# The Importance of Community and Collaboration in Education after Covid-19

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The lockdown has drawn attention to the importance of community in our lives. With [half the world’s students](https://en.unesco.org/news/half-worlds-student-population-not-attending-school-unesco-launches-global-coalition-accelerate) out of school or university, community has also been one of the most important features of education students have missed. Schools and universities are intellectual and social communities. One of the challenges of teaching remotely is to imitate these communities by, for example, [fostering an online community](https://cirlresearch.com/2020/03/24/fostering-an-online-community-three-tips-for-engaging-students-online/).

Covid-19 has presented three major challenges for schools: a widening attainment gap; learning loss; and heightened emotional and social needs. Learning catchup should not come at the expense of a focus on emotional and social support; indeed, excessive focus on the former could exacerbate the need for the latter, by increasing stress and anxiety. Headteachers [recently called](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jul/07/headteachers-across-england-call-for-exams-to-be-cut-back-next-year) for exams to be cut back next year to reduce the impact of learning catchup on students’ mental health.

Schools cannot meet these challenges alone. Support is needed from governmental and non-governmental organisations. Effective *community* support is also vital. Fruitful co-operation between communities and their members requires effective [*collaboration*](https://cirlresearch.com/2020/06/09/collaboration-in-education-after-covid-19/)*.*What kind of collaboration is needed to foster the community support required to address the challenges education faces after Covid-19?

The pandemic has precipitated a regression of the progress made over the past decade in reducing [educational inequality](https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/news/the-covid-19-crisis-and-educational-inequality/). Global projections outlined in a recent [report](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_(2020)_-_Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf) by the [Education Endowment Foundation](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/) (‘EEF’)  ‘suggest that school closures will widen the attainment gap’ and are likely to reverse ‘progress made to narrow the gap since 2011’, with a median estimate that it will widen by 36%.

School closures have precipitated a significant learning loss. Recent studies [revealed](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/millions-of-pupils-are-doing-little-or-no-work-in-lockdown-sztvqdq0c) that a fifth of UK children have done less than an hour of schoolwork a day during lockdown. The greater impact of learning loss on disadvantaged students is evidenced by studies showing that attainment gaps widen during summer breaks. The EEF report outlines the impact of closures on the ‘disadvantage gap’: ‘the interaction between the amount of summer learning loss and students’ socioeconomic status’. The report cites the most recent review of evidence on ‘summer learning loss’, which estimates that in reading and language, ‘on average, summer vacations [create] a gap of about 3 months between middle- and lower-class students’. Since this year’s summer break follows a lockdown lasting over three months, the learning loss for many students will be higher and the disadvantage gap will widen.

The pandemic has increased the need for greater social and emotional support for students. Calls to the NSPCC about domestic abuse are at a [record high](https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2020/Calls-about-domestic-abuse-highest-on-record-following-lockdown-increase/). During the first seven weeks of lockdown, [Childline delivered](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/coronavirus-children-mental-health-lockdown-childline-counselling-anxiety-a9533951.html) 43% of the counselling sessions for young people it delivered over the whole of last year. A [report](https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-evidence-challenges-and-risks-relating-to-virtual-and-digital-delivery) by the [Early Intervention Foundation](https://www.eif.org.uk/) states that the ‘impact of social isolation on children and families will be significant’ and is likely to increase child poverty and abuse, family stress, parental conflict and domestic abuse, and risks of cyberbullying and online grooming. Adolescent mental health is likely to deteriorate. Child poverty will be more severe for families with lower incomes and job security. [Recent evidence](https://adc.bmj.com/content/early/2020/06/30/archdischild-2020-319872) suggests a possible increase in child abuse since the lockdown.

At earlier stages of education, interpersonal interaction is more important for teaching and learning. This is among the reasons that earlier educational levels [benefit less](https://cirlresearch.com/2020/06/02/what-has-the-lockdown-taught-us-about-the-challenges-facing-ed-tech/) from educational technology. Videoconferencing can imitate a classroom community, but only to a degree.

The importance of interpersonal interaction has led to some schools requesting teaching assistance from pupils’ families. Primary school teachers and headteachers identified the increase in parental responsibility in teaching as one of the main challenges they have faced during closures, in a recent [workshop](https://vimeo.com/423080303) hosted by the [Tony Little Centre for Innovation and Research in Learning](https://twitter.com/Eton_CIRL). Some schools have collaborated with families to create ‘family hubs’: home support networks to assist with teaching and learning.

The importance of parental involvement is one of the two factors identified in the EEF report that affect learning at home (along with remote learning).EEF research suggests that parental ‘engagement in children’s learning and the quality of the home learning environment are associated with improved academic outcomes at all ages’. The report also suggests that schools ‘may need support in communicating effectively with parents and in helping parents understand specific ways to help their child learn’. Research by the [RSA](https://www.thersa.org/) on [preventing school exclusions](https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/preventing-school-exclusions) suggests that pupils’ educational outcomes, attendance and behaviour can be improved through close partnerships between schools and pupils’ families.

But we cannot expect the challenges to be met only by schools working with families. Family support is hugely variable. Wider *community support networks* are also required.

A promising proposal on the kind of long-term community support needed is offered in a new initiative by the RSA. [Laura Partridge](https://www.thersa.org/about-us/staff/profiles/laura-partridge) argues that we need to create a ‘child-centred system’ of [‘*collaboratives*’](https://medium.com/@thersa/no-school-an-island-6b883826ba47): operational networks of ‘collective responsibility for children across schools, youth work, social work, health, criminal justice and the voluntary sector’ across UK localities. Collaboratives involve schools, public services, and voluntary and community organisations. They aim to create a shared sense of responsibility over creating better futures for children and to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children.

On this model of collaboration, schools are placed ‘at the heart of a wider community network protecting the safety, welfare, health and wellbeing of pupils’. This is a difference in degree, rather than kind, between existing forms of collaboration between schools and local communities. For example, teachers already play an important role in identifying concerns and making referrals to children’s services.

Robert Halfon, chairman of the Commons education select committee, [recently advised](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2020/06/09/boris-johnson-told-set-national-education-army-save-school-year/) the Prime Minister to fund a national initiative to form a ‘national education army’ to support schools in addressing the challenges following Covid-19. He recommended that we use public buildings as temporary schools, and that we hire school inspectors, students and retired teachers to teach. If an ‘army of teachers’ were recruited, a role they should help fulfil lies beyond the classroom: to act as members of support networks to address the challenges schools, students and families now face.