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The University of Huddersfield

HudCRES

Huddersfield Centre for Research in Education and Society

**Home schooling – a parents' perspective in the
advent of Covid-19**

March 2021

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Executive Summary

Project aims: The project aims to:

- Identify how parents are managing home schooling in the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Explore what home schooling feels like from a parents' perspective
- Establish benefits and challenges that the home schooling experience may entail

Methodology and Process: A critical participatory action research project was carried out by Dr Lisa Russell, Reader in Education at the University of Huddersfield. The study included 30 images depicting what home schooling felt like from the parent's perspective; the development of a rainbow 2021 lockdown journey representation image with input from 16 parents; 10 image-elicitation interviews; focus group interviews; semi-structured, paired and individual zoom recorded interviews with 29 parents and 3 teachers located within one small village primary school from March 2020 to February 2021.

1 Outcomes

- 1.1 A total of 35 interviews were conducted. The interviews took place via the online platform of zoom, and involved a total of 29 mothers and 3 teachers.
- 1.2 30 images (still and moving) selected by parents depicting their home schooling experiences were collated and analysed.
- 1.3 All data were analysed and key themes identified. These are summarised below and reported in detail in the main report.
- 1.4 A set of recommendations and report were produced for consideration by the School and presented to Governors.
- 1.5 A top tips for parents and guardians as schools re-open to more children poster was co-produced with parents and distributed to all parents and staff at the school in electronic and (A4 and A3) hard copy format.
<https://www.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/research/hudcres/top-tips-poster-a4.pdf>

2 Findings

2.1 Balancing home schooling and employment

All participants that were working (paid and otherwise) experienced challenges balancing home schooling and work, with some mothers changing their employment patterns or stopping paid employment completely during lockdown periods and home schooling bouts.

2.2 Gendered division of labour

Managing day-to-day household tasks, caring responsibilities, employment and the organisation, delivery and execution of home schooling was largely (but not exclusively) conducted by the mothers of the household. Explanations for this largely lie in the gendered division of paid labour with the father's employment often given prominence due to its higher paid and more secure status.

2.3 Feelings of fatigue, guilt and anxiety

Many parents expressed bouts of tiredness and anxiety around the physical, emotional and mental demands of home schooling and the longitudinal and often unpredictable nature of moving in and out of national lockdowns and isolation periods, with some expressing concern about having a negative effect on their child(ren)'s educational achievement and overall wellbeing.

2.4 A unique family experience

It is important to acknowledge that parents (and families) experienced lockdown and home schooling in very different ways, with many rejoicing moments of happiness, freedom and creativity, as well as feelings of tiredness and stress. Many parents recognised this as a special and unique time that enabled them to watch their child(ren) grow, deviate from the restrictions of the national curriculum and learn other important 'life skills' such as cooking, riding a bike and learning about nature.

2.5 Changing use of technology

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the rapid adoption of digital technology across schools in England, with significant changes in the delivery of learning. Parents recognise the educational and social benefits their child(ren)s use of technology can bring during the crisis, but also voice concerns over their children's increased levels of 'screen time' and resulting inequalities that may ensue from those that have access to the new and latest technologies and resources compared with those that don't.

3 Conclusion

- Working parents have experienced challenges balancing home schooling and work, with some changing their employment patterns or stopping paid work completely during home schooling bouts.
- Parents experienced home schooling and the lockdowns in different ways, with most articulating feelings of 'ups and downs'.
- Feelings of fatigue, stress and anxiety were commonplace, especially during the start of the pandemic and during initial lockdown and isolation periods.
- Feelings of nostalgia and enjoying the opportunity to spend time with their children in a prolonged and unique way were also evident. Many parents cherished the opportunity to watch their child(ren) grow, spend time together as a family and get directly involved with their children's learning in creative and innovative ways that enabled a break from the constraints of the national curriculum and an ability to appreciate the outdoors, engage with nature and learn 'real life' skills.
- The mass rapid advent of online learning, coupled with the lockdown restrictions meant children were engaged with increased online activity in terms of their home schooling and for socialisation and leisure time purposes.
- Parents, teachers and children learnt new technological skills during the pandemic that will arguably be transferable and serve relevance to our society's future way of working.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Employers and schools should recognise the challenges working families are experiencing and set expectations accordingly – many working families are working outside of the conventions of nine to five, Monday to Friday working patterns when balancing their various home, caring, work and home schooling responsibilities.

4.2 Schools should have clear, frequent and up-to-date communicative strategies for parent and carers since guidance and expectations can change rapidly.

4.3 There needs to be a greater acknowledgement regarding parent and carers wellbeing in addition to the child(ren)s. Working and understanding families in their entirety is viewed as paramount when developing future support resources and mechanisms for families during the pandemic.

4.4 Parent and carers should be recognised as key stakeholders with valuable life experiences that can be better integrated and recognised as a valuable educational resource both within and outside of the school setting.

4.5 Educational resources and the school curriculum should include and acknowledge the benefits and challenges of online learning, as well as recognise the importance of ‘real life learning’ and ‘outdoor activities’.

1. Introduction and context of the report

Schools, parents and children have had to manage a rapidly shifting world and education landscape as Covid-19 was thrust upon the UK and beyond in early 2020. This report prioritises the parents' voices to scrutinise and explore their experiences of home schooling and lockdown during the pandemic. A critical participatory action research methodological frame was used with the intention of foregrounding parent voices and enabling them to contribute to actioning change at the school level and inform national educational and employment policy.

On Friday 20th March 2020 schools across England were closed (except to the children of key workers and vulnerable children) until further notice as a response to the coronavirus pandemic. Amidst the preparation for shutdown, the education sector had to quickly create homework packs and set up new ways of working online. Boris Johnson made clear that children 'should not be left' with grandparents or others in groups vulnerable to contracting coronavirus. In a matter of days record numbers of children were being home schooled through no choice of their own or their parent/carers own making and with little regard to the child or parent/carers work and home individual circumstances.

On the 2nd July 2020 the Department for Education and Gavin Williamson (DfE Press release, July 2020) revealed plans for all schools and colleges to reopen in full from September 2020 with Covid-19 secure measures in place. Schools were asked to reorganise themselves by keeping children in class or year group 'bubbles', alongside protective measures such as regular cleaning and handwashing, with the aim of reducing the risk of transmission. Where positive cases were identified within school, small groups of children and staff were asked to self-isolate for 14 days. Schools were also expected to have plans in place to provide remote education to pupils self-isolating. For this particular school every class with the exception of Class 4 were sent home at least once to self-isolate between September and December 2020. Leaving only Class 4 physically present in the school building at one point.

On 4th January 2021, the Prime Minister announced another national lockdown, following one day's return to school after the Christmas holiday. During the lockdown, schools should once again only allow vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers to attend. All other school children were to learn remotely until at least March. During this time a greater acknowledgment regarding the notion that face-to-face teaching is better for the child's wellbeing and educational achievement was acknowledged. However, little attention was again really given to parents and their specific needs managing their home schooling and lockdown experiences, with schools being expected to provide a minimum of three to four hours daily remote learning involving both recorded and live direct teaching time (DfE, 2021).

From March 2020 the vast majority of children were being homeschooled in England by their parents, who were in a significant number of cases feeling uncertain about their ability to home school. Between 7 May and 7 June 2020, 87% of parents said a child in their household had been homeschooled because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with the percentage decreasing as the age of the only or eldest child increased (ONS, 2020). April 2020 data revealed that only two in five parents felt confident teaching their children at home as schools remained closed due to the coronavirus (The Metro, 11th April 2020). According to a Sutton Trust poll (April 2020), just 42% of parents reported feeling confident home schooling, with 12% of parents saying they felt 'unconfident'. Sir Peter Lampl (Founder of the social mobility charity and chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation) said, 'the learning environment has never been more important' and yet little is known about how the parent/carers were and still are experiencing and feeling about home schooling. To address this gap in knowledge this research aims to:

- Identify how parents are managing home schooling in the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Explore what home schooling feels like from a parents' perspective.
- Establish benefits and challenges that the home schooling experience may entail.

Home schooling is defined, understood and contextualised very differently in different contexts (Bhopal and Myers, 2018). Within the context of this report, home schooling is not understood as an elective concept, rather the phenomena has been enforced upon families in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby a child is educated outside of the mainstream school system by a parent, guardian/carer alongside the (largely online) input from teaching staff. Parent¹ is here defined as a responding adult who has at least one dependant primary school child (aged between 4 and 11 years) in their household.

Parents from this particular school were largely very pleased with the exemplary home schooling delivered by the school and praised the efforts of teachers, with the vast majority feeling listened to, understood and supported. In some instances, parents felt the communicative channels between the school and the home actually improved and many expressed appreciations for teachers 'going that extra mile'. Thus, this particular school is viewed here an example of good practice that may serve to exemplify how school leaders may better implement changes based on the experiences of remote learning enforced by lockdown with the aim of revealing how the crisis may become an opportunity for grassroots innovation. Challenges parents faced largely depict wider social (gendered) inequalities and to some extent disgruntlement with the

¹ All participants and the school reported within this document are given pseudonyms to help protect their identity. Where photographs have been used individual consent from the participants has been gained.

governments educational response to the crisis rather than any direct result of the schools' conduct.

Parents were for example very aware about the wider concerns regarding pupil progress and the implications home schooling may have in terms of widening the attainment gap between children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in relation to those from more affluent backgrounds, especially in relation to access to resources, technological devices and internet access at home (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). There are national reported concerns regarding class, gender and race inequality's in terms of what is being offered and how. The Sutton Trust's parent poll on school closures report (April 2020) that children from better off households are more than twice as likely to have had more than £100 spent on their education since the shutdown meaning educational (and indeed digital) divides may increase over the pandemic period.

By the time the pandemic is over, most children across the UK will have missed over half a year of normal, in person schooling, increasing to two thirds of a year if schools weren't to reopen as normal until Easter. On the 22nd February 2021 the government made clear that the return to face-to-face education was deemed a national priority, due to the significant impact caused by being out of school on children's health and wellbeing. All primary school children return to school on Monday 8th March (Gov.UK press release 22nd February 2021).

Early evidence resulting from the analysis of the IFS Annual Education Spending Report funded by The Nuffield Foundation (Britton, 2020) suggests that the loss of schooling is disproportionality effecting those children from lower income families, resulting in a likely rise in inequality over the longer term and implying a long-run loss in earnings of £350bn. Thus, there is a real need to explore the nuances of a small group of parents' perspectives in relation to this larger education landscape to shed in-depth data on how they as individuals are experiencing home schooling in the advent of the Covid-19 crisis. Moreover, there is a real need for us as educational researchers to provide empirical data that can be used with immediate effect to help ease this rapid, but necessary transition by providing up-to-date and specific school level data with rigour and speed in order to maximise direct impact on school and national level home-schooling policy.

Methodology and process

The project used a critical participatory action research (CPAR) method (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014). In CPAR reciprocity between the researcher (Russell) and the participants (parents and staff at the school) is given prominence and decisions about what to explore and what to change are taken collectively. The aim of the project was to explore the social reality of home schooling by opening up 'communicative spaces' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) in which parents and

teachers could reflect together on the character, conduct and consequences of their home schooling practices and experiences.

Research was conducted within one small village voluntary aided, mixed primary school located in the North West of England that has 4 mixed age classes with just over 100 children on roll. Most pupils are of White British heritage and a higher proportion of girls attend the school. The proportion of disadvantaged pupils and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities in the school is relatively low. The proportion of pupils who have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan is above national average. The school was selected as a site of exemplary good practice in terms of its delivery of home schooling, with some families purposely moving their children from other local schools in-between the various lockdown periods in anticipation of further home schooling bouts.

The main corpus of data included 35 interviews with 29 mothers across all year groups and 3 female teachers, plus 30 images selected by parents to depict their experiences of lockdown and home schooling. All interviews were recorded via zoom, transcribed verbatim and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. The nature and length of each interview was participant-led in that they agreed when the interview would take place and for how long (interview length ranged from approximately 30 minutes to over an hour). Participants also (in the majority of cases) indicated whether the interview took place on an individual, paired or focus group basis. The main corpus of data collected and analysed for the purposes of this report was collected over a twelve-month period, from March 2020 to February 2021. The CPAR approach recognises parents as experts in their own lives and was cyclical in nature, capturing in 'real-life' time what was happening in a fast-changing timeframe. Each of the three cycles of the design corresponded with lockdown and isolation phases, alongside the consideration of emerging themes as the flexible and inductive nature of the design unfolded. Specifically, data includes:

CYCLE 1 (March-May 2021) – First national lockdown

- 8 interviews with 21 parents that explored parents initial and ongoing experiences and feelings regarding home schooling (March-May 2020)
 - 1 individual parent interview with a child in reception
 - 1 focus group with three parents with a child in reception
 - 1 focus group interview with three parents with a child in Year 1
 - 1 focus group interview with five parents with a child in Year 2
 - 1 focus group interview with five parents with a child in Year 3
 - 1 individual parent interview with a child in Year 4
 - 1 focus group interview with three parents with a child in Year 5
 - 1 focus group interview with three parents with a child in Year 6

- 10 image-elicitation interviews with 21 parents with children across all year groups (April-May 2020)
 - 1 paired parent interview with children in reception
 - 1 individual parent interview with a child in reception
 - 1 focus group interview with four parents with children in Year 1
 - 2 paired parent interviews with children in Year 2
 - 2 paired parent interviews with children in Year 3
 - 1 individual parent interview with a child in Year 4
 - 1 paired parent interview with two parents with children in Year 5
 - 1 focus group interview with three parents with children in Year 6
- 3 semi-structured individual interviews with teachers in April 2020 (including one Early Years classroom teacher and two Key Stage Two classroom teachers that shared Deputy Head responsibilities and governing board roles).
- 30 images (to include 1 video, 3 internet selected images and 27 photographs depicting home schooling and the experiences of lockdown from the parent's perspective)

CYCLE 2 (June-November 2020) – Return to school after national and regional lockdown restrictions and isolation periods

- 3 focus groups with 14 parents to understand parents feeling about returning to school after lockdown (June-July 2020)
 - 1 with six parents with children across all year groups (from Reception to Year 6)
 - 1 with three parents with children in Reception and Year 3
 - 1 with five parents with children in Year 3 and Year 1
- 4 interviews that explored parents experiences and feelings regarding their child(ren)s return to school after periods of isolation (October-November 2020).
 - 1 semi-structured, paired interview with two parents with a child in reception
 - 1 semi-structured, individual interview with a parent with a child in Year 1 and Year 3
 - 1 semi-structured, individual interview with a parent with a child in Year 1
 - One focus group interview with four parents with children in Year 3 and Year 4

CYCLE 3 (January-February 2021) – Third lockdown

- 7 individual semi-structured interviews with parents in January and February 2021

- A rainbow 2021 lockdown journey representation image with input from 15 mothers and 1 father

The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018). All findings were regularly anonymised and summarised for the Head Teacher and fed into relevant Governor Meetings (April 2020 -February 2021) to act as a channel of communication between parent/carers and school teachers and possible vehicle for change and developments regarding how parent/carers and teachers can work together to improve the home schooling experience for children, parent/carers and teachers in this one primary school setting during the pandemic.

2. Findings from the Critical Participatory Action Research

The Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) comprised of 35 interviews conducted with 29 mothers and 3 teachers, the development of a rainbow 2021 lockdown journey representation image with input from 16 parents (15 mothers and 1 father) and 30 images selected by parents depicting their experiences of home schooling and lockdown during March 2020 to February 2021.

A number of key themes emerged from the CPAR, illustrating the longitudinal and differing home schooling experiences family's felt during the first lockdown and subsequent isolation and lockdown bouts. Many mothers experienced moments of stress, guilt and fatigue when balancing home schooling with employment and other caring responsibilities, with episodes of enjoyment and gratefulness regarding the affordances home schooling gave for families to spend extra 'quality' time together, become more involved with their child(ren)s education and immerse themselves with nature and the outdoors. The importance of clear, quick and meaningful communication links needed between home and the school became more paramount than ever and the means by which this was achieved largely switched from face-to-face to online/telephone platforms. Findings are organised around what parents and teachers say are important and are reported here under key themes in the following sections.

2.1 Balancing home schooling and employment

All participants that were working (paid and otherwise) experienced challenges balancing home schooling and work, with some mothers changing their employment patterns or stopping paid employment completely during lockdown periods and home schooling bouts.

Covid-19 and the associated lockdowns meant that many working parents (both mothers and fathers) were faced with doing paid work and family care at home simultaneously. Finding time for both paid work and family care is a significant challenge for contemporary households (Craig and Churchill, 2020), with the time demands being particularly felt by mothers who wished to maintain their attachment to paid work while balancing the demands of a family (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). Many working mothers as exemplified in the interview excerpts below acknowledged the challenge of balancing home schooling and constant childcare demands with paid work.

A Juggling Act

Anna - It's all-consuming at the moment. It's just work and school and there is nothing else, and there's not even room for anything else. You know when you think about all the other things you normally do like on an evening? And they've all gone, yet you're kind of looking at yourself thinking, there would be no time for them now anyway.

Claire – You're just juggling constantly aren't you?

Anna: Yeah.

Claire: Juggling just sums it up for me, yeah.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 3 (28/04/20)

Many parents expressed feelings of sadness, stress and feeling overwhelmed upon Boris Johnson's school closure announcement in January 2021, with one mother who placed her reception aged son in school part time in the 2021 school closure due to the increase pressure she felt from her employer the second time around.

Gabriella: Stressed. Just stressed. I was just thinking how we'd juggle it. And although I knew we could do it, because we'd done it when they'd had the two weeks before Christmas, but I just remember that being quite hard work.

Individual parent interview transcript (25/01/21)

Whilst enforced restrictions during Covid-19 were associated with increases in fathers' time with children and somewhat narrowed the gender childcare gap between parents in dual-earner households, with many fathers doing some home schooling. However, reports also suggest that for some, mothers' unpaid worktime in some instances went up even more with some reporting a feeling of dissatisfaction with how they and their partners shared home schooling responsibilities and other unpaid work and care during Covid-19.

I'm not a teacher

The younger (and more numerous) the children the more demanding the childcare responsibilities and parents desire and arguable need 'to be present' whilst home schooling, with some questioning the degree to how much input they as parents should give. Parents welcomed communication with the school and wanted reassurances that they as much as their children were doing ok by their children education wise. With some parents feeling at times that their input may have

possibly being doing more harm than good in relation to the stress sometimes involved motivating their children to learn. The interview excerpts below illustrate a common parental concern about their lack of 'teacher' skills.

Aimee - But not being a teacher I'm not sure how much to guide and I'm not sure how much to say or not to say. You know, if he's not doing something quite right I don't know whether to say anything or if that sounds critical, or I don't know whether it's better to just let him do something but not do it perfectly, or whether to help him do his perfect practice that they talk about sometimes. So, I find myself in a bit of a bind sometimes between being too involved and then feeling like I'm micromanaging what he's doing, or just stepping back and letting him do anything. But I don't know if that's helpful or not? So, I think not being a teacher I don't really know how to go about it. Because I don't want to put him off some of his work by being too critical, but when I did kind of leave him to it he was just coming down to me every five minutes. So I just find it easier to be in the room with him.

Focus group transcript with mothers with children in Reception (04/04/20)

Claire - But I do want to try and make her work a bit more independently, because the trouble is if you're just sat there with her she will ask you every two minutes what to do. So I am trying to see if I can leave her a bit more to do it independently because, yeah it's no use if I'm constantly helping her, because she'll go back to school and be used to having a teacher there as her own personal go-to, not that I'm (short laugh) professing I'm a teacher in the slightest but, you know that.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 3 (28/04/20)

Disruption of family routines of time and space

Merging of physical work, school and home spaces were commonplace with some parents utilising dining room tables into 'home school' (and often paid work) spaces. Many parents too reported working longer hours outside of the conventions of 9-5 in order to fit all of their home schooling and paid work responsibilities in. One parent here describes an image she took that depicted home schooling from her perspective, she herself labelled the image as 'complete carnage' and explains the disturbances many families experienced when trying to balance home schooling and work in terms of managing shared spaces and working in different ways and across different time modes.

'Complete Carnage' – one working mothers' image depicting home schooling from her perspective (22/04/20)



Lilly: Complete carnage (short laugh). It's just, yeah, we're all trying to sit round the same table, eat, work, get along, do you know just about everything at once, stuff gets put away at the end of the night and then I pull it all out the day after. And then just as the day goes on the table just gets busier and busier. Suntan cream, juice, fruit, books, iPads, do you know? (...) I'm making sure she's done for about eleven until half past because then I can concentrate on work myself.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 1, (27/04/20)

The Monday to Friday, nine to five working day conventions became disrupted, with many requiring an ability to work flexibly. Interview data suggests that parents felt some employers were more supportive than others when it came to flexible home working and managing the furlough scheme, with many who were self-employed drastically reducing their hours or changing when and how they managed their day-to-day employment routines. Some mothers had to change or reduce their working hours with some taking a conscious decision to take a pause on paid work while inserting all their energy into the task of home schooling, with others too feeling effectively forced out of employment and forced to take redundancy or reduce their hours due to the nature of their paid work, coupled with the fact that in many cases the male of the household offered the main and more stable source of income. As one mother below describes, although a joint decision was made about how the dual-earner household would manage home schooling two primary aged children, the outcome was that she would take most of the responsibility since the father held a senior position within the Police and often worked shifts.

Josie: So John's (husband) income is our steady eddy and that's what we rely upon to pay the bills. Anything that I make is like an additional bonus or an extra really. So

that was the immediate decision that was made, that John would continue as normal and I would buffer the gaps.

Lisa: Okay. So do you take the major responsibility for the home schooling element then?

Josie: I take the full responsibility, and John does any maths problems that I can't do myself (both laugh), which are quite frequent.

Individual parent interview transcript (04/02/21)

Data also suggests that during the third lockdown some parents felt that employers became less supportive and were less likely to furlough staff. Thus, increasing the pressure some parents felt to balance home schooling and employment, with some more readily opting to claim 'key worker' status and place their child(ren) in school.

Families (like the school) seemed to settle into home schooling a little more smoothly during the third January lockdown, despite expressing sadness too that schools would once again close to the majority of children. Parents and their children knew more about what to expect and had previous routines, structures, knowledge and resources more readily available to draw upon during the third national lockdown. Previous apps such as seasaw and tapestry were already up and running and were deliberately kept 'live' once the school had re-opened to more children in September 2020 with a view to be able to quickly and effectively implement home learning material and open communicative channels between the home and school during inevitable subsequent home schooling bouts and lockdown measures.

A balancing act for teachers too

It is important to note too that a significant proportion of teaching staff at the school were working parents themselves and they too faced the challenge of balancing home schooling and learning new skills and new ways of working in rapidly changing and uncertain times.

Mrs Stine: Well having my children around at the same time, that's really hard, because I feel like I can never get any one thing complete. So, I might be writing the daily planners and I can't just have one or two hours to sit down and do them. I don't know when I'm going to do the reports, I don't know when I'm going to get to do any of my subject stuff. I'm finding that a real challenge.

Individual teacher interview (08/04/20)

In general, parents felt that teachers related well to their own home schooling experience and were conscious that teachers too were under pressure to be pro-active, find new ways of working and manage unpredictable circumstances. The school had to find new ways to communicate with the children and their parents fast.

Mrs. Webster: I think we were very pro-active in making sure we had a way of communicating with the children that was interactive. So, we didn't just want to send home a load of textbooks and say 'get on with it'. We wanted to have regular communication.

Individual teacher interview (21/04/20)

Parents appreciated frequent communications with the school that attempted to ease parental anxiety and stress around getting all tasks done. As the crisis continued a tighter focus on learning Maths and English ensued whereby 'essential' and 'desired' learning was more formally separated to help parents and their children navigate the basics while simultaneously trying to manage differentiation and provide adequate resources for those children physically on-site and those remote learning. The school also introduced a 'Wellbeing Wednesday' part way through the third national lockdown to enable children to catch up on work missed, focus again on the key subjects while also factoring in space for children to engage with other outside and more creative activities such as making hand puppets, engaging with photography, riding a bike and going for a walk.

Encouraging child (in)dependence

The age and character of the child(ren) seemed to relate to the child(ren)s ability to complete their home schooling activities independently. How independent children were largely shaped the ease at which the home schooling and employment balancing act manifested. Many parents felt that some of their children's levels of independence flourished during lockdown while others wavered with time or diminished. Lauren for example talks about how she felt her (Year 3) child's independence had grown over the home schooling periods, she talks with pride about how well her daughter has adapted, demonstrated independence and has grown throughout the crisis.

Lauren - she's (the child) learnt from the last time, she just gets on with it, this time I feel a bit useless, I've not really been involved in the same way. That is largely down to the school, the way in which they have managed the seesaw, they've kept it going and then they had all the resources ready to go should lockdown or the need for isolation happen, so I do thank the school for that.

Individual parent interview transcript (20/01/21)

Further benefits that home schooling brought for some including an increase in pupil independence, progress made in learning new skills like using technology and engaging creatively with nature, the outdoors and other family members will be explored further in sections 2.4 and 2.5.

2.2 Gendered division of labour

Managing day-to-day household tasks, caring responsibilities, employment and the organisation, delivery and execution of home schooling was largely (but not exclusively) conducted by the mothers of the household. Explanations for this largely lie in the gendered division of paid labour with the father's employment often given prominence due to its higher paid and more secure status.

Many dual-earner households negotiated together how they would manage home schooling and employment, but in most scenarios, this meant the mother chiefly taking the task of home schooling on due to the fathers more stable and often highly paid employment position (explained and exasperated by many by the extended periods of maternity leave many mothers opted for upon the birth of their child(ren). One mother who had recently returned to employment after a six-year career break to look after her young family describes feeling frustrated and marginalised due to the situation she found herself in after having being made redundant during the first school closure period and now opting for furlough after having found a replacement full time position due to the second school closure.

Hannah: So not only are you trapped looking after the children because the schools are closed but your employer's treating you unfavourably because you're a woman, and your spouse, who expects you to contribute towards the bills has no cognisance of the fact that your pension contributions are missing, your salary's taking a hit and so on and so forth.

Individual parent interview transcript (22/01/21)

Other mothers opted to reduce and/or change their working hours in anticipation of the demands of home schooling and caring for a young family during lockdown. Julie, for example worked on a consultancy basis pre-Covid, but decided to 'let it go' for a while since her husband works full-time for the NHS and they had three children to support and care for at home.

Julie: I have three children (...) I'm self-employed and I have stopped taking on projects so I'm currently not working. I have one project potentially going to start in a

couple of weeks, and we've taken that decision because my husband is working within the NHS. He's not a frontline worker but he is supporting the NHS, and he's in full-time work, and we just, I knew that I was not going to be able to support three children through primary school home-schooling and try and keep my consulting practice running at the same time. So, I've just had to let it go for now. Which is devastating.

Focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 6 (23/04/20)

Different types of families and different types of children

Even within the same family different parents viewed their children managing home schooling in varying and different ways. Families with more than one child at home talked about the difficulties they sometimes encountered balancing their different child's education, mental health and social wellbeing needs. These needs seemed to depend largely on the child's age, level of independence and own personality and individual and family circumstances. Many parents with one child or more also acknowledged the challenge of keeping their (child)ren constantly motivated to learn. Most talked about experiencing 'good days and bad', thus acknowledging the ups and downs that the lockdown experience entailed for many families during the pandemic. Julie a mother of three depicts the differing motivation levels of two of her children, with one child generally being more motivated than the other, but with both experiencing bouts of boredom due to the monotony of the day-to-day during lockdown.

Julie: For me and Johnny (son) neither of us are enjoying this experience. I'm extremely frustrated and he's quite emotionally distressed by it all. Polly (daughter) started off really well, she was very motivated. She was sat up to her desk in her bedroom, she would get up in the morning, have her breakfast, she wouldn't necessarily get dressed, but whatever, and then she would just go upstairs and start her work. And I think now she's not having her breakfast until about eleven thirty in the morning, she's doing a bit of work and then she's saying 'oh this is really boring', so she's going off and doing something else. And then she'll come back in the afternoon. So, she's still totally managing her own time, and I, I haven't actually checked with her teachers (...) But I trust her that she is doing it all, because she's so conscientious. Yeah whereas I am having to drag Johnny kicking and screaming through everything, everything, and I have to sit with him, and he gets very frustrated very quickly.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 6, (30/04/20)

Many blended families recognised the challenge of balancing the joining of two or more separate yet joined families with differing household rules, regulations and

needs, while also expressing the wonderful opportunity it gave them as a parent separated from their spouse to spend unique, long and uninterrupted episodes together with their children (and in some cases their blended family's partners children) due to travel restrictions and lockdown guidance. These feelings of opportunity were also tainted with concern about how long restrictions would be enforced and the effect of a child not physically seeing their mother or father for extended amounts of time (sometimes several months). Concern was also expressed regarding children's grandparents and many parents worried about their parents lack of socialisation, especially where grandchildren were concerned. Mass and abrupt reductions in socialisation regarding children with children, separated parents living in other households with children, and children and parents with respective grandparents and parents were a key concern for many parents during the lockdown periods. With many parents voicing concerns about the lack of socialisation their children were experiencing over and above concerns about the potential gap in educational progression their child(ren) may experience.

Julie: She gets it all done (...) she gets good feedback from her teachers and whatnot. So, for her really it would just be a socialisation thing more than an educational thing.

Focus group transcript with mothers (08/06/20)

It is important to note that some parents believed lockdown had actually improved the overall wellbeing of their child, suddenly released from the pressures and rigid structures of school and the national curriculum. Many cited experiencing unique family time and enjoyed seeing their children grow, spend time with their loved ones within their 'bubble' and engage with nature, spend time outdoors and learn 'real life' skills such as baking, managing finances and talking about children's future aspirations. This positive aspect of home learning will be explored further in section 2.4 and 2.5.

2.3 Feelings of fatigue, guilt and anxiety

Many parents expressed bouts of tiredness and anxiety around the physical, emotional and mental demands of home schooling, with some expressing concern about having a negative effect on their child(ren)'s educational achievement and overall wellbeing. Many mothers talked about feeling guilty that they were not doing enough or didn't feel better able to manage the demands of multiple siblings.

Fatigue, guilt and anxiety

Feelings of guilt were common, especially amongst those trying to work and home school and/or looking after the family and 'being mum' as well as home school. Those with younger children to look after seemed to find the 'juggle' of the day-to-day more demanding than those with older children. Andrea a working mum of two (including one pre-school aged child) describes her feelings of guilt and anxiety in the below interview excerpt.

Andrea: I think it's the, it's just for me a cycle of guilt. Am I doing enough? They're missing out. Am I doing enough for work? I feel disadvantaged in my sort of situation because a lot of people, my colleagues, don't have young children, but I want to be out there doing the same, doing what they're doing. But obviously first and foremost I don't want to neglect the children, so it's like just am I doing enough basically? Which makes it more stressful (short laugh).

Focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 2 (27/03/20)

Another mother describes feelings of chaos, guilt and exhaustion when trying to juggle home schooling and childcare with three young children when during an image-elicitation interview. Like many during the initial stages of the pandemic she describes feeling worried that she was not doing the right amount and right type of home schooling.

Jocelyn: Right (short laugh), yeah. So basically, this for me highlights the chaos of attempting to do anything home-school related at all whilst looking after three children on my own (...) I guess it's a case of just finding that it's one extra thing to juggle. But at the same time (...), I'm feeling the negativity because I'm struggling to fit in the extra stuff if that makes sense.

Lisa: Yeah.

Jocelyn: So rather than thinking, oh great lovely, we'll sit down, I'll spend some good time with her doing some schoolwork, I can't do that because of the other two (...) And then I'm left feeling guilty, like I'm not doing what they should be doing and all that. And then by the end of the day I'm just exhausted because I've been juggling three of them with very, very different needs as opposed to just two or even one.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 1 (27/04/20)

After the initial shock of school closure for families and schools and during later lockdowns the structure and input from the school increased and started to more closely align itself with the national curriculum. For many families their lives were

immediately transformed over night and a period of readjustment to the lockdown restrictions and school closures ensued.

Parental stress, depression and anxiety have again increased since new national restrictions have been introduced according to the latest report from the Oxford University-led COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents and Children in Epidemics (Co-Space) study, based on data from over 6000 UK parents, Data from this research supports the finding that many parents feel particularly drained and spread too thinly by the demands of meeting their children's needs during the pandemic, along with home schooling and in some instances work commitments (Creswell, Co-Space Study, 2021). Creswell (2021) reports particular concerns for the levels of strain felt by parents in low-income families and those supporting children with special educational needs.

Some parents expressed a concern that their stress and/or lack of teaching skills and know-how may have been having a negative effect on their child(ren)s educational progression and overall wellbeing. Experiencing bouts of stress, alongside more positive moments were commonplace for most families. Most parents were acutely aware of how their own wellbeing may shape their relationships with other household members and were able to recite moments of stress. Hannah a mother of two, spent the first lockdown shielding indoors, she reflects on this moment in time during the following interview excerpt.

Hannah: It was an immensely stressful time and it impacted on the children and Peter (husband) and our relationship, because I just felt why are women being sent back, you know, why am I being sent back to the 1950s?

Individual parent Interview transcript (22/01/21)

Managing rapid and unforeseen changes

The constant shifting educational and general outer society landscapes were one source of anxiety for parents. Even when schools re-opened there was a constant sense that any moment their child may be sent home to isolate again and an immediate parental response would be required. Schooling (as well as previous wrap around childcare) wasn't a fixed certainty, and with that came anxiety around how families may cope with future isolation periods and lockdowns, leaving many parents unable to foresee change and plan their work and caring responsibilities accordingly.

One mother of three who described herself as 'on a career break' shared her initial thoughts regarding the school closure in January 2021. She described feeling 'gutted', 'shocked', 'trapped' and 'tired' and as a result of struggling during the first school closure she made a conscious decision to opt out of work and become a full time 'homemaker' with plans to return to employment later on.

Lorna: Absolutely gutted, I was shocked, I was shocked much more than I was last time (...) and I've really tried to change my mindset recently to its not happening Lorna so stop stressing about it, so I just thought they're in school today and that is all that matters and I thought at worst if it did happen it would be for a couple of weeks so when I heard it was up until the February half term I was absolutely gobsmacked and devastated to be extreme (...) Do you know why I felt trapped? It's that repetitiveness, the tediousness of the day when you're just at home and it's just the same and I can't go and do what I want to do because I have to sit with these kids and I have to be mummy and it's just relentless.

Individual parent interview transcript (25/01/21)

Lorna, Andrea, Jocelyn and Hannah's experiences here resonate with the larger national picture regarding parental feelings of stress, fatigue and anxiety. Recent Official National Statistical data for example reveals that between 3 April and 10 May 2020, of parents who were home schooling, one in three women (34%) agreed that it was negatively affecting their well-being compared with one in five men (20%), while 43% of home-schooling parents agreed that it was negatively affecting the well-being of their children (ONS, 2020. Page 2). Understanding the parent's experiences of lockdown and home schooling is thus paramount to help identify types of advice, support and help parents may find of most use, alongside an understanding that the parents, as well as the children's experiences and needs change as the pandemic progresses. Such findings also acknowledge the importance of understanding how school closures and the pandemic affect families in their entirety, since such drastic changes in one sphere of one family members life (such as a child not being able to go to school) has a knock-on and sometimes unforeseen effect on other family members (such as parents) day-to-day lives.

Ups and downs – a succession of both good and bad experiences

All families experienced home schooling and bouts of lockdown differently, most described moments of 'ups and downs', but the degree to which these were experienced depended on a number of inter-related factors such as how closely families had been tainted by Covid-19 in terms of health, finances and juggling various employment and caring responsibilities, alongside how well they felt their children were coping and 'getting on' with the home schooling.

One mother described moments of joy and creativity that home-schooling gave, opening up opportunities for her son to draw, interspersed with moments of stress where she aligns herself to bursting into some kind of 'Incredible Hulk' figure – a fictional superhero with a dual personality depicting incredible strength and

uncontrollable anger alongside a second more socially withdrawn, reserved professional personality.

'The Hulk' – one mother's image depicting home schooling from her perspective (21/04/20)



Anna: So, I was trying to kind of show just the sheer amount of stuff on the dining room table, which is where Larry (her son) is, so, and trying to fit in other stuff like guitar practice, trying to keep on top of that. And then the only thing that kind of keeps him quiet for like a good hour is like these, he's been doing these like YouTube drawing tutorials and he's absolutely loved those, and it's really nice to see him do it. So, he's got kind of his, he's got all his pens there. And Hulk because it was just how I kind of feel at the end of each day. But I did this and then ended up having a big argument with Arthur (Husband) about it, because he was looking at what everyone else has done, and he was like 'oh you make it look like we don't know what we're doing'. And I was trying to say 'no', but I said, 'I'm trying to show that this it's like the state of my mind at the end of the day', because I just cannot, I think, take any kind of, anything else on. You know, like I feel like I'm full, my capacity is now full. So, any other kind of small task or small, like if you realise you've not got an ingredient that you need for tea, and that's it, I'm just like, that's it, gone.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 3 (28/04/20)

Such feelings were commonplace, but it is important to note that they were usually interspersed with more positive moments too, with many feeling like they would look back on this time with a sense of nostalgia, alongside moments of challenge and despair.

2.4 A unique family experience

It is important to acknowledge that parents (and families) experienced lockdown and home schooling in very different ways, with many rejoicing moments of happiness, freedom and creativity, as well as feelings of tiredness and stress. Many parents recognised this as a special and unique time that enabled them to watch their child(ren) grow and engage with nature.

Many parents rejoiced in the freedom they had as home schoolers to take their learning outdoors, engage with nature and embrace the relevance of 'real life' skills that may better serve their own and their child(ren)s wellbeing, as well educational and general social and cultural developments. Many took the opportunity to learn about nature, cooking, taking care of finances and local geography for example. In general opportunities and motivations to embrace these freedoms of opportunity dwindled as the longevity of the lockdown periods and bouts of home schooling continued on throughout the twelve months, but many families tried to hold on to these positive moments and embed them into their subsequent family lockdown routines.

Engaging with nature and outdoor learning

There is a significant body of academic research that suggests that increasing children's engagement and participation with nature and the outdoors correlates with significant improvements in children's mood and wellbeing, especially over sustained periods (Harvey, Montgomery, Harvey, Hall, Gang and Watling, 2020). Data from this research suggests parents are very much onboard with encouraging their children to embrace and build further engagement with nature into the school curricula and evidence suggests that this could indeed serve as a low-cost way for schools to improve children's psychological wellbeing while simultaneously operating under Covid-19 social distancing restrictions.

During the summer months many families enjoyed the sunshine and cherished the ability to go outside and learn. Erika describes how she changed her and her daughter's (Tammy) routine from an indoor, fairly regimented routine to a more flexible, outdoor approach. Erika and Tammy were both able to do their work outside on the moors and spent hours and sometime most of the day working, walking and enjoying the freedom of the outdoors with each other and their dog.

'Working on the moors' – one mother's image depicting home schooling from her perspective (27/04/20)



Erika: If Tammy was in school and I was working from home I may head up the moors, if I've got my tablet and I've got my works phone and the reception's all right up in the moors in most places, I'll just sit down, take the call, fire up the tablet and do it. I just think, wow how lucky I am to be able to have that technology and that, you know, those devices to be able to do that. I mean to be fair when we first started with lockdown, which was the original picture I was going to send you, was, Tammy was at one end of the table and I was on the other end of the table, both with laptops. And I just thought, do you know what, this is not how we're doing it, this is just not how we're doing it. This is stale, this is regimented, this is, it's just not going to last, it's not going to last. And I'm not staying indoors watching a computer and Tammy looking for the next thing that comes up on Seesaw when the sun's shining and she could be out there going up waterfalls and river walking and all the rest of it, seeing where she's born and her heritage and the history. And, you know, we'll do times tables whilst we're walking and make a song, or I'll take a picture of the spellings on my phone and we'll look at it whilst we're walking. Or, you know, we'll get the times table songs on YouTube and sing along. There are ways to do it, so I'm just doing it like that.

Lisa: How long are you out there for?

Erika: Hours if I'm to be honest. If it's a nice day, hours.

Lisa: Wow. You just set off with a picnic and your iPads and your phones and go?

Erika: Yeah, and she loves it (...) And she's not typically been one for exercise, Tammy, to be honest, but she's really thriving on knowing how far she's walked, knowing where she's walked and looking at the map and learning about the moor if you like, and where it joins up to and some of the historic monuments. She loves doing like videos. So when we did this picture here she'd (short laugh), she'd got me to video her saying this was her river walking business and for thirty pounds she'd guide you up the waterfall and back down and you could have some snacks and she'd provide a picnic and [pause] yeah mad stuff really actually, but (...) I'm enjoying this, I'm closer to Tammy than I've ever been because I've got the time.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 6 (30/04/20)

Harper (mother of two) discusses enjoying the freedom of the family creating their own curriculum together and embracing whole topics (such as snails) into other key life skill areas such as baking snail bread and drawing.

'Exploring nature with garden snails' – one mother's image depicting home schooling from her perspective (04/03/20)



Harper: We're following the Exploring nature with children curriculum, so next week we're onto garden snails (...) It's brilliant. So next week we're going to be sort of capturing some snails and putting them in a box and drawing them and things like that and learning all about them. And so, I think this last week was about the Spring Equinox, so we did sort of lots of stuff around that, but next week I'm going to do a bit of prep as well beforehand now I know how it's worked and things. And yeah, just get organised really over the weekend so they're ready to go again then for the next week.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 2 (27/03/20)

More 'family time'

Families appreciated that this was a very special and unique time that enabled parents to spend more time with their child(ren) and watch them grow. For some blended families and employed parents the dynamic of working from home or being furloughed afforded families more 'family time' together. Such feelings were particularly paramount during the first lockdown, where many families were taking their learning outside and spending quality time together that otherwise wouldn't have happened. Some mothers – especially those that shared childcare with another parent like Erika, talked about really enjoying the home schooling experience.

Erika: I feel lucky that I've just got one child (...) I'm enjoying this, I'm closer to Tammy now than I've ever been because I've got the time. I'm doing stuff with her that I wouldn't, you know, we come from a separated home so actually Tammy's in school and then she spends every other weekend with her other parent. So, I feel like I've just got more time with her than I would normally have had, and I'm cherishing it.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 6 (30/04/20)

Others talked about some children's wellbeing actually improving since their child felt less tired not being at school, as well as the joys of seeing siblings play together, get along and in some cases re-connect. The ability for families to spend quality time together was viewed as a real plus.

Violet: She's just enjoying messing around with her sister and coming up with all these random games. Which is probably, you know, that's a really positive thing out of all this I think, and like the sibling bonds will probably get stronger through this. Even though they might have their tiffs here and there, I think it's quite nice that they get to spend this time together.

Connie: It is actually. I've noticed that with mine. I've noticed Donnie and Rita have actually been playing much, much more than they have done in a long time. You know, like sort of during lunchtime they'll have their lunch and then they'll take themselves off up to their bedrooms and, you know, they're playing role-play games, which for a nine-year-old boy is quite unusual. But they're getting on so well.

Lisa: Just maybe having that space to do it, I don't know.

Connie: Well yeah, yeah, and the time I suppose, and maybe not necessarily having that, the constraints of the school day where, you know, they're home by three thirty and then I'm washing packed lunches and getting ready for dinner and there's kind of, you know, stuff to be done. I think there is a little bit more freedom in our new school day and they're finding other things to do to kind of, not necessarily occupy themselves but to make each other happy and to enjoy their time. And it's one of the

things that I struggle with with my children sometimes, is how they get along with each other, together. Because they, you know, they do, the boys do fight and, you know, Rita's the youngest and she's a girl and sometimes she's a bit, she's very good at actually just getting on with it but I do sometimes feel like maybe she's being a bit left out. You know, various situations, various things that go on between siblings. But they're actually all doing remarkably well at the moment. I've not had to, you know, tell them off very much or, or anything really. It's remarkable actually. And that's nothing to do with me, that's just them, you know, them just sort of getting on with it. It's quite a relief actually (short laugh).

Lisa: Yeah, I'm sure.

Violet: My boss was saying today, he's got three kids and his youngest is five and is at school, and he was saying that they've seen a like remarkable improvement in his behaviour, being at home. And they think it's just down to the, like how tired he is through having to go to school each day. And actually, him having time to be at home and things, he's like a bit of a changed character.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 2 (06/04/20)

During home schooling bouts parents (and children) felt they had more freedom to dictate what, when, where, with who and how learning took place, with many viewing this freedom to learn and engage with nature and the outdoors as a real source of support for their own and their children's sense of wellbeing.

Outdoor learning and embracing new 'real-life' skills

During the first (partial) school closure staff worked hard to improve an outdoor learning area for the children upon their anticipated return to school. Part of the outdoor area was funded by the Parents Teacher Association (PTA) and all parents who participated with this research and were asked about the development of the school's outdoor area seemed to favour the school's ethos to further embrace the outdoors and encouraged the school in the future to better implement and recognise other skills children may have developed during the lockdown as valued.

Lisa: There's been a movement actually to integrating more outdoor stuff. How do you feel about doing that, you know, as a curriculum initiative really? Because it's fairly new. I mean we've always gone outside, but I think more so, and obviously the outdoor area has been developed.

Josie: Yeah. I think it's an amazing add-on. I think looking at the curriculum I feel so sorry for the teachers because it is so dry and a lot of it is so unnecessary to life experience and what we need to be able to translate into the real world. So, for me

personally I take things very pragmatically and look at what I needed as a seventeen, eighteen, nineteen-year-old adult, and whether that be learning about mortgage rates or APRs on credit cards or how to change a tyre when my car needed some maintenance. I would much prefer there being a practical element to the curriculum that actually teaches you how to budget and manage money or devise a meal plan for a week and work out how much you need to spend on different ingredients rather than learning what fronted adverbials are (both laugh), because it's just meaningless. I get really cross when I see the curriculum and see what they're having to teach, because I just find it really, really unrelatable to what the children are going to need to be armed with when they leave school.

Lisa: Do you think there's been an opportunity during the home learning to sort of shift or work more flexibility as a parent at home in terms of what you're teaching maybe and why and how? Have you had arguably more opportunity to sort of embed those real-life skills in the home, perhaps that, not missing at school but that the school maybe have a harder time trying to integrate because they're following the National Curriculum?

Josie: Yeah, I think so. I think as a family we've always been quite open to new ways of thinking about things, so more often than not we'll talk about different careers and how much, you know, wage you would expect from, you know, if you were going to be a dustbin man compared to a lawyer, and what credentials you would need to fulfil those roles. So, we've always been quite, I guess, open-minded as to how to interact with the kids and give them the best tools to then go out into the wider world.

Individual parent interview transcript (04/02/21)

As well as viewing the lockdown and partial school closure episodes as a unique and special time whereby families spent quality time with one another, often peppered with more negative feelings related to the uncertainty, fatigue and longevity of the crisis, families and schools were forced to rapidly shift the delivery of their learning online. This too represented a key skill that developed the children's, the parent's and the teaching staff's technological knowledge and ability, alongside which a different way of sharing information, conducting meetings and indeed socialising developed.

2.5 Changing use of technology

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the rapid adoption of digital technology across schools in England, with significant changes in the delivery of learning. Parents recognise the educational and social benefits their child(ren)s use of technology can bring during the crisis, but also voice concerns over their children's increased levels of 'screen time' and resulting inequalities that may ensue from those

that have access to the new and latest technologies and resources with those that don't.

Access to technology and other resources

In March 2020 schools and families had to quickly learn how to embrace technology and remote learning, with some schools operating different platforms and ways of home schooling compared to others.

In this unprecedented time teachers too had to utilise existing platforms and learn new ways of communicating with children and parents, as well as offer remote learning resources and remain open to key worker and vulnerable children.

Families that had traditionally stayed clear (intentionally in some instances) of opening their child(ren) up to the world of iPads, laptops and the like suddenly found themselves without key resources required to execute the home schooling effectively. Families working from home with multiple children suddenly found themselves in a situation where they were sharing and competing for devices on a day-to-day basis. In the early days this presented key challenges in terms of some parents knowing how to use the online learning platforms, with some teachers personally venturing out to child(ren)s homes kindly dropping off much needed devices, fresh reading materials and the like. Mrs Cardiff in her interview below describes how staff were trying their best to ensure all children had fair access to all resources.

Mrs. Cardiff: So I had three people contact me within the first two weeks to say 'look I just can't do the maths on Seesaw. I haven't got anything that's large enough to see what they need to do'. So I drove round and pushed some maths books through their door.

Individual teacher interview (22/04/2020)

Parents were very grateful for teachers going that extra mile to ensure all children had adequate resources to execute the home schooling tasks with greater ease.

Different ways of learning and teaching

Children, parents and teachers quickly had to come to grips with new online learning platforms and resources such as tapestry, seesaw, timetable rock stars and learning by questions. Some of these resources were being used prior to Covid-19 but upon their first introduction nobody could foresee just how important they would be in the absence of face-to-face teaching.

Parents with multiple siblings had to learn different platforms and navigate different resources for their respective children, such challenges were more prevalent during the initial lockdown in March 2020, with parent, teachers and children's knowledge and ICT (Information and Communications Technology) skills and/or confidence improving throughout the crisis.

Adele: Yeah. I mean we had issues with technology and things like that, and the different types of technology and different platforms that the different year groups use. So, it was kind of just finding your way around those, that sort of thing.

Focus group transcript with mothers with children in Reception (04/04/20)

Many parents felt their children helped them to navigate these new technological resources and teachers too felt under pressure to learn new technological skills and rapidly implement them into their teaching practice. Some teachers felt more comfortable than others remote learning, with some enjoying communicating with children and parents in new and creative ways, while also feeling accomplished for learning new ICT skills such as how to edit a video and develop YouTube sessions.

Mrs Stine: Don't forget you're trying to set up your work from home, work that you've never done before, trying to teach children, that you've never done before (...) It's such a strange way to communicate, over Tapestry. It's all written and I'm very conscious about every word that I use, and I thought, well I'm just going to speak to them like I would speak to them face-to-face, in like friendly language, and I put like emojis on, you know, to the children. I put little stars and apples and stuff on and try to make it fun really, because they (the children) must find it strange. And then for my class I've done some YouTube videos for phonics (...) But, it really helps me so much because I really enjoyed them, and I learnt new things (...) I've learnt how to edit a video. I had no idea that I could do that, you know? (...)

Lisa: Is there any other advantages you think, you see to this sort of way of delivering?

Mrs Stine: Um [pause] new skills (...) I think it's being creative, even in the simplest terms. Like I have to assume, I'm pretty sure all my parents have got devices, so that's okay, but I can't really assume they've all got gardens and I can't really assume they've all got printers. So, thinking, having to think about those things, I think they all have got some outside space but I can't really ask, 'excuse me', you know, 'have you got a garden?' So anyway, so just a small example, was that I'd sent a sheet home, well kind of a sheet, and it was just with some rhyming pictures on, and it was just to give them some rhyming words. And it's, you know, and so how many times can you think of a rhyming word? (...) You can't think of any can you? So anyway, they'd screen grabbed it and drawn on it, you know, and sent it back. So, I thought that was a really creative way on their part as well (...) So yeah, yeah

being creative. And it's really like nice connecting with them in a different way, directly to their homes, you know, I'm really enjoying it.

Individual teacher interview (08/04/20)

Access to technology was vital, but so too was access to other resources such as the amount of time parents had to spend with their child, how independent the children were in their learning styles, their age and own home and family settings and access to resources such as outside space and the like also mattered – but teachers, during the initial lockdown couldn't assume all families had equal access to all resources which shaped their delivery, but also flourished a degree of pedagogical creativity.

In addition to managing different family members digital needs and varying knowledge bases in terms of using technology in different ways for the purposes of socialising, work and schooling, parents (and teachers) too were aware of the larger societal inequalities in terms of the 'digital divide' – the unequal access and utility of internet communication technologies and the potential this has to replicate existing social inequalities and even create new forms of stratification (Ragnedda and Muschert, 2013), in addition to larger educational and consequent wider social inequalities (Thompson, 2019).

A recognition of inequality's

Parents and teachers recognised issues of inequality between those who had access to technology and other educational and social support resources with those who did not. There was also a recognition that 'private' schools may be gaining an unfair advantage during the remote learning periods, leaving some parents feeling a little disgruntled regarding wider social inequalities.

Julie: I think for me the benefit, and it's not, you know, I'm extrapolating from Johnny who's not even invited back, but I just feel that he's falling behind, and without proper teacher support it's just going to get worse, and I'm thinking beyond his peer group at school, just at a national level, the gap is widening between very, kids that are going to really posh schools that have continued, they're doing Zoom lessons. You know, they have an entire curriculum. It's all day, they are being taught, you know, they have teacher contact blah blah blah, and then we're looking at this sliding scale where our school is doing really well on a local level from what I can judge, but, you know, the gap is widening and widening. And by September they're going to have lost a whole half a year of schooling.

Jackie: The gap is so, it's yawning open, and our kids are at the wrong end of the gap basically.

Julie: I think it's a lot more relaxed and I think they probably are getting the work done in a shorter period of time. You know, because they're not having breaktime in the morning, lunchtime, dadada, they've just done it quickly. So, it is shortening their school day, and it's better for them really, especially at primary school I think. You know, go play out, go walking, baking, gardening, learn a lot more things I think than being at school.

Image-elicitation focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 6 (30/04/20)

Evidence of wider discontent with the Governments management of the crisis and home schooling was evident. Parents were asked to write 1-3 words depicting their initial feelings following the governments school closure in January as part of the rainbow 2021 lockdown journey representation and the vast majority reflected negativity towards the government, including words such as, 'shambolic'; 'gutted' and 'frustrated'. Based on the first two cycles of data collection and analysis the rainbow lockdown journey representation included key themes such as 'home schooling', 'family' and 'leisure' leaving one space for participants to include their own theme. One mother elaborated on her selected theme of 'government' and wrote the following.

'Government': I feel completely let down by the Government. At the beginning they came across as arrogant and made a series of bad judgements. They have continued to make bad and inconsistent decisions and along with misuse of the capability of the country. They have created weak and flawed guidance, all of which I feel has resulted in the third lockdown and the school closures.

Rainbow 2021 lockdown journey representation (05/01/2021)

As schools re-open on the 8th March some parents also expressed a desire for school teachers to be prioritised for the vaccination alongside other key workers.

Too much screen time

During the third national lockdown children were sent home with physical home learning packs in addition to their online learning journals and resources. This was viewed as welcomed by most parents who saw the value in increasing children's time away from the screen and actually putting pencil or pen to paper. The school too wanted to develop children's writing capacity and some parents like Anna interviewed below felt the shift actually improved her son's independent learning.

Anna: So, with the maths (...) where they have the maths workbook? So, it's like watch the screen and then go down and work in the workbook. And that's so much better because you can do that, I think last time trying to write answers in Seesaw was so fuffy. You know, and I ended up doing it because it was just quicker. So, it was like 'right tell me what to write and I'll do it for you', and that, so whereas now I'll watch the initial lesson with him and then he's just doing that on this own. He goes as far as he can and then shouts what he needs help with. So, and that's way much easier than before.

Individual parent interview (19/01/2021)

Most parents recognised the increased time their children were spending in front of a screen. Some parents expressed concern over the increase level in screen time their children were now accessing for home schooling and for socialisation purposes. Some felt their children were getting too much screen time.

Billy: I have quite a strong opinion about how much screen time they have. Not so much the TV, but certainly on tablets and things like that.

Focus group transcript with mothers with children in Reception (04/04/20)

Different ways of socialising

Other parents felt their management of their children's screen time was more flexible and felt that their child(ren)s need to speak, play and see other children was important during this time. Parents voiced concerns regarding the lack of socialisation their children were being exposed to – this in many cases was viewed as a higher concern than their shift to remote learning and the negative impacts this may have other child(ren)s educational future and outcomes. Kylie, a mother of child in Year 5 talks about quite liking the home schooling experience, but also mentions that the downside is the children not being able to socialise with their friends.

Kylie: It would be nice if they could just go and play with their friends in the park in the afternoon or something, or do something nice. But besides from that I think, I quite like it really. And then if she could do some socialising, that's the only thing isn't it, that they're not socialising?

Focus group transcript with mothers with children in Year 5 (23/04/20)

With little other way of socialising more children engaged in zoom get togethers in formal scenarios like via organised groups such as Beavers, Cubs and Rainbows or

informal ones organised by parents and sometimes via the children themselves to share stories and talk with their friends, celebrate birthdays and play games such as Minecraft. As Emily below explains, this was viewed as a unique experience that wouldn't last forever, so new rules regarding screen time were accepted.

Emily: It's not so much the learning. It's what they do after it. So, you know, we're working and they've finished and it's chucking it down. What do they do? (...) What are they going to do? What do they want to do? So, but yeah, they are spending way too much time on games. But what can you do?

Lisa: Yeah.

Emily: It's temporary.

Individual parent interview (22/01/21)

Concerns about children spending too much time 'on screen' and not enough time outdoors playing with other children is not a new phenomenon, but within the context of the crisis everyone who participated with this study had to engage with technology in increased and different ways. Parents, teachers and children changed how they worked, how they taught, learned, socialised, communicated and spent their free time, operating and adapting to do this remotely rather than (or in addition to) face-to-face.

3. Conclusion

This critical participatory action research aimed to identify how parents were experiencing home schooling throughout the pandemic and various regional and national lockdown periods. Working parents have experienced challenges balancing home schooling and work, with some changing their employment patterns or stopping paid work completely during home schooling bouts. Parents experienced home schooling and the lockdowns in different ways, with most articulating feelings of 'ups and downs'. Feelings of fatigue, stress and anxiety were commonplace, especially during the start of the pandemic and during initial lockdown and isolation periods. Much of these feelings could be explained via the high level of uncertainty parents experienced around how they would need to rapidly alter their day to day activities to ensure their children's wellbeing and educational needs were taken care of. Alongside these concerns, feelings of nostalgia and enjoying the opportunity to spend time with their children in a prolonged and unique way were also cited, whereby many cherished the opportunity to watch their child(ren) grow, spend time together as a family and get directly involved with their children's learning in creative and innovative ways that enabled a break from the constraints of the national curriculum and an ability to appreciate the outdoors, engage with nature and learn 'real life' skills such as baking, gardening and managing finances.

The mass rapid advent of online learning, coupled with the lockdown restrictions meant children were engaged with increased online activity both in terms of their home schooling and for socialisation and leisure time purposes. Parents, teachers and children learnt new technological skills during the pandemic that will arguably be transferable and serve relevance to our society's future way of working.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Employers and schools should recognise the challenges working families are experiencing and set expectations accordingly – many working families are working outside of the conventions of nine to five, Monday to Friday working patterns when balancing their various home, caring, work and home schooling responsibilities.

4.2 Schools should have clear, frequent and up-to-date communicative strategies for parent and carers since guidance and expectations can change rapidly.

4.3 There needs to be a greater acknowledgement regarding parent and carers wellbeing in addition to the child(ren)s. Working and understanding families in their entirety is viewed as paramount when developing future support resources and mechanisms for families during the pandemic.

4.4 Parent and carers should be recognised as key stakeholders with valuable life experiences that can be better integrated and recognised as a valuable educational resource both within and outside of the school setting.

4.5 Educational resources and the school curriculum should include and acknowledge the benefits and challenges of online learning, as well as recognise the importance of 'real life learning' and 'outdoor activities'.

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