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To cite this article: Claire Lee & Lucy Wenham (2023) 'We just have to sail this sea all together until we find a shore': parents' accounts of home-educating primary-school children in England during COVID-19, *Education 3-13*, 51:2, 276-291, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2021.1963803](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1963803)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2021.1963803>



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Published online: 11 Aug 2021.



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'We just have to sail this sea all together until we find a shore': parents' accounts of home-educating primary-school children in England during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Parents' everyday realities of enforced home-schooling during COVID-19 may offer important insights into strengths and weakness of education systems. This article presents findings from a qualitative study involving parents of primary-school-age children in England during the first 'lockdown'. Parents shared common concerns with routine, motivation, resources, support, and children's wellbeing, and responded creatively to the challenges they faced. We argue that focusing narrowly on 'learning loss' and getting 'back on track' may lead to impoverished educational experiences post-COVID-19, and that a broad, engaging curriculum with social and emotional wellbeing at its core will support children's thriving in an uncertain future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 May 2021

Accepted 27 July 2021

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic; school closures; primary school; home-educating; home-schooling; parents

Introduction

The educational experiences and trajectories of 1.6 billion children globally have been radically disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020). For many millions of children worldwide, schools have been completely closed for almost an entire year (UNICEF 2021). For others, schools have opened intermittently, examinations have been cancelled and teaching and learning have shifted online. While schools and families in some countries have been able to utilise existing virtual learning platforms, in the vast majority of countries a seamless transition to distance learning was impossible. Patrinos and Schmis (2020) estimated early in the pandemic, for example, that only 10% of countries in the Europe and Central Asia region had robust e-learning capabilities and that 'none [had] integrated curriculum widely delivered with a blended mode' (para. 16).

In the UK, the first school closures were announced on 18 March 2020. Almost overnight, against a background of stress and fear, all parents,¹ whatever their other commitments and their experience of education, found themselves recruited as home educators, with no idea when schools might reopen. Schools mobilised to adapt teaching methods, adopt distance-learning resources and technologies, and rethink pastoral care provision, while remaining open to vulnerable children and children of key workers. Yet provision varied enormously between settings; some families were supported with lesson plans, materials and online teaching, while in other cases families were left without resources. In effect, this has been an unforeseen, unplanned global educational experiment.

However, while most experiments investigate a set of questions, this experiment presents us *first* with evidence and *then* invites us to ask questions. Many questions, for example, have been asked

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about attainment gaps and lost learning (e.g. Education Endowment Foundation 2020; Green 2020). The Education Endowment Foundation asked, for example, ‘To what extent has pupils’ attainment in reading and maths been impacted by school closures in 2020?’ In response, researchers calculated ‘a Covid-19 gap of around 2 months’ progress’ (Rose et al. 2021, 1) in Year 2 children² in these subjects. Similarly, the Department for Education suggests that ‘time out of school in the 2019/2020 academic year may have affected primary pupils’ performance in reading, maths and spelling, punctuation and grammar assessments’ (Department for Education 2021, 8). Closing these attainment gaps through catch-up interventions and strategies, such as extended school days, a national tutoring programme and summer schools, has been the focus of much consideration by policymakers in the UK.

Such emphasis on remedying lost performance reflects these words written only a year before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic:

in conditions of crisis – such as the financial crash or the slow climate catastrophe – intellectual and material effort is focused towards working out how to get ‘back on track’ to the previous upward trajectory of economic growth rather than exploring alternative trajectories. (Facer 2019, 7)

Perhaps, then, instead of a focus on returning to business as usual, the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic presents us with an opportunity to ask different questions and consider alternative trajectories of education. The pandemic offers us as a society the chance to take stock of our education policies and practices and their effects. What has been lost, and what gained during the school closures? Where were the strengths in our education systems before the pandemic, the things we need to return to? What new realities and ways of working have emerged that we wish to take forward? And what do we need to leave behind as we seek to build an education system with the strength, agility and kindness to respond to an uncertain and precarious future? The pandemic has made visible – as never before, perhaps – the vast inequalities between families with different socio-economic backgrounds, between those able to provide ample space and resources for learning, including digital devices, connectivity and skills, and those with fewer resources. How, then, can we develop our education system so that it works equally well for all learners as it currently does for the privileged minority? As Breslin (2020) argues, the pandemic challenges us to lay the foundations of a more equitable education system fit for the twenty-first century.

We bear these questions in mind as we present here data from a small-scale qualitative study, conducted during the first national lockdown in England with families who had suddenly found themselves responsible for teaching their children from home. In order to ‘capture’ the unique challenges and changes being enacted at that moment, we invited families to chronicle their day-to-day activity as the situation unfolded: their experimentation, challenges, successes and emotional responses, the thriving, surviving and floundering that went on. Our detailed findings point to families’ struggles with the expectations placed upon them and to the decisions they made about their children’s learning. The struggles of our participant families to ‘keep up with’ the curriculum during the school closures highlight weaknesses in education systems in which teaching and learning is driven to a great extent by high-stakes testing and accountability mechanisms. However, the families’ reflections also highlight the less measurable but crucial ways in which teachers and schools support children’s wellbeing and their social learning.

In what follows, we briefly review emergent research on COVID-19 school closures, then outline our methodology, before turning to our findings and their implications.

Contextualising the study

In the early stages of the pandemic, researchers attempted to predict the likely educational impacts of the pandemic by examining research on learning loss during previous school closures and summer holidays (Education Endowment Foundation 2020; Eyles, Gibbons, and Montebrown 2020; Rose et al. 2021). However, in some of those studies, what counts as loss (or, indeed, learning) is unclear (Education Endowment Foundation 2020), as are the factors associated with summer

learning loss or, even, for some students, gain (Atteberry and McEachin 2019). With standardised tests cancelled during the nationwide lockdown in the UK, actual test data were unavailable, but the results of commercially-available standardised tests have been used to calculate children's learning loss. Researchers from the NFER calculated that Year 2 children were behind in reading and maths and that the disadvantage gap was wider than had been previously predicted (Rose et al. 2021), and recommended that this lost learning should be recovered through catch-up activities. Similar findings come from analysis of optional reading, maths and Grammar, Punctuation and Spelling tests taken by 250,000 pupils from Reception class to Year 5³ (Blainey, Hiorns, and Hannay 2020). That schools decided that, in the absence of compulsory testing, their pupils should take these examinations in the first weeks after six months of school closures, rather than focus on other activity, points perhaps to the entrenched nature of testing within the English education system.

Other researchers investigated the quantity and quality of home-learning undertaken by families in the UK and the resources available to them during the first lockdown. Andrew et al. (2020) reported that almost 60% of parents of primary-school children described struggling with home-educating, although a NowTeach survey suggested 64% of parents found home-schooling enjoyable (NowTeach 2020, para. 4). Following suggestions that students spent 5 hours daily on schoolwork (Andrew et al. 2020), Green argued 2.5 hours was more accurate, and described the loss of schooling as an 'epidemic of educational poverty' (2020, 1).

Researchers agreed that disparity of provision and facilities would inevitably increase educational inequalities:

Pupils from better-off families are spending longer on home learning; they have access to more individualised resources such as private tutoring or chats with teachers; they have a better home set-up for distance learning; and their parents report feeling more able to support them. (Andrew et al. 2020, 3)

Green (2020) noted that independent schools were providing far more online teaching and learning at that time than state schools. The British government's much-publicised endeavours to supply computers and internet access to certain disadvantaged students have been described as 'ad hoc and disorganised' (Children's Commissioner 2020, 4). Extra tutoring for disadvantaged pupils has been widely suggested as a solution (e.g. Major and Machin 2020), and, through a national tutoring programme, the government is focusing its efforts on catch-up interventions for disadvantaged children. Summer schools and an extended school day have also been mooted, underpinned presumably by the logical but vastly over-simplified notion that learning is simply an input-output equation.

While learning loss continues to grab headlines, there is also a small body of evidence that presents more positive findings. One study, for example, found that multilingual families reported that their children's language and literacy in their mother tongue improved during lockdown (Serratrice 2020), something that is not measured in standardised tests and is thus largely hidden. An international study by researchers from the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation found evidence of children in many countries including the UK contributing ideas to help shape services, designing and disseminating information and messages of hope and using online platforms to take part in consultations and express their views (Larkins et al. 2020). And in a report entitled *Coronavirus and My Life*, alongside negative views about the pandemic, children also identified some positives, including new learning opportunities and increased reading and outdoor activity (Chamberlain et al. 2021). Such studies suggest that when learning is conceptualised as more than simply the skillset measured in SATs-style tests, and as more than a linear, individual trajectory to be accomplished at speed, more nuanced understandings of children's learning during lockdown can be developed, and children can be positioned as more than simply bearers of test results.

In the next section of this article, we turn to our own study, which sought to drill down into the complexities of enforced lockdown home-educating as described by parents. While our wider study involved children of various ages and their parents, this article focuses on the accounts of six families with primary-age children.

Methodology

To respond swiftly to the lockdown and avoid direct contact with participants, we used a simple diary method. We asked parents to write a brief description of what the child did each morning and afternoon, a short daily reflection, and a slightly longer weekly reflection. This method allowed us to build a detailed and nuanced picture of what the parents themselves identified as noteworthy, and allowed participants control over what they chose to share, rather than asking them to respond to predefined questions. With disrupted routines and extra demands on their time, participants could also complete their diaries when it suited them. We were aware that researching during the lockdown required particular ethical sensitivity.⁴ We stressed that there was no obligation to complete the diaries every day, and emphasised participants' right to withdraw without explanation from the project. In practice, the parent diaries ranged from brief notes to densely-written reflections. Starting in March and April 2020, the diaries petered out in early June.

Participants were recruited via the researchers' community networks. While not intended as a representative sample, our six participant families were ethnically and economically diverse. They included both single- and dual-parent families; the children attended a variety of schools, and their homes ranged from a small city-centre apartment to a house with a garden in a rural location. Parents' occupations and working practices also varied; some were working outside the home, some teleworking and others furloughed.

Our research is framed as an interpretive endeavour that recognises that 'we belong to the things we are trying to talk about' (Caputo 2018, 107). Our analysis also acknowledges that, like any other research methods, diaries are contingent on a unique communicative context; they are aimed at the anticipated response of a known or imagined audience (Bakhtin 1981, 1986) – in this case, ourselves as educational researchers and educators. This situation necessarily involves power relations and an awareness of how the writer wishes to portray her/himself. Additionally, any communicative genre carries expectations and conventions of usage. Diary-writing steers participants towards introspection and recording of 'private' thoughts (Hyers 2018), yet it would be naïve to assume that diaries tell a comprehensive and unchanging truth, or individuals' innermost thoughts. Rather, diary-writing may be used as an opportunity for reflection on emergent ideas and feelings, and a diary offered to others to read represents what people choose to share at a very specific time in their lives. Further, our own concerns and positionalities inevitably coloured our interpretations of the diaries. Both researchers on the project were ex-classroom teachers, for example, and were in touch with teacher colleagues during the lockdown.

We used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), annotating the diaries with reflections and observations, coding the data and deriving themes: parents' anxieties about their children's educational progress and mental health; concerns with routine and curriculum; the challenges of conflicting demands, roles and relationships; and the challenges of motivating children. Another key theme was parents' creativity in rising to the challenge of enforced home-educating. While we acknowledge that the very nature of the research project meant that these were relatively privileged families with the benefit of internet access, these are important glimpses into what learning during the lockdown was like for some families living through these extraordinary times. We examine these findings in the next section of this article.

Findings

'I had a panicking thought ... what will happen to my children's education after all this is over, can they pick up from where they left?': anxiety about progress

A key concern of parents was the effect of school closures on their children's educational progress. Some were anxious that their children would fall behind age-related expectations; they wrote of 'statutory yr 3 spellings', children being 'behind' with their times tables, 'readjusting her work to a

year [below]'. One parent wrote that her child had 'regressed academically (Can't even write date or read – her reading was above age range normally!)'. Another worried about her son underperforming in his future secondary school: 'I feel so worried he will never catch up'. Such fears reflect the prevalent discourses about learning loss, such as estimates which suggest UK children will have 'lost' at least two-fifths of a normal school year (Smith 2020).

Highly conversant with the age-related attainment expectations of the English national curriculum, the parents were alarmed at taking on responsibility for their children's progress unsupported by the usual expertise, routines, activities and structures that reassured them their children were learning the right things at the right time. It is important to recognise that parents are schooled from their children's earliest years in specific ideas of how education should happen: individual attainment, measurable progress, clearly defined curricular targets and age-related expectations (Ang 2014). To abandon these overnight – and with little support with alternatives – seemed to leave an alarming vacuum for many parents. Our research suggests that in this time of enormous uncertainty, parents clung, initially at least, to familiar structures and routines.

'Honestly I don't know the morning and afternoon anymore. It's just day!': concern with routine

A pervasive theme in the early diaries was parents' desire for routine. Many commented on the blurring of time in lockdown: 'One day is blending into another!' Weekends and weekdays were indistinguishable. Figuring out how to structure the day was a commonly-expressed concern. All families in our study started out with some form of timetable to maintain continuity with the children's highly-structured school days. Before long, however, most were 'already tired of getting the children to follow a timetable'. The diaries soon record families tweaking their schedules, experimenting with early morning starts, afternoon working or getting up late, before eventually recognising that timetabling was contributing to their stress: 'School work all got a bit tense and didn't end well, so my plan for this week is to be more relaxed, it's just not worth the aggro:-)'. Some abandoned any attempt at formal scheduling, and 'ripped up the official timetable ... we don't have to stick to exact time'. Families eventually developed their own routines, some doing schoolwork in the morning and using the afternoon for other activity: 'works much better to relax in afternoon and get out of house'. For a family observing Ramadan, the lockdown provided a welcome opportunity to structure their time around the fast 'without worrying about schedules and getting to places on time': 'schoolwork is now done at night, after breakfast'.

'I feel the strain of trying to keep them all sane and productive': productivity and resources

A related theme was parents' concern with productivity. They felt responsible for their children doing 'something productive for a few hours a day', which tended to be written work assigned by teachers. None of our participants' schools provided regular online classes at that stage of the pandemic. One parent reported having no communication with the school until she made contact after seven weeks of lockdown. She described feeling more positive once she had done so. While one parent reported online one-to-one teaching assistant time, and another mentioned a weekly phone call from her child's teacher (which the family sometimes missed during Ramadan), in the main schools provided paper-based learning packs when the lockdown started and later emailed out links to websites and suggestions for activities, overwhelmingly related to Maths and English.

These task lists had mixed receptions. For some families, they provided something productive to do and a concrete, if often dull, framework for learning. One child in his final year of primary school, for example, was assigned SATs⁵ revision books, despite the exams being cancelled. After a month he finished the books, to his mother's evident relief: 'Feeling glad to see the back of the Sats workbooks!' Yet, although she describing her son being bored and dispirited, she was also reassured that

he was keeping to age-related expectations; he ‘knew about 70% of the answers so I’m happy with that’. For some, schoolwork became a source of conflict and anxiety as parents struggled to persuade their children to complete the work set: ‘This week we got through only three math worksheets – no English, and no Science’. Parents expressed frustration at children’s lack of autonomy, productivity and pace: ‘she worked at her own pace regardless of my requests’.

Yet when we consider the ways in which UK primary-school lessons are often structured – with a review of previous learning, often involving a game, carefully-designed interactive instruction from the teacher, usually followed by practical tasks, oral or written work, often with a partner or a group, and with continual adult encouragement (Keeble 2016; Rosenshine 2012) – we can understand how children may find a diet of worksheets and textbooks both unfamiliar and unpalatable. One parent described her daughter as ‘bored and upset and lacking intellectual stimulation’. Yet only one mother reported asking her child’s teacher for more interesting work. Others, perhaps, felt less entitled to challenge teachers or add to their workload during the pandemic.

Most of our participants mentioned trying out online learning resources, such as exercise routines and online maths challenges. However, the success of online resources varied. One parent wrote of ‘great fun investigating evaporation, condensation, melting, sieving and dissolving. I LOVE BBC Bitesize!’ However, another, who had high hopes for the much-publicised BBC Bitesize lockdown lessons, expressed her disappointment that her son found them ‘boring and lame’. Our evidence suggests that parents found trawling through the sheer quantity of online resources available frustrating and time-consuming. One mother told us she was not sure she was looking in the right place. The parents made no mention, for example, of the somewhat opaquely-named National Oak Academy, a British government-backed and teacher-created online school offering video-recorded lessons and materials. Yet, despite reports of two million lessons watched in its first week of operation (Whittaker 2020), the government website had no links to the Oak Academy. A year later this was still the case. Our research suggests that parents relied mainly on websites suggested by their children’s schools.

‘Sometimes I feel suffocated’: conflicting demands and parents’ wellbeing

Their new roles as home-educators clearly presented both emotional and practical challenges to parents. Balancing home-educating with other commitments was tiring, stressful and emotionally draining. One mother, who was initially working outside the home, described her dismay at returning home one day to find her child’s maths book full of errors: ‘I got mad with him’, ‘guilty for having to work’ and ‘out of control’. When she was eventually furloughed, she described her relief at being able to devote more time to teaching. Others commented on work commitments which sometimes had to take priority over schoolwork: ‘I am overwhelmed with my work so I keep telling my children I will attend to their schoolwork after my deadline’. Another even apologised: ‘We’ve been so busy, sorry have lost track with what she is doing’. And most parents in our study had more than one child, with the added complication of managing different sets of schoolwork and needs and sharing devices (‘poor [younger child] getting totally forgotten!’). In some families, close confinement, compounded by the lack of children’s after-school activities and social contact, also intensified sibling conflict: ‘all I hear downstairs is my kids bickering – “Stop bothering me” – “You started first” ... Ah it is endless!’

Home-educating in lockdown presented particular challenges for lone parents isolated from support networks, and one participant described how work pressures, ‘24-hour parenting’ and home-educating left her exhausted and craving ‘time to breathe’: ‘Sometimes I feel suffocated by constantly raising two kids without support’. This stress was compounded by cramped living conditions which meant her ‘talkative and demanding 8 year-old’ was ‘always behind me, next to me or in front of me! ... aaah please go back to school child!’ She reflected on her ‘confused emotions’ and her guilt that the extra time with her children was less pleasurable than she felt it should be. Even under normal circumstances, mothers experience a ‘welter of emotions’ (Reay 2000, 568) in

relation to their children's education; this mother described the unusual situation as an 'emotional rollercoaster', making it 'hard to stay positive'. She hinted that her struggles to manage her 'role overload' (Lois 2006, 518) dented both her confidence and her sense of self as a parent, a problem she tackled by connecting with supportive friends via videoconference: 'Having some chat with my friends and them validating that I am a good mother helps a lot'.

'Feeling inadequate': parents blaming themselves

Few would suggest that during lockdown the general public should perform home dentistry or plumbing to professional standards, yet our research suggests that the expectation that parents ought to be able to educate their children left many with feelings of failure and guilt and the sense that others must be doing a better job. One mother, for example, wrote, 'I don't know how to get him to be creative! ... Feeling inadequate as I see all of the creative, lovely things other people's kids are doing'. The very wealth of online home-schooling resources, while offered as support, may actually have compounded parents' fear that their children were missing out. Another mother recounted feeling 'huge relief' on learning that her daughter was doing no less schoolwork than her friends. It is important, then, to acknowledge the enormity of the task asked of parents. Teachers have specialist training in theories of learning, curriculum design, subject knowledge, pedagogies and managing student engagement (Department for Education 2011; Keeble 2016). Experienced teachers know how to find and evaluate resources; they have repertoires of tried-and-tested teaching activities, and are skilled at assessing children's learning needs. Small wonder, then, that parents struggled to meet the demands of enforced home-education. Instead of questioning the assumption that everyone should be able to teach, however, parents blamed themselves for feeling overwhelmed, and imagined that others were doing better somehow.

'Really reluctant to do any work. He has zero motivation': momentum and motivation

One of the main challenges highlighted by all parents in our study was motivating their children: 'She did do some school work, but it never goes well getting her motivated. Apathy rules at the moment'. This finding resonates with research into traditional home-schooling mothers which identified children's low motivation as a key contributor to parent burnout, even in families choosing to home-educate their children permanently (Lois 2006). With no end of the lockdown in sight, families also struggled to maintain momentum: 'I tried to get her to do her school work, printed the math worksheets. She kept putting it off. The English tasks which she completed last week, this week she did only one'.

Yet when we consider the resources, knowledge and relationships that teachers mobilise to motivate children and encourage perseverance, parents' struggles with motivation are unsurprising. Not only are teachers skilled at engaging students through planning and scaffolding intrinsically motivating classroom activities; they also operate, and operate within, a complex eco-system of institutional demands, values, routines and procedures, and motivational and behaviour management techniques (Bates 2017). Even the built environment of the school is designed at least partly around keeping children on task (Leander 2002). Motivation is also relational: children may seek teacher approval and peer recognition, through which they gain a sense of themselves as a successful learner or otherwise (MacLure et al. 2012).

Small wonder, then, that in the completely different ecosystem of the home setting, motivation and momentum waned. The diaries contain few hints of the children finding the school-provided tasks intrinsically interesting, or even seeing their purpose or relevance to their ongoing learning. Ambiguity in lockdown as to whom the children were doing the tasks 'for' may also have contributed to their lack of engagement. These findings raise important wider questions about whether our education system promotes or inhibits children's autonomy as learners, and, while detailed discussion of

these questions is beyond the scope of this article, a wealth of literature is available (see, for example, Hedegaard, Edwards, and Fler [2011]; Hudley and Gottfried [2008]).

'I hate nagging [him] to work': teacher/parent roles, relationships and emotional labour

Another challenge identified by parents stems from the difference between the parent–child and the teacher–child relationship. Even professional teachers, who, one might assume, are better-equipped than most for home-educating, found it a struggle. One of our participant parents remarked, 'Home schooling your own child EVEN as a teacher is really hard work'. As Lois (2006) points out, 'new home-schooling parents do not simply lack formal training in educating children; they lack formal training in educating *their* children' (Lois 2006, 509; author's italics). One mother in our study, herself a former teacher, commented: 'I tried to explain it to her but she gets so frustrated and clearly do not like me 'teaching' her. Well, I don't like it either!'

Such tensions may be partly explained by the deeply social nature of learning and learner identities. How we see ourselves, and how we behave, as teachers or pupils, parents or children, is constantly negotiated and renegotiated with others (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Holland et al. 1998; MacLure et al. 2012), in a particular cultural context. It follows, then, that home-educating is not merely a matter of shifting *where* learning happens; it also requires renegotiating long-established relationships and ways of being and behaving, something tacitly recognised by eight-year-old Allie, who rejected her mother's attempts to solicit her co-operation. When her mother promised that 'starting next week, we will have "mommy school" ... two hours of school where both kids attend', Allie, her mother reported, 'wasn't too excited. She said, "I will then say no to all your questions!"' A compliant pupil in school, Allie was unprepared to be that same pupil at home or to see her mother as a teacher.

Teaching is an endeavour that requires unceasing 'emotional labour' which 'requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 2003, 7). Teachers are expected, for example, to bring energy and enthusiasm into the classroom, to engender (or at least perform) positive feelings even when feeling worn-down or unhappy; to encourage rather than criticise, and to handle children's resistance and negativity with cheerfulness and empathy. Yet teachers, while genuinely caring about their students, also have a 'protective cloak' (29) of distance from their pupils; they go home each evening and bid farewell to their class at the end of the year, and they can frame a child's refusal to work as an emotional or learning difficulty influenced by factors beyond their control – and therefore, not their fault. They can laugh off problems in the staffroom, employ escalating systems of sanctions or support, or recruit other professionals' help. Home-educating parents, on the other hand, have few such protective measures; their children's education is a personal matter and an emotional investment.

This is not to deny that parents perform emotional labour; on the contrary, Hochschild stresses that close family relationships involve intense emotional work. However, the techniques employed by teachers to manage classroom relationships may well ring as insincere or inauthentic in the home setting, and a child may be unnerved by a parent trying to be a teacher because it unsettles their usual relationship and habitual interactions. Similarly, for parents, a child's resistance to their attempts to home-educate may feel like ingratitude or a personal rejection, and lead to conflict, especially when parents are fatigued and harassed. One parent in our study acknowledged losing her temper and sending her child to bed. Another commented: 'R really uncooperative about school work ... Needless to say, it all came to a head mid-afternoon'.

'I think we will settle in': compromise and creativity

Our findings so far suggest that attempts to replicate classroom teaching at home proved less fruitful and more challenging than parents had hoped. One reflected,

In an ideal world you imagine, 'Oh I'm going to have my little classroom – they're going to be as excited as I am about it'. But it's so much less stress thinking I'm not gonna do it any more. Cause she's happier.

While some parents gave up on schoolwork altogether, most eventually found a balance between school-assigned tasks and activities oriented more towards their children's interests: cooking, collecting caterpillars, playing videogames and board games, gardening, walks, arts and crafts. While some parents jokingly justified such activities in 'school-approved' terms – 'PE' (physical education), for example – or argued that these activities met their child's emotional or social needs – 'he was not in the mood for school work so we went for a long walk around the lake in the afternoon'; 'lots of time chatting to her friend playing Roblox' – some also recognised them as valuable learning activities in their own right: 'Practical lessons and time spent outdoors were really successful'.

Our research suggests that, alongside relaxing their daily routines and rethinking the curriculum, many parents also found creative ways of breaking down the teacher–child binary and avoiding the frustration of trying to coerce their children into working. Some found it helpful to position themselves as learners alongside their children, rather than as their teachers: 'We conquered addition of fractions ... I felt proud to finally understand fraction addition'. Parents also exploited the rich learning opportunities afforded by their everyday activities such as cooking or gardening: 'We made up a game on our allotment called #guess that veg and #guess that fruit'. Some families centred learning around events such as birthdays or Iftar, giving their children real responsibilities: cooking, making cards, or decorating the house.

Parents also observed that activities such as playing board games enabled them to better understand their children as learners, to 'see things about them that I would have not normally been able to see'. Parents became more attuned to their children's educational needs. One, for example, recognised that her child 'finds it hard to ask for help when he doesn't understand things' and resolved to work on this. While some parents were desperate for their children to return to school ('Maybe light at the end of the tunnel with year 6 going back [soon]? Fingers crossed!'), others cherished the lockdown as a time of increased closeness: '[She] is being a sheer delight at the moment and loving learning and being with us both ← wish this wasn't transient too! lol'. While many parents will have cheerfully handed back their children's everyday instruction to their schools, many will also have gained an increased understanding of and involvement with their child's education, which may offer opportunities for richer school-parent partnerships in future.

'I am increasingly worried for my kids' mental health': wellbeing concerns

Not only was teaching their own children a steep learning curve for parents, the challenges they faced were compounded by the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that surrounded the pandemic. Parents frequently related worries about their own and their children's mental health: 'Feeling tired and fed up and sad for my kids'. Some parents used the diary as a reflective tool. One, for example, wrote, 'Feel anxious about how long we can carry on – note to self DON'T WATCH THE NEWS BEFORE BED!' Another parent recognised that the incessant pandemic newsfeeds affected her wellbeing, leading her to 'overthink', and that this was also the case for her daughter: 'she hates listening to the news on TV as it has nothing but corona stories'.

Parents also reported worrying changes in their children's behaviour. One commented, 'She is more attention seeking now and that worries me and sometimes frustrates me to the point I don't know how to deal with it'. Another wrote, 'it breaks my heart to see how scared she is', as she observed her adopted daughter 'regress to the little girl who moved in, baby speech, "forgotten how to read", saying spikey things, night terrors + sweats, etc': behaviours she identified as triggered by the pandemic. Another mother commented that her teenager's changes in behaviour were leading to increased tension in the household: '[He] has turned nocturnal and very surly'. And the parent of a child about to move to secondary school worried about his preparedness for a successful

transition. Traditional rites of passage, such as residential visits, celebrations and performances, mark the end of primary school in the UK, while induction and taster days prepare children for the next phase of their education (Jindal-Snape and Foggie 2008; McLellan and Galton 2015). Such activities play a crucial part in allowing children to acknowledge and share their feelings about these major changes in their lives, yet they were largely cancelled during the pandemic. This mother observed, ‘He isn’t growing in confidence as I saw with my other older children’.

‘We need to find a way out of this for our kids’ sanity’: navigating uncharted territory

The unprecedented nature of the lockdowns, of course, meant that home-educating was uncharted territory, reflected in geographical metaphors in the parents’ diaries – ‘find a way’, ‘sail this ship’, ‘lost’. Parents’ sense of being ‘at sea’ was particularly evident in their concerns about how to talk about the pandemic with their children. One mother reflected on her uncertainty: ‘Sometimes I feel guilty not talking to her about the situation, but I think she doesn’t want to talk about it’. She did, however, invite her daughter to engage in a small positive act of activism, suggesting that she draw a rainbow to display in their window. Her daughter surprised her by creating a poster that read: ‘Thank you for staying home, thank you all employers and thank you all NHS [National Health Service]. Thank you for the deliveries’. Thus the mother recognised ‘how much she is aware of what is going on though she doesn’t talk about it much’. Another parent wrote, with a regretful emoji, ‘We can’t hide most of this from the children 😞’ and explained how she attempted to emphasise the positive aspects of lockdown with her child: ‘we 3 are together all the time, the planet is recovering naturally’. This parent also found ways of engaging her daughter in constructive action through writing to residents in a local care home. The gratitude shown by the residents and their carers provided the child with the positive sense of having made a difference: ‘she was so proud, and so was I!’ For a slightly older child, watching the news provided an outlet for his frustrations: ‘he watched the Coronavirus briefing and was moaning about being stuck at home all the way through’.

Parents identified isolation from friends as acutely challenging for their children. The extent to which children craved the company of others, and the influence of living conditions on children’s lockdown experiences – but also her child’s resourcefulness – became apparent to one mother, who observed her daughter developing a connection with children in the flat opposite: ‘She said, “I see them at the window everyday ... They smile and I smile and today they waved and I waved. I think they are nice girls”’. In contrast, a family with a garden had an easier time of socialising – ‘So thankful for neighbours kids (playing 2 m apart over wall!)’. As the first lockdown in England started to ease, children with gardens and safe outdoor spaces were able to begin to meet friends, although the children living in a small flat did not see any friends face-to-face for five months.

However, all families swiftly devised creative ways of online socialising, such as organising online scavenger hunts with classmates – ‘she so loves this but always cries after as see’s friends’ – communicating with overseas cousins, or doing online quiz nights. While news reports often express alarm that social media and gaming will damage children mentally and socially (e.g. Hymas 2018), the positive role that digital connectedness can play in children’s social lives became evident during lockdown, as children used their devices as vital links to friends: ‘Let him play for ages on his X-box. It’s how he chats to friends’.

From the parents’ richly reflective diaries, it was clear that, even though each family experienced enforced home-educating differently – and even differently from week to week – there were also many parallels between the parents’ concerns and accounts of their lockdowns. It interested us also that the diaries all stopped arriving in early June. For one mother, this coincided with her child’s class returning to school. Another explained that, having found the diary-keeping ‘cathartic’ initially, by June she had ‘nothing new to say’ and felt she wanted to stop reflecting and simply ‘live in the moment’.

Implications

While not wishing to over-generalise from this small-scale study, our findings allow us both to offer some recommendations for the short-term, as schools deal with the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and further potential disruptions to schooling, and to reflect more broadly on the questions we raised at the start of this article. Rather than focusing on how we get 'back on track', we see this moment of rupture as an opportunity to consider whether we were on the right track in the first place. We ask: What insights have we gained from what has been in effect an educational experiment on a grand scale? How might these insights help us to develop a stronger, kinder, more agile and more equitable education system that is better fit for the future?

First, it is likely that teachers and school leaders are dealing with competing priorities in the aftermath of the school closures. From our research findings, we suggest that key immediate challenges for schools are to find creative ways to support children to make sense of their lockdown experiences, to provide a sense of stability and safety after a year of disruption, and to build on what children *have* learned during the pandemic. Given that even before the pandemic, research suggested that on average one in ten children in the UK had a diagnosable mental health condition (Barnardo's 2019; YoungMinds 2016), our findings support the argument that a focus on children's emotional wellbeing is an imperative (see also British Psychological Society 2021). Additionally, while some children may have slipped seamlessly back into collaborative learning activities and friendships, others may need long-term support with friendships and working relationships with their peers, especially those whose access to videoconferencing and outdoor play spaces has been limited. To meet all these challenges, teachers must have autonomy and be trusted to draw on their expertise to meet the needs of the children within their settings. A rich curriculum, including play, art education, literature, music, physical and outdoor education and the existing personal, social and health curriculum, will play its part in supporting children's emotional, social and academic development. All this will require intense emotional labour from teachers, whose mental health may itself have been negatively impacted during the lockdown (Allen, Jerrim, and Sims 2020). Teachers, therefore, should be consulted about the support they need themselves.

Yet schools also find themselves under intense pressure to ensure children make up for 'lost learning' and to close performance gaps between affluent and less affluent children. Test results are likely to be used not only to identify how far children's performance has slipped from the norms, but also as evidence of the success or failure of governments' handling of education during the pandemic (Smith 2020). The danger is that political pressure may translate into increased testing and a burden placed on children to catch up and prioritise exam performance. A desire to drive up results could lead to a corner-cutting curriculum that focuses on maths and English exam-oriented objectives, with even less emphasis on outdoor learning and creativity than existed pre-COVID-19 – an example of the 'accountability tail wagging the educational dog' (O'Neill 2013, 9). It is crucial, then, that schools and policymakers do not allow party-political concerns to overshadow the pressing need to help children make sense of what has been happening, enjoy learning and re-establish friendships.

We argue that schools will need a sophisticated approach to assessment-led learning on their return. Yet our example of a child spending lockdown revising for exams that would not even take place shows the pervasiveness of teaching to summative tests in some settings (A. Braun and Maguire 2018; Hutchings 2015). Simply administering SATs-style tests to identify interventions that will drive up children's scores in their eventual SATs tests will profoundly narrow curricula and diminish children's education. More rounded and more searching ways of assessing for learning – and teaching for thriving – are needed.

Rather than focusing solely on learning loss, it is also important to find ways of recognising and validating what children *did* learn during the pandemic. Our findings suggest that while some parents struggled to motivate their children to complete school assignments, it does not automatically follow that their learning – in the broadest sense of the word – was impoverished. We provide

evidence of parents' inventiveness in engaging their children with a broad range of educational experiences. Arguably, corresponding with residents of a local care home, designing posters, and watching and responding to the news may be more beneficial literacy activities than some of the grammar exercises that feature heavily in the English national curriculum. And while some children will undoubtedly have had richer lockdown learning experiences than others, and the pandemic has by no means levelled the playing field between children with varying levels of privilege, schools will need to find ways of acknowledging and building upon the learning that curricular tests cannot capture: 'It is vital for children's psychological wellbeing that the rhetoric around "catch up" does not detract from their achievements and progress during lockdowns' (British Psychological Society 2021, 2). The lockdown may also have created impetus for more fruitful and reciprocal parent-school partnerships. Schools might consider how they can harness and build on the insights and expertise gained by parents as their children's main educators for several months.

In the longer term, analysis of our findings raises critical questions about educational and social inequalities. We found, for example, that during the first lockdown, contact with schools provided reassurance and direction to parents, yet was sparse. We have suggested that regular online lessons or videoconferencing with teachers provided both greater clarity about the audience and purpose of children's work, and an incentive to complete tasks, than doing them 'for' their parents. This finding is consistent with research that found that schools' use of virtual learning environments, as opposed to a flow of assignments, was associated with pupil engagement (Lucas, Nelson, and Sims 2020). Yet we also provide evidence that, despite the rapid adoption of online working practices by many organisations during the first national lockdown in the UK, some schools relied entirely on emailing out worksheets. It is likely that this practice had more to do with ensuring all students had equal access to resources than an unwillingness or inability to adapt teaching methods (Andrew et al. 2020). We believe it is untenable that schools were unable to take advantage of online teaching techniques and tools simply because students did not have the infrastructure to access them. Enforced home schooling has, then, shed light on often-invisible, longstanding inequalities of access to resources, including digital technologies. These inequalities must remain in the spotlight after the pandemic is over. The British government, having eventually supplied over a million laptops and tablets to school students, has clearly recognised that online learning is an educational necessity. We argue that such infrastructure provision should be a priority beyond the pandemic. However, digital inequalities are part of a web of broader and entrenched social inequalities (Robinson et al. 2015, 2020; United Nations 2019), including poverty, poor housing, employment precarity and food poverty, and cannot be addressed in isolation from these. Moreover, the ability to make full use of digital devices is linked with people's internet access and speed, as well as their skills and perceptions of the benefits and harms of digital engagement and their access to support (Courtois and Verdegem 2016; Hargittai and Hinnant 2008; Hargittai, Piper, and Morris 2019; van Deursen et al. 2017; Robinson 2009; van Deursen et al. 2019). Simply supplying devices is far from a one-stop solution.

Our findings relating to children's motivation also invite critical reflection on educational practices. We found little evidence of children being inspired by the inherent interest of their schoolwork, and wonder: are schools over-reliant on behaviour management systems? Are parts of the formal curriculum so divorced from children's interests and priorities that when elaborate mechanisms of extrinsic motivation are removed, children simply refuse to engage with them? MacLure et al. (2012, 460) argue that 'teacher-led control operates against self-discipline, since the former is exerted externally and the latter is supposed to operate internally' (460). It is interesting that the activities parents found to be meaningful to their children tended to be curiosity-driven, practical, creative and outdoor activities and writing for real communicative purposes – activities that are often marginalised by the focus on success in high-stakes tests (Wenham 2019). Similarly, parents' reports that children struggled to maintain momentum invite consideration of how teachers cultivate children's autonomy as learners. Are children so dependent on teacher support and scaffolding that in the absence of these they simply cannot cope? If children are unused to developing their own

curiosity-led projects, and their learning is structured in infinitesimally small, pre-defined steps, is it any wonder that in the absence of that structure, as we saw in the pandemic, they are 'lost'?

Finally, our research suggests one more thing that the pandemic has brought to light: that teaching is a multifaceted and difficult endeavour. It is crucial, then, that schools recognise the pressures on home-schooling parents and avoid stigmatising children who did not complete all their schoolwork. Employers must also recognise the difficulties of juggling work, caring for and home-educating children, and ease work pressure on parents. A well-designed, up-to-date government website with links to teacher-rated, high-quality learning materials would be a useful resource for parents. And perhaps, after decades of erosion of teacher professionalism and public perceptions of teacher expertise (Beck 2008), the pandemic will lead to a renewed respect for and trust of teachers.

Conclusion

This study investigated the everyday realities of six diverse families as they navigated the uncharted territory of home-educating their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. We identify challenges they faced, compromises they made, and expertise they gained in meeting conflicting demands, establishing routines and attempting to motivate their children to complete schoolwork. We provide evidence of how each family's experiences were coloured by their individual circumstances, including work commitments, home environments and the support provided by schools. Our findings also show the creativity that parents brought to the tasks of providing their children with a relevant, balanced and engaging education and supporting them to thrive socially and emotionally.

We suggest that the pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to take stock of what we are doing in our education system and why. We argue that the untenable inequalities that the pandemic has spotlighted will continue to exist post-COVID-19 and should be tackled as a matter of urgency. Our findings on parents' difficulties with motivating their children also suggest an over-reliance by schools on extrinsic motivational mechanisms rather than an intrinsically motivating curriculum, and on tightly-structured, exam-focused learning objectives rather than promoting learners' autonomy and curiosity. We also warn that a post-pandemic focus on learning loss and catching-up, if learning is defined narrowly as the range of skills which can be captured through high-stakes tests, may not only stigmatise some children and families but may also lead to increased testing, corner cutting and an impoverished curriculum. We argue that a broad and engaging curriculum with a focus on social and emotional wellbeing will be of crucial importance in supporting children's holistic development post-COVID-19. Finally, we hope that the insights gained during the chaos and crises of the pandemic will lead to something positive: an education system that is kinder, less tied to accountability mechanisms that strangle innovation and restrict agility, and one that is more responsive to children's curiosity about the changing world in which they find themselves and to their need to find ways of being well within that world.

Notes

1. In this article, 'parents' refers to parents and carers.
2. Age 6–7.
3. Children in Reception class in England are aged 4–5; children in year 5 are 9–10 years of age.
4. Ethical permission was granted for this project through the University of Bristol, in line with British Educational Research Association guidelines. Participants provided informed consent before commencing the study.
5. SATs: National curriculum tests in maths and English, taken at age 10–11.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work is supported by the Elizabeth Blackwell Institute, University of Bristol, with funding from QR SPF (Quality-Related Strategic Priorities Fund), UKRI Research England.

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