The impact of Covid-19 on the primary school community

Series editor: Dr Gill Johnson

This is the third in a series of articles exploring the impact of COVID-19 within the primary school community from different perspectives. As a national organisation, advocating for and working in partnership with primary schools to fund research, it was considered important that we should explore and reflect upon a year dominated by the pandemic and consider the impact on primary education.

Senior leaders' perspectives

Senior leaders (SLT) have faced colossal challenges this year. They have had to respond to and interpret Government guidance issued in March, to ensure a safe working environment; close schools to all but key worker children and those considered vulnerable; make significant shifts in curriculum and pedagogy to embrace blended learning approaches from widely varied starting points; adapt to changing guidance; communicate effectively with pupils at home and their families; ensure the wellbeing of all within the primary school community and alongside this – prepare for a safe return to school of all pupils in the autumn term of 2020

This article presents a selective summary of the perspectives of six senior leaders from five

Senior leader (Pseudonyms)	School(s) profile 2018/19			
	No. on role	FSM	SEND (numbers with EHCP)	EAL
Veronica (School Trust - two schools)	326	33%	5.5%	4.9%
	465	3.8%	1.1%	24.9%
Carolyn (Church Aided School)	357	20.4%	2.2%	30.5%
Annie (School Trust)	481	36.3%	2.1%	29.3%
Marcia (School)	472	40.6	1.5%	44.1%
Janet and Helen (School)	228	45.8%	0%	16.2%

https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/compare-schools

case studies representing a diverse (geographically, ethnically and socio-economically) range of schools in England (see table).

As with each strand of this project, ethical procedures were followed according to BERA guidelines (2018). Interviews took place via Zoom between September and

October 2020. Analysis involved full transcriptions of interviews and themes were identified through charts and the mapping of data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

First, the response by senior leaders to school 'closure'* is considered. The findings are then discussed in relation to the main themes

What is striking from all senior leaders is the unwavering commitment to meet the needs of children and their families, whilst protecting the workload of staff.

which emerged: curriculum, communication and community. The article concludes with a summary of lessons learned from the analysis, common to all schools.

First response to school closure Notification by the Department for Education (DfE) of school closure on March 23rd was greeted by all senior leaders with huge concern. Emotions ranged from 'panic' to 'horror' – with vulnerable children at the forefront of each senior leader's mind. Children's safety, in all cases, was paramount. Helen felt considerable distress that she couldn't prepare the children and families better and Janet – the head teacher in the same school - was most worried for the Year 6 pupils and the impact on their learning and preparedness for the transition to secondary school.

Veronica, who works for a Trust suggested that the DfE guidance was clear, but the layer of interpretations from the local authority (emails into which she was copied) had served to confuse other senior leaders. Within her Trust she felt enabled *'to enact [the guidance]'* Annie suggested that everybody was '*building the road in front of us'* and also noted that teaching union advice had been both helpful and reassuring.

There was general agreement, perhaps unsurprisingly, that guidance improved over time; but the responsibility still lay with the SLT to interpret the guidance according to each school setting – creating considerable discussion and sometimes consternation. Schools varied in terms of their readiness for the lockdown. Marcia described it as a 'shock' despite

strong communication between senior leaders in the authority, whilst Veronica suggested that in anticipating the length of lockdown, they were slightly better prepared. The concern amongst all senior leaders was to create a curriculum that would work for children at home, as well as those at school (key worker and vulnerable children).

Curriculum – Digital

In this summary, curriculum content can only be touched upon. Senior leaders focused on digital access and the broader curriculum and this is reflected in the analysis here. All senior leaders recognised the need to create an engaging, accessible online learning platform. At the same time there were general concerns around: staff digital skill sets (which varied hugely), families having the hardware or sufficient data to access the learning platform, and how home-school connections might be successfully maintained in an online context.

Both Marcia and Annie needed to create an online platform at speed. The development was based on knowledge of the community; as Annie states: *'we imagined what would be the minimum for family capacity to be able to support their children – we worked everything on the basis of that.'* For this reason, they created online access which was immediate and straightforward through the school website.

Alongside the online learning, printed learning packs were sent home – initially to 'buy time' as Marcia commented, whilst online learning was being established or improved –

but all schools made them available on an ongoing basis to a greater or lesser extent, where online access was problematic for families.

None of the senior leaders at the time of interview had gained access to laptops for children through the DfE scheme. The system for application was too slow because of the means testing required. Each school found its own solution to providing hardware for children. In Carolyn's school, a major fundraising event by the parent-teacher organisation raised funds to purchase Chrome Books for children. Veronica sang the praises of their IT specialist who audited school hardware ensuring that every family had some form of digital access.

Online learning mirrored work in schools and offered a balance of English and Maths together with broader curriculum learning with a strong and successful degree of creativity (evidenced through observation, website visits and feedback).

Curriculum - Creative

The commitment and determination by all senior leaders to offer a creative curriculum during the lockdown was striking. For children attending school, the smaller numbers, and a more fluid structure to the school day (required to protect the integrity of the learning bubbles), created more opportunities for outdoor learning, creative 'specialist' activities such as drumming and dance and, significantly, a more relaxed pace of learning. As Carolyn noted: *'It's just that freedom to pace things with the children... we didn't have dinner*

There was something about recognising the parents as an equal partner and giving them a bit of respect around that and helping them do their job.

rotas and break rotas – *people were doing it within their bubbles'*. This sentiment was echoed by all other senior leaders, without exception.

For Annie, ensuring a comfortable environment was paramount and colour coded 'pods' were created using screen dividers, this proved to be very successful when larger numbers of children returned from 1st June. Veronica described how a curriculum theme was created which focused on enabling the children to understand COVID-19 and the nature of infection and immunity. This so called 'recovery' curriculum was mirrored between home and school. As she comments: 'talk about a real, lived curriculum!'

Outdoor learning and the creative arts were used in all settings, not only to offer a broad and balanced curriculum but to enhance wellbeing. Annie cited their greatest curriculum success (evidenced in parental feedback and website views) as an art pack of materials which was sent home. The art activities offered through the website (and mirrored in school) brought families together in a very positive way. Providing resources for home use was also a priority for Janet and Helen, and Marcia - these included pens, paper and reading books.

All senior leaders indicated that significant challenges existed around learning tasks, differentiation and feedback – and not all were resolved. Solutions were explored in different ways but in all cases, it was decided that the introduction of new curriculum content would be necessarily limited; the focus being on consolidation of prior learning. This took pressure off children, staff and parents – particularly those who had little confidence or capacity to facilitate home learning.

Communication - Home and School

All senior leaders recognised the vital importance of good communication between home and school. In all cases, existing channels of communication were used and enhanced from March 23rd onwards, with the aim of ensuring that children and their families were as safe as possible, and that learning resources could be accessed. From the moment of school closing, Janet and Helen, made a commitment to contact every family each week; families really appreciated this. Marcia's school kept an 'engagement log' and contacted families where there was a concern. Mobile phones were issued to all staff for ease of communication and this was well received. In all schools, teachers would make virtual contact via Zoom or email on a regular basis to give feedback or 'check-in' with children. In all cases, vulnerable families were prioritised, whether this involved contact by a home-school link teacher, or a phone call from the Special Needs' Coordinator (SENCo) highlighted by Carolyn. Feedback from surveys sent out to parents, were used by all senior leaders to refine communication systems – related to both learning and wellbeing.

Communication - Staff

Within school, communication with staff was also increased, according to the data. As Carolyn says,

'We've never consulted with staff as much as we have since March.' She went onto say that the level of collaboration was something they were determined to continue.

Veronica echoed this stating that, *'we ensured that throughout the whole process staff were consulted – coached - these collaborative groups took place'.* In common with all senior leaders interviewed, Veronica used a staff survey part-way through lockdown, to better understand the issues faced by teachers. When Annie's staff survey revealed teachers feeling isolated, their wellbeing was protected by inviting them to come back into school to benefit from social interaction. In all cases, senior leaders had clarity about the need to communicate regularly with the staff group and acted to protect their wellbeing. Marcia noted that the necessary changes to learning and pedagogy facilitated greater collaboration between teaching staff and brought them closer together.

Community

Without exception, all senior leaders observed a strengthening of their primary school community. As Annie commented, *'I don't think we've ever been closer to our families.'* She went onto say that the lockdown had exposed needs of which they had been unaware; families felt better able to 'connect back' with the school.

Veronica was clear that reconnecting with the community was one of several positives to emerge from a challenging time. She noted that families were looking to schools for advice. *'the only people they could ask advice and help from, were*

the teachers – because everyone else went quiet'. Marcia was aware of parents who on their daily walk *'would deliver food packages to other families…so we really came together as a community.'*

What was compelling from the interview data was the respectful and compassionate approach all senior leaders demonstrated to all families, including those who struggled to engage with school. Janet was surprised at how supportive the parents were, given the number of changes faced: *'to say that we were sending out a letter every single day to say…'this is the latest change'… they began to understand…they could see the stress on our faces'*.

Annie considered that: *'There was something about recognising the* parents as an equal partner and giving them a bit of respect around that and helping them do their job'

This was echoed by Carolyn who noted how they sought to reassure and affirm parents about their role in facilitating learning.

Veronica was visibly moved describing how they responded as a school community to a child's distress at passing the school gates on a walk - the child was missing assemblies: *'we very quickly put an assembly into place … the children came and wrote messages on the railings – and left messages. So that whole school community had gathered for an assembly – but they hadn't - it was a virtual thing.'*

Lessons learned

Key lessons learned were many and varied. A summary of the key lessons which emerged across all cases is presented here from the challenges faced, the reflections made and the solutions that were explored by all senior leaders:

- being mentally 'agile' to embrace and manage change.
- having an engaging curriculum with a strong online learning platform
- ensuring staff have the digital training they need to support blended learning.
- finding ways of effectively supporting parents to facilitate online learning
- re-committing to a broader curriculum which includes outdoor learning and the creative arts
- questioning initiatives and processes in school robustly to ensure they benefit children
- re-focusing on the importance of wellbeing of children, families and staff.
- making time to build relationships across the primary school community

Annie sums up the lessons well: *'the learning matters but the other thing about primary school that matters is the relationships and that feeling like you're part of a big family.'*

Conclusion

This article highlights the range of issues explored through the research. What is striking from all senior leaders is the unwavering commitment to meet the needs of children and their families, whilst protecting the workload of staff. Their honesty about the significant and ongoing challenges faced, is only matched by their unremitting creativity to problem solve on a daily basis to serve their respective primary school communities.

*It is noted that schools were never completely closed.

Pen Portrait

Dr Gill Johnson is an independent researcher, published author and freelance writer. She has previously worked as an Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham and as a Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Trent University. She has a particular interest in the role of teaching assistants, literacy and literacy support, children's literature, and children's wellbeing. She is a member of the National Executive of ASPE, reflecting her commitment to promoting and upholding the importance of primary education.

References

British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018)

Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, fourth edition, London. https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical- guidelines-for-educational-research-2018

Miles, M. & Huberman, A. M. (eds.) 1994. Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook, London: Sage.

The next Bulletin in this series will be published in January 2021

Feedback
Email us on ASPEinfo@aol.com or visit www.aspe-uk.eu