



Department
for Education

16-19 Learners' Experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic

Research report

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Social Research

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Executive Summary

The DfE commissioned independent research agency Family Kids & Youth to carry out qualitative research to understand and explore how the learning and wellbeing of 16–19-year-olds has been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of the research was to explore young people’s experiences of lost learning and to find out how they have been affected by restricted school and college attendance since March 2020.

The research explored young people’s experiences of educational recovery support and how they felt about the support measures that have been introduced. The purpose was to gather evidence and insight to inform ongoing policy work that supports young people’s educational recovery.

The qualitative research,¹ consisted of 15 online paired interviews with young people aged 16-19 in full time education. As such, results are not generalisable to the wider population, but provide an in-depth picture of the experiences of the young people interviewed. All young people were recruited from deprived areas of Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester, as defined by the ONS [‘Index of Multiple Deprivation’](#). Sub-groups of the 30 young people included Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), English as a 2nd language, disadvantaged learners,² and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).

Research participants reported finding online learning difficult. They felt that learning in the home environment was disruptive and did not allow for the ‘hands-on’ practice some students required for their field of study.

Some learners reported having issues with receiving laptops from their school, causing them to miss lessons altogether, and those that did have laptops sometimes found the technology difficult to use which limited their engagement in remote learning e.g., cameras not working, internet dropping out.

Restricted attendance at schools and colleges had an impact on the mental health of the young people involved in the research. Participants reported feeling demotivated to do work, missed socialising with their peers, and felt disappointed and sad that they had to skip traditional milestones, such as the prom or last day at school.

¹ **‘Qualitative research’** looks in-depth at people’s lives to give a sense of their experience. It is not quantifiable and does not necessarily reflect the views of the wider population. For more details see: Busseto, L; Wick, W; Gumbinger, C (2020) [‘How to use and assess qualitative research methods’](#). *Neurological Research and Practice Vol 2 Article number 14*

² **Disadvantaged learners**, to include those eligible for free school meals (FSM) at age 11-15, students in ‘block 1’ (economic disadvantage based on IMD), students in ‘block 2’ (low prior attaining in maths and English) for funding purposes – **based on Index of Multiple Deprivation for area**.

Face-to-face lessons were highly appreciated by participants once these resumed. Young people liked being in a classroom setting but felt there was room for improvement in terms of the sessions arranged by their institution to aid educational recovery.

Research participants reported that the educational recovery sessions arranged by their institution were not always specialised or sufficiently detailed. The number of students in the sessions was an important factor for the participants. One-to-one or small group sessions were popular with young people of all backgrounds to help them recover from the impact of the pandemic on their education, as were having sessions built around their existing timetable.

The young people in the research also felt that educational recovery sessions should consist of multiple approaches, including both online resources and personal support.

Introduction

Background and Research Objectives

Measures for supporting 16-19 learners were announced by DfE [in June 2021](#), as part of a wider 'education recovery' package. These included extending the Tuition Fund (an existing policy) to support low attainers, and giving Y13s (or equivalent) the option to repeat up to one year where their learning was significantly impacted by Covid-19 (launched in September 2021).

Like all learners, students aged 16-19 (in further education and school settings) have had their learning disrupted by Covid-19.³ This disruption was felt to be particularly acute amongst disadvantaged learners, for whom the pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing attainment gap.⁴

To further strengthen Covid-19 educational recovery support for this cohort, the DfE commissioned a qualitative research study, to be carried out with a range of 16-19 learners, to improve its understanding of how young people's learning and wellbeing had been impacted by the school and college closures, their perception of the need for 'catch up' and how they felt about different support measures that have been introduced. The insight and evidence gathered will be used to inform ongoing policy work and decisions for this cohort.

³ Sharp, C., Nelson, J., Lucas, M., Julius, J., McCrone, T. and Sims, D. (2020). *Schools' responses to Covid-19: The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020*. Slough: NFER.

⁴ Department for Education (2021) *Understanding Progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year: Findings from the summer term and summary of all previous findings*.

Research Method

Fieldwork took place from the 14th September – 1st October, 2021. It was unable to take place before this date as recruitment in schools and with young people was challenging during the school holidays.

Participants were recruited by Family Kids & Youth's team of recruiters in Middlesbrough, Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester. We had previously contacted schools in Middlesbrough and Newcastle in the hope of conducting interviews in school, but because of timing (return to new school year in September), none felt able to help.

Recruitment Sample:

- 15 paired interviews with young people were conducted⁵
 - All participants were aged 16-19
 - C1C2/DE socioeconomic background⁶
- All young people were recruited from areas of deprivation according to the ONS [‘Index of Multiple Deprivation’](#).
- All young people were in full time education
- Sub-groups of the 30 young people included:
 - Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)
 - English as a 2nd language
 - Disadvantaged learners
 - Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)

The project brief had suggested individual in-depth interviews, but FK&Y recommended paired interviews since in our experience young people feel more comfortable about sharing their experiences if they are with a friend.

While we learnt a great deal from speaking on average for 60 minutes, in-depth, to a wide range of 30 young people in areas of deprivation, this was not quantitative research and the opinions are those of the 30 young people who took part, and not a nationally representative sample 16–19-year-olds in England. Interview findings have been used by the DfE to inform ongoing policy for 16-19 year olds as part of education recovery.

⁵ A paired interview consists of two interviewees and one interviewer

⁶ National Readership Survey (2016) ‘Social Grade’, available at <http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/>, accessed 25th October 2021.

How has the learning of 16–19-year-olds been impacted by Covid-19 related restricted attendance at schools and colleges?

Face-to-face vs. online learning



The Home environment

Participants were asked about their experience of online learning during lockdown, how this compares to face-to-face learning and the overall impact it had on their education.

Participants reported finding online classes difficult and found that being at home was a challenging environment for remote learning. In some cases, there was too much noise or disruption to allow young people to concentrate. For others, there were too many distractions such as social media or family.

“When you’re at home, you’ve got maybe a gaming console in front of you, your phone, your laptop. It’s easy to get distracted whereas at school you could always ask the teacher ‘can you explain this to me?’” - *Boy, age 17-18, English as a 2nd Language*

“Your house isn’t made to be a school” – *Girl, age 18, BAME*

The young people taking vocational courses felt there was only so much that could be learnt remotely or online before practical skills and techniques needed to be taught (vocational courses being studied included mechanical engineering, hairdressing and beauty). Some skills and techniques were difficult or impossible to learn at home. Similarly, artistic, creative, and some scientific experiments were difficult to carry out at home and participants missed out on the inspiration and stimulation of being in the art room or science laboratory. Being outside the school environment meant that some

resources were either missing or needed to be supplied by the student. Participants felt this was particularly difficult for disadvantaged students.

“I had to lug a sewing machine home on the bus and then I didn’t really have a good place to use it as I was sharing the kitchen table with my mum who was working” - *Girl, age 17-18, English as a 2nd Language*

Participants felt that a lack of teacher interaction and the physical stimulation of the classroom environment also had an impact on their learning at home. Without face-to-face interaction and a structured routine there was less accountability, leading to lower levels of engagement amongst some of the young people we interviewed.

“I had no reason to do it anymore... you’re not getting that face-to-face from a teacher saying you’ve done this work well...or like you’re not in the class environment...it’s just at home and like there’s nothing really encouraging you to carry on going” - *Girl, age 16, BAME/SEND*

“A lot of people didn’t do their online lessons. It was a lot easier to skip them. A lot of people got worse grades because they had to be at home” - *Boy, age 18, BAME*

Communication and information



Motivation during remote learning

We asked young people how it felt to participate in online classes.

Participants reported that online classes could be demotivating and were often lacking in interactivity. Many participants said they turned off their cameras during online lessons and there was a lack of motivation to engage. Peer influence sometimes meant that it was difficult to focus.

“Online is a lot easier to get distracted in. When I was doing it all you had to do was have your camera on for 30 seconds to say hello, then you could turn them off. I knew people that did that and were muted for an hour and a half. You have YouTube there and go and watch some nonsense rather than doing the learning” - *Boy, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

“Online learning was really hard because it was quite demotivating, because you just spent a lot of time in your room, on a laptop, and it was just quite hard to get used to” - *Girl, age 16, BAME/SEND*

Participants acknowledged that some teachers may have found it equally difficult to teach online, due to the increase in pressure to meet exam objectives and targets. Older students in particular picked up on these challenges.

“For them (teachers) it’s quite hard, physically they’ve had to get everything together” - *Boy, 17, BAME*

“I think they did the best they could in a really bad situation” – *Boy, 18, BAME*

Timetabling

Young people who were on vocational courses had timetables for when they would have practical and online learning, but these were sometimes hard to find, or clashed with other lessons meaning learning was missed.

“They had a timetable, but they didn’t share the timetable with everyone. They just posted it on the Instagram page, but some of us don’t have Instagram” - *Girl, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

Tests and assessments

As new ways to assess students were introduced, some of the research participants felt there was not enough time to understand what was expected of them, the new processes that had been implemented, or to prepare for the tests. This led to increased stress, and decreased motivation to learn further.

“They’re trying to prep us for mocks and GCSEs, but at the same time it’s like there’s too much stress on you, you feel like it’s a burden you can’t handle” - *Boy, age 16-17, Disadvantaged Learner*

“I know a lot of people who felt so pressured to get the grades it literally stressed them out and upset them” - *Boy, age 17-18, BAME*



Communication during online lessons

Research participants described how online lessons had changed the normal way of communicating with their teachers and peers and receiving feedback.

Some participants emailed or sent texts to their teacher for support and were aware that other students were doing this also, but there could be a long wait before receiving a reply. There were however several examples of teachers who went out of their way to be very supportive, providing personal support and input.

“It wasn’t as effective, as in like you understand lessons a lot better once you’re in the classroom and you’ve got a teacher talking to you in person” - *Boy, age 16, BAME*

“My English teacher, she was very helpful. She was always trying to push us saying ‘anything you don’t understand feel free to message me and I can arrange a 1 to 1 call’” - *Boy, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

“If you wanted to text them (teachers), they would take ages to text back because obviously they are on different lessons and they can’t text back. It was hard, it was really hard.” - Girl, age 17, Disadvantaged Learner

For some of the SEND young people who were interviewed, being able to stay after class and ask questions could make the difference between understanding and not understanding content. Even if teachers remained after a video lesson to assist, if other young people were also present some participants reported it could be uncomfortable to ask for help.



Parental and carer support

Research participants who said they had good parental guidance and support were able to successfully navigate their way through online learning and progress more easily. However, some respondents who had key workers as parents felt they were more likely to be self-sufficient as they were sometimes left on their own at home outside of school or college hours.

“One of my subjects, I’m really struggling so I’m actually thinking of just getting a tutor outside of school to help me with certain things...to be honest I would fund it myself...when your family’s not really education savvy they don’t really ask much about it” - *Boy, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

“If you email them (teachers), there were probably plans in place but I would go to my family first before going to the school” - *Boy, age 18, SEND*

For participants within multi-generational households with many siblings, family life restricted the space that could be used to work from home, as well as access to available digital devices and access to the internet, which made remote learning more difficult. Some BAME research participants also spoke about an additional pressure brought

about by a perceived need to please their parents and meet their expectations. Participants felt that the legacy of lost learning was more pronounced for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and lockdown accentuated existing disadvantages.

Disadvantaged young people and the digital divide



Access to remote learning

Participants were asked about the technology and devices they had for remote learning and whether these met their needs.

Many participants reported that there were often internet or laptop issues during their remote learning, making online classes difficult or completely inaccessible. Some participants did not have access to a laptop meaning that only their mobile phones were available for online learning. This affected their online experience and ability to complete their work. For example, not all functions on laptops were available on mobile apps, meaning some aspects of online lessons were missed.

“There were a couple of lessons where I did it from my phone, that’s not really good enough for online learning because it’s harder to keep track...we use Microsoft Teams so there’s the whole chat function” - *Boy, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

“It’s quite hard to access work from your phone...many stuff is on emails that you can’t open...sometimes I would find myself going on just for registration and then literally not being able to access the work” - *Boy, age 17-18, English as a 2nd Language*

If devices were damaged or broken during lockdown, participants had difficulty replacing them as demand was so high and help was not always available. There were several

examples cited of laptop and phone cameras stopping working partway through lockdown.

“I used to do Zoom calls on my phone, and obviously because my camera doesn’t work, and because I had told my teachers about that, they didn’t really have a problem with it as long as they could hear me” - *Girl, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

“They gave us computers to take home, but they weren’t that good. They didn’t work properly...you had to be in a certain room in the house to get good signal” - *Girl, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

Participants felt that at times issues with technology and devices got in the way of them catching up and this affected their confidence.

Additional technology needs

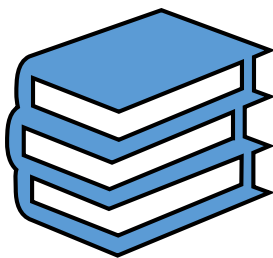
Whilst some participants had been given laptops, they reported receiving no guidance on how to use them, and did not know how to set them up or use the cameras for their lessons.

“Knowing me, me and computers are not really friends. So, it was a bit too hard for me to get onto the lessons” - *Girl, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

Maintaining the devices was also reported to be a problem by participants. If they had been lost or not charged then sometimes phones would be used instead, meaning that some aspects of the online lesson were not available. For some participants, laptops had arrived too late, and students had already started their college course.



Exam Preparation



GCSEs

Participants were asked to describe their experience of exam preparation during lockdown and what support would have been helpful around tests and exams.

Some of the students taking part in the research had been expecting to take GCSEs and preparing for this. However, with the introduction of lockdown it was suddenly unknown what would happen with exams and how these would be used to move forward with their education. Not knowing how they should prepare or what was going to happen led to many participants reporting that they had experienced considerable stress, and a feeling of frustration, as subjects studied and revised had apparently gone to waste.

“We were kind of thrown into college, it was a lot harder. We’ve not even done our GCSEs, how to revise proper, for like, any exams. We were kind of just thrown in” - *Girl, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

Dates of tests were changed several times, followed by uncertainty about whether they were still going to be taken or not, and subjects that had been studied were removed from mocks due to lack of time.

A-Levels

Participants suggested that more time could be allocated to preparing for exams. Those that were soon to have A-Level mocks felt there was not enough time to get ready and felt under-prepared.

The catch-up lessons that were available through some colleges/post-16 providers, while supported by students, was felt to be in need of improvement. Participants felt that this time could be better used to focus on key exam topics that have been missed, rather than covering whole subject areas.

“Our school was mainly focusing on doing loads of tests. We did some in March, then some in April, then some in May. To try and get as much evidence as they could. Obviously doing all of those tests was a lot of stress, especially the May ones as they were very last minute. So that was added stress” - *Girl, age 16, BAME/SEND*

“I would have never been able to do the jump from GCSE to A-Level without the GCSE exams” - *Girl, age 18, SEND*



Grading during Covid-19

Some participants voiced doubt about the use of teacher assessed or predicted grades, feeling they were unfair, and not reflective of the additional work that had gone into sitting and revising for an exam.

“I remember when we got our grades back. It wasn’t predicted grades, it was just accumulated by the teachers. Something that they had made up. I thought that I should have done better, because I had done better in the mocks” - *Girl, age 19, Disadvantaged Learner*

Some participants suggested that coursework grades could be put in place of exams to allow for a better assessment of their work, and their progress throughout the year.

The impact of Covid-related restricted attendance in schools and colleges on 16–19-year olds’ mental health and wellbeing

Face-to-face vs. online



Online learning and mental health

Participants were asked how remote learning and lockdown impacted their mental health and wellbeing.

Research participants explained that not seeing people in person or socialising with peers was difficult and had caused some to feel anxious and isolated. Many participants explained that they had to make a conscious effort to stay in touch with friends and remain social throughout lockdown. Despite this, friendship groups had sometimes changed due to normal changes in development and interests at this age.

“I think [lockdown/covid] has isolated quite a few people now” - *Boy, age 17, Disadvantaged Learner*

“I felt really anxious. I feel like I really enjoy a lot of my lessons because I was around certain people” - *Girl, age 16, BAME*

“There were two weeks I didn’t see people and I felt myself going down. But then I saw people again and I felt alright” – *Boy, age 18, SEND*

Working from home also impacted participants’ motivation and the effort put into schoolwork. Participants explained that areas in the home that were normally for relaxing had become work areas, with considerable work to do and reading required between

online sessions. Remote learning led to participants having late nights and a lack of routine, which was seen to lower mood, with days 'blurred into one'.

"You're not in that the class environment it's just at home and like there's nothing really encouraging you to carry on going. So, the more and more you get demotivated the more you get behind and then it's just starts a cycle not to do it" - *Girl, age 16, BAME*

"There were some very long nights on the PS4" – *Boy, age 18, SEND*

Some participants expressed frustration that education was being put ahead of students' mental health. There was, they felt, a perceived lack of personalised support, with no sense of belonging, and feelings that were not acknowledged by their teachers.

"If you're struggling at home or if you're just struggling mentally schools should put on things to help you. I don't know about other schools, but my school didn't really...they were more focused on the grades we were getting...I know a lot of people who felt so pressured to get the grades it literally stressed them out and upset them" – *Boy, age 17, Disadvantaged Learner*

Key school milestones

Participants expressed a real disappointment and sadness at having missed key events, such as the school prom, the last week of school, and other common 'end of school' rituals. This added to the wider legacy of the social impact of lockdown and the opportunities lost for participants; such events were viewed as a key part of the educational experience they shared with their peers. Participants flagged the lack of support around beginnings and endings; because these were felt not to have been acknowledged, there had been no celebration or closure between academic milestones.

"I didn't get a prom, I didn't get anything. I just feel like I've been thrown in at the deep end" - *Girl, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

"We missed the fun stuff like work experience and trips" - *Girl, age 16-17, BAME*

"It was the final day, and we were sent off on our own to do whatever, there were no talks or Zoom meetings or calls...it was just finished, that's it" – *Boy, age 18, Disadvantaged Learner*

Restrictions in school / college

Experiences of restrictions

Participants were asked about the restrictions put in place at school or college, and how these impacted their mental health and wellbeing.

Mask-wearing, social distancing in schools and, for those that had left school for a new 6th form college, not being able to mix in with their new peers in college impacted some participants' ability to build new social bonds with other students. This was unsettling and appears to have affected their confidence; many participants believed they had forgotten normal social skills, having not interacted with other young people face-to-face for so long.

“Nearly all of us got social anxiety when we'd gone back to school because we weren't with any people...we weren't comfortable with people as before” - *Girl, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

“It was really unsociable” - *Girl, age 17, Disadvantaged Learner*

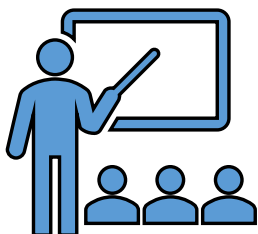
Some participants noted that having fewer students in class meant that there were fewer breaks in their school day; this was not only physically tiring, but also meant they had less time to socialise.

For those participants who moved into further education during lockdown, remote learning meant that young people did not meet their new classmates until they returned to face-to-face lessons. Some participants found it uncomfortable and awkward to interact in the classroom as contact and socialisation with peers was limited. This hindered their ability to form 'study buddies' for homework.

“It was rubbish. We were in one day a week. I thought I would make lots of new friends, but I couldn't do this because I was hardly in” – *Girl, 18, English as a 2nd Language*

How do 16–19-year-olds perceive educational recovery support and proposed support measures?

Support for educational recovery received



Perceptions of educational recovery interventions

Participants were asked about what support they had received to catch-up on their education and what they thought about it.

Participants complained that there were too few, or no, catch-up lessons or support available after GCSEs at their places of study. Many young people in the research explained that even if the support existed, it had not been properly advertised and they had not been made aware of what was available to them.

“I haven’t heard much about extra help or anything” – Boy, age 17-18, *Disadvantaged Learner*

“I had the worst help possible...we were resitting GCSEs in November [2020] and we did no maths in the run-up to November, sat the GCSEs, and then they started teaching us the maths. The big problem for me in that was the fact that in my college there were 3 tutors...every time I asked for help I never received it” - Boy, age 17-18, *Disadvantaged Learner*

Timing of educational recovery support

Participants said there may have been some recovery sessions available at lunchtime, but they did not attend and did not know what was covered; they had been reluctant to give up their time for socialising with others. Participants felt that catch-up lessons organised by schools and colleges were demanding and having them at lunchtime when young people had been in class all morning meant they did not get a break. Some participants had also been told to use their holidays as a time to complete any leftover work.

“I don’t think many people find [lunchtime workshops] beneficial, unless it’s for revision” - *Girl, age 17, Disadvantaged Learner*

Genuine free time was highly valued by the research participants, and it was felt that this was needed for their mental health. Participants did not want to spend their free time on additional schoolwork.

Some participants were left to decide themselves what work, if any, was incomplete, but would have liked more individual guidance on what was required to catch-up on their courses.

“For our history [course]...I was at home [for the summer holidays] and a few weeks in they sent us a history exam booklet. It was three questions, but it was exam questions, so they’d count toward your mocks as well. You’d have to get them done before the first lesson in September” - *Boy, age 16-17, BAME*

Delivery of educational recovery support

For those participants who had attended secondary school educational recovery sessions, these were most appreciated when they were carried out as small-class lessons, incorporated into the existing timetable. These recovery sessions often replaced lessons such as P.E.

Participants appreciated the greater level of attention they received from teachers in smaller class sizes. Where additional large-class lessons were organised in school halls, some participants compared these to sitting at home in an online lesson.

“When we got back to school after home learning, they’d create an intervention and extra lessons to catch up. For example, you’ll miss out on PE to do an extra maths lesson which was quite effective as well” - *Boy, age 16-17, Disadvantaged Learner*

“I’d have liked...extra lessons, because my whole timetable isn’t full so there’s time to spare in the day” - *Boy, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

In terms of the content of the recovery sessions, participants felt that the sessions were too general, and teachers should instead focus on specific areas that students struggled with the most.

Those that took part in face-to-face recovery lessons in the second lockdown (Autumn 2020), had found them most useful when there were clearly defined topics covered.

Support required



Support needs

Participants were asked what type of learning support they received versus what they would have liked.

Whilst there was support available for the participants, it did not always meet their needs. In terms of their mental health, participants said that school support was generally in the form of newsletters and talks, but these did not feel personalised to them. Participants described being offered advice that did not feel right for them and provided no validation of how they were feeling, as well as not considering their specific situations. Some participants said that support could feel quite remote at times, e.g., ‘a phone number on a poster’, rather than a person who asked how they are feeling and was interested in building a supportive relationship with them.

“It was nice to have a newsletter with links and stuff and what you can do during lockdown to help you, but it stopped there, you’d hear the same thing (advice) every week... it felt very impersonal” – *Girl, 18, SEND*

In terms of learning support, many participants reported that presentation slides were available after online lessons, but having sessions recorded so that they could be looked over later would have been a great help.

“At least if they recorded sessions maybe, uploaded them that would be good” – *Girl, 18, BAME*

Some participants would have liked to talk to teachers about their mental health but felt that this was not always possible. It was felt by some participants that having a mentor in school who they would be able to talk to and confide in would be helpful. These young

people would also have preferred to discuss their mental health at a designated time and place in-school or college. When it was available such support was appreciated.

“A person came into our lessons and said, ‘if you need any support or help with anything just come to me and talk about it’. I think that’s a big help” - *Boy, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

Support for young people with SEND

SEND participants often used the SEND learning support that was available at their college, although this was not always available for the whole period of lockdown and participants would have liked support services to have remained open during lockdown. Participants found that it took time for specialised learning support to start again after returning to learning in person, which was a challenge. Staff changes during lockdown also meant teachers were sometimes unaware of young people’s specific SEND needs.

While it was appreciated when in-person support was re-introduced, SEND participants reported not receiving any specific SEND support for educational recovery.

“It was less of like a catch up, it was more like a preparing us for the new subjects were going to take in Year 11, just to like, prepare us for that. We didn’t really get anything to like, help us with the stuff we had missed” - *Girl, age 16, BAME/SEND*



Accessing SEND support

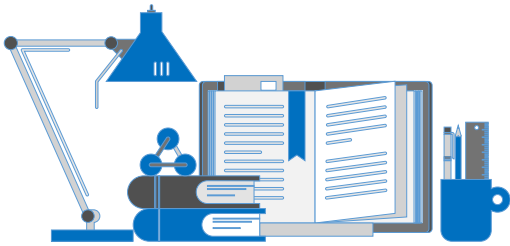
Some SEND participants voiced a concern that the additional support they were entitled to could feel like an unfair advantage and was therefore something that they choose not to make use of. In some cases, SEND participants had refused to seek extra help, despite knowing it would be beneficial, as they thought it would change how people would perceive them.

SEND participants felt there was still a stigma around needing additional learning support or being seen as 'different' to others. Concern about being separated from their peers during exams or in class meant that some additional help was not always used or requested even when needed.

"I did feel a bit awkward asking for it (help)" - Girl, 18, SEND

What support is needed now?

Additional support wanted



Tutoring

We asked participants what additional support they wanted to help their education recovery.

Additional tutoring was welcomed and popular with participants, especially for those with SEND. To get the most out of tutoring, participants felt it would need to be 1:1 or in small groups (up to 10), and ideally face-to-face, although it could also work online. Optional lessons and support during the summer holidays would also have been appreciated.

“Lots of my friends that have had tutors think it’s a really good thing to have. Even an extra hour, two hours a week so you can just go over the course with somebody who maybe isn’t a teacher or someone that you know very well, I think can be quite helpful” – *Girl, 16 BAME/SEND*

“Small groups are always helpful because it creates a happier atmosphere because you are with other people who are doing the same thing as you” - *Girl age 16, BAME*

Although participants explained that a break from schoolwork and stress was needed, they would have been reassured if they had known that the help was available during the holidays. They would have liked to have used this time to have some guided help to increase their learning skills or get ready for the return to school.

“It’s always beneficial to get as much help as you can” - *Girl, age 18, SEND*

“In summer there wasn’t really any classes... Due to the whole hectic year I think a lot of people just wanted to have a break” - *Boy, age 17-18, English as a 2nd Language*

Participants with clearly supportive families had been more easily able to fill the gaps in learning themselves, and some parents had been able to organise and afford a private tutor for their children.

Ideas for further support

Some participants suggested that the academic year could be extended by two weeks to help alleviate the pressure to catch up in time, while still having some holiday. Other participants said there could be catch up sessions around school and college hours, but these would only be attended by those that want to learn, so they should be voluntary.

“I think we could have extended the school year a little bit because we couldn’t get the opportunity to do the things we’re used to doing in school...like two weeks” - *Girl, age 17, English as a 2nd Language*

“I think it would just be best to offer [support] not force it on anyone” - *Boy, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

Some participants argued that schools and colleges should be doing more to help with exam techniques, such as how to answer exam questions. This could also be paired with more exam experience. This was viewed as essential, since so many missed out on the chance to get exam practice. Participants who were doing A-Levels explained that they had sat their last formal exam in primary school.

“The last time I sat in a hall was for my SAT exams, I don’t think the mocks count” - *Boy, age 18, BAME*

Views on ‘catch up’

Many participants reported that their schools and colleges had used the phrase ‘catch-up’. Research participants felt it was important to take the pressure off young people to catch up and this could be done by potentially reducing the level of content in exams. The concept of ‘catching up’ felt too demanding for many participants and had negative connotations which added to the pressure they had been feeling.

“Reduce some of the topics for GCSEs. In history we do 4 units, I say reduce it to 3” - *Boy, age 16-17, BAME*

Participants said they would have liked more signposting and clearer routes to information and support such as practical guidance on what they might do after they leave school/college.

“I had no help with [applying for] school or anything. They didn’t really give me any help at all. It was just my mum and my dad”- *Boy, age 17-18, Disadvantaged Learner*

“I know that some of my friends have just gone to college on a random course that they have no interest in. I sort of feel for them a bit because they’re doing a course that they have no interest in. In a way it’s a waste of two years of their life.” – *Boy, age 17, Disadvantaged Learner*

Support for mental health

Support for mental health was paramount for participants; many had felt isolated by the experience of lockdown and learning remotely. Participants felt that a combination of talking therapies, online resources, and personalised support would help to alleviate their anxieties.

“Teachers could offer after school sessions. Even little stuff like stationary, like personalised messages, personalised reinforcements like ‘nice, well done’” - *Boy, age 17-18, English as a 2nd Language*

“When you’re quite young I don’t think it’s necessary to have this kind of stress” - *Girl, age 16, BAME/SEND*

Support for SEND

Participants with SEND felt that support needed to be in place at all times and should be proactively offered rather than relying on young people to request it themselves. This could take the form of a drop-in service where support is provided on an ‘as and when basis’. This would be best for immediate support and could be offered online.

“[The teachers] could have maybe found time to have drop-in sessions” – *Girl, 18, SEND*

“I actually asked to go into school because I hated being at home that much” - *Girl, age 18, SEND*

Summary and Conclusions

The research found that participants' experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic had been challenging. Online learning was difficult for many of the young people interviewed, and participants wanted more support to help them with the transition back to the classroom. The Covid-19 pandemic had also been challenging for participants' mental health and participants felt they would have benefited from more personalised wellbeing and academic support. The findings of this qualitative research are not generalisable to the population of 16-19 learners, but they do provide an in-depth picture of the experiences of the young people interviewed.

Online learning

Online learning was difficult for the young people interviewed; they had found it demotivating and stressful. Interacting with peers and communicating with teachers was challenging for participants. Acquiring basic equipment such as laptops had been difficult for some disadvantaged participants who subsequently missed lessons because of delays or inappropriate equipment e.g., mobile phones. The home environment could be disruptive for participants, with many distractions, including other family members, noise, restricted space to work, limited access to digital devices and to the internet.

Exam readiness

Participants who had been due to take their GCSEs during lockdown experienced stress and did not feel they had enough time to prepare fully for assessments. Some participants taking A-Levels noted that they hadn't done an assessment under exam conditions for many years. Participants would have welcomed more support to prepare them for exams, as well as greater promotion of existing support.

Mental health

School and college restrictions meant that the wellbeing of many participants had suffered. Many said they missed out on traditional milestones such as the school prom or traditions such as signing shirts at the end of term, which was disappointing. Personalised support, where available, made a big difference to participants' mental health.

Returning to the classroom

Participants were pleased to return to the classroom but restrictions such as social distancing, mask-wearing and 'learning bubbles' meant that it was harder to connect to peers.

Educational recovery support

The amount of educational recovery support available varied across participants. Where support was available, subjects were often covered broadly, with participants feeling they would have benefited from more focused support on exam topics. Support with exam techniques would have been appreciated by participants, as some had not taken an exam since primary school.

SEND support

Participants reported that SEND services were not always kept open during lockdown, and it was felt by participants that they would have benefited from these being open throughout. Some SEND participants also reported a stigma around accessing support.

Advice on post-secondary school plans

Research participants would have valued more guidance on post-secondary school plans.



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