

Two years after the first lockdown almost a third of young children are not reaching learning expectations for their age

Submitted by: The Influence Crowd

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Two years since schools closed to most pupils, younger children's learning is showing no sign of recovery, according to one of the largest reports into the impact of the pandemic on primary school children which was released today.

Children in Year 3 (aged 7- 8 years old) experienced a steeper drop in their learning during the Covid crisis than older primary school children, and the pandemic has delayed their recovery more severely.

The Juniper Education National Dataset Report, March 2022 – The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on primary school children's learning examines teacher assessment data from over half a million pupils representing more than 6,000 primary schools.

It looks at the percentage of pupils achieving, or exceeding, what is expected for their age (age related expectations) for all pupils who were in primary school at the start of the pandemic – the current Years 3 through to 6. The data compares their attainment in reading, writing and maths with pre-pandemic levels.

Youngest worst affected

The report reveals that nearly one in three of all Year 3 children has not met age related expectations in reading, writing or maths compared with around just one in five before the pandemic, when these pupils were in Year 1. In autumn 2019, 82% of Year 3 pupils achieved age related expectations in reading, 79% in writing and 83% in maths. Two years later these figures have dropped to 68%, 58% and 69% of pupils respectively.

Frazer Westmorland, headteacher of Mundella Primary School in Kent, said: "The huge disruption of the pandemic means that many children haven't had the opportunity to rehearse the routines, skills and social aspects of learning which they normally develop in Key Stage 1. So by the time those children reach the middle years of primary school, they are struggling to find their feet.

"This report provides a strong evidence base from which schools can direct their strategy and resources to support the pupils in greatest need and help them make the most of the years ahead."

Recovery slowest in youngest pupils

The report indicates that not only has younger children's learning suffered the most during the pandemic, but it is also yet to show signs of recovery. The number of Year 3 pupils working at age related expectations has fallen progressively from pre-pandemic levels right through to autumn 2021. However, there are some early signs of recovery in the older year groups with a slight uplift in attainment during the autumn term. Year 6 reading attainment increased from 70% in summer 2021 to 73% in autumn 2021. Writing attainment rose from 60% in summer 2021 to 63% in autumn 2021, and maths went up from 67% to 70%

Youngest pupils with SEN fall further behind their peers

The pandemic has raised new barriers for children with SEN, with the gaps widening between children with SEN and their classmates, particularly in Year 3. In 2019, the gap in attainment for Year 3 pupils with SEN in reading was 29 percentage points. Two years later, the gap has grown to 45 points.

Writing is the subject most affected

Of the three core primary subjects, writing suffered the most from the pandemic. All year groups in the study saw steeper drops in writing than in reading or maths. The biggest fall in writing attainment was for Year 3, with only 58% of children where they should be for their age in writing compared with 79% prior to the pandemic.

Inequalities growing between disadvantaged pupils and their peers

The Covid crisis has exacerbated inequalities by widening the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their classmates. In autumn 2019, 68% of disadvantaged children (those who qualified for Pupil Premium) met age related expectations in maths compared to 82% of their peers – a 14-point gap. By autumn 2021, only 55% of disadvantaged children were reaching expectations for their age in maths, a gaping 20 points behind their peers.

Report author and former primary head, Stephan Nicholls, who works as an education consultant for Juniper Education, said: “The past two years have been exceptionally disruptive to children’s education, and Year 3 children – whose last normal year of schooling was when they were in Reception – have suffered the most from the pandemic.

“While the report brings sobering news, there are glimmers of hope that older children are already taking the first steps towards recovery in their attainment.”

Key points from the report at a glance

The report can be viewed at <https://junipereducation.org/resource/downloads/national-dataset-report/>

Methodology

The Juniper Education National Dataset collects anonymised teacher assessment data from schools which use its pupil tracking solutions to give percentages of pupils who are achieving or exceeding what is expected for their age (age related expectations).

We have taken the pre-pandemic baseline of autumn 2019 and we compare that with three further datapoints of autumn 2020, summer 2021 and autumn 2021.

- Autumn 2019 provides an indication of attainment pre-pandemic
- Autumn 2020 gives a snapshot of attainment as lockdown 2.0 takes effect
- Summer 2021 offers insight into the effect of lockdown 3.0 and the spring roadmap
- Autumn 2021 covers months of disruption due to continuing high levels of infection

We are looking at attainment across three academic years (2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22) because only certain cohorts have been in primary education that entire time and so can be tracked – the current Years 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Unless otherwise identified all analysis in the report relates to these pupils and we refer to them by their current (2021/22) year group.

For each datapoint, we have broken attainment data into the following pupil groups:

- Year group
- Pupils with an identified SEN
- Disadvantaged pupils – those who qualify for Pupil Premium which includes looked after pupils, and pupils who have received free school meals at any time in the last six years

Schools wishing to benchmark their own reading, writing and maths assessment data with the results of the Juniper Education National Dataset 2022 can and submit their own assessment results via:

<https://junipereducation.org/resource/downloads/national-dataset-analysis-tool/>

For further information and to arrange interviews, please contact:

Louise Everett, The Influence Crowd (on behalf of Juniper Education). louise@theinfluencecrowd.co.uk

Tel:07855 257927.

Ends

Notes to the editor:

- Report author, Stephan Nicholls of Juniper Education and Frazer Westmorland, headteacher of Mundella Primary School, plus other primary schools heads around the country are available to interview please just call Claire Bustin on 07870 808166 or Claire@theinfluencecrowd.co.uk to arrange interviews

- The report is available to view at

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