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'I think it's been difficult for the ones that haven't got as many resources in their homes': teacher concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on pupil learning and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

School closures due to COVID-19 have been predicted to have a large impact on pupils' learning and wellbeing. Systematic evidence about teachers' perceptions of what challenges their pupils have faced, and how they have been addressing these challenges, will be important for post-pandemic planning. We interviewed 24 teachers from English state mainstream primary and secondary schools in June 2020 and asked them to describe the impact of partial school closures on their pupils' learning and wellbeing, and how they had been addressing challenges as individual teachers and at the whole school level. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Six themes were identified: (a) *pedagogy and process*, (b) *communication with pupils and families*, (c) *life at home*, (d) *the role of parents*, (e) *a COVID-19 curriculum*, and (f) *moving forwards and making plans*. Teachers reported difficulties in navigating the new form of education and finding the most effective way to teach and engage with the pupils. Pupils' lack of routine and their home environment were seen as influencing their learning and wellbeing. Parents' differing levels of involvement raised concerns about inequality. We discuss the practical implications of how to support pupils' learning and wellbeing both during and after COVID-19.

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At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, schools around the world closed to help manage the spread of the virus (Viner et al., 2020), affecting approximately 1.6 billion students (UNESCO, 2020a). This disruption affected pupils' lives, including their learning (Dorn et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020) and mental health and wellbeing (Asbury et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). In England, schools closed for all pupils on 20 March except for children of key workers and some vulnerable pupils (Department for Education, 2020c). During this time, teachers continued to deliver education, remotely or in person, to all pupils.

Pupil learning

School closures are estimated to have resulted in a loss of 0.3 to 0.9 years of schooling for pupils around the world (Azevedo et al., 2020). However, disruptions to learning have affected pupils unequally (Dorn et al., 2020). The gap between disadvantaged and

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advantaged pupils is estimated to have widened by a median of 36% (see Education Endowment Foundation, 2020 for a review). In England, independent schools were twice as likely to deliver online teaching every day as state schools were (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Clark et al. (2020) examined the effect of differing levels of online education for middle school pupils in China and found that those who received online education for seven weeks during lockdown showed greater academic progress (by 0.22 *SD*) than those who did not.

The availability of technology to engage in online learning is also likely to have consequences for pupil learning, with some pupils effectively experiencing digital exclusion (Mohan et al., 2020). According to a survey of primary and secondary school parents in England, only 25% of primary school pupils and 62% of secondary pupils had exclusive access to a computer for their school work, with 10–12% of pupils having access to no device at all (Andrew et al., 2020). Moreover, some pupils are affected by restricted internet access. According to the 2018 Consumer Digital Index, 12% of 11–18 year olds in the UK have a laptop, desktop or tablet to access the internet at home (Lloyds Bank, 2018). Murat and Bonacini (2020) estimated that, in the UK, pupils who do not have access to a computer at home are likely to experience learning loss in reading and mathematics corresponding to 1 to 1.1 years, while pupils without internet access are likely to experience a loss of 2.2 to 2.3 years. What is lacking currently is an understanding of *teachers'* perceptions of the consequences of school closures on their pupils' learning and progress, although they are the deliverers of pupils' education.

Pupil wellbeing

Teachers, as the professionals who have most contact with individual pupils, play an integral role in safeguarding children and young people. COVID-19 has led to new or greater wellbeing difficulties for some pupils and their families, due to financial hardships; increased caring duties; restricted contact with others; sharing a confined space; increased tensions; or combinations of these and other factors (Prime et al., 2020). These stressors may expose pupils to adverse or traumatic experiences, which are associated with increased academic and development risks (e.g., Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Kar, 2009; Rajmil et al., 2014). Pupil wellbeing has been a matter of concern for teachers as they cannot monitor their pupils' wellbeing as closely as usual (Kim & Asbury, 2020;).

There are likely to be advantage gaps in pupil wellbeing too, depending on factors such as parent wellbeing and work circumstances. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1992) Ecological Systems Theory, family wellbeing is both directly and indirectly connected with child wellbeing. Parents with homeschooling responsibilities during school closures have reported reduced positive affect and raised negative affect (Lades et al., 2020), which may partly be explained by a struggle to balance work and homeschooling. Moreover, some families have been confronted with additional stressors, such as unemployment or job insecurity, which have likely hit disadvantaged families the hardest. Additionally, children in vulnerable and at-risk families are acutely at risk of further deprivation and poorer wellbeing (Children's Commissioner, 2020). As teachers have endeavoured to keep in touch with their pupils and families during this time (Kim et al., 2020), capturing teachers' understanding of what their pupils' wellbeing is like is necessary in order to plan how to best support their needs.

The current study

Teachers can provide unique and useful insights into the lives and experiences of their pupils, especially during a time when oversight from other sources is limited. Thus, we asked: after 12 weeks of partial school closures, what did teachers perceive the impact on pupil learning and wellbeing have been?

Methods

Participants and procedure

Twenty-four state school teachers (11 primary and 13 secondary; 6 male and 18 female), participating in a longitudinal study of teachers' experiences of COVID-19 in England, responded to this section of the interview. They worked in schools with Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles ranging from 1 to 10, the full range. Participant information is presented with each cited quotation; that is, Female/Male; Primary/Secondary; and Senior Leadership Team (SLT)/Classroom teacher (CT). More information about the participants can be found in Kim and Asbury (2020).

Participants were interviewed over Zoom (2020) between 8–18 June, which was approximately 12 weeks after school closures and when partial school re-openings were just beginning. The full interview, of which this study was one part, lasted an hour (*SD* = 16 minutes). They were compensated with a £15 retail voucher. The project was approved by the ethics committee of the researchers' university department (Approval Ref: 20/06).

Measures

Participants responded freely to a series of open interview items. We first asked teachers how schools being closed for most pupils was affecting the learning and wellbeing of the pupils they teach. Second, we asked what they were doing to address these challenges, and what might need to be done in the future. Third, we asked what support they felt they would need to address learning loss or a widening gap between high and low attainers, and affluent and disadvantaged young people, when pupils returned to school. We asked them to answer from their perspective as individual teachers and, separately, with a whole school perspective. The schedule for this section of the interview can be seen in Supplementary Material.

Data analysis

Teachers' accounts of the impact of school closures on pupil learning and wellbeing were analysed using a reflexive six-stage approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). After a research team member familiarised themselves with the data, the data was systematically and semantically coded using an essentialist/ realist framework (Burr, 2003). That is, we aimed to report on the participants' reports of their reality, their experiences and the meanings they applied to them at face value. These codes were reviewed, discussed by the full research team and further refined. Once coding was complete, the codes were examined for broad patterns and overarching themes were identified. The data relating to each theme were then collated and pertinent data extracts were used to illustrate and add coherence to the analytic narrative (Clarke & Smith, 2015).

Results

A reflexive thematic analysis identified six main themes: (a) *pedagogy and process*, (b) *communication with pupils and families*, (c) *life at home*, (d) *the role of parents*, (e) *a COVID-19 curriculum*, and (f) *moving forwards and making plans*. These themes represent the emotional and logistical realities teachers reported they were facing when instructing, communicating with and safeguarding their pupils 12 weeks after partial school closures.

Theme 1: pedagogy and process

This theme reflects the challenges participants experienced in teaching their pupils, the majority of whom were still at home.

In delivering remote education, teachers said they found it difficult to be effective in their usual ways, such as providing immediate and individualised feedback and engaging in back-and-forth conversations to guide the pupils' thoughts.

> So much differentiation is done through the way that we talk to children, and the way that we, you know, hand over resources to them . . . . going over and helping one particular child and rephrasing the questions for them, and you know . . . grabbing a resource and saying . . . try it this way, or try it that way . . . And that's, that's the difficulty I think over, to do it . . . online. (Participant 10; Female, Primary, CT).

Moreover, teachers were frustrated that they could not use students' non-verbal cues to provide timely help. As Participant 6 (Female, Secondary, SLT) put it:

> . . . when you can see that a child is struggling in the classroom . . . you can see [from] the look on their face that they're struggling. So you can unpick that and work through it. You just can't do it.

These quotes encapsulate the powerful non-verbal cues used in physical classrooms that feed back into the teaching process but are largely missing in remote education, representing a barrier to teaching and learning, and therefore pupil progress.

Even for the minority of teachers who engaged in some online synchronous teaching, which offers the advantage of real-time exchanges, teacher–pupil interactions and pupil–pupil interactions were said to be dissimilar to those that would occur in physical classrooms. For example, teachers could not use facial expressions as cues to understanding pupils' level of understanding and engagement because *'lots of kids are not wanting their image on the screen at all in a Zoom call'* (Participant 21; Male, Secondary, CT). Some participants explained how they attempted to work around pupil preferences: '*I'll set up a system on Microsoft Teams where . . . they don't have to come on camera or speaker or anything like that. They can just type a question . . . And then I respond*' (Participant 17; Female, Secondary, CT).

Teachers were keen to reimagine the classroom environment using online platforms. However, some pupils did not have access to the necessary technology to engage with online learning, '*I think it's been difficult for the ones that haven't got as many resources in their homes. A lot of them don't have their own laptop or their own computer or printer*'

(Participant 19; Female, Secondary, CT). While some schools were able to provide laptops to some pupils, they could not provide for all, which was a barrier impeding on ensuring equal provision to all pupils.

> So you've got the obvious group of children that don't have computers. Well we solved that, we gave them computers that were in the school . . . Then there's a next level up, a family with three children and two working parents on one laptop. What do you do for them because they don't, they're not in the poverty bracket? They're quite, they might be well off, but they've only got one computer. So you, if everything's online and three children are working at home and two parents working at home, well then what? (Participant 7; Female, Secondary, SLT)

Indeed, access to technology seemed to be an issue extending beyond the 'traditional' disadvantaged pupil groups.

In response, some staff went to great lengths to ensure that pupils had access to learning materials in other forms. Participant 5 (Male, Primary, SLT) said, '*. . . we don't just send everything through the ClassDojo [remote learning platform], we have been posting as well . . . and if they don't get their packs of work in the post, we've literally been delivering them round.*' It was clear that teachers were prioritising access to learning materials and providing logistical support where possible.

Many teachers explained how they tried to meet the specific needs of certain pupil groups. Several mentioned how pupils with low literacy skills and those with English as an Additional Language (EAL) may be struggling to access and engage with learning materials. Furthermore, pupils with EAL may be getting *'probably some good support at home, but sometimes it's in their native language'* (Participant 1; Female, Primary, SLT), which may mean that they are lacking the opportunity to immerse themselves in the English language, thus affecting their learning.

In addition to inequality of learning between pupils *at home*, several teachers commented that inequality may be present between those pupils attending school and those at home. Participant 9 (Male, Secondary, SLT) described how at school, the focus has been on providing support to the vulnerable: *'And we're keeping, the school for the vulnerable kids, we're keeping it going, but that's purely staffed by our pastoral staff now. So it's very much a less academic, more supportive, school.'* Some teachers reported that some pupils at school seemed to at times hold back from engaging with the learning material, perhaps because the supervising teachers were often not subject specialists. Moreover, teachers reported falling into the role of providing childcare rather than education. As Participant 10 (Female, Primary, CT) put it: *'I'm kind of just babysitting really'*, with Participant 2 (Female, Primary, SLT) suggesting that *'they [the pupils] know that the teaching, that the learning that they're doing here is, you know, they're not, it's much, much less purposeful'*. Participant 3 (Female, Primary, SLT) described how they realised that school needed to improve the quality of learning for those in school:

> we said we need to ramp this [the lessons] back up a little bit . . . It's got to be a little bit more like learning for the children that are in and otherwise they're at a disadvantage compared to the ones that have been doing stuff from the learning platform and stuff.

Teachers tried to ensure that pupils were supported in their learning, whether they were in school or not, and that they were providing work that was accessible. However, they faced challenges to teach in a way that was engaging and appropriately differentiated.

Theme 2: communication with pupils and families

This theme highlights the value teachers place on keeping in contact with pupils and their families so as to understand how they are doing both socio-emotionally and academically. The greatest barrier for teachers seemed to be not being able to establish contact with families. As Participant 4 (Female, Primary, SLT) highlighted:

> What we're also really conscious of . . . is that we don't know about necessarily what's been going on for parents and families that are a little bit more reluctant to talk to us, or don't notice the differences so much because they've been quiet.

In consequence, teachers like Participant 15 (Female, Primary, CT) were concerned about these pupils' wellbeing.

> It's really hard because we can't be there and there's some children who don't access the internet and that we don't see so I don't know how some of the children are because I've not heard from parents, have not had work from them. So it's really difficult to gauge how they're coping.

The lack of openness within established communication was also a concern for teachers. Participant 11 (Female, Primary, CT) reported that *'parents don't really give much away about how happy their children are either at home'* and that when they were able to talk to the pupils directly on the phone, *'They're not ones to, to say "I'm upset" if their mum is stood right next to them'*.

Moreover, a lack of communication meant that teachers did not know whether some pupils were doing the set work. With the absence of submitted schoolwork from some pupils, some teachers concluded that they may have not been learning: *'God knows what they've been doing in the last 12 weeks. They certainly haven't been doing their work'* (Participant 8; Male, Secondary, SLT).

Even with pupils with whom teachers had been communicating from the beginning, there was a decrease in pupil engagement and communication over time:

> And often we get really, really nice stories back and clearly they're engaging with that and they seem to be getting on quite well. But as weeks have gone by, we've noticed they've kind of not engaged with it, or they've submitted things like 'I am okay,' which sounds a little bit ominous. (Participant 17; Female, Secondary, CT).

Many teachers reported that their schools had gone to great lengths to keep in contact with their pupils and families, such as via social media, emails and phone calls. However, such attempts were not always successful, as exemplified by Participant 20 (Female, Secondary, CT):

> So ringing them every week, providing they answer, because if we're ringing from home, we've been asked to ring 141, which shows your number's withheld and so therefore, a lot of people don't actually pick up withheld numbers. So there's been some students it's been hard to get through to . . . . We are communicating a lot via email.

The difficulty in engaging them also meant that pupils were at different points in their learning and progress, which made setting work difficult.

> Even after contacting every single parent in Year 10, we're still not getting all of the kids doing the work, and . . . it's starting to get really difficult now, because you're setting work, and and it's obviously a lot of it is sequential . . . everybody should be at point D and you've got some kids at B, some at C and some at A, so . . . you're almost having individual pathways which is very, very difficult to manage. (Participant 8; Male, Secondary, SLT).

Several teachers also described how keeping in contact with pupils had become increasingly difficult as their teaching timetable increased and they were required to spend more time in school, which raised questions as to how long they could continue check up on individual pupils.

In sum, limited communication and engagement from pupils exacerbated teachers' worry for their pupils' learning and wellbeing.

Theme 3: life at home

This theme centres on the impact that pupils learning from home and being away from normal school routines had on pupil wellbeing.

Many teachers raised concerns over pupils' lack of routine, exemplified by a conversation Participant 18 (Male, Secondary, CT) had with a Year 10 pupil: '. . . *I was like, "what time do you go to bed?" He was like, like "what, about like half, 4 or 5am and then get up at like 3, you know, 2pm" and just, you know, their whole routine, just upside down.'*. This lack of routine left some teachers feeling powerless; *'I don't know what to do,'* (Participant 16; Female, Secondary, CT).

Being at home was perceived to be particularly challenging for pupils living in difficult home environments, and schools supported them where they could. Ensuring food security for some pupils' families was a priority for many schools, such as that of Participant 5 (Male, Primary, SLT).

> We've also been taking food share parcels around to families in, in our area as well. So, and those that have been struggling. The free school meals, we've literally, for some parents we've had to print off [the vouchers] ourselves, and and hand, hand them to them, just because the [computer] system was either over flooded or it didn't work properly or they haven't got any internet.

Safeguarding for pupils at home was another concern for some teachers. Participant 11 (Female, Primary, CT) reported that *'we've had quite a few CPOMS [safeguarding software] alerts, which makes me think that some of the children's wellbeing is being affected, maybe the tensions at home are heightened because of the current situation'*. Schools seemed to be diligent in ensuring that potential safeguarding issues were not missed.

> We've also had more regular safeguarding team meetings to just go over and over and just double check that the children that could slip through the cracks haven't and I put that as one of the challenges is that concern that the system might not defend children who are at home with domestic violence er you know that those children are great worry for us. (Participant 7; Female, Secondary, SLT).

Some pupils may still be unsupported at home as *'they'll be left at home all day because their parents are key workers . . . and they're not going into school because that's what their parents have chosen'* (Participant 23; Female, Secondary, CT). Other pupils, however, were benefiting from being at home. Participant 11 (Female, Primary, CT) said that for some it had been:

> just really great to spend more time with the family and actually attachment wise, it's going to be really beneficial for them to have that quality time with their parents with their family and learning life skills that they wouldn't have had in any other way.

In fact, some pupils who had sometimes struggled at school seemed to be doing better at home and were experiencing lower levels of psychological distress.

> Some children are flying . . . especially for some children with an autism diagnosis, actually, there's, there's a lot of stressors in schools that they're not facing at the moment. I've got, speaking to one parent, we've got one boy who's just not wearing any clothes all day, and you know that to him, he's got his, you know, his stresses are right down. He's okay. This is great. This is ideal for him. (Participant 2; Female, Primary, SLT).

However, most pupils seemed to be missing playing and interacting with each other physically, which social media could not completely replace. Participant 19 (Female, Secondary, CT) indicated: *'They're really missing social interactions, they're missing being in school, so although they're all on FaceTime WhatsApp, whatever else just that day to day hanging around spending time with their friends'.*

Overall, there was a mixed impact of pupils being away from the usual structure of attending school on their wellbeing. Lack of structure and social interaction opportunities seemed to negatively impact some while others benefited from learning from home and spending more time with their families.

Theme 4: the role of parents

This theme illustrates the importance of and the factors that contribute to parents facilitating pupil learning and wellbeing. Parents are pivotal in pupil success, yet parents' level of involvement seemed to differ. As Participant 24 (Male, Secondary, CT) put it: *'The levels of support they receive is really different, as well, as some of the parents have been helping out with checking what they're doing and being encouraging. Some have a, you know, less less hands on approach.'* What teachers then feared was that *'for the children who don't receive an awful lot of support at home, their learning will be impacted on the most'* (Participant 14; Female, Primary, CT).

Parents' level of involvement seemed to be influenced by the parents' professional and personal circumstances and backgrounds. That is, while some parents were able to teach their children one-to-one, others struggled to do so, for example, because *'a lot of parents are juggling working or other children, along with their reception child as well'* (Participant 11; Female, Primary, CT). Moreover, because *'There's some students that are from families who do not value education'* (Participant 20; Female, Secondary, CT), parents' level of involvement as well as their child's attitudes towards and behaviour were reported to be affected.

Even when parents were keen to provide support, some struggled to convince their children to cooperate, *'they're not used to working at home, and they're not used to working for their parents'* (Participant 10; Female, Primary, CT). For some parents also, they prioritised their child's wellbeing over their learning, which as Participant 20 (Female, Secondary, CT) explained it: *'And every parent I've spoken to, which helps, I suppose, to explain the low engagement in some ways, has has had their child's wellbeing and mental health at the forefront of their priority at home. Not on getting their science worked on'*.

Some differences in parental involvement could also be attributed to which educational level their child was in. Teachers reported that some parents of secondary school pupils may have limited involvement because parents were intimidated by the level of work and worried that their input might not be helpful.

> I think, particularly in older children, parents don't think they need help . . . I think it's been harder on young people than it has on 11 year olds. Because . . . their parents are still very engaged on the whole, they will go out for a walk, and they'll have a kick around with the ball, or play a board game or watch a film together and they don't feel that older young pupils need it. (Participant 7; Female, Secondary, SLT).

Furthermore, teachers benefited from parental feedback as they could then help parents navigate their children's work: *'If I say to parents, you know, "just tell us when it's not working . . . Because we can change it."'* (Participant 2; Female, Primary, SLT).

It was clear that teachers felt that parental support and involvement were pivotal to pupil learning and wellbeing. For younger pupils, parents were the gatekeepers through which the teaching and communication passed on from teachers to pupils. For the older pupils, teachers highlighted that it was important for parents to encourage and motivate their children. However, it seemed that not all parents did not or could not fully support their child's learning and wellbeing because of work commitments as well as personal values and experiences.

Theme 5: a COVID-19 curriculum

This theme highlights the difficulties that teachers had in deciding what they should teach pupils during the lockdown period.

In order to maintain equal access to learning for all, some schools and teachers chose to suspend teaching new material: *'When we set tasks we don't set any new learning as such because we don't want them to teach the children wrong because then it's going to get bigger'* (Participant 12; Female, Primary, CT). When new learning content was delivered, some curriculum changes were necessary, as not all learning could take place successfully via remote teaching. As Participant 6 (Female, Secondary, SLT) put it: *'While staff can . . . try to, it just cannot it cannot make up for a classroom and especially with . . . new material'*. Furthermore, given an absence of pupil assessment and feedback, teachers found it hard to determine the pace and direction of learning.

Moreover, some teachers struggled to ascertain how much and what they should teach those who would be sitting national exams next year (i.e., GCSE and A levels). They indicated that if exams were to go ahead in Summer 2021 that they needed to teach them new material in order to cover the curriculum in time.

> You'd like to think that they have to make some kind of allowance for it, for the next year's GCSE . . . and if you sort of had that information now, you could prepare next year for them. But they've effectively missed over a quarter of, you know, probably a third of their GCSE. And although they're getting the material, they're not getting taught it, and . . . either they won't think it's important or they won't be able to access it. And they certainly won't have done the amount that they would have done if they were doing English for four or five hours a week. (Participant 22; Female, Secondary, CT).

Several participants believed that the work that they provided was key to keeping pupils actively engaged. Primary school teachers wanted to offer work on a variety of topics and subjects, rather than only English and Maths, to prevent pupils becoming bored. As there were no strict restrictions on the material that needed to be taught during lockdown, several teachers enjoyed the possibility of including content outside of the curriculum and/or emphasising certain aspects of the curriculum. Some tried to include content that related to mental health and wellbeing through art or nature projects: '*So we've tried to make sure that there's always been some kind of PSE [Personal and Social Education] or wellbeing activity on there as well.*' (Participant 13; Female, Primary, CT).

Ultimately, teachers found making decisions about curriculum content difficult as they did not know what the future held for schools. Yet they wanted to ensure engagement and that enough content would be covered to prepare for possible national exams next year but without widening any potential learning gaps.

Theme 6: moving forwards and making plans

This theme describes teachers' desire to plan their teaching for the coming months so that they could get pupils back on track with learning when they return to school, as well as their frustrations with the barriers that prevented them from planning.

Teachers indicated that they would need to undertake rapid assessments when all pupils returned to school to determine where their knowledge gaps were. For those who needed it, they would then provide appropriate support through individualised targets, small group provision and repeating work where necessary.

> I think when we're back in September, we will definitely, well, we know we will be doing a lot of assessments and then we'll have to work out what those gaps look like. And and I definitely think in an ideal world, we will need to put some kind of booster systems in place to support some of those children. (Participant 13; Female, Primary, CT).

However, they reported that they could not make plans too far ahead. They firstly needed to see the pupils face-to-face. As Participant 8 (Male, Secondary, SLT) put it: ' . . . *in terms of longer term strategy, we're just waiting to see where . . . this is all going, really. We've got to do face-to-face, I think . . . if we're going to do this thoroughly.*' Moreover, they were waiting for guidance as they did not know when full school re-openings would happen and what the government's expectations would be on curricula and exam content. Secondary school teachers were particularly struggling to plan for exam groups, '*until we get the directive from the exam board and the government about how you're going to be assessed next year, we're struggling to plan for that*' (Participant 20; Female, Secondary, CT).

Some teachers also were worried that when pupils return to school, some pupils may struggle to get back to the routine of learning and engaging in social interactions. Moreover, some said that they were offering pupil counselling, with Participant 15 (Female, Primary, CT) giving a sense of the extent of teachers' concerns on pupils' wellbeing:

> Actually, their emotional wellbeing is much more important when they first come back. So, it's that . . . acknowledgement that the academic side, yeah of course it's important, but until the emotional side is in place and they're happy, then that's not going to happen anyway.

Despite these concerns, Participant 16 (Female, Secondary, CT) summed up the resilience and determination demonstrated by many of the teachers in the study:

> There's going to be things that work really well, and things that don't work at all. But I think that teaching is a profession where we kind of all have a bit of a dogged nature, and we won't give up. We'll just keep trying and if it doesn't work, we'll try something else. And we'll just keep going. And hopefully we'll get there.

This theme highlights teachers' plans to address pupils' social-emotional and academic needs when they return to school. However, they felt they could not make detailed plans but were determined to make it work somehow.

Discussion

We examined teachers' perceptions of the impact COVID-19-related school closures have had on pupils' learning and wellbeing in England. Six themes were identified: (a) *pedagogy and process*, (b) *communication with pupils and families*, (c) *life at home*, (d) *the role of parents*, (e) *a COVID-19 curriculum*, and (f) *moving forwards and making plans*. These themes illustrate how being a teacher encompasses both instructional and pastoral roles, and how socio-economic factors can affect pupils' learning and wellbeing.

Pupil learning

Remote education was unfamiliar territory for most pupils and teachers before the pandemic. Nevertheless, many teachers adapted well to the new circumstances but faced some barriers. They reported difficulty in determining the content of their teaching, partly because they could not plan ahead without government guidance and direction, which teachers in England have reported since April 2020 (Kim et al., 2020; Ofsted, 2020).

Moreover, teachers were worried about students being disadvantaged by lack of resources. In some schools, in which pupils were more likely to come from disadvantaged families, teachers reported that it was difficult to engage with and pupils using electronic means because they simply did not have the necessary resources. The impact on pupils' learning seems to also be affected by school budgets and government support. In April 2020, the UK government promised 200,000 devices and 50,000 internet routers to children with social workers, care leavers and disadvantaged Year 10s (Department for Education, 2020a). This meant that only 37% of the 540,000 eligible pupils were able to receive one (Children's Commissioner, 2020), before even considering the needs of

disadvantaged families that did not meet these narrow criteria. Some of our participants reported that their schools were able to cover some of the difference. The concern is for schools who do not have resources to do so, with reports that 28% of advantaged state schools had provided devices to their pupils compared to only 15% of the most deprived schools, where the need would be the greatest (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Our participants' accounts raise serious concerns about opportunity equality for disadvantaged pupils learning in disadvantaged schools.

Our teachers reported that parents seemed to be struggling to support their children with home learning, which is in line with quantitative findings that more than half of parents of primary and secondary school pupils in April/May in England were struggling with this (Andrew et al., 2020). To support parents, our teachers reported putting in extra effort to communicate with them but not always successfully as some of the neediest families were also the hardest to reach. Schools have identified that supporting parents with home learning will be the primary strategy to mitigate inequality gaps (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020), bolstered by findings that strong school–family relationships are predictive of student academic success (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017). Thus, whether remote education continues or not, teachers should work with parents so that they feel confident and have the necessary skills to support their children's learning.

Pupil wellbeing

Teachers were naturally concerned about pupil wellbeing but could not fully identify the extent to which pupil wellbeing had been affected by COVID-19 as they had not seen most of their pupils for months. They were particularly concerned for pupils from difficult home environments, and worried that the social inequality was widening during COVID-19. Given, the interconnectedness of family wellbeing and child wellbeing (Newland, 2015), schools and teachers recognised the importance of supporting families by addressing issues such as food insecurity as a means of fulfiling their duty of care to their pupils.

They also recognised though that pupil wellbeing is connected with learning. When participants were asked to talk about the impact of school closures on pupil learning and pupil wellbeing as separate questions, their discussions of pupil wellbeing often led to reflection on its effects on academic achievement, but not vice versa. The centrality of wellbeing to academic achievement is supported by findings that social and emotional competencies matter for learning (Panayiotou et al., 2019). It seemed that COVID-19 had highlighted an important function of schools—a safe environment in which pupils can explore the self and the world, and receive support and resources (Gilligan, 1998). The priority to care for pupil wellbeing is echoed by survey findings of primary school teachers in England administered in May 2020 (Moss et al., 2020). They found that the top three priorities in schools reopen were identified as being pupil psychological wellbeing (77%), coping with new school format (70%), and health and safety of all (50%). The least of their concerns was catch-up for missed learning (8%).

Practical implications

Researchers, policymakers and practitioners must work together to develop and implement strategies to recover from immediate negative effects on pupils, and mitigate against further negative effects, especially for disadvantaged groups (UNESCO, 2020b). Provision of financial support and resources will be important to ensure that pupils have access to appropriate resources, such as access to technology and broadband at home, and support to address learning gaps. Each school is in a unique context with diverse economic and social-emotional needs. Thus, what is likely to be helpful are national centralised guidelines and funds that allow sufficient flexibility and autonomy for local authorities and schools to interpret, adapt and implement them in a way that is appropriate for their local contexts (Mohan et al., 2020).

Additionally, teachers should be provided with adequate resources and training to ensure that they can deliver high quality remote teaching. For example, ensuring that clear explanations, scaffolding and feedback are especially important in effective remote education (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020), training for which can be delivered through webinars (e.g., Department for Education, 2020b). Moreover, teachers should be adequately trained to support parents in their homeschooling efforts, which can help prevent potential parental burnout and, thereby, child maltreatment in this ongoing pandemic (Griffith, 2020).

Limitations and future directions

The current study involved semi-structured interviews with state school teachers in England. As some teachers had not physically seen their pupils for months when they were interviewed, their perceptions may have been biased. Future studies may wish to assess teachers' longitudinal trajectory of understanding of pupils' learning and wellbeing. Furthermore, triangulating reports from teachers, parents, and pupils may further enrich one's understanding of the impact of school closures.

This paper provides a unique insight, through teachers' lenses, on the impact school closures were having on their pupils 12 weeks after schools closed to most pupils, and highlights important gaps in policy and practice to support pupils to address the challenges of learning and mental health and wellbeing. The findings emphasise the urgency for policymakers to ensure that teachers are adequately trained and equipped to mitigate the ongoing disruption caused by the virus. Collective action is required at multiple levels and from multiple parties to build a more equitable and resilient educational system that looks after pupils' learning and wellbeing.

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Data availability statement

Anonymised data can be made available to researchers by contacting the corresponding author

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