

# Pandemic as portal

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Listening to the voice of the school  
system to inform transformation

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The Relationships Foundation was set up 25 years ago to develop relational thinking and engage with policy makers. We believe that a good society is built on good relationships, from family and community to public service and business. We study the impact that culture, business and government have on relationships and consider how to strengthen social connections. We also campaign on issues where relationships are being undermined and support people who wish to carry out their own relational research. Much of the Foundation's recent work has been in the schools sector where we aim to demonstrate that a more relational approach to leadership, management and practice can have a positive impact on outcomes for young people, their communities, and wider society.

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Brief notes on methodology</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Notes on reading and context</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Summary of insights &amp; takeaways</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1. Relatedness</b>	<b>12</b>
Relationships	13
Relationships missed	14
Relationships protected	15
Relationships developed	16
Conflict	17
Conflict at home	18
Conflicted priorities	19
Conflicted role	20
Exposure	21
Exposure to new role	22
Exposure to new threats	23
Exposure to new ideas	24
<b>2. Agency</b>	<b>26</b>
Disruption	27
Disruption of time	28
Loss	29
Assumptions challenged	30
Expectations	31
Unfamiliar demands	32
Hope	33
Understanding	34
Communication	35
Contact as care	36
Listening	37
Imagining the unknown	38
<b>3. Purpose</b>	<b>40</b>
Being a student (& child)	41
Being a parent	44
Being a teacher or leader	46
<b>Voices from within</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Endings</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Looking outwards</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>55</b>

# Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic has dramatically changed the landscape of school education and the nature of the relationships that underpin it.

Under significant stress, students, parents, teachers and school-leaders have had to renegotiate their terms of engagement with the school system. The boundary between 'school' and 'home' that could previously be relied upon to define their roles and thereby provide clarity and reassurance was breached. Parents have had to step into roles previously 'outsourced' to professionals, teachers have had to find new ways of working together, and children have had to come to terms with the absence of familiar routines, rhythms and rituals. New forms of dependency, division and disadvantage have arisen, as have new assumptions about trust, competence and wellbeing. Existing structures have fragmented and been replaced by new (nominally temporary) ones, priorities have been challenged, and surfaces that were solid have become unstable or dissolved.

Given all this, there is an understandable urge to return to normal, but it may be that this is not possible, and not just because we are stuck with the virus and its impact for some time to come.

It may also be the case that the shifts in connection, authority, understanding, respect and purpose between all parts of the system mean there's no going back. It may be that the questions raised about 'normal' by this unprecedented high-stakes crash-test mean many won't want to go back anyway.

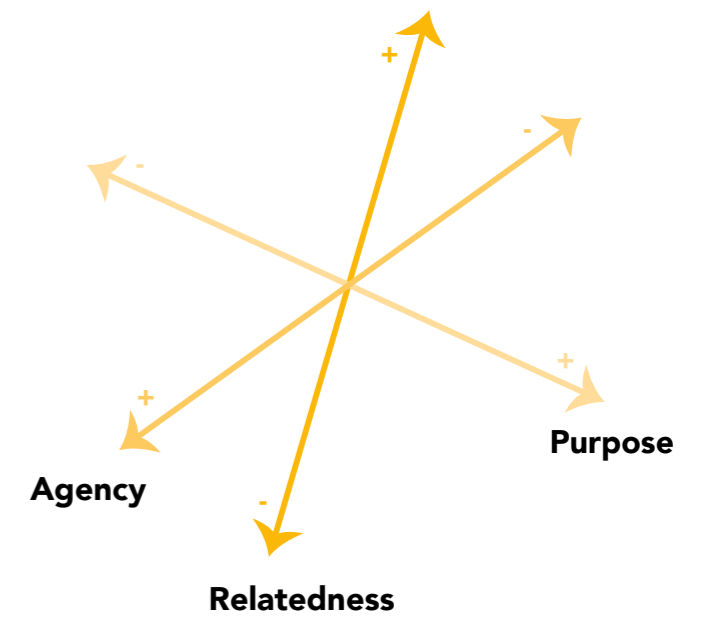
There is an opportunity amidst all this to change the nature of the game; to rethink how schooling is done, who it involves in 'delivery', and what it seeks to achieve. In other words, to take an unexpected leap through Arundhati Roy's portal. Which is why we are delighted to have been asked to contribute this research as Big Change and partners prepare to launch a new Co-mission on the Purpose and Future of Education.

Such a leap requires a sense for how the key players in the game - the parents, teachers and children - relate on an emotional level to one another and to the system of which they are a part. The pandemic provides an unprecedented window for exploring that relatedness, how it has changed, and what people feel about that. And that is what we have set out to do here.

There was plenty of understatement in the group discussions we held, but few as stark as the quip by a parent that we were "living in crazy times". It was a crisis we could neither prepare for nor had prepared for, and it affected every part of everyone's work and life.

Behavioural frameworks like self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) suggest that, when faced with a crisis, people and the complex systems they create - including schools and families - are tested along three axes. The first is about relatedness, relationships and human connection; will people become closer to one another or will they grow more distant? The second relates to agency; will people act independently and with initiative, or will they become dependent and inert? And the third axis is about competency or purpose; will people remain true to the course they were on or will they change direction and run with the new wind?

The following report explores how the school system responded to these tests and is intended to help us learn from the collective experience of our participants as, like Arundhati Roy, we dare to imagine another world.



## Ben Gibbs & John Ashcroft

Relationships Foundation, March 2021

The authors are indebted to Sandy Henderson, organisational consultant, researcher and former Director of OPUS (2016-19), for his support in our application of the Listening Posts methodology for this study, for ideas as to meanings, and for his inspiration with respect to how to structure this report.

*"Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.*

*We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."*

## Arundhati Roy

Financial Times, 3 April 2020

## Brief notes on methodology

The exploration was carried out using the 'Listening Post' methodology developed by OPUS, an educational charity established in 1975 to promote the understanding of social and organisational life<sup>1</sup>. The Listening Post is a form of bounded social enquiry which provides a 'snapshot' of society, or a section of society, at a particular time.

Between September and December 2020, a series of group discussions were conducted online with two groups of parents, two groups of teachers and school leaders and three groups of school children<sup>2</sup>. Participants were encouraged to think about and discuss their experiences and preoccupations during the first lockdown.

The discussions were recorded, transcribed and then reviewed to identify the key themes that emerge from across the groups as a whole. The researcher's own response to the data both in the sessions and the analysis is also of interest and is noted in the following report where appropriate.

Some fundamentals:

- The Listening Post approach proposes that what emerges from discussions in small groups is expressive of the characteristics of the wider system to which those groups belong
- Each of the seven Listening Posts comprised a 60-minute group discussion conducted online via Zoom (although one of the student groups was abandoned after 40-minutes due to technical issues in their school)
- Participants contributed anonymously as representatives of the school sector, sharing experiences from the perspective of their roles within the system
- The transcript from each discussion was then anonymised, with quotes that spoke for the whole sector highlighted and separated for use in the report
- We reviewed the transcripts, looking at both what was on the lines and between them. We sought to 'hear' the unspoken assumptions, patterns and themes that arose from the discussions, and which unconsciously express the participants' relatedness to the school system, as well as something of its character. Through this approach we hoped to hear the system talking.

A key principle of the Listening Posts approach is that the voices of participants - and of the system they inhabit - emerge from both the discussion groups and the report without filter. To that end, facilitation of both the groups and the reporting of what was said is minimal. Our aim is for the authentic voices of the system and those in it to be heard, in place of those who all too often speak on their behalf, including ourselves! We believe that this is particularly important at this time.

The main report comprises a broad selection of comments taken from the transcripts and grouped together in thematic sections. These are each preceded by a brief interpretation of what was 'heard' and concluded with a tentative hypothesis and some of the questions it poses, presented - while restaurants are still closed - as a 'takeaway'.

## Notes on reading and context

This study is a snapshot in time. It captures the views of parents, teachers and young people as they reflected in the last quarter of 2020 on their experience of the first lockdown eight or nine months earlier in the second quarter of the year. Their reflections would have been coloured by their subsequent experiences over the summer as the lockdowns eased, by their situation at the time as lockdown policies differed across the country, and by their understanding of - and hopes for - what might happen over Christmas and into the new year. Their context at the time was dynamic, and it is important to hold that in mind as you read.

The context in which the data were analysed and the report written was also dynamic, and the work has inevitably been influenced by the experiences and characteristics of the facilitator and lead author, and by the fact he is a white, male, middle-class, tech-enabled, teacher-trained father of two school-aged children, etc.

Finally, it's worth noting that the context in which you are reading the report is dynamic, and that you too carry the residue of your own experiences from 2020. The hope as we were writing was that schools would be re-opening to some or all students in early- or mid-March. Indeed, that proved to be the case and the report is being published in the week that schools can re-open to all students. Your reading will be affected by that.

As we begin to move forward from that point, it would be tempting to view the past as a foreign country, and to believe that the people represented in the report did things differently there. However, it's clear that there is too much to learn from these experiences to collectively deny or forget them, however traumatic they might be, or how fantastical they might seem.

# Summary of insights & takeaways

## 1. Relatedness

Schools are places of belonging as well as learning, and the pandemic threw this into stark relief. It also changed the way the three groups relate to one another, resulting in new tensions and conflict, regressive behaviours and a sense of vulnerability and exposure.

### INSIGHTS

- #1 The social and relational aspect of school is highly valued by parents, teachers and students, and was greatly missed during the first lockdown.
- #2 Some behaviours one might perceive as negative may be attempts by the other to protect something of value to them.
- #3 Even the simplest gestures and activities which enabled connection had a significant impact on the quality of people's experience.
- #4 Young people make a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of the important adults in their lives and can be confused when these are challenged.
- #5 Parents are not just passive recipients of information or requirements (or benefits) from schools. They have agency and made up their own minds about how to integrate school demands with their home lives.
- #6 Teaching may be conceptualised by parents as more punitive than developmental, and that it was this aspect of the role that was prioritised, even where that was later regretted.
- #7 People were incredibly adaptable and, through both experience and reflection, have learned a great deal about themselves and others which could be of significant value in the 'new normal'.
- #8 The trauma of the first lockdown - and of subsequent experiences for many - will need to be reconciled at some stage. It seems too serious to be subdued.
- #9 Eyes have been opened to possibilities that exist beyond the boundaries of one's normal experience, with great creative potential.

### TAKEAWAYS

Schools are not just places of learning but are also places of belonging; they are social systems, providing a vital site for the development and maintenance of relationships for both children and teachers, and for self-actualisation. It is clear that this function is also understood and highly valued by parents.

- » *What would schools do differently if they considered their role as a place of belonging in which learning takes place through relationships?*
- » *As schools adapt to 'online delivery', is it enough to provide 'live lessons' or do students also need to have opportunities to maintain relationships over the learning platforms too?*

School culture has a powerful impact beyond the boundaries of the school, and it is clear that some of the more punitive aspects of school have been reproduced in the family system.

- » *What does this mean for how school leaders plan the values, processes and routines that establish a school's culture? What does it mean for the ongoing relationship between home and school?*

The relationship between home and school has changed substantially. Power has shifted. New expectations and dependencies have developed. People are striving for a return to familiar relationships between the school and home in particular, but at the same time, people want to use this moment as an opportunity to change the school system (and the work system) for the better.

- » *Should schools acknowledge what's happened to these relationships before seeking to move on?*
- » *Should they seek to repair relationships where required, and build on those areas where the nature of relationships and relatedness have changed for the better? Where does the responsibility for this lie?*



## 2. Agency

The experience of being locked down amidst significant uncertainty disrupted people's sense of agency and the capacity of those around them, including previously trusted 'authorities'. This seemed to be felt as a threat to one's very sense of identity.

### INSIGHTS

- #10 The routines and familiarity of school life provide meaning and security, over and above their operational function in terms of subject timetabling, etc.
- #11 As schools engage with the inevitable drive to focus on 'lost learning', they may miss the need to also help people think about other losses too.
- #12 Any assumptions we might have about people's experience of lockdown should be explored and confirmed before they are used as a basis for action.
- #13 Demands which are passed (or delegated) across a system can be felt greatest by the people at the end of the line - the children - who cannot themselves pass them on.
- #14 There is a great deal of hope and expectation at all levels in the system. Some of this is likely to be unrealistic, which could result in disappointment and alienation if not discussed.
- #15 Learning was going on at all levels, about oneself and about others, and that this might be of greater long-term value than any 'loss' of subject-learning.
- #16 Communication is important not just as a means of information transfer, but as a vital form of care and contact.
- #17 Communication has to be two-way, with as much (if not more) attention paid by schools to how to listen as how to broadcast.
- #18 Contact (or communication) has an important role to play in filling a void which would otherwise, particularly in a stressful situation, be filled by other means.

### TAKEAWAYS

The return to school has become a matter of significant national interest, perhaps with a symbolic value around an end-to-the-disruption far greater than we can imagine when preoccupied with thoughts of 'lost learning' or even children's mental health.

- » How can schools and communities work together to explore the needs of parents, teachers and children as they return to more familiar roles and goals?
- » How can expectations around a 'miracle re-opening' be sensitively managed so that schools aren't placed under even greater pressure?

It is striking that much of the language used in the discussion groups - particularly by parents - was around failure and inadequacy, mirroring one of the prevailing critiques about the reductive and selective nature of the English school system.

- » Were parents made to feel as if they were 'graded' on the basis of their resources, ability or background in the same way - it is argued - their children are? If so, what does that mean?

There is much to learn from the experience of parents during the pandemic about how teachers might communicate with them as colleagues, and how the home might be maintained as an extension of the classroom, long after it has ceased to be a replacement.

- » Are schools ready and willing to accept parents as colleagues?
- » How can the relationships that would require be properly managed?
- » What would such a transformation require from an organisational perspective?

## 3. Purpose

Children in particular experienced the lockdown as a 'lack'... a lack of contact, a lack of space to develop their own identities, a lack of purpose. Parents were confused about what their purpose was, and aware that their capacity to enact it was contingent on their social, economic and demographic position. Teachers and school leaders, on the other hand, seemed to feel they had been given a rare opportunity to reflect on their purpose, and to consider what they might leave behind as they step through the portal.

*"You don't get to go to the panto... you have to watch it on the computer."*

**Student**

*"I feel that my son was dealt a really, really good hand."*

**Parent**

*"And it's a weird thing to say, but there is just so much bullshit in education. For me, the pandemic is a marvellous confrontation with reality."*

**Leader**

### TAKEAWAYS

Children seemed confused by the shift in expectations and practice around their role as students, and troubled by the dissolution of the boundary between school (where they had been learning to develop their own identity away from home) and home (where they are a 'child').

- » What adjustments need to be made by schools to their 'recovery plans' to help children find themselves at school again?

How one felt about being a parent in lockdown was greatly influenced by income and class and this was reflected in preoccupations with the inconsistency of experience (including with respect to technology), along with feelings of envy and a sense of some kind of prioritisation. Parents 'knew their place' as 'good' or 'inadequate', with the label 'outstanding' reserved for an imagined elite.

- » Is it realistic for schools to be expected to 'solve' these social and cultural issues? Is there a danger of schools being blamed for them?

The experience of being a teacher or school leader in lockdown appeared to be defined by the opportunity for growth; the space afforded to think and reflect on the real purpose of their endeavours and of the school system more generally.

- » How can the potential of this inflection point be realised?

# 1. Relatedness

/rɪˈleɪtɪdnəs/

noun

The state or fact of being related or connected.

*"The physical being together is the serendipity of school."*

Leader

## Relationships

The pandemic has had a significant impact on relationships. The imposition of 'lockdowns' and rules about 'social distancing' have kept us away from social settings and apart from friends and live-away family members. At the same time, 'stay at home orders' and the closure of schools and workplaces have forced live-together families into closer day-in-day-out proximity than ever.

We have been encouraged to report neighbours who have sought to maintain relationships by breaking these rules, as to do so increases the risk of 'community infection'. We feel desperately sorry for people who have not been able to 'say goodbye' to loved ones in hospital, or whose weddings have been postponed. We have been advised that the home is where we are most likely to be infected, by those who we are in close relationship with.

And yet face-to-face contact - both the greatest threat and the very essence of the relationships we desire - is the thing we have missed the most, and which we are most eager to resume. Just as grandparents are desperate to hold and to kiss and to hug grandchildren, so children are desperate to be back with their friends at school. Teachers have felt bereaved at their separation from the relational buzz of school and delighted by the closeness of the contact they did have. Parents have felt betrayed by their children's experience of abandonment and inspired by teachers' attempts to maintain contact.

One thing stands out from our experience of running the group discussions though, and that's the sense that schools were missed more for their social function than for their orthodox educational role.

### TAKEAWAYS

That schools are not just places of learning but are also places of belonging; they are social systems, providing a vital site for the development and maintenance of relationships for both children and teachers, and for self-actualisation. It is clear that this function is also understood and highly valued by parents.

- » *What would schools do differently if they considered their role as a place of belonging in which learning takes place through relationships?*
- » *As schools adapt to 'online delivery', is it enough to provide 'live lessons' or do students also need to have opportunities to maintain relationships over the learning platforms too?*

## Relationships missed

The sudden loss of the school as a space for the development and maintenance of relationships was felt acutely by all groups, with some children expressing this in terms of a lack of the sort of supportive attention they need in order to learn...

"My mum just had meetings. I just did my work all the time."

"I wouldn't say I missed my friends but that's not really part of school. / What? Really? That's the main bit of school!"  
(Student dialogue)

"I'm just doing this curriculum on my own, my parents are both like just somewhere else."



### Teacher

"How did I feel during lockdown? Lonely."

"We hit a sort of brick wall... an emotional hole of coming to school where there are no children. It just felt very, very strange."

### Leader

"This is very strange thing to confess; I kind of mourned the loss of school."

"I'm not sure they missed school, by the way. I think they missed the relationships that are at school. And in a socially distant world, the school is the one oasis in that world."

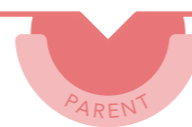


"The class teacher was nowhere to be seen in their classrooms."

"The touch point that they should have had every day was missing. Just somebody showing them the guinea pig, or the book that they've read, or the TV programme that they watched or anything."

"We had one phone call per child from the teacher and that was pretty much it. Apart from a random video they did at the end where they threw a toilet roll between all the teachers."

"My daughter, in year 11, was basically left to do nothing. I feel like they were abandoned."



## #1 INSIGHT

The social and relational aspect of school is highly valued by parents, teachers and students, and was greatly missed during the first lockdown.

## Relationships protected

People felt protective of the nature and quality of the relationships that exist in (and between) the school and family systems, and some took action - or planned action - in an attempt to ensure that these were sustained even where that action was felt to be subversive...

"Sometimes if you do something wrong, the teacher would say don't even correct it. They said spend more time with your family."

"I think lockdown has made everyone kind of like prioritise the fact that you don't just go to school to learn. There is a social aspect as much as you want the education. You might be able to just text your friends or facetime or do quizzes or whatever but seeing people in person you don't realise how much you crave just to be around people."



"One thing I learned during lockdown was that I absolutely missed teaching. I didn't think I would miss it that much. And I know everyone's on about the great interactions with digital, but I don't think anything can replace the face-to-face. There's that kind of warmth when you're all together, which doesn't come across over media."

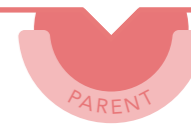
"We are from an all-boys school in a quite a deprived area of London, so our school is more like a home. It's like a sense of belonging and attachment. They sort of yearn to come here."



"My seven-year-old was like I don't want to do this anymore. And I was like, I don't want to do it either because I want some kind of gratification for this work."

"It actually took the fellow parents to write to the school and say, could we at least see the teachers because the kids are worried that they're ill?"

"Ultimately as an only child, she had to look after herself."



## #2 INSIGHT

Some behaviours one might perceive as negative may be attempts by the other to protect something of value to them.



## Relationships developed

There were opportunities to maintain the continuity of some relationships during lockdown, and where efforts were made to make the most of these, people were highly appreciative. Similarly, when schools re-opened and relationships could be re-established, the efforts made to re-connect were vital...

*"Now we're back, it's really nice seeing friends. I mean, now you become even better friends with your friends. Because you can't see them for a period of time you've become even stronger."*

*"People say 'nobody actually likes school'... but yeah, I do. Imagine if there was no school, it would be like sitting there at home alone all day every day."*

*"The biggest thing was not seeing like my friends in person. I have to look for them online. Well, obviously it wasn't the same."*

*"Some teachers were also not just teachers but like were very like helpful not just with schoolwork, but just like seeing how we are and checking on us."*

### Teacher

*"We felt like the children were saying to us, I wish it could be like this all the time. This is lovely, because they got a chance to get to know us as well as real people, not just as their teachers."*

### Leader

*"The physical being together is the serendipity of school."*

*"I was very aware of the fact that my daughter's teacher should have been shielding because she had cancer a few years ago, so perhaps was particularly vulnerable. But every morning without fail, there was a nice comment for each of the kids and some work on the blog."*

*"The tutor put together a group for her form group, but a coaching group, where she tuned into them each day. And she was setting quizzes, or she posted a picture of her dog and say what she'd been doing with them, or asked them how they were."*

STUDENT

TEACHER/LEADER

PARENT

## #3 INSIGHT

Even the simplest gestures and activities which enabled connection had a significant impact on the quality of people's experience.

## Conflict

The pandemic has changed the way each of the three groups relate to one another. As the boundaries of the school, family and work systems have blurred, they have required parents, teachers and students to find and negotiate new ways of working together amidst great uncertainty and complexity. The nature of these boundary changes is explored below, but one of the outcomes has been a sense of significant tension. Perhaps the participants were playing out the friction caused by the boundaries being ground together, or maybe they were enacting tensions which had always been there, but which had been surfaced by the tremors.

The sense of potential (or actual) conflict was palpable throughout the discussion groups. Parents spoke of conflict with their children, and children of conflict with their parents. Teachers felt embattled and entrenched, but also sensed a potential victory in terms of a longer-term 'war' for the real essence of education<sup>3</sup>. Parents and teachers both spoke of being conflicted in terms of role; when was a parent a teacher, for example, and what did that mean for their role as a parent. For teachers who are also parents, and who also had to make sure their schools and homes were virus-free, this was particularly acute.

The experience of all groups was characterised by a complex contrast of often conflicting emotions, perhaps unsurprisingly due to the sudden and forceful nature of the boundary changes. Parents, teachers and children have had to adopt and integrate new roles. In a very short space of time, each had to form new identities as a home-worker, a keyworker, a home-schooler, and so on. The assumed rules of family life, school life and childhood had to be renegotiated. Parents sought clues as to how to do this and looked to their own experience of school as a child for these as well as to their child's school. It appears that the nature of these experiences had a significant impact on a parent's approach to home-schooling, and that school cultures - whether rigid or flexible, punitive or tolerant - were reproduced in the home. Frequent expressions of inadequacy - often presented as polarisations or as idealisations - suggest that this process of identity (re)formation was extremely difficult to bear.

### TAKEAWAYS

School culture has a powerful impact beyond the boundaries of the school, and it is clear that some of the more punitive aspects of school have been reproduced in the family system.

- » *What does this mean for how school leaders plan the values, processes and routines that establish a school's culture?*
- » *What does it mean for the ongoing relationship between home and school?*

## Conflict at home

The closure of schools meant that children were spending more time in close proximity with their parents and siblings, but were also finding it difficult to accept their parents' new role as teachers...

"If you need to ask your parents, they didn't really know what you're talking about. So they couldn't really help. And you got really angry with your family."

"My mum and my dad were always working as well. So yeah, my dad was really quite annoying, like just coming in every five minutes asking me if I needed to change my socks or something, disturbing my work. So I couldn't read."

"It became like your family was just like a bug, like a bee. Like an annoying fly around you."

STUDENT

"Every day was a bit of a battle to get her to do the work."

"Because of having to juggle her needs, and trying to teach her with my own work, and just having people at home, it was fairly stressful."

"The doorframe in the kitchen is massively cracked from the amount of times he slammed it."

"Every morning now I get 'I don't want to go to school'... it's painful to get them up and out. I've never had that before. But now to get back into that sort of normality is hard work."

PARENT

### #4 INSIGHT

Young people make a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of the important adults in their lives and can be confused when these are challenged.

## Conflicted priorities

Parents in particular it seems felt a tension between their perception of schools' demands and their responsibilities as a parent (and, for some, as an employee). Some established and defended their own 'red lines'...

"If you had any siblings, they'd just be bugging you because they also needed help with their work. Your parents couldn't be with both at the same time. The parents were just going crazy. Some of them had to work, which was hard with us at home. I felt sorry for them."

STUDENT

"The one silver lining, I would say, is a parental insight into and appreciation for what teachers do."

TEACHER

"And then, you know, it was kind of I was quite resentful as well, because I felt that I was having to kind of juggle a lot more."

"We got these horrible printouts. We could kind of drag it out through the week but mostly we'd do it in the morning and focus on our own things."

"After a while we pretty much disengaged completely from school in every way. I didn't read the emails and I didn't look at the requirements. I tried to do some reading with her, but she just rebelled. Just for the happiness of our house, she would just get on with what she wanted to do."

"The relationship with her was much more important than trying to pursue school."

"I felt they didn't trust us to understand the complexities which was a frustration."

"That was a massive part of us being together as a family unit and making sure that it wasn't just about school. School can be caught up."

PARENT

### #5 INSIGHT

Parents are not just passive recipients of information or requirements (or benefits) from schools. They have agency and made up their own minds about how to integrate school demands with their home lives.

## Conflicted role

Parents appear in many cases to have adopted the punitive aspects of the teacher role, perhaps based on their own recollections of how they experienced teaching, or on their concept of what goes on in their child's school...

*"But my parents made this rule and they have to check things before you send it. I don't know whether or not they trusted us. But they wanted to see that we actually did it."*

STUDENT

*"My experience was quite multi-dimensional and complex because I'm a parent as well."*

*"My own kids were doing a fraction of what my school were doing. So then I became agitated. And I wanted to get in contact with their school. And I thought, actually, I'm in the same position as them."*

TEACHER

*"I wish I'd been a bit more relaxed in some ways, because I kind of was quite anxious about them keeping up with work and persisted with trying to do stuff, but possibly at the expense of my relationships with them."*

*"I was just thinking if I'd taken stuff more laid back maybe it would have been less stressful but my parents always said school was important and supported my education regardless of what's going on. Yes, you're sad, but you still have to do your homework. Yes, you're happy, you still have to do your homework. And that was drilled into me, and I'm trying not to be that person. But then when you're stressed out, everything just goes out the window, and you just go back to the normal that you know, or that you grew up with. And you revert to that person. And it's just like, he goes, I'm tired."*

*"So at that point, I was safeguarding my own children."*

PARENT

### #6 INSIGHT

Teaching may be conceptualised by parents as more punitive than developmental, and that it was this aspect of the role that was prioritised, even where that was later regretted.

## Exposure

Bubbles and boundaries have taken on significant new meanings during the pandemic. People formed bubbles to protect themselves against the virus as well as from the fear of uncertainty and change. Parents and students accepted - to a greater or lesser extent - the intrusion of school life into family life, but not passively. The adoption of 'primitive' activities like baking bread, jigsaw puzzles and walks in nature might be seen as a 'regression' to parents' own childhood experiences; an attempt to strengthen the family system in response to competing demands from 'outside' and to ensure its survival.

The theories that underpin the work of child and educational psychologists view schools as 'containing' organisations<sup>4</sup>; structures which take over from the parent as the primary space in which a child's natural anxieties are mediated through new relationships with peers, adults and social expectations. Such a process of containment is considered vital to child development, but it also serves an important social function, allowing other systems (like the family and work systems) to sustain. The theories also suggest that the school and family systems are often in tension, with the child acting as the focal point for the dynamic relationships between the two<sup>5</sup>. It's perhaps unsurprising therefore that the language used by all three groups in response to the dissolving structures was characterised by a sense of exposure and vulnerability.

### TAKEAWAYS

The relationship between home and school has changed substantially. Power has shifted. New expectations and dependencies have developed. People are striving for a return to familiar relationships between the school and home in particular, but at the same time, people want to use this moment as an opportunity to change the school system (and the work system) for the better.

- » *Should schools acknowledge what's happened to these relationships before seeking to move on?*
- » *Should they seek to repair relationships where required, and build on those areas where the nature of relationships and relatedness have changed for the better?*
- » *Where does the responsibility for this lie?*

See page 54 for a tentative illustration of how the relationship between the school, family and work systems may have changed during lockdown.

## Exposure to new role

The requirements and expectations of the new roles - parent as teacher; teacher as innovator; student as independent - were confusing and evidently difficult to process; experienced as surreal and perhaps alienating...

"My parents had lots of Zooms. And when they were on, we had to be quiet. But when we needed help, we were like, stuck. There was no-one there that could help. My sister would have helped me but she had lots of work herself."

"When we did come back I'd forgotten how to act a little bit. I know some people who were quite anxious and didn't want to come back. Everyone kind of like forgot how to act like the first day all over again at school."

"It's like we got too used to being locked away. Like zoo animals. This must be how they feel when they're back out in the wild."

STUDENT

### Teacher

"It feels like new territory for schools, this kind of exposure, if you like, and kind of anxiety and being on the edge and having to think about these things on, let's call it a strategic basis."

### Leader

"As a Principal, everybody was asking me questions that I didn't know the answers to. And that was a place that was actually quite frightening."

"I don't think I've dropped a ball, but there is this fear when you're holding the responsibility for the safety of your community at a really pragmatic level. I've got to do my best to make sure nobody gets Covid."

TEACHER/LEADER

"There was a real void and the kids felt abandoned. We didn't hear anything from individual teachers until we had a big manila envelope come through the box which was their end of year report, which by then was useless, because we'd been spending every waking hour with them, we knew exactly where they were at. And they'd progressed beyond whatever the teacher said."

"I don't get involved in any of the mums' WhatsApp groups and all that kind of competitive crap."

"My work was looking after all our elderly relatives. I found that personally quite challenging."

PARENT

## #7 INSIGHT

People were incredibly adaptable and, through both experience and reflection, have learned a great deal about themselves and others which could be of significant value in the 'new normal'.

## Exposure to new threats

As the pandemic and lockdowns have worn on and we've learned - to some extent - how to keep things ticking over, so it becomes easier to forget just how threatened people felt during the first wave. Each group expressed a very tangible fear of death, of isolation, and of being 'unmasked' as incompetent in one's new role...

"And then you were stuck and if you didn't do the work, you were left behind. But no-one knew. You didn't know what to do."

"In the lockdown, it was like the world just went. It was like your house is the only thing ever. Your house is the only thing on this planet. It's like a cell, and you're stuck you're stuck in the cell. When you went back to school... it was like back into the world, like coming back from the dead."

"What I needed the most was for things to be normal and safe again. I wanted normality."

STUDENT

### Teacher

"Because of the anxiety, people are waking up in the middle of the night a lot of the time. And we're still going into a situation every day where we don't know if we may get infected."

"When we heard we were locking down, it was as if we were a balloon that had been popped. That's how it felt. The students were totally gutted. You would have thought they'd be celebrating? But they were in tears coming to see me."

### Leader

"It's a sort of Stockholm syndrome that we suffer from in British education. We're locked up with these DfE people and they're actually like killing us. And yet we've become really good friends with the people who took us hostage and took over our mind. It is a case of who's really in charge."

TEACHER/LEADER

"I have a heart condition and I'm a single parent and the news was freaking me and my son out. I called school on a Monday morning I said I'm really sorry, but until the news clears up or these numbers start going down, we're staying home because he was freaking out going mummy, what if you're coming home on the bus and somebody coughs on you or this happens? So we just took the decision to stay home."

"I was holding this kind of anxiety of trying to keep things ticking over for the kids."

"The kids are in bubbles, they're constantly sanitised. The kids are so used to sanitising now and washing hands and stuff. It's like a routine they know to get into class, wash your hands, sanitise at your desk, and he comes home and he's doing the same thing."

PARENT

## #8 INSIGHT

The trauma of the first lockdown - and of subsequent experiences for many - will need to be reconciled at some stage. It seems too serious to be subdued.



## Exposure to new ideas

Teachers in particular have had to innovate, and to innovate fast, adopting new (and perhaps previously resisted) forms of technology and pedagogy. The forced exposure to new ideas and realities from outside their familiar network - and also outside the school system - seems to have unshackled something that feels exciting and creative...

"It opened my eyes to a lot of problems. With things like the movement for Black Lives Matter and Pride movements and everything. Before, I'd not try to understand it because it wasn't part of school. But now I realise the extremity of these problems and how people get together to face these things. I don't think everyone would have known the extent if we weren't all in a pandemic because you always have an excuse to ignore it. But there is no excuse if you didn't have anywhere to go."

STUDENT

"Schools tend to think of themselves as separated from society, but what you are seeing is there are kids and families that have really struggled in this situation. Bereavements, economic catastrophes and people that have lost businesses, and the kids are bringing that into school."

"I think the disappearance of the exam was a major breakthrough moment in a lot of people's lives. I mean, you know, we gave the grades! It's just these breaks in routines that enable you to ask what is the essential thing?"

"I think it's really forced us to look outwards and actually have much more meaningful networks with people because we've got a shared experience, and that shared experiences actually created much stronger networks."

"I think we are still learning lots about what how we're feeling and how we move forward from this because I think there's still a big journey to happen."

TEACHER

"We're near Microsoft so there's probably a lot of parents that may have been able to help with the IT situation, but I think schools are particularly bad at reaching out for help."

"I decided to picture somebody from school trying to manage a bubble, manage online and remote learning, managing their own family circumstance, which obviously we didn't know about and get a window on their world in that way."

"We've gone through something that has pushed them and us outside of our comfort zone, and it's kind of, you know, gone back to normal, but with a little bit more responsibility for one's own actions and one's own entertainment."

PARENT

*"I think the disappearance of the exam was a major breakthrough moment in a lot of people's lives. I mean, you know, we gave the grades! It's just these breaks in routines that enable you to ask what is the essential thing?"*

Teacher

### #9 INSIGHT

Eyes have been opened to possibilities that exist beyond the boundaries of one's normal experience, with great creative potential.



## 2. Agency

*/ˈeɪdʒ(ə)nəsi/*

*noun*

The capacity of an individual to actively and independently choose and to affect change; free will or self-determination.

*"I got a real insight into the capacity of the people around me, the way the school actually operates because of them, not because of me. This was an absolute revelation."*

Leader

## Disruption

Agency, or the capacity to act in ways that are self-determined, is fundamental to one's sense of identity and role. For behavioural psychologists like Ryan & Deci (2017), one's capacity to act in any social context is determined by the extent to which our 'basic psychological needs' for autonomy, relatedness and a sense of competency are met or thwarted. It seems fairly obvious then to state that the experience of being locked down - of becoming more dependent on others and unable to control events, of finding the nature of one's relatedness to people and systems had changed, and of feeling incapable with respect to new roles - had a marked effect on parents', teachers' and students' sense of agency.

Agency also depends on one's context remaining relatively stable and predictable, and it was clear from the discussions that the instability and unpredictability of the pandemic was catastrophic. Even a fundamental and constant concept like time appears to have been disrupted, and to have changed texture during the lockdown. Primary school-aged children felt they'd had to become 'early teenagers' and to fend for themselves. Parents found that their usual ways of managing work time were ineffective when applied to managing school time.

People frequently used metaphors relating to journeys, which one might interpret as being in between places, or in neither one place nor another. Roles were reversed and assumptions challenged, with leaders becoming followers, parents becoming teachers and dependents having to become dependable.

There was also a palpable sense of loss; that time, continuity, purpose and opportunity had been left behind. Interestingly, there was little reference made to the idea of lost learning, although that may have been in the back of people's minds.

### TAKEAWAYS

The return to school has become a matter of significant national interest, perhaps with a symbolic value around an end-to-the-disruption far greater than we can imagine when preoccupied with thoughts of 'lost learning' or even children's mental health.

- » *How can schools and communities work together to explore the needs of parents, teachers and children as they return to more familiar roles and goals?*
- » *How can expectations around a 'miracle re-opening' be sensitively managed so that schools aren't placed under even greater pressure?*

## Disruption of time

The sudden change of routine - such an important feature of child development and of school and family life - was really confusing for people. Children were perhaps most explicit about the impact of that on them, but the shifting sands were noted by all groups...

"We were just sitting inside and doing nothing and watching the days pass."

"It was like most of the day we were stuck. It was like we were early teenagers. Like most teenagers are like addicted to their phones. Always on the screens. It was like kind of like that. You didn't want to be on the screen as well. It was so boring."

"I was basically in limbo."

"I felt like I lost a major part of my year. It just disappeared, and I'm not sure where it's gone or whether we'll get it back. I binge watched Netflix a lot like loads of it... baking, fun things. Anything to pass the time."



### Teacher

"And words like fomite, aerosol, close contact. This is a whole lexicon that has evolved and we now teach in this new landscape. I tend to just keep moving forward, but it was utterly exhausting."

### Leader

"One of the things I experienced in lockdown was that time really slowed. You know, the 12-hour days stopped. All of a sudden, it was like, now what? And I think we make school too fast. You know, school has become fast food."



"I plummeted in May half term. I think it was then. It's been like falling through time."

"I felt desperately sorry for my year 11... When they brought them into school on the last day, the school knew that they weren't going back the next day yet didn't tell the students. So they went into school that last day not knowing it was their last day."

"Like many people, I constantly felt like I was doing a rubbish job of everything. And I'm sort of still reeling from it now. And the kind of continued sort of constant changes and you know, what will happen in the future and that I feel like it has been taking its toll."

"Very quickly, I realised that the only way I was going to get through it in terms of homeworking was to plan. I will designate two and a half days when I'm sat at my desk and the other two I'll be working but also working with the kids. And you do what you can to try and make up those days."



## #10 INSIGHT

The routines and familiarity of school life provide meaning and security, over and above their operational function in terms of subject timetabling, etc.

## Loss

In facilitating the discussion groups and subsequently making sense of the transcripts, we experienced something of the deep sense of loss that was being expressed. There was real, tangible sense of sorrow, and of trying to hold on to what was available...

"My mum went to the shop, and my dad was at work and I had to stay in the house by myself. Yeah, I was like in the house on my own the whole time... we weren't really needed."

"I found out that I am really impatient. I know. It's just I get really distracted. I have that speed on stuff and just get the work done. Good. Right. Down. Ready? Go."

"Year six should be the most exciting year here but we're like missing everything... it's a big part of our lives just gone. It's behind us now."



### Teacher

"Working in the school without anybody here was very challenging and much more challenging than I thought because I thought at least I'll have peace and quiet at school or be able to concentrate on what I need to do. But I actually had to move back home. Because I really did feel a sense of bereavement."

"You felt as if you were grieving for all of the community."

### Leader

"How do we not lose our vision and values in the midst of all of this and the decisions that we need to make?"

"I kind of lost my role."



"I know it sounds ridiculous, but they missed out on prom. But even that last day of school that kind of you know signing the shirts, that's actually kind of a rite of passage. And they missed out on that."

"We had an interesting thing that our head teacher suddenly disappeared just before lockdown."

"My son's tutor did nothing for months, she didn't engage with them at all. And then it was only in July she put something up. She sort of formed the group and said, Well, it seems to me that we're going to be doing this for another month. So I suppose we better put a group together."

"For the kids, it was all a bit mind blowing, to be honest."



## #11 INSIGHT

As schools engage with the inevitable drive to focus on 'lost learning', they may miss the need to also help people think about other losses too.<sup>6</sup>

## Assumptions challenged

Having the background to school, home and work life change so dramatically seems to have made certain features and assumptions about what is 'normal' for oneself or others stand out with more contrast. People expressed surprise at some of these new perspectives...

*"I had too much time to think... I think it resulted in me being an over thinker. So I was just overthinking everything that came around, because I had so much time and I think that's probably what anyone would do if they have time."*

*"People just seem to have more time now, and to value it."*

*"I feel a lot of responsibility. It's like everyone's watching us and either worrying about us or fearing us as spreaders. I see older people looking at me in a way I'm not used to and feel worried I can't do anything right."*

*"I had to cook lunch every single day. I cooked myself omelettes... that was what I had every day."*

STUDENT

### Teacher

*"You know, they're just getting on with life. And it's almost as if they realise the adults are trying to do something difficult here, and that they need to step it up, to be a little bit more independent. We have noticed an improvement in behaviour and resiliency, a change in the resilience level of pupils who we thought had very low resilience."*

*"You know, the virus could knock all that out... a little invisible thing could create a reality where only the essential things survive."*

### Leader

*"I'm going to be completely candid. I wasn't that busy in lockdown. And my response was to wake up late. It became a kind of almost spiritual crisis; it became a kind of 'what the hell am I going to do here'. And it's been very fruitful in that respect. It's made me think about lots of things, especially how relationships work."*

TEACHER/LEADER

*"We've had two years of battling to get her some kind of education so I felt when we went into lockdown that I was probably more prepared than anyone. What you were all feeling all of a sudden - 'oh my god, there's no school, what do we do?' - I'd obviously experienced two years prior."*

*"I want young children to be as normal as possible and not have this whole period dictate their future views of the world."*

PARENT

## Expectations

People were understandably very preoccupied by the new expectations placed on them in their new and confusing role. It wasn't just that the goalposts had been moved, but that the goals had changed too.

With reference again to Ryan & Deci's model of self-determination theory, goals and aspirations help people organise their lives, and the nature of these goals - particularly whether they are imposed by others or defined by oneself, and whether they are extrinsic (in pursuit of wealth, fame and image) or intrinsic (in pursuit of personal growth, relationships or giving to others) - is vital to the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, motivation and wellbeing. It may be that one outcome of the lockdown was that many of people's self-defined goals were displaced overnight by goals and expectations imposed by others, with little or no guidance or support. One might also suggest that many felt compelled to focus on new and troubling existential goals above any previous priorities.

Each of the groups - parents, teachers and students - frequently spoke the language of inadequacy, incapacity and incompetency, or highlighted where they had been surprised by unexpected examples of excellence (or just adequacy). Our choice of language here is not accidental. The emergence of spoof Ofsted signs in home-schooler parents' windows during the first lockdown might be seen as a tragicomic symbol of the fear of being judged a 'good parent', a 'good teacher' or a 'good student'.

People need to feel effective and build self-identities around roles at which they can excel and gain recognition. In the context of the lockdown where they were thrust into new roles with new expectations, one might suggest that those in our discussion groups were giving voice to their experience of losing their identity as a parent, as a teacher, and as a student or child.

### TAKEAWAYS

It is striking that much of the language used in the discussion groups - particularly by parents - was around failure and inadequacy, mirroring one of the prevailing critiques about the reductive and selective nature of the English school system.

» *Were parents made to feel as if they were 'graded' on the basis of their resources, ability or background in the same way - it is argued - their children are? If so, what does that mean?*

## #12 INSIGHT

Any assumptions we might have about people's experience of lockdown should be explored and confirmed before they are used as a basis for action.

## Unfamiliar demands

With new roles come new demands which, in this case were largely undesired and unwelcome. Complaints were made to the great nameless 'they' which was used as a way of personifying whoever - or, more likely, whatever - was to blame...

"They didn't really explain it. When we did the end of year five test, they didn't explain it."

"But when I went into year six, there was some work that we did in year five, but I didn't really understand. So I was kind of left behind and I was too shy to ask the teacher."

"In the beginning, I think there was, in some subjects, unrealistic workloads. They assume that three teachers in the same subject all set work and we'll be able to get through that in a day whilst getting on with other work as well."

"I'd say at some point, I was completing more work at home than what I have done in school in the past year."



### Teacher

"My days were very, very long. I would say another three or four hours on my normal school day."

### Leader

"There was a time when I just had constant information and propaganda coming through from the DfE and the local authority. It was almost like PTSD or shellshock. It sounds like I'm over exaggerating. Sometimes there'll be four days of these emails I've just got to check."



"Some of it was ridiculous, like early on, they were like build a rocket ship. Yeah, like in our spare time we're gonna build a rocket ship."

"What we got offered was a great big splurge of websites and activities... loads and loads of resources. But we're shattered by the time we sit down. I don't want to now try and curate a list of activities that they might do."

"I guess the key thing that I remember is the impossible juggle of work and home-schooling."

"Although they never said it felt like they were still working on the premise that there will be a parent at home, doing stuff."

"I was working very early in the morning, and then taking over the afternoon shift for the home-learning. Pretty exhausting when by that time you've done an eight-hour day already. And then you've got to learn what the slave trade was all about!"



## #13 INSIGHT

Demands which are passed (or delegated) across a system can be felt greatest by the people at the end of the line - the children - who cannot themselves pass them on.

## Hope

Perhaps to help face the challenges presented by new and unfamiliar demands, and the sense of incompetence they engendered, people seem to have set unrealistic expectations themselves; hoping for fantastic outcomes...

"There's a lot of pressure now, as things go back to normal. There's going to be a lot of focus on us and our exams after last year. But the teachers are also reminding us a lot that we're near the end of our courses and have to change pace a bit. It's like everyone's trying to forget."



### Teacher

"I think in education we're so good at turning negatives into positives, because that is what we do every day."

### Leader

"One thing I say to myself is before I retire, if I can have some impact on us moving forward more positively in the way that we know we should be, instead of somebody telling us how to do it. If we miss that chance now I will never forgive myself."



"I said, because even though we're not physically going to school, you still have school. I know we're locked down but we still have to learn. So he did PE with Joe, he had his book reading on his free time. But I was like, we have to get schoolwork done. That's important. Education is important. Yes, we're locked down, but it's going to be over soon, there'll be probably one more week of home-school and we'll be in school. And I just kept that going. And then six months later, we're still in lockdown."

"It was a total mind melt plus I lost loads of weight, because I was just not even really eating. The school never contacted us, actually. We had sort of parent mail, which basically said, don't contact us, like astonishing, actually."

"I remember I had this big grid set up and was very organised and planned, and I sent it to my team saying, this is how I'm structuring my time. And then after a day, that was just thrown out the window completely. It was just all fantasy land, anyway."

"So I feel like my expectations would never be met, but they did the best that they could with a really, really poor situation."



## #14 INSIGHT

There is a great deal of hope and expectation at all levels in the system. Some of this is likely to be unrealistic, which could result in disappointment and alienation if not discussed.



## Understanding

There were frequent expressions of sympathy and empathy; an awareness that others were facing unfamiliar and unrealistic demands too, and that they were either rising to the occasion or otherwise...

*"I think like when we originally came back was like a big like rush and panic, we're still going to uni, we're still going to have our exams, we were so used to not worrying about these things because they were in the unknown, that when reality hit there was a bit of a panic."*

*"When we went into year 6, the teachers were expecting less of us, because the work was really easy. I think they expected we didn't learn in lockdown. But we were like, this is so easy. We did learn."*

STUDENT

*"I got a real insight into the capacity of the people around me, the way the school actually operates because of them, not because of me. I think it's a big headship lie that you tell yourself: 'this place is great because of me'. And there are lots of things that that allow you to think that. So this was an absolute revelation."*

*"I feel a bit embarrassed really saying it, but I think I've had to really concentrate on being aware of my own wellbeing, because I felt I couldn't."*

LEADER

*"I think initially they tried really hard and were quite empathetic about what was going on. And that continued on for a while."*

*"The teachers weren't great through lockdown, but I think it was a difficult situation. I thought it was pretty poor, but forgivable as teachers were pretty burned coming into that."*

*"We've been doing it for three hours, it's not making sense, or the computer's not working. I'll sit with you. We'll go through each question slowly together. And he was getting flustered. I was getting frustrated, because there are things that I didn't know as a kid. And now it's there on the screen. And I'm trying to explain to him and he's not understanding."*

*"I suppose what struck me most I think, was this huge juggling act of schools were trying to do."*

*"The school took a very relaxed approach; caring about your mental health, you know, take things easy, etc. And then two weeks later, quite an aggressive email saying your daughter has not submitted this work. It's like 'whoa'. You can't say that we're looking after mental health and then demand work in the next couple of weeks."*

PARENT

## Communication

The Coronavirus pandemic is the most intense crisis in living memory and as such has driven great uncertainty, created significant stress and anxiety, and prompted people to focus only on the present moment; to adopt tunnel vision.

In this state, when people are unsure about what they know and what information they can trust in the face of an existential threat, the need for guidance and clarity is acute, whilst the capacity to absorb complex information is limited. In its absence, our natural tendency is to turn to fantasy, whether it is of our own making or borrowed from social media.

It was clear from the discussions that people - parents in particular as they struggled in isolation with their new roles - were looking for leadership from their children's schools. As the school's 'Newly Unqualified Teachers', they were looking for words and advice to help them feel safe, to help them understand and adjust to their new role, and to help them cope emotionally. In the main, it seems that such support was unavailable.

This is not to be critical of schools or school leaders, who were adapting to the dynamic situation at the same time as the parents were, but rather it is to emphasise the suggestion that a lack of contact during lockdown appears to have been felt as a lack of care, and that communication is counterproductive if it is only one-way.

### TAKEAWAYS

There is much to learn from the experience of parents during the pandemic about how teachers might communicate with them as colleagues, and how the home might be maintained as an extension of the classroom, long after it has ceased to be a replacement.

- » Are schools ready and willing to accept parents as colleagues?
- » How can the relationships that would require be properly managed?
- » What would such a transformation require from an organisational perspective?

### #15 INSIGHT

Learning was going on at all levels, about oneself and about others, and that this might be of greater long-term value than any 'loss' of subject-learning.



## Contact as care

Few parents spoke of having adequate contact with their child's school; most expressed a lack of 'communication'. Of particular note though is the strength of emotion about this, suggesting that it wasn't just information that was needed, but care...

*"But my parents are from a different country, so they don't know. I'm just doing this curriculum on my own, my parents are both like just somewhere else."*

STUDENT

*"I felt I was not just worrying about their education, but worrying about their welfare, their well-being. We were ringing home every fortnight and I would look forward to those phone calls. The parents wanted to talk to me as well as the children and we would laugh so it was good. And, you know, we've built a community at school, and we're part of that community."*

*"Our communication strategies had to go up about 18 notches. So every day we're trying to feed out reassuring messages, being very open and transparent with everybody, allowing them to use the chat facility so we can send out frequently asked questions at the end of the day."*

TEACHER

*"I think some of the communication with school didn't help. There's a lot of mixed messaging."*

*"I think a bit like others have said I felt frustrated in terms of the lack of contact with school."*

*"And then we finally had some interaction from the teachers, but that wasn't until the first of June and was limited to a kind of 'well done' if somebody put something meaningful online."*

*"I just want a little more back from you as to why you're doing what you're doing and how you've come to some of your decisions. Because otherwise I am sitting here feeling a bit abandoned."*

*"The school has always put a real emphasis around the wellbeing of the child, but I felt like the lack of communication, particularly in the first few months, really did not speak to that sort of ethos that they had put forward as being the end all and be all of them as a school."*

*"It was like pulling teeth trying to get information and context."*

*"If I had anything I could say to schools and teachers it would be just keep talking to us, just tell us what's going on. Because we will understand or at least try to understand if you can explain what's happening. But to know nothing in the midst of what is already a fairly chaotic situation is just frustrating for the best intentioned and the most patient parents in the world."*

PARENT

### #16 INSIGHT

Communication is important not just as a means of information transfer, but as a vital form of care and contact.

## Listening

Parents were the recipients of whatever communication was provided by schools, but it seems they (and their children) had few opportunities to be (or feel) heard themselves, further exacerbating their sense of isolation...

*"As a school leader, am I going to use this as an opportunity to really listen, or are we going to do what we always did?"*

LEADER

*"You just kind of wanted to scream but you knew no one was listening."*

*"I think we had maybe over the course of those two or three months, we maybe had one, one or maybe two phone calls from a teacher. Are you still there? Are you okay? Of that kind of nature."*

*"I felt that we were sometimes talking past each other."*

*"I wasn't surprised with their shocking lack of support. Well, it wasn't shocking to me because of my prior experience, but it was funny listening to everyone else go, why aren't they telling us this? Why are they so bad? And I'm thinking, well, they're just reverting to type."*

*"I really appreciated the fact that even though everything was going crazy, they had this thing where they're looking after the new year 7s and wanted them relaxed and prepped for the new year. And in June, they sent out a pack which said when you come back in September, we're going to be doing some of the smart stuff and academic subjects, but you don't have to do any of that over the summer. My son felt like he could enjoy his summer holidays."*

PARENT

### #17 INSIGHT

Communication has to be two-way, with as much (if not more) attention paid by schools to how to listen as to broadcast.

## Imagining the unknown

In the absence of contact or communication people fantasised about what was going on, leading some to feelings of envy about having missed out to others, or speculation about what was going on behind 'closed doors'...

"The teacher posted the answers by accident so everyone could see if they wanted to. I bet a few people did. I didn't do this."

"I bet some of the teachers would just be posting the work and then like relaxing, like it's the summer holidays."

STUDENT

"And my son would be like, Oh, did I do a good job? I don't know. It just says thanks. And you know, we weren't getting any feedback."

"So just give me give me a little bit of background here because you know, I'm not a teacher, I don't work in education, but I'm a professional you know, I've got an understanding of how things can be complex. I just want you to give me some context about some of your decision making, rather than giving a very brief amount of information and forcing me to read between the lines."

"None of us had any sense of what was actually going on behind doors. We knew school wasn't closed. We also knew that our kids weren't really getting much work. And have they said, 'look, here are all the things we're trying to do at the moment'. But they just went silent on us. And there was nothing we could do with that except speculate."

"It's really hard to understand it; to get your head around how schools could have responded so differently. I still don't know the answer. But that's made it probably a little bit harder, because you hear these stories, but you just don't understand why the response was so different across the country, across same city, across the same area."

PARENT

*"If I had anything I could say to schools and teachers it would be just keep talking to us, just tell us what's going on. Because we will understand or at least try to understand if you can explain what's happening. But to know nothing in the midst of what is already a fairly chaotic situation is just frustrating for the best intentioned and the most patient parents in the world."*

Parent

### #18 INSIGHT

Contact (or communication) has an important role to play in filling a void which would otherwise, particularly in a stressful situation, be filled by other means.

# 3. Purpose

*/ˈpəːpəs/*

*noun*

The reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists.

A person's sense of resolve or determination.

*verb*

Have as one's intention or objective.

## Being a student (& child)

Throughout the discussion groups, the focus of the adults was unsurprisingly on the wellbeing of the child; on their mental health, their missing-out on experiences and 'rites of passage', their ability or otherwise to engage with school and friends.

The students themselves expressed a preoccupation with the experience of isolation, of being 'stuck', in 'limbo', uncontained and exposed, of missing friends and the 'buzz' of school life. They were concerned about being confronted with choices and experiences usually associated with those older than them, and with having to grow up too quickly. This was occasionally expressed as a sense of entrapment (in a "zoo"), perhaps highlighting the sudden lack of school as a separate social system in which students can develop their own identities away from parents and domestic responsibilities. The loss of the relational aspects of school - expressed in relation to friendships but appearing also to apply to teachers - was deeply felt as a void.

The switch to online learning was largely unwelcome, and the technology itself was described mainly in obstructive terms, and as an inconvenience. Remote learning was experienced emotionally as 'distant' and 'disconnected'. This perhaps challenges prevailing assumptions that young people are largely at ease with digital media as a replacement for 'real' interaction, or indicates that the technology lacked a key social element.

Students were also very aware that their parents were having a hard time, and there's a palpable sense of guilt for this. They are aware of the sacrifices being made for them, of how difficult it was for their parents to step into the teacher role, of the risks being taken by teachers (as 'keyworkers') at schools that had remained open. It was difficult in the discussions to encourage students to accept our invitation to talk about how they had felt, and this may relate somehow to the sense of responsibility they had internalised.

### TAKEAWAYS

Children seemed confused by the shift in expectations and practice around their role as students, and troubled by the dissolution of the boundary between school (where they had been learning to develop their own identity away from home) and home (where they are a 'child').

» *What adjustments need to be made by schools to their 'recovery plans' to help children find themselves at school again?*

## Student preoccupations

*"The technology was the worst. I couldn't figure out what was what? I thought this thing was in one place, but it wasn't... it was in the opposite."*

*"Sometimes it's really hard to write on it. Even if you have like an iPad pen. It's just still really hard."*

*"It was really confusing because our teachers sent the wrong codes and I've got like five different identities. There were only a few people who got the right passwords. I only know one of them."*

*"You don't get to go to the pantomime... you have to watch it on the computer."*

*"Well, it's a different kind of teaching. I don't think everyone adapted to this."*

*"As things went on it got annoying. It's hard doing work at home. There were constantly internet connection issues and stuff. So classes would lag and the screen would go blank sometimes. It wasn't fun. It stopped being enjoyable pretty quickly."*

*"I think teachers were frustrated as well, especially when the lessons weren't going how they'd planned them to go, and the technology failed. It was like they were fighting the technology sometimes. We'd have to stop for ten minutes when they tried to fix it."*

*"I don't remember going out with friends and not having to think about the whole Covid thing."*

*"I think my experience is different to many others because I lived in a house with people with Covid. So I had a lot of time by myself, locked away in real isolation. But it was my own fault."*

*"Yeah, everyone has had to adapt haven't they. A lot of people have been in really unfortunate circumstances because of work and things so I think everyone here has realised how lucky we actually are. And that we can get through this together."*

*"Wearing a mask or standing a few centimetres apart and not seeing people in the family is not that bad. It's not that hard when you think about the sacrifice that other people have made and that people have died."*

STUDENT

## Enactment

There were several points in the discussion groups when we felt the participants' experiences were enacted or represented indirectly through an interaction or behaviour. These may have occurred as a form of unconscious communication, or they may have been fortunate coincidences which simply helped us make sense of the material. Either way, we feel that the following experience adds colour and nuance to the findings, and makes some sense of what the children were dealing with:

*The second discussion group with students was arranged directly with the school, though it was very difficult to get hold of the contact and wasn't clear up until half an hour before the scheduled start time that it would go ahead as planned.*

*As the Zoom session began, my screen was filled with six images from six laptops which were being set up in the same room by an IT technician who was moving from one screen to the other, adjusting the screen and volume. The microphone on one of the laptops was on and I could hear him whispering to himself, above the murmur of excited voices outside the room. I had the sense of being an unwelcome visitor or a distraction.*

*As the students walked in, they appeared in and disappeared from different images and then re-appeared in others. As they sat and each laptop was unmuted, there was incredible feedback, which was being played back to them through speakers in the room, causing them to cover their ears. I could then see and hear the technician panic and rush round the table to mute the laptops, knocking one over. I felt quite nauseous at this point.*

*I questioned the use of multiple laptops in the same room and was told it was to enable social distancing. It took a further five minutes for the technician and I to find a feedback-free solution, which involved having only one laptop unmuted by the technician at a time when a student wanted to respond. This then failed so the technician closed down all but one laptop, meaning I could only see (and hear) only five and a half of the dozen or so students, plus the occasional head as someone else joined in.*



## Being a parent

Parents struggled during lockdown, balancing competing priorities, adapting to new roles and goals, keeping their households safe and secure, battling with technology, maintaining relationships with their children and others in close proximity... the list goes on.

However, the struggle was unequal. Some in this sample were under significantly more pressure than others, and it is safe to assume that we saw just the tip of the iceberg. We were more than aware, for example, that our sample was limited to those with access to a device for the Zoom calls and an internet connection. But the voice of those who were excluded by this requirement - and who would therefore have been excluded from the experiences of school we were discussing - were heard in the sessions, albeit faintly.

There was an awareness of (and support for) a process of prioritisation going on; an allocation by schools of resources to families and parents who needed the most help. And yet the sense that one (and one's children) were 'insignificant' compared to those in need was discomfiting. Linked to this was a sense of envy for the imagined or rumoured or fantasised or anecdotal experience of those whose schools had 'stepped' up'. Independent schools featured frequently in these envious reflections, the privacy and exclusivity of private schools becoming - for some - an imagined utopia behind a 'paywall', perceived to have been largely unaffected by the lockdown.

We were also struck by the extent to which the quality and nature of a child's school experience appears to be very bound up with parents' identity and are curious about how this has changed over time, driven - perhaps - by the concept of school choice and by the narrative around the 'terminal exam'.

In any event, it was clear that the pressures associated with a 'make-or-break' culture in the school system had entered the home and landed squarely on the shoulders of parents.

### TAKEAWAYS

How one felt about being a parent in lockdown was greatly influenced by income and class and this was reflected in preoccupations with the inconsistency of experience (including with respect to technology), along with feelings of envy and a sense of some kind of prioritisation. Parents 'knew their place' as 'good' or 'inadequate', with the label 'outstanding' reserved for an imagined elite.

» *Is it realistic for schools to be expected to 'solve' these social and cultural issues? Is there a danger of schools being blamed for them?*

## Parental preoccupations

*"I was getting frustrated because we don't have a printer, so we were having to physically trace diagrams off the screen onto paper to then do the work to then take pictures of it to then send back. And we're pulling our hair out. There were days where he was just like, 'do I really have to do this?' And I'm like, 'but education is important. Schools expect you to do the work'. And then, just before the summer holidays, I found out he was one of six kids who did the work every day out of class of 30."*

*"I feel incredibly frustrated. I saw differences in friends' children at different schools and how they switched to online learning so much quicker. They were just back in and they were learning straight away."*

*"I know from our class Facebook group that a lot of children were not doing any work at all, either because the parents were working full time and it was all too much, or because they simply didn't have the competence or the knowledge to be able to help their children with what was required."*

*"I feel that my son was dealt a really, really good hand."*

*"We live in a very small city with one state school and one independent school. And the disparity was stark. The independent school were up and running, I think two days after lockdown with a full curriculum. And the only thing that was different was they didn't have to show up in the morning in their uniform, but they still registered for every lesson."*

*"I do think it is it's down to money, and it's to do with it access."*

*"I was trying to work full time, and my husband was trying to work full time, and we were both in our house with our five- and seven-year-olds. Up until the end of April - when thankfully my employer put me on furlough - I was waking up at 6am and trying to cram as much as I could in until 10. My employer was still arranging meetings when I had booked out time to try to do some sort of educational activity with my children. If one of our meetings went over, it was a disaster, because the other of us had another meeting lined up. And we were just turning the TV on to get through the day. I was falling asleep at eight o'clock when I put my daughter to bed."*

*"My frustration is that a small minority of state schools were able to do it, and that a large majority of independent schools did it. And they did it through hard work. They stepped up. Whereas the teachers at my school just did not work very hard."*

*"Although her teacher was willing to come on and do a class Zoom with the kids, because some of the other staff didn't want to do that with their classes she wasn't allowed to do it with hers."*

*"School probably didn't email and contact in as much as probably some of the parents would have wanted, but the children and families that needed support were the focus. For example, I know that our next-door neighbour who is unfortunately terminally ill, got a phone call every single week from school to check how their kids were getting on and what was happening. I knew that we were insignificant because we had what we needed."*

*"I could make a guess that there was some prioritisation going on about who they thought needed most contact. It would have been nice if someone had said something along those lines, so you didn't have to work it out."*

*"We shielded daddy and we kept him safe, which is such a powerful thing to say to the other children."*

*"The children were remarkably resilient, and they learned lots of new skills because they had to, in terms of things like just getting on with learning. They didn't have Microsoft Teams, they didn't have Zoom, their schools didn't do that. So they were just working from different platforms on online learning, but not engaging with their teachers, apart from via email, and messaging, and stuff like that. But they were very resilient in terms of being able to work independently."*

*"When school started giving us work it started off fairly easy. We'd go into Bitesize and send stuff in on Teams. But then as soon as we sent something in the teacher would reply and add more work, so soon we were having like nine-hour days... doing schoolwork for nine hours straight."*

*"When the school turned on the online work for his year group, I actually witnessed some quite inspirational teaching."*

*"I remember at one point sitting with her and looking through a PowerPoint about poetry, and reading a page about accidents and thinking, what am I doing? I'm reading a page about accidents with somebody who's eight years old, you know, and neither of us really knew what it was about and were thinking this is just absolutely pointless."*

*"I wasn't surprised that schools are flailing around because they still act as if they're in the last century when it comes to it. I think the pandemic has just shown some truths about schools."*





## Being a teacher or leader

Whilst it is clear from a range of different sources that teachers and school leaders have been under great pressure at various times since the pandemic reached the UK, we were surprised that it didn't appear to be a significant preoccupation when reflecting on their experience of the first lockdown.

Instead, the impression one gets from the transcripts is that the period of relative calm (and we use that phrase tentatively) provided educators with a rare space for reflection, renewal and development. Many said they had had time to consider their priorities and their practice - the process of teaching - and that certain needs usually kept at the margins of their consciousness were suddenly and unavoidably right there in front of them. One might go so far as to characterise the experience as a sort of a reckoning.

Again, this sample's experience is not representative of every teacher or school leader's, but it is an important addition to our understanding of the school system; that it took a crisis like the Coronavirus pandemic to create a space in which the profession could free itself from a constant cycle of activity to think about its priorities and to try something new. And the fast adoption of technology to enable remote delivery was certainly felt to be very new and very 'edgy'. This was in contrast to the experience of those parents who were more seasoned in the use of digital platforms for work and social activity.

Whilst there seems little appetite from anyone for the new model of predominantly online delivery to sustain, it seems unlikely that what has been learned will be forgotten, and that some of the innovative approaches that were found to work will be blended with some of what worked before. The importance of this paradigm shift is reflected in several of the parents' comments in prior sections too, concerning the fact that schools "still act as if they're in the last century". Not for much longer, one might suspect!

Something else that was voiced by the groups was a renewed appreciation for the teaching profession, symbolised perhaps both through the trials and tribulations of parents having to step into teachers' shoes, and the vital 'keyworker' status afforded to schools as key to 'the recovery'.

### TAKEAWAYS

The experience of being a teacher or school leader in lockdown appeared to be defined by the opportunity for growth; the space afforded to think and reflect on the real purpose of their endeavours and of the school system more generally.

» *How can the potential of this inflection point be realised?*

## Professional preoccupations

### Teacher

"I had to reinvent my way of teaching, so I've developed a lot as a practitioner through doing it. And joining networks, going to lots of drama network meetings, Zoom meetings online all the time. Remaining active and wanting to learn more, so I could deliver better lessons. So yeah, the digital world is a brand new, brave new world."

"What has really had an impact is that we've got a professional development programme all recorded; an anytime, anywhere approach with tasks to do in between each recording, live question and answer sessions, and so on. What we've seen is lots more staff engaging, because they can do it in their own time, engaging a lot more on the things that matter to them. Who would have known if somebody told us ten years ago that we would be doing that?"

"People have talked about the possibilities of what technology can do and then apologised for that, that it's not real. I'm interested in this tension. Obviously, something will be lost if you move to a kind of a digital platform. Nothing's going to replace a live theatre experience. But my kids are watching the National Theatre on demand on the RSC and they're imagining that they're there."

"There's this kind of creative tension isn't there between what you've been taught to deliver; what we know is the most effective form, which is the real-life context and the physical contact. And then there's these new possibilities that technology can bring to complement that. But there's an interesting space in between that feels quite dangerous."

"I think for me personally it was my disadvantaged children I was very concerned about and those were the children that absolutely needed that support or that extra work. And of course, some parents were not willing to bring the children in because it was very uncertain or very worrying for them. Some decided to keep their children at home, so we were making regular phone calls. But it still was not enough for me and I was just like, 'oh my gosh, I just wish that we could do something. We want the children here.'"

"What we have seen is a bigger gap appearing because the parents who have been at home working with the students have got much more involved in the topics and the parents who found that really difficult have moved further away. That gap has widened."

"I don't know when that's going to end or how far it's going to go. How far it's expected to go? And how much are we going to evolve?"

"Because we're using Zoom and all this other technology for work, it's also going into our social lives."

"We had 52% of the children in during lockdown and there was one teacher for fifteen children. The quality of teaching was glorious. If we just could guarantee that level of support, it would make a massive difference. There was just some lovely practice when there was just fifteen. The relationships were closer."

"The journey I went on was to become even more pragmatic than I usually am. I had to find a way of sort of switching off my over emotional brain."

### Leader

"Are we going to wait for the DfE to tell us what the data shows or are we going to mobilise right now as a profession and say, actually, the real lessons are different. Now you've had your dream, you know, your virtual thing and that AI will teach these kids and all that crap. It needs to be completely repudiated. I would say if it's proven anything at all, it's that the mechanisation and the industrialisation of education has gone way, way too far. A lot of these experiences that we're finding valuable now are the ones that the kids missed the most, which is the engagement, the relationships, the interaction and the community, and that we therefore have to fight to preserve them."

"And it's a weird thing to say, but there is just so much bullshit in education. For me, the pandemic is a marvellous confrontation with reality. All that stuff like Ofsted... it just fell away. And what you're left with is the kids we're trying to educate."

"The kids have come back and they have made it so abundantly clear to me that the technology sucked. That the teachers thought the tech was great, and they thought it was shit."

"I actually split the senior team in two and I said to one 'you need to be in charge of the day to day; I trust you'. And they took hold of that. And the other half of the team actually worked from home and we did Teams meetings every day, and just worked on vision and values."



## Voices from within

In addition to using themes to organise the experiences of our participants and the structure of this report, we explored evidence of subliminal or unconscious concerns expressed by participants through their use of idiom. Sandy Henderson has referred to these in his Listening Post reports as 'visceral images'; representations of deeply felt and unsurfaced preoccupations.

Idioms convey figurative meaning under and below the literal sense of the words used, but which is still important for interpreting (subconscious) emotional emphasis. The use of analogy and rhetoric might be taken to represent the affective content of the discussion.

Some of the idiomatic words and phrases presented in the discussion groups (in **bold**) have been woven into a narrative by the author to provide a different way of understanding the groups' underlying preoccupations. Obviously, this process involves some poetic and creative license on the part of the author, but it reflects his sense of both facilitating the groups and analysing the transcripts:

As a parent, I was **flat out** like the performer of a **balancing act**, trying to **juggle her needs** and **cram in as much as I could**, but it was **all just fantasy-land**. I wanted to **scream as everything went out the window**. We were left in a **real void**, and I had **brain fuzz** or **mind melt** as the pressure **took its toll** on me. But we had to carry on; it was **drilled into me** to keep going, so **I kept scrambling around**, trying to **build a rocket ship**. It was frustrating; **like pulling teeth**, but we were **armed and ready**. My daughter was **shell shocked**, but in the end the **teachers were burned**, and it was a **parenting win**.

As a teacher, we had a **confrontation with reality**. We **mourned the loss of school** and were **Zoomed out, flailing around** trying to do an **impossible job**, but were **all in the same boat**. By **pure luck**, by **serendipity**, the boat turned out to be a **life raft**. But I **plummeted** in the **bombardment; hit a brick wall**. I was **needed at the barricades**, on the **front line, fighting the technology** that **took us hostage**. But **the balloon had popped**. **We're all in it together** and **had cut through**.

As a child, it had felt like **my house was the only thing on the planet**, which was **intense** and **quite dangerous**. I **had to protect myself** from being **blown away**. The people around me were **bugging me** but **dropped like flies**. In the end, I had to **rise to the challenges** and **come back from the dead**, but looking back, it seems **like a pantomime**.

## Endings

The analysis of Listening Posts does not presume to offer a conclusion as such, but rather an invitation for the reader to draw their own conclusions from both the material available in the report and from their emotional response to it. We offer a series of insights and takeaways for the reader to consider but acknowledge (and emphasise) that these are far from exclusive.

Above all, the report represents an attempt to think about the experience of lockdown and what that might mean for the school system, and a call for others to do the same. It is difficult to think in the face of a threat like Coronavirus and in a context as dynamic as a global pandemic, but we are surely duty bound to do so. Understanding the pandemic as a portal requires an understanding of the human nature of the experience. It is only with that understanding that we can all cross the threshold safely, and together.

*"Crises and deadlocks when they occur have at least this advantage, that they force us to think."*

Jawaharial Nehru

## Looking outwards...

### A brief review of how the themes in this report are reflected in other studies

It is no surprise that the unprecedented impact on children's education of lockdowns and school closures has been widely studied and commented on, and that there is an increasing amount of data on the experience of lockdown available for review. Whilst this is far from a comprehensive review of that research, we include it here to illustrate how the themes emerging from our discussion groups resonate with the wider process of reflection and learning taking place throughout the system.

The most prominent themes in published studies are, perhaps, equality and mental health/wellbeing, but there is also a widespread desire to see the pandemic crisis as an opportunity for change... to step through the portal. An Institute of Education survey of primary school teachers noted that they "do not want to return to business as normal"<sup>7</sup> while the Edge Foundation report that "the most striking thing that parents and teachers agree upon is that they want this pandemic to lead to a much broader and more rounded education."<sup>8</sup>

The scale of 'today's crisis as opportunity' is seen by others as requiring "rethinking of four of the organisational premises of our schools" to prepare for a new normal: the teaching session, the concept of a 'a teacher', the curriculum, and assessments.<sup>9</sup>

#### Wellbeing

The wellbeing concerns link to our themes of relatedness and agency. Relationships, conflict and disruption all influence the foundations of wellbeing and, as the Listening Posts revealed, people have experienced lockdowns very differently. The OxWell survey run by the University of Oxford found that while 54% of pupils reported lower wellbeing, 24% felt their wellbeing was better.<sup>10</sup> It was the older pupils whose wellbeing was most compromised, perhaps reflecting the different nature of their social relationships as well as more anxiety about the future. Commenting on the findings, Professor Mina Fazel noted that "a lot more than academic learning takes place at school" and emphasised the importance of "unpicking the different and complex components that can help a young person thrive."

A Manchester Institute of Education study of 16-19 year-olds found that many described feeling a range of intense, difficult feelings during lockdown including sadness, worry, anxiety, irritability, fear, distress, loss, change, and uncertainty. The relational aspect of this was seen in participants "strong emphasis on the importance of staying connected to other people" but with many explaining "that they were feeling disconnected from others and finding this difficult" (though also reported "a sense of large-scale togetherness, where we're all in this together"). The disruption was seen in participants "feeling that their lives had changed because of the pandemic, sometimes dramatically so" and that "they felt they were missing out on important experiences and facing uncertain futures."<sup>11</sup> A study of younger pupils found that some had "had no face-to-face contact with friends for over four months."<sup>12</sup>

For school staff, stress and anxiety, as well as happiness and fulfilment, come from many sources. Interaction with pupils and parents, implementing change rapidly, relationships with colleagues, home circumstances and health concerns all involved change and were experienced differently. Both Ofsted<sup>13</sup> and the Nuffield Foundation<sup>14</sup> noted pressure on school leaders. However, the Nuffield data from around 8,000 teachers in England collected between September 2019 and September 2020 found that "slightly fewer teachers were highly-anxious about work after lockdown was imposed, with about one in 20 reporting very high anxiety compared to one in eight before lockdown." Inevitably, a headline result does not capture the mix of experiences and feelings reported in the Listening Posts.

#### Equality

This varied experience has heightened awareness of different forms of inequality and the future role of schools in addressing it. Digital inequality has been a major concern with IPPR noting an estimated one million children and their families do not have access to a device or connectivity at home.<sup>15</sup> Reflecting on teachers' digital competence in light of COVID-19, Neil Selwyn at Monash notes that one implication has been "the relocation of any 'class' wholly into the households of 25 different students" and that "it's no longer possible to work around differences in students' varying capabilities to engage in schoolwork at home."<sup>16</sup>

As well as the difference in students' technology resourcing there are also notable differences in students' support from parents and families to engage in technology-based schoolwork. Nuffield Foundation report a survey of over 4,000 parents in England showing that "children from better-off households are spending 30% more time each day on educational activities than are children from the poorest fifth of households."<sup>17</sup>

Teachers noticed this. The Institute of Education found that around half the teachers working in the more disadvantaged schools had become more aware of how poverty and overcrowding impact on student lives; two-thirds of the same teachers were more aware of how difficult home learning was. They note that "these types of insights into family life are likely to impact on how schools think about how they handle home school relations going forward."<sup>18</sup>

#### Boundaries and partnerships

This has led people to reflect on how the boundaries and partnerships between home, community and school might change. Reflecting on their survey of primary teachers, the Institute of Education note that "we can learn from the help schools have given their communities during this time, and use that knowledge gained to build a more rounded and resilient education system going forward."<sup>19</sup>

Commenting on the opportunity afforded by the pandemic to critically reflect on how school might support the children of families in financial hardship, one headteacher noted that children "spend a maximum of 1,330 hours in schools a year; the influence a school can have is limited in isolation, because the other 7,430 hours are beyond the reach and influence of a school." This is not a new issue, but an example of how the challenges of Covid have given new energy to reimagining the role of schools in a collaborative endeavour whereby "we could provide year-round opportunities to broaden horizons, keep children safe and fed, while engaging them in culturally rich experiences."<sup>20</sup>

Malcolm Groves, author of *Flipping Schools*, echoes this, noting that schools alone are only able to influence some 20-30% of the factors that affect educational achievement.<sup>21</sup> He sees the experience of lockdown and re-opening as reinforcing the need for *“greater recognition to the contribution of a school in building social capital, within and around itself.”* He goes on to suggest that more outward-facing schools need *“an unrelenting focus on the quality of relationships, on becoming a model of community itself - a place of trust, mutual respect and belonging”* and *“a commitment to seeking anew the active and on-going engagement of all stakeholders.”*<sup>22</sup>

Communication is essential to taking this forward and, as the Listening Posts revealed, the demands for new and enhanced communication during lockdown were not always easy to satisfy. This is one of the themes addressed in Big Education’s *Learning from Lockdown* blogs.<sup>23</sup> Fiona Forbes, for example, reports on a survey of parents emphasising the importance of communication and encouragement.<sup>24</sup> She notes that many parents described themselves as being ‘on their knees’, utterly exhausted and counting down the days.

## Care

This then links to the Listening Post theme of ‘contact as care’. As the pandemic opens up new boundaries and partnerships, it also prompts reflection on what caring might mean in the new context. At the start of the first lockdown, the initial question was ‘are you doing okay?’ Concern then spread, as we have seen, to mental health, wellbeing, and the disproportionate risk for some children that they would be left behind.

The Institute of Education’s survey of teachers found that their primary concern at the start of lockdown was with pupil welfare. In addition to checking how families are coping in terms of basic food, health and emotional needs, teachers saw providing support and advice for learning as a priority. This duty of care fell unevenly across schools. For schools in the most disadvantaged areas, monitoring and responding to the effects of poverty and hardship was more of a priority. Indeed, teachers in these schools were more likely to be spending time on activities not traditionally thought of as ‘teaching’.<sup>25</sup>

Staff, parents and pupils have all needed to experience care. While the pandemic created specific needs care will always be important. The fundamental importance of relationships in supporting pupils was summarised by one headteacher at a Schools of Tomorrow event: *“You have to build the relationships first. Nobody cares what you know until they know you care.”*<sup>26</sup> The Jack Petchey Foundation’s youth survey found that one in five young people reached out to a teacher or lecturer for emotional support during the lockdown, *“showing that educational staff provide more to young people than just teaching.”*<sup>27</sup>

## Technology and digital competence

The need to teach during lockdown has required a fundamental change in the channel of communication. Interaction with parents, pupils and colleagues has moved online. Like many other sectors, schools have seen a pandemic-driven acceleration in the adoption and use of technology. Learning from this period created the opportunity to reflect more intentionally on how it might be done well in the future. The Edge Foundation note that *“the entire education community has undergone a crash course in the use of an array of platforms”* and that *“this crisis could, and should, be the springboard to take the use of technology to the next level, as part of what we do all the time.”*<sup>28</sup>

Returning to Neil Selwyn’s reflection on digital competence during COVID-19, he notes that it *“has taught us all to value the social, emotional and profoundly relational nature of online education.”* He suggests that the COVID-19 experience *“has shown how it’s important to reassess how these familiar qualities and traits (such as flexibility, contextual awareness, and compassion) translate over into the less familiar settings of video conferencing and learning management systems.”* He concludes that talk about teachers’ ‘digital understanding’ or ‘digital confidence’ shouldn’t be taken to refer only to knowledge about technology but also *“teachers need to have good awareness of the social, emotional and affective aspects of technology-based education, and feel confident in their capacity to respond appropriately.”*<sup>29</sup>

Here again the challenges of lockdown are not new, but existing problems are seen in a new light and with added urgency. Sean Morris at the Digital Pedagogy Lab<sup>30</sup> has looked at these issues over many years. He notes that *“because digital spaces are not automatically equitable spaces, critical instructional design requires a willingness to course correct, to pivot, and often out of an empathetic response or a flash of new understanding about how students encounter the digital.”*<sup>31</sup>

Lockdown has seen great creativity and imagination as teachers, parents and pupils respond to new challenges. While challenging for some, for others it has represented encouragement and opportunity. One head of drama noted that *“there’s no doubt that lockdown was a challenging time, but it also forced us to move education in the direction it was already heading at a much faster pace.”* Using technology in new and exciting ways, he found the opportunity for the arts to lead the way in helping teachers *“find creative ways of teaching and to support students to develop their ability to express themselves and develop their levels of mindfulness and resilience as we all navigate this new normal.”*<sup>32</sup>



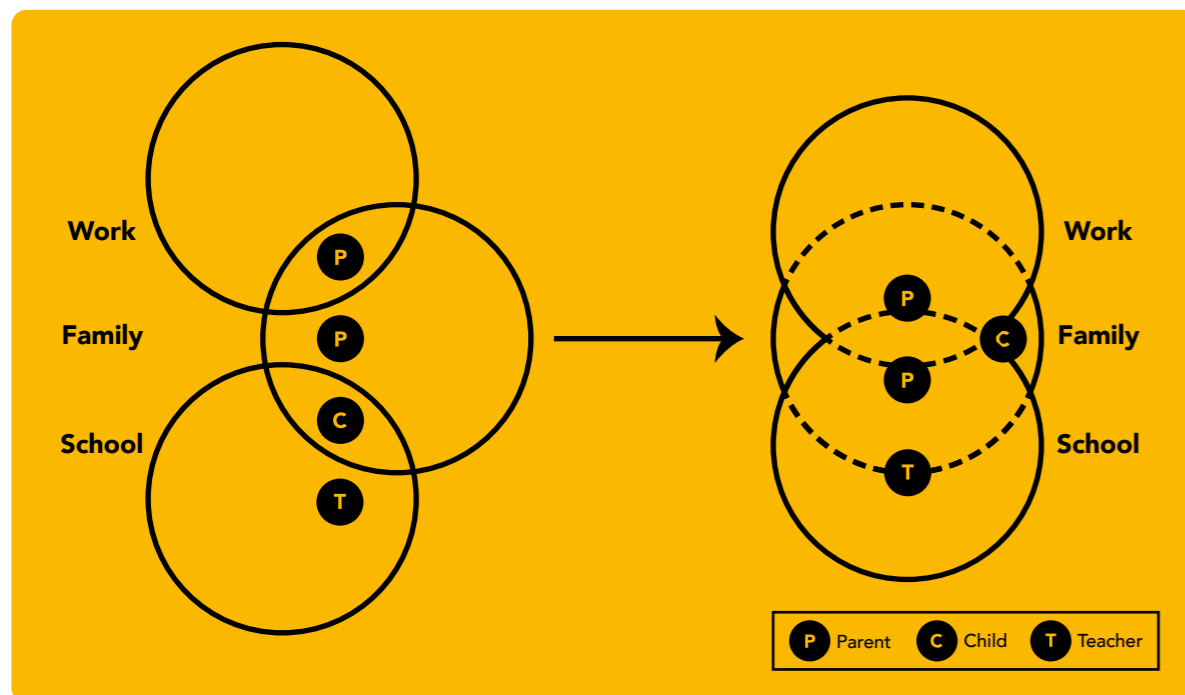
## Assessment

Finally, one big change from the experience of schooling during Covid was the cancellation of exams. Here too responses varied dramatically, with relief, anxiety, fear and hope all evident. One fear expressed was *“that increased scrutiny of children’s test results following the pandemic may lead to even more test-driven teaching and an impoverished, corner-cutting curriculum.”*<sup>33</sup>

Others see opportunity. So, for example, the Edge Foundation commented on *“the cancellation of the annual ritual of exams, along with the accompanying stress levels, and the challenge of marking scripts on an industrial scale”* and expressed the hope *“this might pave the way too for different types of qualifications, which assess a wider range of competencies, are taken at stage not age, and do well for all learners, not only those who are most academically able.”*<sup>34</sup>

## Changes in school, family and work systems

Linked to the ideas set out in the "Exposure" section on page 21, this is a tentative illustration of how the relationship between the school, family and work systems may have changed during lockdown, and where the key protagonists within these systems now locate themselves.



## APPENDIX: Notes on recruitment...

Parents were invited to participate via a link in the Parent Ping<sup>35</sup> app and directed from there to a brief online survey providing some detail about the study, asking them for some demographic data and contact details, and providing opt in and out opportunities. All but one of the 15 parent participants identified as female; four identified as BAME; 11 had only primary-aged children, three had only secondary-aged children, and two had children in both phases; all of the parents' children were in state-funded schools.

To recruit teachers and school leaders, we reached-out through our charity's network, again inviting interested parties to a brief online survey (as above). Nine of the 11 school-staff participants identified as female; five identified as BAME; seven were teachers, four were leaders; all worked in state-funded schools, five in primary and six in secondary, including one special school.

To recruit students, we first approached non-school groups like Scouts, Cadets, and so on, before approaching schools in our charity's network. This process was disrupted by the dynamic situation across England with rolling regional and national lockdowns and people in schools being difficult to contact due to workload and the need to isolate. We asked schools to field 8-10 students for each of the groups but can't say for sure how many participated in total as (we think) some remained out of view of the cameras and didn't speak. It was at least 22. Naturally, due to data and child protection policies, we were also kept socially-distanced from all demographic data on these participants.

It is notable that:

- We had many more parents sign up than we needed for the study and that everyone invited to the two sessions turned-up
- We had difficulty recruiting sufficient numbers of teachers and school leaders and that several of those who had signed-up to each session didn't show-up
- We had considerable difficulty getting access to groups of children and, whilst the expected number were present in each group, the technology provided by the school to mediate the discussion proved to be a limiting factor.

## Endnotes

- 1 OPUS - An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society ([www.opus.org.uk](http://www.opus.org.uk))
- 2 Notes on the recruitment process are included in an appendix on page 54
- 3 This sense of embattlement was expressed most clearly (and quite violently) through the use of idiom, as illustrated in the 'voices from within' sketch below.
- 4 See Orford, 1996; Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osborne, 1983; Youell, 2006, for example, after Winnicott, 1964
- 5 "At times the nature of the rivalry between parents and teachers, arising from the desire of both to gain positive attitudes from the child, can be such that both sides avoid each other altogether. The parents' unresolved feelings from their own school days, for instance, feelings of fear or rebelliousness which relate back to their childhood, may hold back or distort their contacts with the school staff. Parents may also be anxious about being criticized over shortcomings in the upbringing of their child on the one hand whilst on the other hand teachers may anticipate being blamed for learning and discipline failures, which may either lead to angry exchanges or inhibit communication altogether." Osborne (1983)
- 6 To an extent, this insight mirrors findings in ImpactEd's 'Lockdown Lessons' report and from ParentPing's regular parent surveys.
- 7 Moss\_DCDT Report 1 Final.pdf ([ucl.ac.uk](http://ucl.ac.uk))
- 8 [https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19\\_report\\_final\\_-\\_web.pdf](https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_report_final_-_web.pdf)
- 9 <https://www.uwl.ac.uk/news-events/news/experts-explore-future-education-following-covid-19>
- 10 <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-09-16-more-half-year-12-students-report-poor-mental-wellbeing-lockdown>
- 11 [https://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/education/research/impact/teenagers-experiences-of-life-in-lockdown/?mc\\_cid=b4f394b24e&mc\\_eid=bf100c6c2a](https://www.seed.manchester.ac.uk/education/research/impact/teenagers-experiences-of-life-in-lockdown/?mc_cid=b4f394b24e&mc_eid=bf100c6c2a)
- 12 Children's reflections on home education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for the return to school – School of Education Blog ([bristol.ac.uk](http://bristol.ac.uk))
- 13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-covid-19-series>
- 14 <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/teachers-well-being-largely-unaffected-by-lockdown>
- 15 <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/children-of-the-pandemic>
- 16 <https://lens.monash.edu/2020/04/30/1380217/online-learning-rethinking-teachers-digital-competence-in-light-of-covid-19>
- 17 <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/educational-gaps-are-growing-during-lockdown>
- 18 Moss\_DCDT Report 1 Final.pdf ([ucl.ac.uk](http://ucl.ac.uk))
- 19 Moss\_DCDT Report 1 Final.pdf ([ucl.ac.uk](http://ucl.ac.uk))
- 20 <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/post-covid-19-a-brave-new-world>
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- 32 <https://curiousminds.org.uk/lessons-from-lockdown/>
- 33 Children's reflections on home education during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for the return to school – School of Education Blog ([bristol.ac.uk](http://bristol.ac.uk))
- 34 [https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19\\_report\\_final\\_-\\_web.pdf](https://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_report_final_-_web.pdf)
- 35 See [www.parentping.co.uk](http://www.parentping.co.uk)... we are indebted to Karen Wespieser and her team for enabling this access

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Definitions from Oxford Languages.



# The Poem in Quarantine

The poem is trying to convince itself all families  
are like Russian dolls, tells everyone the hokey kokey

is its favourite song. If this poem were autumn, it  
would not be dry enough for leaf fights, if it were

spring the daffodils would be stars a little worse  
for wear. But this poem is neither, its season is the

smudge, at 17:36 pm. The poem tries to walk it off,  
but the rule is the muck is there even if

you can't see it. The poem diverts eyes like a  
fisheye mirror It's heavy isn't it, the poem thought,

with the whole sky above your head, and can  
that be technically allowed? Birds fly

above the poem's head in a V-shape like  
the sky is telling the poem to fuck off. The day

this poem pulls out the plug everything  
will sink into the ground like water pouring

into a moat some child dug at the beach  
and leave just the shells on the windowsill.

This is no way to live. Only knowing the time  
by the temperature of your tea, seconds

by your heartbeat when it's in the nature of a poem  
to burn bridges, to smell the coffee, to go break  
some more glass.

**Linnet Drury**

*Taken from a collection of poems by children taught by poet and teacher Kate Clancy  
at Oxford Spires Academy, from <https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/kate-clanchy-lockdown-poetry>*





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