



Living and learning during a pandemic: the views and experiences of primary school children.

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Dr. Yana Manyukhina, Research Fellow,
Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 Years)



Researcher: “Why did you want to take part in this interview?”

Child: “Because nobody had listened to children”

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis dramatically shifted the terms on which schools and homes in England were operating from 2020 onwards. For the vast majority of families, lockdown-induced school closures meant that children’s academic learning and socio-emotional development had to happen within the confines of their homes. This presented an urgent need to research the impact of the COVID-19 on children’s education and wellbeing.

In March 2020 all educational settings across the UK, including primary schools, were closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with all teaching consequently being moved online. Only children of key workers and those children considered vulnerable continued to attend schools in-person.

Children started to return to schools from 1st June 2020, when school classes in nursery (3-4 years old), reception (4-5 years old), Year 1 (5-6 years old) and Year 6 (10-11 years old) began to re-open in England. The original plan to have all primary-aged children back in schools by the end of June was reversed by the government due to growing concerns over the impact of the full return on the virus infection rate. As a result, all year groups did not return to classrooms until the start of the new academic year in September 2020 when compulsory school attendance was reintroduced in England. In-person schooling had been disrupted for almost six months.

In mid-December 2020 schools in England began to shut down again and go back to remote learning in response to the escalating growth of the pandemic. Shortly after the Christmas break schools in England were instructed not to return to face-to-face teaching. Consequently, all primary schools remained closed to most children until 8 March 2021, when students began to come back to schools as the first step in the government's 'roadmap' out of the lockdown announced by the prime minister on the 22 of February.

Research analysing the impact of pandemic-related school closures in England on pupils' academic attainment has consistently shown that pupils across all year groups and subjects have made less academic progress compared with previous year groups, and that the loss of learning has been greater for disadvantaged pupils (DfE, 2021; GL Assessment; 2021; NFER 2021; RS Assessment 2021). A survey of 1,653 primary teachers in state schools in England explored teachers' changing priorities during the first lockdown, highlighting the increased emphasis on the welfare, safeguarding, and socio-emotional needs of children and families, and the ways in which teachers had to adapt teaching techniques and resources for the home-learning context (Moss et al. 2020). Similarly, a survey of 40 highly experienced professionals in the education sector conducted by the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy in May - June 2020 indicated significant academic, social, and emotional impacts of the pandemic on children (Wyse et al. 2020). Recommendations have been made on how to enable school leadership and teachers to deal effectively with the negative effects of unplanned school closures on learning progress, including retaining a broad curriculum and supporting children's mental health (Harmey & Moss 2020).

The research on the effects of school closures on pupils' well-being and learning has been mostly based on large-scale surveys that have examined the perspectives of education professionals. There is a lack of research exploring children's own views

and feelings around their lives during the pandemic, particularly young children. The pilot project research presented in this working paper was designed to record and report primary-aged children's experiences during the first lockdown and upon their return to schools in Autumn 2020. While based on a small sample, it adds children's own voices to the body of evidence of the impact of the pandemic on their wellbeing and learning. Its value is best summarised in the quote from 9-year-old study participant Taylor¹ who, when asked why she wanted to take part in the interview, replied: "because nobody had listened to children".

Project summary and key findings

The research reported in this paper is exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's education and wellbeing. Data collection was conducted in the first and second halves of the autumn term of 2020, following the reopening of schools in September after the first national lockdown.

A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was used to recruit primary-aged children, drawing on the HHCP's existing network of primary school settings and children's charities, as well as individual parents. Additionally, the study was advertised on parent-focussed social network sites such as Mumsnet. The sample on which the current paper reports includes 12 children, among which there were seven girls and five boys, aged between 6 and 12 years old.

Data were collected through one-to-one interviews lasting 45-60 minutes each. All interviews were conducted remotely via GDPR-compliant video conferencing software, with at least one parent present in the room. Interviews had an overarching theme of children's views and feelings about living and learning during the pandemic but were otherwise unstructured to allow the participants to talk freely using their own words and focussing on the experiences that seemed most important to them. Prompts, cues, and follow-up questions were used to encourage children to expand on their perspectives and feelings.

It is important to note that due to the nature of the study's sampling strategy, which relied on participant self-selection and referrals from initial respondents to generate additional participants, the final sample of children can be seen as biased towards those residing in stable households with positive family environments and favourable living conditions, and the conclusions and recommendations offered in the paper should be approached with this in mind.

1. All children's names have been pseudonymised.

Key findings:

1. Children prefer learning at school to home learning due to opportunities for social interaction.
2. Children prefer learning at school to home learning due to teachers' presence and feedback.
3. Children's creativity has been boosted by the opportunities to engage with arts freely, that is without prescriptive guidance around the type of activities and the amount of time to be spent doing them.

Findings 1: Social interactions are fundamental to children's wellbeing.

All children interviewed for the study reported feeling "lonely", "sad", and "unmotivated" in the absence of opportunities to interact with their teachers and peers in school, and to have in-person meetups and playdates with friends more generally. The emotional strain endured by the children was reflected in the way they described their experiences of social isolation, the hardest part of which was "not being able to talk about your feelings" (Dennis, 9) and "having to keep everything inside you" (Audrey, 8). The participants missed their teachers, with whom it was "really hard to get in touch" (Fred, 7). The feelings of loneliness and boredom were especially acute for those without siblings or pets. These findings demonstrate that the lack of communication with peers and teachers has been one of the most significant disadvantages of home schooling for the participants, and the most impactful one for their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

While technological solutions, such as phones, computers, and iPads, were available to all participants, only one of the 12 children reported maintaining regular contact with teachers and peer through various means, including text messaging, video conferencing, email, and phone calls during the lockdown. For the majority of the participants, remote contact with teachers and peers happened on an ad-hoc basis, and most found it unrewarding due to various problems. These included technological obstacles, such as connectivity issues, logistical challenges, e.g. group meetings being difficult to convene and run smoothly, and experiential aspects, in particular online communication being perceived as sub-par to face-to-face interactions.

Findings 2: Children experience learning at home as less effective and less enjoyable.

The majority of the participants reported feeling that their academic progress had stalled. For example, 12-year-old Jake felt that home learning was “not as sharp” as in school and “numbed the senses”, while 8-year-old Audrey emphasised the importance of teacher expertise, noting that “parents can’t explain things as well as teachers”. The participants cited a number of factors as key reasons behind less fruitful learning. These included a reduced curriculum adopted by many schools during the first lockdown wherein only subjects perceived as essential, namely maths and English, were retained, while those pertaining to the domain of arts and humanities were temporarily dropped.

Another key reason was the absence of teacher feedback, which represented an important source of a sense of achievement for the participants and consequently affected their motivation for learning. For instance, when asked about the disadvantages of being educated at home, 6-year-old Angela stated that in school, “teacher can give you a sticker when you do a good job”. Similarly, 6-year-old Nora talked about gold and green stars, part of the school’s traffic light grading system, which she would get for her learning achievements. Although Nora’s teacher continued to reward students with stars during the lockdown, Nora missed seeing them displayed on the wall in the classroom, which made her feel “proud”. Overall, not having their assignments and homework graded or commented upon by teachers made the children feel unmotivated and less willing to persevere with their learning. Conversely, on occasions where feedback was provided to the participants, this helped them feel “as if you were in the classroom” (Audrey, 8), where teachers were at hand to “help if you had questions and doubts” (Stella, 7).

Technology-enabled teaching has introduced extra challenges in children’s learning, alongside certain benefits. Many participants found it harder to maintain concentration and focus while learning online. Lack of on-hand teacher support made completing activities more difficult and meant that children had to resort to parental help, which was not always or immediately available. Remote learning presented additional issues such as uploading assignments, ensuring online safety, and “lots of printing out” (Miriam, 9) for which parents’ help was required.

In terms of the advantages of remote education, several participants found that online activities can be more diverse and more creative in nature compared to the regular in-school offerings. “There were some really fun activities”, said 6-year-old

Sonia, referring to the Oak National Academy online learning platform. Angela, 6 was entertained by “funny” videos of her teacher reading stories aloud, while Dennis, 9 enjoyed making news clips and collecting data about Mars rovers on the NASA website.

The participants expressed overwhelmingly positive emotions in regard to the reopening of the schools. Being back at school made them feel “more positive” (Jake, 12), “happy” (Fred, 7), “really happy” (Yulek, 9) and “super happy” (Dennis, 9), because they felt they could “have more help” (Audrey, 8) and “learn more stuff than we do at home” (Yulek, 9) and because “it’s nice to see my friends” (Sonia, 6). When asked how they would feel if the pandemic forced schools to shut down again, children said they would feel “a bit sad” (Angela, 6), “angry” (Nora, 6), “disappointed” and “annoyed” (Audrey, 8), while Dennis (9) gave two thumbs down.

Among the positive aspects of lockdown life, having the freedom to engage in activities of their own choosing was most frequently mentioned by the participants, as illustrated by the responses from 7-year-old Graham who enjoyed “doing my own stuff” and Sonia (6) who liked being home because “I could do more stuff that I wanted”. As for the benefits of the new post-lockdown school routine, learning in smaller groups was mentioned by several participants as a welcome change from the usual “squashed” classroom (Sonia, 6).

Findings 3: Children engage with and enjoy art most when given the opportunities to do so on their own terms.

The arts have been an important element in the participants’ lives during lockdown. They reported spending a lot of time, alone or together with family members, engaging in various forms of art including drawing, painting, crafts, making origami, decorating windows, playing musical instruments, and writing poems and movie scripts. While some of the children continued with the activities they had been engaging with pre-pandemic, some of the interviewees came to discover their capacity for creating and enjoying art during the first lockdown. For example, when asked what was good about staying at home, 9-year-old Miriam replied: “I got very good at art”. This was also the case for 7-year-old Stella, who produced her first abstract painting “Nightingales” (shown in Figure 1), followed by a series of other abstract artworks while being home-schooled by her mother. Similarly, 7-year-old Graham wrote his first movie script during the lockdown and at the time of our interview was planning out a rehearsal of the script with his parents. Lockdown life

inspired Dennis to produce a painting called “My Quarantine Reality” with which he won the first place in a painting competition held at his father’s workplace. Comprising four different fragments, Dennis’ picture depicted different aspects of his family’s life during the lockdown, including home schooling, family mealtimes, and movie nights. 6-year-old Sonia spent a lot of time playing music, doing colouring and “lots of painting”.

All participants reported experiencing enjoyment when engaging in art. They described art activities as “fun stuff” (Stella, 7) and “fun things you can do at home” (Angela, 6). When asked to specify what those fun things were, Angela replied: “It’s not playing with toys or watching TV”. “What is it?” – “Drawing!”, the child exclaimed. Similarly, for 7-year-old Catlyn, making beaded figures with her mother was the most pleasant lockdown experience.



Figure 1. “Nightingales” by Stella, 7

When asked what made doing art at home so enjoyable, the participants gave responses that emphasised the importance of having freedom to choose what activities to engage in, how much time to spend doing them, and what outputs to produce. This is captured in the quote from 8-year-old Audrey: “it doesn’t matter if something isn’t just right, you can do it freely”. This highlights the importance of supporting children’s agency, that is providing them with meaningful opportunities to make independent choices in their learning (for our current research on children’s agency see: http://bit.ly/HHCP_CHANT)

Conclusion and recommendations:

The children in this study strongly prefer learning at school to home learning. Socialisation and teacher support and feedback are the two elements of the schooling experience that children reported to be missing most during school closures. Furthermore, children’s engagement with art has been boosted by the expanded opportunities for free choice and unrestricted time in artistic pursuits. In light of these findings, the following four recommendations can be made in relation to further possible lockdowns, with points 3 and 4 applying to home-schooling practices more generally.

1. It is of critical importance to ensure that children continue to actively socialise during lockdowns to maintain their socio-emotional wellbeing. Opportunities for social interactions can be created remotely, including through phone calls, video chats, text messaging, Netflix parties, with attention being given to mitigating common issues such as having too many participants on a call/meeting.
2. Parents and carers should encourage children to express their emotions and feelings and create opportunities and spaces for them to do so.
3. Providing feedback on assignments and activities is key to ensuring that children continue to learn effectively and have a sense of progress and satisfaction while learning at home. In the absence of teacher feedback, parents and carers should strive to offer alternative ways of assessing and acknowledging children’s achievements.
4. Art can play a crucial role in making children’s lives and learning during lockdowns more enjoyable as well as in terms of catering to their developmental needs. Parents and carers should, to the extent possible, strive to provide resources, a choice of activities, and uninterrupted periods of time to children to enable them to engage in art on their own terms.

Further reading

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(2020). Written evidence submitted by the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy to House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services, June 2020 <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6364/pdf/>

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