



The Reported Effects of the Pandemic on the Academic and Developmental Progress of Pupils in Specialist Provisions in England. Using Estimates From School and College Leaders to Determine Differences Between Economically Disadvantaged and Non-economically Disadvantaged Pupils With Special Educational Needs

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This paper addresses an identified gap in research during the COVID-19 pandemic: how the disruption impacted on pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) attending specialist (i.e., non-mainstream) settings in England. Estimates provided by around 200 special school and college leaders at two timepoints during the pandemic are used to provide overall estimates of the extent to which the pandemic and time spent out of school had on the academic and developmental progress of pupils in these settings. We find that the reported effects are greater than those reported elsewhere for pupils in mainstream settings. In line with research involving the mainstream school population in England, we find that the reported effects on academic and developmental progress were greater for pupils facing economic disadvantage. Additional data from our survey of leaders reveal that the reasons for the reported impact on pupils were: (i) limited access to school or college and the extended periods of non-attendance; (ii) the widespread disruption to the delivery of health and care provision for pupils with complex SEND; (iii) the particular way in which COVID protections and restrictions impacted the curriculum offer in specialist provisions; and (iv) limited digital access, which affected home learning. Looking to post-COVID recovery, special school and college leaders identify an urgent need for tailored support for their communities.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), recovery, socioeconomic disadvantage, special schools

INTRODUCTION

The Effects of Pandemic Disruption on Academic Progress

Since March 2020, children and young people across the world have spent time out of school on a scale that is without precedent. In England, it is estimated that between March 2020 and April 2021, mainstream school pupils in England lost about a third of their normal learning time (Elliot Major et al., 2021). While the public health risk relating to COVID necessitated the near-complete shutdown of school-based education, there has been understandable widespread concern about the impact the disruption caused by the pandemic has had on pupils' progress and attainment. In the early stages of the first national lockdown (March to July 2020), it has been shown time out of school meant pupils fell behind in terms of curriculum coverage.

The impact of lost time in school may have been offset to some extent by the considerable effort made by educators to: (i) provide access to teaching and to enable pupils continue learning during the lockdowns (e.g., remote lessons streamed *via* online platforms); and (ii) to “recover” learning time *via* intensive catch-up tuition, delivered on a one-to-one and small group basis, once schools reopened. There is clear evidence that pupils in England have had an uneven experience of remote learning support, in terms of quantity and quality (Lucas et al., 2020; Catten et al., 2021), and that there is wide variation in terms of the impact of pandemic disruption on their academic progress.

Given the disproportionate effect that COVID is known to have had on the academic progress and emotional wellbeing of children and families from different socioeconomic backgrounds, a great deal of attention has been given to determining the impact of time out of school on the academic progress of economically disadvantaged pupils, and the support measures needed to help mitigate these effects. In England, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are often defined as those who have been eligible for free school meals (FSM) at any point in the last 6 years. Estimates vary (Children's Commissioner Office, 2020; Montacute, 2020), but analyses by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) suggested that school closures could have widened the existing attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers by 36% (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2020).

Sharp et al. (2020) used estimates provided by teachers to gauge differences in “learning loss” between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils. At the point when schools had been closed to the majority of pupils for 4 months (July 2020), 98% of teachers in mainstream schools in England estimated that pupils were behind in their curriculum learning, compared to where they would normally expect them to be, by an average of around 3 months. Yet teachers in the most deprived schools were over three times more likely to report pupils were four or more months behind, compared with teachers in the least deprived schools (53% vs. 15%).

Analyses conducted for the Department for Education (DfE) in England using data from a computer-adaptive assessment commonly used in schools to identify gaps in learning, suggested that in October 2020, the average learning loss in reading for primary-aged pupils overall was around 1.8 months and

around 1.7 months across all secondary-aged pupils (Renaissance Learning Education Policy Institute, 2021). Learning losses in mathematics were estimated to be around 3.7 months. Having controlled for a range of pupil characteristics, primary-aged and secondary-aged pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were found to have lost, on average, approximately 2.2 months in reading, and around 4.5 months in mathematics. Therefore, disadvantaged pupils had lost about half a month more than their non-disadvantaged peers in reading, and for those in primary schools, around a month more in mathematics.

The EEF, meanwhile, investigated the impact of school closures on the disadvantaged attainment gap for pupils in Key Stage 1 in England using termly assessments (in autumn 2020, spring 2021 and summer 2021) in reading and mathematics. The performance in these assessments of 12,311 pupils from 168 schools was compared with the performance of a representative cohort of same-aged pupils on the same assessments in pre-pandemic years (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2021). Analyses showed that by the end of the summer term 2021, Year 1 children were overall 3 months behind where they were expected to be in reading, and a month behind in mathematics, seemingly having made some recovery over the course of the 2020/21 academic year. Year 2 children were overall reported to be 2 months behind in reading and had recovered to above the expected standards in mathematics. Yet once again, in both year groups and for both subjects, there was (at spring 2021) a substantial gap in attainment between disadvantaged children and their peers, equivalent to around 7 months' progress—a gap potentially wider than pre-pandemic levels (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2021).

Rolling analyses of the impact on academic progress in England, such as those reported above, centre on pupils who attend mainstream schools. Since the disruption triggered by the pandemic began, however, far less attention has been given to children and young people who attend special schools and colleges (hereon, specialist provisions). We know little of the extent to which the pandemic has affected the academic progress of pupils who are educated in specialist provisions, or the extent to which there has been any additional impact on progress for those in specialist provisions from an economically disadvantaged background.

Pandemic Disruption and Specialist Provisions

Interest in both the effects of pandemic disruption on the specialist provision population and the section of it that face economic disadvantage, is important for several reasons. Firstly, there is the lower rates of achievement among pupils with SEND, relative to their peers, and the overlap between SEND and socioeconomic disadvantage [Dyson et al., 2004; Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), 2018]. Secondly, specialist provisions were largely meant to be exempt from the partial closures that affected mainstream schools in England. During the first and second national lockdown (January to March 2021), the UK Government closed educational establishments for the majority of pupils. Exceptions were made for children of “key workers”—people who were essential to the pandemic response, such as medics and other health professionals—and

“vulnerable” children [see Department for Education (DfE) Guidance, 2020a,b]. This group included children and young people with the highest level of SEND, as defined by having an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP): a legal document, prepared by a local authority (LA), which sets out a pupil’s additional needs alongside the provision required to meet those needs. As virtually all pupils educated in a specialist provision (98%) have an EHCP (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a), this meant that specialist provisions were supposed to remain open and providing places for all of their pupils during periods when education was “closed” to the vast majority of pupils who attended mainstream schools in England.

One final reason why the learning and development of pupils with complex SEND who attend specialist provisions is relevant in the context of the pandemic is that, despite these settings remaining in effect open for business, external providers of the additional supports and therapies that many pupils receive—and which are specified on their EHCP—were unable to operate due to COVID restrictions. For example, many of these professionals were instructed to work from home and social distancing measures meant that hands-on physical therapies could not be delivered on-site.

On the one hand, the particular “business as usual” protections given to specialist provisions in England may have mitigated some of the worst impacts of the widespread disruption to teaching and learning loss for the pupils that attend them, compared with their typically developing peers who were shut out of their mainstream schools and colleges during lockdown. However, there are no data on how the disruption has affected the specialist provisions population overall, nor on any differential impact that there might be on the economically disadvantaged pupils who attend them.

The Special School Population in England

Before we explain the research reported in this paper, it is helpful to clarify the specific population to which it relates: children and young people who are educated in special schools and colleges in England. The most recent official data show that the overall number of children and young people with SEND in England stands at 1.41 million (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a). Overall, 82% of all pupils identified as having SEND in England attend a state-funded mainstream school (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a), whilst 10% attend a specialist provision. Seven per cent attend an independent private school, though it is unclear from the official data what proportion of these are special schools and what proportion are mainstream schools.

It is a comparatively small part of the school population, but it is a population with the greatest educational needs. The populations of pupils with SEND and those who experience disadvantage overlap quite notably. Overall, pupils with SEND are twice as likely to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) than their typically-developing peers: 31% vs. 15% (Department for Education [DfE], 2021b). Looking only at the data for pupils

educated in a state-funded specialist provision, the proportion eligible for FSM is 43% (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a).

Official data in England do not report results from special schools separately, but broad trends show that at the end of primary school, around 22% of pupils with SEND achieved the expected level in reading, writing and mathematics between 2017 and 2019, compared with 74% of those without SEND. Data for national assessments at the end of secondary school show that the average attainment 8 score for pupils with SEND in 2019/20 was 31%, compared with 54% for those without SEND. The average attainment 8 score for pupils with an EHCP was 15% (Department for Education [DfE], 2021b).

This Research

As stated above, the policy decisions designed to keep special schools and colleges open during lockdown alone provide the basis for assuming that pupils in specialist provision have experienced the pandemic differently from their peers in mainstream schools, but little is known about the impact on learning. Furthermore, given the trends observed in the general school population, nothing is known about any possible additive effect of having complex SEND *and* being economically disadvantaged.

The analyses reported in this paper are unique insofar as they are the only data in England thus far to shed light on how the pandemic and the disruption caused by it has impacted pupils in specialist provisions. These data were collected as part of a wider investigation into the experiences of specialist providers in England and of the families of pupils with an EHCP who attend them, during the 18-month period from when the COVID pandemic first began in March 2020. The study produced several reports on how specialist provisions were affected by the pandemic, and how families navigated the disruption to their child’s education, well-being and the impact on family life during the lockdowns. The full findings from the project are published in three reports published by the Nuffield Foundation (see Skipp et al., 2021a,b,c).

This paper focuses on the data from the study on the effect of pandemic disruption on pupils’ academic and developmental progress, and the key factors that affected the delivery of education in specialist provisions during two national lockdowns. The main purpose of this paper is to describe the reported impact of pandemic disruption (including lockdowns) on the academic and developmental progress of children and young people in specialist provision in England, based on estimates obtained from school and college leaders. Our analyses address three research questions:

1. What has been the effect of the pandemic disruption on the academic and developmental progress of pupils in special schools and colleges?
2. To what extent do these effects differ between schools and colleges with the highest and the lowest proportions of pupils facing economic disadvantage?
3. What factors might explain any effects on pupil academic and developmental progress, and which (if any) are unique to specialist provisions?

In the discussion section that follows the presentation of results, we consider how the effects and causes of pandemic disruption on pupils in specialist provision compare with the effects and causes relating to pupils in mainstream settings. We discuss the limitations of the main analyses, but it is worth noting early on in this paper that the methodological challenges of capturing the impact of pandemic disruption on pupils are well known to researchers attempting to reliably gauge academic progress within a heterogeneous SEND population. Our approach relied on the professional judgement of experienced special school and college leaders, and while somewhat imperfect, this study nonetheless provides the only data we know of that offers any form of baseline for the impact of the pandemic on the learning and development of some of the most vulnerable children and young people in UK schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data for the analyses reported here were collected *via* national surveys, conducted toward the end of two periods of national lockdown in England: (i) July to August 2020; and (ii) June to July 2021. For expedience, we refer to these periods as Lockdown 1 and Lockdown 2. Both surveys were designed to collect data about specialist providers' experiences of operating during the pandemic and the impact of these periods on staff, pupils and families. Senior leaders (typically headteachers or principals, although in a small number of cases, deputy headteachers) were invited to complete an online survey on behalf of their school.

Survey items were arranged into five areas, and were mainly close-ended in nature. The questions collected data from school leaders on:

1. Pupil characteristics, including pupils' personal care needs, use of school transport, and residential place capacity.
2. Attendance and school access, including setting capacity during regular times and during lockdown, the proportions of pupils attending on a full-time and part-time basis, and the reasons for any changes to capacity and attendance.
3. Organisational arrangements (i.e., use of teaching bubbles) and the curriculum offer, and the factors affecting changes to either/both.
4. Support at home for learning, health and care, etc. and how it was delivered.
5. Impact on pupils' academic progress and developmental progress.

Special school and college leaders were asked to provide an estimate of where, on average, they felt the pupils in their setting were in terms of their progress toward academic targets in literacy and numeracy, and their wider developmental progress, in terms of their: (i) independence, self-care and life skills; (ii) health and physical development; (iii) social and communicative skills; (iv) behaviour and self-regulation; and (v) emotional and mental wellbeing. Estimates was expressed in terms of months ahead or behind where leaders would have expected pupils to be (on average) had it not been for the pandemic. Respondents were asked to use a slider to indicate the extent to which pupil progress

across the domains had been affected by the pandemic disruption. Options were capped to 3 months ahead (indicating a positive impact) to 12 months behind.

Open-ended survey items invited respondents to share experiences and reflections of the pandemic, in terms of the impact on their pupils, families, staff and setting, and their views about the post-lockdown period and wider recovery process (i.e., addressing "learning loss").

Sample Lockdown 1

The survey was emailed to all 1,694 special schools and colleges in England. Responses were received from 170 headteachers and 31 senior leaders, representing a total of 201 specialist providers (12% of all providers). In terms of the characteristics of the specialist provisions, the sample was composed mainly of state-run special schools and colleges; 30% of respondents represented independent providers. There was an even split in terms of roll size. A third of provisions typically had 50 or fewer pupils on roll, a third had between 50 and 100 pupils, and a third catered for 100 or more pupils. Over half of the sample were all-through schools, providing places for pupils in each year group from 5 to 18 years old. Thirty-nine per cent provided places for younger children (3–5 years old), and a quarter catered for young adults (ages 18–24). A quarter offered residential places. This survey also asked about pupils' support need. Just over a third of the sample (36%) reported that more than half of their pupils required personal care. The distribution of the achieved sample was representative of the national population of special schools in England based on phase and FSM levels. Therefore no weighting was added to responses.

Lockdown 2

The same full sample of specialist providers were contacted, and 190 completed surveys were received: a response rate of 11%. To encourage provider participation, toward the end of the survey fieldwork period, the Lockdown 2 survey was split into two sections: a set of core questions answered by all 190 respondents, and an optional section, which was completed by a subset of providers. The sample was composed mainly of state-funded provision; 33% of respondents were from independent providers. The average pupil roll per setting was 96. Half of the sample had fewer than 88 pupils, a quarter had between 89 and 127 pupils, and just under a quarter had 128 pupils or more. Over half of the sample were all-through schools, with 12% offering places to primary-aged pupils, 25% to secondary-aged pupils, and 7% to pupils over the age of 16. Just under 20% of providers offered residential places. The profile of these respondents was compared with the overall specialist sector population. The response data was then weighted based on the over- or under-representation of school phase and FSM quartile¹

¹The indicator of disadvantage used throughout this report is that of Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility. This is expressed as the proportion of the student body within each provider that is eligible for FSM. The weighted distribution of FSM eligibility was then divided into quartiles, with the lowest rates of FSM eligibility in quartile 1 (Q1) and the highest rates of FSM eligibility in quartile 4 (Q4).

compared to the population, as recorded by the DfE. The range of weightings was between 0.61 and 2.52.

Analysis Procedure

The approach taken to analysis was the same for both surveys. Firstly, administrative data collected by the government were used to identify the characteristics of each school, including phase (i.e., primary; secondary; post-16; all-through), the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM, school type (i.e., state-funded; independent) and region. Descriptive statistics were then prepared for all survey items, with tests of statistical significance used to identify associations between selected items and school characteristics. Data were collapsed as appropriate where cell counts were too low for reliable analysis. Associations between selected items and school characteristics were identified using a Chi-squared test for independence. Items based on continuous scales were analysed using a one-way ANOVA² with a Bonferroni (1936) adjustment. Results were considered statistically significant where the probability of a result occurring by chance was less than 5% ($p \leq 0.05$).

All percentages reported in this paper were based on the number of survey item respondents, excluding non-responses. All bases are presented unweighted, whilst percentages and breakdowns are provided using weighted data. Percentages reported in the text are rounded to the nearest whole number. Only statistically significant results are presented by school/college characteristics. In the presentation of results that follows, some cases percentages may not sum to 100%, due to rounding.

RESULTS

The Effect of the Pandemic on Academic Progress

The Lockdown 2 survey invited special school and college leaders to estimate, on average, where they felt the pupils in their setting were in terms of their progress toward academic targets in literacy and numeracy, compared to where they expected them to be, were it not for the pandemic. At the point of data collection, the United Kingdom was 17 months into the pandemic.

Leaders were asked to specify in terms of months how far, on average, pupils in their school were ahead or behind expectations. Leaders estimated that, overall, they thought pupils were just under 4 months behind in their literacy development (−3.8 months) and numeracy development (−3.7 months), compared with where they would have been had it not been for the pandemic.

Table 1 shows the range of leaders' estimates and the proportion of respondents. Seventeen per cent of leaders reported that, on average, their pupils were on track with their literacy and numeracy (0.00 months). A third of leaders estimated that the average level of academic loss among their pupils was at least 6 months, and 9% estimated the loss at 9–12 months. At most, 2% of leaders reported that, on average, pupils' academic progress had improved despite the pandemic.

Leaders were also asked to estimate pupils' progression/regression in relation to the development of the behaviours that underpin learning, and which are necessary for academic achievement. The survey described behaviours for learning as the emotional, social, and cognitive skills required to engage in learning. These results are also shown in **Table 1**. Leaders reported that, on average, their pupils were on 4 months behind where they would have expected them to be had it not been for the pandemic. A third of leaders estimated that the average level of loss in this area was at least 6 months, and just 1% reported an improvement. While these estimates were broadly in line with the average estimates for academic progress, the proportion of leaders estimating the loss at 9–12 months was notably greater at 17%.

Looking at the difference in the mean reported learning losses for different cohorts of pupils, as shown in **Figure 1**, leaders of special schools and colleges with the highest proportions of pupils eligible for FSM reported greater average academic losses for their pupils.² Pupils in provisions with higher rates of FSM eligibility were estimated to be, on average, 1.4 months further behind in literacy than their peers in schools with lower rates of FSM eligibility (4.7 months behind overall), and 1.1 months behind in numeracy (4.5 months behind overall).

In terms of their progress in behaviours for learning, pupils in schools with higher rates of FSM eligibility were reported to be, on average, 2.3 months further behind pupils in schools with lower rates of FSM eligibility (5.7 months behind overall).

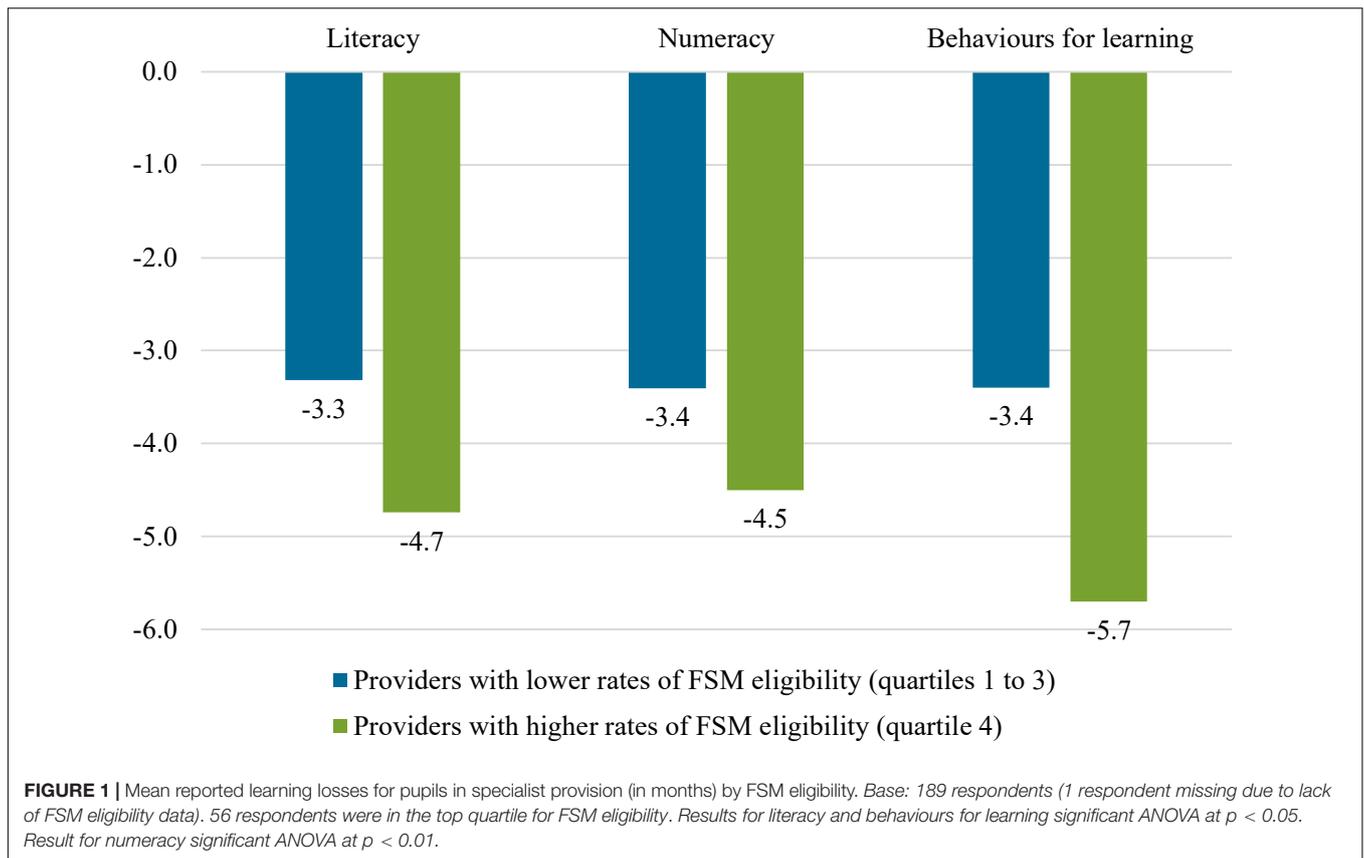
For all respondents, data on the proportion of their pupils eligible for FSM were matched with DfE data. This distribution

²Comparisons were conducted using one-way ANOVAs. All results were significant at either 1 or 5%.

TABLE 1 | Average estimates of progress toward academic targets (May 2021).

Progress (months)	Literacy	Numeracy	Behaviours for learning
−12.00	2.3%	2.3%	4.7%
−11.00	2.0%	1.4%	3.6%
−10.00	2.5%	2.2%	4.4%
−9.00	2.1%	2.9%	4.2%
−8.00	3.3%	2.8%	3.4%
−7.00	1.0%	1.7%	4.6%
−6.00	20.6%	18.7%	8.3%
−5.00	5.7%	6.6%	6.6%
−4.00	5.2%	6.9%	7.4%
−3.00	13.2%	15.8%	12.7%
−2.00	16.5%	12.4%	8.7%
−1.00	6.0%	7.6%	9.5%
0.00	17.5%	17.1%	21.05
+1.00	0.4%	0.4%	0%
+2.00	0.7%	0%	0.4%
+3.00	0.9%	1.2%	0.5%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Overall mean (months)	−3.8	−3.7	−4.1

Base: 190 respondents.



was then classed into four evenly sized groups: Quartile 1 contained providers with the lowest proportion of pupils eligible for FSM (the rates of FSM eligibility in these schools was 25% of pupils or fewer), and quartile 4 contained providers with the highest rates of FSM eligibility (the rates of FSM eligibility in these schools was 50% of pupils or more).

The Effect of the Pandemic on Developmental Progress

In addition to academic progress, the Lockdown 2 survey asked special school and college leaders to estimate the average rate of progression or regression in relation to aspects of pupils' physical, emotional and social development. Leaders were asked to specify (in terms of months) how far pupils in their school were, on average, ahead or behind where they would have otherwise expected them to be in relation to their: (i) independence, self-care and life skills; (ii) health and physical development; (iii) social and communicative skills; (iv) behaviour and self-regulation; and (v) emotional and mental wellbeing. **Table 2** shows the range of average estimates and the proportion of respondents against each dimension.

Roughly 2% of respondents indicated that, on average, their pupils were on track with developments across these areas (0.00 months). Leaders estimated that, overall, pupils were just over 4 months behind in their independence, self-care and life skills (-4.2 months), social and communicative skills (-4.2 months), and behaviour and self-regulation (-4.4 months),

compared with where they would have been had it not been for the pandemic. Between 34% and 40% of leaders estimated that the average level of loss in these three areas was at least 6 months, and between 15 and 19% estimated the loss at 9–12 months. Around 2% reported that, on average, pupils' progress had improved in these areas despite the pandemic.

Pupils were reported to be just under 4 months behind in their health and physical development (-3.8 months). Just over a third of leaders overall, and leaders of schools and colleges that were attended by pupils with a physical disability (17% of all settings) reported that their pupils were, on average, at least 6 months behind in their physical development. Fourteen per cent overall estimated that the average level of loss in health and physical development was between 9 and 12 months, while 3% reported improvement despite pandemic disruption.

Leaders reports that pupils were, on average, 5 months behind in terms of their emotional and mental wellbeing, which is not surprising given the well-evidenced emotional toll the pandemic has had on young people in general (regardless of any additional need). Of particular concern is the finding that almost half (46%) of leaders estimated that the average level of loss in terms of emotional and mental wellbeing to be at least 6 months, and a fifth reported that it was between 9 and 12 months. Just 1% reported improvement despite COVID.

It is worth noting that settings attended by pupils with emotional and mental health needs or speech, language and communication needs did not show any additional increase in

TABLE 2 | Average estimates on wider progress (May 2021).

Progress (months)	Independence, self-care and life skills	Health and physical development	Social and communicative	Behaviour and self-regulation	Emotional and mental wellbeing
-12.00	5.2%	5.6%	5.1%	5.3%	8.1%
-11.00	2.6%	3.7%	3.5%	3.2%	3.7%
-10.00	1.9%	2.8%	1.0%	5.3%	4.4%
-9.00	4.8%	2.1%	4.3%	5.5%	4.2%
-8.00	3.6%	2.9%	4.7%	5.6%	7.6%
-7.00	3.7%	1.1%	3.7%	2.6%	2.8%
-6.00	12.5%	17.2%	17.2%	10.5%	15.0%
-5.00	5.7%	2.7%	4.9%	3.1%	1.9%
-4.00	9.6%	8.1%	6.2%	8.6%	8.4%
-3.00	11.9%	9.85	12.2%	12.2%	11.7%
-2.00	12.6%	10.0%	9.5%	13.1%	11.6%
-1.00	10.2%	8.15	7.7%	5.4%	7.25
0.00	13.2%	22.4%	18.8%	18.0%	12.1%
+1.00	0.8%	0.45	0%	0%	0%
+2.00	0.4%	0%	0%	1.1%	0%
+3.00	1.2%	3.0%	1.2%	0.5%	1.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Overall mean (months)	-4.2	-3.8	-4.2	-4.4	-5.0

Base: 190 respondents.

losses in those areas. This may be the result of there being very few schools in the sample that specialised in educating exclusively or predominately pupils with these profiles, and/or an artefact of these needs often co-occurring with other types of needs for example, autistic spectrum conditions.

In terms of the differences in the mean reported learning losses for pupils with different levels of disadvantaged pupils, we again found that losses were greatest for those with greater numbers. As shown in **Figure 2**, leaders of schools and colleges with the higher rates of FSM eligibility reported greater average losses across all five dimensions. Pupils in settings with more pupils eligible for FSM were reported to be, on average, 0.9 months further behind in their independence, self-care and life skills than their peers in schools with lower rates (4.8 months behind overall), and 1.7 months behind in their health and physical development (5 months behind overall) and 1.8 months behind in their social and communicative skills numeracy (5.5 months behind overall). Losses of an estimated 2 months were reported in relation to behaviour and self-regulation and emotional and mental wellbeing. Pupils in schools with higher rates of FSM eligibility were reported to be, (respectively), on average, 5.5 months and 6.3 months behind overall.

As we acknowledged earlier, our analyses relied on impressionistic data from special school and college leaders on average losses experienced among heterogeneous cohorts (in terms of chronological age and need) aggregated to the school level. We address the shortcomings of this necessarily pragmatic approach in the discussion section, but for now it is enough to say that the results of our analysis paint a troubling picture. They suggest that despite the exemption afforded to specialist provisions by the Government during the periods of lockdown, which allowed them to remain fully open, the academic and developmental progress of pupils educated in these settings

appeared to be markedly affected by the disruption caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, pupils facing the greatest disadvantage (as measured by FSM eligibility) experienced additional levels of losses across multiple domains.

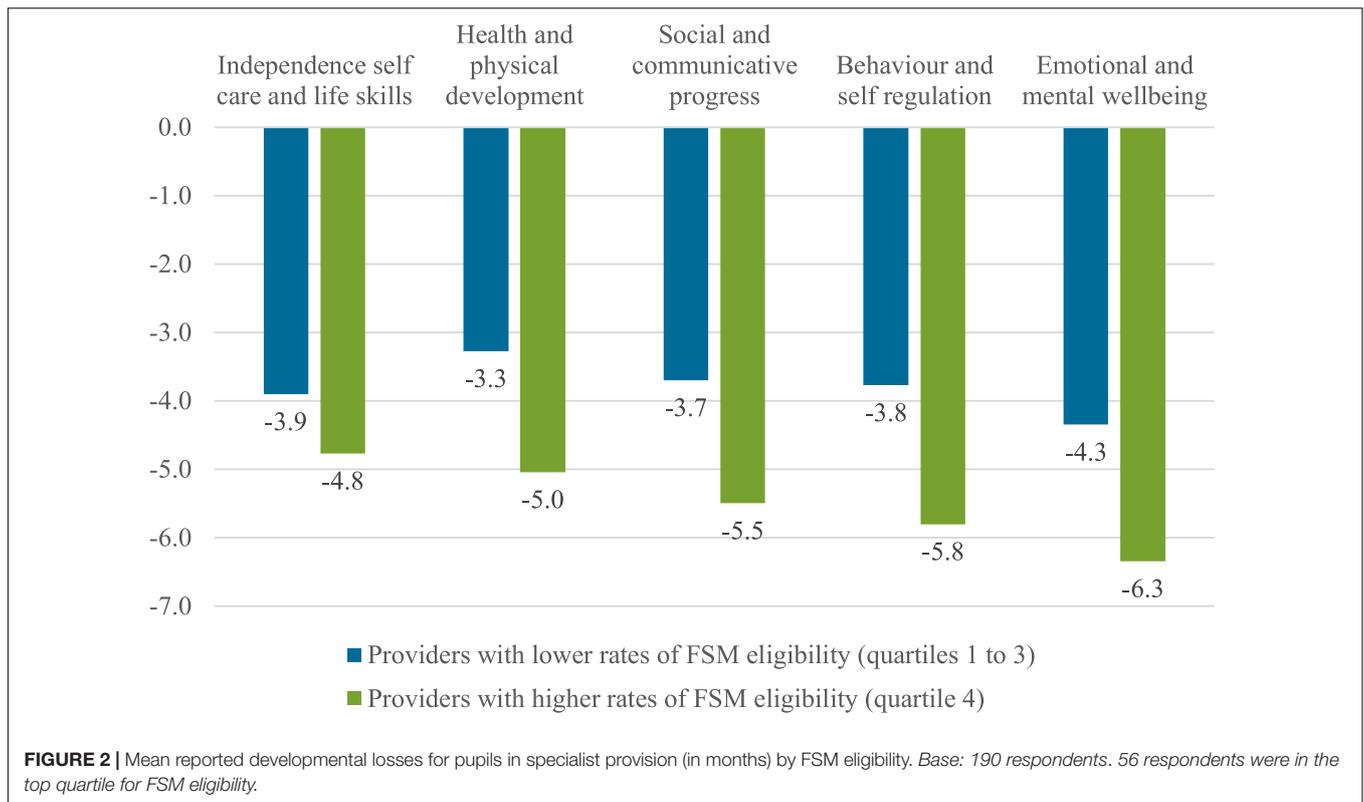
Explaining the Effects on Pupils' Academic and Development Progress

We turn next to the factors that best explain the results above on the effects on pandemic disruption on academic and development progress. This component of the study aimed to identify differences in the experiences reported by special school and college leaders that were unique to their contexts, and by definition, much less likely to have been experienced by mainstream schools. Our presentation of results is arranged under the four headings, under which closed-ended survey items about schools' experiences of the pandemic were grouped.

Access and Non-attendance

Despite government policy intimating that specialist provisions should stay open during the periods of lockdown, the lack of available staff and the concerns about operating "as normal" during a pandemic meant that this was not always the case. We found that in Lockdown 1, 11% of specialist providers remained fully closed. Of the schools that were open, the majority (87%) operated at less than 60% capacity. Only 13% of respondents reported operating with a full or near full complement of pupils attending. This increased slightly during Lockdown 2, with leaders reporting that by the end of this period, they had been able to operate at (on average) three-quarters of their usual capacity.

In Lockdown 1, only around 30% of pupils attended their school or college and around 70% of pupils did not attend their usual setting at all. By Lockdown 2 this had doubled to over 60% of pupils (with 40% of pupils not attending). However,



16% of pupils were only offered a part-time place at their usual setting (whereas they would previously have been in full-time) during Lockdown 2.

Another finding from the survey regarding transport is relevant here. Almost six out of ten providers (58%) reported that three-quarters of their pupils relied on external services to provide transport between home and school/college. Where local authorities withdrew these services due to lack of available staff or because of COVID restrictions on sharing enclosed spaces, many pupils were unable to attend their usual setting, even if it was open and able to offer them a place.

Another factor that prevented some pupils from attending school or college (where open) was parental concern. Medical advice (in place at the time) suggested that some children and young people should shield, and therefore not attend school. Some pupils were considered medically vulnerable to catching or being adversely affected by the virus, and others were considered at heightened risk of transmission due to not being able to maintain social distance from others; either because of their personal care needs (requiring them to be in close contact with staff) or because it would adversely affect their behaviour. Our survey found that settings with the highest levels of disadvantaged pupils were more likely than other settings to report that parents were not sending their children into school due to the pupils' high anxiety (this was given the main reason for non-attendance by 90% of providers in FSM quartile 4 vs. 62% of providers in quartiles 1–3). Just under a third of providers with the highest levels of FSM eligibility (28%) reported low demand for pupil

places during the second lockdown, compared with 11% of other providers).

These results suggest that non-attendance or limited attendance, coupled with on-going difficulties with accessing specialist provision, help to explain the variation in the losses in academic and developmental progress between settings with greater proportions of disadvantaged pupils and those in with lower proportions of disadvantaged pupils.

Widespread Disruption to the Delivery of Health and Care Provision

Another significant policy decision affecting the SEND sector in Lockdown 1 was the relaxation of the EHCP laws under the Coronavirus Act 2020 [see Department for Education (DfE) Guidance, 2020a,b]. Between March and September 2020, local authorities (LAs) managing the delivery of EHCPs were temporarily relieved of the legal requirement to provide the education, health and care input specified in a pupil's EHCP. Many practitioners who delivered such services were unable to practice due to COVID restrictions, or were following guidance or advice (from the government or from a professional body or union) not to carry out face-to-face work. Some health professionals were redeployed into other frontlines roles combatting the virus and its affects. LAs were instead required to use their "best endeavours" to provide what services they could to children and young people with an EHCP.

In Lockdown 1, around two thirds (64%) of special providers said they were unable to deliver full health or care services to the majority of their pupils who were attending their setting.

Providers with the highest FSM rates were more likely to be unable to maintain health and care input. We found that 39% of respondents could not maintain health input for the majority of their pupils, and 18% could not maintain care input, compared with 13 and 7%, respectively, for those in settings with lower FSM rates.

By Lockdown 2 (winter 2021), EHCP laws had been restored and (as noted above) around 60% of pupils were attending. Yet responses from leaders, suggested that almost half of their pupils were not receiving their full health and therapeutic support (47%), or their full care support (46%). We cannot know for certain what proportion of this group were the same pupils who were not receiving input in Lockdown 1, but the survey results suggest that access to health and care provisions persisted for some time after the second lockdown. In May 2021, leaders reported that around a third of pupils (34%) attending school were still not receiving their full health and therapeutic input, or their care support (37%). However, by this stage in the pandemic, settings with the highest levels of pupils facing disadvantage were more likely to report that care input had been maintained, compared with providers with lower levels of pupils facing disadvantage (54% vs. 29%).

The implication of these results is that a significant proportion of pupils with severe and complex health and care needs, and a legal entitlement to therapies and support to address those needs, had their needs largely unmet for a period of 12 months or more. In this light, the lack of progress in terms of the developmental losses are understandable. Again, it seems that in the initial stages of the pandemic, settings with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils were more affected than those with lower proportions, with some rebalancing occurring only after pupils had spent extended periods out of school.

COVID Restrictions Affected Availability of Wider Curriculum and Developmental Activities

The Lockdown 2 survey asked leaders to indicate the extent to which usual practice had been affected by adherence to Government guidance³ on how schools and colleges should operate during the pandemic, as well as the wider social restrictions in place. The results suggest that they were unable to offer wider curriculum and developmental activities for extended periods. These activities are often used to deliver some of the care and support that pupils with complex SEND need. On-site activities, including (as noted above) therapies and social events, were either severely limited or stopped. Over half of respondents (52%) reported that at the end of the 2020/21 academic year, they were having to limit their in-school activities. Off-site activities, such as swimming and work experience, were similarly curtailed. Seven out of ten leaders said they had restricted their usual out-of-school activities over same academic year. It seems reasonable to conclude that being unable to deliver such activities was a likely contributor to the negative impact on areas of pupils' development, wellbeing, and behaviour reported earlier.

³Schools COVID-19 Operational Guidance is continually updates and available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/schools-coronavirus-covid-19-operational-guidance>.

Limited Digital Access Affected Home Learning

The final indicator from our survey that helps explain the results on the effects on pandemic disruption on pupil progress concerns learning at home. On average, respondents estimated that around 30% of families whose children attended their provision had little or no digital access at home (i.e., in terms of internet access and/or having a suitable device). Roughly one in three school/college leaders said that this was the case for over 35% of their families. Responses from providers serving greater proportions of disadvantaged families showed that those with higher rates of FSM eligibility estimated that 37% of their families had limited digital access, whereas this seemed to be less of an issue in provisions with lower rates of FSM eligibility (22%).

These results suggest that at least some pupils had a restricted educational diet during the periods that they were unable to attend their specialist school or college. This then may help to explain the learning losses reported earlier. That disadvantaged pupils appeared to face even greater restrictions in terms of accessing online learning again offers a plausible (if partial) explanation for the differences between schools with higher and lower rates of FSM eligibility.

Limitations

As we prefigured, school leaders' estimates on the effects of the pandemic disruption on pupils' academic and developmental progress, though necessarily impressionistic, were based on the professional judgement of experienced special school and college leaders. In many ways, relying on leaders' professional judgement was the only realistic option, as there are no consistent measures of progress used across the specialist sector and the age ranges covered, or which are suitable to be administered to pupils with a wide range of needs and rates of development. While school and college leaders' estimates offer a level of validity, we must acknowledge that aggregating academic and developmental progress at the school level is problematic. An average whole school estimate on any one dimension will cover a potentially wide variation of outcomes at the individual pupil level, and cover a wider range of chronological ages than the majority of mainstream settings, which for best part cater for pupils in either the primary years or the secondary years.

A careful trade-off was needed in terms of both obtaining useful data and limiting the burden on participants. As our findings reveal, the pandemic disruption put staff in specialist provisions under significant strain. Therefore, under the circumstances, the convenience of asking leaders for whole school estimates was deemed suitable, and posed the least risk to adversely affecting the overall survey response rate. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which pupil progress across the domains had been affected by the pandemic disruption. The format of this question was the same as the one used by our project partner (NFER) in their surveys of staff in mainstream settings. The justification for this was to enable at least some comparison of how mainstream schools and special schools/colleges had experienced the pandemic. We share these comparisons in the discussion that follows, but one point to make here is that our survey of specialist providers and the NFER's

survey of mainstream settings were not fully synchronised in terms of timing. Therefore, the data reflect the state of play in different settings at slightly different points in the pandemic.

Finally, we note that whilst we can have a relatively high degree of confidence that the survey sample was representative of specialist provisions in terms of FSM as a measure of disadvantage, we cannot know for certain whether our data were representative of experiences of the pandemic.

DISCUSSION

Consistently and reliably measuring the impact of the disruption caused by COVID on children and young people has been necessarily limited throughout the pandemic. In England, virtually all of the data analysed and reported nationally has focused on pupils attending mainstream settings. The data reported in this paper offer the only measures (of which we know) for pupils in special schools and colleges in England. Our analyses are indicative of the extent to which the learning and development of some of the most vulnerable pupils in the UK school system was affected by pandemic disruption, between March 2020 to July 2021.

The results suggest that the academic and developmental progress of pupils attending specialist settings was negatively affected over this period, resulting in them being overall several months behind where leaders of these settings would have otherwise expected. Because the pupil populations in mainstream settings and specialist settings are quite different, comparisons between their academic and/or developmental progress are somewhat hazardous and not particularly instructive even in normal times, let alone amid the turbulence of a global pandemic. However, looking to the results from our wider study and the research on the impact of pandemic disruption on their peers in mainstream schools reviewed earlier, it is worth noting that there are grounds for surmising that the effect appears to have been greater for those attending specialist provision. Reports of effects on the mainstream population vary (as do the sampling periods), but teachers' estimates of how the pandemic has affected pupils' academic progress suggest that they were around 3 months behind where they would otherwise have been (Sharp et al., 2020). Using the same method to ask the same question of leaders of specialist settings, we found that pupils were estimated to be around 4 months behind where they were expected to have been. In addition, we found that the wider developmental progress of pupils in these settings had been negatively affected over this period, with up to 5 months deficit. (We note that we are unaware of comparable measures for mainstream pupils).

A key finding from our study is that, much as we have seen in the analyses of attainment data for pupils in mainstream settings during COVID, facing economic disadvantage is a compounding factor. The learning and developmental losses for disadvantaged pupils educated in specialist provisions were greater than for their less-disadvantaged peers. On the basis of the results reported here, it appears that although the government identified pupils with SEND as being potentially more vulnerable to COVID—and therefore devising and implementing policy to try and mitigate

the effects of virus transmission—of all pupils in all schools, those facing the greatest levels of financial disadvantage in specialist provisions were those most affected by the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Sharp et al.'s (2020) survey of 1,782 classroom teachers in England, for example, which also used teacher estimates of the effects on pupil learning, reported that those in the top fifth most deprived mainstream schools were over three times more likely to report that their pupils were 4 months or more behind in their curriculum-related learning (53% vs. 15%). A similar trend was evident in our survey. Leaders of the special schools and colleges with the greatest levels of pupil deprivation reported significantly greater impacts on their pupils' learning, leaving them between 1 and 2.5 months further behind than their peers in less deprived settings.

Other data from our survey suggest that this has been the case due to a combination of factors. Firstly, despite the advice to special schools to stay open and continue offering places for their pupils, our study found that both the reported demand for places and pupil attendance were lowest for special schools and colleges with the highest proportion of pupils facing deprivation. When setting this policy, it seemed that policymakers took little or no account of the impact a lack of available staff would have on delivery. To this we can add the effects of: giving insufficient regard to the lack of certainty around whether, or which, pupils were more vulnerable and should therefore reduce their social contacts; the inability of pupils with high support needs to maintain distance from others; the lack of available transport to facilitate attendance; and the effects of a general increase in anxiety and behavioural concerns relating to exposure to the virus.

Specialist provision is where pupils with complex additional needs access learning tailored to suit their needs. So, being out of school was clearly going to affect academic progress for these pupils. However, specialist settings also act as a provider or site for other developmental inputs. Pupils receive specialist interventions from teaching assistants (for mental wellbeing, for example), health and care services are delivered within these settings (such as speech and language therapy and physiotherapy), and they provide appropriate environments to support the development of social, emotional, communicative and physical skills. Official data from the DfE (Department for Education [DfE], 2021c) from autumn term 2021, when all schools were fully open, show that attendance at specialist settings averaged at around 82%, meaning almost one in five pupils had not, at that point, returned to school as expected, and were not accessing the highly individualised specialist support and curriculum offer that defines their day-to-day provision. It seems to us that the stunted nature of wider development found through our study is a direct consequence of pupils having limited access to special school and college, and the essential inputs and provision they deliver and host.

A striking finding from our study was just how long some pupils in special provisions went without access to the therapies and health and care supports outlined in their EHCP; in over a third of cases, for 12 months or more. We concluded that this in large part explains the developmental losses found *via* the

school/college leader estimates. To draw one illustrative example of the regressive effects of this from our wider research (see Skipp et al., 2021a,b), one 7-year-old girl with profound and multiple learning disabilities had, in effect, lost her ability to stand and walk short distances as a result of her usual mobility routines and access to specialist equipment being suspended. Additionally, we found through our wider study of the experiences of families that some were more able to address the gaps left by the abrupt removal of their provision. Some paid for private remote health and care services (such as speech and language therapy), and some bought resources and equipment to support learning and/or maintain levels of physical activity. It is not wholly clear from our data, but we suspect that having the resources to do this, both financial and in terms of space in the family home, were likely to have been skewed toward more affluent families and against those facing the greatest economic disadvantage.

Our survey revealed the way in which the provision offer was further narrowed as a consequence of certain activities, especially those that took place off-site, such as swimming or horse-riding, not being permitted under the COVID restrictions in place at the time. Research commissioned by the Government on how mainstream schools responded to the pandemic in the 2020/21 academic year found that around nine in ten schools cut back on extra-curricular activities because of COVID (Achtaridou et al., 2022). The DfE survey, involving 1,018 school leaders, also found that two-thirds of mainstream primary schools and half of mainstream secondary schools also reduced their after-school offer. The difference here, however, is that such activities tend to be an integral part of the special provision curriculum offer. These are curricular activities, not extra-curricular. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the reduced access to the usual provisions necessitated by the COVID restrictions had a greater impact on the developmental opportunities special schools and colleges could offer, compared with their mainstream counterparts, and inevitably, on the developmental progress of the children and young people for which they cater.

Finally, our survey found that, on average, around 30% of families were estimated to have little or no digital access at home. This is slightly higher than estimates for pupils in mainstream settings. Lucas et al. (2020), for example, reported that around 25% of families had restricted digital access during Lockdown 1. While access to remote learning was no doubt a factor in the learning losses reported in both school sectors, pupils in specialist provision have individualised learning plans, and their needs require specific individualised resources; all of which, in most cases, cannot be met in mainstream provision as straightforwardly as many of us may like. Despite being as, if not more, technologically capable than their mainstream counterparts, special schools and colleges found it more challenging to transfer and replicate their teaching and learning offer online. Added to this was the difficulty of having these children and young people at home over this period. It placed a large burden on families to have their children with severe and complex needs at home 24 h a day without any of their additional care (Skipp et al., 2021a,b). It would be no surprise if keeping them engaged in learning slipped down the order of families' domestic priorities over this time.

Implications

Our study was limited to how COVID and the disruption it has caused affected children and young people who attend special education provision in England. This group represents only half of all pupils in the English school population whose SEND are sufficiently complex to require an EHCP (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a). The remaining half of the population who have an EHCP attend a mainstream school, alongside the larger groups of pupils who have SEND but do not have an EHCP (categorised as being “SEN Support”). We note, therefore, that much remains unknown about the impact the pandemic has had on the population of pupils with SEND who are educated in mainstream schools.

The results of the analyses reported in this paper offer evidence to suggest that some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils lost out the most, educationally and developmentally, from the disruption caused by the pandemic. Additional evidence from our survey of specialist provision leaders reported elsewhere (see Skipp et al., 2021a,b,c) suggests that these pupils are likely to be further let down by the Government's intransience on providing the estimated levels of funding required to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on schools (Coughlan and Sellgren, 2021). Leaders to our survey that the support on offer to address the effects of the pandemic was not sufficient to address the impacts on pupils in their settings. Around two-thirds of respondents had either accessed, or were considering accessing, the “catch-up” funding offered by the Government to English schools *via* its Educational Recovery Plan, although they reported this was insufficient to meet their needs and the additional costs incurred by specialist providers. Just 9% had accessed, or would consider accessing, funding for the National Tutoring Programme (NTP)—the Government scheme intended to provide additional, targeted support for school pupils who have been most affected by disruption to their education as a result of the pandemic.

When asked for their views on aspects of the Government's recovery strategy, only 4% of special school and college leaders said that the NTP was an appropriate way to address the needs of their pupils. The majority of respondents said that support for recovery for pupils with an EHCP needed to go beyond the educational losses that the Government's strategy appears only to address. Overall, leaders suggested that the Government's plans for recovery, as far as special education was concerned, were poorly thought through, ill-informed, and not suitable to meet the needs of their settings, their pupils or their families. This could mean that the cohort who seem to have been the most greatly affected overall by the pandemic are the ones who will be provided with the least support to recover.

CONCLUSION

The study reported in this paper addressed the urgent gap concerning a lack of data collection on the effects of the pandemic on pupils with SEND in special schools and colleges in England. Our study found that pupils in specialist provisions were impacted across both academic and developmental domains. While acknowledging the shortcomings of the approach used to

determine academic and developmental progress, we offered a comparison with the effects of COVID disruption on pupils in mainstream settings, using the most relevant and up-to-date data available. We concluded that there are grounds for thinking that, of all pupils in all schools in England, economically disadvantaged pupils in specialist provisions have the experienced greatest levels of loss in academic and developmental progress during the pandemic.

We suggested a number of probable factors that best explain the variance in reported estimates for pupils' academic and developmental progress. Finally, we argued that, as the rebuilding effort gathers pace, policymakers need to give greater attention and priority to the needs of special schools and colleges and their communities in order to ensure that the gaps our research has identified are not further exacerbated by inadequate recovery planning and resourcing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

For inquiries regarding the data, please contact the authors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AS: data collection, analysis, and interpretation. RW: literature review, data, and policy interpretation. CT: data analysis and interpretation. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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