Primary teaching during the first and second COVID-19 school closures: how schools learnt from lockdown

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The COVID-19 school closures in 2020 presented an unprecedented challenge to primary education, with teachers, parents, and children having to rapidly adjust to a remote learning environment. After only a brief return to school for many children, the national lockdown at the start of 2021 brought a second wave of school closures and a return to remote learning. Remote teaching and learning requires different technology and skills to classroom-based education, and places different demands on teachers, as well as pupils and their parents. Studies have reported that teachers in England had had little professional development in integrating technology into their teaching prior to the pandemic (Galvis & MacLean, 2020), and that less than a quarter of state schools had online learning platforms already set up (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). This resulted in concerns about the effectiveness of remote learning approaches and calls for training and guidance for teachers in online teaching (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020; Nelson & Sharp, 2020). This paper reports on research into how primary teachers in England learnt to teach remotely and support children's learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how their practice developed between the first and second period of school closures. We sought to understand how teachers used professional learning networks (PLNs) to develop their skills during the pandemic, and the extent to which these individual networks contributed to a whole school approach to remote teaching and learning. PLNs are 'uniquely personalized, complex systems of interactions consisting of people, resources, and digital tools that support ongoing learning and professional growth' (Trust et al., 2016), and we used connectivism learning theory as a framework for exploring how digital technology could enhance and extend professional learning networks (PLNs) (Downes 2019), and enable whole school learning.

Data were collected through two rounds of semi-structured interviews with primary teachers, during the first and second periods of school closures in 2020/21. Participants were recruited from respondents to a survey as part of a larger study on primary school teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, who provided their contact details in order to participate in a follow-up interview. Survey respondents were recruited via a convenience sampling strategy, with the researchers using email and social media to share the survey link with primary education networks. Out of 214 survey respondents, 64 provided their contact details, and we conducted 24 interviews in total. Responses to the background questions in the survey were used to select participants at various points in their careers (from newly qualified teachers to those with over twenty years' experience), from different types of schools (state schools, academies/free schools, and independent/private schools), and from schools in more or less disadvantaged communities (measured by the percentage of pupils in the school receiving the Pupil Premium additional funding from the government). The initial interviews focused on how teachers were supporting children's learning remotely, the technologies they were using, and any training they had received in remote teaching. We also explored how pupils and parents had responded to and engaged with the remote learning offering. We then contacted the interview participants again at the start of 2021, to

discuss their experiences of remote teaching during the second period of school closures, and reflect on this in comparison to the first period.

Qualitative data from the interviews were analysed thematically, with both authors coding the data independently, and then meeting at regular intervals to discuss and agree the themes and sub-themes. A predominantly deductive approach was taken to the coding, using connectivism learning theory as a guiding framework, but we also included inductively derived codes where new insights arose from the data. Initial findings showed that most teachers had received no formal professional development to support remote learning, but that internet-based tools enabled teachers to utilise and expand their PLNs, to engage in informal development. The 'anytime, anywhere' nature of PLNs (Trust et al., 2016) enabled these to support teachers' development across a diverse range of areas whilst working remotely during the lockdowns. Individual learning was also shared more widely through both digital and face to face means to develop whole school approaches to remote teaching and learning. We argue that there needs to be greater recognition of the value of informal online professional development for teachers, and that schools need to foster the positive impact such connections can have beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

References
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