

## Written evidence submitted by the International Literacy Centre, UCL, Institute of Education

to the Education Select Committee Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, July 2020.

This submission comes from the research project "A duty of care and a duty to teach: educational priorities in response to the COVID-19 crisis".

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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>

Data were collected and analysed between May – Sept 2020. This submission summarises a systematic literature review conducted as part of this project

## Learning Loss versus Learning Disruption

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A key term used in the discussion of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on education is 'learning loss' (Department for Education [DFE], 2020). However, the term 'learning disruption' may be a more useful descriptor for pupils' experience during the COVID pandemic.

The literature on learning loss is based on a large body of research that attempts to estimate learning lost over the summer holidays during planned closures (cf. Education Endowment Foundation, 2020 for a systematic review of this literature). This research focuses on the impacts on academic achievement of time out of school under ordinary circumstances. It neglects to consider the wider social, organisational and disruptive issues characteristic of unplanned closures. In addition, the events studied are not strictly comparable, not least because during routine summer holidays there will be no planned attempts to home-school, yet this was a core part of COVID provision.

Given that the closures that have occurred due to COVID-19 are unplanned, and part of a wider health and social crisis, we suggest that the literature on unplanned school disruption is a more useful reference point to inform understanding of the likely impacts of school closures during COVID on children's education. As part of our ESRC funded project, *A Duty of Care and a Duty to Teach*, (See also Moss, Bradbury, Duncan, Harmey, & Levy, 2020) we conducted a systematic review of the literature on crises which have disrupted education, such as unplanned closures due to weather (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) or health related events (e.g. SARS). The circumstances in which the global COVID-19 pandemic arose, and the resultant lockdowns and school closures that took place, are more similar to the events this literature has explored.

To contribute to planning for recovery, we synthesised recommendations for factors that were deemed important in helping schools and pupils return to more normal ways of working. Many of these recommendations are directly relevant to the question: *"What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?"*

In the next sections, we present a brief account of the methods used, provide a summary of key findings and policy recommendations, displayed in Figure 1, followed by more detailed summaries of each key theme, setting out the conclusions derived from the literature that we included in our systematic review.

## **2. METHODS**

We conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature about school closure and/or reopening due to natural disasters or health related events like pandemics. Overall, we screened 307 studies, conducted a full review of 47 studies and, following a quality evaluation, synthesised the findings of 15 studies. We used Dixon-Woods et al., (in Gough et al., 2012) suggestion that the studies be evaluated by considering if (a) researchers provided a clear account of the process they employed, (b) had enough data to support their conclusion, (c) used appropriate methods of analysis, and (d) that the claims were warranted given method.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE FOLLOWING UNPLANNED CLOSURES. FIGURE 1.

Theme	Finding	Recommendation
<b>School Leadership</b> <i>School leaders are pivotal in the return to school following unplanned closures.</i>	Leaders' local knowledge was essential in knowing the needs of the community.	Provide school leadership with the autonomy to use funds as they see fit
	The experience of the event was vital in feeding into future contingency plans	Provide school leadership with the time and opportunity to reflect on the experience of the event and to develop a clear contingency plan that would account for (a) communication systems (b) chains of information and (c) the needs of the community
	School leaders play a vital role in caring for the social and emotional needs of staff	Provide school leadership with the necessary resources to support employees' mental health
<b>Curricular Foci</b> <i>Schools are essential in the return to normalcy and the curriculum needs to be responsive to needs</i>	Children needed to be educated about the event	Provide learning materials that will educate children about the facts about COVID-19
	Children are likely to need a change in pace and content	Return to normal with an acknowledgement that children need more time and flexible opportunities to learn
	The curriculum can provide a means for children to express themselves	Focus on content which will provide a vehicle for children to express themselves through the arts and literature
<b>Mental Health</b> <i>Schools are essential in supporting the mental health of students.</i>	Unplanned closures can affect the mental health of students	Provide teachers with the training to deal with trauma

## 4. SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

### 4.1 LEADERS' LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WAS ESSENTIAL IN RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY.

A key theme in studies that documented unplanned school closures caused by crisis was the understanding that schools play an integral role in the communities in which they are located. In this literature, schools are treated as sites of safety and support at times of crisis with school leadership playing a pivotal role in developing appropriate social support, tailored to the communities' needs (Mutch, 2015). Fletcher and Nicholas (2016) conducted a study examining the role of principals in supporting students learning during and after natural disaster. Using semi-structured interviews they found that school leaders know the community well and this allows them to play a pivotal role in ensuring social cohesion. Mutch conducted an exploratory study with school teams using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with teachers and arts-based methods with students in four schools in Christchurch following an earthquake. She found that school leaders are better placed than outside authorities to understand their school communities' needs based on local knowledge – they are aware of the nuances of the context, the relationships and the school community and understand much more precisely how and when this knowledge matters for recovery. Stuart et al. (2013) in case studies conducted both six months and 36 months after major snowstorms found that school leaders have specific local knowledge which is key in examining how schools managed temporary school closures and the consequences of these closures. O'Connor and Takahashi (2014) conducted two case studies in New Zealand and Japan comparing the responses of schools post-earthquake. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with the school community they concluded that it was school leaders that are better placed than central government to see more clearly the actual needs of the community (O'Connor et al., 2014).

In conclusion, it was evident in the studies we reviewed that extraordinary and unplanned events brought out the best in communities while also highlighting their vulnerabilities. School leaders played central roles in recognising and responding to the needs of their community, particularly the most vulnerable, and were able to do so well through their local knowledge.

#### 4.2 LEARNING FROM THE EVENT WAS VITAL IN FEEDING INTO FUTURE CONTINGENCY PLANS

It is inevitable that there are lessons to be learned following an unplanned closure both in terms of what to do if it were to happen again and in dealing with related incidents following the event. Emergency preparedness plans are designed to address these issues in the case of natural disasters. While certainly, school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic were slightly different to closure due to an earthquake there are several similarities in terms of the challenges it posed for school leadership – for example, opening new lines of communication with parents and families, provision of alternate education (online learning), and contingency planning for future closures.

An overriding theme in the studies we reviewed was the need to be prepared to communicate information effectively and clearly with the larger school community during the event. Howat et al. (2012) in an ethnographic study that used both interviews and focus groups in schools following reopening after Hurricane Katrina found that issues regarding communication caused significant tension in schools and communities. Stuart et al. (2013) also found that diffuse leadership and a lack of clear lines of responsibility caused tension. They considered that once the event was over, school leadership would benefit from building in time to reflect on how effective communication was managed in order to learn from the past for any future events. They found that good communication was particularly crucial, given the need to keep the school community informed about what, in effect, may be a wide ranging of decisions that have to be made quickly (Mutch, 2015). Mutch (2016) conducted 25 semi-structured interviews of both individuals and groups focusing on school communities and the role of community in recovery post-crisis. Using a constant-comparative method to examine the data collected, she highlighted the vital role that communication plays and recommended that, wherever possible, communication must be maintained, be timely, and contain accurate information.

Schools need time to reflect on their response to closures and subsequent reopening due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Contingency plans should include a particular focus on lines of communication.

#### 4.3 SCHOOL LEADERS PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN CARING FOR THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF STAFF

A strong theme in all the literature we reviewed was a focus on the social and emotional wellbeing of staff as well as students following closures due to unplanned events. School leaders have a role to play in supporting staff, many of whom may have compromised wellbeing after stressful events (Direen, 2016), even though they have returned to school and seeming normality (Howat et al., 2012). The fact that the unplanned event may have had significant impacts on the social, emotional, physical, and economic well-being of the school community needs to be acknowledged. Indeed, returning in itself may be a source of anxiety. From this point of view, Mutch (2017) in her study of school closures post-earthquake in Canterbury found that making too many changes too soon after the event was unhelpful.

In the COVID context, the literature suggests that some staff will be returning to school under stress and creating school normalcy should be a priority (Howat et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2008) rather than introducing new programmes or initiatives.

### 5. CURRICULAR FOCI

#### 5.1 CHILDREN NEEDED TO BE EDUCATED ABOUT THE EVENT

Schools can play a pivotal role in educating children about the event itself. In terms of public health events like COVID-19 this seems particularly important. Johnson et al. (2014) conducted focus group interviews with teachers about a disaster preparedness curriculum that was implemented after the Christchurch earthquake of 2011. Analysis of their interviews, suggested that schools can play a pivotal role in addressing misinformation, dispelling rumours, and provide education about what happened and what may happen in potential future events.

Schools are well placed, with appropriate support, to support children to learn about COVID-19 and how to stay healthy in an age appropriate manner.

## 5.2 THE CURRICULUM IS AN IMPORTANT MEANS OF SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S RETURN TO NORMALCY

In terms of curriculum, there was only one study which documented the effect of an unplanned event on academic achievement. Lamb et al. (2013) documented the effect of Hurricane Katrina on mathematics achievement in Mississippi and found negative changes for some sub-groups but not all. In contrast, other studies focused on how curriculum can be used as a vehicle to support children's return to normalcy. For example, Johnson et al. (2014) recommended changing the curriculum to respond to the event through literature and writing. Alvarez (2010) conducted an ethnography investigating how Hurricane Katrina impacted teaching practices in English and the role of writing and storytelling. She found that providing time and space to write was a positive pedagogical practice in these circumstances. Indeed she suggested that teaching in these circumstances demands both a change of pace and content and an opportunity to both tell their stories and listen to others.

In sum, the literature on the curriculum following unplanned events emphasised the need to review how curriculum could be paced appropriately and leveraged to support a return to normality.

## 6. MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENTS

Schools can have a positive influence on the mental health of the school community following an unplanned event if teachers are prepared to deal with distress (Barrett et al., 2012). Barrett et al. in an ethnographic study reported that following Hurricane Katrina schools reported that students had difficulty with concentration and there was a need to adapt pace and content of what was being taught. Many studies emphasised the need to equip teachers to be able to recognise and deal with the effects of trauma (Johnson et al., 2014; Ward et al., 2008). For example, Ward et al. (2008) conducted a survey post-Katrina and then held a conference for discussion of the findings with survey participants. Their participants reported a need to be equipped to provide psychological support. O'Connor and Takahashi's (2014) case study of children in both New Zealand and Japan following an earthquake found that children's responses to events may not manifest for months as they begin to adjust to school, process events and become more willing to talk about something distressing.

O'Connor and Takahashi (2014) described how, when children returned to school following earthquakes in New Zealand and Japan, children enjoyed the distraction of school and the opportunities to play with their peers. Indeed they stated that schools following these events can 'keep children safe, support learning, support staff and family, and manage anxiety (p.48)'. As Mutch (2016) suggested: schools can become a locus for supporting the community to come together, to learn to self-advocate and, indeed, celebrate successes.

These findings suggested that resilience can be built by attending to the mental health needs of the school community. In the case of COVID-19, children may have experienced illness, food poverty, and prolonged absence from a wider family network and, indeed, their friends, and may have suffered or be suffering from trauma. To best support children, teachers need to be able to recognise the signs of trauma. This may be a professional development need.

## 7. SUMMARY

The existing literature on cases of learning disruption after unplanned events such as natural disasters is more helpful in planning for school resilience post-COVID in the UK than the research on learning 'lost' over the annual summer holidays.

The important lessons to be learnt from research on learning disruption are that:

- School leaders are pivotal in the return to school following unplanned closures.
- Schools are essential in the return to normalcy and the curriculum needs to be responsive to needs
- Schools are essential in supporting the mental health of both students and the wider school community

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