

Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward

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Introduction

This report is based on a survey of 1,653 primary teachers in state schools in England. The survey was conducted by Teacher Tapp¹ during May half-term 2020, just before schools started re-opening. It forms part of the ESRC-funded project “A Duty of Care and a Duty to Teach: educational priorities during the Covid-19 crisis”, based at the International Literacy Centre, UCL Institute of Education and led by Professor Gemma Moss. This research is exploring how primary teachers in England have prioritised their responsibilities towards families and children under the unusual circumstances that Covid-19 has created for schools. This report is designed to contribute to public debate on what should happen next in education.

The survey asked teachers to reflect back on their priorities during the period of lockdown from mid-March to late-May. During that time, primary schools were only open to children in key worker families or vulnerable children, providing a limited amount of face-to-face contact time for many staff. Indeed much of primary teachers’ work was focused on supporting children at home, either with their learning or with their general health and well-being. Many teachers were particularly anxious about vulnerable children not in school and staying in touch with them.

We often think of a duty of care and a duty to teach as two separate elements in each teacher’s work, yet a single conversation or action can fulfil both roles at once. The survey questions were designed to explore how teachers managed both dimensions in responding to the needs of the families and pupils that form part of their local community during this time.

We wanted to know where they thought the main priorities lay; and whether and if these unusual circumstances had led them to think more broadly about the role schools play in their local communities and how this can be more fully recognised going forward.

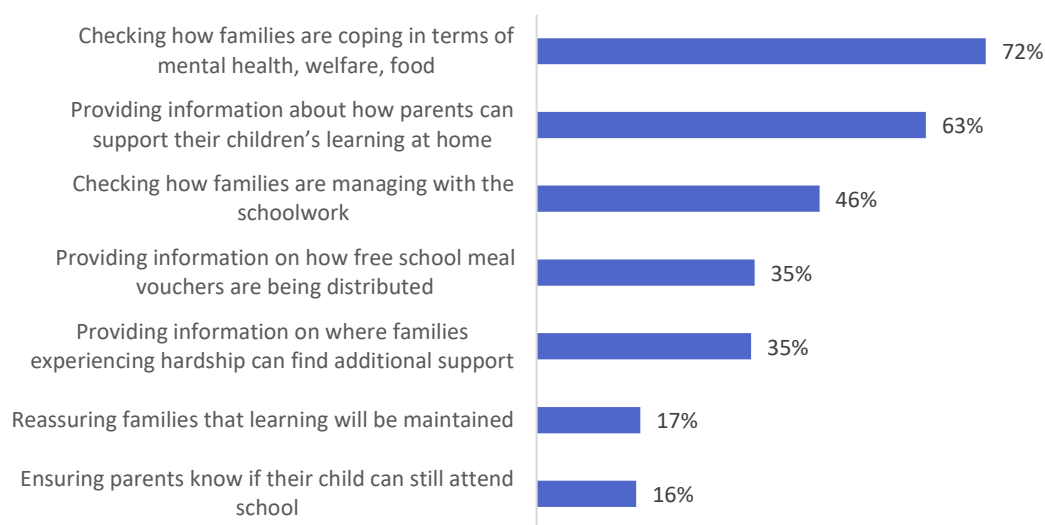
Key findings

1. ‘Schooling’ is about much more than learning.

This is reflected across all primary schools in the actions staff took once lockdown started. Teachers’ primary concern at the start of lockdown was with pupil welfare. Figure 1 shows teachers’ stated priorities in communicating with families during lockdown. In addition to checking how families are coping in terms of basic food, health and emotional needs, teachers saw providing support and advice for learning as a priority.

¹ Teacher Tapp regularly surveys teachers in England. Between May 27th – 29th, primary school teachers registered with Teacher Tapp were asked whether they would like to answer 10 questions about schooling during COVID-19. For more details of the sample and the survey methodology see Annex: Data and Methods.

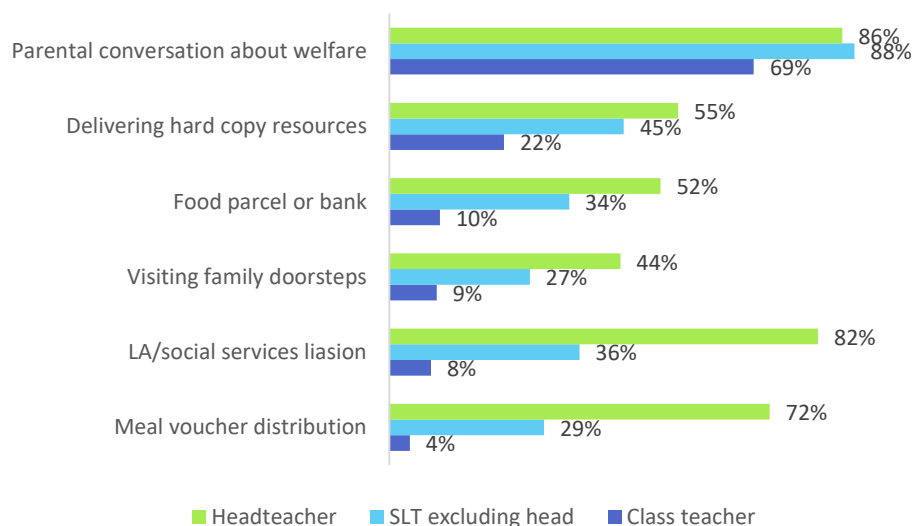
Figure 1: Priorities for communication with families during lockdown



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

Headteachers were taking a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for safeguarding and welfare during lockdown. Figure 2 shows they were more involved in conversations about welfare, as well as more likely to be carrying out the practical jobs of delivering hard copy resources, checking student welfare on the doorstep and running food banks or lunch distribution. In addition, they shouldered most of the responsibility for liaison with the local authority and social services, as well as the administration of the free school meals voucher scheme – a task that proved particularly troublesome.

Figure 2: Proportion of primary teachers involved with different types of learning and support activities during lockdown



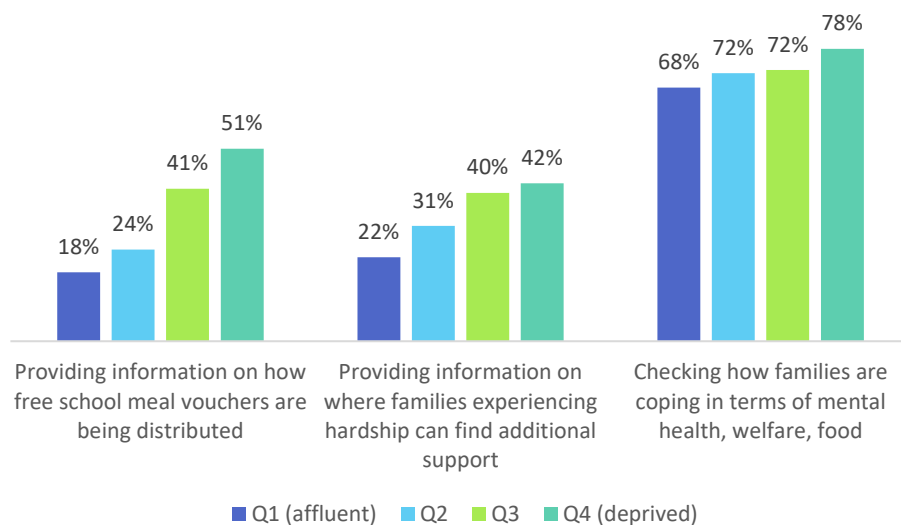
Question: Which of the following have you personally been involved with during lockdown?

The most likely explanation of why headteachers in particular felt it necessary to commit so much of their time to welfare and safeguarding activities is that they were responding to a basic human need that they felt they had a moral duty to address, particularly given the depleted state of social services and local authority welfare functions. They might well feel that care for family welfare falls within the remit of a school as a necessary precursor to learning taking place. They may also have felt unable to pass these duties to other teachers in the school, either because they did not fit into the typical ‘job description’ of a teacher, or because they represented legal responsibilities that lay with them as a head.

2. The duty of care fell unevenly across schools.

To some extent, every school has ‘caring’ duties to fulfil for families, but for the most schools in the most disadvantaged areas, monitoring and responding to the effects of poverty and hardship was more of a priority. Indeed, teachers in these schools were more likely to be spending time on activities not traditionally thought of as ‘teaching’. Figure 3 shows that 51% of teachers in the most deprived schools found they needed to prioritise the practicalities of free school meal voucher distribution in conversations with parents, versus just 18% of teachers in the least deprived schools.

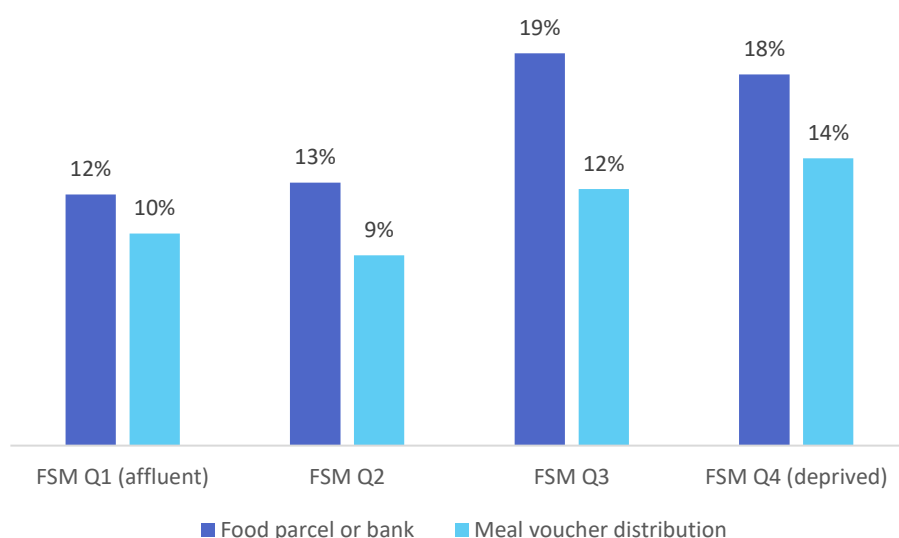
Figure 3: Higher priority given to welfare needs of families in more disadvantaged schools by % of FSM – priorities in communication



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

Teachers in more deprived schools more frequently reported that they were involved with running a food bank, delivering food parcels or meal voucher distribution (Figure 4).

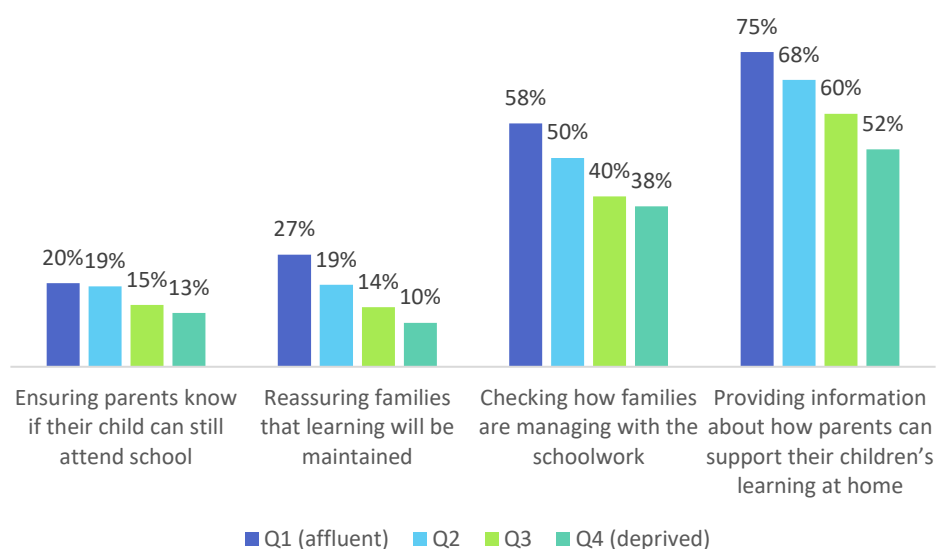
Figure 4: Proportion of teachers involved in activities to alleviate food poverty, by school deprivation quartile



Question: Which of the following have you personally been involved with during lockdown?

With families less likely to find themselves in ‘crisis mode’, more advantaged schools were better able to focus on implementing and supporting home learning. If the ‘welfare’ part of the conversations with parents is straightforward, then this leaves more time to check on learning. The corollary of this, of course, is that those working in more advantaged schools had communities perceived to be more worried about maintaining continuity in their children’s education. So, 27% of teachers in the least deprived schools said they needed to prioritise reassuring families that education would not be disrupted, versus just 10% of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Higher priority given to educational needs of families in more advantaged schools

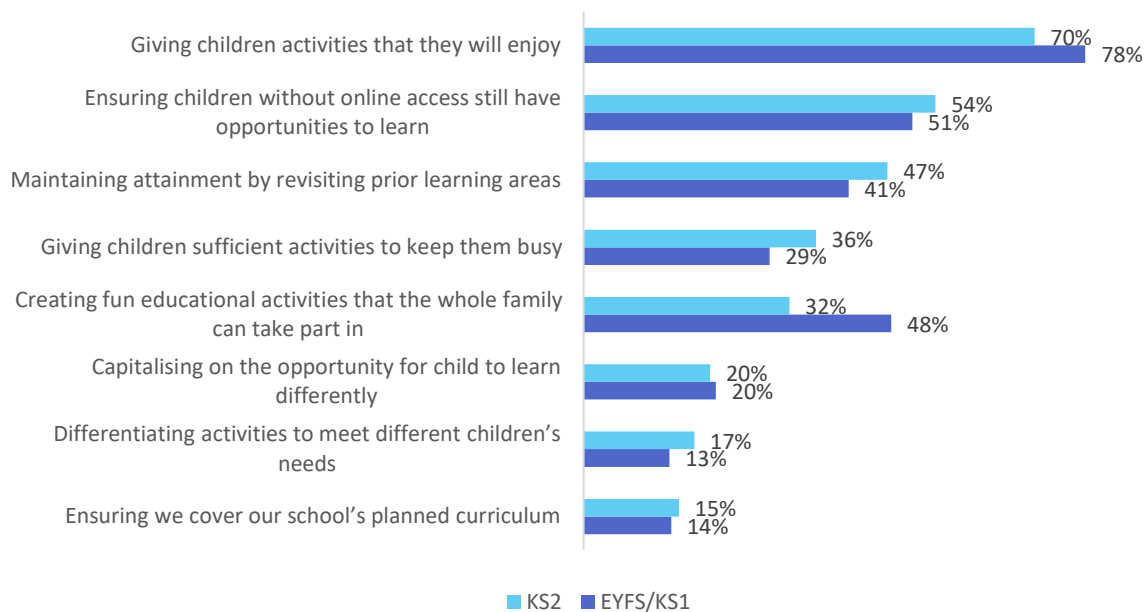


Question: Thinking about YOUR school community, which of these had highest priority in communicating with families during lockdown? Please tick just THREE responses.

3. Teaching approaches took account of the novel home-learning context.

Teachers adapted their teaching resources to the age of the children and the support that parents might be able to offer at home. In general, primary teachers understood that home learning activities needed to be both appealing and enjoyable since they could not coerce children into completing work, through sanctions or otherwise. Teachers in Years R, 1 and 2 (marked as 'EYFS/KS1 on Figure 6) recognised that learning could only take place as a family activity with the support of a parent who might well have other children to care for, or be trying to work from home.

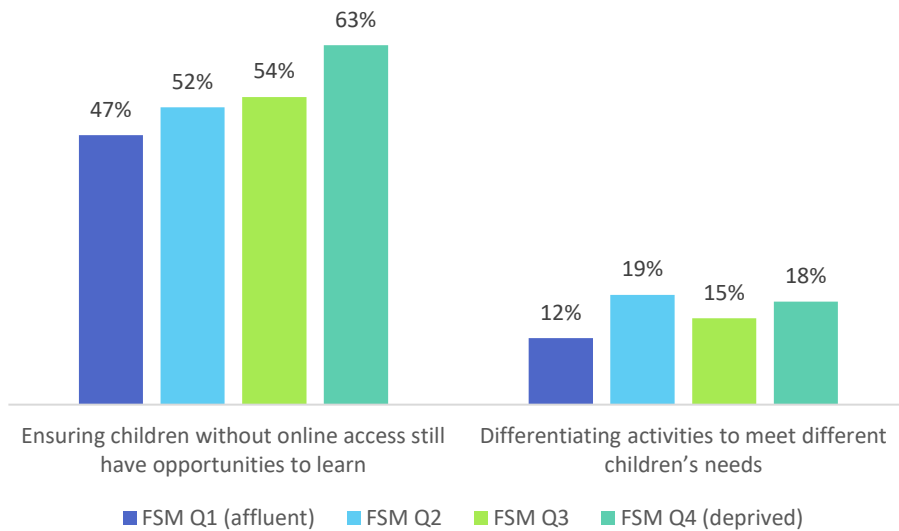
Figure 6: Priorities for creating resources during lockdown, by Key Stage



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

Teachers in schools with a higher free school meals proportion were significantly more likely to prioritise resources that did not require online access (63% had this as a priority, versus 47% in the most advantaged schools). These more disadvantaged schools were a little more likely than more socially advantaged primaries to take considerations of differentiation into account in the design of resources.

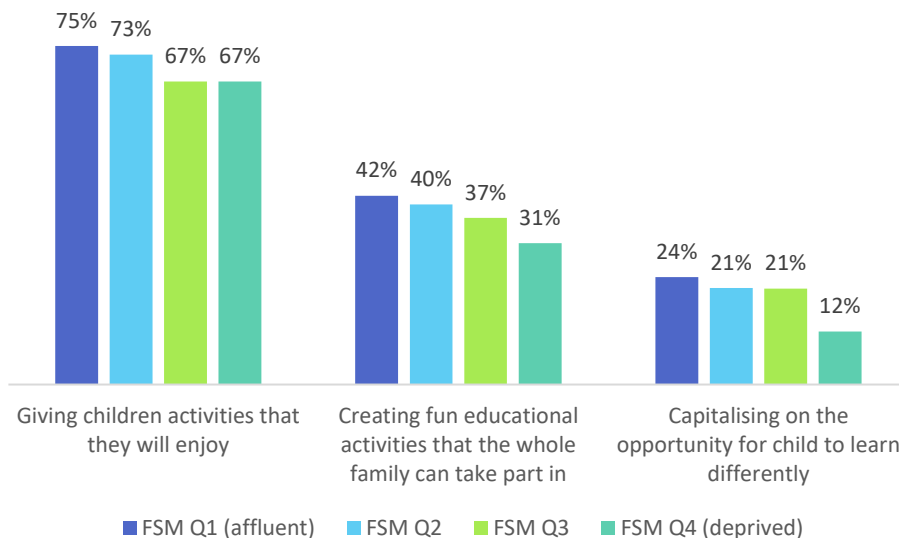
Figure 7: Greater relative priority in more disadvantaged schools



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

With fewer concerns about online access and variation in student needs, the least disadvantaged schools were able to focus more on giving children activities that they will enjoy (a priority for 75% versus 67% in most deprived schools), creating fun activities for the whole family (42% versus 31%) and making the most of the opportunities for children to learn differently (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Greater relative priority in more advantaged schools

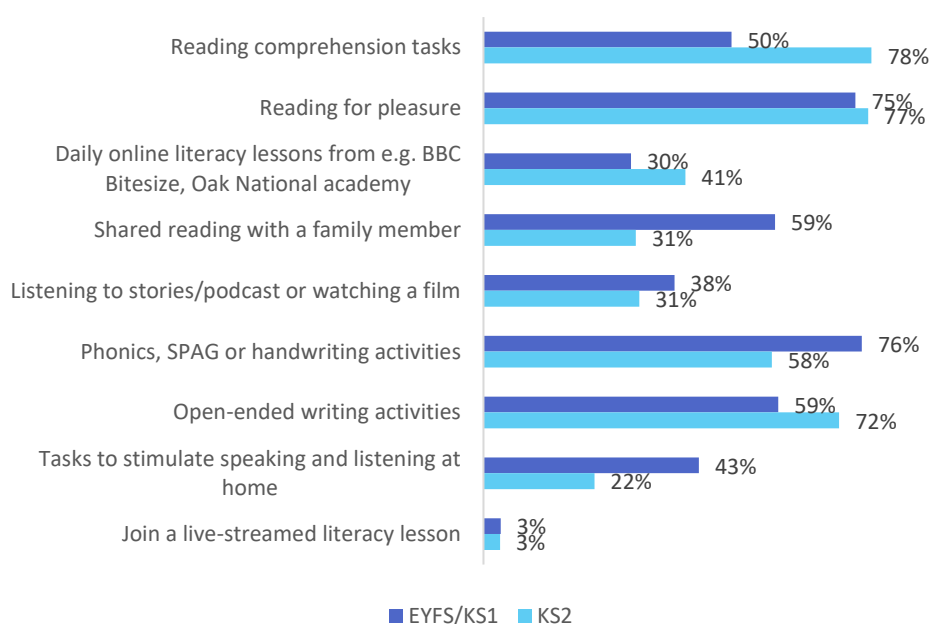


Question: In creating teaching resources during lockdown, what have been your *TOP 3* priorities? Please tick up to 3.

4. Literacy activities teachers set reflected the balance of the curriculum.

Literacy activities set reflected the balance of the curriculum as well as those activities teachers thought that families could most easily undertake. Teachers' responses showed they prioritised maintaining practice in the core skills of reading, handwriting and grammar/spelling. Figure 9 shows that Years R, 1 and 2 teachers (EYFS/KS1) prioritised phonics, spelling, punctuation and grammar exercises (SPAG) and handwriting alongside reading by both the child and family members. Teachers in Years 3-6 also asked families to read, but this is supplemented by reading comprehension tasks and more open-ended writing activities. Only around a third of teachers asked families to undertake activities quite different to the 'normal' classroom, such as listening to stories or watching films. Similarly, a minority of teachers set tasks to stimulate speaking at home.

Figure 9: Literacy activities set by teachers, by Key Stage

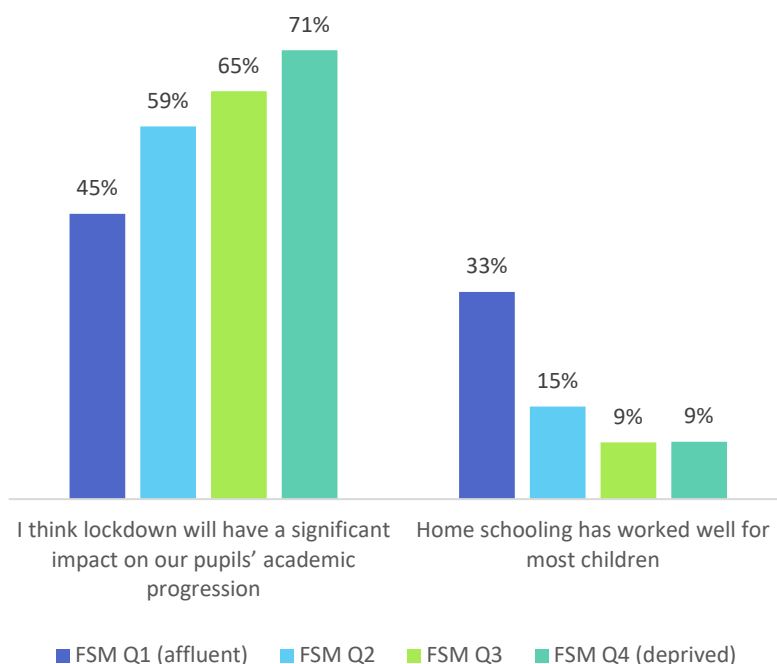


Question: Tick the literacy activities you asked your pupils to undertake at home last week

5. The effects of lockdown differ according to the social circumstances of the school.

The effects of lockdown on families differ according to the social circumstances of the school. Teachers are far more likely to feel that home schooling has been successful in more advantaged communities, though it is interesting to note that even there just 33% of teachers say it was successful for most students (see Figure 10). By contrast, the majority of those teaching in schools serving disadvantaged communities feel that lockdown will have had a significant impact on academic progression.

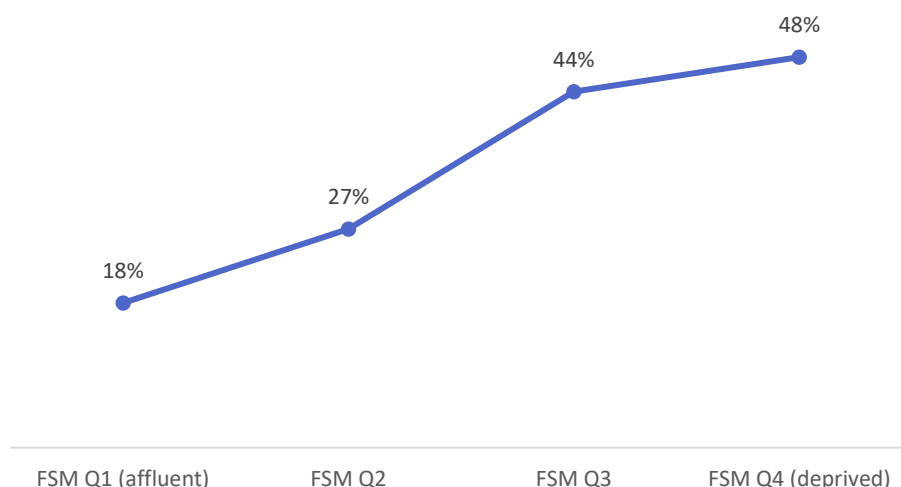
Figure 10: Teacher beliefs about the effect of lockdown on learning, by school FSM quartile



Question: Thinking about the consequences of lockdown for YOUR pupils, which of the following statements do you agree with?

These concerns about the impact of home schooling align with teacher perceptions of time spent studying during lockdown. Figure 11 shows that around the end of April, half of teachers in schools serving the most disadvantaged communities said their typical student was studying for less than one hour a day; in more advantaged communities the proportion who felt less than an hour was typical was just 18%.

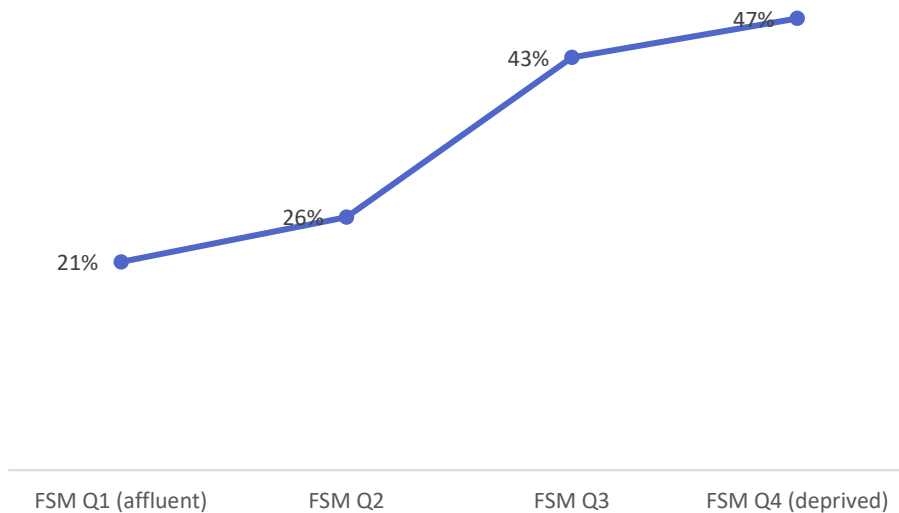
Figure 11: Proportion of teachers reporting that their typical student was studying for less than one hour a day



Question: At present, how many hours each day do you think the average pupil from your class IS learning at the moment? (28/04/2020)

By the end of lockdown for primaries in late May, about half of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools said that the majority of their pupils were doing NO work at home (see Figure 12). In the most advantaged schools, one-fifth of teachers felt the majority of pupils were no longer doing any work at home at all.

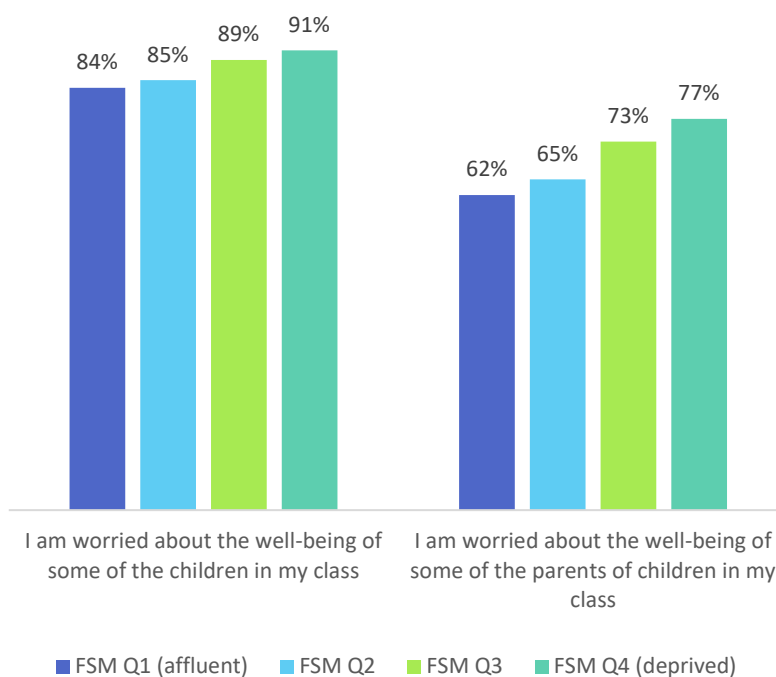
Figure 12: Proportion of teachers who felt that majority of their pupils were doing NO work at home



Question: Approximately what proportion of all the students you teach do you feel did *NO* work last week (e.g. you received nothing you asked for or cannot see work on apps/websites you can monitor)? (29/05/2020)

Almost all teachers said they were worried about the well-being of some of the children they taught, regardless of social circumstances of the school. However, those in disadvantaged schools were far more worried about the well-being of parents (see Figure 13) and this is likely to impact on what they can do. Primary age children's well-being cannot be fully separated from their parents' well-being. Though schools have a duty of care towards children, not parents, primaries operating home learning programmes are very reliant on having parents who are willing and able to interpret learning instructions and support children in completing the work.

Figure 13: Teacher beliefs about the effect of lockdown on well-being, by school FSM quartile



Question: Thinking about the consequences of lockdown for YOUR pupils, which of the following statements do you agree with?

6. The social and emotional needs of children and their families are at the forefront of teachers' minds.

The social and emotional needs of children and their families are at the forefront of teachers' minds as students start to return. As primary schools re-open, teachers plan to prioritise the psychological well-being of pupils in a safe environment. Educational concerns related to catch-up and transition to the next academic year were not as high in teachers' priorities, at least as they considered pupils returning to school in June (see Figure 14). Figure 15 shows that teachers felt the priorities of their own community were well aligned with their own. In their opinion, parents would value children settling back into a daily school routine and receiving psychological support for their well-being over catching up. Indeed, there is considerable agreement that children settling back into the normal school routine and readjusting to that context is a necessary precursor for children's learning to resume in a purposeful and meaningful way.

Figure 14: Teacher priorities as schools re-open

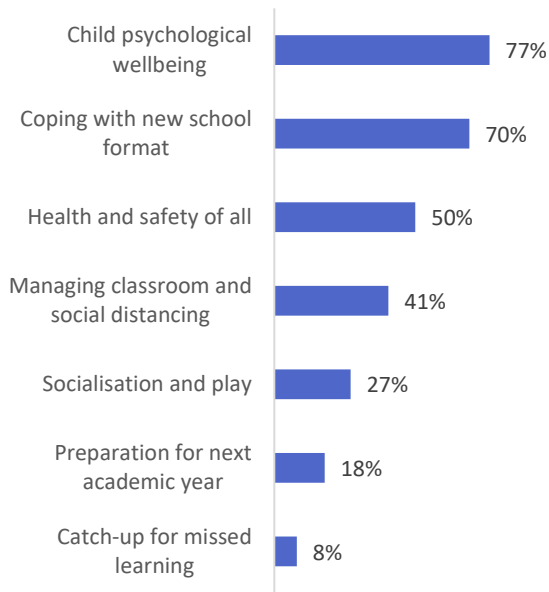
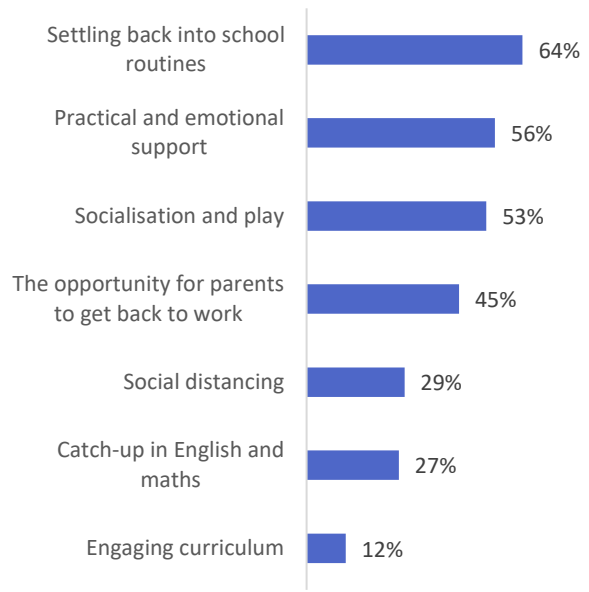


Figure 15: Perceived family priorities as schools re-open

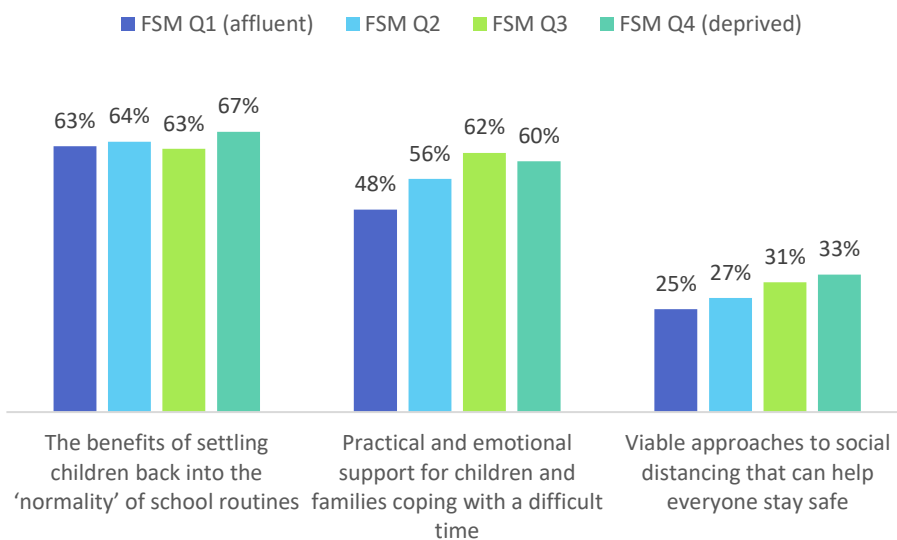


Question: Which THREE of the following will be your top priorities when students begin to return to school in June? Please tick just THREE.

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

Even as schools return to 'normal', the social needs of the communities have not gone away. Those teaching in more disadvantaged schools feel their community will be more concerned about social distancing and will benefit much more from the psychological support that the school can give the family (see Figure 16).

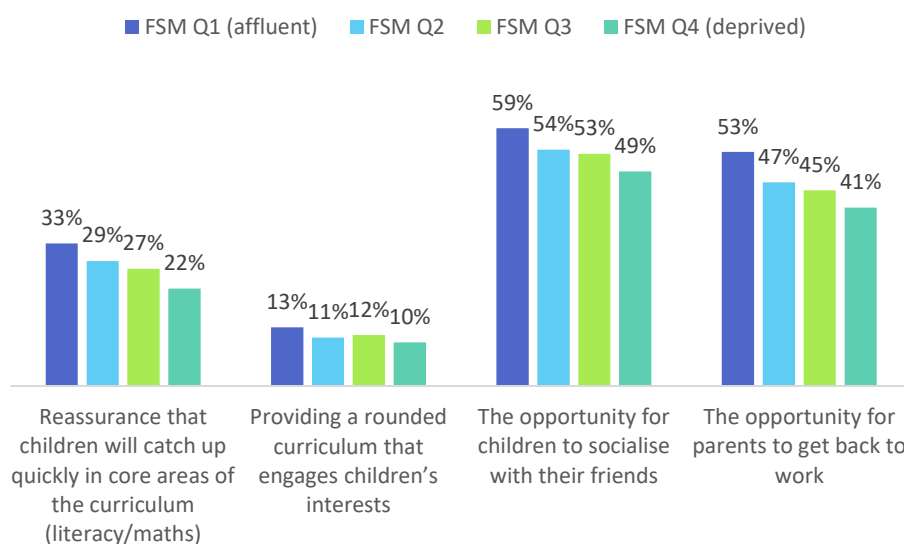
Figure 16: Responses selected more by teachers serving more deprived communities



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

In schools serving more advantaged communities, social and psychological needs are seen as a little less pressing. So, as Figure 17 shows, teachers are more likely to feel that these parents will want to prioritise ‘catching-up’ in core areas of the curriculum, alongside opportunities for children to socialise and help in getting parents back to work.

Figure 17: Responses selected more by teachers serving more advantaged communities



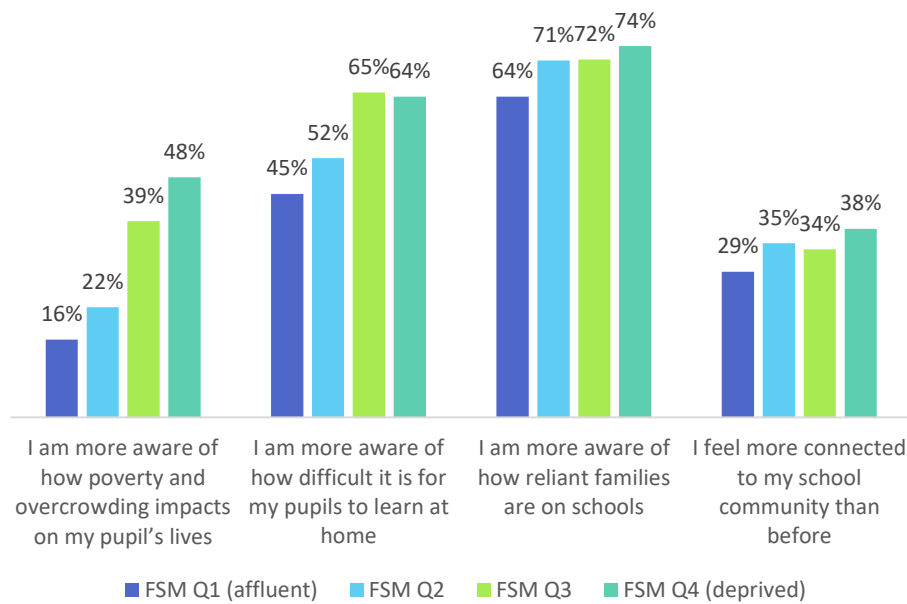
Question: As schools reopen, which of the following statements best sums up what you think your families will value most. Please tick just THREE.

7. Many teachers have gained a better understanding of their community from supporting home learning.

Many teachers have gained a better understanding of their community from supporting home learning during the crisis. This has given teachers a different perspective on family life. However, while most teachers say they are now more aware of how much families depend on them, only a minority say they feel more connected to their community than they did before. This may reflect the classroom teacher's limited role in fulfilling the 'care' duties during lockdown, with many of these carried out by headteachers. However, this may also be a direct result of teaching under lockdown. After all, many primary teachers (particularly in Years R-2) are used to seeing and talking with parents every day – something that was not possible during lockdown.

About half the teachers working in the more disadvantaged schools said they felt more aware of how poverty and overcrowding impacts on student lives; two-thirds of the same teachers were more aware of how difficult home learning was (see Figure 18). These types of insights into family life are likely to impact on how schools think about how they handle home school relations going forward.

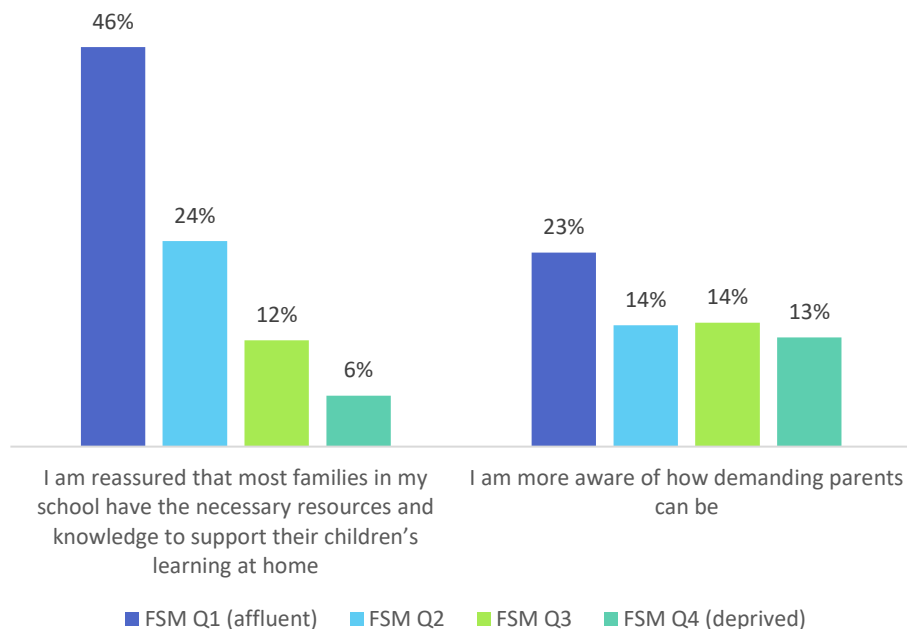
Figure 18: Changed perceptions of community more prevalent in high FSM primary schools



Question: How has lockdown changed your perceptions of your school's community?

For those teaching in the more advantaged schools, almost half have been reassured that parents are able to support their children's learning, while a quarter say they are more aware of how demanding parents can be (see Figure 19).

Figure 19: Changed perceptions of community more prevalent in low FSM primary schools



Question: How has lockdown changed your perceptions of your school's community?

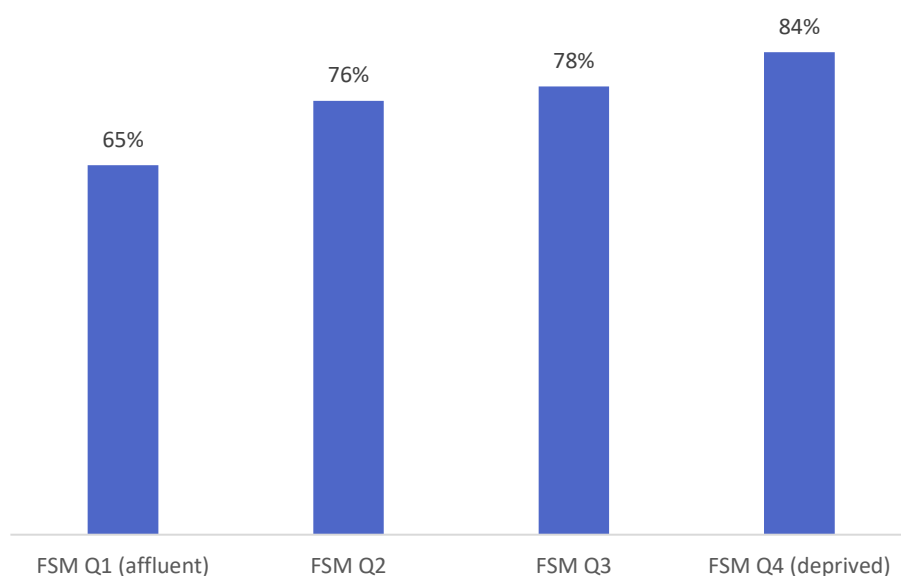
8. Teachers do not want to return to ‘business as normal’ in September.

We asked teachers what should happen to primary education in the post-COVID era. Given the important role that primary schools have played in supporting their communities, it is perhaps not surprising that 7-in-10 teachers agreed with the following two statements:

- Schools have an important role in building community resilience that should be both recognised and funded
- Primary education needs to begin again, with a broader definition of curriculum values and purposes

Most primary teachers also felt that it would be unfair for testing and inspection to go ahead next year, given the inequalities in how school closure has affected different communities. Figure 20 shows that this holds across the spectrum, with 65% teaching in the more advantaged communities agreeing this would be unfair, and an even greater number, 84% of those teaching in the more disadvantaged communities, agreeing with the statement.

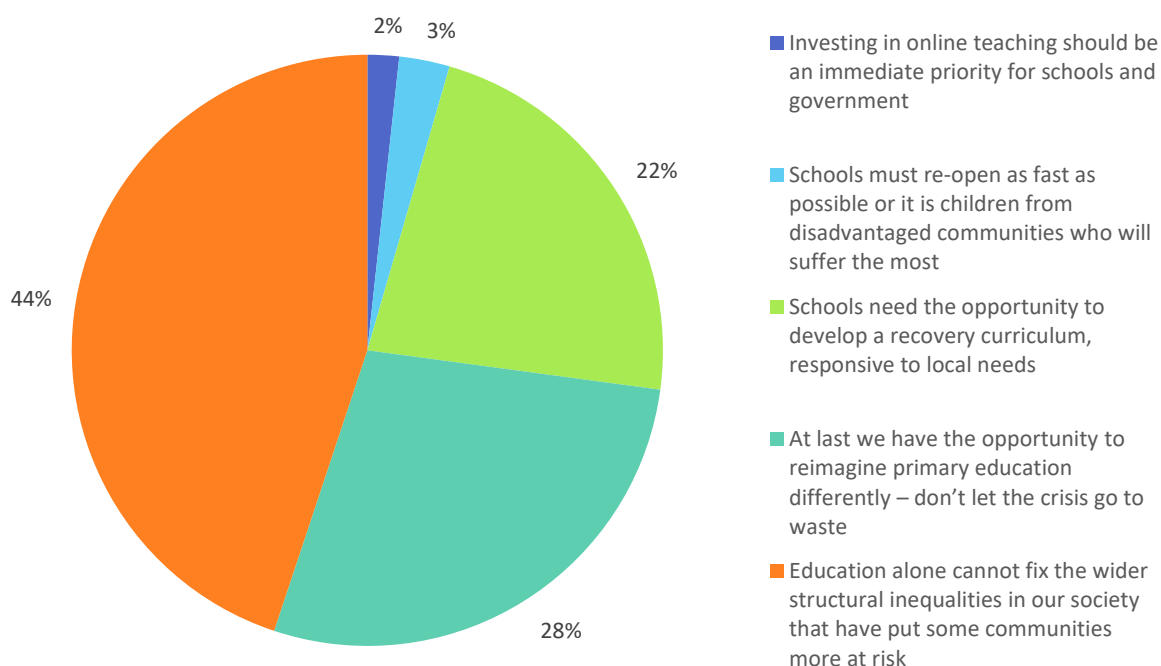
Figure 20: Percentage who agree that: “If testing and inspection goes ahead as normal next year, schools serving the most disadvantaged communities will be unfairly penalised”



Question: Thinking about opportunities as well as challenges for primary education, post crisis, what do you think should happen next?

We asked teachers to select a statement that most closely reflected their own views about the immediate priorities for primary schooling. Figure 21 shows that the largest group selected the statement: “Education alone cannot fix the wider structural inequalities in our society that have put some communities more at risk”. Very few supported the government’s goals announced at the time: making it a priority to open schools as fast as possible or investing in online teaching. The overwhelming majority (94%) were looking for change

Figure 21: Statement about schooling that most closely reflects teacher's own views



Question: 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?

Conclusion

This report sets out the findings from our survey of primary school teachers in England, conducted at the end of May, just before schools were asked to re-open to Years R, 1 and 6. We wanted to know what teachers had been doing during the initial school lockdown phase of the Covid crisis, as well as their reflections on what should happen next.

Much of the media coverage of the impacts of Covid-19 on education, both during lockdown and since, has focused on what has been lost through school closures, and whether and how quickly schools can make up for any gaps. For some commentators, this has meant calculating the missing lesson time and extrapolating from that to future educational damage. Particular worries have been expressed over the numbers of children doing little or no school work at home, with children in the most disadvantaged circumstances seen as most at risk in this way. (For Teacher Tapp estimates of the amount of work pupils were undertaking in April and in May, see Figures 11 and 12 above). In response, in the short term, government has pledged to connect more children to the internet to facilitate online study at home; and in the longer term has announced a 'catch up' fund and a National Tutoring Programme for the coming academic year.

Our report suggests different priorities. In particular it highlights teachers' increased awareness of the extent to which the material conditions of living in poverty impact on children's learning. For schools working in the most disadvantaged contexts during the

crisis, ensuring children are fed and helping families reach wider networks of support when required have been at the forefront of their interactions with their communities. Successful home-learning depends upon these kinds of needs being met first.

Primary school teachers working with every community have been very aware of the necessity of adapting tasks to the possibilities and constraints that the home learning environment offers. Tasks need to engage and motivate children as well as fit the pattern of parental activity at home, including the need for parents to juggle working from home with meeting the broader needs of the household² in addition to supporting children's learning. Teachers have had to take all of these factors into account in setting learning and teaching tasks that can be successfully undertaken at home.

Learning at home during the lockdown cannot precisely replicate learning in school. Instead of treating what should happen next as a race to catch up on 'lost' opportunities to learn, primary teachers told us that first and foremost they would prioritise resetting the clock by reengaging children with school routines, enabling children to socialise with their friends, and ensuring the classroom is a safe space in which learning can take place. Making pupil well-being an essential part of recreating a good learning environment is likely to endure well into the autumn term, bearing in mind the on-going threats of transmission of the virus and the possibility of school closures that any flare ups may provoke. Re-building confidence in the system will mean negotiating with parents locally and paying attention to their concerns. This is important, if local communities and teachers are to feel secure in any arrangements put in place.

Looking ahead

As schools re-open, teachers will want to use their professional judgement to assess where children are and how best to plan for purposeful and meaningful learning that can build from there. This is the foundation from which high quality teaching always proceeds, whatever children's starting points. Planning for such a well-rounded curriculum that puts children's interests first needs to be distinguished from a hasty scramble to get back whatever might have been lost. Appropriate leadership will give teachers and schools the opportunity to formulate a clear plan for recovery over the medium to longer term and encourage them to work in that timeframe. Needs are likely to be diverse, and they are for each school to assess, taking their local context into account. All school communities are entitled to rebuild from these principles – but perhaps especially those that have been ravaged by Covid-19 most, whether through impacts on families' health or finances, or the risks of unemployment and hardship that may result from sudden changes in the local economy and which may push families hard.

Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising how many teachers agree that 'If testing and inspection goes ahead as normal next year, schools serving the most disadvantaged

² Interestingly, the UK Household panel survey found that "the amount of time parents spend actively helping their children with schoolwork does not vary much by parents' educational background". (See p14, https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/general/ukhls_briefingnote_covid_homeschool_final.pdf).

communities will be unfairly penalised'.³ The government and its agencies need to be aware of this, as they consider what to do about assessment and inspection for 20-21. The monies the government have committed to supporting schools at this time will be useful, particularly if they are in addition to funding by other channels. But schools should be given discretion on how to spend such monies most aptly. The stipulation that some proportion must be spent on a National Tutoring Programme may not be helpful. Schools will benefit more from being able to assess their own needs and then plan locally and collectively on what is best for them and their pupils, in that context.

Covid-19 has in many senses been a national disaster. Its effects will ripple on into the next year, not least as the government struggles to get the economy back on its feet – an unprecedented task with few clear options. Our poorest communities are likely to feel the economic effects most sharply. The basic food insecurity they already face has been quite rightly highlighted through the crisis.

We began this project, wondering what recognition the part schools have played in addressing the needs of the poorest communities might gain through the crisis. We now know ever more clearly how important a resource schools are for all their local communities. They are part of the glue that holds us together during times of stress and economic strain. We need to rebuild, aiming for a more resilient school system, with the support systems in place for communities and their pupils that enable schools to play their part within their local communities. For this to become a reality, those responsible for the shape and form of the accountability system need to recognise that education is indeed about much more than learning. As many of our survey respondents recognised “Education alone cannot fix the wider structural inequalities in our society that have put some communities at risk.” But it does have an important part to play. It is time for us all to reimagine primary education differently. We can learn from the help schools have given their communities during this time, and use that knowledge gained to build a more rounded and resilient education system going forward.

³ 75% of the sample as a whole agreed with this statement; amongst Heads that rises to 84%.

The Teacher Tapp survey panel

The Teacher Tapp survey panel comprises teachers across the state and private sectors in England who download a mobile app, provide valid teacher credentials and allow it to notify them of new questions each day at 3:30pm. Teachers are recruited to the panel via social and traditional media, promotion at professional development events, and via word of mouth in schools. All survey questions asked are multiple and single response questions.

In total, 2,292 state-school primary teachers who opened the survey app on Wednesday 27th, Thursday 28th or Friday 29th May were asked whether they would like to answer 10 questions about schooling during COVID-19. Of these, 1,653 (72%) chose to answer the questions. These teachers were identified as being in the primary phase, either because their school identified them as a primary phase teacher or because they taught in an all-through or middle school and self-identified as teaching primary-aged children.

The survey questions asked were:

1. Which of the following have *YOU* personally been involved with during lockdown? Tick any that apply.
2. Thinking about YOUR school community, which of these had highest priority in communicating with families during lockdown? Please tick just THREE responses.
3. In creating teaching resources during lockdown, what have been your *TOP 3* priorities? Please tick up to 3.
4. Tick the literacy activities you asked your pupils to undertake at home last week
5. Which THREE of the following will be your top priorities when students begin to return to school in June? Please tick just THREE.
6. As schools reopen, which of the following statements best sums up what you think your families will value most. Please tick just THREE.
7. How has lockdown changed your perceptions of your school's community? Tick any statements that you agree with:
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:
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:
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.

These ten questions were supplemented by three other questions asked at other times on the app during lockdown. These were:

- Are you currently working longer or shorter hours than you would in 'normal' circumstances? (26/03/2020: N=1,954)
- At present, how many hours each day do you think the average pupil from your class IS learning at the moment? (28/04/2020: N=2,018)

- Approximately what proportion of all the students you teach do you feel did *NO* work last week (e.g. you received nothing you asked for or cannot see work on apps/websites you can monitor)? (29/05/2020: N=1,964)

Calculation of Teacher Tapp panel weights

Post-stratification weights are applied to the survey responses to ensure they reflect the demographic characteristics of state-school primary teachers in England, using the following procedure:

1. We drop the results of all teachers for whom we cannot find a valid school identifier (Unique Reference Number) from the free text school name and postcode that they give us;
2. We only retain teachers if they provide us with valid information on their gender, age and job post since these are the characteristics used for matching against the population in the School Workforce Census and Independent Schools Census;
3. We calculate population shares in census data for 32 groupings of primary teachers who are allocated according to their region, gender, age and job post;
4. We calculate sample shares in the Teacher Tapp valid responses for each question, which yields sample weights as the ratio of population to sample share.

Creation of demographic categories for analysis

In this analysis, we categorise teachers according to their seniority and to their school's free school meals proportion. Teachers are asked to self-identify as a:

- Headteacher
- SLT ex head, i.e. a senior leader who is Deputy or Assistant Headteacher
- Class teacher, any other teacher not on the senior leadership team

We identify the teacher's school free school meals proportion using Department for Education administrative data. Primary schools are grouped into 4 quartiles according to their free school meals proportion. The cut-point for the four groups are: 5.3%, 10.4%, 19.2%.