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## **Changes in the Learning Environments During Subsequential UK Lockdowns 2020-2021**

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This paper has been written by the 'British Families in Lockdown' research team led by Leeds Trinity University and identifies the perceived changes in learning and educational experiences as reported to us by British parents (some of whom are educators) that took part in our longitudinal study covering the first three national coronavirus lockdowns of 2020-2021. 'British Families in Lockdown' (BFiL) is a qualitative study which is currently investigating the day-to-day experiences of British families during the pandemic. Our research started in March 2020 during the first national lockdown and is ongoing. Sixty parents from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures are participating in interviews whilst under lockdown in their homes. Family members share their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children's schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use. This study was quick to respond to the start of the pandemic in 2020 and is one of the few qualitative studies collecting a broad range of data from the UK population ranging from the first lockdown up until the present time.

### **Education and Learning**

We feel it is important to make a distinction between education and learning. We would suggest that whilst a child's educational level can typically be related to age defined attainment measures such as assessments, tests and exams, a child's learning is often connected to a developmental process that takes place outside of the domain of prescribed curricula and may be more nuanced, individualised and difficult to measure. Learning can and does take place in an educational setting, but it is not limited to academia alone.

The lockdown experiences have clearly led to an interruption in formal education and UK children have had their schooling interrupted to differing degrees, however we are currently still uncertain about the full extent to which children's education itself has been impacted, since many exams and other assessments have been cancelled or postponed. In this paper, parental perceptions will offer some interesting insights into the feelings of families in regards to this matter based on their lived day-to-day experiences and reflections.

The extent to which experiential learning has been affected is difficult to determine without further detailed analysis and research. From our study it is clear that children have continued to learn in different ways whilst being at home and out of school. The value of this learning and the nature of this learning has not yet been quantified, nor has an appropriate method for measuring it been suggested.

Education has more recognisable methods through which gained knowledge can be measured against a target-based curriculum, whereas the nuanced and hidden processes of learning can perhaps best be gained through qualitative research such as this. The following data reflects both the educational and learning experiences reported to our study team:

### **During the First National Lockdown** – 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020

At this time, families had to quickly adjust to the shock of an unprecedented national move into lockdown. There was a great deal of uncertainty concerning the nature of the virus and how it could be transmitted. People were also concerned about food shortages and a loss of public services. As a result, families were generally very cautious, mostly staying inside and only going outside for one hour of exercise each day (some families did not leave the house at all). On the whole families followed the lockdown rules, although there were a number of reports of teenagers being allowed to see their friends still. This was further evidenced by numerous reports of groups of teenagers being seen hanging out together across the country being a common sight that was recollected by most of the participants. In terms of home learning, for the majority of the parents interviewed, this was the first time they had experienced teaching, although within our sample there was also a representative sample of experienced educators. Findings from the first lockdown include:

- Not all families with parents who were critical workers took up a place for their child in school. Some felt that keeping their children at home was safer.
- School and nurseries provided inconsistent provision for home learning. Some support was perceived as very good, whilst other support was considered to be insufficient.
- Parents were often critical of schools in regards to the work being sent home and felt it was either not enough, not well explained, or was too difficult.
- Some parents found it difficult to understand the schoolwork being sent home, particularly if English was not their first language.
- Support services were either discontinued or completely stopped for families and children with additional needs.
- Children with SEND and their parents experienced little or no support for home learning at a time when they were perceived to be in great need.
- Families with additional support needs and/or unsupportive employers experienced the most difficulties in terms of household tensions, which were perceived to have had an impact on the effectiveness of home learning.
- Parents of children attending state schools were disappointed that many children had little or no contact with their teachers.
- Children at private schools seemed to be getting the most amount of contact and support from their teachers.
- Some families noticed that their children were much happier to be learning at home and that school had been a cause of anxiety and distress.
- Feelings of closeness and levels of bonding developed within the majority of households through shared experiences and spending more time together.
- For some parents, the process of engaging with their children's educational needs through home schooling led to positive experiences of bonding and shared goals.
- Some children generally got on with their work in a positive way, whereas others would find it difficult to study.

- Some parents were stricter than others in terms of the number of hours children were expected to study each day. Strictness could often lead to tensions in the household.
- Most parents prioritised their children's mental health over schoolwork.
- Many children were perceived to be missing their friends and the social aspects of the school environment. Physical contact with others was considered to be a particular loss.
- Some parents saw the advantages to home schooling both in terms of their child's well-being and in terms of their educational experience. As a result, they began to consider home schooling full time or part time as an option in the future.
- The majority of parent's were fully engaged and supportive of their children's educational needs. Some parents generated their own improvised curriculum and learning journeys.
- Parents generally had no way to know if their children's education level was being affected by the lockdown, they were waiting to see what the teacher's said when the children returned to school.
- Older children required less parental support than younger children.

### **During the Second Lockdown – 5<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

One of the significant differences between the first and second lockdowns, was that children's attendance at school was maintained throughout the second lockdown. However, in many instances, children found themselves at home for periods of two weeks or more because there were outbreaks of the virus in school; as such, some home learning still took place. In terms of wider public attitudes to the lockdown, at this time there were increasing numbers of people publicly objecting to government restrictions and there was a reported rise in the number of coronavirus deniers, which led to a divided nation between those who were resisting social distancing guidelines and those who were wanting to maintain them and even increase them. The government were considered not to be giving strong enough messages about how people should act, which led to uncertainty. Furthermore, the 'three-tier' system which had been running since the 14<sup>th</sup> October, seems to have caused people to become confused regarding what was acceptable behaviour and what was not. Findings from the second lockdown include:

- For most families, little had changed from the first lockdown. Inabilities to socialise, see extended families, get back to old leisure routines, financial worries and fears about coronavirus had continued.
- Sharing family experiences continued to be valued and most families valued their time together. Some families had adapted well to the changes and experienced strengthening bonds within the family.
- A minority of parents reported that restrictions no longer felt alien and that life was moving forwards and towards more normality in terms of work and school.
- Most parents were happy to see their children back in school. Although concerns about the risks of coronavirus were present. Children who were back in school were reported to be very happy.
- For those families who struggled in the first lockdown. Experiences often got worse in the second lockdown, particularly in terms of stresses and strains within the home.
- A minority of parents expressed an urgent need for their children to be in school.
- Families with SEND needs were receiving insufficient support and this was leading to tensions in the home. School places were available to children with additional needs, but

parents did not feel it was safe to send clinically 'at risk' children or children with strong anxieties back to the school environment at this time.

- Children with medical and other support needs were not receiving their appointments or consultations which was stressful and was considered to have had a negative impact on well-being.
- For some children with autism, not being able to access their specialist schools was difficult in regards to their expectations of regularity.
- For some families, the children had developed severe mental health concerns related to attending school and their parents chose to keep the children at home.
- Some parents expressed that the school was not prepared to support children who had difficulties in returning to school and seemed ignorant of the reasons for parents and children not wanting to attend.
- Some working practices had to be modified to support children who found school to be emotionally and psychologically difficult to attend.
- During isolated outbreaks of coronavirus in schools, children were sent home for two weeks. Some parents felt that school work demands also being sent home were unachievable.
- Teachers, parents and children were faced with additional stresses to encourage children to reach their 'age related' expected level of education. This was considered impractical.
- For several parents, the strains of their children being at home for two weeks whilst they were working from home led to negative outcomes.
- As more parents were facing increased work demands, the reliance on the use of screens also increased as a means of occupying children.
- Children spending long periods of time looking at screens was perceived as problematic for many parents, but they felt there were no other options. It was encouraged by schools. Concerns were expressed about age-inappropriate material.
- There were issues with children playing online games surrounding peer groups playing 18+ games and encouraging/bullying others to do so.
- Generally, most parents felt that the second lockdown was more stressful than the first. The good weather of the first lockdown was gone and employed parents were now expected to undertake high workloads often alongside home schooling demands.
- Parents who were adult learners, struggled to balance their own online learning with childcare and home schooling.
- Some parents commented that schools did not offer financial support to parents who were home schooling.
- Some families felt safer inside the home than outside the home and thoughts of leaving the house brought on anxiety. Worries of catching covid at school has affected some children's wish to not attend school. Schools were seen by some parents as the super spreader environments.
- Some children who have had a history of personal trauma or PTSD have found it difficult to find escape through socialising and have been forced to think more about their traumatic experiences.
- Children were going to school with their friends but did not understand why they could not socialise out of school.
- Some parents were concerned about how social isolation could affect children long-term. The absence of extra-curricular activities was seen as a negative for many families.

- Many people feel that rules were unclear and some were unaware of what the restrictions were. More families were inclined to break the rules if they felt the needs were strong enough.
- Many people were perceived to no longer be acting like there was a lockdown.
- Parents generally expressed feelings that the lockdown had been mismanaged and that the different types of restrictions had caused confusion.
- A number of parents felt that the lockdowns should be stricter.

### **During the Third Lockdown** – 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Despite the Government giving indications that children would be returning to school following the Christmas break, a significant spike in COVID-19 cases and a feeling that the spread of coronavirus was not being controlled, led to the Prime Minister announcing a third national lockdown, this time with the majority of children to be learning from home. As such this lockdown was more similar to the first lockdown in terms of children not being expected to attend school and for the family home to become a site of formal education. However, unlike the first lockdown, many more parents were now in a position to work from home or go into work because either their employers had adapted to fully support and sometimes embrace home working, or because the parents were classified as critical/key workers. Since the government expanded their classification of what constitutes a critical/key worker, this also meant that the schools had to offer teaching provision for more children of such parents. Findings from the third lockdown include:

- The categorisations of key/critical workers were thought to have expanded and more parents were eligible to send their children to school.
- Educators reported that the classrooms were fuller than they were expecting and that schools did not have the same feeling of emptiness as they experienced during the first lockdown.
- Teachers were considered to be making more of an effort and parents were receiving much more support at home with more work being given to the children. Some parents felt it was too much work.
- Some parents said that their teachers were in regular communication with their children and some schools in the state sector were receiving online group lessons.
- There were still marked differences between schools in terms of how they worked with their pupils. Some created a full day structured around a normal timetable, whereas other set more relaxed targets.
- Parents found that the younger children needed much more attention and support than the older children.
- Some parents felt that the home-schooling environment was good for the children when it was tailored to support the child's specific interests.
- Some parents were told that their home schooling had been highly effective and that their children were on target with what they would have been expected to know had they been at school.
- Other parents perceived that their younger children were not reaching the same levels of development as their older siblings had at a similar age.
- Parents whose children were in school felt that it was good for them to be there and that it gave them feelings of normality. This was particularly true for SEND children who thrive under regularity and routines.

- Some parents of SEND children felt that school was the right place for them to be, whereas others felt the schools were too risky in terms of contracting coronavirus.
- One parent of a disabled child reported that the school had low expectations for the child moving into the world of work and therefore little effort was made to support their home learning and education during lockdown. They noticed this in relation to their other children who did not have a disability. Specialist learning materials for their disabled child were not provided.
- Children throughout the sample were using more technology and although there have been numerous perceived benefits for learning, education and entertainment, parents were concerned that too much screen time was unhealthy.
- Some children were continuing to express concerns about attending school for mental health reasons. Some were concerned about the risks of catching coronavirus, for some, school leads to anxiety and for others, separation from the family home is a cause of worry.
- Educators also worry about the safety of school environments and were concerned about catching coronavirus whilst at work.
- Some families have stopped seeing vulnerable members of the family such as grandparents since their children have returned to school, out of fears that they may be carrying the virus. As such, some support bubbles ceased to be able to function.
- Since parents and children were spending more time together at home with their parents, and since their parents were now working from home, some children were exposed to more “mature” environments connected with the day-to-day lives of adults.
- Some parents were concerned that they had possibly spent too much time in adult company and this may affect their ability to interact with other children when returning to school.
- Several parents were increasingly interested in considering home schooling their children either on a full-time or part-time basis in the future. This was particularly important to those parents whose children did not want to return to school since they had developed mental health problems associated with attendance.

### **Summary**

In the first lockdown, there was a significant change to the lifestyles of British families in which parents and children were able to spend much more time together without the demands of work and school. Generally, this led to improved family bonds, better communication, happier households and positive outcomes. Conversely, in rare cases some families felt ‘trapped’ together, which led to increasing domestic tensions and negative outcomes. These negative outcomes were often associated with those families who had additional support needs. Rather than gaining additional support during lockdowns, when perhaps they needed it, these families had support taken away. Perceptions of the success of home learning and education outside of a formal school setting were often associated with perceptions of well-being. All parents, irrespective of circumstances appeared engaged and committed to supporting their children’s development.

In the second lockdown, parents who had previously found home schooling a chore or stressful, were better supported with their children being in school. However, this also meant that the parents adjusted their lifestyle to take on more work responsibilities. This led to difficulties when children were sent home for two weeks at a time due to outbreaks of COVID-19 within their class. British families perceived the second lockdown as more stressful and conflicting ideas regarding appropriate, acceptable and aspirational behaviours concerning social distancing and safety, were exacerbated by unclear and inconsistent government guidance.

In the third national lockdown more people were experiencing working from home full-time, alongside facing obligations to support their children's education from home. This unmanageable situation led to children often being placed in front of an educational or entertainment screen, whilst the parents themselves were sat in front of a work screen. Many of the bonding experiences between parents and children that took place in relation to home schooling during the first lockdown were lost. Some parents expressed feelings of guilt regarding the placement of their children in front of a screen and some were concerned about health implications. However, it was generally felt by these parents that they had no choice. Schools were now sending children significant amounts of work to be completed at home which was helpful but also interfered with some of the impromptu shared experiences families enjoyed during the first lockdown. The third lockdown has generally been perceived as more stressful again and the advances and gains in well-being made during the first lockdown have only partially transferred.

Schools in the state sector significantly improved the support they were offering home learners to a level which matched the private schools' support offered during the first lockdown. Many more learning materials were provided including online lessons.

### **Recommendations**

1. We suggest that **new methods of measuring and assessing learning over the lockdown periods** are investigated which may be based on experiential developments rather than those which are curriculum based. It may be that children who experienced lockdown may have benefitted from spending more time in the company of adults and may better understand psycho-emotional complexities and the value of forming strong emotional bonds.
2. Families who have additional support needs seem to have been significantly negatively affected as a result of the lockdowns and rather than receiving more support, they have been receiving less. This **failing of the most vulnerable families, needs further investigation** and efforts must be made to redress this inequality.
3. Positive experiences of the first national lockdown in terms of the improvements for many families' well-being which were associated with more family time together and the development of stronger bonds, also seems to be connected with a decrease in work and school commitments. This has been further evidenced in the third lockdown when increased work and school obligations have led to less family bonding time and given rise to increased stress levels. **Lessons must be learned concerning work-life balance.**
4. More effort needs to be made by schools to **understand why children may experience anxiety in schools** and do not want to attend. There have been a significant number of cases in which pupils have connected school with anxiety. Given that schooling is compulsory, these parental reports of children's anxieties in association with school requires immediate attention.
5. The policy of allowing children to attend school during the second lockdown, changed employers' perceptions of employee's needs in comparison to the first lockdown. As such, expectations of productivity increased. This can be seen in both positive and negative lights. These expectations continued into the third lockdown, except children were no longer expected to attend school. This led to feelings of significant stress for parents who felt that the third lockdown was more difficult to manage. **Employers should be scrutinised on how they support parents** who are home schooling during national emergencies.
6. For various reasons, children have been experiencing more screen time which has been perceived as being negative for their health and well-being. Avenues for **supporting children**

**to spend more time learning away from screens should be explored** should subsequent lockdowns occur.

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**PROJECT DETAILS**

**British Families in Lockdown Study**

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