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| **Living and learning through lockdown: a fictionalisation of the challenges and opportunities of homeschooling during a global pandemic**Gillian Forrester¹, Jo Basford¹, Ruth Hudson¹ and Jim Pugh¹¹Institute of Education, Staffordshire University, Stoke-on-Trent, UK WORD COUNT = 9123Correspondence:gillian.forrester@staffs.ac.uk https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6162-3645Author contact emails:j.basford@staffs.ac.uk https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3662-6606r.hudson@staffs.ac.uk https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2630-5924j.pugh@staffs.ac.uk https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5027-4665 |

**Abstract**

This article reports on research which investigated the lived experiences of primary school headteachers, teachers and parents during the first lockdown in England between March and July 2020. It aims to understand how homeschooling was approached and the challenges and opportunities it afforded. Individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken with participants and the findings are presented in the article in three episodes using fictionalised scenarios. **The episodes created are: the initial approach to homeschooling, coping with uncertainty and realignment.** The themes emerging from each episode are: pragmatic decision-making, change and the impact upon welfare and well-being and shifting priorities. The article illustrates the struggles of homeschooling in lockdown and some surprising outcomes, and also points to future possibilities for education.

**Keywords**

Homeschooling; home-learning; lockdown; COVID-19 pandemic; fictionalisation

## **Introduction**

Prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, home education was a phenomenon familiar mostly to families who had elected to exercise their right to educate their children outside the boundaries of the traditional classroom (Rothermel 2015). However, in the early months of 2020, and as a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, educational institutions across the world closed their doors and began to operate remotely (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020). Home education was no longer the private business of a few, select families. Overnight it became a public concern; a shared endeavour that required schools and families to work together to sustain the educational experiences of the children in their care. The expediency of the shift to homeschooling and remote learning was unprecedented. Both teachers and families had little time to plan and adjust to the unexpected personal and professional challenges that the pandemic had brought about. Schools were open only to the children of key workers or those deemed ‘vulnerable’ and school experience during this time was quite different with, for example, mixed year groups, a different curriculum and often more creativity (Breslin 2021).

The study took place within a Multi Academy Trust (MAT) in an area of disadvantage in England. The perspectives of headteachers, teachers and parents from three primary schools within the MAT were gathered to gain an insight into the challenges and opportunities that homeschooling afforded. The aim of this study was to capture the lived experiences of participants during the first lockdown that took place in England between March and July 2020 and to better understand how homeschooling was approached.

## **Literature Review**

Early studies which were conducted during the first lockdown have captured the immediate impact of the sudden shift to learning remotely for learners, carers and educators. International studies have highlighted commonalities in their findings which usefully include the United Kingdom (UK) context. For families, the transition to homeschooling created disequilibrium in the traditional ways they supported their children’s learning, as parents’ roles shifted to that of a teacher. A number of studies highlighted the challenges for parents of maintaining their children’s interest and motivation to study (Klapproth et al. 2020; Williams et al. 2020) as well as their concerns for the social and emotional well-being of their children as the lockdown situation continued. Williams et al.’s (2020) analysis of homeschooling in Great Britain based on the Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) during the period 3rd April to 10th May 2020 and 7th May to 7th June 2020 found that 77% of parents gave a lack of motivation as the reason for children struggling with homeschooling. There were also personal challenges as many families were balancing their own work demands with homeschooling, whilst others were dealing with unemployment and furlough. The OPN survey sample size comprised 2,010 to 2,500 individuals per week. Payne (2020), also drawing on the OPN, notes it was more probable for parents to be furloughed (13.6%) compared with those without children (7.2%). According to Andrew et al. (2020) and Petts et al. (2021) it was the women in the home environment who typically took on the role of educator, frequently at the expense of their own careers. However, Payne (2020) found that while women tended to provide more non-developmental childcare during lockdown, both men and women spent similar amounts of time on developmental childcare which included homeschooling. The extent of parental involvement in homeschooling in the UK is illustrated in a study by Thorell et al. (2020) which compares school closure across seven European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found the contact of UK children (n=508) with a parent assisting with schoolwork, for example, was 45.18% (the highest figure across all countries) compared to 4.42% (the lowest figure across all countries) of their time being spent in direct contact with their teachers, through such activities as live lessons.

The experiences of educators as they transitioned to provide learning remotely highlighted the challenges and uncertainties teachers faced in responding to UK governmental requirements and subsequent retracted and revised guidelines as the longer-term implications of the pandemic were realised. Some of the initial barriers were technological; either schools were not sufficiently resourced to deliver online learning, or families did not have the necessary digital capability such as bandwidth or technological devices to support and enable online learning to take place at home (Carpenter and Dunn 2020). Additionally, there were issues related to teacher and parental technical competence (Thorell et al. 2020). Teachers were reportedly ‘emotionally overwhelmed’ by the uncertainties (Kim and Asbury 2020) and also experienced a shift in their role and identity finding themselves as ‘advisers’ (Carpenter and Dunn 2020) due to the limited opportunities to engage with their pupils and teach them synchronously. Nevertheless, the shift to remote learning also revealed unexpected opportunities for teachers where they have seen the potential benefits of online learning for building learner agency (Whittle et al. 2020), which in turn increased learner engagement.

The lockdown situation has served to raise concerns about how the demands of homeschooling have aggravated and widened educational inequalities (Cullinane and Montacute 2020; Letzel et al. 2020). This is particularly evident for those deemed as having special and educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or those with pre-existing mental health difficulties (Thorell et al. 2020). Evidence suggests there is a correlation between the confidence of parents and time spent to support homeschooling and parental capital (Andrew et al. 2020). However, the demands of homeschooling had a negative impact on parents’ own well-being and their ability to do their own job if they were working at home. This could sometimes lead to negative interactions between parents and their children (Schmidt et al. 2020). There were concerns related to children’s welfare and well-being, including child protection issues. It has been noted as well that many vulnerable children may have remained at home, rather than making use of the school place available for them, due to the associated stigma attached to such labelling (Breslin 2021).

## **Methodology**

The review of the literature above identified various international studies which explored the impact on learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and where quantitative methodologies were typically utilised, such as online surveys. The aim of this study was to gain a more personalised insight into the lived experiences of the main stakeholders during the first lockdown. As such, a narrative methodology was employed in the form of semi-structured interviews. The participants were three headteachers, three primary teachers and four parents of primary school children. The research focussed on two main questions:

How did participants approach homeschooling during lockdown and what informed their decisions?

What were the challenges and opportunities of homeschooling experienced by participants?

The interview framework comprised eight key questions designed to enable participants to convey their bespoke experiences of homeschooling during lockdown, which were adjusted accordingly for the three participant groups. Headteachers and teachers were asked to describe: a ‘typical’ working day during lockdown, decisions made regarding the type of approach and materials provided for homeschooling, the extent of the use of virtual technologies to support homeschooling, their perceptions of challenges faced by families and how schools were able to support them, and changes made and priorities for the reopening of schools in September 2020. Parents were asked a complementary set of questions whereby they described: a typical day of homeschooling, their approach to homeschooling, whether that changed over time, the use of virtual technology, communication with the school and the most significant impact that homeschooling had on family life. The research adheres to the British Educational Research Association’s (2018) ethical guidelines and approval to conduct the study was granted by Staffordshire University’s Ethics Committee. Prior to interview, all participants were provided with information about the study, and all gave their written consent.

The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and Zoom depending on participants’ preferences. The interviews were transcribed and read several times by two of the co-authors of the article. Cognisant of our position in the social world, we attempted to examine the effects of our own preconceptions and personal experiences upon the data. As discerned by Basit (2010), we regard reflexivity as an iterative process warranting critical self-analysis. We are mindful of the benefits of acknowledging subjectivities rather than trying to eliminate them (Ahern, 1999), which we considered immensely important for this particular research as we had also lived through the recent uncertain times of lockdown. Being reflexive enabled the trustworthiness of the information generated (Wade et al. 2009). Subsequently, descriptive pen portraits were crafted for each participant providing a succinct summary of each participant’s experiences. Next, the transcripts were analysed using data-derived and researcher-derived coding practices to give access to the data; patterns were then sought and themes created (Braun and Clarke 2013). The themes identified across the datasets were deemed particularly pertinent to participants’ accounts and encompassing experiences. It was evident that the period of lockdown fell into three distinct episodes and, for reporting purposes, one key theme is presented in Table 1 in association with each episode.

[Table 1 near here]

Clough’s (2002) work regarding narratives and fiction, Mifsud’s (2016) notion of dramatisation, Campbell and Kane’s (1998) “fictional critical writing” and Eisner’s (1997) exposition of “alternative forms of data representation” were drawn upon and provided inspiration for reworking the interview data into fictional scenarios. The rationale for creating these scenarios was to: respectfully present accessible and innovative accounts of the participants’ homeschooling experiences; to better convey the voices of the participants rather than the authors; to reveal the dimensions of human affectivity that may not be apparent in a more traditional presentation of qualitative research findings; and, in doing so, contribute to the production of new knowledge about life and facilitating learning under lockdown.

Campbell et al. (2004) promote the idea of fictionalising pen portraits of participants to represent the collation of ideal personalities which encompass their experiences, attitudes and personal characteristics. The pen portraits created as part of the analysis were “real” as they summarise and faithfully reflect participants’ accounts. However, it is the scenarios presented in this paper that are fictionalised whereby we have intentionally brought together the otherwise separate voices of the different groups of participants. Each scenario has “their roots in fact” (Campbell and Kane 1998, 3) and is “a fictional account truthful to the findings” (Wade et al. 2009, 40). The scenarios are constructed from the verbatim accounts extracted from the interview data, with some reworking of tense, some additional linking words or sentences to aid with the flow of an online thread or verbal conversation and occasionally some moving around of the order of sentences to create a coherent conversation. This is in line with Wade et al.’s (2009, 43) approach of preserving “many of the participants’ actual words.” The presentation of the findings below as fictitious scenarios captures and illuminates aspects of life and facilitating learning under lockdown and offers insights into the inextricably linked contexts of the three different worlds of the three participant groups during unparalleled times.

## **Findings and analysis**

What follows are fictitious scenarios for each of the three groups of participants and for the three episodes of time identified. These comprise an online chat forum for parents, social meetings on Zoom of friends who are also teachers and formal meetings via Teams for headteachers.

#### **Episode 1 (25th March – 3rd April 2020) Initial approach to homeschooling**

It was announced that schools should close from the afternoon of Friday 20th March although, exceptionally, schools would remain open to look after vulnerable children and the children of key workers. This episode is about the participant groups’ initial response to lockdown, their respective approaches to homeschooling and pragmatic responses to change.

A group of parents regularly post chats on Mumsnet. This thread was started by a Mum during the first week of lockdown asking how others were approaching homeschooling.

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|  Ideas for homeschooling? |
| CosmoCath Wed-25- Mar-20 21.10 |
| Help! I’ve literally come out of hospital after having my baby, and now I’ve got to start homeschooling my other two. The school have just put all this stuff online that I need to print off. Any tips? |
| Mindymanda Wed-25- Mar-20 21.35 |
| TBH I’ve taken potluck with the activities the teacher has posted. Molly’s in reception and we just pick out the tasks that she wants to do. She loses concentration quite easily, so after about half an hour she’s asking to play outside or go on YouTube |
| Tina B Wed-25- Mar-20 21.42 |
| I know what you mean! Given half the chance my five-year-old will sit in front of the telly all day. My kids thrive on routine, so we’re pretty much sticking to a school day. We get the more formal learning done in the morning, like phonics, maths and writing, but the afternoon is much more flexible. I’ve got two other little ones to contend with, so by the afternoon we generally use the time playing – unless it’s something more topic based – this week they got to build a volcano! |
| SSJ Wed-25- Mar-20 21.58  |
| Agree! Routine is really important. George is dyslexic, recently diagnosed. He’s come on so much since starting school that we don’t want him to fall behind. For me reading is key to everything, so we start with reading, then bits of spelling and writing. He loves MyMaths on the laptop, the only problem is I can’t then get any of my work done. |
| Mindymanda Wed-25- Mar-20 21.59 |
| Me and my husband are self-employed, we can’t work at the moment. We can’t claim furlough either. We’ve only just moved to a new house as well, so money is a bit tight. |
| CosmoCath Wed-25- Mar-20 22.02 |
| Yeah – I was made redundant while I was on maternity leave, and my hubbie has been furloughed too….don’t know how long for. |
| Tina B Wed-25- Mar-20 22.07 |
| Gosh – so sorry to hear that Mindymanda and CosmoCath - that must put out you under even more pressure. My husband only went self-employed last year, so he needs to keep working. Luckily, I’m a teacher so we have a regular income. My head has been really understanding that we are trying to home-school our own children while also preparing materials for our own class. |
| SSJ Wed-25- Mar-20 22.14 |
| Sounds like it’s the women who are bearing the brunt of all this. I’m a teacher too, and my husband is a key worker. He’s left the decisions about homeschooling to me…but to be honest, I’d rather it was that way. I’ve a much better idea about what my son needs. I’ve got resources I can use from school too. |
| CosmoCath Wed-25- Mar-20 22.02 |
| I’m thinking I’m going to do my own thing as well. I’ll print off some of the stuff that school sends us, but TBH there’s lots of things I want to do myself. We’ve got a VR, so I thought we could have fun with Google Maps and do cooking, things like that. |
| SSJ Wed-25- Mar-20 22.14 |
| Yeah – trust your instincts and do the things that you know your child needs. |

In the Zoom conversation below three friends who are also teachers from three different schools in the MAT, and would usually see each other socially, reflect on how lockdown is being managed in their respective schools.

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| **Zoom: Friday 27 March 2020, 7pm**Orla: Who would have thought just a few weeks ago we’d be where we are now, meeting together on Zoom, and at work having to plan for parents, homeschooling? Charlotte: A **lot of things happened really quickly.**Simon: Yes, obviously with the limited time that we’ve had to get things in order. We looked through loads of different avenues to how we would approach the homeschooling. Charlotte: We had a Zoom meeting and as a school we decided our approach would be three English lessons, three maths lessons and three topic lessons over a week. We decided we wanted these to be chunky lessons that would enable people to take their time, do them when they wanted. There were aspects to these lessons that parents could certainly develop and that could have taken the children through the week.Orla: Right. I’ve been setting the home-learning packs and ensured we have a range of suitable activities that would engage pupils and try to cover as many areas of the curriculum as we possibly can. We’ve put those on the internet for the children to access, but it does seem to be difficult for the children to engage at home. We’ve also encouraged home crafts with supplies that they should have around the house.Simon: We’re making a paper pack too. So essentially the children that aren’t doing the online learning have the paper packs to take home. I’ve put the packs in the foyer but then I'm not in school again until next week, so I won’t see them taking the pack. It’s just waiting until next week to see whether they’ve taken it or not. That’s the biggest challenge, making sure no one is being left behind. |

The Teams meeting below was arranged on the last day of term before the Easter holidays and involved three headteachers from the MAT. In the first part of their meeting, they shared experiences of completing risk assessments alongside planning the organisation of staff in school and at home. Captured below is the next agenda item, staff continual professional development (CPD). The headteachers exchange their intentions for the effective use of teachers’ time in their respective schools.

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| **Teams: Friday 3 April 2020, 9.30am****Louise: We’re doing a lot of CPD at the moment on how to set home-learning, what home-learning will look like, where we will get home-learning from. How we would plan for it, how it will be distributed, all of those sorts of things. All staff are required to set home-learning for every single child, which will be a big learning curve for a lot of staff.**Robert: W**e’ve decided we’ll get CPD up and running because we haven’t been doing it anyway, and so we’ve thrown a whole load of CPD at people.** Rachael: That’s interesting, you see we’re having the CPD while staff are at home and they can’t work in school, not wanting to waste that time. But also, being very aware that they have their own responsibilities and some of them have children at home, some of them have limited access to IT. So, it’s trying to find the balance of giving them CPD they can do at home online, on the IT that they have, that is very much about where we as a school are trying to go so it isn’t pointless CPD just for the sake of it.**Louise: We’ll also do staff training for other areas because there are so few children in school. All staff have been asked to do some sort of professional development, so safeguarding online, the prevent online, things to do with their subject if they've got a subject lead, NQT portfolios and teaching portfolios are being maintained.**  |

#### **Key theme 1: Pragmatic decision-making**

The suddenness of the lockdown left little time for school staff and parents to prepare for the shift to remote learning and to respond to unprecedented change. It became apparent very quickly that any plans to utilise digital platforms to create online synchronous and asynchronous learning experiences were reliant on the skills of both teachers and families as well as the availability of the necessary home-based IT resources. Headteachers were faced with several competing challenges from the outset. While they needed to ensure staff were spending their time purposefully when working from home, two of the heads indicated they were aware of staff juggling their professional responsibilities with their own caring commitments. Professional development was an initial priority in relation to preparing for homeschooling, but headteachers also saw the situation as an opportunity to engage with CPD activities that were aligned to their school’s development priorities.

For the teachers, their priority was to ensure that no child was “left behind”. Pragmatic rather than pedagogical principles informed their approach to planning for learning. Activities were planned to ensure coverage of both the core and foundation subjects, whilst recognising the necessity for children to have opportunities to be practically engaged, to use resources that were readily available at home and also to make learning enjoyable. Teachers quickly realised that any planned online learning activities needed to be replicated in the form of paper-based “packs” for families who did not have the necessary resources to support online learning. Besides planning for the curriculum in school and for parents at home, there was pressure on teachers to complete CPD and all of this in the context of their own family situation.

The schools’ concerns about the variation of skills and resources that families had to hand to support homeschooling effectively were reflected in parents’ responses to the situation. Parents seemed to appreciate being able to choose what activities they would complete with their children and when. Their decisions were informed by their children’s perceived needs and interests as well as their own personal circumstances. For the two teacher-parents, they were able to draw on their professional knowledge to ensure learning was structured and targeted towards their children’s needs. The other two parents were less confident about how to approach homeschooling and tended to take a more pragmatic approach that fitted with the time and resources they had available.

#### **Episode 2 (end of May early June 2020): Coping with uncertainty**

This Teams meeting for headteachers took place on the last day before the half-term Spring break. The agenda item captured below concerns the use of online platforms, notably ClassDojo, to deliver teaching and learning resources and communicate with parents. However, issues relating to welfare permeate this discussion.

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| **Teams: Friday 22 May 2020****Rachael: So, did everybody participate in ClassDojo, all of your parents?** Robert: Some really struggled, it didn’t occur to us that families don’t have printers at home, people don’t have technology at home. We talk about the world today, every child having an iPad, it’s not the case we found. Probably a quarter of our families wanted paper copies of what we were doing which I initially said, “we can’t do that” and within about two days we said, “OK yes we are going to have to do that”. Because people were trying to teach three children using just a phone.Louise: We've got so many of our free school meals children that hadn't got access to the Internet, we opted to deliver free school meals. We agreed to do deliveries of food rather than do food bank vouchers. We also then rota'd the minibus to deliver exercise books, workbooks, any worksheets, any books that we needed that were being used as a stimulus. So the children were offered the choice, every activity was being offered online but also offered as a paper version as well, so they could do either, or both if they really wanted to.Rachael: We’re keeping ClassDojo now because it's just become something we love and we’re proud of. A lot of parents are using it, but also that continues to be the mission to get everybody on there because we're having to deliver any messages and letters, by email, text and ClassDojo. We’ve still got one parent in this class, or one parent in that class who are hard to reach. But we’ve done welfare checks regularly, phoning up. Robert: My deputy was in charge of chasing up pupils and making sure we touched base with all of the families and coordinating that. Some parents understood that it was “can you please just check in online and say you’re OK or we will have to phone.” Anyway, that message never got through to about five families.Rachael: Sometimes it's been, as you can imagine with the more extreme mental situations, it's been just a small number of parents have got in touch and said they were really struggling, not just kind of what we were all experiencing, but they were really worried about their child so then it was a case of signposting them to some extra counselling or support that we were able to put them in touch with. You’ve done a lot of delivering Louise.Louise: Yeah, for some of our parents, we've delivered games. We've delivered a slide. You know, things like that that people have donated in. And then we've been able to redistribute to somebody who needed some support or needed something extra. Above and beyond, we've been able to do that as well.  |

In the Zoom conversation below the teachers would have typically met up socially during the spring bank holiday week. As they are still in lockdown, they meet on Zoom instead and are reflecting on work during the previous half term.

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| **Zoom: Wednesday 27 May 2020**Simon: How’ve you been getting on at school and working at home, since we last spoke? Orla: We started using Class Dojo after Easter, it’s been lovely for parents to have this. You know, to be able to actually present and show the children’s achievements on there. They could send videos or photos or pieces of work that the children had engaged in. We did tasks on there, daily, and that was a good way for parents to communicate with us as well at any time of the day, for any support and help they needed. Simon: We thought we could do more using that approach and giving the children a bit more teacher-led learning rather than giving them paper packs; some of the parents might not know how to teach or teach in different way, and so you can do a lot of the work we do in class and you can attach videos. So, we could do little teach demonstrations as well, which to be fair it took a little bit of time. But we felt the children, they could still see you in them and a little bit a little normality, I guess.Orla:Yes, we did a class video weekly, so the children could remember what we actually looked like basically. [Laughs] Myself and another teacher did a song of the week. [Laughs] We researched songs for this sort of time, you know of what is going on in the country/world. Mr Lenny plays the guitar and I sing, as you know, so we released a song to the school every week as well. [Laughs]Simon: I hate recording myself. And because you can't stop to ask if everyone understands, you can't stop to just give you a demonstration separate so you can follow it, and we just thought that was the best for the time that we had. **Oh, good Charlotte is here now.** We were just talking about life the last few weeks, how are things with you?Charlotte: So, what happened we had a huge meeting that changed everything. We had some feedback from parents. Leadership used Dojo and asked parents what was good about what they had received so far and what they felt needed improving or changing. What came from parents, the key message really, was “please can we have all of the planning for the next week on a Friday, so we have chance to get our heads around it before we start learning on a Monday?” **Then we had new formats and everything to plan in and it really did take a long time.**  |

After the half-term Spring holiday break, the government permitted the re-opening of some schools on Monday 1st June for some year groups. This Mumsnet thread captured at the end of that first week illustrates parents’ worries.

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| Have your kids gone back to school? |
| Mindymanda Fri-5- Jun-20 11.10 |
| Hi everyone. I have a dilemma. Molly has an opportunity to go back to school, but I’m really not sure whether it’s safe for her to go back. I’ve seen all sorts of posts on Facebook about other Mum’s going to parties at each other’s houses. I really need to go back to work, but I’m thinking it would be better if she went to her Grandma’s. Am I being selfish going back to work? |
| CosmoCath Fri-5- Jun-20 11.30 |
| I feel your pain! I had the same dilemma, but for different reasons. Jack’s a real social butterfly, and he’s really missed being with his friends. He started spiralling after Easter and I think he’s also struggled with me trying to be a teacher and his Mum. He has gone back to school now and he’s so much happier. |
| Tina B Fri-5- Jun-20 11.37 |
| I wouldn’t say Darcy struggled; other than sometimes she would say “Mummy I’m tired of writing now.” She’s gone back to school now, as I needed to go back into school myself. It’s been the best thing for her, she loves school.  |
| CosmoCath Fri-5- Jun-20 11.41 |
| I know what you mean, my sister was struggling with her kids and she needed to go back to work, so we brought them into our own bubble. It worked quite well as our kids are similar ages, so it meant they could do stuff together. I ended up buying some workbooks from the supermarket tho’ as I was starting to feel at a loss as to what to do with them.  |
| SSJ Fri-5- Jun-20 11.52 |
| I’m afraid I’ve been quite strict about keeping up the work. George knows there’s no point in asking if he can watch telly or play his video games – he knows he has to get those four of five pieces of work done every day. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not all work and no play. I chunk his work, and then give him periods of time to play.  |
| Mindymanda Fri-5- Jun-20 12.02 |
| That’s very disciplined! Since my husband has gone back to work it’s become even more difficult to motivate Molly. She tends to listen to him more than me, so most of the learning is taking place when he gets home at night-time. Mind you, she still loves Joe Wickes in the morning! I’m a bit worried about her going to her grandparents, as they are not very technically minded. I can see the online learning going through the window… |
| CosmoCath Fri-5- Jun-20 12.11 |
| We love Joe Wickes too! I used to strap the baby on to me and we would do it all together. |
| SSJ Fri-5- Jun-20 12.18 |
| Have you talked to the school about your concerns Mindymanda? |
| Mindymanda Fri-5- Jun-20 12.22 |
| That’s the problem really, there hasn’t been much contact with school. I’m not really comfortable messaging the teacher on ClassDojo to explain our financial situation. It would have been much easier to have a phone conversation. Have you had any direct contact with your teachers? |
| Tina B Fri-5- Jun-20 12.35 |
| I have to say I’ve been impressed with Issy’s teacher – I can’t believe how quickly she responds to messages, and it’s usually in the evening. I don’t know how the teachers have done it really. I’ve noticed as well now that teachers are sending things more regularly and giving us actual work to do rather than showing us pictures of what our children have been up to. |
| CosmoCath Fri-5- Jun-20 12.55 |
| I know other schools did live lessons – it’s a shame our school didn’t do that. I think that was one of the reasons why my son started to struggle ‘cos he didn’t have direct contact with his teacher. The school expected us to message to say we were ok each week, but that was it really. |

## ***Key theme 2: Change and the impact on welfare and well-being***

The episode above reveals how schools responded to parental requests and changed their initial approaches to homeschooling. Teachers appeared to be utilising technology to much greater effect and there is evidence of the development of cultural, social and digital capital amongst teachers and also some parents. It also reveals a widening gap between advantage and disadvantage whereby some parents were using digital skills for example to upload work, and this also elicited a response or interaction with their child’s teacher. For those children who were only using paper packs, there appears to be limited opportunities for learning conversations with teachers. Parents noted dips in motivation and had increasing worries regarding their child’s well-being. Parents’ **uncertainties and often low levels of confidence in homeschooling, and their financial and welfare insecurities connected to employment, job losses and being furloughed, triggered families turning to schools for all kinds of different support. This led to the development of new relationships, shared understandings and trust, and perhaps a greater appreciation of each other’s position in the lives of children. The concerns of headteachers tended to be focused on safeguarding issues and the welfare of pupils and families.**

#### **Episode 3 (End of school year July 2020)** **Realignment**

This episode illustrates the priorities of schools (heads and teachers) and parents as their more normal roles realign. That is, the ultimate handing back of responsibility for teaching and learning firmly to the domain of schools. Each scenario depicts the various participant groups at the end of the 2019/20 school year.

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| **Teams meeting for headteachers on Friday 17th July 2020****Rachael: So, what will be your priorities when children come back in September?**Louise: Mental health and well-being is one of our biggest priorities. **Robert: Yes, immediately it will be their well-being. Some children who have got so out of the habit of school and are so stressed about the thought of returning, so getting them back through the door is going to be a bit of an issue. So, the children’s well-being and the curriculum and the attendance probably in that order.** Rachael: We've been reading a lot about emotion coaching and we've got some training planned with an educational psychologist over the next 12 months to really dig into emotion coaching, helping children to self-regulate their behaviour. So that's something I wanted to do anyway, but I think it's ever more important at the moment.**Robert: Personally, I think children are extremely resilient, the ones that have come back so far have been fine. We have got training for staff for mindfulness, and we have got days where somebody is in working with a class at a time and dealing with children. But we have set it all up in case people are right and it is a car crash.**Louise: Obviously, we need to start teaching them and we need to get them back in school. Some of the lessons will be a little bit shorter just so they do have that talking time and that support time. Rachael: We're not going to hit them with assessments in the first week, you know. We're going to teach and assess and use teachers’ assessment, and then try and make really good use of this funding to provide extra teaching afterwards or some one-to-one or some small group intervention in those key areas. **Robert: We know for a fact that some children have done no work.**Rachael: We've learned lessons as well from COVID in that the children who’ve been in school, some of our most vulnerable children have loved school, really loved it. We’ve had children who would always come but were a bit reluctant who now couldn't wait for school the next day because the activities have been so practical and so engaging. And it hasn't been the same pace, so we tried to learn from that. **Robert: [pause] Doing some work to make sure we maintain those links that we have now got with parents, because that was an issue for us before. I know the parents better, they know me better, I think a lot of people have needed me personally to solve a problem for them or to arrange for it to be solved and that has brought them out of the woodwork.** Louise: I think there will be a benefit in the long run for us and I think there are some meetings and some appointments that will carry on having to be like this! |

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| **Zoom: Friday 24th July, first week of the school holidays**Simon: It’s been quite a few tough months hasn’t it? Just getting to grips with working through the lockdown and doing the planning and prep for homeschooling, and getting our heads around all the online stuff, then schools opening in June. It was a difficult time, wasn’t it?Charlotte: Yes, it was, it really was.Orla: There are positives though, that we can take from this time, I’ve been thinking about this a lot. What were the worst bits and the best bits about homeschooling would you say?Charlotte: The worst bits for me were seeing children who were capable of so much better and receiving from them quite poor work online, when it came back. Simon: Yeah, and the other problem is, if you think about it, how much of the home-learning has been done independently or with help?Charlotte: But for me that’s some of the best bits. Seeing children who obviously had an awful lot of support and help in a one-to-one environment, but that has enabled them to really improve some of the skills they were struggling with at school. The worst bit I think probably initially was, all the way through really, has been the amount of work [laughs] and just having to quickly develop all those skills. Orla: And then towards the end of lockdown, some just started to lack interest. ClassDojo was exciting and fun to begin with and three months down the line it became kind of a chore for them, so the interest started to kind of disappear in those sorts of activities. Simon: Yeah. It was quite easy keeping contact with those who were doing the online stuff as they were sending messages and things, about how to do certain tasks, or if someone wanted like a little bit of extra like clarification, I could give them that quite easily. Orla: Hmmm, but for me that’s some of the best bits. Seeing the vast kind of variety of activities that children took part in with their loved ones that they never usually have time or chance to do. I mean one boy sticks out in my class. When the children came back into school in June, he had been gardening with his grandad and we have got a little garden area, so Year 6 oversee looking after that. The last few weeks he led the class, and I have just never seen him in that role before. So that was lovely to see that he had an area to excel in, usually I’d never be able to see that.  |

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| Yeah – Schools out for Summer! |
| CosmoCath Mon-27- Jul-20 21:22 |
| Hey everyone – how are you all? Can you believe we’ve made it to the summer holidays? It’s been a strange few months. What’s been the best and worst bits for you? |
| Tina B Mon-27- Jul-20 21:39 |
| Bonding with Darcy – just fantastic. Getting the chance to do all the creative things that I don’t normally get to do. Usually on the weekend I’m trying to do housework, cooking and play with the children – so actually being able to stop and put all that on hold and prioritise her learning has been great. It’s given me a glimpse of how she is as a learner. |
| SSJ Mon-27- Jul-20 21:49 |
| I agree Tina B – as a teacher you don’t normally get to spend one-to-one time with your child during the week. It also gave me the opportunity to really identify where there were some gaps in his learning and fill those gaps - I normally just wouldn't have time to do |
| Mindymanda Mon-27- Jul-20 21:49 |
| Yeah – the best thing has definitely been spending time together as a family – we’ll cherish that. We’ve just moved to a new house, so we’ve been able to go out together and explore.  |
| CosmoCath Mon-27- Jul-20 22.01 |
| When are we ever going to have five months of just being at home in a family bubble? My kids got to bond with their baby brother. It makes you realise that we just rushed life before all this happened. I’m really glad the school didn’t make us do all the learning online, having that choice was important. |
| Mindymanda Mon-27- Jul-20 21:15 |
| For me, it was definitely not knowing if I had made the right decision about going back to work. My parents aren’t very good online, so I just ended up buying Usborne maths and phonics books. TBH – we haven’t had a routine for months. Molly is probably wondering where her teachers are now! |
| CosmoCath Mon-27- Jul-20 22.23 |
| My plan for breastfeeding got cut short… and it affected Jack mentally, just not being among his friends all the time and seeing him cry over not being able to go to school. You feel like you’re not doing your best, or enough – but then when you hear other parents who say they haven’t done one bit of homeschooling, I know I have actually done my best. |
| SSJ Mon-27- Jul-20 22.26 |
| It is the women who have suffered the most from this. I think if lockdown were to go on for any longer or schools were closed after furloughed ended it would have been women that were more likely to lose their jobs because they were stuck at home with the children. We've worked very hard for equality over the years, and it would be a shame if something like this put us back again. But at the same time there is something very natural and genetic isn't there about mum looking after the children? |

## ***Key theme 3:* *Shifting priorities of the participant groups***

**The headteachers in the study had encountered and embraced a relentless series of challenges in an uncertain environment where leadership was expected and indeed needed for a situation no headteacher anywhere had ever previously experienced. These challenges, the headteachers in this study consider, were compounded by other factors, notably decisions by government with directives often arriving late in an evening. These required speedy action which posed many problems for heads such as overcoming logistics in school organisation and planning for learning. Two of the heads divulged mistakes they had made which they had quickly learned from and rectified. Overall, however, and importantly, they perceived that they had availed themselves to their staff, parents and pupils in a way which defined their position and abilities as a school leader during a time of unprecedented challenges. Indeed, the development of greater trust between families and schools, and children’s learning as a shared endeavour, was notable in the data. The return to school priorities were predominantly about alleviating children’s anxiety and dealing with their mental health and well-being, responding to pressures to plug gaps in knowledge and skills and catching up on the curriculum.** The teachers in the study articulated the immense shift in practice which was suddenly required of them along with an increased workload. The need to quickly upskill pedagogically and digitally was vital to be able to provide the resources for home-learning and to significantly change their approach to teaching and learning. **For parents, the relief of just getting to the summer holiday period is evident in the data. Their perceptions of having coped to varying degrees during lockdown and feeling at times completely overwhelmed and out of their depth were evident in the data, both of which heightened their sense of guilt of not being equipped with the necessary skills to teach their children at home and/or facilitate their learning.**

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This research was driven by two main questions: “How did participants approach homeschooling during lockdown and what informed their decisions?” and “What were the challenges and opportunities of homeschooling experienced by participants?” To address these questions, the scenarios presented demonstrate experiences of homeschooling during lockdown from different perspectives. Also, and importantly, they provide a snapshot of time where each participant group was given extraordinary and empathetic insight into the worlds of the other participants. **The scenarios illustrate the struggles and uncertainties of enabling learning to take place in lockdown yet also point to future possibilities for education and some surprising outcomes. Thus, there have been losses but also gains.**

**In relation to the reasons for the approaches which were adopted, the initial pragmatic decision-making that occurred amongst the three groups revealed, quite strikingly, the digital divide across different schools in the same MAT with some impoverished access to ICT and poor digital literacy amongst both teachers and families. In terms of curriculum priorities, the shift to online learning required teachers to take an innovative approach to curriculum delivery. There was, inevitably, an initial knee-jerk response to homeschooling, although during lockdown approaches were changed and consolidated. Nonetheless, the data indicates that teachers care deeply about the welfare, well-being and progress of their pupils. Teachers concerns for and emotional investment in their pupils’ learning, as children faced the uncertain situation, exhibited the caring tendencies inherent in their professional identity (Noddings 2012). The c**oncerns about welfare issues and well-being highlighted in this study reveal the wider role played by schools within the community as a central organisation not only for education and notably child-care during lockdown, but also as a site for welfare and the meeting of basic needs. This suggests the school is at the heart of a community responding to a wide range of needs. Overall, **findings from the research allude to the need for clear planning and communication for school closures from government in light of there being future lockdowns. Indeed, the call by UNESCO (2020) to involve teachers in school returns seems not to have been well heeded. However, teachers have a heightened role in calculating health risks, creating safe learning environments, modifying the curriculum and assessment processes and supporting pupil well-being. Ultimately, there needs to be a greater appreciation and understanding of the impact on practitioners of decisions made by policymakers, and timely strategic support to enable schools to plan for, develop and organise homeschooling effectively. This is** with a view to developing **feasible blended learning approaches in the future, for the short and longer term.**

**Disparities in ICT provision and skills were challenging during lockdown and must be prioritised in the future reduce inequalities. Lockdown has underscored the enduring attainment gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children, which resonates with other studies (see for example Andrew et al. 2020). From a social justice viewpoint this gap must be acknowledged and addressed going forwards with more concerted efforts and targeted funding. Lockdown revealed the need for pertinent CPD to upskill teachers appropriately, as well as ensuring those entering the teaching profession receive the necessary education which cultivates a high level of digital literacy and promotes innovative practices.** As the summer months of 2020 loomed and the autumn term lay ahead the shifting priorities among the different participant groups were evident. The impact of homeschooling has evidently impacted upon children’s emotional and mental health and well-being (YoungMinds 2020). All participants worried about the impact on children’s motivation to learn when returning to school, the reigniting of social relationships, and, for teachers especially, dealing with the pressures of the recovery programme for disadvantaged learners.

The pandemic brought under the spotlight underlying issues which already permeated schools and educational practice but were previously hidden (Kim and Asbury 2020). With regards to the potential opportunities afforded by lockdown, new forms of communication between schools and parents through digital technologies, as evidenced by the utilisation of ClassDojo for example, have been forced to the forefront. Amongst the opportunities this generated was a new interface between homes and schools, with greater interaction and engagement as a two-way process. Whether this 24/7 form of communication is sustainable for schools beyond lockdown however is questionable. School leaders will need to carefully manage the expectations of parents going forward to protect teachers from excessive and unrealistic demands, while also avoiding parental dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, the engagement of parents in learning through online communication should be harnessed as its potential has been exposed. There seems to be a willingness for schools and parents to improve the learning partnership using online technologies to facilitate greater two-way communication which will enable parental engagement and voice. Indeed, the uncertain situation faced by all three groups of participants seems to have enabled the building of a greater sense of trust. There were reportedly other positive effects of the lockdown situation for some families with the opportunity to spend extensive periods of time together as a family which has strengthened relationships and fostered closer bonds (see for example Pozas et al. 2021). While there were reports of children encountering difficulties in sustaining motivation and interest, some appear to have valued the increased autonomy in having choices about how and what to study (Letzel et al. 2020; Whittle et al. 2020). Indeed, for children who traditionally struggle with formal learning situations, the use of digital platforms was perhaps an ‘unexpected success’ (Breslin 2021, 90), for some enabling them to flourish in ways that were not usually seen in the classroom. Undoubtedly the growth of digital technologies to support the holistic needs of learners both during the lockdown and afterwards when pupils returned to schools has served as a ‘catalytic opportunity’ to embed technologies into the lives of learners (Williamson and Hogan 2020).

A limitation of this study is that it is small-scale and captured participants’ experiences at a particular moment in time. It does however, triangulate the views of headteachers, teachers and parents, and it is clear there is some tension between what has been discerned as effective pedagogically and beneficial pragmatically. While our data does not enable us to offer any more insight, future studies could continue to study the experiences of ongoing uncertainties in education and also include the voices of pupils.

All three participant groups mooted aspects of life which they considered had been lost during lockdown; loss being inextricably linked to time in this context. While there are reported concerns about lost learning during lockdown (Department for Education 2021) it also created opportunities for children to engage in more creative learning experiences (Breslin 2021). These unexpected opportunities and notable gains should be carried forward into the future of school organisation and learning.

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**Table 1. Episode and corresponding theme.**

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| **Episode** | **Description of episode** | **Key theme** |
| 1. Mid-March- 3rd April 2020, before the Easter holiday break | 1.Initial approach to homeschooling.  | 1.Pragmatic decision-making |
| 2.After the Easter break – early June 2020 | 2.Coping with uncertainty  | 2.Change and the impact on welfare and well-being |
| 3.Early June – July 2020 | 3.Realignment | 3.Shifting priorities of participant groups |