Back to School – and After

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Summary

- School closure has been damaging to the mental health of some children and to the educational progress of many. The long-term costs to individuals and the economy of this hiatus in schooling can be exaggerated, but are still likely to be substantial.

- The costs of the damage are likely to have fallen most heavily on poorer or otherwise disadvantaged children, and the government is understandably taking particular note of this in designing policies to assist educational recovery.

- As with the NHS, the Covid-19 crisis has exposed longstanding problems in the educational system and there is a strong case for government policy to look beyond short-term recovery and temporary changes.

- Policies such as changing the structure of the school year and the length of the school day, which have been advocated for years, could now be brought forward. The government could also consider changing the ages at which children enter and leave primary school.

- Teaching practices could be reviewed in light of new technologies and changes in the way in which children learn. It should become easier for a wider range of people to become teachers, and the requirement for Qualified Teacher Status could be dropped in maintained schools.

- In the short run, some form of examination is needed, delayed if necessary, for A level and other terminal qualifications, rather than reliance on teacher assessment. In the longer term, the National Curriculum could be decluttered and there could be only a limited number of examinations at 16. A levels might usefully revert to a modular structure.

- More power could be placed in the hands of parents, particularly poorer parents. The Pupil Premium could be given to parents to spend on tutorial support or other relevant educational provision. Experiments with education vouchers could also be encouraged, with the ultimate objective of making it possible for the distinction between state and independent schools to be broken down.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has cost many lives, particularly amongst older people, but attempts to limit the spread of the disease have also had a damaging impact on English[1] schoolchildren whose education has been disrupted. At the time of writing, many have had little more than three months teaching in schools over the last eleven months.

Those who were facing public examinations such as GCSEs, A levels and International Baccalaureate (IB) last summer were instead assessed by their teachers. Those now in Years 11 and 13 have already been told that the normal form of exam is scrapped, but as of mid-February they remain unclear exactly how they will be assessed, which adds to the stress young people (and their parents) normally experience when facing these crucial stages in their educational careers.

With the exception of children of 'key workers', most pupils will have been home-schooled for much of the last year, with varying degrees of assistance and support from teachers and parents. They have been cut off from sports and extra-curricular activities and visits, while also being unable to play or socialise with their peers except through the artificial means of social media and Zoom.
This briefing explores the case, not only for an early return to school, but also for a rethinking of educational structures and processes which hold children and young people back even in the absence of pandemics.

The costs of school closure

Where parents have been forced to reduce paid work to look after their children there will have been substantial costs to family budgets (Andrew et al. 2020), and concomitant costs to GDP and tax revenue. These costs are difficult to estimate because of the complicating factor of furloughing in many families.[2]

Some economists, recognising that pupil learning has been severely disrupted,[3] have instead pointed to the more speculative costs of this disruption in terms of decreased future earnings for today's children. For instance, an Institute for Fiscal Studies estimate (Sibieta 2020) that they could face an average lifetime loss of earnings of £40,000 has attracted many headlines. This estimate may be unnecessarily alarmist[4] and seems largely to be motivated by justifying massive new

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[1] Education is a devolved responsibility. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own educational structures and traditions. Although some of the issues and proposals I cover here have counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom, I concentrate on England.

[2] 'Parenting in lockdown: Coronavirus and the effects on work-life balance', Office for National Statistics, 22 July 2020 (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/parentinginlockdowncoronavirusandtheeffectsonworklifebalance/2020-07-22).

[3] Full assessment of this damage will take a long time, but early reports are worrying. For instance, the Education Endowment Foundation's analysis of the effects of the first lockdown suggests that primary-age pupils had by autumn 2020 significantly lower achievement in both reading and maths as a result of missed learning: they were about two months behind normal levels. There was a larger attainment gap between disadvantaged (free school meals) pupils and non-disadvantaged pupils (Rose et al. 2021).

[4] The IFS author used a World Bank review (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018) of studies in many countries of the effect of an extra year's schooling within populations where school leaving ages display considerable heterogeneity. This is not analogous to the disruption caused by the pandemic. Moreover, the estimate is based on the assumption that schooling directly augments productivity, which in turn directly affects pay. But many economists (such as Caplan

educational spending to prevent this outcome. Nevertheless, it alerts us to difficulties which some older school pupils may experience on entering the labour market.

The deleterious effects of the lockdown on school pupils are not confined to the financial; they include impacts on child abuse, family break-ups and damage to mental health (Newlove-Delgado et al. 2021). When children are not in school, problems are not picked up. The outgoing Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, has written that 'in 2017, 1 in 9 children were found to have a mental health disorder. This jumped to 1 in 6 by last summer'.[5]

One thing which is abundantly clear is that, while school closure has affected all pupils, it has affected some groups far more badly than others. In the first lockdown learning time, previously roughly equivalent for all primary school pupils, diverged sharply, with children from the richest third of families learning for around four and a half hours more per week than those from the poorest third. Among secondary school children, where there was already a gap of 45 minutes a day in learning time, this widened by about fifteen minutes (Andrew et al. 2020: 45-46).

There were also significant differences by region (Green 2020), with children in London and the South East doing markedly more schoolwork, both online and offline, than those in other parts of the country.

Worryingly, such differences have probably not disappeared during the current lockdown. The Sutton Trust has reported that in the first week of the January school closures, although time spent in learning had increased across the board compared with last year's lockdowns, 40 per cent of children in middle-class homes were reported to be doing over five hours per day, but this was true of only 26 per cent in working-class households (Montacute and Cullinane 2021). Parental support also varied, with 28 per cent of those on low incomes finding it more difficult, as against only 15 per cent of those on the highest incomes, while access to laptops and broadband has demonstrably been uneven.

Moreover, even the classroom provision for the children of key workers – albeit extended to those with inadequate access to devices – seems to be favouring the better-off. 20 per cent of children in middle-class families were attending school in January, as against only 16 per cent in working-class families.[6]

(2018)) argue that education's effect on earnings is largely the result of screening individuals for their employment potential: it is essentially a positional good.

[5] 'Lockdown school closures mean we need to act now to save children's education and wellbeing', Childrens Commissioner for England, 5 January 2021 (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2021/01/05/lockdown-school-closures-mean-we-need-to-act-now-to-save-childrens-education-and-wellbeing/).

[6] This probably reflects the type of parental employment and the differential impact of furloughing.

Back to the classroom in the short run

There would be significant benefits from getting children back to school as quickly as possible. The government has stated that its priority is to get schools fully open before any other relaxations of the current lockdown. At the time of writing, it seems likely that schooling will resume in England in early March 2021. Present indications are that all children will return more or less at the same time, though some scientists, headteachers and education unions have argued that primary pupils should return first, together perhaps with year 11 and 13 students who would normally be facing GCSE and GCE exams.

Getting all children back, though, may be easier said than done. The legal position is not quite clear. The government's position in defending itself against the judicial review of its powers in the first lockdown is that it merely 'requested' schools to close.[7] In principle, local authorities, heads and governing bodies of schools have some latitude and used it to bring forward closure in some cases, and certainly to close particular classes and year groups, when Covid-19 cases were reported during autumn 2020. The National Education Union is concerned that it is not yet safe to return to the classroom,[8] and may try to prevent full return. Parents themselves may be reluctant to send their children back to school, as they were in numbers last autumn, and it is unclear what would be done about this.

At the moment there does not seem to be a consensus to vaccinate teachers before schools return, and innovative suggestions such as attendance rotas, where for example pupils might attend two days a week to enable reduction in classroom numbers, or where we continue with a blend of classroom and remote learning, do not seem to be under active consideration.

As for examinations, we appear to be in the same difficulties as we were in 2020, with GCSE and GCE students, parents and teachers still in confusion at the time of writing. Having announced in October 2020 that this year's examinations would go ahead as normal – a decision confirmed as late as 3 December - Boris Johnson announced on 4 January 2021 that they have been abandoned.
A short consultation exercise was held to see what should take the place of exams, but it appears that we are again going to have to rely mainly on teacher assessments (probably based on even less information and knowledge of individual students than last year) to make these very important decisions.

Teacher expectations are unreliable predictors[9] of exam performance and it should not be beyond exam boards' ingenuity to devise shorter alternative modes of assessment which would give some

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[7] See: Dolan -v- Secretary of State for Health and Social Care judgment, paragraph 27 (https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Dolan-v-SSHSC-judgment-011220-.pdf).

[8] 'National Education Union launches plan for education return and recovery', fenews.co.uk, 28 January 2021 (https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/62473-national-education-union-launches-plan-for-education-return-and-recovery). There are inevitably some risks involved but recent research suggests that 'there is no significant evidence that schools are playing a significant role in driving the spread of the Covid-19 disease in the community, particularly in primary schools'. Furthermore, 'cases in teachers were seen to decline during the November lockdown, particularly in those regions that had previously been in Tier 3, the highest level of control at the time'. See: 'New research finds no evidence that schools are playing a significant role in driving spread of the Covid-19 virus in the community', Warwick University, 15 February 2021 (https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/new_research_finds_no_evidence_that_schools_are_playing_a_significant_role_in_driving_spread_of_the_covid-19_virus_in_the_community1).

[9] They may also be consistently biased against some ethnic groups (Burgess and Greaves 2013).

objectivity to these decisions. Without such external indicators, over-optimistic teacher assessments will likely prove impossible to moderate, as was the case last year,[10] and lead to some injustices as well as difficulties for universities and employers.

The government has announced some plans to facilitate catch-up, with a particular concern for disadvantaged groups. Laptops and WiFi access have been provided for poorer pupils. A ‘catch-up premium’, now standing at £1.3 billion,[11] includes finance for extra staffing costs associated with teacher absences and £350 million for a National Tutoring Programme, intended to bring tutors and academic mentors into school to support disadvantaged pupils. Sir Kevan Collins has been appointed ‘Education Recovery Commissioner’[12] to drive this work forward.

Longer-term issues

The government has not, however, acknowledged that many of the problems which school closures have thrown up are evidence of longer-term dysfunction in the English educational system, rather like the pandemic’s exposure of longer-term problems within the National Health Service.
For instance, England continues to occupy a relatively lowly position in the results table for the international PISA tests of student achievement at age 15; way behind Asian countries such as China, Singapore, South Korea and Japan, but also significantly weaker than European countries such as Estonia, Netherlands, Poland and Switzerland. Many of these countries, incidentally, have had much shorter school closures during the pandemic than has been the case here.

Moreover, there have long been considerable variations in achievement in our schools. Despite rising proportions of students getting good GCSE and A level results, and going on to higher education, somewhere between 15 and 20 per cent may be ‘functionally illiterate’[13] when they leave school. A particular problem seems to be the low levels of achievement of white working-class children (House of Commons Education Committee 2014).

Rather than applying sticking-plaster ‘solutions’ to current catch-up problems faced by our schools, we could pursue radical restructuring of our educational structures to improve school performance and generate greater innovation, competition and parental choice. The rest of this briefing outlines some suggestions. This would be in line with the government’s stated policy of long-term ‘levelling up’ across the country.

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[10] ‘U-turn will mean A-level and GCSE teacher grades stand’, *TES*, 17 August 2020 (https://www.tes.com/news/u-turn-will-see-A-level-and-gcse-teacher-grades-stand).

[11] ‘Guidance: Catch up premium’, Department for Education, 19 November 2020 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/catch-up-premium-coronavirus-covid-19/catch-up-premium).

[12] ‘New Commissioner appointed to oversee education catch-up', Department for Education, 3 February 2021 (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-commissioner-appointed-to-oversee-education-catch-up). Sir Kevan is a distinguished and experienced appointee, though some have suggested that his involvement in contracting for the National Tutoring Programme may produce a conflict of interest when evaluating the Programme’s success.

[13] In the sense that they apparently lack the formal reading and writing skills to take a full part in society, although this cannot be precisely measured and some claim that the problem is exaggerated. See: ‘Are 20% of school leavers illiterate?’, 16 February 2013 (https://www.localschoolsnetwork.org.uk/faq/are-20-school-leavers-illiterate).

Entry points, the school day and the school year

There is nothing which should be sacrosanct in our school system, which is a palimpsest of more than 150 years of educational thinking, institutional inertia and often contradictory government intervention. For instance, we take it for granted that children should start school at five, a relic of the Forster Education Act of 1870 which first introduced the principle of compulsory education but allowed children to leave at age ten.[14] In practice, school entry age nowadays averages at four and a half, as primary schools no longer encourage children to enter on their birthday, but insist that they enter the system in the September of the school year in which they turn five. This means that there can be ten or eleven months between the ages of children entering reception classes, something which can lead to long-term disadvantage.[15]

Lockdown has demonstrated that remote learning is a near-impossibility for small children, who in their first year or two of school are mainly learning how to cooperate in groups and focus their attention, with formal learning at his stage being relatively limited.[16] And there have been regular claims in recent years that significant numbers of young pupils are unprepared to start school because they are unable to hold a book or pencil or wash themselves, or are not toilet-trained.[17] UK children start primary school earlier than most other developed countries[18] and it might make sense to have children start school later, perhaps at six, when they are better prepared to learn. This in turn has implications for pre-school provision.[19]

Primary schools might be better starting later but also finishing later. Entry to independent secondary schools is often at thirteen, and the 1967 Plowden Report recommended transfer at twelve rather than eleven for maintained schools. Later entry into secondary education could well benefit those children who find it difficult to cope with the change from small, supportive primary school environments to much larger secondary schools, where there are too often problems of poor behaviour and bullying.[20] A traumatic start in secondary education may have lasting consequences.

The school day is another issue with implications for pupil performance. In most English schools, the teaching day is shorter than it was fifty years ago. There are arguments to suggest that a longer school day would benefit pupil performance, particularly at secondary level. It would create more scope for wider extra-curricular activity such as sports, hobby clubs, artistic and cultural activities,

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[14] Strictly speaking Forster's Act allowed local authorities to impose compulsion between 5 and 13, although children could leave at 10 if they had reached a minimum level of achievement.

[15] 'Summer-born pupils disadvantaged throughout primary school – study', *Guardian*, 21 November 2018 (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/nov/21/summer-born-pupils-disadvantaged-throughout-primary-school-study).

[16] Given this, it is difficult to see why nurseries were allowed to remain open while the first years of primary school were closed in the current lockdown. The justification offered by ministers in terms of low risk and the need to allow parents to work (even in non-essential jobs) applies equally to Reception and Year 1 pupils, for whom online teaching is manifestly less effective than for older pupils. See: 'Covid: How long will nurseries stay open?', *BBC News*, 11 January 2021 (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-55545277).

[17] 'So many pupils aren't toilet trained that this school has had to hire a nappy-changer', *Manchester Evening News*, 10 April 2019 (https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/parenting/pupils-toilet-nappy-changer-school-16107868).

[18] France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan and most parts of Canada and the USA begin compulsory schooling at six.

[19] Much of which is still privately provided, and rather more flexible and attuned to parental preferences than state primary schools.

[20] 'Schools failing to tackle bullying and poor behaviour to be heavily punished by Ofsted', *Independent*, 16 January 2019 (https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/schools-bullying-behaviour-pupils-classroom-ofsted-inspection-framework-rolling-a8729301.html).

which tend currently to be disproportionately taken up by middle-class children. It would reduce the pressure on working parents who have to pick young children up from school.

A longer school day might also obviate the need for homework, always a vector for inequality at secondary school level (House of Commons Education Select Committee 2014: 47-49). If all pupils had to do an hour or an hour and a half's supervised private work two or three afternoons a week it would put them on a level footing: at the moment some children find it very much easier to work at home than others.

As the Education Endowment Foundation[21] puts it:

> on average, pupils make two additional months' progress per year from extended school time … There is some evidence that disadvantaged pupils benefit more, making closer to three months' additional progress. There are also often wider benefits for low-income students, such as increased attendance at school, improved behaviour, and better relationships with peers.

Ministers are aware of these arguments. Michael Gove, for example, when the Coalition's Secretary of State for Education, said 'I would like to see state schools offer a school day that is nine or even ten hours long'. [22]

The structure of the school year, and particularly the long summer holiday period, might also usefully be adjusted. The summer holiday tends to reduce learning retention, and this probably has most impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have the opportunities for travel or the motivation or resources for peri-educational activities such as reading and hobbies over the summer.

The government has hinted at lengthening school days and cutting short the summer holidays this year to assist in repairing the damage of the prolonged lockdown; the National Education Union, however, is refusing to cooperate without an increase in pay and the cost of this may deter the government.

The national contract

Teaching is the most heavily unionised sector in Britain, and unions are keen advocates of the national contract. Their ideal, as Seifert and Ironside (2019) put it, is that there should be 'qualified teachers, trained to a national standard, regulated and inspected within national professional guidelines, and employed under nationally-determined pay and conditions'.

The national contract is tied to the traditional school year, with employment based on teaching terms and with the odd and confusing principle that salaries are based on ten months (with the summer period completely free of commitments) although paid on a monthly basis throughout the year.

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[21] 'Extending school time', Education Endowment Foundation (https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/extending-school-time/).

[22] Quoted in Long (2019: 11).

This means that radically reshaping the school year would bring the government into conflict with the unions; it is thus unlikely to happen this year. Even if temporary extra payments were made available for staff prepared to work outside the contract, unions would probably be unwilling to concede the principle. Nevertheless, changing the contract is something which the government probably should be working towards if it wants to reshape the school day and the school year in the longer term.

Academies, free schools and the maintained sector

In principle, adherence to the national contract is only required of those schools within the 'maintained sector' – state-funded schools run by local authorities. Private ('independent') schools have never been required to adhere to it. And since 2002 it has been possible for schools to opt out of local authority control while still retaining state funding, by becoming academies.[23] These are owned by charitable trusts, which may be part of a chain.

Academies are not required to adhere to the national contract, although some do. Nor are free schools – academies which have been created since 2011 from scratch, rather than having a previous life in the maintained sector – required to adhere to national terms of service.
Individual school heads even in the maintained sector have some power to alter their school day, working week and school year, but those in academies and free schools have wider powers. They have used these in fair numbers, going for longer teaching days (and/or in some cases running weekend sessions[24]) and marginally changed years. Local authority maintained schools, however, have stuck to standard hours – and even sometimes chosen to reduce working weeks by closing early on Fridays to save money.

Academies and free schools do not have to adhere to the national curriculum and have been encouraged to innovate with their educational provision.

As of 2018, 72 per cent of all secondary and 27 per cent of primary schools were academies or free schools. Just over half of all pupils were outside the maintained sector. The academic performance of these schools seems to be rather better than local authority-run schools, although this is not always the case (Young 2019), and they certainly seem to be more innovative. The potential for innovation is what encouraged Nicky Morgan, when Education Secretary, to press for all schools to be converted to academies by 2022, a policy which was subsequently abandoned after opposition from Conservative-led local authorities amongst others.[25]

It may be a good time to revive the push for academisation in a situation where as much flexibility as possible is needed in the education system. One important element might be academies' ability, long a feature of independent schools, to appoint teachers without Qualified Teacher Status. In

[23] There are two types: 'sponsored' and 'converter' academies. The Labour government's original scheme encouraged poorly-performing state schools to become academies run by sponsors who were responsible for turning their performance around. Converters, on the other hand, are schools which previously had 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted grades and have opted to convert to academy status.

[24] 'Six-day week for academy chain pupils who lost out', *The Times,* 14 September 2020 (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/six-day-week-for-academy-chain-pupils-who-lost-out-qcg6jf6p8).

[25] 'Government drops plan to make all schools in England academies', *Guardian*, 6 May 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/may/06/government-backs-down-over-plan-to-make-all-schools-academies).

other words, appointees need not have undergone standard teacher-training (often criticised in the past for enforcing misguided educational orthodoxy), but have other characteristics, such as experience in business or the armed forces, which make for a good teacher.

Increased diversity of experience in teaching would be greatly welcome. The school teaching workforce is currently seriously unbalanced in gender terms, with three-quarters of all teachers (and approaching 90 per cent in primary schools) being female. It is often asserted that the dearth of male role models in schools[26] is one of the factors explaining poor performance by working-class boys, and there may be some truth in this. There is also currently underrepresentation of all major ethnic minorities in the teaching workforce,[27] which again could be a factor in the poor school performance of some groups.

As we are likely to be looking to expand the teaching workforce, and as we come out of the pandemic with large numbers of talented graduates of all ages looking for new careers, an increased flexibility in recruitment of teaching staff is of importance.

Exams

It is too late to save this year's public examinations, but it ought to be possible to arrange some alternative forms of assessment, at least in core subjects, which would provide a stronger basis for teacher grade predictions. In the case of A levels and IB, these would probably have to be held much later, perhaps in early September 2021. This in turn would require later university entry, perhaps in January.

In view of the difficulties of agreeing this with all parties, it is understandable if no such arrangements have proved feasible. With the benefit of hindsight, the government's confidence in autumn 2020 that the coming summer's exams would go ahead as normal was seriously misplaced. If a Plan B had been put in place, we would not now be in this position. As it cannot yet be safely assumed that lockdown will not happen again at some stage, contingency planning for 2022 and beyond should be undertaken now.

Looking to the longer term, many people are using the current crisis to argue that we should abandon public examinations at 16, an argument which has been around for a while. It is true that most other countries in Europe do not have formal exit qualifications at this age, and now that students are supposed to stay in school or college at least part of the time until they are 18, the case for assessing them at an earlier age seems weaker.

[26] 'Exodus of male teachers leaves boys without role models', *The Times*, 19 October 2020 (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exodus-of-male-teachers-leaves-boys-without-role-models-xdkstxj9r).

[27] 'School teacher workforce', Department for Education, 18 February 2021 (https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest#main-facts-and-figures).

This is the view of Lord Baker, who was Mrs Thatcher's Education Secretary and partly responsible for the creation of GCSEs[28] in the 1980s. He has recently said that GCSEs 'are past their sell-by date and must now be scrapped'.[29]

But some alternatives being discussed seem lightweight. One suggestion is to have a 'weblink to a portfolio showing what children have done at school'; another is to have 'digital passports which will also track children's kindness and creativity', while the Archbishop of Canterbury is in favour of 'forest schools'.[30]

There is certainly a case that children are over-examined. Mugging up for ten or more GCSE subjects seems excessive and must surely detract from other aspects of young people's intellectual and cultural development. However, abandoning any form of public assessment at 16 would be mistaken. Despite the extension of schooling to 18, the reality is that things do change sharply at 16, with many students switching to new sixth-form colleges or FE colleges, or entering apprenticeships or other employment where they continue with part-time education. Sadly, many drop out before completing A levels, other qualifications or apprenticeships and become unemployed or NEETs (not in education, employment or training).[31] If they had taken no public assessments at 16, those dropping out would have no qualifications at all to fall back on.

Even now, many achieve little from their schooling. By the age of 19, around 100,000 young people have failed to achieve five A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent: disadvantaged children (those who have been eligible for free school meals) are more than twice as likely to be in this position.[32]

Moreover, results at 16 do provide an indicator (with due allowance for the characteristics of pupil intake) of a school's educational success.[33] Results at 18 cannot do this, as many students will have transferred to other institutions or employment at 16.

Perhaps what is needed is a stripped-down version of Michael Gove's EBacc (Young 2019: 32) with a small core of assessments, perhaps even just English Maths and Science, which ought to be within the reach of more pupils and with all other subjects internally assessed.

As for A level, there may be a case for a return to module-based A and AS levels, which involved building up a qualification over two years rather than 'Big Bang' examinations at the end. They offered a firmer basis for university admissions offers than is currently the case – and were we to face disruption in the future similar to that in the current pandemic, might augment teacher predictions.

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[28] By merging GCE O ('Ordinary') levels with the Certificate of Secondary Education, a lower-level qualification intended for those likely to leave school at 16. See Shackleton (2014).

[29] Quoted in 'For Generation Covid schools outdated GCSEs may no longer make the grade', *The Times*, 12 February 2021 (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/for-generation-covid-schools-outdated-gcses-may-no-longer-make-the-grade-mrxv7bs86).

[30] Ibid.

[31] 'Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: November 2020', Office for National Statistics, 19 November 2020 (https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/november2020).

[32] 'Briefing: the children leaving school with nothing', Children's Commissioner, September 2019 (https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/cco-briefing-children-leaving-school-with-nothing.pdf).

[33] Which is one reason why some trade unionists would like to scrap them.

Teaching practices

Teaching in schools has changed over the decades, and children do not have to sit in formal rows with prohibitions on speaking out of turn and rote learning of basic facts. Nevertheless, today's classroom practice would not seem totally unfamiliar to children of fifty or even a hundred years ago. Most sessions are still teacher-led, even though teachers use interactive whiteboards rather than chalkboards.

The period of remote learning has by no means been entirely negative, as many teachers have learnt that they can do things differently.[34] It may be that in future they will make regular use of Zoom links with outside experts, and use pre-recorded lessons for revision purposes or where pupils miss sessions as a result of illness or other absence ('snow days'). Teaching assistants can work together with pupils in different ways. Homework delivery can be facilitated and students can keep in touch with their teachers during school holidays.

As suggested earlier, this may mean that school contracts and teacher responsibilities may need to be redefined, and recruitment (for example of teachers with high-level IT skills) should be broadened out from those who have undergone traditional teacher training.

More parental choice?

Since 2011, schools have been paid a 'pupil premium' to support disadvantaged pupils. This currently amounts to £1,345 for every primary age pupil and £955 for those in secondary school, with eligibility based on claiming free school meals, or having done so in the last six years.[35]

This money is given to schools to use as they think best. An interim evaluation by the National Audit Office (2015) suggested that it was not always being used specifically and effectively to support disadvantaged children, with the money being used for more general purposes such as hiring teaching assistants. Sometimes it may have substituted for other funds which were withdrawn as a result of budget cuts. The NAO noted that the parents of disadvantaged pupils had no say in how the resource was used. Ofsted has shown increasing interest in how the premium is used, and has downgraded a number of previously 'outstanding' schools which were judged not to be using the money effectively.[36]

One way in which better-off parents are able to support their children's learning is through the use of private tutors. Private tutoring seems likely to increase sharply after lockdown ends, as parents try to help their children catch up.

[34] 'Remote education research', Ofsted, 18 February 2021 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/remote-education-research/remote-education-research#conclusion).

[35] There are also premia available for 'looked after' children and those with parents in the forces. See 'Pupil Premium', Department for Education, 1 February 2021 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium).

[36] 'Ofsted & Pupil Premium Accountability 2019: Guidance for School Leaders', Third Space Learning, 30 June 2020 (https://thirdspacelearning.com/blog/pupil-premium-ofsted/).

The Sutton Trust[37] has regularly tracked the use of private tutors. In a 2019 survey it found that 27 per cent of 11-16 year olds in England and Wales had received private tutoring at some stage in their education. Among those from 'high affluence' households, the proportion was 37 per cent, contrasting with a figure of 20 per cent for those from a 'low affluence' home.

The government understands that individual tutoring can significantly benefit pupil's progress, and has recognised this in providing £350 million to support a two-year National Tutoring Programme[38] where schools can access 'academic mentors' to work with children. However, the focus seems to be on 'small groups' rather than individual children and it is again left to schools rather than parents to take action.

And it is a top-down solution. More power could instead be placed in the hands of poorer parents, who are likely in most cases to have a better understanding of their children's needs. One way to do this might be to redirect the pupil premium in future to parents in the form of vouchers which could be used to hire tutors or to use for other educational purposes such as theatre or concert visits. This was proposed by Frank (now Lord) Field[39] at the time the pupil premium was announced, and fitted in with his general philosophy that the state and its employees make too many decisions which are better taken by individuals and their families.

Lessons from the private sector

Independent schools seem to have been quicker to innovate and to deliver online and/or personalised support to students in the first lockdown. Back in March last year 28 per cent of private schools, as against only 2 per cent of state schools, were already using Zoom or Teams video-conferencing with pupils. And they were prepared to return to on-site teaching earlier: they would have reopened their buildings much sooner were it not for the insurance issues which the government failed to resolve.[40]

While state schools have upped their game in the current lockdown, a significant gap persists: in the first week of the current term in January, 86 per cent of private schools but only 50 per cent of state schools were using video-conferencing. As the Sutton Trust (2021: 6) puts it, 'While provision in the state sector has changed substantially, it has been outpaced by the private sector'.

This better performance may in part be because independent schools are better resourced (though this is not always the case), or employ more flexible staff, unencumbered by the national contract. But clearly the financial incentive to provide continuing educational support is a huge factor. Parents are not willing to pay fees without getting a service and private schools have had to respond.

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[37] 'Private Tuition 2019', The Sutton Trust, 25 September 2019 (https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/private-tuition-polling-2019/).
[38] 'How the National Tutoring Programme can help students', Department for Education, 8 December 2020 (https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2020/12/08/how-the-national-tutoring-programme-can-help-students/).
[39] 'Poor families hit hardest by long school holidays, says Frank Field', *The Times*, 11 September 2010 (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/poor-families-hit-hardest-by-long-school-holidays-says-frank-field-q25xhq8g6v9).
[40] 'Private schools plea with ministers to allow more year groups to return to the classroom next month', *The Telegraph*, 23 May 2020 (https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/23/private-schools-plea-ministers-allow-year-groups-return-classroom/).

This incentive is inevitably lacking in the state sector, where parents can do little to show their displeasure at schools which are not providing adequate remote learning and support to pupils, and where taxpayer backing remains in place however poorly individual schools have performed.[41]
When all this is over, we could usefully go back to first principles in thinking about our schools. Why do we involve government at all in education? It began in the nineteenth century with the unassailable principle of protecting minors. If some parents were unwilling or unable to provide or pay for education themselves, it was argued, the state needed to step in.

Our Victorian ancestors did not, however, envisage that education should be free for everybody. Subsidies would only go to the poorest. Most parents, as scholars such as E. G. West (1965) have pointed out, could afford at least some contribution to schooling costs, and their spending power helped ensure that schools be responsive to their wishes. Today, most UK parents must accept what they are given – or, at the moment, often not given – by the government.

One relatively painless way to give parents more clout would be to revive the concept of the educational voucher (Seldon 1986). The government could give all parents a voucher equivalent to existing average yearly expenditure per school pupil (currently around £6000, although it varies by age) and encourage state schools to compete to attract or retain parental custom.

A bolder move could be to allow vouchers to be used in the private sector as well as in the state sector, and to be topped up by parents' own contributions, thus giving many more families access to private education. Poorer families could be given vouchers with a bigger cash value.

Over time, the value of the voucher could be frozen and all parents would have to contribute as the average costs of schooling rose. State schools – which could be privatised, whether as for-profits or not-for-profits – would need to compete on both price and quality of education. Different school styles could emerge, including mixed modes of online and face-to-face teaching, different lengths of school day and school year, and different curricula.

Private education need not, as is often assumed, be highly expensive. As James Tooley (2018) has argued, it is possible to devise 'no frills' private education which would be cheaper than state schools, yet teach to a high standard. The distinction between bog-standard state and elite private education – for so long something which has maintained class barriers in Britain – could gradually disappear if we were sufficiently bold in our thinking.

[41] Ofsted is in principle parents' guarantee of adequate standards in state schools, albeit at a considerable remove. Its reports are rarely read by parents, and those who try can find them opaque. Ofsted has been (perhaps understandably) particularly ineffective during the pandemic, with normal inspections cancelled. Its remit has only recently been extended to cover following up parents' complaints about remote learning during lockdown. See: 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) rolling update', Ofsted, 19 March 2020 (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofsted-coronavirus-covid-19-rolling-update).

Conclusions

There is evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused considerable damage to most children's educational progress, and also to the mental health and well-being of many. It is important that schools re-open as soon as is reasonably possible. Although there are continuing health risks, these can be assessed objectively; there is no 'zero-risk' situation.

There is a continuing danger of further lockdowns in the future, and plans could be put in place for this eventuality so that some of the problems faced in the last year can be avoided.

It is evident that some children from poorer homes will have suffered particularly badly from school closure, and it is understandable that, in attempting to mitigate the effects of lockdown, particular emphasis is being placed on assisting disadvantaged pupils.

However, problems of disadvantage are of long standing, and it is important that we do not simply look for short-term fixes – particularly since many apparently sensible immediate responses, such as temporary expansion of the school day or reduction in summer holidays, are likely to be difficult to implement.

The abandonment of GCE, GCSE and IB exams this year need not preclude some form of nationally-organised assessment to supplement teacher predictions. In the medium term, the government could sensibly cut down – though not abandon – testing at 16. A levels might sensibly revert to a modular structure.

England's educational system could be loosened up to allow more innovation and wider teacher recruitment. It might be wise for the government to eschew top-down solutions and allow schools and parents more choice.

A bold government could look again at voucher schemes and other ways in which choice could be widened, for instance by making it possible for more families to access private education at reasonable cost.

The crisis in England's educational system has taught us many things about the way in which students learn. It offers an opportunity for significant reform, rather than patching up a system which has been shown by the pandemic to have serious flaws.

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