



*Polonia
and
Friends*



Home Learning Support Project Executive Summary

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Background

The school closures that have been imposed around the world to reduce the spread of the coronavirus are one of the most defining features of the COVID-19 crisis. On 20 March 2020, UK schools closed their gates to all but the children of essential workers and those deemed most vulnerable; during this period of lockdown, under 3% of pupils in England continued to attend school in person. The majority of children then spent more than a full term out of school.

Combined with the disproportionate effect of the crisis on the health, finances and employment of Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) households, the COVID-19 crisis could have disastrous consequences for inequalities in children's educational attainment.

Somerset Diverse Communities (part of Community Council for Somerset) and Polonia and Friends jointly applied to the Somerset Community Foundation for a grant from Somerset Coronavirus Response & Recovery Fund. This grant funded four learning assistants in Somerset that supported homeschooled children in their native language (Italian, Polish and Portuguese) between 24th June 2020 – 28th August 2020. The assistance was delivered using the Zoom video conferencing platform.

The aim of the project was to reduce the disproportionate impact of school closure due to the lockdown on families for whom English is a second language (EAL) and help the students to catch up with the neglected material, and prepare them for the upcoming new school year. It was important to make sure that parents of EAL pupils understand correspondence from the school, about how to support their children with home schooling.

The Learning Assistants supported 8 children from 7 different schools (St George's Primary; Chilton Trinity; St Gildas; Holy Trinity, Ashill, Huish, Buckler's Mead Academy). They used 56 hours out of 60 hours available (including introductory sessions with parents and administration work).

This summary highlights the problems encountered by EAL children and their parents, when faced with the task of facilitating home-schooling during lockdown.

Comment:

The new demand for homeschooling caused challenges for parents who were struggling to adapt to the roles and responsibilities of teaching. There have been gaps in homeschooling quality, exacerbated by the consequences of children's socio-economic circumstances, e.g. access to electronic devices; parents varying education levels and the impacts of financial instability.

Because of lockdown, students from EAL households have been faced with the barrier of a huge lack of exposure to and contact with, the English language. Access to extensive opportunities for English speaking, listening and reading are fundamental to development of fluency and without fluency, students are restricted in their ability to engage with the curriculum. Additionally, it can be extremely challenging for EAL students and their parents to understand the particular requirements of homework, even if they are proficient in the language. Parents have had to assume the role of primary educators, while balancing their work commitments or dealing with the financial and social implications of being laid off or furloughed. The new situation caused additional stress and anxiety which doesn't help in providing adequate guidance to their children.

At home, EAL children tend to communicate in their native language and the use of the English language is limited to the necessary minimum. Parents, children and EAL teachers had to undertake a new challenge in overcoming difficulties related to the language barrier – IT vocabulary and new command formulation, e.g., click on icon in the lower left corner, minimize the window, etc.

“It was very hard! Some learners do not have access to internet, computer and have limited English language skills. Besides, it takes much longer to explain what I am asking for and their attention span seems to be shorter. It is much easier to be distracted, especially if you have access to the world of social media in front of you.” – EAL teacher from Somerset.

One of our Learning Assistants worked with one family in which one parent was Polish and the other one Brazilian - both manufacturing workers. These parents work on opposite shifts so one can always be present and support their children in what is needed. Even though they tried their best, neither of them was comfortable with technology.

“[.]These parents only had one computer and neither of them knew how to use it, so it was all down to the oldest son to try to understand how it would be used for schooling – he himself didn't know much about it.” – Helena, Learning Assistant

A few weeks into lockdown, these parents sort of “gave up” on tracing homework, content, exercises and online lessons. When the Learning Assistant stepped in, the children were already on the third week of a break from homeschooling.

“During lockdown we lost track of our kids' homework and school tasks. We didn't stop working through lockdown and for that reason there was not much time to spend supporting them. Also, we are not that educated to help them at this stage. Our school and education were in another language, in another way and time. Our knowledge in English, Science, Computing or Maths is neither fresh or updated. Having an independent person checking on their homework and giving them daily tasks helped a lot!” – Parent of 8 and 10 years old pupils.

The lack of educational instruction and guidance available to children from EAL backgrounds, means that receiving an effective education from home has not necessarily been possible for these students.

Parents supported by this funding reported that most of their time is spent managing their children's behaviour and improving their focus, instead of completing schoolwork. The magnification of behavioural issues, due to children struggling with social isolation, has made this role even more challenging (stress and anxiety). Therefore the Home Learning Support Project seems to be an indispensable support for these families:

"These sessions were good and helpful. I was happy it was given in my native language. [...] I was motivated on doing my homework because I knew someone was going to check on it the following session." - 9 years old pupil.

"The learning assistant pushed me to do my homework and keep up with the teacher's program. I do not like being on camera, so it was not easy for me, but some sessions we did with the camera just pointing at my notebook which was fine." - 11 years old pupil

The learning assistants involved in this project reported that some of the children were particularly isolated because of their lack of access to electronic devices. Due to the inability to visit children's homes during lockdown, families have found it extremely difficult to obtain extra educational support. This technology-based disadvantage has also presented problems in regard to the good quality communication between families, schools and wider support. The extra funding challenges induced by lockdown have meant these barriers have been even harder to overcome.

Furthermore, education-focused organisations and charities have had to adapt to the complex and limiting circumstances of lockdown, while attempting to support children's schooling, e.g., the charity Diversity Voice started supporting EAL children online.

Some EAL students in normal circumstances, are able to access extracurricular educational activities. Due to governmental requirements the activities of the Polish Saturday School in Taunton have been suspended. There are not allowed to come back to rented premises of one of the local schools. Nearly 200 children have been deprived of the opportunity to continue learning and have contact with their peers. They are looking to secure another venue for their classes (ongoing).

Summary:

The negative implications and consequences of lock down on children and their education, have been extensive. As well as the complexities faced by all parties (children, parents, teachers, schools and organisations) when undertaking new tasks, the

need to redress the subsequent inequalities (in learning, opportunities and well-being) will present significant challenges long-term. There may be scope, moving forward, with a new awareness of the issues impacting children and their families during lockdown, we can not only enact a system better prepared for homeschooling (in case of a future crisis) but consider policies which could attempt to expand equality of opportunity in society more broadly, e.g., enable EAL children attend school.

“From my personal experience and also from listening to other parents sharing their journey with their kids at home I believe this learning tutoring project was extremely helpful and necessary to help not only adults adapt to the new work reality, but also to give kids the support they need so the impact on their education is as minimal as possible.” – Learning Assistant.

Although, the Home Learning Support Project was very well received and brought the desired results, it was delivered in challenging environment. It would have been useful to have more support of local authorities and schools in reaching out to EAL families, but it was delivered during a crisis and capacity was stretched across the system. Their recognition could help us to support more EAL children in overcoming difficulties and challenges caused by the lock down.

Assistance from schools in promoting the projects like Home Learning Support is invaluable – it would help to reach the interested group (EAL families) and gain their trust. It is important that essential information about additional support is translated into the language of the children attending the school concerned. Early initiation of additional support would prevent potential neglect of educational attainment. It is also important that schools are aware of organisations that are able to help EAL families in many other ways. Therefore, in the event of a similar crisis in the future, direct and closer cooperation between EAL teachers, schools and EAL communities is recommended.