

## **1. Title**

Children researching their everyday lives, education & relationships during the coronavirus pandemic (CHEER) by Professor Helen Lomax and Dr Kate Smith, University of Huddersfield.

## **2. About the authors of the submission**

Helen Lomax is Professor of Childhood Studies in the School of Education and Professional Development and Dr Kate Smith is a Senior Research Fellow in Child and Family Wellbeing in the School of Human and Health Sciences. They developed the Corona Chronicles research project where children living in some of the most disadvantaged wards in the UK chronicled their everyday lives, education and relationships during the coronavirus pandemic (CHEER).

## **3. Summary of submission evidence**

This submission provides evidence from our longitudinal research with children aged 9-11, **including vulnerable and disadvantaged children**, about school closure and the move to home-learning.

The evidence on which this submission draws is an area of which there are almost no comparable studies that include the demographic (children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children), age (aged 9 -11), geographic area (primary schools in the North of England) and participatory qualitative methods.

Using participatory art-based research to 'chronicle' children's lived experiences during lockdown, as well as taking part in one-to-one in-depth photo-elicitation interviews, we researched with 16 children during the first lockdown to date. Drawing on a dataset of seven data points that include over 100 visual and textual data and 20 hours of in-depth photo elicitation interviews with children, this submission also builds on our earlier submission of evidence to the Education Select Committee - September 2020 (Lomax and Smith, 2020) - ref KTC729667 and December 2020 (Lomax and Smith, 2020a) - ref HSE0729667.

### **Children included in the research**

Children who are vulnerable and disadvantaged are included in the sample. This includes children who are disadvantaged economically, for example children who are in receipt of or are eligible for free school meals during the pandemic, and children living in families who are in receipt of low-income benefits/Tax Credits. Our sample also includes children who have

been in the care of their local authority and have either lived with foster parents or are children who cannot be brought up within their birth family, and have become full, permanent, and legal members of a new family. Children who are vulnerable are included, for example those growing up with adversities that could affect their lives, wellbeing and life chances, and are likely to be more at risk under lockdown (Andrew et. al., 2020; Armitage and Nellums, 2020). Children with special educational needs are part of the sample, such as children whose needs and abilities affect their ability to learn and where their behaviour or ability to socialise, means, for example, they struggle to make friends. Some children's reading and writing is also affected, for example because they have dyslexia, and some of the children have difficulties with their concentration levels.

To note, however, these broad demographic characteristics can mask the particular circumstances of different children in the sample. For example, some children situations changed during the pandemic and they were living with family in receipt of (or eligible for) free school meals and/or in receipt of low-income benefits during the pandemic.

## **The findings**

The findings are organised around the following four areas which children told us were important – Children's voices, Relationships, Learning, Access to the outdoors. Issues of inequality are included across the four areas.

### **3.1 Children's voices**

Children are experts in their own lives (UNCRC, 1989) and have a right to express their views about school closure and the move to home-learning. Children expressed concern about the ways in which they have not been directly addressed or listened to during the pandemic (Rowland and Cook, 2020). For example, children reported feeling confused when their schools closed for most children and their lives pivoted rapidly to home-learning.

*"Well like the first time that Boris Johnson said it, I was like what? I was like does that mean I can't go to school? ... it was confusing, lockdown, as well, because I'm like well what can we do and what can't we do? ... like every time my mum said the news was on tonight, I was like, in the morning I was like 'what's he (Boris Johnson) saying, what's he saying?' Erm, some of the bits were confusing" (Hannah<sup>1</sup>).*

Being at home, without direct support in school from teachers and friends, was regarded by many children as difficult. School closure and home-learning raised anxiety:

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<sup>1</sup> These are pseudonyms and the team are currently working with the children to identify pseudonyms of their choice

*“When the schools closed... we tried to do home learning, but it was really hard for me and my younger brother... It was difficult because normally a teacher would be there and ...I’d have my classmates to be there with me to get through it with” (Betty).*

In the absence of active dialogue with children by government representatives in England, the impacts of policies were felt by children and the lack of child-led messages were a problem.

*“I feel like children need to have a bit more say ... He might be the person looking up at the news, the scientists, the politicians, and thinking where, ‘where am I, where are the people like me?’” (Peter).*

Being able to communicate their own stories and hear from other children about the impact of the pandemic was important to children.

### **3.2 Relationships – parents, teachers and friends**

Home-learning online started well for some children during lockdown. Relationships and the familial resources of parents and friends were vital. Children valued the support of their parents, but they had different levels of parental support with home-learning. Some children reported intensive support that their parents provided:

*“... my mum and dad were sat beside me and they like talked me through it” (Katy).*

Other children highlighted the particularly supportive role that their mums had been able to provide. The role of many mums was reassuring and essential to home-learning:

*“... me and my mum and my brother were doing home schooling together and my mum was the main teacher. So she would set me up, see if its, if it’s hard I could ask her questions and she helped me. But if it was fine, she would go and help (my brother) and be fine. So she would always be there” (Peter).*

As time went on, many children struggled with the levels of support parents could offer and sustain. Several of the children had working mums who had to juggle home-learning with their own work commitments. Children worried about these challenges:

*“Well it felt like a lot at the time, like it was struggling for my mum a bit to get everything done in a day because like we managed to do all of it, it was just hard for my mum because she had to do her work and she had to help us” (Nancy).*

*“I was with my nana and granddad because my mum had to work at home. She couldn’t help me and my sister with it all, she was working” (Dominic).*

Some children also felt that their families were unable to support their home-learning, with parents unfamiliar with changes in education:

*“Mostly if I needed help, because sometimes my dad didn’t know because modern school and stuff and sometimes even my step-brother didn’t know. So mostly we needed help! (Dylan).*

Difficulties with home-learning were also reflected in children being unable to be in school with their teachers and unable to speak one-to-one in a classroom with their teacher:

*“... how different it [was] been not being able to have that one to one, that like sort of like that close, feeling when the teacher’s helping you... The most challenging part I think of when I couldn’t go to school... not being able to like see my teachers and like basically not being able to do like a normal school day” (Gaby).*

Children felt the role that teachers played was essential to their home-learning, but that many of the challenges were that school was closed to them:

*“I didn’t get the help that I got at school at home and like I get, I get better help and that from my teacher than my mum” (Nancy).*

Whilst learning at home started well, it waned over time. Children felt that they couldn’t sustain the levels of concentration or enthusiasm for home-learning:

*“I was like getting so frustrated because I couldn’t focus, I wasn’t used to doing work at home... I wanted to do it, but there were so many distractions that I couldn’t do it and like it didn’t feel natural” (Beatrix).*

The uniqueness of home-schooling gradually became something that children did not enjoy and they longed to be back in school with their teachers and friends.

The children who managed home-learning did best by doing the work in the mornings and using the resources sent by schools. Then, in the afternoon, many of the children spoke about non-school activities (playing with siblings, craft, baking, going for walks, connecting with friends online).

Children missed the learning they get from spending time studying, playing and talking with their friends in school. Therefore, contact with other children during home-learning was a vital source of support for children. For example, children who were able to establish contact with each other on digital platforms helped each other with remote learning and to find out 'what's going on' – this social contact also helped children to deal with anxiety about home-learning.

“We've got this WhatsApp group and we talk on that” (Dominic).

*“I think Zooms are like really good to use because that means like if you like can't see each other, you can like, go on the Zoom and say hi to everyone. Like because once we all had an app called Zoom and we could do Zoom meetings on it and we could like call or like message on it and just say hi to each other ... then I came on and we just started chatting for like one hour” (Bobbi).*

Contact and friendships with other children were maintained through access to mobile phones, social media platforms and games consoles (Xbox, PlayStation, etc.). Being able to connect with friends in this way was an important source of reassurance for children when school was closed. But not all children had access to the resources they needed (as we outline in the next section – 3.3 Learning).

The quality of the relationships that surround children are important to them when their school is closed to them and for home-learning, but this requires time (such as a parent/guardian at home when the child is at home) and the digital resources to stay in contact with their friends. Parental time to support home-learning (for example when a parent is fulfilling a keyworker role) varied widely with corresponding impacts on children's home-learning.

### **3.3 Learning – teachers, online platforms and broader learning resources**

Children started to receive home-learning at the start of lockdown through online platforms, facilitated by their school.

*“Our teachers and our head teachers did an incredible job in making sure that we still had enough learning... Google Classroom is when we started it. So we'd have like Google Classroom meetings and everything... I like Zoom, but I prefer Google Classroom because you could have chats and everything on there” (Gaby).*

The use of Google Classroom, Zoom, Class Dojo and WhatsApp groups helped with making schoolwork accessible. However, children preferred live online lessons with their class teacher. Online chat alongside their lessons with their teacher supported home-learning.

Access to digital platforms greatly varied amongst children and digital inequalities posed challenges for different children home-learning. Some children's tech could not be updated or was lost and devices broke:

*"I used a phone because, err, I have a laptop, but I don't know where the charger is because it doesn't come on. It's like dead" (Bobbi).*

There was a disparity amongst children who had unequal access to digital resources, which made home-learning and contact with others often difficult:

*"... you have to pay like sixty pounds a year or something nuts. Well yeah, we can't do that kind of stuff, that's just going to drain the account and I don't have much pocket money" (Colin).*

For some children the poor quality of their connectivity made access to home-learning more difficult and sometimes it was not possible:

*"Well the internet in our house is not the best, erm, so that's hard and the other day my teacher did a parents' evening with my mum... but the internet wasn't working" (Gemma).*

Digital inequalities impacted home-learning. Children also suggested that not everyone in their peer networks had access to the technology needed to do their home-learning and stay in touch with their friends.

*"... if no technology in their house, no, erm, if broken or the person that you want to face-time doesn't have a phone, so they can't speak to you, so that would be difficult" (Oscar).*

Alongside schoolwork set through home-learning was a wide variety of self-directed learning, including a range of fiction and non-fiction books which enabled children to read offline, as well as resources such as board games.



Playing board games and learning (Nancy).

Wider digital resources also supported children's home-learning.

*"Maths Tango... it's like where you do Maths to get a civilisation. You've got to plan it and aliens and robots from around the world come. But to do the task which you need to do, you need to do puzzles, which is the maths work" (Daisy).*

Much of the success of home-schooling was dependent on digital and material resources at home (such as books, art materials, digital resources – computer packages, upgrades and social media platforms). These resources enabled children to be creative and imaginative, crafting and developing digital skills.



Being creative and imaginative, crafting and developing digital skills (Ellie).

Some of the most disadvantaged households had access to the least digital and material resources and these inequalities undermined home-learning. However, broad demographic

characteristics can mask the particular circumstances of different children with circumstances changing for many children during the pandemic, increasing disadvantage and vulnerabilities.

### 3.4 Access to the outdoors

The closure of school and the rapid introduction of home-learning meant that children tried to keep well by balancing home-learning with other wellbeing activities outdoors. Children valued access to green space and connections to nature, resources that support their physical activity and mental wellbeing.



Balancing wellbeing with home-learning (Dominic).

Children described doing home-learning and also spending time outside in their gardens (those who had access to a garden).



Learning in the garden (Katy).

Green spaces and fresh air were important to children and they enjoyed going to the park, local beauty spots, woodlands and reservoirs, balancing their time in outdoor spaces (where they could) with time in the home doing their schoolwork.

*“It felt good to get some fresh air ... playing in the garden sometimes, like when we first went into lockdown, all we could do was play in the garden” (Nancy).*

Connections to nature had a positive effect on children’s mental health. Time and space in nature helped children’s ability to focus and cope with all aspects of their lives.

*When things got quite difficult during the things that were happening in my life and the things that were happening worldwide, I feel like sometimes it got a bit too much so I would go down [to the garden]and I would just like, I would scream and everything and then I would just be like I’d listen and everything would be quiet, so I’d scream again and then all of a sudden I’d hear like, the sound of like a thousand birds, like cawing and everything (Gaby).*

*“... it feels good going for a walk in the nature because it’s like you, you’re actually getting some fresh air, other than just staying in the house” (Katy).*

Children who had the least access to outdoor and green spaces were from some of the most disadvantaged households. This impacted their home-learning, with little opportunity to balance their time in outdoor spaces with time in the home.

#### **4. Body of evidence**

The evidence presented responds to the following areas requested by the Select Committee: To examine whether the Department for Education effectively supported schools and pupils in England during this period, including:

- whether it managed its overall response effectively;
- whether it managed the move to mainly home-learning effectively; and
- whether it effectively supported vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

##### **4.1 Scope of the evidence**

The evidence is drawn from phase 1 & 2 of our longitudinal research undertaken with children aged 9 -11 (year 5 - 6) attending primary schools, including in disadvantaged localities in Yorkshire and Humber.

#### **4.2 The research has three phases:**

1. **Phase 1** (July - August 2020) Children used arts-based methods to chronicle their experiences of school closure and the pandemic (complete and included here).
2. **Phase 2** (Oct. - Nov. 2020) Photo-elicitation interviews with 16 children (complete and included here).
3. **Phase 3** (Dec. - March 2021) Art workshops in which children are generating key messages for parents, teachers and policymakers and will be shared using digital animation (evidence is forthcoming and not included in this submission).

#### **4.3 Phase 1 and 2 activity and data**

During phase 1, 16 children (aged 9-10) researched with us, at a distance, using creative visual arts (animation, collage, comic strips, drawing, craft, digital photography, video and filmmaking) to 'chronicle' their experiences over a period of six weeks in England.

During phase 2, the same 16 children (now aged 10-11) took part in in-depth photo-elicitation interviews.

#### **4.4 Data set**

The data set comprises children's week-by-week reflections on: Things they had noticed, their relationships, learning, physical activity, the environment and 'giving' as important dimensions of wellbeing (The Children's Society, 2014; NHS, 2019).

It consists of:

- Visual and textual data from children about what they experienced as supportive of their learning and wellbeing during school closure and pandemic.
- Photo elicitation interviews with children about their lived experiences of school closure, what supports their education and what resources they were able to draw upon (material, familial, personal) to support their learning and wellbeing during the pandemic.

### **5. Summary and some solutions**

Children are experts in their own lives (UNCRC, 1989) and have a right to express their views about what best supports them during school closure and the move to home-learning.

#### **5.1 Involve and include children**

Children need to be consulted about school closure and the move to home-learning using methods appropriate to them. Schools and services need to create opportunities for children

to express their views and be listened to so they can communicate their stories and messages to adults and other children.

## **5.2 Methods for involving and including children**

In times of global crisis, creating safe, online spaces can serve to facilitate conversations between adults (researchers, policy-makers) so that children's voices can be included in policies designed to support their learning and wellbeing.

## **5.3 What children find best supports them during school closure and home-learning is contingent on the familiar relationships and material resources available to them.**

- Access to digital resources, including internet-enabled devices and quality of connectivity, is important for children's home-learning during times of school closure.
- Use of online platforms – Google Classroom, Zoom, Class dojo, online lessons and WhatsApp groups – helps with home-learning, as well as interaction with their teachers, during times of school closure.
- Live online lessons with teachers, alongside access to online chat with their teacher and the pupils in their classroom (including friends), is supportive of home-learning during times of school closure.
- Access to wider learning resources (books, creative materials) helps support home schooling during times of school closure.
- Parental time is extremely important to support children's home learning during times of school closure.
- Access to other pupils online, especially their friends, offers vital support for home learning during times of school closure.
- Access to outdoor space and time in nature/green space is important to children trying to keep well and balance time in the home doing schoolwork with being outdoors.

To note, some of the most disadvantaged households and children who were most vulnerable to adversities had access to the least of these resources; these inequalities undermined home learning which compounded over time. Consultation with children, including those living with disadvantage and vulnerabilities, is essential in order to understand and address these inequalities and their impacts on home-learning and wellbeing in the short and longer term.

## References

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