Teachers' experiences of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic: summary report

Research Report

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10th March 2023

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How to cite this publication:

Carroll, M. & Constantinou, F. (2023). *Teachers' experiences of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic: summary report*. Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

Acknowledgements

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to education systems around the world. As the pandemic spread, many schools were forced to teach lessons remotely, requiring rapid development of new teaching and learning approaches. Once schools reopened, virus control measures and further closures prevented a full return to 'normal' schooling for some time. In many countries, disruption continued throughout 2020, into 2021 and beyond.

As education returns to 'normal', it remains necessary to understand impacts of the disruption on students and teachers so that appropriate support can be offered where it is needed, and to help guide policies and system-level changes. In addition to impacts, there is also a lot to be learned about the steps taken by teachers, schools and parents during the period of disruption: in the case of future disruption it would be helpful to have records of what did or did not work, of how challenges were overcome and of opportunities that arose. Hence, there has been, and will continue to be, a great deal of interest in this extremely challenging period.

The work reported here represents one contribution to this field of research. In spring 2021, we carried out a survey to record the views and experiences of teachers who had, at that stage, been teaching in disrupted conditions for around one year. Specifically, we asked questions about three main areas: impacts on students, impacts on teachers, and teaching methods. The survey aimed to understand both overall patterns and *variation* in experiences, by engaging with teachers from a wide range of countries and schools.

This report aims to provide a brief overview of survey results. If more detail on methodology or survey results is desired, the full report is available at www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/our-research. A more detailed exploration of results relating to learning loss has already been published (Carroll & Constantinou, 2022), and other areas of the survey may receive similar attention. The rest of this report will focus on summaries of key results and emerging themes.

Methods summary

The research was developed in collaboration with colleagues from the Cambridge Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM). CEM provides assessments to schools around the world, in both state and independent sectors, and for students aged 3 to 19. Hence, we targeted the survey at schools that use CEM assessments to provide the desired diversity of experiences.

Survey questions were developed over several cycles, and then trialled by colleagues with teaching backgrounds and an active teacher. Most questions were short, closed questions, with optional comment boxes where respondents could provide extra information. Ethical approval was granted via Cambridge University Press & Assessment's research ethics process. In late April 2021 we emailed invitations to all schools that use CEM assessments. Recipients were able to respond themselves, and to forward the invitation to colleagues in their school. The survey was open until the end of June 2021.

For closed questions, we calculated frequencies of the different response options and identified the most common response. We also contrasted responses between key subgroups to understand possible sources of variation: we compared the UK and the rest of the world, independent and state schools, and primary and secondary schools. For free text questions, we read every comment supplied, and identified common themes to provide context to the quantitative results.

Key results

Sample composition: who responded?

The survey was completed by 404 respondents[1], from 38 countries. 49% of respondents were from the United Kingdom; countries with 10 or more respondents included China, India, Italy, Malaysia, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Respondents came from 198 schools, but were unequally distributed between them, with 149 of the schools having only a single respondent. Respondents from secondary schools made up 77% of the sample, whilst those from primary schools made up 15%; 8% were from schools that fell into neither main category. Almost 80% of respondents were from independent schools and 20% were from state schools, but this pattern was even stronger in the rest of the world (93% independent) than in the UK (66% independent). Hence, the survey response achieved the desired diversity, but we note that the sample over-represents schools in the UK, independent schools, and secondary schools.

The complexity of learning loss

Learning loss (typically considered to be the "gap" between post-pandemic attainment, and the level expected *in the absence of the pandemic* (e.g., Newton, 2021)) has been a major focus of attention. We therefore asked several questions about learning loss, aiming to understand both its extent and nature. The first such question was "*how far ahead or behind in their curriculum learning do you feel most of your students are at the moment, compared to in a 'typical' year?*". Overall responses are presented in Figure 1. This shows that the most common response was "*a little behind*", which was selected by nearly 58% of respondents. However, it also shows that around 8% thought that loss was worse ("*a long way behind*"), over 28% thought their students were "*neither behind nor ahead*", and a little under 5% thought they were *ahead* of expectations.
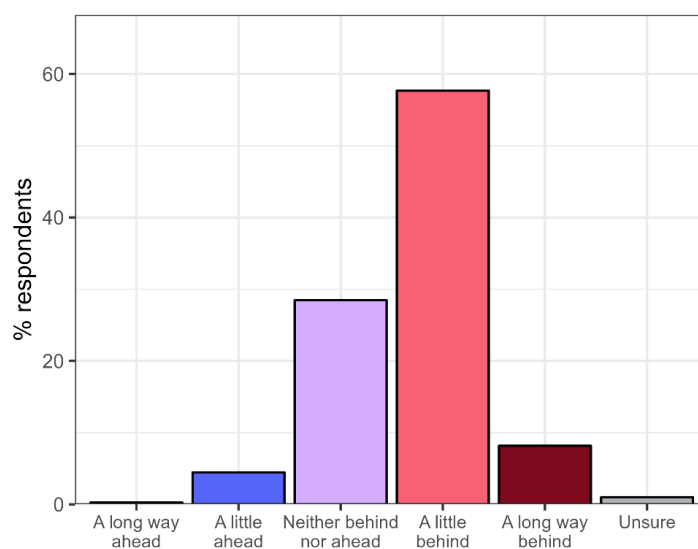

Figure 1. Overall responses to "How far ahead or behind in their curriculum learning do you feel most of your students are at the moment, compared to in a 'typical' year?"

We then asked respondents to estimate how far ahead or behind their students were. Figure 2 shows responses for those who thought students were behind expectations. Over half (58%) of

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[1] The survey was split into several major sections. The 404 respondents described here are those that completed the first major section on student and teacher impacts, but the number of respondents decreased slightly in later sections about teaching methods. The reduced response rate through the survey did not, however, substantially change the sample composition.

these respondents thought their students were 1-2 months behind, with around a quarter (24%) saying 3-4 months behind. Higher estimates of loss were also possible, with over 15% of respondents estimating 5-6 months or greater. Estimates of loss were higher among primary school respondents, with 32% estimating 1-2 months behind, 32% estimating 3-4 months behind, and 19% estimating 5-6 months behind. In contrast, 62% of secondary school respondents estimated just 1-2 months behind, 23% estimated 3-4 months behind, and only 7% estimated 5-6 months behind. This may, therefore, indicate greater 'learning loss' in younger children. Notably, the estimates here were similar to those estimated from different approaches to studying learning loss, such as those based on standardised tests (e.g., those reported by Newton (2021)).
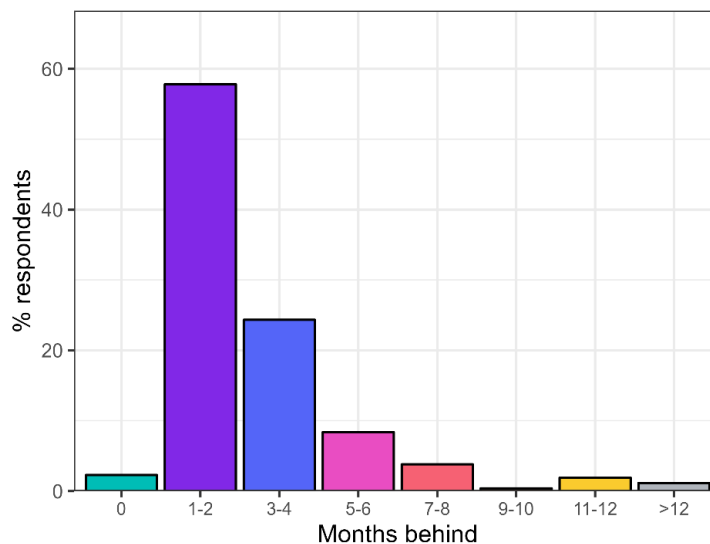

Figure 2. Overall responses to "As a rough estimate, how many months behind in their curriculum learning do you feel most of your students are at the moment?"

We then asked respondents to describe the *nature* of what had been lost (or, indeed, gained), with the question "*If you feel your students are behind or ahead, in which aspects of the subject(s) that you teach are they behind or ahead (e.g. topics, skills)?*" Some of the most common responses indicated that core literacy and numeracy skills had been affected: this supports the focus on core skills both in studies of learning loss (see, e.g., studies reviewed by Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022). However, other common answers indicated a loss of practical skills (due to both remote teaching and virus control measures when schools reopened) and more general study skills such as workload management and social skills. Finally, several respondents described the variability in learning loss, with some students behind and others ahead, even *within* the same classes.

Taken together, these results show that "learning loss" was a relatively common experience, but that it was more complex than may be commonly understood. Although students being behind expectations was the most common observation, a large minority were on track or even *ahead* of expectations. Moreover, the extent of loss varied between groups (e.g., greater loss in younger students) and *within* groups (i.e., differing impacts within the same classes). The nature of what was "lost" also appears to be diverse: core literacy and numeracy skills are part of the picture, but so are practical skills, which needed dedicated catch-up time, as well as general study and social skills, which may be regained simply from returning to normal schooling. Hence, when considering learning loss, we must remember this complexity, especially when considering schemes to support affected students.

Wellbeing in schools

Impacts of the disruption were not limited to learning loss, with concerns also raised about more personal impacts (e.g., Viner et al., 2022; Williamson, Suto, Little, Jellis, & Carroll, 2021). We therefore asked how student and teacher wellbeing had changed during the pandemic. Figure 3 shows the results, with 55% of respondents saying that student wellbeing was "*a little worse*", and 53% saying the same about teacher wellbeing. Nearly 24% of respondents said teacher wellbeing was "*much worse*", while 17% said this about student wellbeing. There was therefore a strong signal of poorer wellbeing for both students and teachers. Analysis of responses from key subgroups showed larger percentages of respondents saying that student wellbeing was worse in UK schools (81% vs. 63% in other countries), state schools (87% vs. 79% in independent schools) and secondary schools (78% vs. 47% in primary schools). These patterns were also evident for teacher wellbeing, but with slightly higher percentages of respondents saying wellbeing was worse.
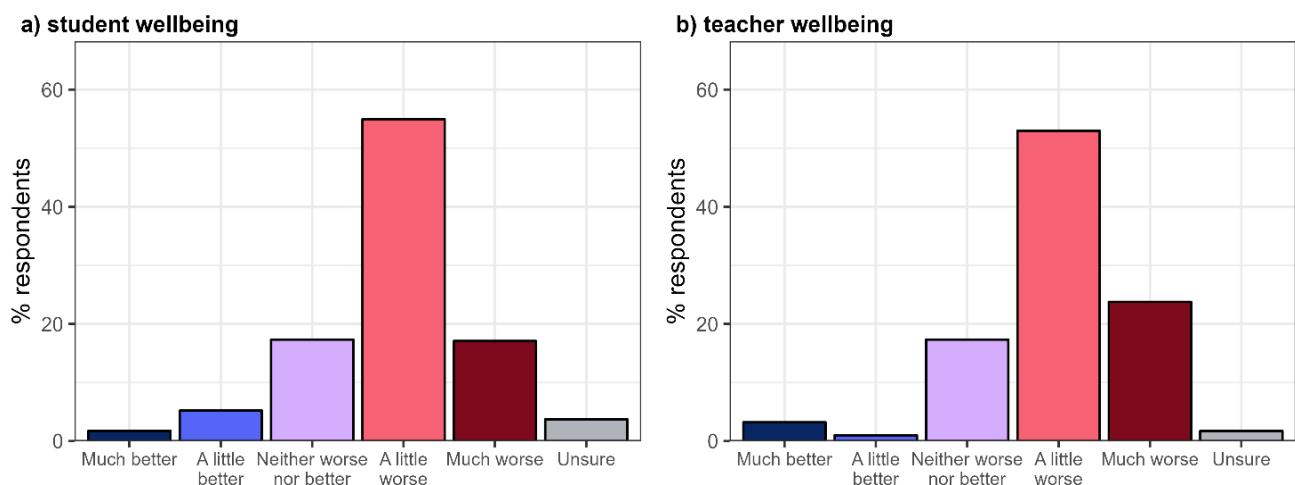

Figure 3. Overall responses to "On average, how is the wellbeing of a) your students, and b) teachers in your school, compared to in a 'typical' year?"

Respondents' comments described wellbeing impacts, with anxiety, stress, fatigue and loneliness all mentioned. For students, the lack of control, uncertainty over the rapidly changing situation, and isolation were all linked to the negative impacts. For teachers, alongside these causes, heavier workloads were also commonly mentioned, with the extra work associated with remote/hybrid teaching and the cancellation of exams both mentioned as being particularly challenging. Furthermore, when asked for any tips to share with other teachers, several respondents focused on how to look after their wellbeing, showing that this was a major consideration for at least some people.

The wellbeing impacts of the pandemic are widely discussed (e.g., Brooks, Creely, & Laletas, 2022; Viner et al., 2022), so the findings here are perhaps unsurprising. However, the strength of the results reaffirms that wellbeing of both students and teachers is, or should be, an important consideration in schools, particularly during the return to 'normal' schooling. Understanding what support and resources teachers and schools may require as they support their students – and indeed themselves – may therefore be an important task in coming months and years.

Learning lessons from remote teaching

Part of the survey was about experiences of remote teaching. Responses to the first question, "*Overall, how challenging have you found remote teaching to be?*", set the tone for the rest of the section. Figure 4 presents the responses, showing that "*somewhat challenging*" (62% respondents) was the most common, followed by "*very challenging*" (19%). Broadly speaking, this pattern was seen in each of the subgroups we considered. This suggests that remote teaching was considered to be somewhat challenging, and that this was a reasonably universal experience.
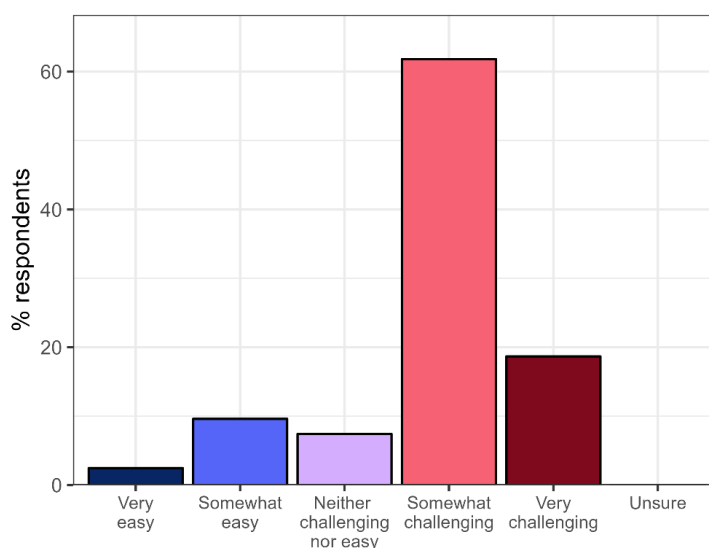

Figure 4. Overall responses to "Overall, how challenging have you found remote teaching to be?"

We also asked whether particular aspects of remote teaching had helped or hindered respondents. Across all respondents, several elements came out as being helpful: the usability of online teaching platforms, teachers' digital skills, and access to technology all proved helpful. Conversely, dealing with students' digital skills, student attendance and, in particular, student engagement, appeared to have been more challenging.

Many comments about remote teaching described challenges that the respondents had faced. Online platforms often lacked features that would have aided teaching (such as the ability to easily mark work), students did not want to turn their cameras on or contribute to class discussions, students lacked access to computers, internet connections were unreliable, and certain lessons or subjects simply did not translate well to remote teaching.

However, a number of comments also described aspects of remote teaching that they had liked. These included online quizzes and formative assessment tools, platforms that had helped with collaboration or sharing documents, and even the opportunity to develop new digital skills. Hence, although remote teaching was clearly challenging, there were positive aspects; in some cases, respondents even stated that they wished to keep using certain tools in face-to-face teaching.

Although remote teaching may not be the main mode of delivery outside of the pandemic, the skills developed and the helpful tools discovered during the pandemic may provide opportunities in the case of further disruption or, indeed, under 'normal' teaching conditions. Sharing ideas about what did or did not work, developing best practice guidelines and school policies, and maintaining teachers' digital skills could all, therefore, be fruitful activities to incorporate in the return to face-to-face teaching.

The role of parents

As so much learning was done at home during the period of disruption, parents had the potential to be much more involved than usual, so we asked respondents about how much parental support their students had received. Responses are shown in Figure 5. The figure shows that around 37% of respondents said that students received "*some support*", with over 28% saying "*quite a lot of support*". However, we observed a key difference between primary and secondary schools, with over 20% of primary school respondents saying their students had "*a great deal of support*", in contrast to only 4% of secondary school respondents.

Variation between whole groups of students may have been expected – younger children needed more support and were less able to learn independently. However, comments indicated that there was also a lot of variation *within* groups, with some students receiving a lot of support and others very little. Family circumstances dictated what support was available, meaning there was a wide range of experiences. Along with comments about the ways in which parents had helped, some comments described challenges faced, with some parents carrying out work for the students or telling students what to do in class.
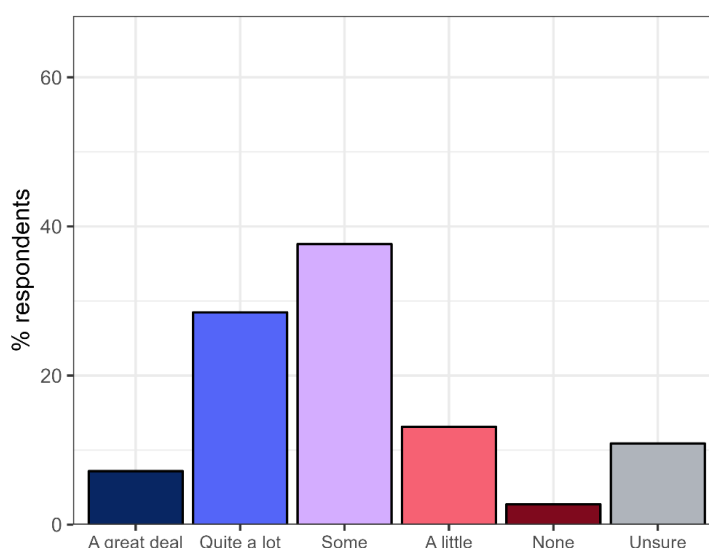

Figure 5. Overall responses to "On average, how much support have your students received from their parents during the pandemic?"

The importance of parental involvement also came through in responses about changes to classroom practices. We asked whether respondents had communicated with parents and supplied parents with resources more or less than usual. In both cases, 22% said they had done these "*much more*", and over 30% said they had done them "*a little more*". Among respondents from primary schools, these values increased to 50-60% saying "*much more*", emphasising the role of parents in supporting younger children's education through the disruption.

The responses show how important parental support, and the relationship between parents and teachers, was during the pandemic. Although the intensity of parental engagement is unlikely to be needed under normal circumstances, there may be opportunities to maintain and develop the closer links that have been established to provide longer-term benefits outside of the pandemic.

Development of communities and training resources

As the pandemic caused many people to work from home (or in isolation, even if in their usual workplace), traditional networks for sharing advice, tips and support may have no longer functioned. To explore this, we asked about who had influenced teachers' practices: results are shown in Figure 6. Overall, senior leaders (around 28% "*very influential*") and other teachers in respondents' schools (35% "*very influential*") appeared to have had the most influence, and teachers in other schools the least (24% "*not influential at all*"). This shows that despite being physically separated, sharing of advice and guidance within schools was still very important.
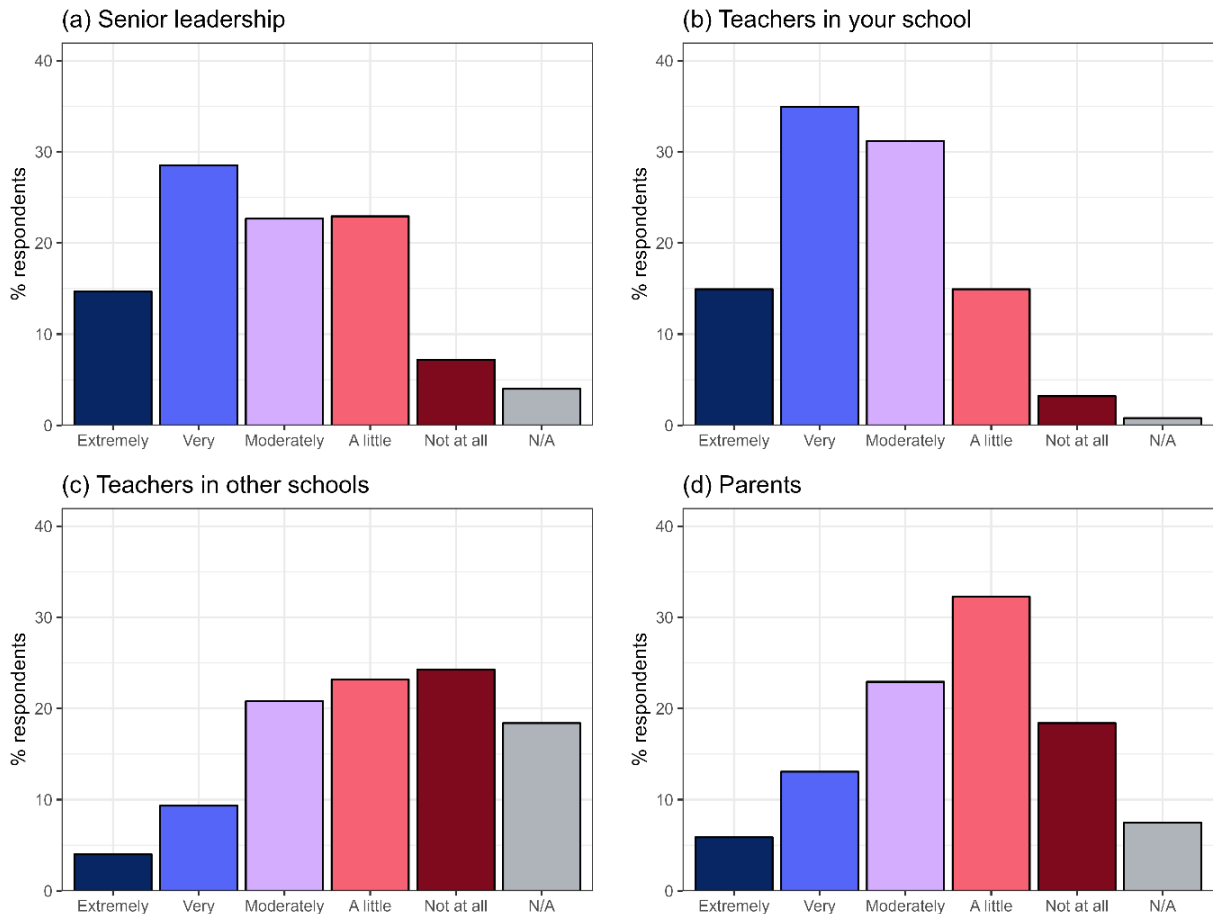

Figure 6. Overall responses to "How influential have the following been on the practices that you use to support your students during the pandemic?"

Respondents also described other important sources of advice. Social media, websites, videos, and other online resources all provided useful opportunities for teachers as they adapted to remote teaching. One respondent did note, however, that the quality of online material was variable, introducing a new challenge of identifying good quality resources and advice. Nevertheless, this shows how online communities gained importance over the period.

A further theme in responses about remote teaching was the importance of building communities within schools, even when colleagues were physically separated. Some respondents described how their schools had set aside time for remote socialising with colleagues, or created internal repositories for sharing resources; both of these were considered to be very helpful. Conversely, some respondents described a lack of within-school support, which left them to work through the challenges of remote teaching alone, in turn leading to increased workloads and stress.

Given the importance of communication and idea sharing during the pandemic, it may be helpful to develop platforms to enable this, either within schools or more widely. Even as traditional networks re-establish, there could be benefits to enabling and encouraging community development and idea sharing, both within and between schools.

The variability of experience

A major reason for carrying out the survey was to better understand variability in experiences. The results in almost every section showed this variability, both at large scales (e.g., between age groups or types of school) and within these groups. Despite the common experience, impacts were clearly not the same. Results show this to be particularly true of learning loss and parental support, but also of experiences of remote teaching and, indeed, a range of other areas. This has implications for support as normal schooling resumes: explicitly acknowledging and responding to the variability may be important to ensure efficient and effective provision of support.

Conversely, some experiences appeared to be almost universal, such as the reported increases in teacher workload, poorer wellbeing, and in the challenges of maintaining student engagement. Identifying these kinds of phenomena – which may be helped by more structural, policy-level changes – is also important. Hence, understanding both variable *and* common aspects of experiences, and considering how this influences subsequent support, would be beneficial.

We also thought it important to consider how pandemic effects could have exacerbated existing differences. Accordingly, we asked whether educational gaps between higher and lower attaining students had changed: results are shown in Figure 7. Overall, nearly 43% of respondents said the gap had "*increased a little*" and 25% said it had "*increased a lot*".
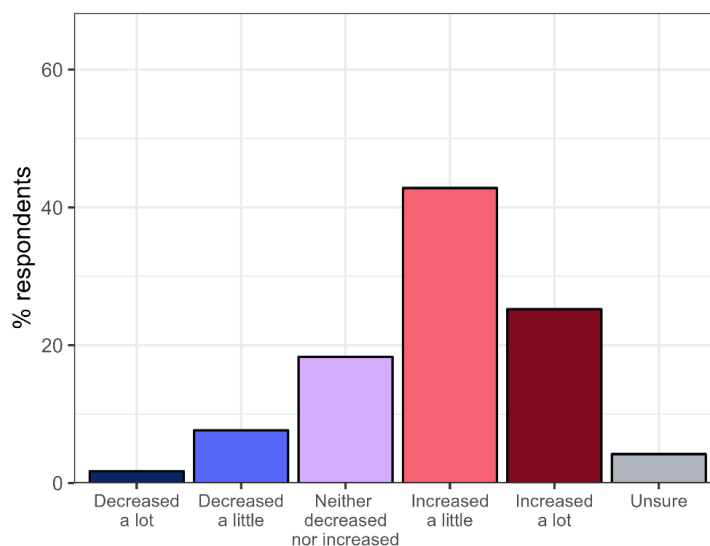

Figure 7. Overall responses to "How much has the educational gap between your most able and your least able students changed since the start of the pandemic?"

These increased educational gaps could come about, in part, from the variable impacts described above. Comments indicated that student ability, parental support, student engagement, and a range of other factors, influenced the extent of the impacts. While some students fell behind, others coped well, and some even progressed beyond expectations. Hence, along with considering the variable nature of pandemic impacts, we should also consider how the impacts

interact with existing attainment gaps; if gaps have indeed been made worse by the pandemic, it is important to understand this so that appropriate support can be put in place.

Opportunities for the future

Responses to many of the questions indicated that teaching in the pandemic was challenging, both professionally and personally. However, when we asked respondents to describe something that had worked well for them, there was a ride range of responses. Many described online tools they had enjoyed using, most notably online quizzes, formative assessment tools, and interactive resources. Several respondents noted that they had enjoyed developing new digital skills over the period. Others found new ways to keep students engaged, and to structure lessons and work programmes to keep things fun. Some found benefits from the increased focus on wellbeing. Hence, despite the challenges, there *were* positive aspects, and it is important that these are not forgotten. Indeed, it has even been argued that the disruption of education during the pandemic provides an opportunity to "build back better" (Zhao, 2022). By considering what did work, and what might provide opportunities under 'normal' teaching, it may indeed be possible to gain something from the challenges faced.

Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to education around the world. Our survey aimed to capture some of the experiences of teachers from the first year of pandemic-related disruption. Whilst the sample of respondents was diverse, we must acknowledge that it is not representative of all experiences, and that certain groups were over-represented in the sample. We must also remember that by its nature, the study collected *self-reported* views of the experience, thus findings and conclusions may differ if another set of teachers had responded or, indeed, if another group (such as students or parents) had been surveyed. However, even with these caveats, the sample is unusually wide-ranging, providing a good insight into both the depth and breadth of experiences of teachers during the pandemic.

The challenges came through strongly in responses, with learning loss, poorer wellbeing, and the difficulties of remote teaching all evident. However, some positive aspects also emerged, such as useful tools for remote teaching, supportive parents, and the benefits of sharing advice and resources. There were common experiences, but variability between and within groups was also important. Taken together, the findings show that we should resist simple interpretations of what happened and should instead remember that, for such a dramatic event, outcomes are inevitably complex. In studying what happened, and in acknowledging the complexity, we will be in a better position to support teachers and students in years to come. Moreover, by learning what worked and what didn't work, we may be in a better position to develop and improve systems and practices as we return to a 'new' normal.

The full report upon which this summary is based, including a full description of the methods, a copy of the survey, and full results tables, is available at www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk

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