Primary Literacy Research Collaborative[1]

Briefing: *Experiences of Literacy in Lockdown: What can we learn?*

Since April 2020, the majority of primary school children in the UK have experienced two periods of school closure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During these periods, schools have been expected to support children to learn at home. Support has included live online teaching using video conferencing and/or resources to be completed on or offline (worksheets, workbooks, videos, online exercises and so on), and/or open-ended tasks involving creative, investigative and exploratory activities. This has required teachers, parents/carers and children to adapt rapidly to new routines, roles and ways of teaching and learning at a time when they have been isolated from their friends, colleagues and wider families. Children missed their friends, special events and opportunities for outings and seeing the extended family (Lee & Wenham, 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2021; The Reading Agency, 2020). Many families will have also faced financial pressures and challenges linked to mental wellbeing, illness and bereavement due to the pandemic (Public Health England, 2021; Resolution Foundation, 2021). Moreover, some children and families will have experienced greater inequalities than others because of their limited access to digital devices or their status as learners of English as an additional language (EAL). Against this background there is considerable concern about the impact of this experience on children's learning, but also the 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.

The document summarises the outcomes of a rapid review conducted in April 2021 which synthesised key findings from research carried out between April 2020 and April 2021 that is relevant to primary literacy education during and after the pandemic. It included studies using quantitative and qualitative approaches. They range from large-scale surveys of trends across populations to in-depth studies of the experiences of individuals and families 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

[1] 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: Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, The English Association, Media Education Association, Oxford School of Thought, NALDIC – the national association for EAL, National Association for Advisors in English, National Association for the Teaching of English, National Association for Primary Education, United Kingdom Literacy Association.

much of this work is still ongoing and/or has not been published in peer-reviewed journals[2] and/or has only so far been reported in abbreviated form.[3] The work also varies in scale 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 were located at the time of this review, although several projects are underway[4]. This matters because it limits what we can learn about the nature of children's experiences of literacy during the pandemic, for example their uses of digital media.

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

In this document the studies are considered in three sets:

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

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

A number of surveys of teachers' and parents' views have suggested that time spent on home learning has been highly variable across pupils in schools in all areas (Andrew et al., 2021; Lucas et al., 2020; Moss et al. 2020; Opinium, 2020). Teachers in schools perceived as serving the most deprived communities reported less time being spent on average than those perceived as serving the most advantaged communities although 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 teach had fallen behind in their 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) – although these perceptions may relate to lack of curriculum coverage rather than learning over time. EEF (2021) provide a list of 'best evidence' on the impact of COVID-19 on attainment, which includes analyses of children's test scores from the period compared to those from previous years, although these have not been systematically reviewed. These include a comparison of Year 2 children's scores on NFER standardised tests for reading in 2020 and 2017 which suggested a difference of 2 months and that the difference may have been wider for children eligible for FSM and those at the earliest stages of reading (Rose et al., 2021). A similar difference (1.7 to 2 months) was found by a study using children's reading performance on Star Assessments to analyse

[2] Work to compile a definitive list of relevant research is ongoing. Researchers engaged in relevant studies are invited to forward details to Cathy Burnett at c.burnett@shu.ac.uk.

[3] i.e. on blogs or in professional publications rather than research reports or peer-reviewed articles.

[4] For example funded by the UKRI COVID-19 Rapid Response fund.

differences in the first half of Autumn term 2020 with what might be usually expected (Renaissance Learning/Education Policy Institute, 2021). However it is too early to judge whether these differences will be sustained or represent a temporary gap. 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. **This work suggests a need for in-depth teacher assessment to inform language and literacy provision on return to school, 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 challenges faced by children's families 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 (Moss et al., 2020). Most followed the pattern and range of school literacy learning, but in recognition of the many challenges of learning at home, enjoyment was the key priority (Moss et al., 2020). For parents, managing home learning was challenging both in terms of sustaining routines and motivating children when they found the materials provided by schools uninspiring. Some 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 & Wenham, 2021).

A survey of children suggested they were often bored (Children's Parliament, 2020). Lee and Wenham (2020) found that boredom 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 suggests that the nature of online learning was focussed on reading and on written responses, and lacked the language-rich dialogic activity that underpins success in each of these. **This work suggests some positive developments that could be built on to support literacy education (e.g. increased communication with families), but 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 partial 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. Potter et al. (2020-2022) are currently exploring how children are 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. Larkins (2021) notes that many children have engaged in self-directed activities that aim to campaign for or create change. This reflects Chamberlain et al.'s finding that children are not passive victims of the pandemic but have been active in thinking about what should be done (Chamberlain et al., 2021). It manifests, for example, in the 'public, environmental literacy events' that Chamberlain (in Chamberlain et al., 2020) photographed, such as chalked messages that thanked the NHS and urged people to 'stay safe.'

A number of surveys have suggested that the range and scope of some children's language and literacy also increased in some important 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 journals/diaries, writing more than usual during the lockdown as they had more time to do so (Clark, Picton & Lant, 2021). The proportion of children reading for pleasure, and length of time spent doing so, also appeared to increase (Clark & Picton, 2020; Opinium, 2020), although one survey of children's book reading habits suggested this was not the case for the under 4s or over 8 girls (Neilson, 2020). Increases may result from increased time and opportunities to choose what to read, although again this varied, with some children unable to find a quiet space to read to themselves.

These examples indicate a range of ways that children have expressed themselves during the pandemic using different modes and media, and also signal opportunities that opened out (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 make a stand for what matters to them. These examples highlight that literacy is not just about a set of skills that will be important for children's curricular learning and for their future lives, but 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 the portal to social and economic wellbeing, social life and civic participation. As such it is the key driver for addressing societal inequities.**

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 also to 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/carers' and children's diverse experiences of COVID-19.**

There is an opportunity here to **learn from what children *did* do as well as what they might have missed** – to reflect on the range of language and literacy experiences they had, 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 builds on children's diverse literacy experiences (e.g. Comber and Kamler, 2004; Cremin et al., 2014; Souto-Manning, 2010). Such work could provide useful models for doing so. As part of this, 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.

The following should therefore be prioritised in planning for children's literacy learning in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic:

1. Give teachers time to find out about, value and build upon children's language and literacy learning at home – enhanced relationships with some parents and careers will make this easier than before. Additional effort to build community links should also be supported.

2. Integrate opportunities for children to talk, play and collaborate in language and literacy activities. This will not only support literacy learning but help children to remake and sustain friendships and the classroom community. Furthermore it will support the language and literacy development of learners with EAL.
3. Provide opportunities for children to reflect upon their pandemic experiences through talk, reading and writing.
4. Provide opportunities for children to act in and on the world around them through the texts they create.
5. 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.
6. 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.

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 language and 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, and may provide limited opportunities to interact socially and academically through talk. At the same time many schools and teachers have been highly creative in supporting children at home. While, it was not possible to locate any detailed studies of learning during lockdown for this review, there are many published accounts of how schools and teachers have built on opportunities for online learning and capitalised on opportunities to support a diversity of language and literacy practices. These include accounts of a complementary school that facilitated opportunities for children to meet Romanian speakers online (Badescu, 2021), examples of teachers building a reading for pleasure culture' through sharing video-ed story readings (CLPE, 2021), and examples from the USA that demonstrate how literacy learning can be used to create a community - through reading, writing and sharing stories as a means to reflecting on experiences (Chamberlain et al, 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? How can we use that knowledge to inform language and literacy provision for all that acknowledges and builds upon children's diverse language and literacy experiences?
2. What kind of language and literacy do children need to engage in learning across the curriculum and in their current and future lives?

3. Which pedagogical innovations in teaching language and literacy have happened during partial school closures? (How) might we learn from these in supporting future literacy provision?
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 are able to 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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