



Primary Literacy Research Collaborative: Updated Briefing *Experiences of Literacy in Lockdown: What can we learn?*

The Primary Literacy Research Collaborative (PLRC) is a coalition of charities and associations committed to supporting research-informed literacy education in the primary phase. It includes: Booktrust, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, The English Association, Media Education Association, Oxford School of Thought, National Association for Advisors in English, National Association for the Teaching of English, National Association for Primary Education, National Literacy Trust, The Reading Agency, United Kingdom Literacy Association.

In Summer 2021 the PLRC reviewed research linked to literacy in primary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. This briefing provides an updated version of this review and proposes a series of recommendations for building on this research to produce a literacy curriculum that meets the needs of the post-pandemic era¹.

Executive summary

1. Possible effects on children's literacy attainment

- Teacher assessments and initial test data suggest that there has been a negative impact of lockdowns on literacy learning for some children, although impacts vary considerably. It is too early to judge whether differences will be sustained.
- Measurements of the impact of time away from school can be misleading as they rely on tests which do not reflect the full range of children's literacy experience.

2. Experiences of home learning

- Schools devoted considerable time to supporting families, particularly in areas perceived as serving most disadvantaged areas.
- While schools maintained the pattern and range of school literacy, they tended to prioritise enjoyment.
- Parents expressed anxieties about their children's educational progress and mental health.
- There were significant inequalities in access to resources for literacy learning, e.g. books, digital devices, data and study space.

¹ A revised version of this briefing will be produced in 2023. Researchers engaged in relevant studies are invited to forward details to Cathy Burnett, Sheffield Hallam University at c.burnett@shu.ac.uk.

- Children’s positive experiences of home learning were associated with interest-led, practical, creative and open-ended activities.

3. Pandemic literacies

- Many children used various media to make sense of the pandemic through play and creative activities and to make a stand for what mattered to them.
- While some children wrote or read less, others chose to write and read more.
- Children in multilingual families had greater opportunities to hear languages other than English in lockdown.
- Audio books and video gaming provided social opportunities to engage with narrative.

Recommendations

Short term

1. Integrate opportunities for children to talk, play and collaborate in language and literacy activities.
2. Provide opportunities for children to reflect upon their pandemic experiences through reading, writing and talk.
3. Provide opportunities for children to act in and on the world around them through the texts they create.
4. Ensure all children have access to the digital technologies, connectivity and books they need to read and write for different purposes and for pleasure, e.g. through ensuring well-equipped school and public libraries.
5. Avoid decontextualised ‘catch-up’ exercises and keep interest, meaning, choice and purpose to the fore when planning for literacy learning.
6. Ensure teachers have time to find out about, value and build upon children’s language and literacy learning at home and support efforts to sustain and build links with families and communities.

Long term

1. Review literacy curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment frameworks to re-imagine what literacy in primary schools can and should be in the 21st century. As part of this:
 - a) Build on opportunities for online learning to capitalise on opportunities to support a diversity of language and literacy practices.
 - b) Provide authentic and motivating opportunities for communication, collaboration and creativity using diverse media.
2. Consider how to draw on community/library reading initiatives to promote engagement with and enjoyment of reading.
3. Ensure that policy makers, school leaders and teachers can draw on rigorous research that reflects a broad view of literacy and uses a range of methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) to support decision making.

Experiences of Literacy in Lockdown: What can we learn?

Introduction

Most primary school children in the UK experienced two periods of school closure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic between April 2020 and July 2021. During these periods, some children continued with schooling as they were the children of key workers or perceived as having vulnerable backgrounds. Schools were expected to support other children to learn at home. Teachers, parents/carers and children had to adapt rapidly to new routines, roles and ways of teaching and learning at a time when they were isolated from their friends, colleagues and wider families (Lee and Wenham, 2020. Chamberlain et al., 2021). Many families also faced financial pressures and challenges linked to mental wellbeing, illness and bereavement (Public Health England, 2021; Resolution Foundation, 2021). There has been considerable concern about the impact of this experience on children's learning and various attempts have been made to gauge this impact. There is also considerable potential to draw on some positive aspects of that experience that have implications for education, particularly in relation to literacy education.

This briefing document provides a research-informed perspective on ways forward for literacy provision both in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic and in building a literacy curriculum for the long term. It summarises the outcomes of a rapid review of research relevant to primary literacy education during and after the pandemic. This was conducted in April 2021, updated in September 2021 and again in March 2022. This briefing references studies from a variety of disciplines using quantitative and qualitative approaches. These range from large scale surveys of trends across populations to in-depth studies of the experiences of individuals and families and to studies that documented children's creative and exploratory activity during the pandemic period. It is important to note however that the results should be treated with caution as much of this work is still ongoing and/or has not been published in peer-reviewed journals and/or has only so far been reported in abbreviated form². The studies also vary in scale, depth and methodology and methodologies are not always described in sufficient detail to enable judgements of rigour to be made. Unsurprisingly, given the time scale, no detailed reports of in-depth, sustained qualitative research of children and literacy were located. There are many aspects of children's experience – such as their experience of digital media during the pandemic – which are likely to have been highly significant but we have located little published UK-based research on this topic to date with the exception of a small number of case studies of individual children (e.g. Ofcom, 2020). Detailed and contextualised insights of children's experiences of literacy during the pandemic are therefore rare at the time of writing but are likely to appear in peer-reviewed journals in the near future.

A briefing of this length cannot do justice to the detailed analysis contained within reports nor can it fully account for the methodological limitations. However, a synthesis of preliminary findings and emerging areas of interest highlights key areas for consideration and further research in planning for literacy education post-COVID 19. These are:

1. Possible effects on literacy attainment
2. Experiences of home learning
3. Pandemic literacies

² For example, on blogs, reports or in professional publications rather than research reports or peer-reviewed articles.

1. Possible effects of partial school closures and missed school time on children's literacy attainment

Surveys of teachers' and parents' views have suggested that time spent on home learning differed widely between pupils in all areas (Andrew et al., 2021; Booktrust, 2020; Lucas et al., 2020; Moss et al. 2020). Teachers in schools perceived as serving the most deprived communities reported less time being spent on learning at home on average than those perceived as serving the most advantaged communities. This is likely to mask considerable variation in both the length of time spent and kinds of engagement by children in all settings. Teachers have expressed particular concerns about those with limited access to digital devices, data and study space (Lucas et al., 2020). Access to books has also been difficult for many, particularly given temporary or permanent library closures (CLPE, 2021; NLT, 2020).

The impact of partial school closures on learning is difficult to gauge. In summer 2020, the majority of teachers surveyed believed that the children they taught had fallen behind in learning by an estimated 3 months partly due to the period of home learning and partly because of the limitations imposed by social distancing and other hygiene measures on return to school (Sharp et al., 2020). However, these perceptions may relate to lack of curriculum coverage rather than learning over time. EEF's (2021) list of 'best evidence' on the impact of COVID-19 on attainment included studies that compared average test scores from the period with those from previous years, although these were not systematically reviewed. These tended to suggest an average difference of about 2 months which rose for those eligible for free school meals (Rose et al., 2021; Renaissance Learning/Education Policy Institute, 2021). Analysis has suggested that the impact was less than initially anticipated for primary school pupils (Renaissance Learning/Education Policy Institute, 2021) but that educational disruption has had a greater impact on younger children and children from lower income households and that there have been negative effects on children's reading scores in Year One (Nash et al., 2022; Tracey et al., 2022; Twist et al., 2022). A summary of the impact of COVID-19 concluded that the attainment gap between pupils from lower and higher income backgrounds has grown across all age groups (EEF, 2021). It is too early to judge whether such differences will be sustained or represent a temporary gap.

It is noted that studies of 'summer learning loss' (which also examine the impact of long breaks in schooling on children's attainment) have been the subject of critique (Harmey and Moss, 2021). Moreover, test scores do not provide detailed insights into the range of literacy learning that may have happened in response to home learning and/or in relation to other activities within and beyond the home (Reed et al., 2021). They may also mask differences in the experience of individuals or groups of children. Given these caveats, Harmey and Moss (2021) argue that there is a need for schools to draw on their own knowledge of the communities they serve and to use teacher assessment to inform literacy provision, not least because children's experiences of home learning will have varied considerably.

2. Teachers', parents/carers' and children's experiences of home learning

These studies draw mainly on survey and some qualitative data. Many teachers reported increased communications with families and the wider community during partial school closures which allowed more in-depth insights into the challenges faced by children's families, particularly linked to poverty (Wyse et al., 2021). Consequently they devoted considerable time and effort to supporting the welfare of children and families, particularly in schools perceived as serving the most disadvantaged areas. Most followed the pattern and range of school literacy learning, but in recognition of the many challenges of learning at home, enjoyment was often a key priority (Moss et al., 2020).

For many parents, managing home learning was challenging both in terms of sustaining routines and

motivating children when they found the materials provided by schools uninspiring. Parents also expressed anxieties about their children's educational progress and mental health, concerns which were exacerbated by their experience of the testing culture (Lee and Wenham, 2021). The pandemic experience also highlighted significant inequalities in access to resources, with many children lacking access to a digital device or connectivity or books (not least due to library closures) (Ofcom, 2021).

A survey of children suggested they were frequently bored during the lockdown (Children's Parliament, 2020). Lee and Wenham's small study (2020) found that boredom in home learning was associated with worksheets and revision booklets and that more positive experiences of home learning were associated with interest-led, practical, creative and open-ended activities. Furthermore, it suggested that online learning was often focussed on reading and on written responses, lacking the language-rich dialogic activity that underpins success in reading and writing. This work suggests some positive developments that could be built on to support literacy education, such as increased communication with families. However, it also raises questions about the focus and quality of the existing literacy curriculum and provision – or at least with those areas that some schools chose or felt obliged to prioritise during lockdown.

3. Pandemic Literacies

'Pandemic literacies' is the term used here to refer to studies of children's reading, writing and creativity during, and in response to, the pandemic. Cowan and Potter (2021) explored how children were folding their experience of COVID-19 into their play – playing 'corona tag' for example, or building LEGO hospitals and adapting games such as hide-and-seek to be played via video calls. Larkin (2021) notes that many children engaged in self-directed activities that aimed to campaign for or create change. This reflects Chamberlain et al.'s finding that children were not passive victims of the pandemic but were active in thinking about what should be done (Chamberlain et al., 2021). It manifests, for example, in the 'public, environmental literacy events' that Chamberlain (2021) photographed, such as chalked messages that thanked the NHS and urged people to 'stay safe.'

Surveys also suggested that the range and scope of some children's language and literacy increased in some significant ways:

- Children in multilingual families had greater opportunities to hear languages other than English in lockdown (Serratrice et al., 2020).
- While some children wrote less, without the support of peers and teachers or the resources, time or space to do so, some turned to writing as an 'outlet for expression' through fiction, poetry and journal/diary, writing more than usual during the lockdown as they had more time to do so (Clark, Picton and Lant, 2021).
- The proportion of children reading for pleasure also increased, with more time and opportunities to choose what to read, although again this varied, with some unable to find a quiet space to do so (Clark, Picton and Lant, 2021).
- Children gained valuable experience through multimedia texts: analysis of The National Literacy Trust annual survey responses for example highlighted increased use of audio books and video gaming. Reflecting on these findings, Best (2021) explores the value of audio books in engaging readers and providing rich opportunities for talk around and about books, and Picton and Clark (2021) highlight the value of video games as a route into reading and narrative and as a means to support social interaction with family and friends.

These examples indicate a range of ways children expressed themselves during the pandemic using different modes and media. They signal opportunities that arose, for some children at least, when they had the freedom to make choices about what to read and

write. Importantly, they also highlight how children use literacy to make sense of the world around them and to make a stand for what matters to them. These examples highlight that literacy is not just important as a set of skills to support children's curricular learning and their future lives but as a means of communicating, expressing themselves and making their voice heard in the here-and-now. Literacy learning is not just about skills acquisition but it is a portal to social and economic wellbeing, social life and civic participation. As such it is the key driver for addressing societal inequalities.

What can we learn in the short term?

In deciding what to prioritise post pandemic, care needs to be taken to avoid over-extrapolating from studies that capture only a slice of children's language and literacy learning during the partial lockdowns. There is a need to read across studies of different kinds and review the basis on which claims are made, recognising that qualitative and quantitative research provide valuable, and different, insights. It is important to recognise that – for any school – the experiences of individual teachers, parents and children will have varied considerably. Importantly it is not just curriculum-based learning that has been lost but time to socialise, collaborate and play. Responses therefore need to take account of teachers', parents'/legal guardians' and children's diverse experiences of COVID-19.

Our brief overview of pandemic literacies also suggests that there is an opportunity to learn from what children did do as well as what they missed: to reflect on the range of children's language and literacy experiences during lockdown, what motivated them and what they felt they gained. There is a considerable body of research from across the world which has highlighted the value of developing an inclusive curriculum which recognises and acknowledges the diverse literacy experiences children gain outside school (e.g. Comber and Kamler, 2004; Cremin et al., 2014; Souto Manning, 2010). This research shows how children thrive as speakers, readers and writers in rich literacy environments which recognise and draw on the various literacy resources that children bring to the classroom. Such research offers models for building post pandemic literacy provision. It suggests that literacy provision should include opportunities for children to read, write and use other media to support their wellbeing, social lives and civic participation. These areas are always important but will be particularly so as children come to terms with the pandemic period and work to remake friendships and explore opportunities to be active in shaping the future.

In the light of this review, we recommend the following priorities in planning for children's literacy learning in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic:

1. Integrate opportunities for children to talk, play and collaborate in language and literacy activities. This will support literacy learning and help children remake and sustain friendships and the classroom community. Furthermore, it will support the language and literacy development of learners with EAL.
2. Provide opportunities for children to reflect upon their pandemic experiences through reading, writing and talk.
3. Provide opportunities for children to act in and on the world around them through the texts they create.
4. Ensure all children have access to the digital technologies, connectivity and books they need to read and write for different purposes and for pleasure. Ensuring well-equipped school and public libraries has an important role to play here.
5. Avoid decontextualised 'catch-up' exercises and keep interest, meaning, choice and purpose to the fore when planning for literacy learning – to generate the enthusiasm, engagement and commitment seen in children's self-initiated reading and writing during lockdown.

6. Ensure teachers have time to find out about, value and build upon children's language and literacy learning at home and support efforts to sustain and build links with families and communities.

What can we learn in the long term?

Without doubt the pandemic period has been highly disruptive to children's literacy education and has done much to exacerbate existing inequalities. It is unsurprising therefore that educators and policy makers are concerned about 'lost learning'. However, this research summary suggests that we need to do more than focus on 'catch-up'. Policy-makers and school leaders need to seize the opportunity to review literacy provision in the long term. Importantly, teachers', parents' and children's experiences of home learning have highlighted some limitations to current literacy provision in some schools – an over-dependence on worksheets and decontextualised exercises that focus on specific skills and knowledge and appear to be unhelpful in developing readers and writers.

At the same time many schools and teachers have been highly creative in supporting children at home. At the time of writing we had found no detailed analyses of approaches to teaching and learning literacy during lockdown. These are likely to be forthcoming. However, there are many published accounts of how schools and teachers have built on opportunities for online learning and for supporting a diversity of language and literacy practices. Many of these focus on text-sharing as a focus for community building. These include accounts of a complementary school that facilitated opportunities for children to meet Romanian speakers online (Badescu, 2021) and of teachers building a 'reading for pleasure culture' through sharing video-ed story readings (CLPE, 2021). Others focus on reading, writing and sharing stories as a means to reflecting on experiences during the pandemic (Chamberlain et al, 2021). In some cases, digital environments opened out new possibilities for communication, collaboration and creativity using diverse media. Stephenson et al. (2021) describe how they devised three 'story landscapes' or online virtual environments for children across the UK to explore at a time when children were physically distant. Artist educators worked in role to involve children in imaginative storymaking through responding to, facilitating and stimulating children's engagement with events in the world. This kind of virtual play, devised in response to the pandemic, would seem to offer considerable potential for providing authentic contexts for children's literacy activity. Community and library reading initiatives have also offered opportunities for promoting engagement with and enjoyment of reading (The Reading Agency 2021).

In the light of this, it is timely to look again at literacy curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment frameworks and re-imagine what literacy in primary schools can be. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss what this might look like, but – in the light of this rapid review – the following questions provide valuable starting points for research and debate.

1. How can we know more about children's literacy outside school? And how can we use that knowledge to inform the literacy curriculum?
2. What kind of literacy do children need to engage in learning across the curriculum and in their current and future lives?
3. How might we learn from the pedagogical innovations in teaching literacy that happened during partial school closures?
4. Which assumptions are made about teachers, parents and children in policy and in research? What is the effect of such assumptions and how might we challenge these?
5. How can we ensure that policy makers, school leaders and teachers can draw on rigorous research that reflects a broad view of literacy and uses a range of methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) to support decision making?

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