



Learning from Learning Disruption:

Using evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic and other unplanned school closures to support plans for future disruptions

A resource for schools

International Literacy Centre | IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society

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Researchers: PI: Gemma Moss. CO-Is: Alice Bradbury, Sam Duncan, Sinéad Harmey and Rachael Levy.

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A summary of our research

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020 schools across the globe were forced to close. Since then, on a stop-start basis, schools have reopened. Many schools, however, are still experiencing the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on pupil and teacher absence as well as the social, emotional, physical and academic impact on the entire school community. While the world has experienced global pandemics like Spanish flu before, the COVID-19 pandemic has been unprecedented. In May 2020 United Kingdom Research Innovation (UKRI) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) awarded a team of researchers at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society with funding to [explore the challenges the COVID-19 crisis set primary school teachers](#). One part of this research was to conduct a review of research on previous learning disruptions to see if we could learn anything from these events that might match with the COVID-19 pandemic. The full review is published [here](#).

This booklet summarises:

- What we did and why we did it
- What we found and educators' reflections on how it aligned with the COVID-19 learning disruption
- What we recommended based on our findings and educators' recommendations for schools and policy makers
- We have shared these findings with educators to combine their reflections on our findings with their experiences.

What we did:

We searched for previous studies on learning disruptions to find out if this might be useful to schools trying to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. We looked for as many studies as possible that described what schools did when temporary school closures resulted from natural disasters (like hurricanes, pandemics, SARS) and what the key recommendations from the studies were. We screened 307 studies. We evaluated the quality of studies in terms of the methods the researchers used and the relevance of each study to our research. We included studies conducted in the context of an unplanned event (not ordinary school holidays). Only 15 studies met our evaluation criteria. We synthesised the findings from these studies and grouped them together by theme.

Why we did it

Policy makers and the media have relied on learning loss research to try to predict what might happen to children as a result of COVID-19. Learning loss research examines what happens when schools close for summer. We did not think that type of research was helpful for two reasons:

1. Summer holidays were not the same as COVID-19 closures because schools had to close quickly, and all members of the community were under extreme pressure.
2. Learning loss research did not provide helpful recommendations for schools closed in unpredictable and stressful conditions.

What we found

Theme	Our findings about previous learning disruptions	Educators' reflections about how this matched with the COVID-19 learning disruptions
Community	School leaders' local knowledge was essential in responding to the needs of the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School leaders were essential in supporting families particularly those who would not ask for help - The pandemic showed that schools and school leaders have a vital place in the community they work in - Schools provided social and emotional support for families
Curriculum	Children benefit from reflecting on the event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children needed opportunities to talk about what happened through assemblies, stories, play and visual arts - They also needed time to not talk about COVID-19
	The curriculum needs to adjust in pace and scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The curriculum could provide a means for expression, but this depended on the external pressures in terms of academic catch-up and returning to a testing regime - There are wider ranges of ability in classrooms - Teachers felt a need to slow down pace but were under stress to keep going at the same pace or faster to make up for lost time
Care	Unplanned closures can affect the mental health of students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The COVID-19 pandemic impacted student's mental health - Many students experienced stress, bereavement, loss and anxiety - Children missed opportunities to socialise and make friends
	Learning from the experience of the event was vital in feeding into future contingency plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools have learned a lot about operating in the context of ongoing absences, working online and in terms of working collaboratively with parents - Continuing to provide for students has reduced the opportunity to take stock of what has happened
	School leaders play a vital role in caring for the social and emotional needs of staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School leaders have had to provide social and emotional support for staff who have experienced illness, anxiety and bereavement - School leaders also need support - Early career teachers have missed opportunities for mentoring - Teachers became more isolated due to bubbles and repeated absence of colleagues

Our recommendations	Educators' recommendations
<p>Recommendation 1: Given the vital role local knowledge played in supporting the school community provide school leadership with the autonomy to use funds as they see fit.</p>	<p>What is helpful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Funding - Guidance on how to spend funding strategically - Use of within school staff who have a place in the community is more helpful than support that is 'helicoptered' in <p>What is not helpful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time constraints on use of funds - An over emphasis on academic achievement given ongoing absences
<p>Recommendation 2: Leadership should have time and support 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) needs of the community.</p>	<p>Schools should be provided with the opportunity to reflect on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What schools did to communicate with the school community - What schools did to educate children in school, out of school and during prolonged absences - What was useful? - Has this been documented? - What practices could be kept going forward?
<p>Recommendation 3: The mental health of children and school personnel was a central concern post-unplanned event. Provide leadership with the resources to support their own, employees' and children's mental health.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional development in mental health and wellbeing in children and adults is essential - Greater connection is needed between public health agencies and schools - Training needs to be provided to recognise the signs of trauma and to have the skills and knowledge to signpost extra support for families, children and staff
<p>Recommendation 4: Acknowledge that children need time and flexible opportunities to learn, focusing on content that provides a vehicle for children to express themselves through arts and literature.</p>	<p>Time and flexibility is only possible if schools are not put under undue pressure to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spend funding quickly in the context of ongoing absences of staff and children due to COVID-19 - An over emphasis on academic achievement to the detriment of creativity and self-expression
<p>Recommendation 5: Provide learning materials that will educate children about the facts about COVID-19 and opportunity to reflect on the events.</p>	<p>Organisations could:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide a central resource list of fiction and non-fiction on the themes of illness, loss and anxiety - Create resources and activities that could be used with children to explore and accurately understand COVID-19 - Create resources for assemblies that could be used by schools as needed
<p>Recommendation 6: Conduct research that moves beyond calculating learning loss and documents the reflections of the school community on the experience of educating during the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<p>Researchers could</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document what schools did - Create an archive children, parents and school communities' reflections of the learning disruptions - Create a nationwide reflective forum to reflect on what happened, what we did and what we could learn from the event