



Department
for Education

Face coverings in schools

Findings from surveys and qualitative
focus groups

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Introduction

Purpose of the research

Four studies were carried out to investigate and explore the experiences and impact of wearing face coverings in school and college. Two quantitative studies were carried out as part of the department's regular representative panel surveys; the Parent, Pupil and Learner Panel (PPLP) and the School and College Panel (SCP). Additionally, two qualitative studies were conducted: separate focus groups with pupils, undertaken by Deltapoll, and with teachers, undertaken by DfE researchers.

The main aim was to build knowledge and to explore experiences of teachers, pupils, and learners whilst face coverings were in use and reflect on experiences after the mandate to wear them in classrooms and community areas in schools had ended.

This report presents the findings from these studies across three themes.

- Overall reflections of the use of face coverings
- Communications and classroom teaching
- Health; mental and physical

Methodology

Two representative panel surveys provided quantitative findings:

Parent, Pupil and Learner Panel

The Parent, Pupil and Learner Panel (PPLP)¹ consists of a group of primary and secondary parents and pupils/learners in years 7 to 13 that have agreed to participate in short regular research surveys on topical education issues. In the February wave of the PPLP, the panel were asked a series of questions on face coverings. The questions on face coverings were answered by 2,396 parents, 1,810 secondary pupils (years 7 to 11) and 2,153 pupils and learners (years 12 and 13). Fieldwork lasted from 2nd February to 7th February 2022 (fieldwork was extended until the 24th February for pupils/learners in years 12 and 13). The parent, pupil and learner results have been weighted to be representative of pupils in schools/colleges in England. Differences between sub-groups are only commented on in the text if they are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The full report of the full wave of findings on issues other than face coverings, was published in June 2022.

School and College Panel

The School and College Panel (SCP)² consists of a group of leaders and teachers that have agreed to participate in a short regular research survey on topical education issues. In the March wave of the School and College panel, secondary school teachers and college tutors were asked a series of questions on face coverings. The questions on face coverings were answered by a sample of 310 secondary school classroom teachers and 80 college tutors. Fieldwork was carried out online from 9th – 16th March 2022. The school sample, and the college teacher sample, have been weighted to be nationally representative of schools/colleges in England (by school/college type and by teacher demographics). Differences between sub-groups are only commented on in the text if they are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The full report of the full wave of findings on issues other than face coverings, was published in June 2022.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-panel-omnibus-surveys-for-2021-to-2022>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-panel-omnibus-surveys-for-2021-to-2022>

Two qualitative studies provided in-depth insight from pupils and teachers:

Teacher focus groups

The DfE conducted eight focus groups and interviews with 22 teachers from a variety of schools in England. The purpose of the discussions was to explore their experiences of teaching during the period when face coverings were required in schools.

Participants were sampled through using a central list of schools as well as being drawn from the panel members of the School and College Panel. No incentives were provided for participation in these focus groups and interviews.

Before they were told the topic of the conversation and prior to taking part in the interviews, participants were asked if they felt the benefits of wearing face coverings in class outweighed the negatives to ensure a range of views were represented in each discussion. They were also asked to provide information on their role, subjects taught, and year groups taught to ensure a spread of different teachers and school leaders.

Discussions were held digitally, with a facilitator, co-facilitator and note taker. Conversations were recorded for automatic transcription with permission. This was a qualitative study so care should be taken not to make generalisations from these findings, due to the small size of the cohort.

Fieldwork was carried out between March 14th and March 16th 2022

Pupil focus groups

Delta Poll conducted six mini focus groups (4-5 participants) via Zoom, the sample purposively recruited to primarily reflect age / year group considerations within secondary school:

The main aim was to investigate pupils' experiences of face coverings. How use of face coverings made them feel, and what they noticed about them being used in and around the school. The groups comprised of one Year 7 group; one combined Year 8-9 group; two groups with Year 10-11, and two groups with Year 12-13. Only state school students were included covering a mix of gender, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Pupils from a range of regions in England were covered. This was a qualitative study so care should be taken not to generalise these findings due to small size of cohort.

Fieldwork was carried out in March 2022

Findings

Use of face coverings

In the February 2022 PPLP, around three quarters (72%) of pupils and learners (years 7 to 13) said they had been asked to wear a face covering (either in class or communal areas) by their school or college since 20th January 2022³. Asian (81%) or black (76%) pupils and learners were more likely than white (69%) pupils and learners to report being asked to wear a face covering by their school or college. This may be linked to areas of high infection rates.

Parents of primary and secondary school pupils (years 1 to 11) were asked a comparable question. Around two in five (37%) parents said that their child was asked to wear a face covering at school. Parents of secondary aged pupils were more likely to report this (75%) than parents of primary school pupils (7%). Parents of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) were also more likely to report this (42% compared with 36% of those not eligible for FSM). Additionally, parents of Asian pupils (46%) or black pupils (53%) were more likely to report this than parents of white pupils (35%). Again, this may be due to areas of high infection.

Experience of using face coverings

Overall, around half (50%) of pupils and learners (years 7 to 13) agreed to some extent that wearing a face covering helped them to feel safe.

Three quarters (75%) of pupils and learners (years 7 to 13) agreed to some extent that wearing a face covering helps keep others safe. The following groups were more likely to agree with this: pupils and learners not eligible for FSM or Free Meal Eligibility (FME) (76% compared with 70% of those eligible for FSM/FME), pupils and learners without Special Educational Needs (SEN) (76% compared with 66% of those considered to have SEN) and Asian pupils and learners (85%) compared with those from the white ethnic group (73%) and black ethnic group (76%).

Reflecting on their experience of using face coverings throughout the pandemic in the focus groups, teachers reported differing levels of difficulty in enforcing face coverings, and many fed back that more evidence to show they were having a positive impact on transmission rates would have been beneficial. They told us that older pupils were more likely to question the efficacy of face coverings, and that they often needed to convince parents, as well as pupils. Teachers expressed the view that face coverings only worked if they were used properly, and that was difficult to enforce. Whilst the general consensus

³ The recommendation for pupils and learners of secondary school age or above to wear face coverings in classrooms was lifted on January 20th 2022, but the recommendation to wear them in communal areas remained in place until January 27th 2022. Additionally, regular testing continued to be recommended until late February.

amongst the teachers in these findings was that face coverings made the school day harder, many teachers reported that mask wearing made them feel safer in schools.

It was clear from pupils in the focus groups that quite different approaches were taken by different schools throughout the pandemic, and indeed by different teachers within the same school toward face covering enforcement. Some schools were hard-line, demanding compliance at all times, while other schools appeared to be quite relaxed, possibly ambivalent about students having to wear them. Pupils in the focus groups said they wanted rules on face coverings, once instigated, to be ruthlessly and equitably enforced.

At the time of the March school and college panel survey there was no national requirement for pupils or students to wear face coverings in classrooms or communal areas. In this later survey just 12% of teachers had asked pupils to wear face coverings either in class or communal areas in the past two weeks. Of those teachers whose schools had asked pupils to wear a face covering, 76% said pupils were wearing a face covering when they should at least most of the time. This was significantly lower than when teachers were last asked this in April 2021(88%). More than two thirds (68%) said pupils were wearing face coverings correctly at least most of the time.

Again, in this later survey almost three quarters (73%) of teachers said they thought face coverings help pupils feel safer in school to at least some extent– just 5% thought face coverings did not make pupils feel safer at all.

Impact on teaching & learning and communication

Teaching & learning

In the February 2022 PPLP, half of pupils and learners in years 7 to 13 (49%) agreed to some extent that wearing a face covering made learning more difficult. White pupils and learners were more likely to agree with this than Asian pupils and learners (52% compared with 42%). Two thirds (66%) of pupils and learners agreed to some extent that wearing a face covering made communication with teachers or school/college staff difficult. Around half (52%) of pupils and learners agreed to some extent that wearing a face covering made it difficult to communicate with friends. White pupils and learners were more likely to agree with these (68% teachers, 54% friends) than Asian pupils and learners (57% teachers, 47% friends).

In the March school and college panel, almost half (49%) of teachers thought that wearing face coverings in class made it more difficult for pupils to learn to at least some extent, while around a quarter (24%) said they did not make it more difficult at all. Two thirds (66%) of teachers thought face coverings made it more difficult for pupils to communicate with others to at least some extent (only 8% said face coverings do not make this more difficult at all). Almost three quarters of secondary teachers (who taught

SEN pupils that wore face coverings) (75%) said face coverings made it more difficult for pupils with SEND to communicate, to at least some extent (compared to 66% for all pupils). Thirty nine percent of teachers said face coverings made behaviour more disruptive to at least some extent, whilst 37% said coverings do not make behaviour more disruptive at all. Teachers in the focus groups reported that face coverings made teaching certain subjects harder, such as languages, dance and drama – often subjects that had practical elements or required communication. It was not uncommon for teachers to report that face coverings in the classroom were preferable to online learning and that face coverings were seen to facilitate that. "So I personally don't have an issue and I don't think many of my colleagues would. I'd rather have them [pupils] in the [class] room personally."

Communication

Communication was reported as a key issue for teachers. Sounds were muffled, making it harder for teachers and pupils who were hard of hearing.

Whilst not a common finding, it was reported that face coverings were a particular issue for pupils who needed to lip read. One teacher mentioned that their school had trialled clear face coverings, but found they fogged up quickly and so still caused a barrier. Teachers reported that there was also an issue for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities or learning difficulties, for example some teachers reported struggling to pick up on the non-verbal cues from autistic children wearing face coverings.

According to the teacher focus group discussions it also made teaching more difficult for Newly Qualified teachers (NQTs), who were still learning their role and had less experience to draw on to overcome the challenges face coverings presented. Teachers also reported face coverings also made it easier for quieter pupils to hold back from participation.

Behaviour

Face coverings were seen by some teachers as an additional tool for class disruption: they could be flicked across the room or used to hide low level chatting. Although it was also noted in focus group discussions that pupils who wanted to disrupt a class would just find another way, face coverings were often associated as another thing teachers had to 'police', with more disruptive pupils only wearing them when they had to or using them as an excuse to leave class. Some teachers mentioned that the behaviour of those identified as challenging worsened during the pandemic. There were pupils who diligently wore their face coverings throughout the pandemic, some were still wearing them.

Behavioural issues and classroom management were also discussed by pupils in the focus groups, some highlighting there were just too many children chatting. Others specifically related this to their lack of ability to focus within the classroom, "It's hard to focus because everyone talks more when you've got a mask on". (Male, Year 10/11).

Some pupils were more able to accept these inconveniences “The problems with communication, having to ask someone to repeat themselves, and yes, it was a bit of an inconvenience, and it was a bit annoying but what can you do?” (Male, Year 12-13). Other children enjoyed wearing the mask, “I love wearing my mask. I don’t have to, but I wear this one all the time around school”. (Female, Year 7). Some pupils raised concerns regarding particular lessons that called for communication, “I think English was quite hard to wear a mask in, especially because we would do a lot of discussions and debates in English and you’re talking a lot so it’s quite hard to hear other people if you’ve got a mask on and if you’re muffled so it was quite restrictive. I think everyone just had to speak louder.” (Female, Year 12/13).

Mitigations

Teachers talked about how they adapted their style to help with communication. For example, one teacher described wearing a microphone to help with communication issues or sitting certain pupils at the front of the class. Teachers also discussed increasing the use of written communication.

Mental and Physical Health

In the February 2022 PPLP, one in five pupils and learners in years 7 to 13 (21%) agreed that wearing a face covering had made them feel anxious, while 57% disagreed that this was the case. The following groups were more likely to agree with the statement that wearing a face covering made them feel anxious: pupils and learners eligible for FSM/FME (27% compared with 20% of those not eligible for FSM/FME), pupils and learners considered to have SEN (30% compared with 20% of those without SEN) and white pupils and learners (23% compared with 10% of black pupils and learners).

In schools, under a third (32%) of teachers in the panel survey thought face coverings made pupils feel anxious to at least some extent, whilst 21% thought they did not make pupils feel anxious at all. Over half of secondary teachers (who taught SEN pupils that wore face coverings) (59%) thought face coverings made pupils with SEND feel anxious to at least some extent, a much higher number than for all pupils.

Teachers in the focus groups reported that face coverings weren’t necessarily associated with poor wellbeing, but they did make it harder to see who was struggling. Teachers tried to make sure the pupils with the most needs were at the front, and closest to them, so it was easier to check on how they were getting on. It was suggested that wearing of face coverings should be strategic, with times that they can be down, for instance when they are near an open window.

Some teachers also expressed that face coverings caused anxiety at the outset of the pandemic, but that pupils had now become used to wearing them, and that anxiety had dissipated. Some teachers considered face coverings to be exacerbating skin complaints

such as eczema and acne, which could in turn have a negative impact on confidence. Similarly, some pupils noticed how the masks were affecting their classmate's skin, acne breakouts were observable. "Some people that I know, not myself personally, but their skin would often break out. They'd get spots underneath where their mask would be because of the heat that gets trapped within the mask." (Male, Year 12-13).

For a small number of pupils in the focus groups face coverings provided literal cover for anxiety about facial physical appearance. They gave an opportunity for students to hide in full view, more relaxed in the anonymity that coverings afforded.

From the in-depth focus group discussions, both teachers and pupils reported that the impact of coverings should be seen as limited compared to the more significant impacts of attendance restrictions and national lockdowns. Pupils reported that lockdown contributed more to mental-health issues, and that face coverings, for some, were seen as a way out of the struggles associated with restrictions.

Conclusion

This research shows how wearing face coverings presented some challenges in schools and colleges. Some teachers and leaders felt that face coverings created a barrier to teaching and learning. This was particularly reflected in their impact on communications (between both staff and pupils and during group work) and on behaviour (creating a mode of class disruption and disengagement). Face coverings were also found to exacerbate any difficulties already facing specific groups, specifically SEND and FSM pupils.

The use of face coverings were found to impact particular lessons more than others; subjects such as PE and dance were perceived to be much harder to teach. Additionally, NQT's, with less teaching experience, were thought to be more affected by the use of face coverings. More experienced staff adapted their teaching style or were more able to recognise those needing support.

Face coverings were also reported to impact physical and mental health for a number of pupils. One in five pupils reported that face coverings made them feel anxious, with this being higher in SEND and FSM eligible pupils. Teachers described how face coverings exacerbated existing issues and made students who were struggling, harder to identify. Although the physical impacts were less common some teachers and pupils also reported complaints of heightened eczema and increased occurrence of acne and other skin issues. Overall, the evidence from focus groups with staff and pupils indicate that it was the package of covid mitigations, including face coverings, that had a cumulative impact on pupil wellbeing.

From the teacher focus group discussions, it was clear that teachers found strategies to minimise the disruption that wearing face coverings could cause. A range of mitigations were put in place to reduce the negative impacts of face coverings. These included teachers adapting their classrooms (e.g., placing hard of hearing pupils at the front) and their teaching styles (writing on boards and using microphones).

Pupils in the focus groups voiced an incredibly mature general acceptance of coverings; why they needed to be worn, how they might help and how they actually helped facilitate a return to school from lockdown experiences. As pupils became accustomed to wearing the face covering many reported that they just became part of the school uniform. While they expressed some frustration around the practical consequences, most commonly cited as hearing impairments in classroom settings, some low-level disruption and as personal discomforts they quickly accepted them and many actually expressed pride in having played their part in keeping their friends and family safe.



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