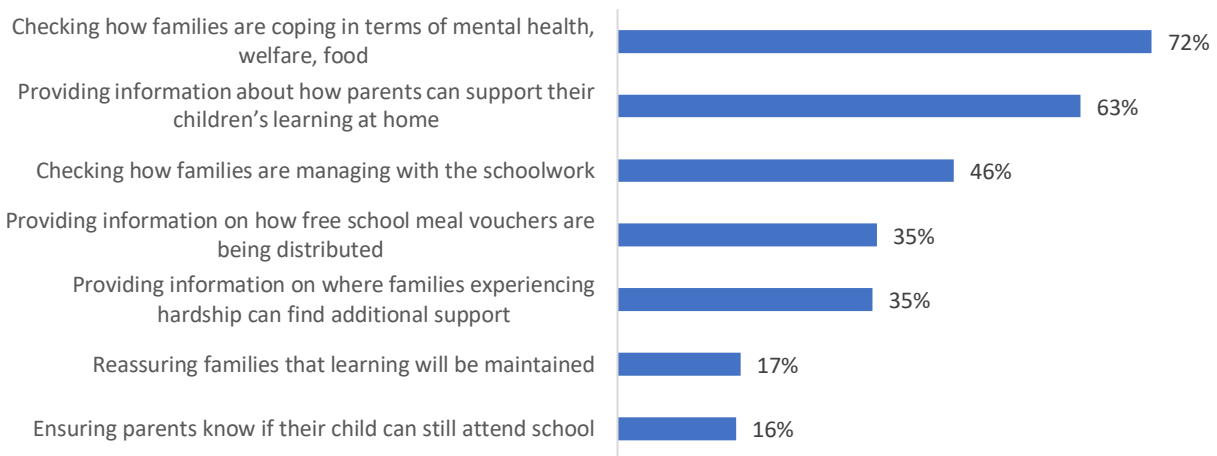
Together the projects have created a rich dataset, tracking a range of perspectives on how the crisis unfolded over time that can be linked to the particular social, temporal, and organisational contexts in which those points of view were formed. The main findings in the sections that follow draw attention to the importance of understanding these local dimensions to the crisis. This contrasts with the absence of interest in or recognition of any such dimensions in political discourse. The discussion that follows focuses on whether politicians' attempts to impose a different narrative and emphasis on managing a way out of an educational crisis has longer term consequences for PBA in England. Findings are presented in temporal sequence.

Survey Findings: Immediate Priorities for Schools and their Communities

The Teacher Tapp Survey established that, in May 2020, while schools were still in lockdown, teachers' priorities focused as much on welfare as on learning. Displaying answers to the question, *Thinking about YOUR school community, which of these had highest priority in communicating with families during lockdown? Please tick just THREE responses*, Figure 1 shows a wide range of concerns that teachers were grappling with in communication with families.

Figure 1

Priorities for Communication with Families During Lockdown

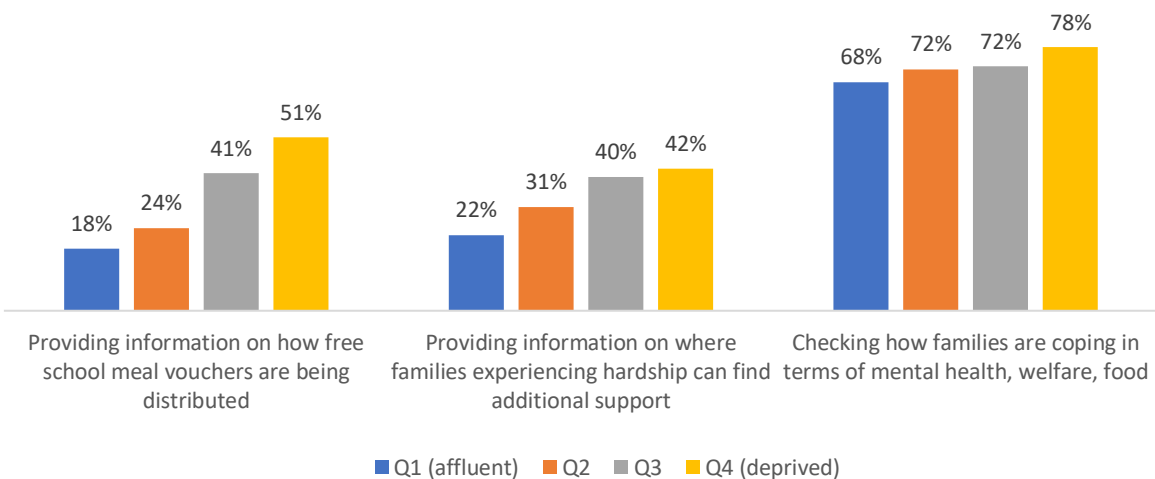


Highest priority was checking how families were coping in terms of basic food, health and emotional needs. Just over a third of respondents reported helping families find additional support if they were experiencing hardship and similar numbers reported helping them navigate the government voucher scheme intended to give families access to food in lieu of free school meals. Of course, teachers were also helping parents support their child's learning at home with 63% offering advice to parents about what they could do, and 46% checking how they were managing the schoolwork.

Teachers in schools with the highest numbers of children on free school meals (FSM) were more preoccupied by monitoring and responding to the effects of poverty and hardship, as Figure 2 makes clear.

Figure 2

Higher Priority Given to Welfare needs: Priorities in Communication by % of FSM



Fifty-one percent of teachers in schools with the highest proportions of FSM pupils were dealing with the free school meal voucher scheme, compared to just 18% of teachers in those with the least; almost twice as many teachers in schools with the highest number of pupils on FSM were helping families experiencing hardship, compared to the least. The burden of care is indeed unevenly spread.

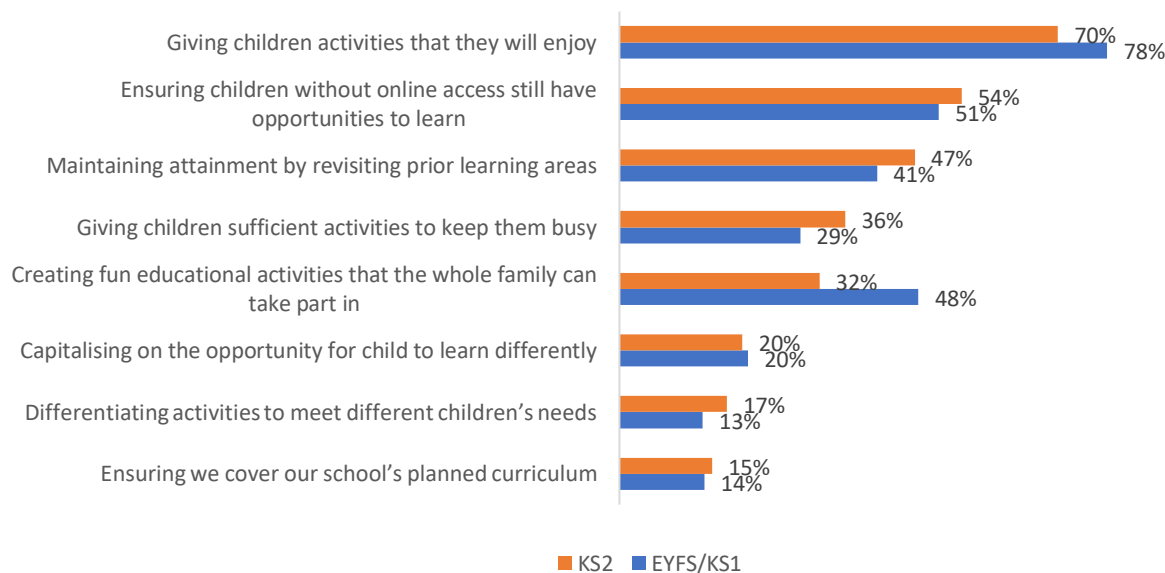
Teachers’ priorities reflect the most pressing issues of concern in their communities. The pandemic hit families living in poverty hardest. Schools responded by keeping children fed and safe during this time. Yet under PBA, supporting families living in poverty is an unrecognised and under-funded part of what schools do, quite invisible to an accountability system that focuses solely on boosting pupils’ attainment, while remaining indifferent to the wider context that shapes children’s lives.

Survey Findings: Adapting Teaching to Support Learning at Home

To understand how schools were handling the novel conditions that the pandemic created for their teaching, we asked: *In creating teaching resources during lockdown, what have been your top three priorities? Please tick up to 3.* Figure 3 shows responses broken down by age. (In English schools, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 covers 4-7 year-olds; Key Stage 2 is 7-11 year-olds), as we thought this might be a contributing factor in how teachers organised learning tasks.

Figure 3

Priorities for Teaching Resources During Lockdown, by Key Stage



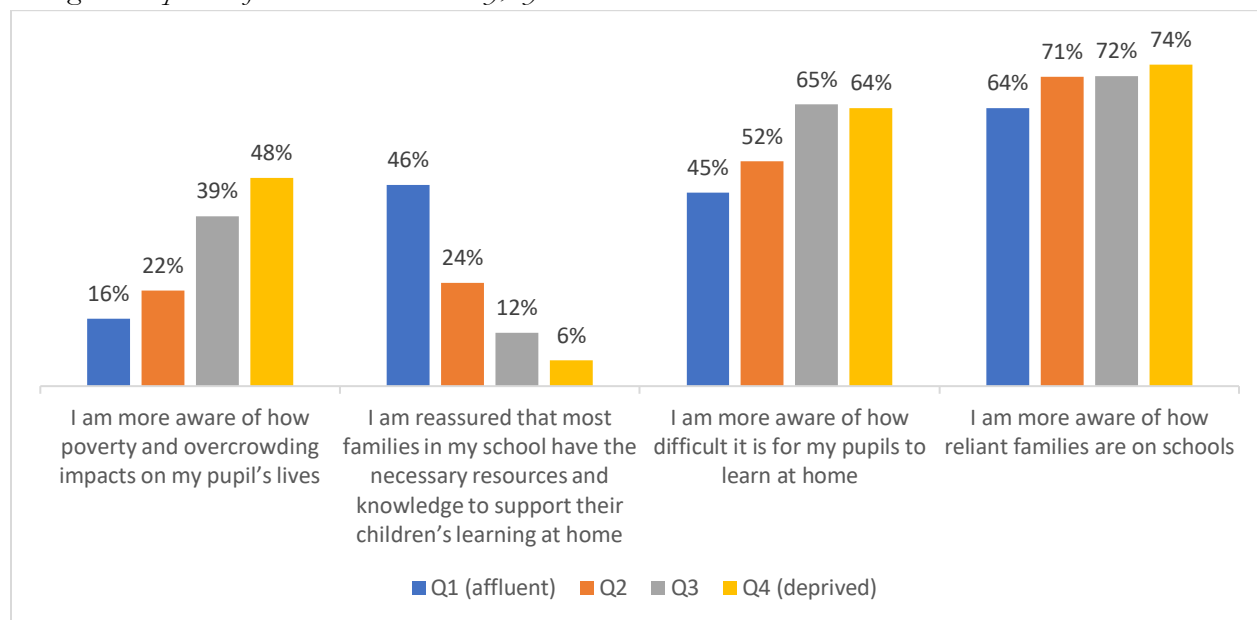
In each age group the main priority was to create resources that pupils would enjoy. Schools recognised that motivation is important in helping children and parents engage in learning at home. Teachers of the younger age groups (48%) were more aware than teachers of older age groups (32%) of the benefit of creating activities that all the family could join in with. Interestingly, “ensuring we cover our school’s curriculum” was at the bottom of the priority list, in contrast to government pronouncements, and was supported by fewest respondents (14% total). Many more teachers were focused on maintaining attainment by revisiting prior areas of learning (44%), a more realistic objective at this stage in the pandemic.

Teachers in schools with a higher proportion of pupils on FSM were significantly more likely to be providing learning resources that did not require online access (63% versus 47% in the most advantaged schools). Local knowledge of the circumstances in which families were living made a difference to what teachers did. Teaching had to adapt in communication with families. The later qualitative study made clear that adjustments were dependent upon whether children had sufficient digital access to make joining an online classroom feasible, how limited the physical space in which to work at home might be, the need to share space and resources with siblings of very different ages, and the difficulties of the whole family finding a workable routine when couped up at home.

Survey Findings: Looking to the Future in May 2020

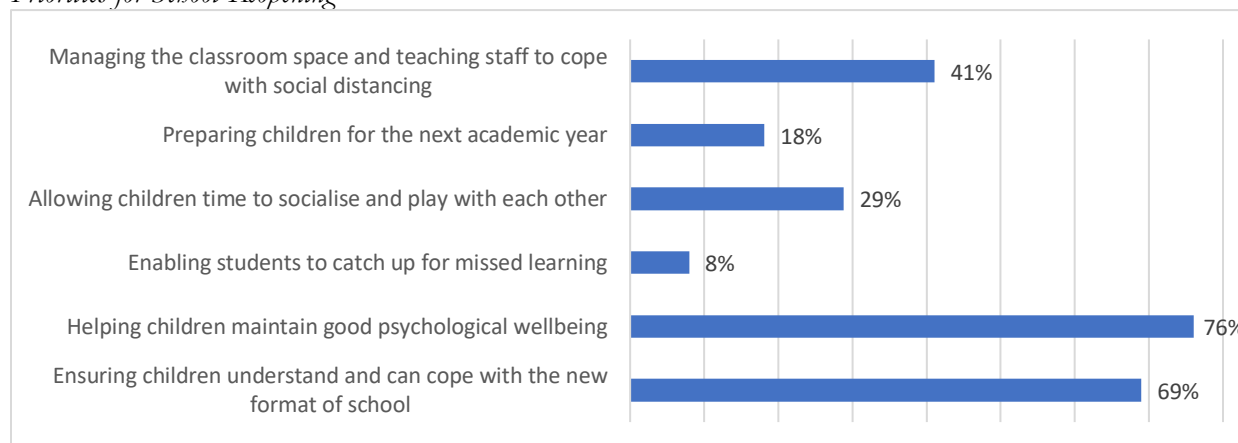
To understand what teachers had learnt from the crisis about pupils and their families, we asked: *How has lockdown changed your perceptions of your school's community?* Fifty-five percent of respondents said they were more aware of how difficult it was for pupils to learn at home; 70% said they more aware of how reliant families were on schools. Figure 4 shows how these responses varied according to the proportion of children in receipt of FSM.

Figure 4
Changed Perceptions of the School Community, by % FSM



Teachers working in schools with the highest proportion of children living in poverty were most concerned about the impacts of children's home circumstances on their learning and their lives. Those working in schools with the lowest proportion of children living in poverty were more likely to feel reassured that their families had had sufficient resources to get by.

To find out what respondents thought schools should prioritise when they finally re-opened in summer 2020, we gave them a range of statements to choose from: *Which THREE of the following will be your top priorities when students begin to return to school in June? Please tick just THREE.* Across the sample, teachers gave very similar answers, regardless of the proportion of children on FSM in their schools. Once again, Figure 5 shows that general welfare and wellbeing were most important. Only 8% prioritised "Enabling children to catch up for missed learning".

Figure 5*Priorities for School Reopening*

This was in line with the priorities teachers had given to family and child welfare throughout. Here, as elsewhere, they orientated to the individual child and their needs considered in the round, not the child as a datapoint in someone else's spreadsheet.

To capture respondents' thinking about longer term change, we asked: *Thinking about opportunities as well as challenges for primary education, post crisis, what do you think should happen next? Tick any statements you agree with.* With opportunities to align with or distance themselves from government priorities, more than 70% of teachers chose:

If testing and inspection goes ahead as normal next year, schools serving the most disadvantaged communities will be unfairly penalised.

Primary education needs to begin again, with a broader definition of curriculum values and purposes.

Schools have an important role in building community resilience that should be both recognised and funded.

[The new test] Reception Baseline should NOT be introduced as planned in 2020.

Very few (4%) picked the statement: *The best approach to supporting children through the crisis is ensuring they reach the expected standards in KS1 and KS2 assessments next year.* For respondents, what mattered most post crisis was a recognition of the important role the profession had played in building community resilience, a social function that gets no recognition in PBA; a sense that the current curriculum settlement under PBA was insufficient; and that a rapid return to testing and inspection would simply penalise those students and schools who had suffered the most during the crisis. Taken in the round, teachers' survey responses highlighted a widening disconnect between their concerns and the government's.

Disrupting the Narratives of Learning Loss and Catch Up

Bringing the research findings to public notice in summer and autumn 2020 gave an opportunity to counter the narratives dominating media and policy circles, about learning loss and the dire consequences for widening attainment gaps (EEF, 2020). This included findings from our systematic review of learning disruption that stressed the value of rethinking the curriculum for successful recovery (Harmey & Moss, 2020) Project briefings stressed the importance of the role

schools were playing in responding to community needs, argued for the continuing suspension of testing and inspection, and highlighted why schools should have more responsibility for deciding what should happen next. (See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/duty-care-and-duty-teach-educational-priorities-response-covid-19-crisis>). This was less in expectation of changing government priorities than in supporting the perceptions of the professionals.

One year on from the start of the pandemic in Spring 2021, we returned to these issues after national and local lockdowns had been largely replaced by lighter social distancing restrictions and schools were no longer officially closed across the country. Although COVID continued to disrupt school attendance in some areas, government attention was firmly focused on plans for school recovery. The calculation of how much money should be committed to that end was framed by “catch up” and the short-term sprint the government envisaged to get everyone back on track. To help decide scale and focus of funding, an Education Recovery Tsar had been appointed on February 3, 2021 to advise on recovery plans. In the event, he resigned 4 months later in June when it became apparent that only comparatively modest amounts of money were in prospect (Weale, 2021a).

Against this background, the second project used a qualitative case study design to refocus attention on the role schools were playing in their communities and the importance of tailoring recovery funding to their local needs. Keeping the focus local seemed an important counterweight to a political discourse that had paid scant heed to the professional community throughout, discounting their knowledge and expertise at every turn.

Insights from Qualitative Case Studies, Summer 2021

The interviews collected as a part of the qualitative case studies demonstrated the diversity of schools’ experiences during the pandemic and their intense connection to place. These are aspects to education that are not visible in the quantitative data routinely collected to monitor and assess system functioning and assumed to be sufficient for that purpose. The interview data gave a much more nuanced picture. For instance, one of the case study schools with an above average proportion of children on FSM had had what could be described as a “good COVID”. Incidence of the disease was low, many parents qualified as key workers and half the school population was on-site throughout. The head recalled teachers and families joining the weekly doorstep demonstration of solidarity with health workers known as “clap for carers” and uploading videos to a shared community site. Yes, the pandemic had called for staff resourcefulness, but staff recalled getting through well. By contrast, another school with similar numbers of pupils entitled to FSM faced a very different experience when the largest local employer shut down. Many parents were furloughed and the school found itself overwhelmed with requests to help families access basic foodstuffs who had never sought such help before. In their community, multi-generational ethnic minority households experienced greater incidence of the disease and increased pupil absences. Local circumstances made a substantial difference to the experience of children and staff.

It became obvious from the incidents that respondents recalled that communities turned to the school as a vital community hub that could help them at a time of great difficulty. Issues raised included lack of food, inadequate housing, domestic violence and mental health crises. Some schools found it difficult to access local services that could help. To fill the gaps in support they stepped up to do what they could themselves. As one head commented “The threshold is so high to get any support from social services ... Often there is nobody and you just have to work it out yourselves ...”. Two schools allowed parents to shield on the school site, when home circumstances were extreme and they needed a place of safety: “[They] lived in a flat, which was temporary

accommodation, that was infested with rats... she was in danger and so were her children, and living with rats. I mean, it was just awful.' All schools were very alert to the problems faced by children suddenly denied access to free school meals. As one head commented 'if we've got hungry children, we have to feed them, right, but what we want is a world where our children aren't hungry'. Their responses demonstrated both the fragility of support that the welfare state in England offers its most at-risk communities, and the crucial role that schools themselves play in keeping communities going when there really is no one else there.

Knowledge-Making Locally during the Pandemic

Schools understood the full range of impacts on pupils and communities precisely because they were intimately involved in watching them unfold. Teachers had taken the lead in doing what they could because they were better informed. First-hand knowledge counts. Remote learning adapted over time because teachers learnt from their initial attempts what worked and what did not. As one Headteacher commented: 'I think from the government's point of view it was, oh we'll just give all these devices out and that will solve the problem, not thinking about actually the root of all this is far deeper'.

Lessons learnt from interaction with families was that replicating classroom practice by timetabling a full day of lessons did not fit the different rhythm to life at home during lockdown. Adjusting to what was possible meant recognising that some families wanted a longer school day with more tasks for their children to undertake, others wanted less (Duncan et al., 2021). Trying to keep children focused on schoolwork for a four- or five-hour stint would not work in households juggling many tasks, particularly when siblings were competing for limited digital resources. Tasks themselves had to adapt. Trial and error established which kinds of tasks parents could most easily support and which they couldn't and the conditions under which synchronous online lessons could successfully take place. Solutions weren't always immediately obvious, when the problems remained unclear. One school reported discovering that young children really missed chatting with their friends – an unmarked aspect of face-to-face teaching in normal times. As a consequence, staff began planning breakout rooms into their online lessons, giving children opportunities to socialise together as they would during the ordinary school day – a human response to a human need. Remote teaching in January 2021 looked very different from remote teaching in summer 2020. As one head noted: 'We changed and evolved over that period, absolutely beyond recognition really'.

There is a very different dynamic to learning in this way. Feedback loops to schools from their communities on what worked and what didn't in teaching at home enabled schools to adjust. This happened much faster and more directly than the information government was assembling and processing at a quite different scale. Many of our respondents commented that government "guidance" to schools was often impractical, did not address actual needs, while frequent changes and late announcements made it an unhelpful burden. As one teacher remarked: 'to anyone ... trying to make these decisions ... it's not a blanket or a one size fits all ... they need to ... stop thinking that they can pluck these answers out of the air'.

In summer 2021 we wondered how schools would calculate the needs of pupils of different ages once they began returning to school and interacting with staff. We were interested in what might be called everyday diagnostics, the holistic attention teachers routinely give the pupils in their care, not the narrow focus on catch up advocated by government. All of our case study schools commented on the needs of younger children in particular, just to socialise with each other, rebuild friendships, and settle back into school routines. As one teacher said: 'I think for us, in a sense, it's socialisation and cooperation, and those roleplay elements, especially with these younger children'.

Curriculum priorities differed from school to school. Some staff thought that Maths had taken the biggest hit; some thought it was writing, others reading. One of the schools with amongst the highest numbers of EAL pupils, thought it was oral skills in English that had been most affected through lack of input at home, and wanted to deal with this by introducing more opportunities for writing and speaking and listening, with plenty of time given to pupils just to re-immense themselves in an English language environment again. Local knowledge shaped the strategies they were putting in place, based on understanding of their school, their pupils and their particular community. This upends the assumptions embedded in PBA that teachers must wait for someone else to tell them what to do. As one head observed: ‘they’ve trusted us to create our own curriculum to send home over the last year and a half. Why can’t they trust us to assess children?’

Discussion: The Difference that Distance Makes

The pandemic revealed how over-controlled, yet ill-equipped, the English system really is, with its low trust culture, fragmented networks, and an inability to plan effectively from the centre in a crisis. Comparing public discussion of education in the pandemic to the priorities teachers voiced in our research makes this abundantly clear. Speaking in the House of Commons on March 18, 2020, the Minister of State for Education said “As soon as possible, we will put in place a national voucher system for every child who is eligible for free school meals”, without properly assessing whether the company to whom the task was outsourced had the capacity to deliver. When the scheme ran into difficulties it was schools who found other ways round. The apparent unwillingness of the government to ensure children continued to receive free school meals during holiday periods became a bone of contention, with a high-profile campaign led by footballer, Marcus Rashford, pressing the government to change its mind. This the government was surprisingly reluctant to do, giving in to short term pressures as each holiday approached, but failing to come up with a more coherent long-term plan (TES, 2020).

This sense of a government out of touch with the realities in schools and communities, and unable to recognise the real needs at ground level, persisted throughout much of the pandemic. The impracticality of its advice was perhaps best demonstrated by asking schools planning to reopen in summer 2020 to enforce a 2-metre social distancing rule, that to implement would have required double the classroom space and twice the teachers (Gibbons, 2020.). In the case of technology, one month into the pandemic, the Department of Education had acknowledged that schools and pupils would need better digital access if learning were to be maintained at home, – yet digital technology and connectedness is something the country has underinvested in for years. (Contrast this with Norway, which used its oil wealth to ensure all citizens had digital access years before [Bubb et al., 2020].) With the government unable to get many laptops or digital devices to where they were needed even by January 2021 and the third full lockdown, schools had already adjusted their teaching offer to what was possible within their communities with or without the help of technology. School resilience contrasts with the government’s slowness to react. Yet the short fall in government promises and the extent to which schools took over where government failed has never been acknowledged in official recovery plans.

Whose Knowledge Counts in Conditions of Uncertainty? Performance Data and the Imperative to “Catch Up”

The government’s difficulty in understanding what was going on in schools reflects the limits of the data they have historically relied on to drive system management, with pupil performance data

acting as the sole metric that counts. Insisting on using test data as the only reliable instrument to calculate losses rather than turning to schools' own assessments of which needs were most urgent – mental health, nutrition, physical exercise, socialisation in addition to learning (See also Moss et al., 2021b) – compounded the sense of a government committed to low trust management, regardless. Rather than prompt collective discussion with the profession on the best ways forward, the government continued to rely on issuing diktats and commands based on limited knowledge or understanding. Governments built on these premises cling on to the underlying logic that drives such systems: that the performance data reflects the quality of education, derived from teachers' delivery of curriculum content, at pace and with fidelity. System disruption necessitates more delivery at pace for schools to repair.

In the English context, the idea that teachers should keep up the pace of curriculum delivery wherever possible was reiterated in policy announcements throughout the pandemic. Ofsted, the school inspectorate, in its guidance to schools on remote learning as late as Jan 2021, reminded schools:

'The aim of education is to deliver a high-quality curriculum so that pupils know more and remember more. ...Everything we know about what a quality curriculum looks like still applies. The remote curriculum needs to be aligned to the classroom curriculum as much as possible. ... it needs to be carefully sequenced and ensure that pupils obtain the building blocks they need to move on to the next step.' (Ofsted, 2021, author italics)

If Ofsted had asked teachers directly, they would have known that this advice had little value. Given the circumstances in which learning at home was going on it was unhelpful to focus on curriculum delivery as if it could happen exactly as it would have done outside of pandemic conditions (Roberts, 2020). Assumptions that pupils would have access to their own laptop in their own bedroom and could seamlessly switch to attending lessons in small groups online, much as they would do in school, were simply not true.

The central idea expressed in the concept of “catch up” as defined by government - that the most immediate necessity for schools, post-pandemic, is to make up for curriculum delivery time lost - reappeared again and again. It was there in policy ideas for summer learning camps when children would be taught content they had missed; or lengthening the school day so more content could be covered. Such proposals would appear first in the press ahead of ministers' public musings. Neither has yet translated into policy change. Rather its legacy is the widening gap between policy perspectives on the pandemic and teachers' professional judgements based on first-hand experiences.

Whose Knowledge Counts in Conditions of Uncertainty? The View from the Ground

Our research shows that when schools found themselves beset by a variety of urgent issues, provoked directly by the human dimensions to the crisis, they had to rely on their own knowledge of what was going on in their immediate school communities to decide what to do. There were no better sources of information to hand. School knowledge-making during the pandemic could not rely on “following the science” as the government claimed it would do when issuing guidance on reducing transmission of the virus consistent with the best advice. Rather schools found themselves innovating in response to unusual circumstances. As our rapid evidence review was to corroborate, this is how disasters unfold (Harmey & Moss, 2021). Local knowledge has a value that knowledge

from afar cannot replicate. Indeed, in the larger disaster recovery literature, respecting local knowledge is a first crucial step in managing disaster recovery well (Murphy et al., 2018).

This insight was largely overlooked in managing education during the pandemic. “Relying on the science” in education policy meant casting around for who else the task of education recovery could be outsourced to. In England’s low-trust system of managing education this gave preference to external suppliers whose products could be parachuted into schools by companies established for that purpose, in effect bypassing the knowledge schools themselves had accrued. To scale up rapidly on this basis, the government rushed to set up a National Tutor Programme that through its online and from afar delivery models ran outside of the principles suggested by the research evidence on effective individual tuition, itself based on circumstances wholly unlike that of the pandemic (EEF, 2021). With too little money behind it to really match need, the programme quickly ran into trouble. Parliamentary questions revealed the low take up in the numbers of pupils helped. The press broke a story that one private company was employing adolescent Sri-Lankan students at low wages (Weale, 2021b). There seemed no quality control on whether tutors had the necessary knowledge of the child, the school’s curriculum or the “gaps” they might be trying to fill.

These are fundamental flaws in a managerial logic that imagines teaching and learning as a delivery system in which teachers do no more than deliver curriculum content, piece by piece. Such a logic literally falls to pieces confronted with a year’s worth of disruption that, on its own calculations of time lost, can never be made up. Rather than abandon the logic, in September 2021 and faced with mounting press criticism, the government replaced the Minister for Education, turning all the problems it had encountered in managing the pandemic into a story of one Minister’s (in)competence, rather than consider more deeply where it had gone wrong (Whittaker, 2021).

In fact, the pandemic has underscored that at heart teaching is adaptive and responsive. Schools themselves are best placed to adapt and respond to a pandemic, just as they are best placed to adapt and respond to the full range of contextual factors that make a difference to children’s learning. They rightly prioritised addressing the very real material effects poverty has on children – effects which management by test data tries to wholly ignore (Gibbons, 2021). Yet crisis management at the centre showed the underlying weaknesses in the government’s approach. It also provides an opportunity to clearly state that to thrive, education systems require innovative and intelligent adaptation and the time to rebuild with sufficient resources, and an investment strategy for the long term (Bradbury et al., 2021; Moss et al., 2021c). This depends upon cultivating high trust in the profession and replacing low trust management from afar with collaborative conversations amongst stakeholders to identify the best ways forward (Moss et al., 2021d).

In Conclusion: The Role of Research in Challenging High-Stakes Testing and Accountability Regimes

At its heart, the pandemic reminds everyone, not least teachers, that the core system knowledge integral to high quality teaching, rests with schools, not governments. Schools are more intimately connected to the communities they serve. As a direct consequence, they are better able to adjust to what their communities need in their moments of deepest crisis. As the reverberations from that crisis slowly subside, schools are best placed to rebuild, not in the shortest timeline that the “catch up” metaphor presumes is vital, with the greatest pressure this places on those who have fallen furthest behind. But through daily contacts that review how pupils’ mental health, physical health and their learning needs can be addressed as schooling returns to normal. This includes time to observe how these different factors interact both in the short and the longer term (Moss, 2021b).

Such an approach leaves room for the unexpected. Early evidence suggests that some children will have gained from learning at home, even if others may have missed out (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). This implies that the most likely outcome to prepare for is that the attainment range in any one class may well be wide. High quality, whole class teaching will do much to repair any damage done, provided schools are given time to adjust and encouragement to adapt their own curriculum planning to the full range of needs that emerge in the class (see also Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin [2021] for a cross-national perspective on recovery that acknowledges a range of likely needs).

The literature on learning disruption suggests a positive value in slackening the pace of curriculum delivery, creating space on the curriculum for pupils to talk about their experiences from this strange time; providing opportunities for creative and affective activity as part of curriculum tasks, and in all these ways offering children a broad and rich curriculum that engages their interests and reconnects them to schooling (Harmey & Moss, 2021). Teaching can adjust to the circumstances of the pandemic if it is given time and resources to do so. Research can support the adjustment if it focuses appropriately: on schools themselves and the knowledge they have gained through the pandemic. That means not being distracted by prevalent mental models embedded in PBA that put interruption to curriculum delivery as the main casualty of the pandemic and most in need of repair (Moss, 2022).

The research projects this paper documents sought to bring this clash over whose knowledge counts into the open, supporting teachers' actions that stemmed from local understandings of what mattered most, and destabilising the contradictory delivery logic that the English government prefers. The rapid pacing of the research activities was designed to maximise the potential to intervene in public debate. Briefing notes for teachers on the themes of primary assessment, learning after lockdown and larger scale system change were published online in autumn 2020 (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/duty-care-and-duty-teach-educational-priorities-response-covid-19-crisis>). In autumn 2021 the main messages shifted to the need for recovery to be locally led, the value of engaging with parents through the crisis, the urgency of funding schools adequately for the community support they offer, especially those communities living in poverty, and the need for longer term investment in place of short-term catch-up funding (Bradbury et al 2021; Duncan et al 2021; Moss et al., 2021c; Moss et al., 2021d).

It is hard work reacting at speed to a conversation in policy, driven by headlines and emerging tropes that appear and disappear as quickly as they came. These research projects operated on two principles: that school knowledge matters; and that the mitigation strategies schools put in place, drawing on their own resources, deserve to be more widely known. These principles stayed with the research team throughout. They suggest other ways in which to unpick the crazy logic on which the English system runs, with too much power over system management given to those with too little insight into what really matters and too little care for using evidence well, in a system that likes to claim it is evidence-informed.

Commentators have drawn attention to the paradoxical dynamic at the heart of high-stakes testing and accountability systems: horizontal relationships between actors in the field of education become increasingly fragmented; even as vertical and linear relationships instituted by those who manage the system from afar strengthen (Verges & Parcerisa, 2018; Verges & Skedsmo, 2021). In many respects, COVID has put this combination of system characteristics to the test, exposing their underlying fragility. Distance under COVID matters, given that the disease acts locally in ways that are highly differentiated by community and setting. Systems that rely on the flow of standardised assessment data upwards to manage their affairs are too thinly constituted to be able to respond easily when things go wrong. They are not geared to listening to local knowledge and indeed have no

way of recognising its value. Yet local knowledge may well be key to finding the best ways out of an extended period of disrupted education (Moss et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2021a). If COVID has upended many of the assumptions upon which high stakes assessment and accountability systems are built, then this paper has suggested that research can make a contribution in supporting change post-pandemic and maximising the opportunity to make new alliances in the interest of doing things differently.

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Appendix A

Survey questions, May 2020

*Which of the following have *YOU* personally been involved with during lockdown? Tick any that apply.*

- Administering food parcels or a food bank
- Free school meal voucher distribution
- Delivering hard copy (printed) learning resources to houses
- Visiting family doorsteps to check on student wellbeing
- Looking after vulnerable and key worker children in school
- Local authority or social services liaison about vulnerable children
- Conversations with parents about family welfare and wellbeing
- Conversations with parents about schoolwork
- Conversations with students directly
- None of the above
- Not relevant / cannot answer

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

- Ensuring parents know if their child can still attend school
- Providing information about how parents can support their children's learning at home
- Providing information on where families experiencing hardship can find additional support
- Providing information on how free school meal vouchers are being distributed
- Checking how families are managing with the schoolwork
- Checking how families are coping in terms of mental health, welfare, food
- Reassuring families that learning will be maintained
- Other
- Not relevant / cannot answer

*3. In creating teaching resources during lockdown, what have been your *TOP 3* priorities? Please tick up to 3.*

- Ensuring we cover our school's planned curriculum
- Maintaining attainment by revisiting prior learning areas
- Giving children activities that they will enjoy
- Giving children sufficient activities to keep them busy
- Differentiating activities to meet different children's needs
- Creating fun educational activities that the whole family can take part in
- Capitalising on the opportunity for child to learn differently
- Ensuring children without online access still have opportunities to learn
- None of the above
- Not relevant / cannot answer

4. Tick the literacy activities you asked your pupils to undertake at home last week

- Reading comprehension tasks
- Reading for pleasure
- Daily online literacy lessons from e.g. BBC Bitesize, Oak National academy
- Shared reading with a family member
- Listening to stories/podcast or watching a film
- Phonics, SPAG or handwriting activities
- Open-ended writing activities

Tasks to stimulate speaking and listening at home

Join a live-streamed literacy lesson

Other

Not relevant / cannot answer

5. Which THREE of the following will be your top priorities when students begin to return to school in June? Please tick just THREE

Assessing the health and safety of children and staff

Ensuring children understand and can cope with the new format of school

Helping children maintain good psychological wellbeing

Enabling students to catch up for missed learning

Allowing children time to socialise and play with each other

Preparing children for the next academic year

Managing the classroom space and teaching staff to cope with social distancing

Other

Not relevant / cannot answer

6. As schools reopen, which of the following statements best sums up what you think your families will value most. Please tick just THREE.

The benefits of settling children back into the 'normality' of school routines

Practical and emotional support for children and families coping with a difficult time

Reassurance that children will catch up quickly in core areas of the curriculum (literacy/maths)

Providing a rounded curriculum that engages children's interests

The opportunity for children to socialise with their friends

The opportunity for parents to get back to work

Viable approaches to social distancing that can help everyone stay safe

Other

Not relevant / cannot answer

7. How has lockdown changed your perceptions of your school's community? Tick any statements that you agree with.,

I am more aware of how poverty and overcrowding impacts on my pupil's lives

I am reassured that most families in my school have the necessary resources and knowledge to support their children's learning at home

I am more aware of how difficult it is for my pupils to learn at home

I am more aware of how reliant families are on schools

I am more aware of how demanding parents can be

I have improved my ability to communicate with families

I feel more connected to my school community than before

I feel greater job satisfaction knowing that I am making a difference in families' lives

I feel proud of the way my school has responded in the crisis

None of the above

Not relevant / cannot answer

8. Thinking about the consequences of lockdown for YOUR pupils, which of the following statements do you agree with? Tick any statements that you agree with.,

I am worried about the well-being of some of the children in my class

I am worried about the well-being of some of the parents of children in my class

I think lockdown will have a significant impact on our pupils' academic progression

Our catch-up provision will benefit children who've fallen behind with their reading

Social distancing will make settling back into a normal routine difficult

Home schooling has worked well for most children

Other

Not relevant / cannot answer

9. *Thinking about opportunities as well as challenges for primary education, post crisis, what do you think should happen next? Tick any statements you agree with.,*

Reception Baseline should NOT be introduced as planned in 2020

The fragmentation of the school system has left many schools to manage the crisis on their own – it's time to rebuild strong locally-based networks of support and advice

Well-organised catch up programmes will address any learning loss quickly

If testing and inspection goes ahead as normal next year, schools serving the most disadvantaged communities will be unfairly penalised

If social distancing becomes the new normal then school routines and pedagogy can easily adapt for the children I teach

Schools have an important role in building community resilience that should be both recognised and funded

The best approach to supporting children through the crisis is ensuring they reach the expected standards in KS1 and KS2 assessments next year

Primary education needs to begin again, with a broader definition of curriculum values and purposes

None of the above

Not relevant / cannot answer

10. *Thinking about the issues dominating public debate about what schools should be doing, during and after the lockdown, which of the following statements most closely represents your view? Pick just one.,*

Schools must re-open as fast as possible or it is children from disadvantaged communities who will suffer the most

Investing in online teaching should be an immediate priority for schools and government

Education alone cannot fix the wider structural inequalities in our society that have put some communities more at risk

Schools need the opportunity to develop a recovery curriculum, responsive to local needs

At last we have the opportunity to reimagine primary education differently – don't let the crisis go to waste

Not relevant / cannot answer

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