LONDON SCHOOLS

BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

HOW SCHOOLS HAVE ADAPTED THEIR APPROACHES TO TEACHING, LEARNING AND THE CURRICULUM

RECONNECT LONDON

Reconnect London

Reconnect London is a practitioner-led network which was founded in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, by a group of school and trust leaders. Working with a wide range of partners, we support and facilitate collaboration between schools, in order to improve educational outcomes for young Londoners.

The network brings together school leaders from across London, providing them with three things:

1. Better understanding of the challenges they face in their particular contexts.
2. An enhanced ability to find innovative and context-responsive solutions to these challenges.
3. The opportunity to share knowledge and expertise with peers in a way that facilitates mutual learning.

Our **Knowledge Hub** contributes to the shared knowledge base about education in London, providing deeper understanding of key issues affecting schools in the capital and helping to share good practice so that it can be emulated.

Our **Headteacher Network** facilitates cooperation and collaboration between school leaders in the capital, providing mutual support and helping ensure that knowledge, understanding and practitioner expertise is effectively moved around the system.

Our **Innovation Lab** helps headteachers to find practical solutions to current challenges facing their schools, with a particular focus on meeting the needs of children and young people who are experiencing disadvantage.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the ways in which London have adapted their approaches to teaching, learning and the curriculum following the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing particularly on:

- learning loss and learning gaps;
- mental health and well-being;
- communication and language development;
- leadership approaches.

The report presents case studies that illustrate how innovative strategies have been employed by schools to address these challenges, highlighting some of the lessons learned from their experiences.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on learning outcomes, resulting in learning loss and widening learning gaps, with a particularly adverse effect on disadvantaged pupils. The case studies in this report reveal how London schools have implemented targeted interventions such as tutoring, academic intervention and re-structuring of the curriculum, to address learning loss and close learning gaps.

The report emphasizes the vital work that schools continue to do to support pupils' mental health and well-being. The case studies highlight the way in which schools have implemented comprehensive well-being programmes, including access to counselling services and mental health support. All of the case study schools recognise the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment to promote resilience and emotional well-being among pupils.

Communication and language development have been a significant focus for many schools, following the challenges of lockdown and the periods of remote learning which many pupils experienced. The case studies in the report show how schools have put into place measures to address this, such as programmes to enhance communication skills and bridge language gaps, as well as prioritising parental engagement to ensure effective home-school partnerships.

Effective leadership has played a crucial role in guiding schools through the crisis and helping them adapt to the changed environment post-pandemic. The case studies demonstrate the importance of strong leadership in fostering a culture of resilience, collaboration, and innovation. All of the case study schools have embraced flexible decision-making, provided professional development opportunities for staff, and encouraged shared leadership to navigate the complexities of the pandemic.

The report highlights the extent to which London schools have demonstrated resilience and innovation in adapting their approaches following the COVID-19 pandemic. The case studies highlight successful strategies employed by schools to address learning loss, support mental health and well-being, enhance communication and language development, and foster effective leadership. These insights provide valuable lessons for other educational institutions facing similar challenges, offering guidance on effective practice in a post-pandemic education landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted London schools, bringing about numerous challenges and changes. Schools faced prolonged periods of partial closure, shifting to remote and online learning in order to ensure continuity of education. This presented various difficulties, including access to technology and internet connectivity, as well as the need to develop new strategies to engage and motivate learners remotely.

The pandemic also disrupted the normal routines and structures within schools. Social distancing measures required modifications to classroom layouts, staggered schedules and enhanced cleaning practices. These changes impacted not only pupils' learning but also social interactions, extra-curricular activities and the overall school experience for many pupils.

Additionally, the pandemic had a profound effect on pupils' mental health and well-being. Isolation, uncertainty, and the loss of routine took a toll on their emotional state. As a result, schools had to prioritize supporting the mental health of pupils, implementing new initiatives and providing access to counselling and mental health resources. Schools also had to adapt the curriculum to accommodate the challenges posed by the pandemic. Teachers had to re-evaluate and adjust schemes of learning to accommodate remote learning, ensuring that essential educational content was covered while also attempting to maintain student engagement in an unfamiliar environment.

For many schools, this has led to long-term changes to teaching methods, learning environments, curriculum delivery and approaches to student well-being. The case studies included in this report illustrate the extent to which school leaders have demonstrated resilience and innovation in the way they have navigated these challenges. They also show how schools are continuing to adapt and evolve in response to the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

Structure of the report

The report explores existing literature in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupils and schools. It does this by drawing on research reports that have been published to date on this topic.

The report includes eight descriptive case studies, drawn from schools whose headteachers chose to share their work with Reconnect London after we put out a call for case studies in spring 2023. The case studies are not designed to be representative, but to provide detailed insight into a small number of examples, attending carefully to their specific contexts.

Some, though not all, of the case study schools are active members of the Reconnect London network. All of the case study schools achieve above average outcomes for pupils and all have been graded at least 'Good' by Ofsted. Further details about each of the case study schools are included in the relevant sections of the report.

SECTION 1
IMPACT ON ACHIEVEMENT

Learning loss and learning gaps

There is considerable evidence that the enforced school closures of 2020-21 and the ongoing impact of the pandemic have had a negative impact on pupil learning and progress. It is difficult to determine the exact levels of learning loss and learning gaps, since research is ongoing and the long-term effects cannot yet be ascertained. However, within the emerging body of research, there are some significant findings across a range of areas, subjects and stages of education.

Donnelly and Patrinos (2022) found that studies showed a range of results regarding learning loss and how it impacted groups of pupils differently. For example, one study found that secondary school pupils were not negatively affected to the same degree as primary pupils. Another study found greater learning losses for pupils who are affected by disadvantage. A third found that learning losses were different in different subjects. Other studies reported how some pupils who had limited or no access to remote learning during lockdown would be returning to school with a 60% – 85% learning deficit[1].

The Department for Education (2021) found that, despite catch-up progress being made in the 2020/21 academic year when schools reopened, both primary and secondary pupils have suffered learning losses in key subjects as a result of lockdown and school closures, with pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds being disproportionately negatively affected and showing slower rates of catch up. Underscoring these findings was the conclusion that more research is needed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on student learning to gain a clearer and more informed picture of learning loss.

Published in the same month as schools began to reopen after the first period of national lockdown, the Education Endowment Fund's (2020) report about the impact of school closures on the attainment gap found that school closure was likely to reverse the progress made in the last ten years. The report stated that two key factors that affected pupil learning the most during this period were the quality of remote learning and parental involvement. This suggests that, to reduce the negative impact on the attainment gap once schools reopened, pupils should continue receiving effective remote learning, along with access to additional resources and sustained, targeted support within school.

Evans et al (2020) interviewed nine London-based English teachers, to understand what teaching and learning was like during the lockdown periods for them. The teachers raised a number of issues including feeling a lack of confidence in the quality of teaching they were providing, the loss of social interaction and relationship building, which they believed to be important

for effective teaching, and an increase in safeguarding issues. They also expressed concern about the inequality caused by language deficits in some households, economic and digital poverty, lesson attendance and engagement, and the rigid nature of curriculum requirements which made it difficult for them to adapt to changing circumstances.

On the other hand, there were some positive experiences that were shared, including how some pupils became more involved and engaged with some subjects when learning online. One teacher who had a diagnosed anxiety disorder felt that the structure of online teaching allowed him to complete his role in a way that was more suitable to his working ethos. He believed that online teaching allowed him to empathise and help his pupils better without the anxiety triggers he had experienced during classroom teaching. This illustrates the extent to which there are both positive and negative perceptions of the circumstances that arose during the pandemic.

Use of tuition

The Education Endowment Foundation suggest that tutoring is an effective strategy for sustained support to help pupils catch up, estimating that the impact of one-to-one tutoring could result in five months' worth of progress being made[3]. Identifying best practice regarding online maths tutoring, Johns and Mills (2021) found that live lessons with shared whiteboard facilities were the most effective teaching method. They also found that pre-set text-based tasks were effective for pupils who were more suited to or in need of flexible access or for students with language and/or learning barriers.

The National Tutoring Programme (NTP)is a government-subsidised initiative aimed at providing high-quality tutoring support in schools to help disadvantaged pupils recover from learning losses. When it was announced in 2020, the NTP was presented as a ground-breaking approach to equalising access to tuition on a national scale, but schools expressed concerns over its effectiveness and consistency as it began to be implemented. In the first year of its implementation, the programme was heavily criticised for failing to achieve the scale of impact intended. Whilst this increased during its second year, jumping from 250,000 to over 2 million ongoing tutoring courses, the quality of the tutoring is unknown, with a considerable number of schools reporting tutoring provision to be inconsistent. Furthermore, statistics show that over 60% of FSM pupils did not receive tutoring through the NTP even though they were a primary target demographic for the programme[4].

Looking forward, it has been suggested that the NTP should change its priorities in terms of scale and speed of implementation, to facilitate a focus on the quality of its provision. It has also been argued that it could improve how it reaches and serves disadvantaged pupils, having greater accountability measures in place for providers who work in disadvantaged schools. There are also calls for the expansion of tuition providers, to bring in established experts and sector leaders currently excluded to improve provision across the country. There are also, however, plans to reduce the level of government subsidy, which could have serious ramifications for the programme and therefore for disadvantaged pupils.

Curriculum content and structure

The pandemic has had a notable impact on the school curriculum in the UK. During 2020-21, school closures and the shift to remote and blended learning models disrupted the traditional delivery of the curriculum. Schools have demonstrated flexibility in adjusting the curriculum to respond to changing circumstances. Curriculum content, classroom strategies and assessment methods have been modified to accommodate remote learning, individual needs and the variable impact of the pandemic on different groups.

Following the return to normal operations in 2021-22, catch-up programmes and targeted interventions have been introduced alongside adaptations to the curriculum, to address learning gaps and ensure all pupils are making progress. Provision has been tailored to meet the needs of different pupil populations and communities. Ongoing efforts are being made to address the impact of the pandemic, and to make necessary adjustments to ensure the curriculum supports pupils' academic progress and well-being.

One of the effects of lockdown and the pandemic was that schools and teachers became aware of how schooling is about more than academic learning. When primary teachers were interviewed about lessons learned before schools reopened in 2020, an overwhelming proportion reported that they did not want to return to 'business as usual'[5]. They believed that primary education in particular should take a broader approach when defining curriculum values and purposes, stating that as teachers their priorities when they returned to classroom teaching would be to re-engage their pupils with school learning and routines and to support socialisation and relationship-building, prioritising pupil welfare and well-being.

The case studies which follow describe the approaches taken by two schools, one primary and one secondary, as they seek to address learning loss and close learning gaps.

CASE STUDY:
Pakeman Primary School, London Borough of Islington

Context

Pakeman Primary School is a 1.5 form entry school for children aged 2 – 11 in Holloway, north London. The school serves a pupil population with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, with more than half of children eligible for the pupil premium. The school also has high levels of pupil mobility, with about one third of children having recently arrived in the country and the majority coming from families who speak a language other than English at home.

Pakeman is part of 'Future Zone', a group of Islington schools who work together and cooperate on particular projects. It has a history of 'good' judgements from Ofsted, with the most recent inspection having taken place in January 2022.

Key strategies

At the heart of Pakeman Primary School's provision is an unwavering commitment to supporting its pupils and helping them to overcome the multiple forms of disadvantage and vulnerability which they experience in their day-to-day lives.

Headteacher Emma Bonnin explains that, although more than half of pupils are eligible for the pupil premium, this underestimates the level of need within the local community. This is partly because a significant proportion of pupils at the school are refugees and asylum seekers who have recently arrived in the country and may not yet be eligible for public funding. There has recently been an increase in new arrivals of vulnerable children from countries including Afghanistan, Sudan, South Korea and Ukraine. This includes six new pupils in Year 6, who joined the school immediately after arriving in the country in March 2023.

The headteacher, who speaks fluent French, has found that there has been a recent increase in the number of families with North African heritage joining the school, because they know that she speaks their language. One of the challenges for the school is to ensure these children are quickly integrated into the school community and supported to transition smoothly to secondary school, while knowing that families are also facing significant challenges relating to housing, finances and their insecure immigration status. These challenges are particularly acute in the case of unaccompanied asylum seekers, who arrive in the UK without family support.

The school is infused with a family atmosphere, where the strength of relationships within the school community is seen as the most important element of their work. This underpins the school's approach to safeguarding, as well as to its provision of additional services for children and their families. They have an extensive child protection register and have worked hard to create an environment where children feel confident

about sharing information and concerns with trusted adults. This is particularly important in a context where there has been a significant increase in the number of children involved with gangs and with 'county lines'. They have seen children as young as eight years old being initiated into gangs, with the school identifying early evidence of the 'grooming phase' when a child comes to school with new trainers or a new hoodie.

To help address these issues, the school works intensively with parents and carers, as well as with children, to raise awareness of key issues. This includes running workshops for parents, in conjunction with the school's safer schools police officer, to talk about the effect of drugs, the reality of gang life and other issues. They are supported to do this work by the local authority and other agencies. This includes funding from a local charity, Richard Reeves, which help to pay for the school's two family support workers.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the school has seen a significant increase in the number of children experiencing mental health issues. There has been an increase, amongst pupils and their families, in reports of acute anxiety, suicidal ideation and domestic violence. A new phenomenon has been something the headteacher describes as 'hibernation', where families stay at home for the majority of the time, often owing to a combination of anxiety and a lack of financial resources. As a result, increasing numbers of children spend weekends and holidays inside their homes, which are often small apartments without gardens. The school works hard to ensure that children have access to as many opportunities as possible at school, including forest school, residentials and theatre trips. This requires extra fundraising, which has become a key part of the school's work, as they seek to find the additional opportunities

and support which children need and which is not available elsewhere. They provide counselling, for example, through two school-based therapists who are funded through BBC Children in Need.

Despite the challenging context, the school has a stable staff body with many long-standing members of teaching and support staff. Additional training and support is crucial, to ensure staff are able to manage well in an environment which places additional demands on them beyond the teaching of children in classrooms. This includes working groups and discussion groups, as well as individual coaching for members of the senior leadership team, and supervision relating to safeguarding and SEN for the Assistant Headteacher who is also the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

The school has sourced additional academic support for children through Action Tutoring, which is part-funded through the government's National Tutoring Programme (the school fund-raises for the rest of the cost). This involves additional tutoring for children in Year 5 and Year 6, with sessions running between 8am and 9.30am on Wednesday mornings. The tutoring is targeted at children who are close to expected levels of achievement but need extra support to consolidate their knowledge. It has made a significant difference to children in terms of both academic skills and confidence, with increasing numbers well-prepared for end of year assessments and SATs tests despite the challenges of the pandemic.

The school has worked closely with Action Tutoring to ensure that this tutoring provision works well for the school's particular context. This includes tailoring the timing and structure of sessions to meet children's needs. Although the tutoring takes place online, Action Tutoring provide a programme coordinator who attends in person every week to set up the sessions and coordinate the process. This ensures there is good communication with the school, that technical issues can quickly be resolved and that there is someone to support children if they need it during the online sessions. Action Tutoring also provides training to tutors and programme coordinators, which helps ensure they understand the context and are well-prepared for working with the children at the school.

Impact

The headteacher describes the tutoring as extremely effective and says that they have never had a bad tutor. It has helped to ensure that a higher proportion of children are on track to meet expected standards at the end of the 2021-22 academic year than previously predicted. The challenge is to find the additional funding needed to top up the subsidised element of the provision and also to increase provision so that it can reach even more children.

CASE STUDY:
Mulberry Stepney Green School, London Borough of Tower Hamlets

Context

Mulberry Stepney Green Maths and Computing College is an 11-18 secondary school in Tower Hamlets, east London. It is a successful school with a positive reputation in the local community. The school is located in an area with significant levels of socio-economic deprivation and a diverse population, including a large community of residents with Bangladeshi heritage.

Stepney Green was previously a boys' school; it became coeducational in September 2020. In 2021, the school moved from a previous multi-academy trust to join Mulberry Schools Trust, which includes several other nearby schools in Tower Hamlets.

Key strategies

Headteacher Paramjit Bhutta explains that, following the return to school after the Covid-19 pandemic, the school was particularly concerned about the amount of learning time which pupils had lost as a result of the disruption they encountered during this time. Despite the school's best efforts in relation to remote learning, not all pupils were able to maintain academic progress. This was exacerbated by an initial decline in attendance owing to a number of factors including increased anxiety and fear from parents.

In addition, pupils' language skills, social skills and ability to interact positively within peer groups were negatively affected by the isolation many of them had experienced during the pandemic. All of this had an adverse impact on pupils' awareness of their future goals and aspirations. The school was concerned that, without intervention, this could affect both achievement at school and the ability of pupils to realise their ambitions.

To address these issues, the school put into place an intensive programme of support. A key focus was a large-scale in-school intervention programme aimed at addressing lost learning time by creating additional learning for all pupils within an extended school day. This has been achieved through an innovative approach to directed time, involving all members of teaching staff delivering one extra hour of instruction every week between 3.45 and 4.45pm for all pupils in Year 7-10. This initially involved targeted groups of pupils but has now been extended to include the whole year group, after feedback from teachers that they wanted to ensure that everyone had access to the extra teaching provided during this time.

This extra teaching time, which is built in to existing directed time for teachers, stops immediately before exams and assessments, to give pupils and teachers time to focus on revision and exam preparation.

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In this way, the programme is different to the type of intervention, such as Saturday and holiday school, which also exist at the school and have continued for exam groups post-pandemic. The whole-school intervention programme takes a longer-term approach focused on addressing gaps in learning, creating opportunities for retrieval practice and the consolidation of core knowledge.

Deputy headteacher Zumon Chowdhury explains that the programme was initially introduced to respond to a sense of urgency post-pandemic from subject leaders who identified how much things had changed and how far behind pupils were. The programme was designed by Heads of Faculty, rather than being imposed by the senior leadership team, and its content and structure reflects both the commitment of school staff and their expert knowledge about how best to support pupil progress. Sessions are usually taught by a pupil's own class teacher, but may sometimes be done by another subject specialist within the department. This works because the school has a culture of collective responsibility, with all staff perceiving themselves as jointly responsible for the learning and progress of all pupils.

Some of the measures which the school introduced during the pandemic have helped with the smooth implementation of this new initiative. For example, they have retained the use of separate entrances and exits for pupils in different year groups that were introduced when pupils were working in 'bubbles'. This helps to manage the flow of pupils at the end of the school day, when some are staying for intervention and others are leaving to go home. The programme has also been informed by pupil voice; sessions initially started immediately after the end of the school day at 3.30pm and this was amended to 3.45 after feedback from pupils that they would prefer a 15 minute break in which they can eat, have a break and go to pray (particularly important in a school with a large number of observant Muslim pupils).

The academic intervention programme has proven so popular and successful that the school is planning to make it into a long term strategy. It runs alongside a range of optional 'fun' after school clubs for pupils and a new whole-school enrichment programme which involves all pupils taking part in at least two trips and visits during the year. This programme, which involves a wide range of activities including visits to cultural and artistic organisations, has been introduced in response to feedback from a pupil survey in 2023. It responds to the school's desire to support pupils' social skills and increase their confidence, as well as boosting knowledge about potential future careers.

The enrichment programme also aims to combat one of the ongoing after-effects of the pandemic which the school has noticed, in terms of increased incidence of social anxiety amongst pupils and their families. Staff have noticed a decreased tendency of families to leave the house and travel around the city during weekends and holidays. It also supports good attendance to school, by providing opportunities for pupils to take part in interesting, stimulating activities to which they would not otherwise have access. By exposing pupils to the rich cultural resources

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that are on offer within London, the programme supports pupils with their confidence, supports the development of their career aspirations and helps to develop their social skills. The enrichment programme is different for each year group, so that by the end of Year 11 all pupils have a wide range of different types of experiences.

As well as the academic and enrichment programme, the school has introduced extended opening hours within the school library, which is now open from 7.30am to 5.30pm. The main aim is to support parents returning to work after the pandemic, and to ensure that there is a safe and supportive space for pupils to access within the school building before and after the end of formal learning. In recognition of the high levels of poverty which exist within the local area, fruit and cereal bars are provided for free to pupils accessing this provision. They have access to computers, where they can complete or print off their homework, or, if they choose, play games with each other. Now, more than ever, it is crucial for the school to provide a warm, welcoming and safe place to which all pupils have access when they need it.

Impact

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, attendance at the school was above national average at 96%+ every year. Following the pandemic, it initially fell 93% but has now risen to 95.5% again following the introduction of a wide range of strategies including the academic and enrichment intervention programmes. Although this is above the national average, which has fallen significantly post-pandemic, the school is continuing to drive for further improvement.

The school has a track record of success in relation to progress and achievement, particularly in relation to boys' education. Outcomes for pupils continue to reflect this.

SECTION 2
IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Research in this area to date reveals that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Many school leaders and teachers place mental health and wellbeing support above academic learning as a strategic priority to grapple with, as they seek to address the after-effects of Covid-19.

One of the most significant pieces of ongoing research into the impact of the pandemic is the Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities Study (COSMO), which has revealed a particularly negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils aged between 16-17 years[6]. Approximately 44% of participants reported an increase in psychological distress including anxiety about the future, sleep problems and panic attacks. Higher increases were reported amongst those pupils who contracted Covid or had experienced long Covid, shielding or food poverty. Referrals to mental health services for young people increased significantly between 2019 and 2021. Over half of the cohort reported that they were less motivated to study as a result of the pandemic, with particularly negative effects amongst pupils who identified as female or non-binary. Pupils with graduate parents, although showing higher overall wellbeing, were more likely to report anxiety about their future plans and prospects.

These initial findings emphasize the importance of having sustainable, well-funded mental health and well-being support in schools. Effective strategies include embedded whole-school mental health and well-being approaches, the creation of cultures within schools where pupil and staff wellbeing is protected, and the importance of ring-fencing funding for mental health provision. The COSMO research also suggests that mental health and well-being support should be a key element of education recovery.

Renewed focus on inclusion and reducing exclusions

Following the pandemic, there has been increased awareness about the need for schools to broaden their understanding of the specific needs of their pupils, as the pandemic has affected groups of pupils in different ways. One key area of focus is how to combat social exclusion, and to ensure that schools are safe, inclusive and welcoming places for all children and young people.

The issue of school exclusion had been increasingly a key topic of debate before the pandemic, particularly in regard to rates of exclusion and their correlation with race, class, gender and Special Educational Needs. Alongside increasing exclusion rates in recent years, awareness has increased about the long-term negative impact of school exclusion on the lives of

individuals and groups of pupils. The issue of race is particularly important in London schools with black and black Caribbean boys experiencing disproportionately high rates of school exclusion[7].

Children who experience school exclusion often face reduced educational outcomes and quality of life as adults, therefore making school exclusion a serious social problem. Approximately 35 pupils are permanently excluded from mainstream education every day, which can lead to reduced educational outcomes, risk of unemployment and an increased likelihood of ending up in prison[8]. Children as young as five have been excluded from mainstream education and there is evidence that most excluded children have some form of Special Educational Needs[9].

Following the pandemic, research shows that girls are more likely to be experiencing informal exclusions such as early exits and school changes[10]. In addition, while exclusions overall showed a slight decrease, permanent exclusions for girls rose by 20% in the year following the pandemic[11]. It is difficult to pinpoint why this has come about but research shows that girls' mental health and wellbeing has been affected the most negatively[12], which could therefore be a contributing factor that is connected with the rise in exclusions.

A number of strategies have been suggested to combat the impact of school exclusion. One of the most comprehensive studies in England conducted by the Institute for Public Policy Research[13] found that excluded pupils are usually drawn from amongst the most vulnerable groups within society. For example, excluded pupils are twice as likely to be a looked after child, four times more likely to be living in poverty, seven times more likely to have Special Educational Needs and up to ten times more likely to suffer from a mental health condition[14]. The report emphasizes the extent to which school exclusion can lead to social exclusion for those affected. It led to the start of 'The Difference' an organisation which campaigns for inclusion across the education system and provides training programmes for school leaders which give them a better understanding of alternative provision.

An Economic and Social Research Council commissioned report, looking specifically at exclusion risks following the pandemic, urges the education sector to re-evaluate how it assesses and identifies pupil needs, mentioning the notion of invisible needs as well as understanding pupil needs from both clinical and social perspectives. It urges schools to become more 'proactive' instead of 'reactive' in supporting pupils who have complex needs and vulnerabilities, suggesting social and emotional development training for classroom teachers to ensure educational experiences are inclusive, sensitive and cognisant of the needs of pupils at greater risk of absenteeism or exclusion[15].

Increased needs of the most vulnerable

There is an emerging body of research to suggest that the pandemic has affected different groups of pupils to differing degrees, as well as exposing and perpetuating pre-existing inequalities and disparities. Jones (2020) highlights the negative impact the pandemic has had on disadvantaged children and schools. Crane and colleagues (2021) argue that special schools, in particular autism special schools, were treated as an 'afterthought' in government guidance when they should have been a priority given the increased challenges and obstacles they faced.

A study evaluating how parents perceived the impact of lockdown and school closure on children who attended special schools found that the vast majority of parents reported negative impacts such as increased risk of depression, anxiety, sleep difficulty, social isolation and loneliness[16]. Parents also felt that their children struggled both academically and emotionally during this period, affecting their learning and emotional wellbeing.

As well as being affected academically and emotionally, some pupils have been negatively affected regarding their aspirations and future planning, with access gaps widening for some groups of pupils. Regarding university applications, 83% of pupils who had at least one parent with a degree were likely to apply to university compared to 62% of pupils who did not[17]. Differences were also observed when looking at future plans based on qualification type and parental education. Pupils with at least one graduate parent were less likely to choose vocational qualifications, which typically involve pathways to apprenticeships, training and employment, rather than continued full-time study such as a university education.

To compound this, it was also found that 44% of pupils attending state comprehensive schools were studying for vocational qualifications compared to 22% of pupils in independent schools and only 11% of pupils attending state grammar schools. Furthermore, 54% of pupils attending schools in the most deprived quintile were studying vocational qualifications. In conclusion, it was found that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to plan to apply to university and had less confidence that they would secure a university place if they did.

Attendance

Attendance has become a huge concern following the pandemic, particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils. One of the key factors which seems to have exacerbated the extent of learning loss is pupil absence when schools reopened[18]. Research looking at absenteeism for free school meal pupils found that around 28% of primary pupils and 40% of secondary pupils eligible for free school meals were persistently absent during the 2021/22 autumn term. The latest statistics show that for the 2022/23 academic year, attendance rates have increased but are still lower than those before the pandemic[19].

Although attendance has been a long-standing issue, evidence of effective strategies to improve attendance is limited, especially for a post-pandemic era. The reasons behind absenteeism post-pandemic are many. Some research suggests it could be due to the anxiety and mental health challenges pupils are facing as well as reduced confidence and self-esteem, and families and parents questioning the whole premise and value of school-based education. Other research suggests that illness, caring duties and reduced economic wealth are also contributory factors in relation to the decline in young people's school attendance.

Previous research suggests that targeted support which takes account of individual contexts is more likely to be effective than blanket policies and interventions[20]. Meanwhile, research by the Education Endowment Foundation shows that sending personalised letters and text messages to parents of pupils who are persistently absent could help improve attendance[21]. It is clear that pupil attendance and persistent absenteeism are key areas of education policy that require greater focus and further research to create solutions to the challenges they pose at a community, family, school and individual level.

Wider social impact

It is important to recognise the wider social impact of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of citizens. Research looking at the long-term societal impact of the pandemic emphasizes how Covid-19 was not a 'socially neutral disease'[22] citing evidence that the pandemic has had a greater negative impact on people who were already experiencing disadvantage. Since the impact of the pandemic has been unequal, proportionate support is needed to help vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to recover and, as a result, reduce inequality in wider society.

Young people who were already suffering from mental health problems were further negatively impacted by the pandemic. The Health Foundation found that excess deaths under the age of 65 in England were the second highest in Europe[23] and that countries where populations suffered from conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular and chronic respiratory diseases, such as England, had higher mortality rates. Meanwhile, mortality rates were more than twice as high for people living in the most disadvantaged ten per cent of local areas in England compared to the most advantaged, and almost four times as high for people younger than 65. This could be attributed to the fact that low-income workers had fewer opportunities to shield, isolate or work from home, were more likely to be key workers and had poorer rates of sick pay and furlough, forcing them to expose themselves more to infection and transmission[24].

Considering all of these findings, it is clear that pupils and their families are facing complex challenges which can only be tackled through coordinated, strategic responses aimed at supporting affected people to recover, in order to reduce the long-term negative effects and the further widening of inequality. The case studies which follow give two examples of the ways in which schools are responding to this.

CASE STUDY:
Surrey Square Primary School, London Borough of Southwark

Context

Surrey Square School is located in south east London, in the London Borough of Southwark. It is a two-form entry primary school which serves 440 children aged 3-11 and also has nursery provision for 2 year olds. The school serves a community with significantly higher than average levels of socio-economic disadvantage and more than half of pupils are eligible for free school meals.

Surrey Square is part of the Big Education multi-academy trust, which it was part of establishing in September 2018. The school is led by co-headteachers Nicola Noble and Matt Morden. It is a highly successful school which has a reputation for academic excellence as well as taking an active role in supporting children, families and the local community.

Key strategies

Surrey Square's response to the Covid-19 pandemic reflects its deeply embedded vision, ethos and values. The school has a long-standing focus on the importance of well-being, encoded in the phrase 'I'm ok, we're ok'. At the heart of the school's work is the belief that children cannot access learning if they are not safe and well, and that these things therefore need to be a key priority for staff. This includes a recognition of the profound impact of trauma and the need for the school to take a trauma-informed approach.

Co-headteacher Nicola Noble explains that, when the school was forced to close at the start of the pandemic, the first priority was to ensure that staff and children were supported to understand what was happening. They created a script that was shared with children to help them understand what was happening, including features such as a 'safety hand', where they drew around their hands and wrote down the names of people they could go to for help. While the school was closed, they not only ran online lessons but also created the opportunity for children to talk with each other, opening up online spaces that were specifically designed for this purpose, focused not on learning but on social interaction.

After the first lockdown, when children and staff were preparing to return to school, there was an emphasis in political and media discourse on 'recovery'. It was clear to the co-headteachers that they needed to develop a deep understanding of what this meant in their particular context, to enable the school community to process and start to recover from the communal trauma they had experienced.

Surrey Square has worked closely for a number of years with Place2Be, a children's mental health charity which works with schools across the UK to provide counselling and mental health support. They helped develop the materials that were shared with children at the start of the lockdown period and had advised and supported the senior team throughout. This was therefore the obvious place for the school to turn for advice about

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how to approach recovery, given their expertise in this area. Place2Be identified four key characteristics which, taken together, characterise effective recovery: self-efficacy, hope, gratitude and connectedness.

The school's approach to recovering after the pandemic has therefore focused on developing these characteristics. This started with the return to school for staff and included working with a clinical psychologist to take staff through a session on trauma informed practice. She led staff through the process of articulating what had happened, sharing what everyone was feeling and giving them an opportunity to describe what they had experienced. Key to the success of this session was an emphasis on the extent to which everyone's experience was different but equally valid, and that it was crucial to be kind both to themselves and to each other.

Their work during this time also focused on rebuilding connections between staff. They spent time together as a staff team, with a focus on re-connecting as human beings, for example by taking part in low stakes team-building activities. They were already working with a framework within the school that identified five ways of wellbeing, but chose to make this more explicit and intentional. They gave everyone a goody bag with things in to help with their return to school, both practically and metaphorically. They also provided staff with access to the school counsellor and to non-managerial supervision.

When it came to the children, the school wanted to ensure they validated everyone's experiences and that each child had an opportunity to express and discuss what had happened to them. They created 'Team SSQ' t-shirts for staff and children to wear when they returned, as a way of building team spirit. Immediately following the return from lockdown, they took the whole school through the process of narrative therapy. This included everyone from nursery through to the co-headteachers. Everyone wrote stories and drew pictures about what they had experienced during the pandemic, identifying what they loved, what they hated, what was difficult and what was easier. These were published across the trust. The aim was to help the children to process what had happened, and to give them the opportunity to be heard and to gain a better understanding of other people's experiences.

During this period, to help children re-adjust, the school adapted the curriculum, making lessons shorter and creating a stronger emphasis on basic skills. They increased break-times and broke up the day into shorter segments. After reviewing their approach to 'golden time', they decided to make this a universal entitlement, reflecting the fact that 'joy' is one of the school's core values. Rather than being a reward, this is now seen as something which all children must have and which cannot be taken away.

To help the school community with its ongoing recovery from the pandemic, they also wanted to retain an element of narrative therapy. The co-headteachers felt it was crucial to create the opportunity for everyone to express their experiences on an ongoing basis, not only immediately but over a period of time. As a result, they worked with Place2Be and CAMHS to create reflective journals which are now a compulsory and

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non-negotiable part of the curriculum. All children complete their journals first thing on a Monday morning, writing about what has happened at the weekend and what they are looking forward to during the week. They are also, in this Monday morning session, taught a wellbeing strategy which they are encouraged to put into practice to see if it is helpful for them. On a Friday afternoon, they return to the journal to reflect on the week they have had and whether or not they found the wellbeing strategy useful.

To evaluate this work, the school has worked with ImpactEd to undertake an evaluation of wellbeing and anxiety levels across the school. They wanted to find out what was happening for all children, as well as being able to identify any children who were potentially masking their trauma but suffering below the surface. They used a survey which ImpactEd had already developed, which was then tailored to be appropriate for the school. This data is now used as part of the school's provision mapping, both for individual children and for larger groups.

Surrey Square continues to work on creating multiple opportunities for connection, conversation, self- expression and the development of positive relationships. To ensure they are meeting children's needs, they are committed to continuously gathering detailed, comprehensive information about children, and to creating multiple opportunities for finding out what is happening with them. They are also continuing to reflect and adapt their practice in light of what is happening in the school and the data they are collecting about the impact of their work.

Impact

The school has emerged from the pandemic as a stronger organisation, because of the extent to which they were able to support children and staff during this time. They have not seen a dip in pupil outcomes. All of the key indicators relating to outcomes for children suggest that they are continuing to flourish and thrive. Feedback from children, families and staff suggests that the school is succeeding in its desire to support positive recovery from the pandemic.

The next step has been for the school to establish the Old Kent Road Family Zone, a community-based initiative which aims to further enhance the school's positive impact on families and the local community. The goal is to celebrate and strengthen the community, ensuring it is supported to recover from the ongoing effects of the pandemic and that it is better prepared for future crises. This also supports children's outcomes, since they live within families, who live within the community.

The Family Zone includes a range of activities co-created by the community including a monthly food and clothing exchange. With five years of funding recently secured, it will soon be opening a Community Restaurant. With significant levels of poverty, social exclusion and destitution in the local area, the project aims to make positive change one person at a time, creating a sense of efficacy and focusing on building connection, community and relationship.

CASE STUDY:
Beacon High, London Borough of Islington

Context

Beacon High in Islington, north London, is a mixed 11-16 comprehensive school in the Tufnell Park area. It was previously a boys' school and was known first as Holloway Boys School and then as Holloway School, before becoming Beacon High in June 2019.

The school is located in a part of London with significant socio-economic division. While some communities in the local area are experiencing high rates of child poverty, there are also pockets of extreme wealth. The average house price in the local area is over £700,000, but most pupils at Beacon High live within local social housing estates; 65% are eligible for free school meals and the majority of families live in relative poverty.

The largest ethnic group at the school is white British and there are also growing numbers of other groups including Somali, Bangladeshi, black African and black Caribbean. It has recently seen an increase in the number of pupils joining the school who are new arrivals to the country, including a number of refugees and asylum seekers.

The school has experienced some challenges in previous years, with several changes in leadership and 'requires improvement' judgements from Ofsted in 2017 and 2019. The current headteacher, Alan Streeter, was initially appointed on an interim basis in 2018 after the school joined the local 'Islington Futures' federation. They have now secured more stable foundations, with a 'good' judgement in 2022 following the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-22.

Key strategies

To rapidly improve educational standards and create a safe learning environment, the new headteacher has led the establishment of an approach which combines high expectations for pupils, in terms of behaviour and academic learning, alongside the provision of comprehensive support to help pupils deal with the many challenges they face outside of school.

The school's approach during this time has built on previous efforts in the local area to train teachers and school leaders in the principles of trauma-informed practice. This work, led by ITIPS (Islington Trauma Informed Practice), aims to provide school staff with an awareness of the ways in which children and young people are affected by the experience of trauma. It also skills up staff with the tools and structures that schools can use to help young people to form positive relationships and develop social and emotional regulation.

Less than a year after the school changed its name to Beacon High, as part of its improvement journey, it was forced to close at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Alan Streeter, the headteacher, believes that this critical incident accelerated the process of reinventing the school. During the pandemic, when most pupils weren't in school full time for the best part of

two years, there was an opportunity to re-set expectations and to move things forward in a way that created an opportunity for a new vision about the school to be securely established.

Before the pandemic, a core team of staff with a shared vision about the type of provision that was needed for the school community had already been established. It was clear, at this time, that there was a need for a particular type of approach which could meet the needs of pupils and their families more effectively than the school had previously been able to do. Key to establishing this was an awareness of the school's role within the local educational eco-system, as well as deep knowledge of the particular needs of its pupils and the communities in which they live..

One key factor in determining the school's new direction was an awareness of the need to improve relationships with parents and families. For a number of years, Beacon High had not been the school of choice for many families and the school therefore had to work hard to establish positive relationships with them. This influenced the decision to take an approach which started with a recognition of pupils' needs and shaping the school's provision around them, rather than the other way round.

The curriculum and extra-curricular provision which is in place at the school has been tailored to meet the particular needs of the pupils at this time, with a significant focus on inclusion and pastoral care. There is a rich offer which prioritises enrichment and additional support alongside high quality academic learning.
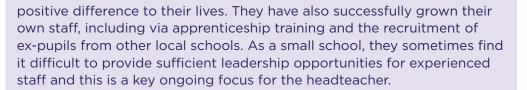
Since the start of the pandemic, an increased number of pupils have found it difficult to maintain focus in classrooms during the school day. There has been a particular increase in the number of girls who exhibit social, emotional and communication needs. To meet this need, the school has developed an internal provision known as 'Refocus', where a dedicated member of staff supervises a quiet working environment for a small number of individual pupils who are temporarily unable to manage in a mainstream classroom. At the current time, the largest group utilising this provision are Year 7 girls. The school believes this is a result of their experience during the pandemic, which disrupted their primary education during years 4, 5 and 6, an important phase in the development of social skills.

The school has a wellbeing centre and a full time wellbeing coordinator. Within this space, pupils have access to sessions run by a range of external organisations including Solace Women's Aid, Targeted Youth Support, Company Three, Music Therapy, Caspiri Project and Abianda, amongst others, to work with pupils. The school has been creative in sourcing financial support for the resources needed for this provision. They successfully bid to the Evening Standard for funding for a 'Pathways' coordinator, who provides mentoring, advice and careers guidance for pupils. They have also brought in the 'Becoming a Man' project, originally started in Chicago, which focuses on supporting young black men to gain a positive sense of identity and agency.

The school has a full-time EAL coordinator and a space dedicated to EAL provision. Last year, they took in 60 Afghan refugees, many of whom did not speak any English. Every week, new pupils arrive at the school, often after recently arriving in the country and with uncertain immigration status. Senior staff at Beacon High work closely with the local authority and other agencies, who will contact them when children arrive from overseas and urgently need a school place. In response to this significant need, they have developed specialist provision for pupils who need early stage induction into learning English, as well as those with previous experience of English who can more quickly transition into mainstream school life.

To further enhance opportunities for non-traditional learning, the school has introduced a room known as 'The Greenhouse', where pupils are growing plants as well as nurturing guinea pigs, chickens, goldfish and a rooftop garden. Within this space, which is open to all, a group of SEND pupils are undertaking a level 1 horticulture qualification, to prepare them for post 16 provision.

The headteacher emphasizes the importance, when developing this kind of provision, of ensuring that the right staff are in place. From application stage onwards, potential applicants are clearly informed about the school's unique vision, ethos and approach, to ensure that those coming in to work with pupils will be able to make a positive contribution to their learning and development in this context. They have successfully recruited a number of staff who have grown up in the local area, and have found particular success in working with staff who are passionate about the importance of supporting local young people and making a

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positive difference to their lives. They have also successfully grown their own staff, including via apprenticeship training and the recruitment of ex-pupils from other local schools. As a small school, they sometimes find it difficult to provide sufficient leadership opportunities for experienced staff and this is a key ongoing focus for the headteacher.

Impact

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for the type of provision which Beacon High is offering to its pupils has become more and more evident. The strong emphasis which the school places on the need to support those with experience of trauma has become more tangible following the start of the pandemic, when arguably all pupils experienced some form of trauma. The increased socio-emotional and psychological needs of pupils within the local area has led to extremely high demand for the type of highly inclusive provision which the school is now offering.

The headteacher recalls that he was recently asked by an external visitor whether they had taken inclusion 'too far'. While he does not agree that this is the case, it has led the school to reflect on the type of provision they are offering. They know that there are some pupils currently attending the school who would not be able to succeed in a more typical mainstream school environment. While they are able to meet the needs of many of these pupils, they are also conscious of the potential benefit of bringing in the resources and specialist provision that these young people need. As a result, they are now hoping to work with the local authority to establish an Additionally Resourced Provision within the school focused on vulnerable girls. This will complement the school's existing provision and supplement existing local alternative provision, which is currently heavily over-subscribed.

SECTION 3
IMPACT ON COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's language development, especially in the early years, has been the subject of significant concern. The enforced closure of early years' settings during periods of lockdown had an impact on children's exposure to language-rich environments. Reduced opportunities for social interaction, peer to peer communication and face to face interactions with educators all had an impact on young children's language development.

Early years – increased needs of youngest children

There is a considerable amount of research that highlights the importance of early years provision for children's social, emotional and educational learning and success[25]. During the pandemic, many schools and nurseries providing for the youngest pupils focused on building community leadership and family involvement, to increase parents' confidence about being able to support children at home. This resonates with pre-existing research about enhancing early years provision.

Looking specifically at the impact of the pandemic on reception children, research shows lower levels of outcomes for EAL, SEND and female students in literacy and maths. Only 54% of children born in the summer term achieved 'expected' progress in literacy in the 2021/22 academic year[26]. As a result, school leaders began to work on methods of additional support including more teacher-led learning and continued online provision as schools reopened.

One of the key concerns expressed by parents was the negative impact on their children of the lack of social interaction and socialisation during periods of lockdown[27]. As we assess the effectiveness of early years provision in a post-pandemic era, it is increasingly clear that the social and emotional development of young pupils is just as important as their academic and educational success.

Speech, language and communication

Communication, language development and literacy skills are becoming a prominent focus when evaluating specific learning losses and gaps. Latest research looking at the impact of COVID-19 on reception children found that children for whom English is a second language were the most negatively affected[28]. The DfE reported that there was 'notable catch-up' for primary aged pupils in reading which resulted in an average learning loss of approximately 0.9 months by the end of the 2020/21 academic year[29].

Speech, language and communication development is considered to be a crucial area of learning and development in the early years that can benefit children in substantial ways as they progress through schooling. Some research suggests that young children engaged in effective language development approaches can make an additional seven months' progress[30]. In the USA, there is a strong consensus that accelerated learning for English learners is needed to improve the accuracy and proficiency of English listening, speaking, reading and writing skills[31]. The research suggests that it is beneficial for students to have increased access to tutors and resources that would help improve their English skills as a result of the lack of social interaction during lockdown periods.

It is clear from the research that a focus on language development is not only paramount for the youngest pupils but also for older pupils. Technology is highlighted as having its uses in scaffolding language learning, creating productive learning environments and boosting student engagement. In terms of teaching, learning and assessment, setting challenging tasks in a way that helps address and identify the language needs of students is considered crucial.

The Education Endowment Foundation (2020) suggest that improving parental involvement through developing better communication channels between teachers and parents could promote the development and maintenance of habitual reading practice outside of school. They also suggest that for effective support, schools should be careful in identifying language needs of pupils and differentiating support for particular needs. Additionally, exposing pupils to a range of language learning methods and ensuring teachers are skilfully trained in applying them in everyday classroom teaching is likely to support language development.

The two case studies which follow give examples of how two schools have attempted to increase parental engagement and support language development in their particular contexts.

CASE STUDY:
Linden Lodge School, London Borough of Wandsworth

Context

Linden Lodge School is a specialist day and residential school for pupils aged 2-19 years old. It is part of the Southfields Academy Trust, along with Southfields Academy. Pupils at Linden Lodge come from a wide catchment area from across London and the south east of England. Most pupils are brought to school each day by specialist transport, with a small number living at the school during term time as part of its boarding provision.

Pupils at Linden Lodge have a range of physical disabilities and special educational needs, including visual impairment, hearing impairment, epilepsy and cerebral palsy. Just under half of pupils are eligible for free school meals and all pupils have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). To meet the varied and complex needs of its pupils, the school's provision includes pre-formal and sensory-based learning, as well as semi-formal and formal learning pathways and specialist provision for deaf blind pupils.

Strategies

Linden Lodge is led by two co-headteachers, each of whom take responsibility for a different element of the school's work. Sarah Norris, who has worked at the school for many years, oversees the school's nursing, therapy and residential provision and also has the role of Designated Safeguarding Lead. Monika Gaweda, the second co-head, oversees the school's educational provision.

The school's provision is structured around the needs of its pupils, with different types of provision reflecting pupils' additional needs and their stages of development. A pre-formal pathway is in place for pupils who need sensory-based learning, while the semi-formal pathway is for pupils who are able to access some formal learning. The Minerva Centre is designed for children who have been in mainstream schools and subsequently moved into specialist provision. These pupils access an adapted and modified version of the national curriculum in addition to specialist provision. The Alba Centre, meanwhile, provides specialist provision for deaf blind pupils.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a challenging time for Linden Lodge, owing to the highly vulnerable and medically fragile pupil population. Despite this, the school was able to navigate this time in a way that has enabled it to build on previous strengths and establish strong foundations for the future. In particular, the inter-disciplinary model which had been developed over a number of years has been taken to another level following the pandemic.

One distinctive feature of the school is the strength of relationships with other agencies, including social care and the NHS. During the pandemic, they had to find a way of working effectively on a remote basis with more than 32 different local authorities in order to meet the needs of their extremely vulnerable pupils. Meetings became more regular as the need to work as a unified team, with everyone understanding what they needed to do to keep children safe, became more urgent than ever. Home visits had to be very carefully risk assessed, leading staff to be even more well-planned and structured and to the multi-disciplinary team having to communicate even more effectively with each other.

The school has a team of 24 full-time therapists on site who are integrated into the school's workforce, providing support for pupils' needs when they arise. One challenge during the lockdown was to continue to provide pupils with therapeutic provision despite therapists initially not being able to see pupils in person. The school prioritised tele-therapy training for staff so that they could move rapidly to online provision, and worked closely with families to help them support pupils' therapy. This built on good established relationships with parents and enabled them to be further strengthened. A key innovation was the creation by therapists of online videos and social stories, which have now become a resource that the school can draw on to support pupils who are not able to attend school in person.

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Even before the pandemic, the school was working with some pupils who were not able to physically attend every day. This includes children who are undergoing, or recovering from, complex medical procedures. Therapists visit these pupils in person on a regular basis, and the pandemic has opened up other opportunities to include them within the school community, for example by attending some lessons and joining assemblies remotely. There are now two pupils on the school roll who are not expected to ever be physically present within the school building, but who can nonetheless take part in many aspects of school life through accessing online provision.

The increased use of technology has created more opportunities for parents to engage with the school. During the pandemic, EHCP reviews initially had to be moved online and the school quickly realised that this was a helpful move, because it created additional opportunities for parents and professionals to access meetings. This is particularly important in a school serving such a wide geographical area and working with a wide range of professionals from health, social care and other services. As a result, the majority of annual reviews continue to be held remotely, which has strengthened relationships by ensuring everyone involved is able to attend. A further change was the creation of personalised learning plans setting out exactly what should be involved with each pupil's home learning. Sharing these plans with parents has increased understanding about the personalised nature of the school's provision and increased the effectiveness of home-school communication.

In 2018, the school developed a parent group, 'Community at Linden Lodge' (C@LL). Previously, it had been difficult to establish a parent association, mainly because most families live some distance away, pupils travel by taxi and there are reduced opportunities for parents to interact with each other. The setting up of C@LL aimed to build community and reduce isolation amongst families, and to create a sense of peer support, which became even more crucial during the pandemic. The organisation brings parents together to help them form relationships with others who are experiencing similar things and can give relevant advice and support. During the pandemic, the school ran online sessions about key topics relating to safeguarding, adolescence and mental health. This has been followed by in-person events such as nature walks, hair-cuts and family portraits. In 2021, they won national PTA of the year award for this work and have continued to build on that success with a siblings group that brings together the brothers and sisters of pupils at the school who may otherwise feel overlooked and isolated.

The school has a dedicated mental health lead whose work focuses on pupils, families and staff and who has recently completed senior mental health lead training with the Anna Freud Centre. Part of her role, which sits within the creative therapies and arts team, is to continually assess pupils and make recommendations about the additional therapies which they might need. Pupils have well-being passports that travel around with them, helping staff to understand what makes that pupil feel safe, settled and ready for learning. Collaboration with the local mental health trailblazer

project has enabled the school to make a link with a clinician who is now providing wellbeing sessions for staff. Additionally, a group of staff have received mental health first aid training through Place 2 Be and the school has recently achieved a Wellbeing Award in recognition of this work.

Since not all pupils at Linden Lodge are able to express themselves verbally, it is particularly important to create opportunities for learning and self-expression that are not reliant on language. This includes a range of creative therapies and extends into the school's post-16 and careers education programme. When preparing for the transition to adult life, the school's goal is to support increasing independence and to be led by pupils' own interests. As part of this provision, pupils work at a café in the school grounds which is fully led and managed by pupils, who are all involved regardless of their pathway. Some pupils do external work experience and others work with external agencies who come into the school to run sessions, for example the 'Blind in Business' group. Staff work closely with pupils, families and employers to scaffold the transition, for example by visiting day centres to ensure they are ready to receive pupils after they leave Linden Lodge. They also liaise closely with local authorities to support pupils' applications for residential college provision where this is felt to be appropriate.

Impact

In its last Ofsted inspection, in January 2022, Linden Lodge was judged to be 'good', in keeping with the judgement made of its predecessor school before Linden Lodge converted to academy status in 2018.

The school's own data, as well as the results of external assessments, demonstrate how well pupils are doing compared with the national picture.

CASE STUDY:
Sheringham Nursery School, London Borough of Newham

Context

Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre is a popular and successful school located in the Manor Park area of Newham in east London. The school provides education for children aged 2-5 years old and also provides health and care services through its co-located children's centre.

The school serves a community with significant levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Manor Park has higher than average levels of child poverty and deprivation, as well as significant income inequality, unemployment, overcrowded housing and lack of access to healthcare.

Strategies

Sheringham has a reputation for exceptional early years' education and care and has been graded 'outstanding' at its last two Ofsted inspections. Central to the school's vision is a commitment to inclusion, valuing and celebrating diversity and ensuring that each child feels included, supported, and valued within the school community.

The school emphasizes play-based learning, recognizing the importance of child-initiated exploration and discovery. Through engaging and hands-on activities, children develop their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical skills while also fostering a love for learning. The school prides itself on its well-trained and dedicated staff members. Staff are highly skilled in early years education and have a deep understanding of child development. They create a safe and stimulating environment that supports each child's unique learning journey. The school recognises the value of outdoor learning experiences, providing ample opportunities for children to explore and engage with nature through outdoor play and activities, fostering a connection with the natural world and promoting physical development. Sheringham also fosters strong partnerships with families and the wider community. It actively involves parents through regular communication, workshops, and collaborative activities, promoting a sense of shared responsibility for children's learning and well-being.

The periods of partial closure in 2020-21 were challenging for the nursery school, which stayed open for vulnerable children and those whose parents were key workers. Staff used various measures to stay in touch with families, including digital platforms where resources were made available in a way that facilitated children's continued engagement with school. Staff made videos to engage the youngest children and there was a focus on playing, chatting and reading with children, both within the face to face provision and via remote learning.

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The school recognised the importance of individualised support during the period of remote learning. Staff maintained regular communication with parents and carers, to understand each child's unique needs and provide tailored guidance and appropriate activities.

One of the key issues identified at an early stage of the pandemic was the impact on children's language development. At Sheringham, a considerable amount of work had already been undertaken in this area. In 2017-18, the school developed the 'Manor Park Talks' project, a course of training for early years staff which helps them to identify and support children with early language development. This initially involved eight nursery settings in Newham.

Manor Park Talks focused on training practitioners to improve the quality of their conversations with children through specific conversational responsiveness techniques. The project was so successful that it evolved first into the Newham Communication Project and then into a larger-scale initiative, the Early Years Conversation Project. This project recognises the critical importance of language and communication during the early years. It aims to ensure that staff working with young children are able to engage in high quality interactions, through professional development which trains staff to talk to children and respond to them in a way that supports their language development. By providing a strong foundation in communication skills, the project thereby supports children's overall development and future academic success.

Impact

Sheringham Nursery School's response to the COVID-19 pandemic showcased their commitment to providing quality education and support to children and families during challenging times. The school's focus on individualized support, well-being, communication, and collaboration fostered a sense of resilience and continuity in the face of adversity.

SECTION 4
IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

Re-visiting of vision and ethos

As the pandemic hit, leaders' priorities shifted from providing effective day-to-day education in their schools to responding to the immediate challenges posed by the situation, including the need to reinvent their schools as providers of online rather than face to face education. There were a large number of obstacles and opportunities to be navigated during this time, in order to reduce short and long-term negative impacts[32].

Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) found that the initial challenges posed to school leadership were predominantly logistical. The significant lack of infrastructure capacity, funding and technological resources affected the quality of remote learning which schools were able to provide. The lack of a solid, effective crisis plan for schools to follow during and post-Covid was a significant obstacle for school leaders to contend with. These logistical challenges also included organisational challenges, including the need to promote and maintain a positive school culture, supporting staff and pupils to transition between face to face and remote learning and the need to address widening educational inequalities.

The priorities for teachers and leaders include the need to address food poverty and safeguarding concerns[33], as well as supporting vulnerable families, liaising with health and social services[34] and attempting to accelerate rates of progress while also closing learning gaps[35]. Meanwhile, research suggests that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those attending state comprehensive schools were more likely to report that they had changed their future career plans as a result of the pandemic[36].

Staff recruitment and retention

Applications to teaching training course, which rose at the start of the pandemic in 2020-21, have subsequently declined by a significant margin[37]. Schools are facing issues in recruiting not only teachers but also support staff, with low wages being a deterrent, especially in areas like London which also have high housing costs.

With more teachers leaving the profession than joining it and increased needs in schools, the teacher crisis is becoming increasingly acute. Research suggests that contributory factors include the pressures of teaching in difficult contexts, a perceived lack of early career support, the rigid, inflexible nature of teacher working conditions and confusing, burdensome teacher application processes[38]. A number of strategies have been implemented in recent years to tackle these challenges including the early career framework, the Education Staff Wellbeing Charter and providing alternative routes into teaching through quality training providers, but their impact is not yet reflected in staff recruitment and retention statistics.

London has lower rates of teacher retention compared to other cities in England with greater numbers of vacancies and unqualified teachers[39]. One of the key reasons is the cost of living in London including housing and childcare costs. Research suggests that there needs to be a concerted effort to make teaching in London a more attractive career and life choice. It also suggests that it is crucial for school leaders to find ways to make working conditions more flexible, improve professional development and find ways to maintain levels of motivation and commitment.

Importance of pupil voice

Opportunities for pupils to express themselves, make decisions and engage with their learning and the operations of their schools were significantly reduced during lockdown on an international scale[40]. In the UK, as in many other countries, significant differences were found between state and private schools. Pupils attending private schools were more likely to continue engaging in social and communal projects such as student councils, community action and campaigns. One of the reasons behind this disparity was the access to and quality of technology and digital competency and resources.

Pupils have expressed their concerns in key areas such as personal safety, sustaining quality relationships, levels of self-esteem and confidence and access to opportunities. The research reveals that young people are willing to share their experiences, opinions and perspectives not only in relation to the pandemic but also how they would like to be helped and supported moving forward. This is therefore a key consideration for school leaders when considering how to support pupils following the pandemic.

Increased emphasis on working with partners

Analysis of multi-agency working between children's social care and schools during the pandemic found that many schools played an 'extended role' in supporting vulnerable pupils, families and communities[43]. Unsurprisingly, research suggests that during lockdown periods, the vast majority of communication was conducted online. There were notable benefits including greater availability for teachers to attend meetings, ease of access for shielding families and pupils and the ability for more stakeholders to attend meetings and reviews[44]. On the other hand, however, there were concerns for families who did not have the equipment or resources to access online meetings and support.

As well as delivering food parcels and organising food collection from school for struggling families, schools also provided extended services such as home visits and telephone calls to vulnerable children and families. In some cases, these services and agencies were working directly with schools to reduce referral times and to be able to offer support more quickly and effectively. Although there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that relationships between external agencies and schools improved, Baginsky and Manthorpe (2021) did conclude that systems and procedures were adapted to mitigate the negative impact of school closures and lockdown on services.

One type of situation in which multi-agency collaboration and support was considered problematic was when parents were expected to take on coordinating roles between agencies, or when there were differences of approach in terms of prioritisation of action from stakeholders[45]. It was also found that upon the reopening of schools in September 2020, multi-agency support such as speech and language therapy and physiotherapy did not resume immediately, causing further delays and deficits for vulnerable pupils.

The two case studies which follow give examples of how schools have responded to the leadership challenges posed by the pandemic.

CASE STUDY:
Seven Kings School, London Borough of Redbridge

Context

Seven Kings School in Redbridge, east London, is a popular and high achieving school with a national reputation. The school serves a community with higher than average levels of socio-economic deprivation and a diverse population, including a large community of residents with south Asian heritage. The majority of pupils at the school, 83%, speak another language as well as English, with languages spoken at home including Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu.

Seven Kings was previously an 11-18 comprehensive; since 2015, when its primary campus opened, it has been an all-through school serving more than 2,300 pupils aged 4-18. The first cohort of 120 children to complete their primary education at the school moved into Year 7 in September 2022, following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key strategies

The school's Executive Headteacher, Jane Waters, describes Seven Kings as a sensitive and complex ecosystem. Despite its track record of success in relation to academic achievement, this is not a school where leaders believe their work is done. Jane and her senior leadership team are constantly seeking to further improve and refine provision, evaluating outcomes and making changes in light of emerging evidence about the extent to which the school is able to meet pupils' changing needs.

When pupils returned to school after the pandemic, the leadership team made a deliberate decision to challenge themselves to make further improvements and to move beyond existing practice. They set a target in their school improvement plan: '*To ensure the gaps highlighted and exacerbated by Covid 19 are not tolerated or repeated but the advances we have made become the embedded attitudes, behaviours and practices of all staff in all areas of the school.*' At first, some of the considerations were practical, such as the need to divide up the school into 'bubbles' and to re-organise the school day to facilitate social distancing and limit mixing between different groups, especially in light of the experience of physically disabled and vulnerable pupils within the school community.

The school has a history of being strongly focused on inclusion, which pervades all aspects of its work. Nearly 120 pupils will have an EHCP by the end of the academic year, which represents 6.5% of pupils, and Seven Kings has a specialist resourced provision for 15 pupils with physical disabilities. This was a key driver for the changes that were made following the pandemic, which reinforced the school's awareness of the needs of the most vulnerable. Their starting point, when planning for the return from lockdown, was to ask what would be best for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners within the school community. This helps ensure that provision meets the needs of all pupils – because those who are the most likely to find it difficult to access learning are the first priority.

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One change the school has made is to the deployment of Learning Support Assistants. During the lockdown, they took on a different role which predominantly involved working with small groups of pupils outside of the virtual classroom in break out rooms. This led to increased awareness of the extent to which the positive impact of the work of Learning Support Assistants at the school resides in their knowledge of the young people in their caseload. As a result, the school has now moved to a model wherein LSAs are attached to particular year groups, rather than moving around or specialising in particular subjects. This reflects an emphasis on the importance of positive relationships and the 'soft data' that in-class LSAs can use to motivate and support students' learning. This has also led to attendance quickly jumping back to pre-pandemic levels as the most vulnerable pupils felt confident and safe to return to the classroom.

One of the most significant changes as a result of lessons learnt from the pandemic has been to the timing of the school day, which now includes a series of lessons that are 1.5 hours in length throughout the secondary campus, with a shorter 45 minute lesson at the start of each day. This has built on the school's previous work to re-develop their curriculum, following the opening of their primary school provision and the need to take account of what was happening in the primary phase. The move to longer lessons has helped drive forward the school's ongoing work on curriculum development, as middle leaders and teachers have thought carefully about lesson design, curriculum sequencing and effective pedagogy to fit the 1.5 hour model.

Post-lockdown, it has been particularly beneficial that the longer lessons provide greater opportunities for recall and retrieval practice, a focus on metacognition and self-reflection and the ability to carry out deeper sequences of learning within a single lesson: preparing, discussing, writing, reflecting and editing work within a session. Feedback from pupils and staff suggests that the longer lessons have helped teachers to find time to carefully adjust curriculum and pedagogy to the changing needs of pupils, following the pandemic. It has also created more opportunities for oracy, which the school identified as a priority on the return to face-to-face education, and for practical work, an area that was significantly affected by remote learning. The increased lesson time has allowed pupils to rediscover their voice and to have the necessary time to fully immerse themselves in the practical and artistic curriculum. In subjects such as English, pupils have more time within lessons to complete longer written answers, growing their stamina, discovering their voice as a writer, and practising the kind of writing which they will need to produce in examinations. The school has also introduced a two-week timetable, to ensure that younger pupils do not experience a decrease in curriculum variety.

Professional development time, including staff meetings, were carefully planned to ensure that time was strategically used to hone the planning and adaptations that had to be done. This has gone hand in hand with the school's ongoing efforts to review, revise and improve the curriculum

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content, structure and sequencing. For the school's leadership team, a positive impact has been the extent to which all teachers have had to think carefully about each lesson, collaboratively reflecting upon and redesigning curriculum sequencing and pedagogy so that pupils continue to receive a stimulating and varied educational diet across each school day.

The school has also introduced a strong focus on transition – between different key stages and between different parts of the school. The 'Elevate 9' and 'Elevate 12' programmes prepare pupils at the end of Key Stages 3 and 4 for the next key stage. They run a bridging programme between Year 6 and Year 7, including oracy lessons, to ensure pupils moving up from the primary school are well prepared for the secondary phase. In Year 9, pupils follow a 'Learn To' programme of work including, understanding their memory, study skills and revision techniques, aimed specifically at preparing them for GCSE.

Alongside 'Learn to', pupils learn and are examined on the GCSE short course RE in Y9, to prepare them for the demands of GCSE courses they will follow in Year 10 and Year 11, giving them the opportunity and time to refine their retrieval practice and put into practice the revision strategies explored in their 'Learn To' lessons. An ongoing piece of work is the transition into secondary school, which this year involved 112 pupils from Seven Kings Primary coming together with 70 children from other schools.

To ensure these changes are manageable and embedded, the Executive Headteacher has ensured all school improvement work focuses on the drive to improve classroom practice. Staff training time is dedicated to

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giving teams time to work together to improve curriculum, pedagogy and classroom practice. They have removed from their strategic planning cycle anything extraneous which does not contribute to this.

The leadership capacity to drive forward these improvements comes partly from the school's ability to recruit staff who are passionate about teaching, about their subjects and about continuous improvement of practice. They ensure people are committed to particular ways of working, emphasizing the need for candidates to be passionate about learning, teaching and professional development. There is a coaching culture across the school which starts with an assumption that everyone's point of view is valid and valuable. Middle leaders are empowered to continuously improve curriculum and classroom practice within their areas. They do not take a 'one size fits all' approach but, instead, are open to new ideas and welcoming of the suggestions made by younger colleagues. There is a sense of excitement about the school's ability to open up the world to their pupils, to encourage them to have high expectations for themselves and to scaffold their aspirations in a way that helps lead them into the next phase of learning.

Unusually, the school teaches all subjects except Maths in mixed ability classes up to GCSE level. This means that teachers have classes with some pupils aiming to grade 9 and others at grade 1. The Executive Headteacher believes that this helps raise everyone's expectations. In year 7 pupils have an explicit lesson on oracy so pupils know what is expected of a Seven Kings learner as a curious and active participant in lessons. It opens up rich learning opportunities within classes that otherwise would not be there. Pupils regularly move between different groups, even in Year 11. Since teachers also move between classes, this encourages a sense of collective responsibility amongst the staff.

The school's drive for continuous improvement has been supported by their strong partnerships with other schools. They work closely with a group of 23 schools who were previously part of their teaching school alliance. This partnership, and the school's own sense of moral purpose, helps to drive them forward during these challenging times. They don't do things because they have always been done in a certain way or because something needs to get done. Everything is purposeful, carefully thought through and based on research evidence. As a result, they know that they are doing everything they can to meet the needs of the children and young people they serve in this context at this current time.

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Impact

Feedback from staff and pupil voice suggests that the changes have been positively received, with pupils particularly commenting on the sense of accomplishment they feel after spending 1.5 hours on a particular task, and staff appreciating the flexibility offered by the longer lesson format. The school's attendance remains above national average, despite the challenges of the pandemic, and the more vulnerable pupils within the school continue to attend regularly and to achieve beyond expectations. Every child now has a laptop and connection to the internet; as a result, the online learning environment has become a dynamic space and a forum for discussion and debate, fundamentally changing the notion of 'homework'.

The opening up of physical spaces within the school, as a result of the need to create spaces during the pandemic when year groups were in their bubbles, was a powerful reminder to school staff how precious outdoor space is to its young people. As a result, they have recently completed improvements to the school's outdoor space including an outside gym and a pond with a planting area, as well as an allotment, which are used by pupils before, during and after school. This is a good example of the way in which the school works both within and beyond the classroom to ensure all its pupils have the support they need.

CASE STUDY:
Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School, London Borough of Islington

Context

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School (EGA) is located in Islington, north London. It is a popular and successful 11-16 girls' school with a strong track record of academic achievement and a history of 'outstanding' ratings from Ofsted. EGA is part of a federation, Islington Futures, which also includes two local primary schools and another secondary school, Beacon High (which is also featured as a case study in this report).

Like many London schools, EGA is located in an area with large disparities of wealth and poverty. Nearly half of pupils are eligible for free school meals, despite the average house price in the local area being more than £800,000. Most pupils at the school are of Bangladeshi and African heritage, with more than 50 different ethnic groups and 50 different languages spoken within the school. The school's work is under-pinned by its commitment to 'Learning Without Limits', which encapsulates its commitment to ensuring all pupils are enabled to achieve their full potential regardless of challenges or barriers.

Key strategies

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, the headteacher and her senior team were aware that there had been a significant variation in pupils' experiences during the periods of lockdown in 2020-21. Some pupils responded positively to the remote support they were given and the resources with which they were provided. Others found it much more challenging and seemed to be more adversely affected. This has had an ongoing effect, with larger gaps emerging for those who were further away from key exam years at the start of the pandemic but whose schooling was most significantly disrupted during that time.

One thing the school have become aware of, over the last three years, is the extent to which the infrastructure around families seems to have become more overstretched than ever. They have found that, increasingly, it feels as if school is one of the few places where families feel a sense of trust and where they know that they will always get the help they need. Amongst pupils and their families, there has been an increase in mental health needs and safeguarding issues, and in the number of pupils who are persistently absent from school. There have also been more incidents involving girls displaying challenging behaviour, resulting in an increased need for intensive support. Exclusions have not increased but the school has had to respond with support that goes beyond the academic, addressing the wider impact on lockdown on pupils' mental health, ability to self-regulate and to remain resilient.

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The school's approach to addressing these challenges stems from their belief that the best lever they have to improve children's lives is the quality of education on offer. Their awareness of the impact of lost learning time during the pandemic has led them to feel more strongly than ever that they must make every moment in school count for every pupil. They are also driven by a desire to ensure that all pupils have access to a wide range of extra-curricular activities and enrichment, along with awareness of the importance of making sure everyone takes up the opportunities on offer.

EGA's popularity means that it has a very local intake, with some parents having grown up in the area and attended local schools. During the first period of lockdown in spring/summer 2020, the school worked hard to stay in close contact with families, calling them regularly and doing everything they could to maximise engagement. This work to strengthen relationships with families helped create a strong sense of trust, and a positive sense of partnership between home and school, which has supported them with their education recovery work post-pandemic.

The headteacher, Sarah Beagley, emphasizes that one thing they have to do is to make all pupils and their families feel that school is possible. The challenges of the pandemic have made this more difficult for more young people, with media coverage often focusing on 'learning gaps, 'learning loss' or depictions of young people as a 'lost generation'. To ensure they avoid this deficit narrative, the school has re-doubled its efforts to ensure all pupils can achieve. This includes investing in IT – the school ensures all pupils have access to a chromebook – as well as supporting those pupils who need additional pastoral support. They have used catch-up funding to create an additional base for small group support, focusing on early intervention, as well as a bespoke suite of workshops run for girls about key issues such as how to navigate changing relationships.

Deputy headteacher Ewan Scott describes how the return to school after the first period of lockdown was a catalyst for change. With pupils working in 'bubbles' and normal routines disrupted, an increased sense of consistency within lessons was crucial to maintaining a sense of calm. This included clear expectations for the way in which teachers start lessons and their ability to narrate expectations. Another key strategy has been to create a shared language of learning amongst pupils, staff and parents. When school re-opened, teachers met with each family individually, steering away from the language of 'deficit' and instead focusing on rich discussion about curriculum and pedagogy. One area of focus during this time was to ensure the school's curriculum reflected the diversity of the community it serves.

EGA has a strong emphasis on supporting teachers to continuously improve their classroom practice. They have put into place additional training and coaching for middle leaders, as well as dedicated time for curriculum development and discussion about teaching and learning. Conscious of teacher workload, they have removed some things in order to create space for others. They removed formal lesson observations and replaced them with coaching, which has opened up a non-judgemental space for teachers to watch each other's lessons and give meaningful feedback about how to improve. They have also moved away from end of unit tests towards doing summative assessment only at two key points in the year, creating a more holistic approach and reducing marking to focus instead on live marking, checking for understanding and responsive teaching.

One key concept they have developed is that of 'schema' – the idea that teachers need to ensure pupils are able to connect their background knowledge with the things they are learning in the classroom. The senior leadership team have worked hard to create ways to support this, for example by creating longer lessons that give teachers the opportunity to slow down and take more time to ensure all pupils understand before moving on. They have encouraged staff to undertake the new National Professional Qualifications (NPQs), helping to create a shared understanding of evidence-based approaches and their effective implementation. Once a fortnight, subject teams have shared planning time dedicated to curriculum development. They are encouraged to talk through the parts of a topic they are finding difficult to teach, digging into the detail and examining how more expert staff and are able to overcome this.

Staff have been receptive to this work and there has been a sense of excitement amongst teachers about being encouraged to develop their passion for their subjects. The shift in focus has been from asking 'what do we want them to learn' to 'what have they learnt', with an acknowledgement that this looks different in different subject areas. For example, in maths and science there is more of an emphasis on knowledge, whereas in English it is more about disciplinary literacy and subject-specific skills. To help ensure that the focus is on continual improvement, the school's new approach to performance management

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asks teachers to identify one aspect of their teaching they want to improve and commit to engaging meaningfully in professional development relating to this area.

The headteacher and her team are also passionate about the importance of the 'super curriculum' and the positive impact on pupils of all the things that are not examined in formal ways. The school has always offered a rich range of opportunities to pupils but have now shifted their focus to integrating opportunities into the curriculum and the school day, to ensure everyone benefits. For example, all pupils in English perform in a promenade production of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the whole of Year 7 visit Kew Gardens and the whole of Year 10 visit Shakespeare's Globe. These activities are seen as a priority, so they are fitted into the school day alongside the more traditional curriculum.

Impact

The impact of the school's approach is evident in the extent to which they have seen a reduction in exclusions, improved attendance and reduction in persistent absence. In addition, the consistent approach to behaviour management is supporting staff and pupils by reducing low level disruption in lessons. The school's focus on high quality pedagogy has been supported by performance management changes and a shift in the approach to CPD, leading to improved quality of teaching across the school.

KEY REFLECTIONS

**This report highlights the profound impact of the Covid-19
pandemic on London schools, while also emphasizing the
resilience of the school system and the adaptability of school
leaders. It provides insight into some of the lessons learned, both
during the pandemic and after the return to normal operations.
We hope this will inform future approaches to education recovery,
as we work towards the creation of a more equal, fair and inclusive
education system.**

1. Learning loss and academic impact

The report highlights the need for targeted interventions, catch-up
programmes, and tailored support to address learning gaps effectively.
Extended school closures and disruptions resulted in significant learning
loss for many pupils. The sudden shift to remote learning posed significant
challenges for pupils, teachers, and parents. The pandemic also highlighted
disparities in access to technology and internet connectivity among pupils
and the extent to which these exacerbate existing inequalities. This has led to
a widening of achievement gaps, with a particularly adverse impact on those
who were already experiencing disadvantage. Approaches to education
recovery must continue to focus on supporting the most vulnerable, and
ensuring that schools serving the most socio-economically disadvantaged
communities have the resources they need to address the academic
setbacks experienced by some pupils during the pandemic.

2. Mental health and well-being

The pandemic significantly impacted the mental health and well-being of
many pupils. Isolation, uncertainty, and the loss of routine contributed to
heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Schools have recognised
the importance of prioritising mental health support and have implemented
a wide range of programmes to support pupils' well-being. In many cases,
they have done so in partnership with the NHS, local government and other
agencies. They are, however, constrained by the availability of resources and
expertise. In many cases, schools have had to fundraise from corporate or
philanthropic organisations to fund the cost of mental health and well-being
support. This should not be necessary; government must ensure that the
additional support which pupils urgently need is available and fully funded, in
a way which removes from schools the need to spend their time fundraising
for essential resources.

3. Communication and Language Development

The pandemic has had a negative effect on children's language development, with particularly significant impact on those experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage. Amongst the youngest children, the pandemic has led to delays in achieving key language milestones. For older children, the lack of immersive language experiences and reduced access to structured language instruction may have hindered the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills. Variations in access to resources, parental support and diverse language inputs have influenced the extent of the impact.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with limited access to technology and other support were more vulnerable to language setbacks. Limited face-to-face interaction, reduced non-verbal cues, and potential technology barriers have affected the quality and depth of language engagement during periods of remote learning. Emotional well-being and social connectedness, which are closely linked to language acquisition, were also affected during this period. While the full extent of the long-term impact on language development is still being studied, early research suggests that the consequences of delayed language skills can potentially extend beyond early years, impacting future academic success and overall communication abilities. Further support is therefore needed for school-based interventions which address these issues, focusing on facilitating language-rich activities, improving the quality of conversations and reading high quality texts to children.

4. Leadership

Educational institutions have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and innovation in responding to the impact of the pandemic. The leadership provided by headteachers and other school leaders during and following the pandemic was essential to their ability to navigate this time of crisis. Strong leadership fostered clear communication, provided support to teachers and students, and facilitated effective decision-making in response to rapidly changing circumstances. This report underscores the need for investment in robust infrastructure, equitable access to technology, support for contingency planning and ongoing professional development for teachers and leaders. Crucially, it highlights the importance of support for school leaders as they continue to navigate challenging external circumstances. Government data shows that, following the pandemic, an increasing number of headteachers are leaving and a decreasing number of other senior leaders are planning to take on the role. A strategic approach to recruitment, retention and leadership development, which takes account of the specific circumstances that affect individual local contexts, is needed if we are to ensure our schools have the leadership they need into the future.

CONCLUSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on every aspect of education and schooling in the UK. This includes learning and progress, attendance and pupil engagement, mental health and wellbeing, career aspirations and involvement with extra-curricular opportunities. During the pandemic, schools acted as vital support hubs for vulnerable pupils and their families, taking on additional responsibilities as providers of information and distributors of basic essentials. Following the return to normal operations, schools have undertaken extensive efforts to support pupils as they attempt to recover from the crisis and to address the after-effects of the disruption caused by the pandemic.

To address the impact of learning loss, catch-up programmes have been introduced to address gaps in knowledge and skills and to ensure those who have missed the most learning do not fall further behind. Additional resources, tutoring and targeted interventions have been provided, in some cases with support from the government's National Tutoring Programme, to help pupils regain progress and confidence in their learning. Schools have adapted the structure and sequencing of the curriculum, to take account of changing circumstances and to support pupils' academic progress following the disruption of the pandemic.

Schools have prioritised mental health and well-being, increasing access to counselling services, providing emotional support and promoting resilience-building activities. In many schools, attention has been given to the development of pupils' social and emotional needs, acknowledging the challenges they faced during the pandemic and the extent to which they are in need of additional help following the return to school. Primary schools and early years settings have also prioritised support for children's communication and language development, which were adversely affected as a result of the limited social interaction which children were able to have during the pandemic.

School leaders and teachers have made changes to established policies, practices and procedures as they seek to meet emerging needs and to help pupils overcome the barriers they face following the pandemic. The case studies presented in this report provide examples of how they have done this, highlighting the skilful way in which school leaders moved swiftly from crisis management to long-term strategic planning. In this way, they have ensured that schools are well-placed to address immediate challenges while also laying the foundations for a more inclusive, responsive and resilient school system.

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Mulberry Schools Trust

Mulberry Schools Trust is a multi-academy trust which was founded by Mulberry School for Girls based in Tower Hamlets, east London. The trust currently includes eight primary and secondary schools, as well as the East London Teaching School Hub and the Mulberry STEM Academy, a partnership with Mercedes-Benz Grand Prix Ltd. The trust's CEO, Dr Vanessa Ogden, is a National Leader of Education and co-founder of Reconnect London.

Mulberry
Schools Trust

Dunraven Educational Trust

Dunraven Educational Trust is a multi-academy trust in south-west London. The trust comprises three primary schools, one secondary and one all-through school. The trust's CEO, David Boyle CBE, is a National Leader of Education and co-founder of Reconnect London.

DUNRAVEN EDUCATIONAL TRUST