



NFER

National Foundation for
Educational Research

NFER impact review 2020/21



**75th
anniversary
issue**



Welcome to our 2020/21 impact review

In 2021, we marked 75 years since NFER was established and explored what the future might hold for education.

NFER was founded in 1946 – in the aftermath of the second world war – with the aim of building a body of evidence that would transform education for children and young people.

Today we are dealing with the consequences of the largest disruption to education in peacetime. The aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis will be felt in education across the world for many years. The need for high-quality, impartial evidence to inform policy and practice has never been greater if the interests of children and young people are to be at the centre of recovery.

Impact of the pandemic on education

NFER has been leading the way over 2020 and 2021 in generating timely insights into how the pandemic has been impacting education and informing next steps. This work has included:

- insights into the challenges being faced by schools at the height of the disruption
- a focus on the dynamics of home learning, including pupil engagement
- monitoring trends in teacher recruitment across the period
- assessing the impact on the attainment of Key Stage 1 pupils.

All this work has generated high levels of engagement with key stakeholders and the media.

Extending our international impact

We have been privileged to have extended the reach of our work further across the world with flagship projects in several African countries, including work on the Girls' Education Challenge in Mozambique and Sierra Leone. You can read more about this growing portfolio of work on pages 19 and 20.

Thanks to the expertise and dedication of our staff, trustees and partners – and invaluable engagement from schools and other education institutions – NFER continues to be a leading provider of independent research and insights. I am delighted to share this review with you and hope you enjoy reading about what we have achieved during 2020 and 2021 in the UK and beyond.

Carole Willis
Chief Executive

92%
of our stakeholders
said that
they valued NFER's political
independence*

*NFER Annual Stakeholder Survey 2021

Looking back at 75 years of NFER

NFER was founded 75 years ago, in 1946. In this issue of our impact review – alongside our review of the past 18 months – we share a brief history of the organisation, including memories that will resonate with some of you. During this period, NFER has grown from a small organisation, with only a handful of projects, to one which has a significant influence on education policy and practice. Today we have 250 staff, 1000 associates and contingent workers and we conduct more than 100 projects a year across the UK and internationally. It has been quite a journey so far, but the work is far from done and we look forward to continuing to work with you for many more years to come.

1940s-60s

The 1944 Education Act included powers for the Ministry of Education and the local education authorities to fund research on education provision, culminating in the creation of NFER in 1946 and its establishment as a self-governing body in 1947.

Within the first year, all the national teachers' associations, all but one of the universities and 140 of 147 local education authorities became corporate members. Partnership working – with schools, central and local government, other education institutions and stakeholders – has been at the heart of our work throughout the last 75 years.

In 1953, NFER published guidelines for a long-term research programme focused on teaching methods and the transfer of pupils from primary to secondary schools.

It also launched a biannual *Bulletin* journal to spread information about NFER's work. This was replaced by the *Educational Research* journal in 1958, alongside a series of occasional publications designed to disseminate research findings with practical implications at minimum cost.

The 1960s heralded a period of great change for NFER with a significant increase in the range and number of projects and sponsors. The research programme extended into secondary education, including studies into grammar school entrance examinations, the effects of film on children and comprehensive education. The Examinations and Test Research Unit, funded by the Department for Education and Science, was established.

In 1964, NFER moved to Slough to accommodate this expansion and in 1967 it amended its constitution, changing from an unincorporated association into an incorporated charitable body.

Sir Peter Innes

Director

February 1947 to April 1950

Ben Morris

Director

May 1950 to September 1956

Dr W.D. Wall

Director

September 1956 to May 1968

1970s-90s

During the 1970s, the volume of sponsored research increased rapidly and there was an increased focus on ensuring that the findings reached as wide an audience as possible, through press conferences, exhibitions and local education authorities.

The first Register of Educational Research, commissioned by the Department for Education and Science and the Social Science Research Council and containing information about 2200 projects, was published. In 1978, the Education Policy Information Centre (EPIC) was established as a national information centre to collect and exchange education policy information at national and local level. This was part of the Euridyce network, a means to exchange information between the European partners.

The Monitoring Services Unit (MSU) was set up in 1978 to provide administrative and technical services for monitoring standards in mathematics and language. This became the central agency supporting all Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) – the national monitoring system used in England until 1989 – monitoring exercises.

In 1977-78, the Item Banking Service was developed for use by authorities and schools, complemented by a Local Research Consultancy Service set up by NFER in 1979 to provide services to schools and local education authorities.

NFER continued to grow its expertise in assessment and testing and in 1981 the NFER-Nelson Publishing Company was formed, jointly owned by NFER and Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.

From 1985 to the mid-1990s, a new era of educational evaluation began. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) evaluation work established NFER's reputation as one of the few research institutions capable of handling large, complex, mixed-method evaluations.

By 1988-89, NFER's work programme reflected the significant changes taking place in the world of education with the Education Reform Act and the legislated National Curriculum. The Statistics Service became increasingly involved in the school effectiveness (value added) area, carrying out analysis on behalf of local education authorities and supporting schools to use data for improvement.

In 1995, NFER delivered the first-ever cycle of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in England as part of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) study.

By the end of the decade, there was a sharper focus on research reviews, particularly on the quality of the underpinning evidence. NFER undertook its own review of research into provision for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

2000 onwards

In 2003-04, NFER responded to growing calls from national sponsors for interdisciplinary approaches to research and evaluation, establishing new partnerships, including with political scientists on the longitudinal study of the citizenship curriculum.

In 2005-06, NFER delivered the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study for the first time in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In 2007, NFER helped establish the Local Authority Research Consortium and in 2008, the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services, funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Engaging schools, always a central feature of NFER's work, was the basis for establishing its Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey in 2007-08, to provide a regular method for gathering teachers' and school leaders' views. In 2011-12, more than 1 million schoolchildren took NFER tests and over 50 per cent of schools in England took part in NFER research.

Dr Stephen Wiseman

Director

May 1968 to 1971

Alfred Yates

Director

1971 to March 1983

Dr Clare Burstall

Director

April 1983 to 1993

In 2013, NFER established a dedicated Impact Team to help ensure that NFER's work had a positive impact. Working closely with government departments, think tanks and practitioner organisations, it built on its success in informing and influencing policy and practice during the following years.

NFER's important research into the recruitment, development and retention of teachers and school leaders has directly informed the government's focus in this area.

In recognition of the key relationship between evidence quality and impact, NFER's Education Trials Unit was established in 2013 to deliver robust randomised controlled trials (RCTs) to evaluate education initiatives.

NFER has continued to provide high-quality assessments and support to governments and organisations including the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), and to practitioners and schools. In 2015, NFER began the design, development and delivery of the National Reference Test, an important source of evidence for awarding GCSEs in England.

In 2018, we piloted and delivered the OECD's International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (IELS), and developed and delivered the new statutory Reception Baseline Assessment for the Department for Education.

Throughout the decade, there was continued focus on NFER's communication of research findings and achieving reach and impact. NFER embraced social media and established the NFER Blog. More recently, there has been a focused drive on raising NFER's profile through media and parliamentary engagement.

NFER's international education team was established in 2016 to support our increasing involvement in a number of high-impact projects around the world. NFER's international presence and contribution to education globally continues to grow.

In 2018, NFER launched a new brand and a new website and continued to build its portfolios of work around international development and NFER's eight key topic areas: accountability; assessment; classroom practice; education to employment; school workforce; school funding; social mobility; and systems and structures. You can read about our latest activity in relation to all these themes in this impact review.

Seamus Hegarty

Chief Executive

June 1994 to October 2005

Sue Rossiter

Chief Executive

October 2005 to December 2013

Carole Willis

Chief Executive

December 2013 to present





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The lives of children and young people worldwide are inextricably linked to the quality of education they receive.

At the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), our mission is to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere and to support positive change in education.



Our impact

At NFER, we use our influence as a leading independent provider of education research and insights to improve outcomes for children and young people.

We do this by creating and sharing evidence and insights into education policy and practice, informing decisions and debates, and supporting the strengthening of practice in the classroom.

We focus our work where it can make the greatest difference, identifying and exploring the key issues and challenges facing our education system.

We actively use the breadth and depth of our expertise to inform and influence policymakers and educators on the issues and potential solutions – always with the goal of improving education in the UK and worldwide.

This year, a core focus of our work has been identifying the impact of Covid-19 on education, exploring what this has meant for schools and colleges and for children and young people, and informing key debates on recovery. We have continued our focus on supporting classroom practice and developing insights to help strengthen the teaching workforce and highlight the need for this to be underpinned by the relevant resource and support. We have also explored key issues in the 16-19 arena, with a focus on the transition from education to employment, progression, future skills and opportunities for all.

Stakeholders, schools, colleges and partners are core to NFER's work and impact. We drive change and improvement by working with and through others. We have made sure that the evidence and insights we have generated have been fed into live policy discussions, into classrooms and into ongoing debates. As well as engaging decision-makers and the wider sector with our insights to inform education policy and practice, working with stakeholders enables us to ensure our research is topical, relevant and reflects the context in which it is applied.

There are multiple groups, institutions and bodies that are working to improve education outcomes for children and young people, which is why we recognise the importance of engaging with stakeholders across sectors and disciplines. These include government, non-governmental bodies and agencies, membership organisations, schools, colleges, training providers, professional bodies, research organisations, think tanks, parent bodies and many, many more.

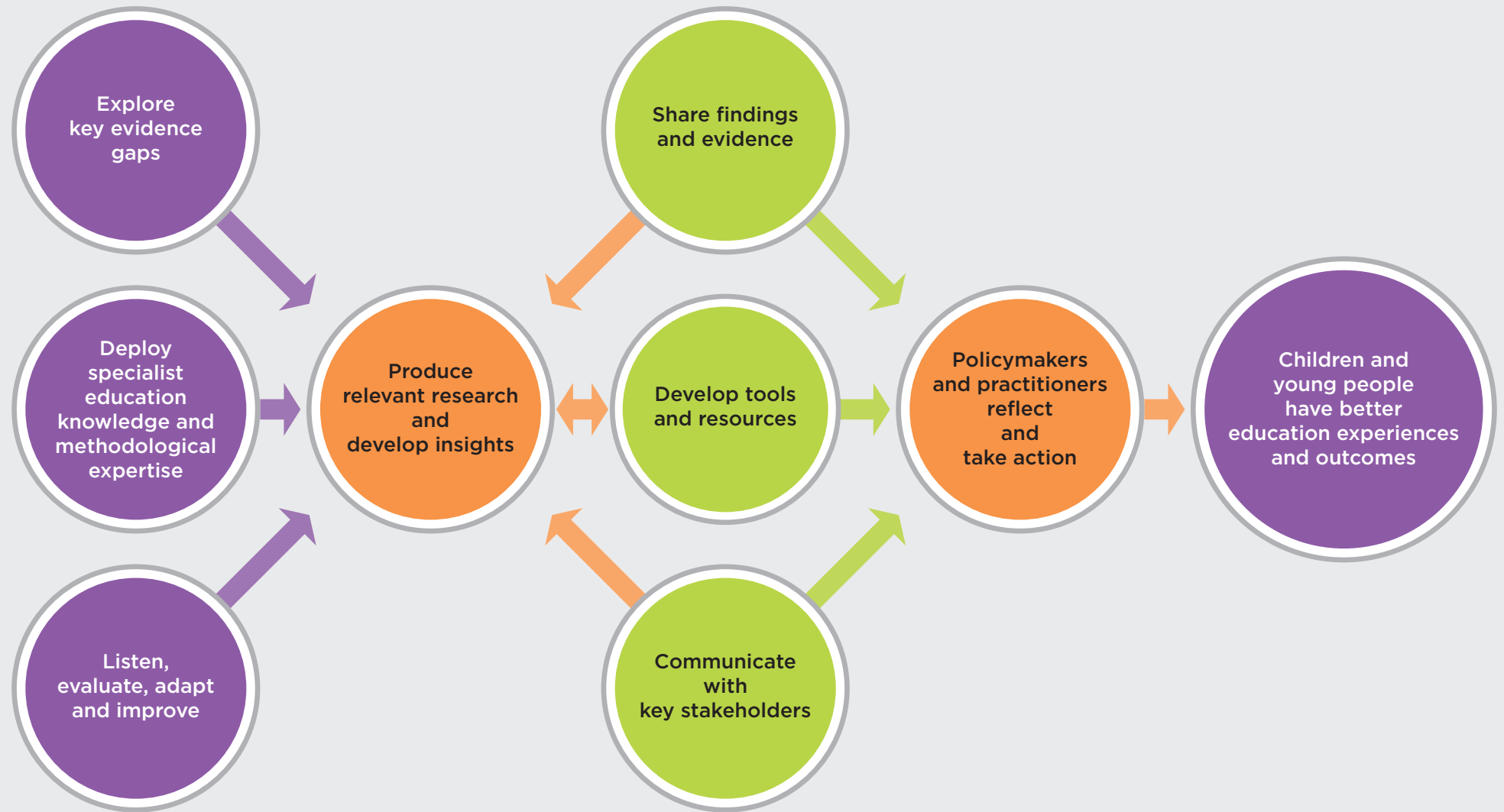
Our approach to impact can be summed up in the diagram on the page opposite.



NFER occupy a rather unique space on the education landscape – respected by, but independent of, government and demonstrably prepared to speak truth to power. They are an incredibly talented team of professionals that have the credibility to influence; with the organisational scale to make their voice heard on the national stage.

Nick Brook, Deputy General Secretary, NAHT

Working to deliver positive change



Influence and engagement

Ensuring that key decision-makers and influencers are aware of and engage with our research is a vital part of what NFER does. Throughout this period, we have engaged stakeholders with our insights in multiple ways, increasing the reach of our evidence and ensuring that our insights inform key issues, decisions and debates in education policy and practice. Here are some headline examples of ways we do this, and details of engagement can be found throughout the report.

Engagement with stakeholders

NFER engages with the education sector in a variety of ways, including reaching thousands of stakeholders through our involvement in events. In 2020/21, NFER spoke at and chaired over 100 events on education policy and related issues. We hosted panel discussions at the Conservative and Labour party conferences and spoke at events on topics such as the impact of Covid-19, social mobility and school funding. We also ran our own series of webinars on topics including T Levels, assessment and the teacher labour market.

NFER works directly with stakeholders to inform our research and feed evidence and insights into policy and practice. In 2020/21, this included sitting on the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) School Improvement Commission and the Royal Society Education Committee, and being part of the Edge Foundation policy network. We have also shared expertise through a wide range of expert panels, steering groups and advisory groups, and through regular strategic meetings with leaders in the education, teaching and skills sectors.

Engagement with policymakers

NFER develops insights and policy recommendations to improve the lives of children and young people, with a focus on getting these in front of politicians and policymakers. We regularly attend a range of all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs), and this year were invited to share evidence and speak at the APPGs for teaching, literacy and education technology. In October 2020, Dr Angela Donkin presented evidence to the Women and Equalities Committee on the impact of Covid-19 on children's education, and NFER's research has frequently been used during debates and questions to ministers in 2020 and 2021.

In areas where we have developed a strong evidence base, we have responded to government consultations, including in 2020/21 about the impact of Covid-19 on education, Ofsted inspections, early years and youth unemployment. Our research has been cited in numerous select committee inquiries, including in oral evidence sessions of the Education Committee and in a report of the Public Accounts Committee. It is also logged with the House of Commons Library to provide a reference point for future debates.

Media and social media

NFER's research gets significant traction in sector and national press, enabling us to raise awareness and increase the reach of our evidence and insights. Our research into the impact of Covid-19 on education was mentioned more than 3000 times by national, regional, international and sector media outlets, including on 18 national front pages. Our research experts also participated in over 100 broadcast interview appearances.

NFER also keeps stakeholders informed about our research through our social media channels, including LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook.



92%
of our stakeholders
who had read our reports said
that NFER research had an
impact on their organisation*

*NFER Annual Stakeholder Survey 2021

2020/21 in numbers

In 2020 and 2021:



More than
27,500
followers on Twitter

More than
2.6 million
impressions on our
Twitter posts

More than
25,000
engagements with
our Twitter posts

More than
230,000
unique visitors to our
website each year

More than
280,000
downloads of our
reports, resources
and classroom
materials

In 2021:

- **17,849 schools and colleges in England** took part in research, assessment trials, projects and products in 2021.
- **1,340,864 pupils in England** took part in research, assessment trials and projects and used our products in 2021.

- **58,726 teachers and senior leaders in England** took part in research, assessment trials and projects and used our products in 2021.

We are extremely grateful to all the schools and colleges that have so generously given their time to support our projects.



Covid-19 research

The Covid-19 pandemic has put huge strain on pupils, students, teachers, school and college leaders and parents. During this hugely challenging period, NFER has been focusing its efforts on supporting the sector in delivering insights into the scale and nature of the pandemic's impact while evaluating and recommending approaches to aid the recovery process.

Our objective has been to bring the big issues (such as the vulnerability of disadvantaged pupils during the partial school closures) to the fore and to encourage solutions which are based on evidence and will deliver impact in the longer term as well as addressing short-term issues.

We are grateful for the support of the Nuffield Foundation and the Education Endowment Foundation in funding aspects of this work.

These were some of the project highlights.

June
2020

Schools' responses to Covid-19

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Research in the early stages of the pandemic found that only 18 per cent of primary school leaders thought it was feasible to open their schools to more pupils from June 2020. School leaders told us they had fewer teaching staff available at a time when they needed more.

This survey from April and May 2020 showed the early signs that disadvantaged pupils were already being more adversely affected. The *Guardian* covered this story, as did the *Daily Express*, *Politics Home*, *Schools Week* and *Tes* magazine. The research was also shared with the Education Select Committee and cited widely during evidence sessions.

Pupils' engagement in remote learning: school perspective

Teachers in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England reported that on average just over half (55 per cent) of their pupils' parents were engaged with their children's home learning while school leaders said that 23 per cent of their schools' pupils had limited access to IT at home. BBC Online, the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian* covered the research.

June
2020

July
2020

Support for vulnerable children

This report, which looked at pupil engagement, in-school provisions, remote provision and welfare support, found that a lack of engagement and parental support were the most important challenges that senior leaders and teachers faced in supporting vulnerable pupils. In-school attendance for these pupils was also low, while many were not engaging in remote provision.

Meanwhile, 54 per cent of senior leaders in deprived schools reported significant concerns for the safety and well-being of vulnerable pupils, relative to 35 per cent of senior leaders in the least deprived schools. The *Evening Standard* and *Tes* magazine reported on this work.

Home learning during Covid-19: a parent perspective

This study, based on data from *Understanding Society* (a longitudinal study of a representative sample of 40,000 UK households), found that almost all pupils received some remote learning tasks from their teachers but that almost half of exam-year students in Years 11 and 13 were not given work by their school.

NFER called for targeted interventions and the weighting of catch-up funding towards schools in disadvantaged areas. The *Guardian* covered this work, as did the *Times*, the *i*, *Tes* magazine and *Schools Week*.

July
2020

Implications of Covid-19 for student recruitment to T Levels

This paper presented perspectives from a webinar run by NFER in July 2020, which brought together key sector stakeholders and decision-makers, including the Director of Technical and Professional Education at the Department for Education (DfE) and further education providers, to explore the implications of Covid-19 for the recruitment of students on T Level courses.

Covid had affected the promotion of T Levels by reducing providers' face-to-face access to schools and pausing the national 'Next Level' campaign.

However, providers told us they had been using a range of innovative virtual strategies to raise students' awareness of T Levels and maintain the interest of current applicants.



Sept
2020

Challenges facing schools and pupils

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Findings from a survey of almost 3000 teachers and school leaders in July 2020 revealed their feelings about the term ahead. Ninety-eight per cent of teachers reported that their pupils were behind where they would normally expect them to be in their curriculum learning. Teachers estimated their pupils were three months behind on average.

There were high levels of interest in the findings and data from the report with wide press coverage. Politicians were particularly interested, and several members of parliament used the report's findings as the basis for questions and evidence sessions.

The impact of Covid-19 on teacher training

Before the pandemic, England's school system was facing an increasingly severe challenge of recruiting enough trainees to initial teacher training (ITT) to meet growing teacher demand and shortages in key subjects. We have been closely tracking the pandemic's impacts on the ITT sector and on teacher supply more broadly.

Throughout this project, we engaged with key stakeholders to share and explore the insights and implications for thinking in this area. The research attracted good press coverage in *Tes* magazine, the *Financial Times* and *Schools Week*. We also presented the insights to the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Teaching Profession.

Dec
2020

The implications of Covid-19 on the school funding landscape

Our research at the early stages of the pandemic revealed growing anxiety from school leaders about its impact on their financial situation. Schools had lost significant amounts of income and incurred substantial additional costs.

The research identified 1500 schools as being at particular risk of great financial hardship due to Covid-19 and these schools were disproportionately likely to be deprived. The exceptional costs associated with the coronavirus scheme covered only some of the additional costs which schools incurred during the 2019/20 academic year.



Jan
2021

July
2021

The impact of school disruption on attainment and socio-emotional well-being of Key Stage 1 pupils

Funded by the Education Endowment Foundation

The first report in a study set up to track the attainment and well-being of Key Stage 1 pupils across the 2020/21 academic year found that Year 2 pupils' attainment in reading and mathematics was significantly lower in autumn 2020 (following periods of partial school closures) compared to a representative sample from autumn 2017.

This report was the first to offer rigorous insights and an estimate of the scale of the Covid-19 gap. It also highlighted a worrying growth in the disadvantage gap in reading and mathematics, which was measured as equivalent to 7 months' progress. Diagnostic detail and support for schools was also provided as part of this project, highlighting common errors and misconceptions from pupils to assist teaching practice.

The impact of school disruption on attainment and socio-emotional well-being

Funded by the Education Endowment Foundation

The second report reviewed Key Stage 1 pupil attainment data from spring 2021. Year 1 pupils had made on average 3 months' less progress for both reading and mathematics compared to previous cohorts.

July
2021

The gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils in spring 2021 for Year 1 was around 7 months for both reading and mathematics. Year 2 pupil performance had not changed from the autumn 2020 study.

Recovering from Covid-19: what pupils and students need now – a policy briefing

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

This study provided insights into pupils' and schools' needs in summer 2021, based on in-depth interviews with senior leaders in 50 mainstream primary and secondary schools predominantly serving deprived populations across England.

Most senior leaders reported that at least some of their pupils were suffering from anxiety and related mental-health conditions and it was proving difficult to access support services.

Social distancing in classrooms was also causing difficulties with teaching and learning practices. The overriding message from school leaders at this point was that they needed more funding and autonomy to make tailored decisions in the best interest of their pupils.

The research was covered by the *Guardian*, the *Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*, as well as in several broadcast interviews.

Sept
2021


Recovery during the pandemic: the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on schools serving the most deprived communities

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

Following the July policy briefing, a more in-depth report was published in September sharing more detail about the curriculum modifications schools had been making to deal with the challenging circumstances and to support recovery.

The research also highlighted the challenges school leaders expected to face at key transition points and called for the disruption schools have faced to be reflected in the accountability system. It also reinforced the importance of developing a proper digital access plan.

 **Caroline Doherty**
@_c_j_b 

@TheNFER continue to do important work on trying to understand the impact of the pandemic on the education sector. See this thread for findings from their latest report 

2:35 PM • Oct 22, 2021

https://twitter.com/_c_j_b/status/1374006809191661568?s=21

www.nfer.ac.uk

Oct
2021

The reported effects of the pandemic on special schools and what they need now

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation

NFER was pleased to support this important project led by ASK Research and to work with University College London. It involved a representative survey of headteachers in special schools and colleges in England, followed by in-depth interviews with a sample of headteachers and parents of pupils in these settings.

The survey highlighted just how significant the impact had been on pupils in special schools, with many having gone without therapeutic care services. They had experienced significant developmental and academic losses and their mental health was suffering.

“
Many children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, did not have the technology, quiet places to study or parents who were confident to support them to make as much progress as usual.

Carole Willis, Chief Executive, NFER

Dec
2021

Impact of school closures and subsequent support strategies on attainment at Key Stage 1

Funded by the Education Endowment Foundation

In this final report of the study, there was evidence of recovery from both Year 1 and Year 2 pupils. Year 1 pupils were still 3 months behind their pre-pandemic peers in reading but had recovered to just 1 month behind in mathematics. Year 2 pupils were 2 months behind their pre-pandemic peers in reading by the end of the summer term, but had recovered to above pre-pandemic standards in mathematics.

To support recovery, schools reported using small group work in reading and mathematics with a notable focus on well-being and personal, health, social and economic education (PHSE). The report was covered by the national and sector press and *Tes* magazine requested a follow-up opinion piece.

Alongside these projects, we have been conducting an independent evaluation of year one of the National Tutoring Programme on behalf of the Education Endowment Foundation.



Conclusion

NFER's research has documented the enormous challenges of the last 18 months.

Many children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, did not have the technology, quiet places to study or parents who were confident to support them to make as much progress as usual.

NFER is playing a key role in the development of a rich evidence base on how best to tackle these challenges. Quality teaching, enabled by a properly resourced and supported teaching workforce, has never been more important.

We have identified that significant investment over multiple years is required to enable children to recover – in academic terms and in terms of their well-being and mental health.

Current evidence on the potential impact of small group tutoring is strong. We are contributing to calls for the government to look again at the funds available to support education recovery over the next few years. This is a vital foundation towards creating skilled and confident citizens and employees who can play a crucial role in the country's future success.

Carole Willis
Chief Executive

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NFER is a leading light for research in the education sector and their reports have shaped the work of our 250 member organisations. Through NFER's research, we have gained a nuanced understanding of the issues facing children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and we have developed collective solutions as a result. Their research covers the FEA's four priority areas - a rounded education, teachers and leaders, post-16 and parental engagement - ensuring that we have a holistic approach to achieve an education system that supports all children to thrive regardless of their socio-economic background.

Gina Cicerone and Sam Butters, Co-CEOs, Fair Education Alliance

“

NFER's dedication to producing quality research in every corner of education is absolutely vital to ensure the system meets the needs of all learners, no matter what their age or background.

Kate Parker, Reporter, *Tes*

Our wider work in 2020/21

As well as undertaking a significant portfolio of work and activity related to the impact of Covid-19 and recovery from the effects of the pandemic, we have explored a range of other issues in NFER's areas of focus.

Workforce

In addition to publishing our findings on the impact of Covid-19, we have developed a range of practical insights into how school leaders and policymakers can improve teacher retention, and ensured that our insights are used by those in the sector to make positive changes.

We have continued our influential series of teacher labour market reports, which explore trends in teacher supply and working conditions, including recruitment, retention and workload (kindly funded by the Nuffield Foundation).

This year we put an additional focus on the short-term impacts of the pandemic, including the impact on teacher well-being. In 2021, we held a launch event to discuss these key policy issues in England with sector stakeholders and decision-makers including Dame Alison Peacock, Chief Executive of the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT). We were also able to extend our analysis to Wales with a core focus on teacher supply.

We have regularly shared our evidence and insights into the school workforce with decision-makers and influencers, including the APPG for the Teaching Profession and its Wellbeing Special Interest Group, and as part of a panel on teacher autonomy and professional development for the CCT Excellence in School Leadership Programme.

We contribute expertise to the wider development of policy and research in this area, by sitting on a range of advisory and expert technical groups including for the Department for Education (DfE), the Education Endowment Foundation and the Nuffield Foundation.

We are also in the process of evaluating several key DfE policy initiatives aimed at improving teacher retention and development, including the DfE's flagship Early Career Framework and Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund, as well as the Tailored Support Programme.

In addition, we have embarked on a project to examine the diversity of the teacher workforce, in partnership with Ambition Institute and Teach First and supported by the CCT and Confederation of School Trusts (CST).

School funding

In the school funding arena, we kept our focus on the impact of Covid-19 on school finances, to support timely decision-making about the deployment of resources.

Our research highlighted the funding challenges being faced by many schools in the context of the pandemic and demonstrated that existing and additional funding would be insufficient to cover the additional costs of Covid-19, at least for a number of at-risk schools. It fed into discussions and debates about the sufficiency of school funding – particularly among the most disadvantaged schools – and contributed to wider calls in the sector for additional targeted funding support to support recovery.

We shared insights at several Forum Strategy events, including a breakfast briefing and the National COO Network event, to provide insights into the wider impact of Covid-19 on school finances, and to support strategic decision-making within school trusts.

We also shared our expertise by chairing the National Academies Finance Conference in March 2021 and participating in the Schools and Academies Conference 2020 debate on the 'The Permanent Funding Crisis'.



Education to employment

As well as our work related to Covid-19, we have continued to share our expertise to inform discussions about T Levels and the T Levels Transition Programme, including chairing the National T Level Introduction and Implementation Conference 2021, facilitated by Government Events.

In June 2021, we published *Putting Apprenticeships to Work for Young People*. This research examined the impact of apprenticeship reforms before and during the pandemic. It also considered to what extent the apprenticeship programme needs to be refocused to ensure that it is inclusive of small to medium-sized enterprises and is working to support young people. A range of influential sector stakeholders, keen to explore these themes further and work with us to develop additional insights to support the evolution of apprenticeships, engaged with our analysis.

In summer 2021, the Nuffield Foundation awarded NFER a grant to lead a five-year programme projecting the demand and supply of essential employment skills up to 2035. The Skills Imperative 2035: Essential Skills for Tomorrow's Workforce will involve NFER and co-investigators working with employers, policymakers and education leaders to provide practical insights to inform long-term planning for how the future needs for essential employment skills can be met.

We have also provided evidence for several consultations, including the review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 and below in England, and submissions to the House of Lords Inquiry into Youth Unemployment to support thinking about progression and opportunities for all.

Social mobility

NFER has successfully increased understanding of the impact of deprivation on pupils' educational progress and attainment in the last year. We further investigated the [2018 Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) results](#) for reading, mathematics and science at age 15, identifying the characteristics of 'resilient' pupils – those from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieved relatively high scores.

In addition to our contributions on the impact of Covid-19 on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, we responded to several national consultations on social mobility, including the Future Perfect Education Commission, the Education Committee opportunity areas inquiry and two all-party parliamentary groups on social mobility and school exclusions.

Taken together, our work on this theme has informed thinking about the most effective strategies to tackle educational disadvantage – an area which has become even more urgent in the face of Covid-19.



NFER is committed to ensuring stakeholder engagement and communications are an integral part of its research programme, something that is particularly important to the Nuffield Foundation as a funder that seeks to make a difference to people's lives through changes to policy and practice.

Frances Bright, Head of Communications
The Nuffield Foundation

**Readership
of the NFER Blog
among our stakeholders
increased by more than
150 per cent
in 2021***

*NFER Annual Stakeholder Survey 2021

Accountability and school improvement

NFER responded to the DfE and Ofqual consultation on how GCSE, AS and A Level grades should be awarded in 2021. To coincide with our response, NFER's lead psychometrician, Louise Benson, published a blog highlighting the key components of fairness in assessment during the Covid-19 era. These include the validity of a teacher-assessed grade, reliability and objectivity, minimising bias, and comparability.

Through qualitative research, NFER researchers explored the challenges facing schools in disadvantaged circumstances, schools' 'readiness' to engage with external support on evidence-informed approaches to school improvement, and the conditions that are necessary to support this.

The findings helped shape the Education Endowment Foundation's new regional approach to school improvement, which is designed to help schools understand and use evidence in the classroom as part of a long-term collaboration.

The findings also informed the work of the cross-sector [NAHT School Improvement Commission](#), which published its findings in November 2020. NFER's research in support of the commission's work explored senior leaders' and classroom teachers' views on the effectiveness with which schools identify, prioritise and take action on school improvement priorities.

Our analysis found that appropriate action did not always follow identifying school priorities as school staff were forced to respond to more immediate issues.

In autumn 2021, NFER successfully delivered the new Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) to more than 600,000 pupils. This assessment has been designed to provide a snapshot of children's starting point at primary school to credit teachers and schools with the progress they make across their primary school career.

Systems and structures

In February 2021, we published [new research](#), commissioned by the New Schools Network, looking at the impact of free schools since their introduction in 2010. NFER compared attainment outcomes of free school pupils to those of their peers in other types of schools and looked at whether free schools had established themselves with families as a credible and popular choice for educating their children. This research also studied the demographics and supply dynamics of the teacher workforce in free schools compared to other schools.

In December 2020, we published [additional analysis](#) of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019, specifically looking at the digital familiarity of teachers in primary classrooms globally and in England. This generated useful insights into the relative resilience primary teachers may have in dealing with the move to remote teaching necessitated by partial school closures.

NFER published its [School and Trust Governance Investigative Report](#) in October 2020. The research, commissioned by the DfE, offered independent evidence to inform future policy development and enable evidence-based prioritisation of resources to support school and trust governance throughout England.



NFER's approach provides a model for really effective collaboration between research, policy and practice. Concise reports, clear recommendations and useful resources, coupled with a focus on sharing insights with the sector, help to maximise impact. We should all continue to create closer links between these disciplines to help change education for the better.

Olly Newton, Executive Director
Edge Foundation

Classroom practice

In addition to our Covid-19 research examining the impact of the adjustments schools have had to make because of the pandemic on their delivery of the curriculum, our Trials Unit continued to evaluate the impact of different classroom interventions. A number of these evaluations focused on interventions designed to target the disadvantage gap.

First, we evaluated Save the Children's parental engagement programme, Families Connect. The trial found no evidence of the programme's impact on children's receptive language or on numeracy outcomes immediately or six months after programme delivery. However, both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that the programme increases parental engagement in children's learning, improves parental skills and supports longer-term improvements in children's pro-social behaviour.

Second, we conducted a pilot evaluation of Mentoring for Early Career Chemistry Teachers, a one-year mentoring intervention developed by the Royal Society of Chemistry. The study suggested some aspects of the programme should be strengthened before it was ready for trial. These included more effective matching of mentors and mentees; ensuring mentors' expertise met mentees' needs; and further engagement of schools to allow mentors to gain a deeper understanding of schools' cultures.

Finally, we evaluated Philosophy for Children (P4C), a whole-school programme with levels differentiated as Bronze, Silver and Gold based on school-level engagement. Our report found no evidence that P4C had an impact on reading outcomes on average for Key Stage 2 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (that is, pupils eligible for free school meals).

Assessment

Assessment services

Since 2017, NFER has had responsibility for the development and delivery of the National Reference Test (NRT) on behalf of Ofqual.

In 2020, the NRT went ahead as previously, in February, before the disruption of the pandemic. In February 2021, however, schools were closed to most pupils and the testing window was moved to the summer term. Despite the disruption, we were able to secure participation from more than 200 schools and thanks to their cooperation and support were able to ensure this important longitudinal study remained unbroken, even though it was not used to support the grading process in 2021. The information gathered from the test also gave an invaluable insight into how Covid had impacted Year 11 pupils.

Responding to teachers' and policymakers' needs for data about the breadth of children's educational experiences and outcomes, we focused on developing ways to access harder-to-measure aspects of children's school and college life.

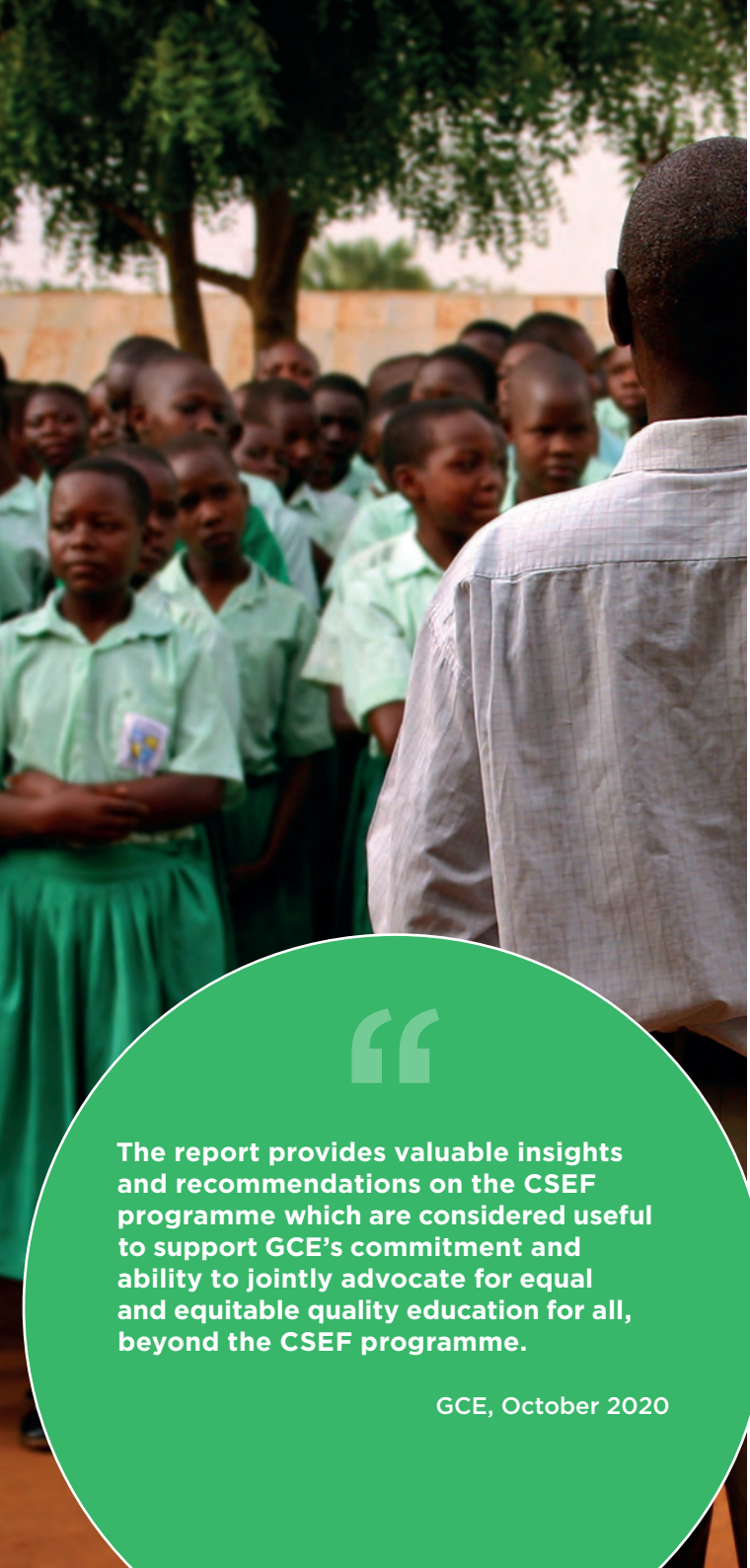
A key area of development was assessment of younger children, as exemplified through our leadership and management of England's participation in the [International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study](#) and through the development of the [Reception Baseline Assessment](#).

Other focus areas for NFER in this period included the assessment of skills and competencies for the world of work, as we approach 2035, and the [mental health and well-being](#) of children and young people.

Assessment resources

Our standardised assessment products for primary schools have proved an essential component of understanding how pupils' attainment and progress may have been impacted by Covid disruption, as well as supporting recovery planning. We have been delighted to support schools and pupils throughout 2020 and 2021 with such practical and high-quality tools and supporting materials to ensure they can get the maximum benefit from their assessments and assessment data.

In 2021, we launched a new product, Bite into Writing, developed specifically to support schools with Year 6 writing development and moderation. We understand from our conversations with schools that this is a particularly challenging area for them, and our assessment experts have been pleased to work with former Standards and Testing Agency moderators to ensure that this range can make the most positive contribution for teachers and pupils alike.



NFER's international work

NFER has been continuing to grow its portfolio of research, evaluation and assessment projects delivered in collaboration with international development partners. We have been able to bring our long history of undertaking educational research, evaluation and assessment to support worldwide challenges in education.

Evaluation of a pilot project in Uganda

We also supported Promoting Equality in African Schools (PEAS) and the Directorate of Education Standards (DES) of the Ministry of Education and Sport in Uganda with an independent evaluation of their Inspect and Improve pilot project. The pilot, which ran from February 2019 to 2021, aimed to improve the quality of leadership and management in ten government schools in Eastern Uganda.

The findings from our independent evaluation helped to increase our understanding of effective approaches for improving school quality. It has also generated practical lessons to inform the scale-up of the project, which has now received funding to be rolled out to a further 40 government schools.

Civil Society Education Fund

The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) commissioned NFER to undertake an independent endline evaluation of the Civil Society Education Fund, 2016–2019 (CSEF III), a programme funded by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

The evaluation documented and reflected on the outcomes achieved by the programme, using a combination of outcome harvesting and process evaluation approaches. This allowed us to identify intended and unintended outcomes which shed light on how the CSEF programme supported civil society organisations to achieve results and contribute towards informed national policy dialogue and strengthened government accountability to citizens for the achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for equitable, inclusive and quality education.

GCE confirmed that the findings from the evaluation will be used to guide and inform future planning and implementation of GCE programmes and will strengthen the work of the movement as a whole.

The results of the evaluation were recently shared at the Comparative & International Education Society (CIES) conference in April 2021, and the full report is published on the [GCE](#) and [GPE](#) websites.



The report provides valuable insights and recommendations on the CSEF programme which are considered useful to support GCE's commitment and ability to jointly advocate for equal and equitable quality education for all, beyond the CSEF programme.

GCE, October 2020



Work with Unesco Institute for Statistics on a new measurement tool

In 2020, NFER worked with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) Institute for Statistics to develop measurement tools for a new indicator to measure one of the targets for the SDG 4 on quality education. The aim of the new indicator is to assess the extent to which countries are creating opportunities for children to develop a breadth of skills associated with global citizenship and sustainable development, such as creativity, collaboration, empathy and tolerance.

The work has helped to increase understanding of how systems create these opportunities. The results of a pilot have been disseminated to members of the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML), a network of education measurement experts leading on measurement of SDG 4, and the tools have been approved for further development.

Supporting the Girls' Education Challenge in Mozambique

As part of a Save the Children project, we designed a mixed-methods evaluation to explore the learning and transition progress of over 2400 girls by comparing the results of both 'intervention' and 'comparison' groups. The research approach was later adapted to generate learning despite countrywide school closures. We delivered baseline and midline reports, which provided a range of important insights and recommendations. Informed by our recommendations, the programme adapted interventions to better support the most marginalised girls, and altered monitoring activities to capture lessons learned during Covid-19.

Additional analysis of international large-scale assessments

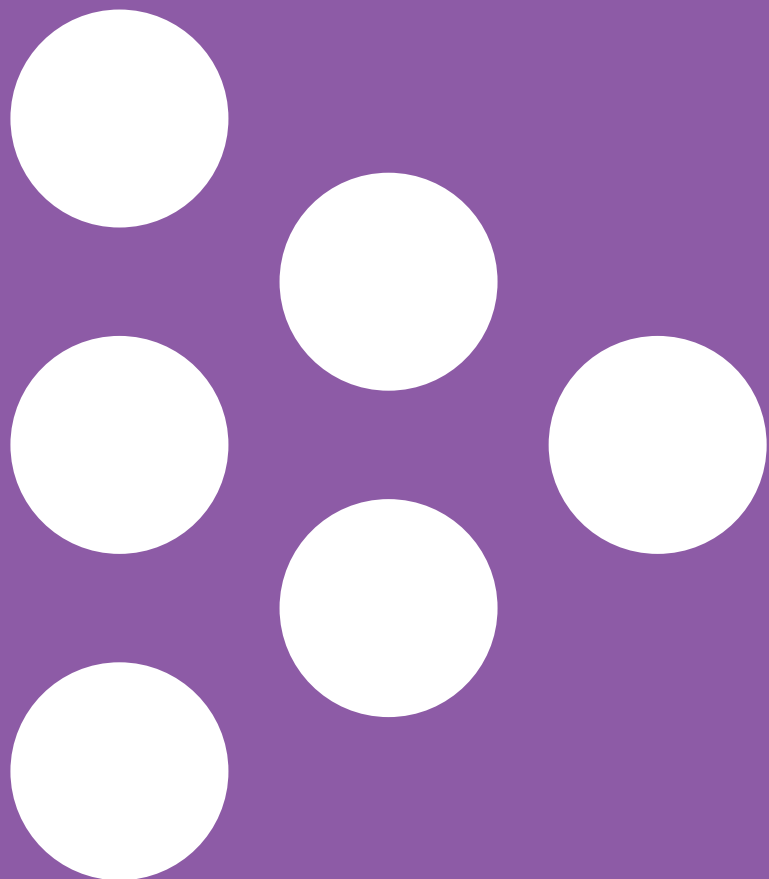
In 2020/21 we published three reports addressing areas of policy priority from analysis of the results of PISA 2018. These focused on disadvantaged pupils, the well-being of pupils, and what we can learn from reading policy in Ireland.

The well-being analysis was of particular interest as PISA 2018 found that UK pupils had comparatively poor well-being and that it has declined since 2015. The analysis found that strong personal relationships are crucial to pupils' well-being and emphasise the importance of the wider aspects of school life: of ensuring pupils have a voice; supporting positive relationships between pupils, teachers and family; and the importance of positive feedback from teachers.

Reading policy in Ireland is of interest because of Ireland's consistently high reading scores in PISA. The key themes identified as successes by Ireland policy experts were stability of policies; collaboration with stakeholders; building review and evaluation into policy creation; and a long history of supporting disadvantaged pupils.

The disadvantage and well-being findings were timely, as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these two areas is of particular concern.

The reports were well-received by policymakers and the disadvantage findings and analysis of Ireland reading policy were covered in depth by the education sector press.



Learn more about NFER

If you would like to know more about our research, our resources and our services, or about partnering with us in our work, please get in touch:

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