Back to School Study: Final rapid report

The Back to School study examined the views of young people, parents, carers and school staff about returning to school after Covid-19 lockdown in the UK, including views on measures to reduce Covid-19 infection risk. This report presents rapid analysis of data from interviews between 15th July and 4th September 2020. Participants were 13 school staff from seven schools - Heads/assistant Heads, teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) - and 20 families from eight schools (12 with a Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) child/parent) - 17 young people (mostly years 7/8/10) and 20 parents.

Key findings

Home learning: Young people struggled with the lack of socialising, teacher interaction and sometimes minimal teacher feedback. Staff found it a poor substitute for face-to-face teaching and were concerned unequal access to technology and space would exacerbate socioeconomic divides in educational attainment. Home learning benefits included fewer distractions, less stress for some young people, especially those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and some better family-teacher relationships.

Feelings about returning to school: Families were keen for young people to return unless they had clinically vulnerable or high-risk family members e.g. BAME. Some young people were concerned about returning to socialising after lockdown, using public transport and catching up on learning, especially in year 10. Staff had 'resigned acceptance' but many concerns about reopening, including: Covid-19 infection risk (to their family and to students and staff), the pressure on teachers not to spread Covid-19, feasibility of risk reduction measures, reduced staff numbers, young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health, managing anticipated behavioural issues, and supporting young people who struggle with learning.

Government guidance: Despite agreeing that schools must reopen, families and staff had very little trust in the government due to their repeated U-turns (e.g. on exam grades), guidelines viewed as unscientific, unfeasible and unclear, and late advice.

Social distancing and risk reduction in schools: Schools had planned risk reduction measures, mainly year group 'bubbles', 2m between staff and students, staggered arrival/leaving/break times, and hand hygiene measures. Families and staff felt social distancing in schools would be difficult. Although year group bubbles were seen as a pragmatic solution, there were concerns about crossover from socialising and siblings. Staff were concerned about student compliance with new measures. Risk reduction measures were anticipated to impact learning, particularly for young people with additional needs (e.g. SEN), those who struggle with structured learning, and years 11 and 13 taking exams.

Test, trace and isolate: Most parents and young people, and all staff, were enthusiastic about a school test and trace programme. Self-isolation was generally seen as feasible for most families. Few families and staff anticipated stigma being an issue for those that test positive for Covid-19; a few mentioned possible 'mass hysteria'.

Solutions suggested by families and staff (see page 6-7 for more detail):
➢ Live virtual lessons and better laptop provision for home learning for future lockdown or self-isolation situations.
➢ Clear and regular communication from school to families on plans for reopening/future lockdowns.
➢ Schools taking a supportive approach to reopening, considering the anticipated emotional impact on young people of returning to school/future lockdown.
➢ Clear, nuanced, timely guidance for schools, focusing on PPE, exams, local lockdowns, young peoples' wellbeing, supporting SEN and catch-up teaching, perhaps from local authority.

- Funding - for catch-up tutoring, emotional support, and supplies/equipment (for learning and cleaning/hand hygiene) - and additional staff and space.
- Resources for young people with additional needs/ SEN.
- Exchanging ideas of creative ways to teach within the restrictions of social distancing.
- Reduced exam curriculum.
- Clear consistent messaging and reminders to young people on new risk reduction measures emphasising compliance for the 'collective good', and well thought-out enforcement of new rules.
- A school-based test and trace programme.
- More clarity on the symptoms of Covid-19 for families, clear and easy methods for reporting, and sensitive school responses to positive tests.

Views of families

Home learning

- Younger students had not attended school during lockdown. Year 10s had almost all been in for a few days (one had not due to perceived risk of Covid-19). Very few students had had 'live' remote lessons. All young people were set work online (one participant was sent paperwork due to lack of internet access). A few reported phone calls from school or online tutor group sessions.
- Attitudes to online learning varied widely. The main challenges were lack of teacher interaction/guidance, minimal/slow feedback, lack of motivation, and loss of structure to the day. The lack of teacher input impacted learning and motivation. Young people who already struggled with school found home learning especially difficult.
- Most parents felt their children coped and adapted well. Some young people enjoyed fewer distractions working at home, planning their own time, a more relaxed atmosphere and becoming better independent learners.
- Most young people missed the social aspects of school, especially year 7/8 who were just starting to socialise independently of their parents.

School campus reopening plans

Most parents and young people, but not all, had information from school about plans for Covid-19 infection risk reduction and some appreciated the clarity of information received. There was, however, a lack of information about academic 'catch-up', and many families wanted to discuss individual concerns.

- Although aware of the ongoing risk of Covid-19 and concerned about a return to lockdown, most young people and parents were eager to return to school for young peoples' learning, socialising and mental health. Home learning was felt to be unsustainable, especially for older years. Parents looked forward to the 'return to normality' and having more time.

> "it's a bit of a joke, you know, and they [government] say they care, but they don't"
> (Sasha, parent of yr 10)

- Despite agreeing that schools must re-open, trust in the government was very low due to repeated U-turns (e.g. on exam grades), unscientific guidelines, and unfeasible, changeable and late advice.
- Concerns about the risk of Covid-19 were mainly due to vulnerable or BAME family members. For most, risk of infection was not a major concern and/or was outweighed by benefits of being back at school.
- Some were concerned about the Covid-19 risk of commuting by public transport.
- Young people were less concerned about the risk of Covid-19 for themselves, and more about returning to socialising and routine after so long, and catching up on learning, especially in year 10. One student was worried about government plans to weigh all young people at school. There was very little awareness of school catch up plans.

- Other less common concerns were: the risk to teachers; compulsory attendance; how school will deal with young people's emotional issues, and practicalities e.g. short time slots for drop off.

🖐️ Social distancing & infection control in schools

- Although families generally agreed schools need to implement covid-19 risk reduction measures, there was consensus that social distancing between young people in schools is impossible due to the volume of people and lack of space in the school environment. Parents could not see it working unless there was more space or fewer young people physically in school (e.g. split classes in a rota system). There was also a feeling that excitement on returning and wanting to be 'normal' may mean close physical contact.

> "people are just are not gonna do it [social distance]. They're just gonna do what they want and like run around the whole place,... it doesn't make sense. I mean, maybe they have some magical plan or something like that, but..there's not enough space" (yr 7 pupil)

- Young people felt that year group bubbles were a sensible and feasible idea. Some parents agreed, seeing it as a pragmatic solution. However, many families were concerned about their effectiveness because a) year groups are so big (200+), and b) there would be crossover between bubbles due to siblings, friends, or congregating outside school gates. Only one young person was concerned about the risk of teachers crossing bubbles.
- There was some concern from parents and young people about how the rules would be enforced, and a few parents thought some young people might see the new rules as an invitation to misbehave, in particular 2m distance from the teachers.
- Social distancing will be particularly difficult at lunch/break times, arrival/leaving school and in corridors, and in active and practical lessons such as art, PE, science, dance and drama.
- Anticipated impact of social distancing measures on learning varied. Parent and young peoples' concerns included the new rules being a distraction, and restricted teaching methods (mainly teacher-student distancing)
- Families were less aware of school plans for hand hygiene and other infection control strategies (face coverings, ventilation etc) but anticipated hand sanitiser gel in/near classrooms, and (latterly) masks encouraged in corridors. There was some concern about availability of washing facilities, and a few parents felt handwashing is more effective than gel and should be emphasised. Barriers included lack of time and forgetting.

🧪 Test, trace and isolate

- Most parents and young people were enthusiastic about the idea of a school based test and trace programme, as it would make schools safer and reassure families, although some parents were less keen due to concerns about use of their child's data. There was concern about school lockdowns being more frequent due to increased testing, with implications for parents (time off work), young people (loss of learning) and schools (attendance figures and academic achievement).
- Barriers to reporting symptoms included parents/young people wanting to attend school (parents needing to work), embarrassment/ stigma, and lack of awareness of the symptoms/what should be reported.
- Self-isolation was generally seen as feasible for families. Many families had already self-isolated and had mixed experiences. Having helpful neighbours made it easier. Lack of space at home made it harder.
- Although most people did not anticipate any major risk of stigma around receiving a positive test result for Covid-19, some felt that it might be an issue among the young people at school.

Home learning

- There were clear limitations and challenges of home learning, which was a poor substitute for face to face teaching, especially for older years. Staff spent extra time working and needed IT expertise.

> "I'm not sure I would call it teaching in the way that I understand teaching. I understand teaching as very much an interpersonal, communicative practice that's very responsive and reactive, as well as being, sort of, prepared and planned and then delivered." (Ellie, teacher, School 5)

- Staff reported some benefits. Some students (especially with SEN) were 'blossoming' and enjoying learning at home during lockdown. Staff also noted improved communication and relationships with families and among staff, including learning how to communicate virtually. Staff IT expertise and the schools' online provision also improved. One school was particularly proud of how they coped.

> "[For] a lot of [autistic spectrum] students I think the hyper-vigilance and the sensory overload that they experience at school is a real challenge, despite academically being very able. I think being in a home environment has just been kind of quite healthy for them" (Dave, SENCO, School 6)

- Staff were concerned about lockdown increasing the divide in educational attainment between families of lower socioeconomic status who had poorer access to space and technology for home learning.
- Learning for young people without computers/internet was particularly affected. The provision of laptops from the government was inadequate and came too late. Paper copies of work were sent out to these students, but they could not be returned for assessment.
- One staff member was concerned about unknown long-term impact of lockdown on young peoples' mental health and capacity to learn.

School campus reopening plans

Staff had mixed feelings and many concerns about reopening schools. These included Covid-19 infection risk, young people's emotional wellbeing, managing anticipated behavioural issues as students readjust to being back at school, and supporting young people who struggle with learning or are in Covid-19 'vulnerable' categories.

- The huge amount of work senior leadership teams had put into making plans for September was appreciated.
- Staff had a "resigned acceptance" of returning to school.
- Staff had a complete lack of trust or faith in government guidance for schools, which they described variously as "atrocious", "woolly", "incoherent", "contradictory", "unclear", and that schools have been "set up to fail".

> "[there is a] complete disconnect between those [gov] announcements and reality of teaching" (Anna, SENCO, School 1)

This mistrust was exacerbated by the U-turns on exam results. Lack of trust in the government made decision-making the responsibility of schools/staff and more opinion based. Advice from local authorities, PHE, and government teaching bodies was more trusted.

- Concerns about schools reopening:
  - The Covid-19 infection risk - schools are like "petri dishes". Some also described "guilt" about being a "spreader" and posing a risk to their own families, and a responsibility to reduce their own risk outside of school to facilitate returning to work.

> "It's almost like this responsibility [falls on teachers] because we know we can't trust our government. It's almost with us and I feel really uncomfortable about that" (Claire, teacher, School 8)

- o Feasibility of risk reduction measures. Also, a variability in young peoples' existing experience of and adherence to social distancing rules.
- o Reduced staff numbers (vulnerable staff working from home).
- o Young people adjusting to the social aspects and routine of school, associated anxieties and behavioural issues, and how the school would manage these.
- o Emotional impact of the pandemic and return to school on young people, and lack of advanced planning from schools on how to deal with this.
- o 'Explosion' of safeguarding issues being reported from lockdown.
- o Particular groups of concern: BAME families due to increased risk from Covid-19; English as an Additional Language (EAL) families who may have spent lockdown not speaking English; young people with SEN, due to their tendency to over-worry, and need for close physical contact, 'soft spaces', and Learning Support Assistants; young people with anxiety; vulnerable young people who have not engaged with home learning or suffered family issues during lockdown; young carers/those with family members at greater risk from Covid-19; bereaved young people; years in transition (7 and 12) and exam years; young people already "avoidant" of school or who struggle with structured learning/have shorter attention spans; vulnerable staff.

> "what's difficult to predict is the more abstract side of it, so the underlying anxieties and worries that students might have about being together… and how that might affect behaviours and interactions with each other" (John, teacher, School 3)

Social distancing & infection control in schools

Most schools had put measures in place to allow for as much social distancing as possible, but young people were not expected to social distance, rather there was a reliance on year group 'bubbles' and staggered arrival/leaving/breaks. Teachers move between classrooms/zones, and staff stay 2m from young people wherever possible – including staying at the front of classrooms. There were plans to reduce/cancel assemblies, vertical tutor groups and practical lessons. Hand hygiene was to be encouraged with hand sanitiser gel in place throughout school and handwashing on arrival and at breaks, masks used in corridors and extra cleaning. Staff felt young people would follow the new rules as they are generally "conformists" but were concerned/unclear about enforcing rules.

The main anticipated barriers to these measures were lack of space, and young people not following the rules for a variety of reasons (forgetting, seeing new rules as a challenge, different rules outside school, being naturally tactile and physical, lack of understanding of collective need). Commuting by public transport was also a concern, as was the impact on teaching methods and pastoral care, and anticipated

> "differentiation for a student with educational needs should be relatively surreptitious in some way. But if I've got a student who's sitting a little further back, and I'm, 'Oh, so and so. Don't forget that you need to do this,' or call across the classroom, that could have quite a debilitating impact. I'm not sure how TAs [teaching assistants] are going to work, because obviously they have to be so close to a student to then to really sort of do their role properly" (Ellie, teacher, School 5)

behaviour issues (e.g. young people left unsupervised in classrooms). New rules, especially pupils distancing from staff and a more academic learning style, were anticipated to particularly impact those with additional needs e.g. SEN, those who find structured learning difficult, those with shorter attention spans, and years 7/exam years. Teachers were concerned about being unable to teach responsively or help those who need extra support.

Concerns about hand hygiene/infection control were mostly practical (provision of hand sanitiser gel, monitoring handwashing, poor ventilation).

Test, trace and isolate

- All staff thought testing in schools is important and would reassure students, parents and staff, and encourage students to attend school.
- There was concern about staff not reporting symptoms/positive tests to the Head as they feel guilty for a) taking sickness absence and b) getting infected (e.g. socialising over the holidays) when they have a responsibility to the school.
- Most staff did not anticipate stigma in response to a positive test at school, although two mentioned possible 'mass hysteria' and another that teenagers 'love to joke and point a finger'.

Suggested solutions

This section describes the parents, young people and staff suggestions for the reopening of schools.

Guidance, resources and information

- Staff need clear, nuanced, timely government guidance/advice, including case studies, developed with input from schools. To include PPE, exams, local lockdowns, dealing with young people's issues, supporting SEN, and catch-up teaching. Staff also suggested directive guidance from local authorities, so schools don't have to independently plan how to comply with government regulations, and local-specific information.
- Staff suggested funding, particularly for: emotional support for young people; catch-up tutoring; learning equipment; cleaning products; hand sanitiser; PPE. Additional staff (e.g. supply teachers) and space (e.g. church halls) would also help, especially regarding the needs of young people with SEN.
- Clear and regular communication from schools about the changes made is important to reassure parents.

Covid-19 risk reduction

- To increase compliance with risk reduction measures, staff felt schools may need to "convince" pupils and emphasise the "collective good". Staff and parents emphasised the need for clear consistent messaging and regular empowering reminders.
- Parents felt schools need to give thought to the benefits and risks of strictly enforcing new 'rules'. One parent suggested splitting the class and having half in attendance, half learning online, although this is not possible within current government guidelines.

Test, trace and isolate

- Parents suggested more clarity on the symptoms of Covid-19, if they were expected to report them. They wanted a clear and easy method of reporting and wanted the implications of reporting symptoms made clear.
- Clear information for young people about the implications of a positive test/reporting symptoms and psychological support for those with positive tests to avoid blame and reassure them about their outcomes.
- Response to a positive test result would need to be dealt with quickly and carefully by the SLT.

School plans to support young people

- A slow transition period to allow young people adjust to the new approaches.
- Risk assessments, communication with, and some school prior to September for vulnerable young people.
- Academically a 'no blame culture' for work not done during home learning, and catch-up provision.
- Collaboration with staff with mental health expertise and external organisations.

Teaching, learning and wellbeing

- In future lockdown or self-isolation situations, parents, young people and some staff would like home learning to include live virtual lessons, to improve learning and social interaction. Some parents wanted clarity on plans for supporting learning in the event of future lockdowns. Staff suggested better laptop provision.
- Staff recommended assessing young people's needs.
- Staff and some parents felt schools need to be understanding of the range of challenges faced by young people during lockdown and learning challenges on return to school. Some staff advised a supportive approach such as trauma-informed response and recovery curriculum, focussing on young people's anxieties and emotional wellbeing rather than getting back to normal/academic achievement.
- Staff suggested a catch-up curriculum, with a focus on years 11 and 13, and reduced curricula from more exam boards.
- Staff suggested changing teaching methods to suit social distancing rules, including more creative teaching, and teamwork and sharing ideas of teaching methods between staff.

"a recovery curriculum [and] the importance of emotional wellbeing and attachment aware, kind of, principles … should be something that's …clearly articulated and shared in government guidance to all schools" (Anna, SENCO, School 1)

Further details

This report should be cited as: Lorenc, A. Kidger, J. Kesten, J. Langford, R. & Horwood, J. Back to School Study: Final Rapid Report, 14th September 2020, University of Bristol.