

Learning through disruption 3: schools engaging with families and communities during COVID



During the COVID pandemic, primary schools have found new ways of working with children and, crucially, their families. This has far-reaching implications for how schools and policy-makers consider home-school communication as a means of developing parental and community engagement in the future.

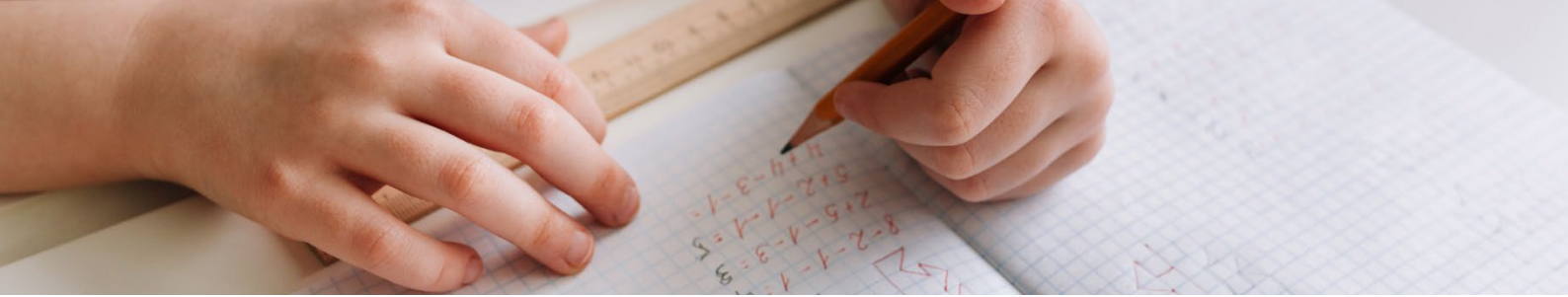
Our project, *Learning Through Disruption*¹, explored schools' communication with children, families and communities during the pandemic, and the nature of the home-school relationships that have been so crucial across the different phases of the crisis. As part of

our research, we asked parents² about their experiences of the periods of home-schooling, as well as the range of challenges that families faced within their reconfigured home contexts.

Parents told us about balancing home-schooling with paid work, managing financial strains and coping with illness and anxiety while also looking after younger children and/or siblings of different ages. Parents reflected on the challenges of lockdown life, including not being able to see wider family or visit places they might usually visit, and the task of trying to reassure and encourage children amid the uncertainties of the shifting situation. Parents spoke of the school routines that children missed and the new routines they

¹ *Learning through Disruption: Rebuilding primary education using local knowledge*. Funder ESRC/RCUK. Grant number ES/W002086/1 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/learning-through-disruption-rebuilding-primary-education-using-local-knowledge>

² Throughout this document we refer to 'parents', and those we spoke to as part of our research were parents (in fact all were mothers), but the points we are making apply more widely to those in care-giving roles and their relationships with the school.



tried to establish at home, as they balanced concerns for their children's wider wellbeing with concerns for their learning and academic progress. In this context, parental insights into schooling across the COVID crisis are particularly valuable.

Findings

- 1. Parental experiences of home-learning varied, as did parents' expectations and preferences.** Experiences of home-schooling varied, depending on family circumstances, what schools were asking children and parents to do at home, and how things changed across different phases of the pandemic. Parents had different expectations and preferences about what schools should be offering and why, in part shaped by how useful they found the tasks sent home, and how manageable the work was, given their personal circumstances.

Some parents wanted 'more work', more structure, more direction and/or learning materials from schools, while others felt this caused undue pressure. Some parents positively welcomed a less structured and more open approach that took greater account of children's willingness to engage and left parents freer to organise the day. Parents' understanding of the tasks set, whether they were also working from home, taking care of smaller children, or dealing with significant financial or health challenges, all helped explain these differences.

- 2. Effective home-school communication was critical in supporting parents during the pandemic.** Both schools and parents reported that the quality of home-school communication was key in supporting families through the pandemic. Regular communication from the school, whether electronic, phone or in person, made a positive difference to families'

home-schooling experience. It was often crucial to parental perceptions of the 'success' of home-schooling

Schools developed new ways of communicating during the pandemic, using both individually directed and group communications on email and apps. Parents welcomed regular contact, with teachers 'checking in' with them and their children. They valued clear guidance on both the school's overall approach and the logistics of what they should be doing at any given point in time. Parents appreciated seeing that their perspectives and feedback were acted on. Regular contact was particularly important in a context where government and press communications sometimes caused uncertainty and additional anxiety.

- 3. Home-schooling allowed many parents to learn more about their child's primary education.** Parents reported a strong sense of 'knowing their own child'. Many shaped home-schooling depending on what they felt their individual children needed in terms of routine, structure, input, volume of work etc. In this way, their responses to the school's input were informed by their understanding of their children's individual personalities, interests and struggles, as well as the emotional effects of the crisis.

For some parents, a noteworthy 'silver lining' of the COVID home-schooling experience was that they felt more in touch with what and how their children were learning. Some parents reported feeling more connected to their children's progress. Some reported positive outcomes for their child's learning from the time spent at home, such as improved reading confidence. Some also reported a renewed appreciation of, and insight into, what and how schools teach their children.



Recommendations

- 1. Schools and parents will benefit from a period of collective reflection on what has been learnt from the experience of home-schooling so they can identify anything they want to carry forward or change for the future.** If more of the recovery funding was passed directly to schools then decisions on how it could best be spent could be collectively arrived at locally.
- 2. Government should work with schools both to support the important and complex work that they already do with families, and to encourage meaningfully collaborative and consultative work between schools and their wider communities.** The pandemic highlighted the central role schools play in their communities. Staff, especially headteachers, have found themselves dealing with a whole variety of issues including those related to social care, mental health, abuse, poverty and marginalisation. Crucially, parents have reported that schools listening to and learning from families, was a critical factor in their managing life and their children's learning during the crisis. It

is clear that developing collaborative and consultative work with communities increases mutual understanding to the benefit of all.

- 3. Schools should be supported in capitalising on the new ways of communicating with parents that they developed during the pandemic.** Many schools developed innovative, effective and inclusive ways of communicating with parents across different phases of the crisis. We recommend that these approaches, involving a variety of media, be continued, and further evolved to develop the gains made in home-school communications, and with the aim of engaging still more parents/families/communities.

Schools found additional challenges in communicating with parents in areas of high poverty, for example through lack of mobile phones or email access. This may require additional resources to address and is a specific area in which schools need sustained support (digital and otherwise) in moving forward so that they can continue to be responsive to the varied and complex needs of their communities.

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