

1. Title

Home-schooling – a parents' perspective in the advent of COVID-19

2. Author

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3. Evidence summary

Evidence is provided to inform **whether the Department for Education managed the move to mainly home-learning effectively**. Data is derived with thirty-one parents¹ and three teachers who reflected together on the conduct and consequences of their home-learning experiences, from one small, mixed-primary school located in rural North-West England.

Research involved three cycles, capturing in 'real-time' what was happening in a fast-changing landscape. Each cycle corresponded with lockdown phases and considered emerging themes.

Cycle 1 (March-May 2020)

- Twenty-one interviews with twenty-one parents and three teachers.
- Thirty images (depicting home-learning from a parent's perspective).

Cycle 2 (June-November 2020)

- Eight interviews with twenty-two parents.

Cycle 3 (December-February 2021)

- Seven individual parent interviews.
- Visual and textual data depicting parent's lockdown journeys involving sixteen parents.

Findings are organised around areas which parents and teachers felt were important and related to their perceptions regarding the overall effectiveness regarding the national shift to remote learning during the first national lockdown, thus the data evidenced here is largely drawn from Cycle 1.

3.1 Shift to remote learning

In March 2020 schools and families experienced a national shift to remote learning. This created severe disruption as headteachers had little time to mobilise and train staff to teach remotely (Bubb and Jones, 2020). Concern about the impact on pupil progress was widespread with fears that home-learning would widen the attainment gap between children from poor homes and those from more affluent backgrounds (Cullinane & Montacute, 2020). Schools had different ways of managing this change and different platforms were utilised within the same schools with different year groups and across different schools.

During the first national lockdown teachers utilised existing platforms and learned new ways of teaching and communicating with families, as well as offering remote learning resources while remaining open to key worker and vulnerable children. Children, parents and teachers quickly navigated new online learning platforms such as tapestry, seesaw, timetable rock stars and learning

¹ Parent is here defined as a responding adult who has at least one dependant primary school child (aged between 4 and 11 years) in their household who educated their child outside of the mainstream school system, alongside the (largely online) input from teaching staff as a consequence to local and national restrictions put in place in response to the advent of COVID-19.

by questions. Passwords and log-in details needed setting-up from home and the school helped familiarise pupils (and parents) with how to access online home-learning resources. Some of these resources were being used prior to the pandemic, but upon their first introduction nobody foresaw just how important they would become in the absence of face-to-face teaching.

Parents voiced challenges around having access to and having the skills to use new and varied online platforms necessary to execute home-learning effectively. During the initial lockdown, many experienced 'issues with technology' that acted as a barrier for their children to home-learn and follow guidance set by school.

'I mean we had issues with technology and things like that, and the different types of technology and different platforms that the different year groups use'

(Parent)

There was an initial re-adjustment period where teachers and parents adapted to this new way of teaching, learning, working and being together at home as a family for long periods of indefinite time. Decisions about how to manage remote learning were made quickly, under uncertain circumstances, causing some teachers (and parents) a degree of stress (Kim and Asbury, 2020). Initially, many teachers felt they were reacting to uncontrollable circumstances rather than being able to efficiently plan ahead. Teachers did not know or have time to scope the differing resources (in terms of access to technologies and other resources such as outdoor space and parental time) available to their families to effectively plan the shift and manage inequalities. The Deputy Head described the initial decision-making processes, referring to looking at what was happening in Ireland as a directive for what might happen in her own school.

'We were aware that we were going to close, you could see it coming, it was just a case of when, and as soon as we saw Ireland go to home-schooling we thought, well, you know, we're not going to be far behind that. It was just a case of how long? So, from our perspective it was a case of trying to get things in place very quickly that would allow us to continue to teach, and get a system that most children would be able to access, and those that couldn't access it immediately we could enable them to access it by helping them out perhaps with technology'

(Deputy Head)

3.2 Unequal access to resources

There was heterogeneity in the amount of time children spent learning, what activities they did during this time and what resources they had to support their learning (Andrew et al, 2020). During the initial lockdown teachers responded to parent queries and requests regarding needing new school reading books, larger screens and better equipped devices needed to manage home-learning. Families that had traditionally stayed clear (intentionally in some instances) of opening their children up to digital online environments lacked key resources vital to engage with remote learning. Families working from home with multiple children were sharing and competing for devices. Initially this presented a number of key challenges. Firstly parents, children and teachers had to learn new skills and navigate these new online platforms, secondly families had to manage the sharing of devices and new shared working spaces within the home, with many setting up home-learning and work around their dining-room tables. Thirdly, teachers found themselves 'going that extra mile', venturing out to child(ren)s homes dropping off much needed devices, fresh reading materials and key textbooks.

Teachers were aware that different families were experiencing home-learning in unequal ways, with much of this disparity being related to the level of family income (Andrews et al, 2020). Teachers tried to personally ensure children had fair access to resources. Some of these resources (finances permitting) could be supplied by school if and when teachers chose to personally take responsibility to deliver them to children's doorsteps, others such as parent availability to help with home-learning and access to outdoor space could not be so easily provided.

'I had three people contact me within the first two weeks to say, 'look I just can't do the maths on Seesaw². I haven't got anything that's large enough to see what they need to do. So, I drove round and pushed some maths books through their door'
(Deputy Head)

Parents appreciated teachers 'going that extra mile' and welcomed regular communication with the school. Schools found new ways of engaging with families and the home-school communication links and relationships were deemed important.

3.3 Different home-learning experiences

In addition to different schools operating different platforms and managing home-learning in varying ways, families too utilised the resources made available from school in different ways (Andrews et al, 2020). This was a concern for teachers who were worried about those children who didn't appear to be (fully) engaging with home-learning and where no/little communication between the school and home ensued. Apps such as seesaw encouraged the submission of work, this was one key way teachers could gauge different levels of engagement with home-learning activities set by school. Monitoring attendance and levels of engagement were key concerns for school.

'We have got children who are doing nothing (...) And then of course there is a certain degree of choice in terms of what they choose then to do. So, if I put out say three activities a day, a maths, an English and another area of the curriculum, they'll always go for the nice one. So, it's the things that you need the consistency with that they're not doing'
(Deputy Head)

Parents, as well as children had much autonomy over how they engaged with home-learning. Data suggests that parents were a lot more directive during the initial stages of the first national lockdown, with many seeking their own educational resources. One parent below talks about how she chose to engage with a nature curriculum.

² Seesaw is a classroom app used by schools in over 150 countries to engage and connect the home and school for the purposes of remote learning.



'We're following the 'exploring nature with snails' children curriculum, so next week we're onto garden snails. It's brilliant. We're going to be capturing some snails and putting them in a box and drawing them and things like that. This last week was about the Spring Equinox, so we did lots of stuff around that, but next week I'm going to do a bit of prep beforehand now I know how it's worked. And just get organised really over the weekend so they're ready to go again then for the next week'

(Parent)

The levels of input, creativity and direction parents invested in their child(ren)s home-learning was dependent upon the dynamic, age and number of siblings within the family; their health status (with some members being asked to shield for example); the level of child independence and motivation to learn within the home; the parents work/financial status and other caring and domestic responsibilities families needed to balance.

3.4 Parents are not teachers

The younger (and more numerous) the children the more demanding the childcare responsibilities and parents desire and arguable need 'to be present' whilst home-learning, with some questioning how much input they as parents should give. Parents welcomed communication with the school and wanted reassurances that they as much as their children were doing ok by their children education wise. With some parents expressing concern that they were doing more harm than good in relation to the stress sometimes involved motivating their children to learn. The excerpt below illustrates a common parental concern.

'I'm not sure how much to guide and I'm not sure how much to say or not to say. If he's not doing something quite right I don't know whether to say anything or if that sounds critical, or I don't know whether it's better to just let him do something but not do it perfectly. So, I find myself in a bit of a bind sometimes between being too involved and then feeling like I'm micromanaging what he's doing, or just stepping back and letting him do anything. But I don't know if that's helpful or not? So, I think not being a teacher I don't really know how to go about it?'

(Parent)

Parents appreciated frequent communications with the school that attempted to ease parental anxiety and stress around getting all tasks done. As the crisis continued a tighter focus on learning maths and English ensued whereby 'essential' and 'desired' learning were more formally separated to help families navigate the basics and simultaneously manage differentiation and provide adequate resources for those children physically on-site and those home-learning. The school introduced a 'Wellbeing Wednesday' during the third national lockdown to enable children to catch up on work missed, focus again on the key subjects and factor space for children to engage with

other outside and more creative activities such as making hand puppets, engaging with photography, riding bikes and walking.

3.5 Balancing home-learning and employment

All participants that were working (paid or otherwise) experienced challenges balancing home-learning and work, with some (usually mothers) changing their employment patterns or stopping paid employment completely. The Monday-Friday, nine-five working day conventions became disrupted, with many requiring an ability to work and engage with home-learning flexibly.

Managing day-to-day household tasks, caring responsibilities, employment and the organisation, delivery and execution of home-learning was largely (but not exclusively) conducted by the mothers of the household. Explanations for this largely lie in the gendered division of paid labour with the father's employment often given prominence due to its higher paid, more secure status.

'John's (husband) income is our steady eddy and that's what we rely upon to pay the bills. Anything that I make is like an additional bonus or an extra really. So that was the immediate decision that was made, that John would continue as normal and I would buffer the gaps. I take the full responsibility, and John does any maths problems that I can't do'

(Parent)

Many teachers at the school were female and working parents themselves and they too faced the challenge of balancing home-learning and adapting to new ways of working.

'Well having my children around at the same time, that's really hard, because I feel like I can never get any one thing complete. So, I might be writing the daily planners and I can't just have one or two hours to sit down and do them. I don't know when I'm going to do the reports, I don't know when I'm going to get to do any of my subject stuff. I'm finding that a real challenge'

(Teacher)

In general, parents felt that teachers related well to their own home-learning experience and were conscious that teachers too were under pressure to manage unprecedented circumstances.

3.6 Outdoor learning

Research suggests that increasing children's engagement and participation with nature and the outdoors correlates with significant improvements in children's mood and wellbeing, especially over sustained periods (Harvey et al, 2020). Data presented here suggests parents encouraged their children to embrace and build further engagement with nature and outdoor learning and wanted this better integrated into the school curricula. Indeed, this served as a low-cost way for the school to improve children's psychological wellbeing while simultaneously operating under Covid-19 social distancing restrictions upon their return to school.

During the first lockdown many families cherished the ability to go outside and learn. One parent below describes how she and her daughter worked outside on the moors.



'I mean to be fair when we first started with lockdown, my daughter was at one end of the table and I was on the other end of the table, both with laptops. And I just thought, do you know what, this is not how we're doing it. This is stale, this is regimented, it's just not going to last. And I'm not staying indoors watching a computer and her looking for the next thing that comes up on seesaw when the sun's shining and she could be out there going up waterfalls and river walking and all the rest of it, seeing where she's born and her heritage and the history. And, you know, we'll do times tables whilst we're walking and make a song, or I'll take a picture of the spellings on my phone and we'll look at it whilst we're walking. Or, you know, we'll get the times table songs on YouTube and sing along. There are ways to do it, so I'm just doing it like that'

(Parent)

4. Summary and solutions

4.1 Different and unequal family experiences

Different families had varying access to different technological and other resources, teachers went that 'extra mile' sometimes to ensure all children had as equal access as possible to resources required to execute home-learning effectively. Teachers planned lessons and adapted their way of managing home-learning in response to parental feedback and signs of (lack of) engagement with school activities. Different schools operated different home-learning packages which shaped what children accessed and how. Examples of good practice should be used to inform future home-learning bouts and include being responsive, inclusive and flexible in their approach. Policy intervention must recognise that different families had unequal home-learning experiences.

4.2 Home-school links are important

Schools should have clear, frequent and up-to-date communicative strategies with families since guidance and expectations can change rapidly. Many families appreciated communication for reassurance and to facilitate connection (for them and their children) with the school while home-learning.

4.3 Involve parents

Parent/carers should be recognised as key stakeholders with valuable life experiences that can be better integrated and recognised as an educational resource both within and outside of the school setting. Working and understanding families in their entirety is viewed as paramount when developing future support resources for families during the pandemic. Please view the references below for a free poster developed to support parents as schools re-opened to more children.

4.4 Balancing home-learning and employment was a challenge

Schools and employers should recognise the challenges working families (including teachers) experienced and set expectations accordingly – many working families worked outside of the usually working day conventions when balancing various home, caring, work and home-learning responsibilities.

4.5 Embrace outdoor learning

Educational resources and curriculums should include and acknowledge the benefits and challenges of online/remote learning, as well as recognise the importance of ‘real life’ and outdoor learning. Data from this research suggests parents and teachers were very much onboard with encouraging children to embrace and build further engagement with nature and the outdoors into the school curricula, especially since this has the potential to serve as a low-cost way for schools to improve children’s psychological wellbeing, while simultaneously operating under COVID-19 social distancing restrictions.

References

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Top tips for parents/guardians as schools re-open to more children poster available free <https://www.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/research/hudcres/top-tips-poster-a4.pdf>