

## The impact of Covid-19 on the primary school community

Series editor: *Dr Gill Johnson*

**This is the first of a series of articles exploring the impact of COVID-19 within the primary school community.** This research study, sponsored by ASPE, examines the impact of the pandemic from the point of view of stakeholders within the school community including pupils, parents, teachers, senior managers and governors. Each stakeholder group has been the subject of a separate review, the findings from which will be presented in forthcoming Bulletins. As a national organisation, advocating for and working in partnership with primary schools to fund research into best practice, it was considered important that we should explore and reflect upon a year dominated by the pandemic and the impact it has had on primary education.

### Pupil perspectives

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The impact and implications of COVID-19 on the primary education community have been, and will continue to be, far-reaching. As the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT) acknowledges, the challenges facing teaching globally are enormous (Miller and Goldberg, 2020). Questions have been raised about the nature of teaching and learning and the role of the teacher to ensure that children continue to make progress. The pandemic has in many ways been a catalyst for intense review, reflection



and discussion as this research report demonstrates. The voice of the child may often be lost in such discussions, but in this article their voices take centre stage to explore their view on the way in which the pandemic has impacted their

learning, their relationships and their emotions.

In this, and subsequent bulletins on the pandemic, case studies will be presented in relation to specific aspects of primary education.



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Although the studies are small scale, they provide a representative and diverse sample of cases which highlight some of the key issues for primary schools relating to the period from the 'lockdown' of March 2020 (when most children were learning at home) into the autumn term (where most children had returned to school).

Case studies can take many forms. According to Flyvbjerg (2006) they have great value in giving evidence (or otherwise) of particular concepts – what he describes as a 'critical' case study. Many researchers acknowledge the value of the methodology for understanding human systems and for finding meaning and understanding in naturalistic settings. The diversity of the case studies is reflected in the range of schools approached with a consideration of factors, including age, socio-economic background, ethnicity and geography. Ethical procedures were followed according to BERA guidelines (2018) and ASPE created information and consent forms for each participating group for this research project. For the pupil perspective, parental consent was sought, but children could express their own wish to withdraw at any point. Pseudonyms were created for all participants and schools.

Data sets were generated from six primary schools; nine focus groups and two individual interviews. The majority of interviews took place in schools with support from teacher-researchers with only one being conducted via Zoom.



The findings are discussed in relation to learning and relationships. The positives aspects and challenges will be examined in two contexts: those children who were at home during lockdown and those who were in school (because their parents were key workers or they themselves were considered vulnerable). Children's emotional response to the pandemic is then discussed across both groups.

### Pupils at Home

#### Learning – positives

For many of the children there were many positives in completing schoolwork at home. The enthusiasm for learning 'new things' appeared to be undiminished with many children citing writing stories and Maths (learning times tables in particular) as popular activities. Learning new things in a different way was noted by some, including the necessarily extensive use of technology and creative curriculum activities which captivated interest. One group

discussed a science lesson which involved bouncing an egg. An art activity was described by Rosa as 'very peaceful to do.' A number of children described being at home as more relaxing and those who had ready access to parental support really valued it.

#### Learning – challenges

For a minority of children, access to technology was a challenge. One child, Jordan, did not receive school emails and others had problems with logging in. These children were not able to access online learning in the same way as others; it was not clear from the data how such issues were resolved by the schools.

Many children commented that being at home involved noise and distractions, especially if there were other siblings. Theo stated that he had 'loads of distractions at home' and Natalie noted the frustration of 'working out questions when your sister is really loud!'



## The overwhelming experience of children in school was positive. The quieter working environment was noted by several children as very welcome.

The majority of children greatly missed timely feedback from their teachers. Katherine noted that it was 'a bit hard not getting that help from the teacher.' Teacher prompts were missed by children, either to motivate or to guide. Yaseena, for example, found it hard to settle to work at home, whereas Sophie found it difficult to navigate the questions and work options with schoolwork set. One child, Florence, considered that work had not been set at the correct level for her and was reliant on her parents to set her appropriate challenges.

### Relationships – positives

Almost all children had some access to some form of technology to make contact with friends and classmates. Various platforms were used including Zoom, school learning platforms for group or direct messaging including House Party and FaceTime. Some children relied on parents allowing them to use their mobile phone to make contact with friends.

Most children enjoyed playing outside albeit socially distanced, including bike riding, trampolining and playdates across the fence with neighbours.

One child indicated that he enjoyed having more time with his parents; this appeared to bring reassurance at an unsettling time.

### Relationships – challenges

Whilst technology was generally seen in a positive light, there were some frustrations expressed. Theo talked

about 'laggy' (time-lag) technology which made proper conversations difficult. Katherine echoed this by saying that it was 'harder to really get into conversation on a computer, because you can't see their faces.' Many children missed going out as much and also missed seeing their teacher.

## Pupils in School

### Learning – positives

Despite school systems and practices being markedly different for children attending school during lockdown, the overwhelming experience of children in school was positive. The quieter working environment was noted by several children as very welcome. Lucy, for example, stated: 'It's very quiet. When it's quieter, I can concentrate more.' Related to this was the appreciation of more attention from the teacher. Ava noted, 'teachers can focus on you more.'

Lottie echoed this: 'you get your own little space and people can focus on you and not anybody else.'

Children generally felt that they did less work in school which they considered to be a positive, but they also liked the different ways of working – one child talked about the fluidity of working and taking breaks with less structure. In one school the distinctiveness of the work was appreciated in a unifying curriculum which all children appeared to follow called the 'recovery' curriculum. The theme of 'recovery' was used to

link to science and learning about the human body.

### Learning – challenges

The challenges to learning in school were perhaps, unsurprisingly, fewer. Children found the spacing of tables difficult which meant that they could not sit with classmates in the same way. Learning was more individual on laptops rather than large white boards – but this was not discussed in negative terms.

The changes to significant milestones were commented upon by one focus group of Year 6 pupils – their leavers' assembly which, whilst going ahead, was planned to take place outside – representing a departure from tradition.

### Relationships – positives

The children based in school during lockdown experienced the same positive use of technology for keeping up with friends and classmates as those based at home. One child, for example, mentioned a Rainbows Zoom meeting where exciting activities were shared – including cooking.

An additional positive was the opportunity to play with different children in school.

One child commented that she was glad of time in school away from her siblings, in order to avoid fights with them.

### Relationship – challenges

A constant frustration amongst the majority of children was the lack of



physical contact. Children greatly missed playing close together and hugging each other as Lottie stated:  
'I just want to go up to them and give them a hug and stuff.'

The inability to physically comfort friends who were upset was also commented upon.

In common with pupils based at home, children missed seeing their friends in person.

Robbie found it very difficult to remember the names of new children in his 'bubble' and revisited this anxiety several times during the focus group. This appeared to impact upon his ability to initiate play with others.

### Emotional wellbeing

All children were asked about how the pandemic had made them feel. As might be expected children expressed a welter of emotion related to the pandemic ranging from happiness to annoyance (about restrictions imposed) to feelings of being fearful or isolated. Most children expressed sadness, either because, on a general level, they were worried about people dying or because, more specifically, they could not see family and friends in person.

Several children used the words 'scared' or 'terrified' with a fear of what might happen. This anxiety was expressed by some children in the form of questions – as Gemma asks: 'I have loads of questions – when will this be over?'

#### References

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## 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.

**The next Bulletin in this series will be published in November 2020**

## Feedback

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## Conclusion

Better understanding pupils' perspectives is essential for all those involved in primary education. It is all the more important in a year which has seen events, in all phases of education, on an unprecedented scale. This study offers a number of insights into the positive aspects of this year as well as the challenges as perceived by primary-aged children from different backgrounds and contexts across England.

Several particular areas of interest have emerged from this study:

- children enjoying learning – whether at home or at school during lockdown;
- children valuing teacher interaction and guidance;
- children appreciating technology for learning and social interaction;
- children needing to see friends in person – beyond the technology;
- children expressing a range of emotional responses to the uncertainty of the pandemic.

It seems appropriate to give the final words to Katherine, one of the children, who offered this insightful response into how she felt about the pandemic with a remarkably objective sense of the significance of the year noting that, 'I think at the start of lockdown I was really excited because we're literally living through history right now - this is going to be something recorded in the history books known for quite a long time.'

The reverberations and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic will impact primary school communities for many years to come. It is incumbent upon educators to attend to what the children are saying and respond in ways that are constructive, creative and supportive.

