



"Lessons from lockdown - could pandemic schooling help change education?"

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Abstract

This paper uses qualitative data from a survey of Higher Education students, who are also parents, to reveal changing attitudes towards, and perceptions of, education during the periods of pandemic school closures in England. Thematic analysis reveals the stresses of 'homeschooling' and how parents reacted and adapted to these, including adjusting ideas around education. The course of this adaptation mirrors the changing attitudes of parents found in pre-pandemic home education. The paper suggests that post pandemic education could be enriched by taking forward some of these ideas, particularly greater flexibility, personalisation and child autonomy in education.

Key words: home education, pandemic schooling, home schooling, educational models, school closure, lockdown education

Introduction

On the 25 March 2020, in response to the global Covid 19 pandemic, schools across England closed their doors to all but children of key workers and those designated as vulnerable. They reopened in September 2020 with further closures at the beginning of 2021 and many children having reduced attendance due to Covid restrictions in the meantime. Whilst schools acted as overseers, the day to day responsibility of maintaining education passed to parents during this period.

This research concentrates on the experiences over this period of a cohort of parents, who were themselves Higher Education students at the time of the school closures. There has been much speculation on the longer term consequences for children of the break to school education which has consistently insisted that a return to normal is not just desirable but also a form of rescue for 'lost learning' (Pensiero, Kelly, Bokhove 2020, Greenway and Eaton-Thomas 2020). However, alongside this the Children's Commissioner for England, Rachel de Souza, has suggested that we also consider 'the positive things' that have been 'discovered during the past year, and do our best to hold on to them for the future' (Children's Commissioner 2021a, no pagination). In this spirit, this paper, rather than concentrating on the losses incurred, takes a similar view to that of Bubb and Jones (2020) that this period can also be considered as a learning experience from which insights into the intersections between school education, education at home and family life can be used to strengthen relationships between school and home and to enhance educational opportunities. This is not to disregard the extreme stress placed on some children and families nor to lessen the difficulties which many have suffered during this time. Whilst these are beyond the scope of this paper it is acknowledged that there have been multiple experiences of education during lockdown of which this paper explores only

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3 a small part. As a researcher into home education, the intention is to consider insights from pandemic
4 schooling which might aid understanding of education in all its various forms.
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7 The unparalleled transference of educational responsibility through the pandemic is most commonly
8 referred to as 'home schooling'. Home schooling however, is certainly not unprecedented and, to
9 preserve the uniqueness of what has happened, some have called for the experiences of 2020 and early
10 2021 to be referred to as 'pandemic schooling', more precisely encapsulating the context in which this
11 took place and the position in which families and children found themselves (Downey 2020, Hardy,
12 2020). In accordance with this, I will be using the term 'pandemic schooling' to signify the
13 educational move from school to home that was enforced during this period.
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19 Whilst pandemic schooling and home education are very differently inspired phenomena, there are
20 also clear parallels in terms of the immediate responsibility placed on parents, the home base, and the
21 family relationships and resources available that play a part in shaping education. Examining how
22 parents adapt to home education following withdrawal from school gives an insight into the
23 challenges and benefits of the situation and shows a path of adaptability with which pandemic
24 comparisons can be drawn. This approach helps to elucidate what home educators' experiences in
25 general might be able to tell us about adaptation to pandemic schooling in particular. Beyond that, it
26 also shows us how learning relationships, environment and opportunities can be developed in the
27 home.
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34 **Home Education in England**

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36 Section 7 of the 1996 Education Act outlines that education is a parental responsibility under English
37 law. This is most commonly enacted through delegation to schools. However, home education,
38 always legal in the UK, has become an increasingly popular choice with numbers growing steadily
39 from the 1980s thus mirroring the global situation (Ray, 2021). Whilst no UK official statistics are
40 kept, estimates for England by the home education charity, Education Otherwise stood at 69,791 on 1
41 October 2020 (Charles-Warner, 2020) with a pandemic / post pandemic rise now expected to plateau
42 and decrease. The success, or otherwise, of home education, either in particular cases or in general,
43 may be hard to ascertain for both practical and philosophical reasons (Author, 2015); the practice has
44 ardent advocates, as well as attracting wide spread criticism. Reports that it works well and is a sound
45 educational choice for at least some children and young people (Rothermel, 2004; Freedman, 2021),
46 may be tempered by widespread reservations (for a few examples among many see Hill, 2015;
47 Lubienski and Brewer, 2015; Weale, 2020).
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56 Bearing this out, is the way in which rising numbers have been cited as a cause for concern by both
57 governmental and media sources. This unease has covered a number of issues including attendance at
58 illegal settings or unregistered schools, children missing education and off rolling. The latter practice
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3 refers to evidence that parents have been coerced by schools to remove their children from the school
4 register although no alternative education provision has been properly arranged or agreed to (Speck,
5 2019). These children then add to the numbers referred to as 'home educated'.

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8 A call for evidence by the Parliamentary Education Committee in its enquiry into 'home education'
9 (UK Parliament, 2021) illustrates how the term has expanded into an umbrella which covers a variety
10 of circumstances "including where they [home educated children] may attend unregistered schools,
11 have been formally excluded from school, or have been subject to 'off-rolling';" (UK Parliament,
12 2021, no pagination)

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15 Other commentators have challenged this use of language and called for greater clarity, arguing that
16 the conflation of disparate groups under this term is both confused and confusing,

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19 "Politicians need clarity in their own minds that illegal education is not elective home education.
20 Neither are coerced education, abandoned education nor state-funded out of school education." (HE
21 Byte, 2020, no pagination)

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24 This paper will adhere to this precision in language, not as a matter of taking sides in the debate nor as
25 a form of advocacy, but rather as a matter of political and educational precision that allows 'home
26 educators' as a particular group in a particular educational position to be clearly identified from
27 others. Thus 'pandemic schooling' refers to children whose education moved from school to home as
28 a result of Covid school closures and 'home education' refers to families where an active choice to
29 pursue education from home has been made.

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32 Reasons for home education often refer to push factors such as lack of support in school, inadequate
33 SEND provision or bullying (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Thomas 1998; Smith et al 2020; Neuman and
34 Guterman, 2016; Parsons and Lewis 2010) so that pull factors such as flexibility, personalised
35 learning, and a strong sense of family life, as well as increased pedagogical creativity, children being
36 actively involved in educational decisions, and the release from standardisation, which it also offers,
37 tend to be overlooked (McAvoy, 2014). However, as families adapt to home educating, these latter
38 factors appear to become increasingly important (Kendall and Taylor, 2016; Thomas 1998, Other and
39 Author, 2007) and to factor as consistent characteristics of this type of education.

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42 Perhaps due to the general mistrust in the practice, in the swift and dramatic turn of school to
43 pandemic education, the accumulated expertise of the home education community was not actively
44 called into play. Instead the move was largely depicted, by the media, social media, academics and
45 government as a shift of educational practice from one location to another (see for examples: Cohen,
46 2020: Ellen, 2020; Foster, 2020: Richardson, 2020; Ritschel, 2020; Weale; 2020). In this, the kitchen
47 table became the work desk, the parent became the teacher, the school work schedule transferred to
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3 the home and there were even suggestions that children should wear uniform and have school-style
4 scheduled breaks (Rose and Pannett, 2020). This perspective echoes the ‘transplant model’ of parental
5 involvement in education as described by Dale (2009) in which educational expertise is the province
6 of professionals who may delegate some of their competences on to parents but who continue to retain
7 both control and power. From it arises a deficit model, that home cannot provide what school can
8 (Children’s Commissioner, 2021), rather than a positive model of the strengths that might be inherent
9 in home learning and the possibilities and opportunities which it offers and that school cannot
10 (McAvoy 2014). This model has been repeated and extended both politically (Andrew et al, 2020)
11 and in research (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020) with the message that pandemic schooling has been a
12 bad experience for children that has resulted in ‘lost learning’ and which will have ongoing
13 detrimental consequences for the generation of children affected.
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21 **Characteristics of Home Education**

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23 Thomas (1998) argues that there is no such thing as a typical home educating family, however, some
24 characteristics of home education do seem to arise from the literature. These will be discussed here
25 with the caveat that research on home education is mostly qualitative (although not exclusively for
26 example Isenberg, 2007; Kunzman and Gaither 2013; Ray, 2017; Rothermel 2004; Rothermel, 2005),
27 uses largely self-selected samples and is therefore likely to focus on families who have adapted
28 successfully to home education and who feel that it has worked well for them.
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34 ***Flexibility***

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36 Flexibility is frequently cited as a key draw, as well as a chief characteristic, of home education (Gann
37 and Carpenter, 2017, Parson and Lewis 2010, Thomas 1998, Jones 2016, Kendall and Taylor 2016).
38 Thomas (1998) found that parents who began in fairly formal fashion, emulating school practices at
39 home, generally became more relaxed and flexible in their provision. Much of school practice is
40 based on the need for one teacher to cater to the learning requirements of up to 30 children and the
41 necessary structure to enable this. This is clearly not the case at home and, as families come to realise
42 this, they take up increasingly flexible practices. Thomas (1998) attributes this to the one to one
43 nature of learning at home and the personalised and intensive parent/child interaction. These negate
44 the need for procedures such as marking work, it being possible to correct and discuss mistakes as
45 soon as they occur. In addition, relatively large amounts of study can be accomplished in shorter time
46 periods given the intensity of one to one interaction. As a consequence, timetables tend to be
47 foreshortened and children’s time freed up for other activities.
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56 The one to one situation means that learning sessions can continue as long as interest and energy last,
57 rather than being timetabled to pre-set periods. Learning activities may then evolve more organically,
58 potentially led by discovery, questioning or curiosity, from one subject area to another. Some home
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3 educators go on to claim that this makes a pre-organised curriculum unnecessary or to be used only
4 as a point of reference. Learning can spring up at unscheduled moments in the day or during the
5 course of other activities and looser learning environments allow the freedom to follow up on
6 unplanned possibilities and subjects.
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10 Similarly, Other and Author (2007) and Author (2016) found that parents take advantage of
11 children's interests, questions, motivations and energies, as and when these arise, building learning
12 around these unscheduled and spontaneous opportunities rather than around a set timetable. Greater
13 flexibility may allow parents to become more creative (Gann and Carpenter, 2017) and for children to
14 practise more autonomy in educational decisions (Parsons and Lewis, 2010; Kendall and Taylor,
15 2016). Jones (2013) argues that this is, in turn, a key encourager of engagement and motivation, an
16 argument supported by Ryan and Deci's assertion (2017) that greater autonomy leads to increased
17 motivation. In terms of pandemic schooling, Greenaway and Eaton Thomas (2020) found that an
18 evolving, flexible approach includes children choosing both activities and learning styles, with parents
19 increasingly willing to embrace this kind of flexibility as they acclimatise to education at home.
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27 ***Personalisation***

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29 That greater personalisation in education is a worthy goal attracts general agreement with Reimers
30 and Schleicher (2020) arguing that moves towards this are a potential beneficial outcome of the
31 educational upheavals of the pandemic period. The increased flexibility allowed by home education
32 is generally accompanied by greater personalisation and the involvement of children in their education
33 as decision makers (Thomas 1998; Other and Author, 2007; Author, 2016; Parson and Lewis 2010;
34 Jones, 2013). These studies agree that children's interests appear to be a guiding feature of home
35 education and a springboard into other subjects, particularly the foundation subjects of maths, reading
36 and computing skills. Other and Author (2007) found a wide range of interests including animals,
37 technology, singing, computers, music and crafts which children pursued at home, often to advanced
38 levels of expertise and sometimes into unusual spheres, one such example being a girl who had
39 acquired the skills and know how to transform a freshly shorn sheep's fleece into a finished garment
40 of clothing. These interests are described by one parent in this research as 'ruling passions',
41 occupying much of children's time and energies. Greenaway and Eaton-Thomas (2020) similarly
42 describe the customisation of learning to children's individual interests as 'integral to home-
43 schooling' (p 529). They describe how engagement with interests leads to 'disguised' learning in
44 which children 'pick up' skills and knowledge as adjuncts to other interests. In other research this
45 type of learning is described as 'incidental' (Jones, 2013, Thomas 1998, Other and Author, 2007).
46 The potential of this type of learning is a central feature of Author's research (2016) on learning to
47 read at home where interests such as numbers, singing, nature, computers, TV watching, games and
48 toys lead incidentally into reading.
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3 This greater agency on the part of children and responsiveness by parents, appears to give rise to
4 education which is personalised beyond the level commonly achieved in school. Parsons and Lewis
5 (2010) also highlight the potential advantages of being able to work at the child's pace without
6 disheartening peer comparisons. For SEND children, home education offered a focus on the child and
7 his or her needs in a way often found very difficult to pursue alongside the needs of other children in
8 school (Kendall and Taylor, 2013). Personalisation is felt to motivate, sustain interest and to increase
9 children's own application. Although high levels of personalisation mean that learning may not take
10 place along pre-given trajectories, there appears to be some agreement that children's educational
11 needs, including those with SEND, can be satisfactorily met at home (Freedman, 2021; Kendall and
12 Taylor, 2013; Rothermel, 2004; Winstanley, 2009).

19 ***Family time / relationships***

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22 An emphasis placed on family time and the improvement of family relationships is often cited as a
23 motivation for, and an advantage of, home education. This can stem from the parental desire to watch
24 over children's religious, moral and social development (Kunzman, 2009; Thomas, 1998) through to a
25 desire for more family time. In a survey of 390 home educators, just over a quarter cited close
26 relationships and time together in response to a question on what home education meant to them
27 (Rothermel, 2005). This contrasts with the motivation to home educate given in the same research,
28 where only 2.88% of parents cited the desire to be with their children as their reason for beginning
29 home education. This can perhaps be explained by Rothermel's assertion that home education
30 changes parent and child relationships; also a point drawn out by Fensham-Smith (2022). Thomas
31 (1998) found a variety of relationship issues that either prompted withdrawal from school and/or
32 improved post withdrawal. These ranged from child distress and disruptive behaviour to depression,
33 anxiety and sibling bullying. All family relationships could be affected and parents reported
34 improvements once home education had begun.

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37 This theme is further extended by Barson (2015) who highlights that home education brings changes
38 to many areas of family life including financial, career and personal lives. Neuman and Avinam
39 (2015) describe this as a 'paradigmatic change in lifestyle' (p215). They found parents asking
40 fundamental questions about education and their understanding of a 'good' education, but also
41 reevaluating their general approach to life. This manifested in parents becoming more open to the
42 unpredictable and increasingly prepared to be responsive and to 'go with the flow'. Neuman and
43 Guterman (2016) argue that home educating parents take on a constructivist rather than rationalist
44 educational paradigm. In this shift, children become more active in the construction of their own
45 learning where knowledge is produced rather than acquired. These changes in approach and thinking
46 play into increasing flexibility and expansion of children's own agency and interests in structuring
47 education. Neuman and Guterman (2016) argue that this is indicative of a shift in fundamental ideas
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3 about what education 'is'. They found that home educating mothers replaced a rationalist
4 understanding of education based on pre decided approaches to given subject matter, with a
5 constructivist view where children build up knowledge through personal experiences rather than
6 through direct information transmission. Jones (2013) found that this change in thinking was, itself, a
7 way of forging closer relationships and creating supportive and encouraging learning environments.
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11 Research on families' reactions to pandemic schooling suggests a similar shift. Graham (2021) charts
12 re-evaluations from families in a small scale, qualitative study who consider home educating full time
13 following the pandemic experience. Their reasons centre on increased time together and a re-
14 evaluation of priorities. The current research continues to build on this, suggesting that, for some,
15 fundamental ideas about what education 'is' have been challenged by the experience of pandemic
16 schooling.
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21 22 ***Pressures*** 23

24 Part of the life style adjustment to home education includes parents coming to terms with new ideas
25 about their own lives as they adapt to the responsibilities of home education. This might entail career
26 and working or studying adjustments and new arrangements between partners for family
27 responsibilities (Neumann and Aviran, 2015). Thomas (1998) found a mixture of views on the
28 demands of home educating. Many parents commented on the claims it made on their time and
29 energies as well as feeling the enormity of the responsibility they had taken on. Barson (2015) notes
30 the compromises amongst the 34 parents she interviewed, including shifting to part time work, career
31 changes and financial loss.
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38 Barson (2015), Neumann and Aviran (2015) and Thomas (1998), all provide evidence that the
39 pressures of home education ease as parents adapt to the new life style. Neumann and Aviran (2015)
40 describe parents adjusting their views on their own self-fulfilment and the organisation of their own
41 lives. A common theme from their interviews is parents, over time, feel able to free themselves up
42 from detailed educational planning and structure and becoming more relaxed with the idea that
43 children's learning will occur anyway. Thomas (1998) notes how parents become less formal and
44 structured in educational approach as they relax into home education and more trusting of their own
45 judgements and educational understanding. Many parents saw this as a step forward in their own
46 personal development and family relationships with Neumann and Aviran (2015) describing a
47 reciprocal relationship between parental personal development and the home education process.
48 Home educating was seen as a fulfilling role in itself and one which offered parents opportunities in
49 different life directions rather than simply curtailing their career and financial options. Thomas
50 (1998) found parents were enthusiastic about the educational opportunities home education offered
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3 them whilst Neumann and Aviran (2015) describe parents becoming more challenging of ideas and
4 the world in general following the decision to home educate.
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7 Making the point that parents considered having young children to be time consuming regardless of
8 how or where they are educated, Barson's interviewees testified that they were able to pursue interests
9 of their own, often sharing these with their children and pursuing them together (Barson, 2015).
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12 Overall, Barson found that parents were adaptive and that although there was no overall common
13 strategy, they were, in general, satisfied with the ways in which they had created new educational and
14 life pathways for themselves and their children. Furthermore, for children taken out of school, home
15 education could come as a relief to parents and children alike. Kendall and Taylor (2014) report how
16 the children in their study 'were happier, more confident and far less anxious' (p 307), whilst parents
17 also found life easier without the stress of an unhappy and resistant child.
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22 Greenaway and Eaton Thomas (2020) found levels of parental anxiety, particularly about their own
23 inadequacy for the educational task, lack of knowledge and worry. They argue that this may also be
24 an indication of wider pandemic stress and lack of preparation time. It may also highlight the need for
25 certain levels of self confidence and educational awareness in moving away from the familiar and
26 finding ways to embrace the unknown. Crozier and Davies (2007) comment on the narrow and
27 prescribed role assigned to the parent in education. Home educators, by definition are breaking out of
28 this narrow role but may still have considerable difficulty in letting go of the normalised parent role
29 on the edge of education (Thomas 1998; Author 2015). Other and Author (forthcoming) are exploring
30 the idea that class, gender and other inequalities persist in home education relationships with Local
31 Authorities, just as Crozier (1997) found they affected home – school relationships. However, in so
32 far as parents' feelings beginning pandemic schooling parallel those of new home educators, it is
33 possible that parents may adapt and settle as they grow in confidence and accustom themselves to the
34 new way of life.
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44 **Methodology**

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46 The aim of this paper is to qualitatively explore the experience of student parents through pandemic
47 schooling. The research rests on an opportunistic rather than aims driven paradigm. This paper is
48 based on data from a survey aimed at uncovering experiences and feelings of university students, who
49 also happened to be parents, during the pandemic lockdowns. The research was generally aimed at
50 exploring the intersections between parenting and studentship. The theme of pandemic schooling was
51 introduced by the respondents, rather than specifically by the research questions. Analysis of these
52 references therefore captures a spontaneous, rather than directed line of thinking. The emergent aim
53 enabled by this, is to capture the educational reflections of parents as they live through and adapt to
54 the restrictions and opportunities of pandemic schooling. The comparison with home education is one
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of interest, not advocacy, and, as Rachel de Souza suggest (Children's Commissioner 2021a), to seek some positive meanings from the dark days of lock down.

Participants

A total of 91 students from 20 different higher education institutions took part in the survey. Of these, 85 were female and 6 male. 55 participants were studying at undergraduate level, 33 at post graduate and 3 participants were studying other courses. Seventy-one were studying fulltime and 20 part time. Seventy-two participants were married/co-habiting (of which five stated their male partner either works away or is unable to support with daily family logistics for various reasons). Eighteen were single parents and one respondent was a grandparent raising their grandchild. This sample is not representative of the wider population who were pushed into the position of pandemic schooling, nor indeed of those in higher education at the time. They were a self-selected sample and, whilst the research expresses a range of experiences, it should also be acknowledged that, as students themselves, the cohort is likely to embody particular characteristics including high levels of educational awareness, understanding, achievement and personal confidence. Crozier (1997) has argued the impact of class and gender on parent / school relations and this may also well have affected parent / education attitudes and relations through the pandemic school closures. Thus, the student/parent's experiences, whilst offering a particular view into the potential wider insights into pandemic schooling, proposes no remit for speculation on how far such views might be shared.

Participants were asked 20 questions across a range of parenting and study issues about their experiences through the three English lockdowns. The data used for analysis in this paper has been selected for its bearing on how parents felt about pandemic schooling through this period. No questions were directly asked about the pandemic schooling experience. Instead, references to this arose spontaneously, and prolifically, in the responses. Their organisation into themes has been conducted through a reflexive analytical approach (Braun and Clarke, 2020) and by taking an inductive stance through which repeated themes have been allowed to emerge from the data. The analysis has concentrated on the establishment and organisation of these themes through reflexive consideration (Strauss 1978 quoted by Waring, 2017). In line with this, a latent approach to analysis has been taken which considers the subtexts of the responses and the ideologies and assumptions underlying them (Braun and Clarke 2020).

Data has been selected from the responses to various open ended questions included in the survey. These questions asked respondents about their overall experience through lockdown, the challenges of lockdown parenting, their reflections on any life changes they would make to their post lockdown lives and what advice they would now give to parents entering a similar situation. Once responses which referred to pandemic schooling had been identified, these were extracted from the data and the

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3 recursive steps of familiarisation, coding, generation of themes, refinement and review were
4 undertaken (Braun and Clark, 2020). A wider stance was then taken to locate the personal
5 experiences shared in the data to the wider socio cultural context and particularly to understandings of
6 education and how these were both highlighted and altered through the pandemic context.
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10 This research falls under the designation of ‘Big Q’ research (Braun and Clarke, 2020) being
11 qualitative in technique and values, and seeking to understand and overview the pandemic schooling
12 experience from a personal and phenomenological view point. However, it bears within it also a more
13 post positivistic stance aimed at being recursively able to inform educational issues, particularly the
14 models of thinking on which education is predicated. To this end, a critical evaluation of socially
15 embedded meanings and structures is taken (Braun and Clarke, 2014) such that lessons may be
16 considered and re-evaluations made in the light of experience and, thence a questioning of the terms
17 under which we go forward in our post/inter pandemic world.
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23 Demographic details (participant number, gender, status, ages of children, full/part time and course)
24 are given in brackets after quotes. Where these are incomplete full, data was not given on the survey.
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28 **Findings and Discussion**

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30 Pandemic schooling was termed ‘home schooling’ throughout by participants.
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32 ***General***

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34 Sixty-nine of the 90 respondents (75.9%) said they had found balancing parenting and studying either
35 hard or very hard through the pandemic. Whilst many factors may have played into these feelings,
36 pandemic schooling was mentioned prolifically across the data either by direct or indirect references
37 to ‘home schooling’. This was an issue spontaneously raised across the range of questions. In the
38 questions ‘How would you summarise your overall experience of pandemic lockdown?’ and ‘What
39 has been your experience of being a parent during pandemic lockdown?’ pandemic schooling was
40 often a named feature. For example:
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47 Trying my best, but struggling to home school (p1 female, married with partner away, 1, 7, 9,
48 full time undergraduate)

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51 It has been difficult adapting to homeschooling (p2 female, co-parenting grandparent of 4
52 year old, undergraduate, full time)

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54 Homeschooling has been a nightmare (p3 female, married, 2 & 5, post grad)

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57 Isolation, homeschooling, motivation (p4 female, single parent, 5 children between 23 & 9)
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Pandemic schooling presented as a notable feature of the parents' experiences of the lockdown and cut across the demographics of the survey as a matter of concern. Across the range of questions the following themes arose as specific facets of the pandemic schooling experience.

Time pressure

Participants, as parents and students, were already busy people. Pandemic schooling was an additional pressure on studying, family commitments, running the home and, in some cases, part time working as well.

I don't have enough time for the list of things I need to do daily so something is always left out, whether it's the washing, cooking a proper dinner, doing school work with my 3 kids, watching lectures, catching up on readings or doing assignments (p5 female, married, 5,5 &6, fulltime, undergraduate)

I have to part-time work from home, do a full time research degree and home school two out of my three kids for two days a week. It just doesn't fit (p6, female, married, 7,9,11, fulltime, postgraduate)

Unable to fit everything in, work, home schooling, cleaning, exercise etc (p7, married female, 5 & 16, fulltime undergraduate)

Home school hasn't really been successful in our home. I don't have the time to sit over the children and make sure they work. (p8, female married, 14 & 11, full time, undergraduate)

Whether with older or younger children, pandemic schooling was seen and approached as a time consuming occupation taking full adult concentration and thus a significant portion of the day whilst encroaching on the time available for other activities. In this respect the sudden precipitation into pandemic schooling echoes the feelings of parents new to home education as discovered by Thomas (1998) and Barson (2015) where the newfound pressures of home education called for wide scale life adjustments and frequently involved moves such as giving up (full time) work.

Juggling activities

Because time was short, activities needed to be juggled in order to fit everything in:

Balancing homeschooling and lectures and assignments (p9, male, married, 5 &2, full time, undergraduate)

I have seen myself struggling to manage everything from work, to home schooling 4 kids to uni work too and running a home (p10, female, married, 4 children aged 5 – 15, fulltime undergraduate)

Activities such as teaching children, house work and studying were seen as separate from one another, each requiring dedicated time allowances so that spending time on one necessarily meant time was taken from another. Again, the squeeze on parental time echoes that of new home educators and the

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3 life style changes and compromises made as part of the adaptation to a new way of life (Thomas,
4 1998; Neuman and Aviran, 2015).

7 ***Requirements of different children***

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10 The theme of time pressure and multiple needs was further extended through reference to the
11 individual schooling needs of children. Children were seen to need different activities and attention
12 according to their ages, stages and abilities:

15 4 children in 4 key stages (p11, female, married, 16,13,10,7 part time, doctoral)

17 3 children home of different ages who need home schooling. (p12, female, married, 8, 5, 3,
18 full time, undergraduate)

20 This is further exacerbated when SEND are involved:

22 Child with special needs needing extra support (p13, female, married, 20,13,10 full time,
23 undergraduate)

25 Attempting to supervise schooling from 3 different schools for children who are all neuro-
26 diverse (p14, female, married disabled partner, 11,7,6 full time, undergraduate)

28
29 The parents in Kendall and Taylor's study (2013) found that individual needs of their SEND children
30 were frequently not met in school because it was impossible to meet the level of personalisation
31 required. From the student/parent returns, it seems that the desire to ensure personalised support was
32 embedded into their approach towards pandemic schooling, appearing as a prerequisite of successful
33 education at home and potentially surpassing what occurs in schools. However, it is an approach that
34 increased the pressure on parents.
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39 ***Standards / school expectations***

41 Parents' experiences of pandemic schooling were also predicated around the learning trajectories of
42 schooling. There was a sense of education being about keeping up with expectations on a pre-given
43 trajectory, indicative of the transplant model (Dale, 2009). Divergence from or 'falling behind' on
44 this trajectory indicates educational failure. Breaking away from school expectations requires a major
45 mind shift in educational thinking even for long term home educators (Author, 2015). In this cohort,
46 parents operating under the assumption of a return to school were anxious that their children should
47 maintain parity with school expectations. This pressure was heightened, on occasion, by school
48 contact. Some parents also mentioned their own fear of falling behind in their studies and this may
49 have leant extra vehemence to their anxieties for their children.
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56 I have been putting my all in making sure my daughter completes her work and doesn't fall
57 behind.(p15, female, married, 6 & 2, full time, undergraduate)

Trying to allow the children and myself not to fall behind in education. (p16, female, blended family, 11,9,8,4 full time, undergraduate)

School expectations causing additional stress and arguments. (p17, female, married, 7, full time, foundation year)

Expectations from all educational establishments of the same quality and quantity of work because it's online. (p14, female, married disabled partner, 11,7,6, full time undergraduate).

Technology

The specific requirements of pandemic schooling were further alluded to in terms of technology, particularly, the need for children to have access to computers. Online technology has been considered a staple of maintaining school / pupil contact through the pandemic and the requirement for all children to have access to technology has been seen to be of great political importance (Pensiero, Kelly, Bokhove 2020). On the other hand, promoting this as essential creates a deficit model for those who do not have (unlimited) access.

Not enough laptops for everyone to work (p18, female, married, 2, part time undergraduate)

Having one laptop has been extremely difficult. I haven't been able to attend online lectures as my children are using the laptop for home learning. (p19, female, married, 13,10,8, part time, undergraduate)

We have 1 laptop between me and 2 children. (p20, female, married, 7 & 10, full time undergraduate)

Taken together the attempts to emulate school at home, echo the transplant model of Dale (2009) where the access to computers is a tool of the transplant procedure that brings professional expertise into the home. It also echoes the deficit model associated with much of the political and media commentary on both pandemic and home education – that the home simply cannot provide what schools do and that therefore such education is lacking (Hope and Bird, 2021). On the other hand, the difficulties encountered resonate with the findings of Thomas (1998), that a school approach is frequently adopted by those new to home education, requiring life style adaptations and involving considerable stress (Thomas,1998; Barson, 2015; Neumann and Aviron, 2015).

Relationships

The distinctive nature of teaching and learning and its separation from other aspects of life continued through parents' perceptions that teacher and parent are distinct roles, separate from, and sometimes in conflict with, each other:

I have seen myself as a primary care giver and at times teacher to my 3 children (p21, female, married, 14,8,6 full time, undergraduate)

I do find the balance between parent and teacher is hard to get right. (p22, female, married husband away most of time, 7 & 10, full time undergraduate)

Not able to meet all the different personalities my child needs. Teacher, friend, counsellor, technology expert, cook, cleaner, mum (p23, female, married, 13 & 8, full time, post graduate)

Where this was further explored, parents indicated the felt need to discipline or motivate their children into school work. That this was singled out as difficult and problematic suggests that, for the parents, this was tied to their new role of teacher, rather than their familiar role of parent.

Difficult to motivate children when they are fed up learning from home (p24, male, married, 14 & 16, part time, post graduate)

Feel like I've had to be disciplinarian making sure school work [gets done] (p13, female married, 20, 13, 10 full time, undergraduate)

My job to try and keep them learning (p25, female, married, 12 & 14, full time, postgraduate).

Stress

The combination of constant juggling alongside feelings of increased responsibility and the pressure of keeping up could lead to feelings of exhaustion and stress:

Home schooling three children, caring for a baby and fulfilling all other parental roles has been mentally detrimental. (p26, female, single parent, 13, 11, 7, 4 months, full time, undergraduate)

Home schooling and completing work combined with meeting the needs of a toddler and studying myself has proved to be very stressful (p27, female, married husband away, 13, 10, 3 part time, undergraduate)

Feel v drained. Limited patience. Kids constantly want my attention which is v hard. (p28 female, married, part time PhD).

The rationalist educational model

Pandemic schooling predicated, through the transplant model, on formal schooling through a rationalist framework (Neumann and Guterman, 2016) emerges as a stressful and ultimately deficit form of education. In this model, teaching and learning are counterparts both of which are distinct and dedicated joint activities requiring full concentration on both sides. Children are categorised according to age and ability, requiring different teaching inputs with learning taking place in particular ways (hence the need for technology) and according to a pre-set programme and timetable, hence the fear of 'falling behind'. Children are not in control of what they are doing, meaning that motivation and discipline are issues and seen as adult responsibilities. Friction between what children want to be doing and what adults perceive them as needing to do, can impact on parent/child

relationships. In this model, education is something done to children, rather than something belonging to the child.

This rather grim picture of pandemic schooling, however presented as only one face of the realities of lockdown. When responding to questions about any upside to the lockdown or changes they would like to make to family life following lockdown, many more positive aspects of the pandemic period came to light. Interestingly the same areas that caused difficulty were also highlighted as being most of benefit: time, relationships, and relief from, rather than added, pressure.

Increased time together

Many parents cited time together as an upside of the lockdown.

It has been hard but nice to spend time with him that I wouldn't have had. (p29, female single parent, 2, fulltime, undergraduate)

I have loved being able to spend so much quality time with my son and will look back with many fond memories. (p30, female, single parent, 3, full time, undergraduate)

Nice to spend extra time with my youngest children (p31, female, single parent, 5 children – 9, fulltime undergraduate)

Spending more time with daughter. (p32, male, married, 5 & 2, full time, undergraduate).

The emphasis on increased time together stands rather paradoxically with the time pressures parents talked about in association with pandemic schooling. When more, rather than less time, is mentioned, this time seems to run concurrently with other time so that time spent on pandemic schooling, leisure time, family time all counted as time together, rather than the exclusionary demarcation of time exclusively devoted to either this or that activity. This time seemed to span, rather than be confined to activities so that things like exercising, cooking, relaxing, playing and school work are recast as joint activities that form part of a bigger category of family life, relationships and learning. Some of the examples included:

We've enjoyed the extra family time, learning lots of new things and spending time together - this has meant my relationship with my children has got even closer. (p22, female, married husband away, 7 & 10, full time, undergraduate)

More time to talk, to cuddle, to love, cook and play together. (p33, female, married, 8 & 6, full time undergraduate)

Spending more time together, carried out more activities as a family, family walks and bike rides. (p34, female, married, 15,13,10, full time, undergraduate)

Quality time exercising together (p35, female, single parent, 12 & 8, fulltime postgraduate).

Relationships

In a similar vein, relationships that had been highlighted as containing conflicting roles of parent/teacher were more positively cast as having been enriched and strengthened by the pandemic period.

I feel that I am closer to my kids now (p36, female, married blended family, 19 & 14, full time, undergraduate)

Helped to build a better relationship with teenage son. (p37, female, two parent, 16 & 18, full time, undergraduate)

I feel closer to my little girl. (p38, female married, child 3, full time, postgraduate)

It has been great having the children with me (p39, female, living with children's dad, 1 & 3, full time undergraduate)

Family time, bonding experience has been great. We have learnt to be more considerate of one another (p36, female, married, 15, 13 & 10, full time, undergraduate).

Relief from pressures

Similarly whilst pandemic schooling had created pressures, there were other pressures which lifted during the lockdowns:

Obviously more time together is always a bonus and less running round to all the clubs and activities the kids have. (p41, female married, 11, 13.14, full time, undergraduate)

I knew where they were (p42, female, single parent, 16 & 18, part time, post graduate)

They've been much happier without school pressures. (p43, female with partner, 6, 8, 10, full time, undergraduate)

My daughter ... has benefited from not having the added social pressures of secondary school ... being able to choose who she interacts with socially has meant less stress for her. (p36, female, married blended family, 19 & 14, full time, undergraduate).

Reassessing education

Making the most of extra time together nurturing relationships and relieving the stresses of pandemic schooling all came to the fore when participants reflected on how hindsight might have altered their experiences. Twenty five (30.5%) respondents indicated that they would have taken a different approach to their child's learning, indicating reflective and changing ideas about education.

Suggestions for advice to other parents included ways of alleviating the pressures and stresses felt from pandemic schooling and echoed the experiences of home educators easing into re-prioritised

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3 family lives that encompassed education, rather than added education as a separate and extra burden.
4 The advice also represents a mindshift from Dale's (2009) 'transplant model' towards a level of
5 educational autonomy in which power relations are equalised, or even reversed, with parents drawing
6 on and using professional expertise but at their own discretion and in their own ways, thus forging
7 independent educational paths.
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11 ***Stress reduction***

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14 Much of the advice proffered suggested playing down and avoiding stress.

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17 Don't stress and be hard on yourself (p41, female, married, 11, 13, 14 full time,
18 undergraduate)

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21 Choose your fights, not everything is worth fighting over. (p14, female, disabled partner, 11,
22 7, &6, full time undergraduate)

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25 Don't stress about the homeschooling. It's better to have a good relationship with your child
26 than to argue about school work. (p42, female, married, 2 & 5, part time, postgraduate)

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28 Take one day at a time. Try to keep it structured but don't stress if it falls apart (p28, female,
29 married, part time, PhD)

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32 This mother, quoted above found keeping two children on school task very stressful and herself split
33 through the various roles she felt she needed to play. Here she is expressing a new equilibrium where
34 relieving the stress on both herself and her children has become the priority. She has not necessarily
35 reached any new understanding of education here but has shifted the emphasis of her life and family.
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39 ***Nurturing relationships***

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41 In many responses the emphasis shifted from school work achievement to nurturing relationships and
42 making the most of time together, including listening to children, also a first step in establishing child
43 agency.
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47 Watch movies, eat the ice cream and laugh we will look back one day and remember this time
48 fondly (p41, female, married, 11, 13, 14, full time, undergraduate)

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50 More patience, more understanding, attempt to understand your child's experiences better
51 through talking to them. And listen, listen - we don't listen enough, ... the main lesson I've
52 learned from the pandemic is: explain this to your child, but also make this a worldview and a
53 shared experience. (p43, female, divorced, 21, part time, post graduate)

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55 Listen to children, give them your time and hug them hard (p44, female, married, 6, part time,
56 postgraduate)
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Use this time to build on your relationship with your child, if you are at home make the most of your time. ... Communicate with each other and find a hobby you can do together to bond. (p45, female, single parent, 14, full time undergraduate)

Questioning the school schedule

The desire to avoid stress and nurture more, led to a questioning of the school schedule and to a greater trust in children's resilience and capacity to handle and overcome the challenges of the time.

Don't worry about children not completing all school work. Make the most of time together. Let some things go. (p46, female, married, 6, 10, 12, part time, postgraduate)

There is more to life than kids' education, they can resit exams if they need to, prioritise your kids mental health above all else (p36, female, married, 19 & 14, full time, undergraduate)

enjoy the time with them even though its difficult won't get it again, and don't stress to much about schooling (p2, female, coparenting grandchild, fulltime, undergraduate)

Don't sweat it. Children will catch up eventually. There's too much emphasis for children to reach a certain target and while those targets are important, it's not the be-all and end-all. The important thing is that your child/children remain happy and see you happy. (p34, female, married, 15, 13, 10, full time, undergraduate)

Do what you feel is right not what others tell you what they think is right. Do not be bullied by authorities. (p47, female, married, 19, 9, 2, part time, postgraduate)

Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Children's well-being is far more important at times like these - the spellings can wait! (p22, female, married husband away most of time, 7 & 10, full time, undergraduate).

This advice echoes the shifts cited by home educating families as they move from emulating school to finding more amenable pathways, particularly those in which children are able to exercise more agency and control over their own activities and education.

Trusting children

In line with Neumann and Guterman's research (2016), parents readjusting their focus towards relationships and stress avoidance also led to an increased confidence to 'go with the flow' and to trust children in their own educational agency.

Enjoy the time & don't stress about the kids' schoolwork so much, they are very resilient (p48, female, married, 5 & 6, fulltime, undergraduate)

Children will pick up on the education soon, they are learning so much more at home too. (p49, female, married, 8 & 6, fulltime, undergraduate)

let the children set the pace when it comes to school (p50, female, married, 8 & 6, full time, undergraduate).

One mother who had expressed that pandemic schooling had been "extremely tough" went on to conclude that

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3 making your children sit down and try to complete as much work as they would have done
4 during school, is not worth the stress to you. Nor is it worth the stress on the children
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6 I've realised my children's own agency is important, and allowing them to make more of their
7 own decisions has enabled them to stay motivated, happy, feel respected and has also made
8 them consider their own responsibility to their learning and life choices (p51, female, married,
9 11 & 5, full time, undergraduate).
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11 Educational stress is avoided by passing responsibility to children, a position generally eschewed in
12 formal education but often cited in home education (Thomas, 1998, Author, 2016).
13

14 *Differences between home and school learning*

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16 Parental reflections echoed the thought processes of new home educators particularly changing ideas
17 about educational interaction, personalisation and flexibility (Thomas 1998). The data showed an
18 increasing recognition that learning at home can be different to learning in school.
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22 I can see and monitor my children's school work much closer. (p52, female, married, 21, 13,
23 11, female, postgraduate).
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26 The mother of one SEND child echoed the findings of Kendal and Taylor (2016), in that she spent
27 time adapting work and helping her daughter:
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29 [my daughter] ...has special needs and cannot work independently and often needs the work
30 sent adapting for her.
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32 Whilst she commented on the stresses of lockdown, she also found that she could exercise greater
33 educational autonomy and personalisation such as was not possible in school. Her reflections also
34 resonate with a move away from the transplant pandemic situation to a more personalised and
35 independent approach.
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37 We spend more time talking and have both enjoyed learning together. I also have a better
38 understanding of how she experiences schoolwork. I think having flexible break and
39 lunchtimes helps her as well. Time to focus on their individual learning and tailor it how I
40 think, using my judgment as parent. (p53, female cohabiting, 10, full time, undergraduate).
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44 *Learning in the everyday*

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46 Over and beyond this, there were also indications that parents were beginning to think differently
47 about the school model of education as being a dedicated teaching and learning activity separated
48 from the other activities of life. Instead, they reflected on the ways in which education might be
49 interwoven into everyday life and how learning might arise from joint activities, shared interests and
50 the ordinary, day to day possibilities of life.
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55 There are lots of ways of helping to educate the kids, (p14, female, disabled partner, 11, 7,
56 &6, full time, undergraduate)
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3 Children are always learning (life learning) even with the worst parents so just be the best you
4 can be and don't worry. Children will have learnt more from lockdown than a school can ever
5 teach. I know mine have. (p37, female, two parent family, 16 & 18, full time, undergraduate)
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7 Normal household activities can be real learning opportunities- my 3 year old has learnt to be
8 extra independent (p38, female, married, 3, fulltime, postgraduate)
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10 Don't worry if all of the school work set isn't completed all the time. Take time to do other
11 activities with your children as they can learn so much from not being in the classroom. (p21,
12 female, married 14, 8, 6, full time, undergraduate)
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14 [W]e can teach them how to take care of themselves/others in an unprecedented time. (p50,
15 female, married, 8&6, full time, undergraduate).
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20 *Emerging educational models*

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22 These further reflections suggested that parents were questioning and sometimes, moving away from
23 the model of education with which they began pandemic schooling. This re-evaluation appeared to be
24 inspired negatively by the high levels of stress (for both parents and children) that accompanied
25 pandemic schooling. As parents reflected on how to handle and/or avoid this stress they began to
26 adjust views of what was important both in the current circumstances of the pandemic and with regard
27 to their family relationships and children's wellbeing. This also seemed to be a product of experience
28 as lockdowns repeated. So, as time went on, parents appeared to become more confident in adjusting
29 the educational model in the light of lived experience. Certainly parents' considerations of how they
30 might have done things differently and their forward going advice, seemed to reflect this.
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37 What might begin as a practical adaptations to cope with lockdown circumstances, alleviate stress and
38 free up time, such as cutting back on school work, led to increasing recognition that learning at home
39 can be qualitatively different to learning in school. Some parents talked about a closer understanding
40 of their child's school work and from that, an opportunity to individualise learning. This reflects the
41 parental journeys described by Thomas (1998) as parents conducting formal home education become
42 increasingly aware of its interactive, intensive and flexible nature. There are possibilities here to
43 consider how parental involvement and understanding might complement school attendance through
44 simple information sharing. Tett and Macleod (2020) suggest that the educational triad of parents,
45 children and school might all benefit from sharing information on timetables and curriculum and on
46 regular drop ins so that parents know what children have been doing during the day and are in
47 advanced place to talk about and further this. Such understanding would also assist in any future
48 transitions between home and school and shared educational enterprises between the two bases. This
49 would be a practical enactment of moving away from Dale's transplant model (2009) towards
50 something more inclusive and egalitarian.
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3 However, respondents also went beyond this kind of adaptation to deeper level questioning of
4 schooling. This seemed to come from two key sources: respecting child agency or trusting children
5 more and finding learning in everyday life. One of the cited sources of pandemic schooling stress was
6 the need to keep children 'on track' through the completion of school work, even when the children
7 themselves had no desire to do this. Trusting children to manage their own school work load or even
8 to abandon the schedule, in part or whole, is a huge departure from the school norm of closely
9 supervised education. Parents who suggested this made recourse to a further two arguments: that
10 children would recover any lost ground with relative ease and that it was more important to prioritise
11 children's wellbeing and contentment over school achievement. In place of school work, parents
12 suggested focusing on shared, enjoyable activities from which learning could naturally arise, as
13 opposed to 'learning' being pursued as a separate, stand-alone activity. The emerging model of
14 education stands in contrast to the one on which the stresses of pandemic schooling were predicated
15 and echoes the contrasting educational paradigms cited by Neumann and Guterman (2016).
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24 ***Going Forward***

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27 In the spirit of Bubb and Jones (2020), this research suggests that rather than seeing the period of
28 pandemic schooling as necessarily a deficit model of children's education, there are lessons that can
29 be learned and positives taken forward into the future of education. Considering how pandemic
30 schooling may be made a more satisfactory experience may be a necessity if we are unfortunate
31 enough to be entering a new state of global health in which further lockdowns are required. Even if
32 this is not the case, there is much value in reconsidering how schools and homes can combine together
33 in fruitful partnerships and at how the experienced benefits of lockdown can be taken positively
34 forward. As post Covid working patterns may change to become more worker friendly, so post Covid
35 schooling might also be in a position to make positive use of pandemic feedback and new educational
36 arrangements.
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44 This research has traced a move in the thinking of the student/ parent cohort about the nature of their
45 children's education. Pandemic schooling was largely described as a stressful experience and this
46 stress seemed to be predicated on a formal school model of education. However, there was
47 widespread agreement that extra time with their children was a positive aspect of lockdown. The
48 parents' further reflective and forward looking thinking suggests some fundamental changes to
49 educational models moving towards a much greater emphasis on flexibility, personalisation, greater
50 child agency and improved family relationships. This move in thinking appeared to be prompted by
51 some of the difficulties of pandemic schooling on the one hand, and the desire of parents to prioritise
52 particular aspects of their children's lives, such as wellbeing and general contentment, on the other.
53 The reasons for, and shift in, thinking mirrors the adaptations of home educating parents as they
54 adjust to and capitalise on the advantages of home education.
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3 Going forward the pandemic experience suggests that post/inter pandemic education could be
4 enriched by encompassing new ways to involve parents in their children's education, increasing
5 flexibility and personalisation of learning, whilst alleviating school work related stress. Home
6 education has already found ways of achieving this and offers a potential, and largely untapped, well
7 of experience and expertise. The journeys of home educating families reveal already established
8 pathways to achieving these educational aims. Clearly, whilst home educating journeys might be
9 reflected in parental thinking, home education itself is not an option or a preference for many families
10 (although one respondent in this research revealed that her family was considering it following a
11 successful pandemic schooling experience). However, there are rich possibilities ranging from
12 increased home/ school partnerships to varying flexi-schooling arrangements. Flexi-schooling is a
13 legal and workable option which, whilst still relatively unknown, has attracted interest prior to Covid
14 for its tremendous potential for capturing the best of home/school partnerships (Humphries et al,
15 2018; Kendall and Taylor, 2016). This is reiterated in the experiences of schools that have embraced
16 the practice (Poultney and Anderson, 2019). It is worth noting that such partnerships seem to
17 embrace a new model of relationship between schools and homes. Rather than the transplant model
18 depicted by Dale (2009) this suggest an empowering of parents and a sharing of expertise; a move
19 which Crozier and Davies (2007) call for in enhancing conventional school – home relationships as
20 well. As these authors point out, demographic features such as gender, class and ethnicity affect such
21 relationships and there is also emerging evidence that current home educating – Local Authority
22 relations are similarly affected (Other and Author, in preparation). Overcoming these barriers and
23 finding the ground on which to forge more supportive, creative and joint partnerships could prove a
24 worthwhile move for school, home and hybrid forms of education. The joy as well as the enrichment
25 of spending more family time, the possibility to reconsider educational models and to recognise the
26 everyday and family relationships as offering pleasant, flexible and valuable learning experiences, the
27 chance to involve children more in the management of their own education are all worthy thinking
28 points to take away from the experiences of 2020-1. The chance to reflect on and take these ideas
29 forward should be embraced.
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