

The impact of Covid-19 on the primary school community

Series editor: Dr Gill Johnson

This is the second article in the series exploring the impact of COVID-19 within the primary school community. In this article the focus is on parent perspectives - exploring the changing role of parents in supporting their primary-aged children through the lockdown in March 2020 where most children were not permitted to attend school. This research study, funded by ASPE, illuminates the challenges faced by parents, including the uncertainty of their normal family routine being overturned and managing demands faced by working, whilst looking after children (Parcel and Menaghan, 1995). The researchers examine what parents consider would be helpful for schools to better prepare them for - what we are currently experiencing: a second wave of the pandemic.

Parent perspectives

What do parents feel about the impact of COVID-19 on supporting children learning from home?

Malini Mistry Senior Lecturer, University of Bedfordshire and Dr Elizabeth Malone, Head of Primary Education Programmes, Liverpool John Moores University)



Role of parents in their child's education

Parental encouragement and support are paramount in shaping children's attitudes and abilities (Vygotsky, 1978). Family as well as the surrounding world also affect attitudes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) but since March 2020, the role families play in their children's learning has significantly amplified. Parents were charged with responsibility for managing their child's learning at home whilst schools acted in a supporting role. Almost all primary schools, 95.7% (University of Essex, 2020), provided work for children to complete at home except the children of key workers and vulnerable children who had the opportunity to attend school.

Participants reported an assortment of emotions to the March 2020 UK lockdown which ranged from the initial excitement of staying at home as a family, to concerns about work alongside the stress and anxiety of teaching children at home.

Telephone and online interviews were conducted with nine parents of twelve children across nine Early Years and primary settings from a range of geographical areas including Greater London, Midlands, and Northern England. Some of these parents had more than one child in the same setting and therefore, were able to offer different perspectives in relation to their children. All participants were made aware of the research purpose, ethical guidelines and the importance of confidentiality (BERA, 2018).

How did parents feel when lockdown across the country was announced?

Participants reported an assortment of emotions to the March 2020 UK lockdown which ranged from the initial excitement of staying at home as a family, to concerns about work alongside the stress and anxiety of teaching children at home. Initially, parents' main concerns centred on activities to keep their children 'occupied' while they worked from home. Feeling overwhelmed at the start of lockdown due to competing demands was a key theme which impacted on engagement with school materials (Parcel, and Menaghan, 1995). Some schools provided detailed hard copy packs, which participants found difficult to engage with due to a lack of 'head space' (Beckman, and Mazmanian, 2020). However, as lockdown and absence from school continued, parents' focus changed towards trying to ensure that their children were engaged in some form of learning.



Parents were initially concerned they were not adequately equipped to teach their children, expressing the view that they were not teachers and feeling that their children knew more than them. Additionally, many parents expressed surprise and unfamiliarity with how topics and subjects are taught, such as phonics (Jolliffe et al., 2019). Interestingly, families who included a member of the teaching profession, also expressed anxieties as they felt the nature of the parent-child relationship made teaching at home difficult (Davies, 2015) because 'they listen more to their teacher than me'.

What did parents do to support their children's learning at home?

If the initial phase of lockdown could be described in a single word as 'overwhelming', the next phase could be described as 'juggling' (Beckman, and Mazmanian, 2020). Parents navigated multiple competing demands on their time to provide home learning (Parcel, and

Menaghan, 1995) which averaged 10 hours per week for the 5-10 year old age range (ONS, 2020).

Parents reported a range of issues with work set for their child by the school which included the level and amount of work. Parents talked about feeling confident with more creative based activities and often used phonics as an example of a subject which they felt was inaccessible (Jolliffe, et al., 2019). When parents felt confident, they would utilise resources from their children's toys and craft materials. In contrast, when they felt unsure and ill equipped, they used online materials. Parents interviewed, indicated that creating learning spaces was challenging in smaller homes or homes without gardens.

As lockdown continued online access became vital for receiving learning updates. However, home working resulted in the juggling of access to devices. Furthermore,



Nationally, 43% of parents felt that lack of guidance or support was why their child was struggling

some parents found the multiplicity of learning platforms a little confusing which caused them to disengage with some forms of learning in favour of 'quick activities' they found themselves like suggestions from parents' Facebook forums.

Parental working commitments meant time was a scarce commodity; therefore, they did not have the time to engage with 'reams of paperwork' (Beckman, and Mazmanian, 2020). Many, instead, used parental social media groups to share and learn about activities, with BBCBitesized and phonics websites being frequently mentioned. However, key workers and those not working did not experience the same issues as parents working from home. Additionally, parents who did not have access to IT devices tended to do their own thing such as allowing children to play in the garden and watch TV as not all could afford broadband and laptops with multiple children in the home.

What were some of the challenges in supporting children's learning at home?

All parents interviewed faced challenges in supporting their children; the most common were issues with accessibility of laptops and confidence in the ability to teach -mirrored in national data, with only 49% of parents feeling confident in their abilities to teach their children (ONS, 2020). Inconsistency of approach, both across and within schools also emerged as a theme (University of Essex, 2020); there were considerable differences in

approaches taken across schools dependent upon whether the setting was private or public. Notably, school nurseries were able to draw on a larger pool of staff to provide support for home learning compared with private day nurseries, as they had not furloughed staff.

Nationally, 43% of parents felt that lack of guidance or support was why their child was struggling (ONS, 2020); this was reflected in our findings. Participants struggled with both the role of the teacher and curriculum content as children tended to 'see us as parents first rather than their teacher'. Some felt unsupported as their feedback informed them of how they were 'doing it wrong', but not what to do instead. Other parents expressed that the absence of feedback left them unsupported as their method of working out concepts was different to the way the children were taught in school.

Time was a challenge for all parents in managing their own schedules as well as the expectations of supporting learning at home (ONS, 2020). Conflicting demands on time meant parents' ability to engage with work set from school was limited. Many parents multitasking throughout the day, meant that they were understandably stressed (ONS, 2020b). As a result, parents found supporting learning in lockdown demanding and challenging. One parent described it as being, 'the hardest thing they have ever done as a parent'. This is perhaps understandable as they were juggling work to ensure financial

stability whilst also trying their best to support their child's learning. However, despite these challenges, many parents responded that it was valuable to spend time together as a family - difficult when all in a family have different schedules.

How can schools help parents to overcome some of the challenges they faced?

It is understandable that schools felt that providing parents with lots of work in hard copy format in one go at the start of lockdown was considered helpful. However, many parents simply did not engage with these packs, feeling that it was too complex to navigate and too time consuming to work out. Parents wanted simple, easy to use resources. Social media groups were useful in providing parents with 'quick and easy' resources to use and parents tended to use as a 'first stop shop', but this was a different story to those without access to the internet. Parents also wanted the technical language used to be more simplified.

Teachers differentiate work to provide challenge or support for individual children, however, work provided during lockdown was generally on one level for most children. Parents would value seeing the step before and the step after, so that they could personalise the learning at home, to prevent disengagement for both child and parent. It was felt that there was an assumption that all children would have access to online materials, which was not always the case.



Some parents enjoyed the sense of community that they felt with their school, class teacher or other parents. They all spoke of interactions with others as a key feature which helped to alleviate isolation and keep them motivated. Some enjoyed social media groups, providing ideas and a sense of camaraderie, while others avoided them, preferring instead to interact with the class teacher or school. However, a unifying theme was that all sought out and valued feedback, (McNulty, Potts and Gallagher, 2018) for their child's work, from the teacher, which was even more valued when provided quickly. Parents spoke highly of schools and teachers who provided online interactions in real time, providing children with social connections and their own voices as parents to be heard (ibid, 2018).

However, some parents did not understand what online interactions were permitted and why, in some schools Zoom meetings were allowed, but not in others (highlighted for parents with children in different schools). More clarity for parents around what they can expect online would be useful. All parents who received phone calls really valued this interaction, again to combat feelings of isolation for parents and children.

Conclusion

The impact of the pandemic has been challenging for parents trying to support their children's learning. Overall, much school support was child focused, however parents themselves would value some discrete support helping them to deliver the curriculum. Short video tutorials or the ability to speak to the teacher about how to facilitate learning would be helpful. This would allow teachers to provide both educational support for the child and emotional support for the parent.

References

- British Educational Research Association (2018), *Ethical guidelines for educational research 4th Edition*, London: BERA
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Davies, R. (2015) Home education: then and now, *Oxford Review of Education*, 41:4, 534-548, DOI: 10.1080/03054985.2015.1048119 [accessed 14th August 2020]
- Jolliffe, W, Waugh, D., Gill, A. (2019) *Teaching Systematic Synthetic Phonics in Primary Schools* London: Learning Matters
- McNulty, K., Potts, J., Gallagher, T. (2018) 'Supporting families in challenging circumstances' in Gallagher and the Pen Green Team. *Working with Children Aged 0-3 and their Families* London: Routledge
- Beckman, C., Mazmanian, M. (2020) *Dreams of the Overworked: Living, Working, and Parenting in the Digital Age* Stanford: Stanford University Press
- Office for National Statistics. (2020, July 22). *Coronavirus and homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020* Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/coronavirusandhomeschoolinggreatbritain/aprilttojune2020>
- Office for National Statistics b. (2020, July 22). *Parenting in lockdown: Coronavirus and the effects on work-life balance* Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/parentinginlockdowncoronavirusandtheeffectsonworklifebalance/2020-07-22>
- Parcel, T. and Menaghan, E. (1995) *Parents' Jobs and Children's Lives* New Jersey: Transaction Publishers
- University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). *Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020*. [data collection]. 3rd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-3>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the parents who participated in this research – it is greatly appreciated.

Pen Portrait

Malini Mistry is a Senior Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of Bedfordshire. She works across a range of different courses including Primary PGCE, Primary BA (QTS), EYTS and also leads the BA Applied Early Years Top Up course. Prior to this she worked across all year groups in a primary school. Malini is a member of ASPE's National Executive. She is also a member of the Editorial Board of ASPE's International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education: Education 3-13 and Book Reviews Editor.

Dr Elizabeth Malone is Head of Primary Initial Teacher Education Programmes at LJMU, where she has taught on a variety of routes for the past ten years. Prior to working at LJMU she worked as a primary teacher, in the UK and abroad, specialising in foreign language education (French and Mandarin). Elizabeth is a member of ASPE's National Executive.

The next Bulletin in this series will be published in December 2020

Feedback

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

