

Written evidence from Helen's Place Educational Consultancy

The COVID-19 School Closures: Effects on Learning and Teaching for Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

Dr Helen Ross

Founder and Owner

Helen's Place Educational Consultancy

As an SEND professional and researcher, I believe that evidence-based policy making is vital. I am providing evidence to the committee as the needs of those with SEND are often inadequately addressed. My professional, class-based work combined with my research and consultancy experience located me ideally to connect with families and other teachers. This research was done in real-time with COVID-19 school closures in order to gain dynamic and raw insights as a basis to generate practical, evidence-based policy recommendations.

I provide expert advice and research consultancy through 'Helen's Place'. My research explores stakeholder experiences of SEND provision within the mainstream education sector, focussing on the empowerment of young people to take ownership of their own learning journeys. I have consulted for the British Dyslexia Association, The Committee for Science and Technology, and Wiltshire Local Authority. I am a fully qualified special needs teacher, Dyslexia/SpLD Assessor and former SENCO, currently working in a mainstream school.

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Executive Summary and Key Recommendations

Questions

This paper discusses research undertaken in April and May 2020 to address the question:

How have the 2020 COVID-19 school closures affected educational provision for young people with special educational needs and disability?

This question is separated into sub-questions in parts 2 and 3, which delineate teachers' and parents'/carers' views.

Method

This study used an online survey, disseminated via social media and sent to schools between 7th April 2020 and 10th May 2020. Both closed and open questions were used (Yates, 2005). Multi-modal, qualitative and statistical (using PSPP v42.2.3) analysis of data from 81 responses (32 parents/carers and 49 teachers) was undertaken.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Parents felt that communication, particularly live and/or face-to-face sessions, was key to supporting their children. Some parents felt that teachers lacked confidence supporting online learning, not using technology well. I recommend:

- Training using online platforms for teachers
- Personalised communication with parents/carers during closures and prior to opening.
- Exploration of schools' learning platforms to provide real-time interactions without compromising safeguarding

While schools are partially-closed, teachers noted that lack of resources impacted on students' ability to access learning. I suggest:

- Provision of resources e.g. laptops and/or dongles to facilitate access to learning for students (one school had a loan scheme) with appropriate training.

Parents and teachers were currently less concerned, about academic progress, viewing social and emotional support as key to re-engagement at school. However, they felt exam-classes needed focus. I recommend:

- Curricular focus on social and emotional support.
- Increased access to support such as ELSAs
- Prompt, clear guidance from examining bodies for the academic year 2020-2021.

Part 1: Rationale and Method

1.1 Data Gathering

This study explored teachers' and families' educational experiences during COVID-19, addressing the question:

How have the 2020 COVID-19 school closures affected educational provision for young people with special educational needs and disability?

Survey data from 49 teachers and 32 parents were collected between 7th April and 10th May 2020, then stored in line with the Data Protection Act (2018). The study followed BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018). With these in mind, the author decided that consulting young people at present may cause them harm due to the sensitive nature of their current educational situation. Therefore, parents/carers and schools were contacted via email, social media and through snowball sampling within the author's own networks (Bryman, 2012).

1.2 Data Analysis

Following statistical testing in PSPP v42.2.3., qualitative data were analysed. Initial reading of question responses delineated broad themes, which then were detailed on further readings. On 'data saturation' (Glaser, 1978), coding was ceased. Thematic qualitative analysis was connected with statistical information for triangulation and 'completeness' of understanding (Bryman, 2012).

1.3 Limitations

Although young people's voices are central to SEND provision, (DfE and DfH, 2015; The Stationary Office, 2014) here, the author did not consult young people to avoid potential harm due to discussion of this current situation. Future work will sensitively focus on young people's experiences.

The sample is small, self-selecting and not representative of the population nationally. This limits statistical tests possible; underlying assumptions are violated, reducing test reliability and validity. The survey was undertaken online; where families cannot access technology, they could not contribute to this survey. Future work will aim to explore their educational experiences during COVID-19.

Part 2: Parents and Carers

2.1 Do children usually use technology at school?

Two-thirds of parents reported that their children used no assistive technology at school. Cramér's V showed no statistically significant association between young people's school-type and their ability to access technology at home versus school, or their use of technology in school. However, assumptions underpinning test validity were violated so testing is inconclusive.

Open ended responses expanded on this. Parents whose children used technology more believed that children could better access information, work independently and complete work online. Insufficient devices was a barrier to students use of technology at home. One parent stated: "We only have one small device and it is a bit rubbish. Can't afford a new one."

2.2 Is work appropriately 'pitched' for students with SEND?

Most parents (circa two-thirds) felt that work was pitched appropriately for their children. However just under one third felt it was too difficult. 'Cognition and learning' which includes dyslexia and moderate learning difficulties, was the most widely declared need in both groups. Statistical tests suggested an association between parental views on difficulty of work and their children's need; small sample size necessitates further exploration to further delineate this connection.

Where parents perceive 'pitching' as too hard, they were doubtful about teachers adapting/differentiating work. One parent noted, "I do not have any evidence that they have ... we have had to adapt it". Where work was appropriately pitched, parents commented on the good communication from teachers, provision of online materials (from special schools) and multisensory resources.

2.3 Do children and young people find learning easier at home or school?

Data show almost half of parents think their children find home-learning harder than school. Tests suggested that difficulty in learning at home is associated with students' type of school and the submission format of learning (whether online or paper copies). Students attending mainstream secondary schools and 'other' schools most frequently found home-learning more difficult. Qualitative data detail 'other' types of school attended. Where children attend special schools, parents found work inaccessible for their children due to their complex needs.

Where work was submitted entirely online, parents felt this made home-learning harder. Although this could be linked to technology used, there was no statistically significant association between online-working and perceived difficulty of home-learning. Surprisingly, parents' perception of children's difficulty in learning at home was not significantly associated with children's area of need.

2.4 How are young people with ECHPs accessing learning at home?

Cramér's V shows association between perceived difficulty in home-learning and EHCPs: those with EHCPs find learning at home more difficult. Parents' responses elucidate why: "[We're] not specialist teachers trained in an environment set up for educating kids with SEN." Parents said that young people found changes in routine challenging, which then impacted their capacity to work. They felt their children's relationships were negatively affected.

2.5 How confident do parents/carers feel in schools' ability to deliver online learning?

Cramér's V showed no association with perceptions of pitching level or difficulty in home-learning. Qualitative data provide insight. Where parents were confident in online provision, they found communication with them and their child to be personalised, differentiated and appropriate to their needs. High value is put on 'live' lesson delivery such as Zoom meetings, or video clips for support. Where parents

were dissatisfied, they cited lack of personal contact, and poorly structured work programmes. They were also cognizant of teachers' difficulties of working remotely.

2.6 Moving forwards

Parents were asked what aspects of technology or working practices encountered during 'lockdown' that they would like to carry through post-closures. A significant theme, arising here was that access to ICT, internet and flexibility were key elements of SEND provision that should be carried forwards. Most responses alluded to the flexibility that working online brings. For example, where disabilities impede attendance, parents suggested that home-study be an option so that learning is not missed. Assistive technology, such as text-to-speech, cameras, and laptops was suggested to mitigate literacy difficulties so that students can work independently. Parents also felt that internet access, online activities/tasks and work submission would be beneficial to their children, "as this is getting them used to how things work 'in the real world'".

Part 3: Teachers and Educators

3.1 How do teachers differentiate work for students with SEND in school?

Common forms of teacher differentiation were dyslexia-friendly measures e.g. PowerPoints, reduced notetaking, and writing prompts such as sentence starters. Students were also given visual timetables, personalised task instructions and task checklists. Any connection between type-of need and differentiation strategies is unclear, as we only have general information on teachers' current students.

Statistical analysis shows association between differentiation strategies and teachers' training; their students' needs; and the type of technology that students use in the classroom. Teachers' differentiation strategies appear linked to the type of technology used by students. Further exploration is necessary, as exploring schools' capacity for in-class technology use lies outside the scope of this study.

3.2 What types of assistive technology do students use in class?

Teachers were asked what assistive technology students with SEND use in class. Laptops were most commonly used, alongside tablets (such as iPads or Android PCs). This was often in combination with speech-to-text/text-to-speech technologies. eg e-reader pens. Statistical testing highlighted strong association between children's school type, and the type of technology used. While young people from mainstream secondary schools had the largest number of technology 'users' according to teachers, 4 teachers reported no use of technology in their current setting. This contrasts with teachers in independent schools who all reported use of technology. This is congruent with evidence that suggests affluent parents are likely to bear costs of assistive technology (Ross, Pending). Teachers also reported use of hearing aids, and loops/microphones, and Dictaphones.

3.3 How is work set for students during school closures?

Online work setting was most prevalent: over 60% of teachers set work solely online, while 30 percent used paper and online methods. There was no significant association between school-type and how work was set. There was association between work-setting methods and teachers' experience of 'Speech and Language' difficulties but not other types of need. This may be because work-setting policies are set at school-level not individual teacher level.

3.4 What systems are in place to support distance learning?

Teachers deliver online learning in many ways. Commonly MSTEams was used. Many schools use Show My Homework as it was already used, whereas many schools had recently adopted MSTEams. Teachers largely reported that they do not deliver live lessons or pre-recorded lessons. Where they did, statistical testing showed association between school-type (eg independent, mainstream) and delivery of live/pre-recorded lessons. Other VLEs such as Class DoJo and Google Groups/Hangouts/Classroom were used for setting work and communicating with parents. Kerboodle and Mathswatch were used by teachers for online activities. Some teachers used Zoom for communication with parents, lesson delivery and setting work. While statistical testing suggested association between systems for delivery and type of school, or with the type of lessons delivered, this is likely directed by school policy not teachers' choice.

Mainstream teachers reported higher disengagement levels than those in independent schools. Reasons for this were not associated with type of need, or how work was set. Further work is needed to better understand lack of engagement.

3.5 Barriers and Moving Forward

3.5.1 Barriers in remote learning

Prior to COVID-19, most teachers surveyed had not remotely delivered learning. Before closures, some teachers were given information on lesson delivery. Where training was received, it was usually in the form of in-house emails or guides, webinars or through staff collaboration. However, a large proportion of staff received no training, despite using unfamiliar software for lesson delivery. Where students disengaged from learning, teachers suggested lack of resources such as devices/internet access, or parents working, as barriers. Despite communicating with parents and students, many teachers viewed lack of face-to-face contact as a barrier to engagement. However, school policies tended to prevent this. Differentiation was undertaken through personalised learning programmes and activities, using online platforms such as Kerboodle. However, where students' literacy is weak, this impedes access to learning; video tutorials, text-to-speech and parental support mitigated this. Teachers also reported students' difficulties in prioritising tasks set. Some believed that working from home not school was problematic.

3.5.2 Long Term Effects

Teachers felt that disadvantaged students and those with SEND would be the most impacted by school closures long term. They felt that social relationships would suffer. Teachers felt that anxiety around returns to school would be problematic, particularly for students who need consistent routine. Further change would upset students' 'new normal'. Concern for year 10 students was noted due to potential disruption of exams. While some teachers were concerned students might lose core-knowledge, requiring significant 'catchup' time, most teachers were more concerned about the social and emotional effects of long-term school closures.

3.5.3 Good Practice Moving Forwards.

Many teachers believe there will be significant difficulties on returning to school. They suggest that focus on social and emotional support rather than pure 'academics' would be beneficial to students. They felt that pupils need stress-management strategies, and, prior to any change, clear communication/pre-warning is vital for pupils with SEND, particularly those with autistic tendencies. They also believed that students would benefit from continuation of some remote-learning strategies as schools return:

- Online research skills: both for teachers' ongoing CPD, and to support students' independent learning.
- Online learning: provides flexibility for students (whose needs affect their attendance) to keep up with work.
- Group/project work platforms: support communication between staff and students, and their families.
- Pre-recorded tutorials: to be sent to students before/after lessons to (re)visit topics at their own pace.
- Regular check-ins with students: particularly for older students, this is useful for supporting them when they are absent from college (FE) or school.
- Focus on pastoral support: students have benefitted from 1:1 contact in lockdown and teachers assert importance of focus on social/pastoral support.

Part 4: Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Communication

Parents felt that communication was key to supporting their children, highlighting importance of live or face-to-face sessions. Some parents felt that teachers lacked confidence in facilitating online learning and used technology poorly. Training received by teachers appeared rather ad-hoc, due to the timeline of closures. However, as schools re-open, I recommend the following:

- Training on online delivery platforms should be available for teachers to provide online/distance learning
- Regular contact with students/families with clear guidelines on its nature/frequency

4.2 Expectations and Practicalities

There was a disjoint in expectations around live lessons. Most teachers did not deliver live or pre-recorded face-to-face sessions, while parents felt this would have been very helpful. Clarity around this is needed:

- Personalised communication with parents/carers should be undertaken during closures and prior to opening so that students can prepare.
- Schools should explore capacities of their learning platforms to provide real-time interactions (many school policies prevent use of personal phones or accounts). For example, using MSTEams or Skype for telephone calls; use of Zoom or other project software for voice chats. Staff should then be trained in this.

4.3 Short-term

In the short term, while schools are still disrupted, teachers noted that lack of resources impacted on students' ability to access learning. Where students with SEND have access to appropriate technology, this can be beneficial (Ross, pending), if students and staff are appropriately trained.

- Provision of resources such as laptops and/or dongles to facilitate access to learning for students (one school had a loan scheme).
- Provision of appropriate training for students and staff for remote teaching and learning.

4.4 Reopening

Parents and teachers were less concerned, in the first instance, about academic progress., viewing social and emotional support such as increased availability of ELSAs, as key to re-engagement at school. For year 10s and college students, teachers and parents were concerned about their engagement with learning, due to disruption of exam teaching. Therefore, I suggest

- Updated curricula to focus on social and emotional well-being.
- Increased access to emotional and social, and pastoral support such as ELSAs
- Clear guidance from examining bodies about students' assessment and examinations in the coming academic year (2020-2021). This will allow schools to plan accordingly.

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