Parent experiences of home-schooling children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities during the Coronavirus pandemic

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**Abstract**

Parents of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) took part in an online survey that explored their experiences of home-schooling during the Coronavirus pandemic. Two-hundred and thirty-eight parents from the UK responded to forty-nine questions about the resources and support they had received, their management and feelings surrounding home-schooling. Chi-square analyses were used to establish whether parent’s experiences differed as a result of socio-economic status (SES) or the nature of their child’s SEND. Results indicated that parents were dissatisfied with the resources and support they had received for their child’s educational and psychological needs. Parents felt inadequate and unprepared, and believed that non-attendance at school had and would have a detrimental effect on their child’s education and mental health. Parents also expressed the negative impact of home-schooling on their and their family’s well-being. Finally, SES and SEND-type were not associated with a parent’s experiences of home-schooling.

**Introduction**

Schools in the UK were closed in March this year due to the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). These closures will impact all children; and for some, the effects will be far-reaching and detrimental to their learning and development. Despite many schools offering places for vulnerable children with Education, Health and Care plans (EHCP), evidence suggests that many did not attend. Although there are currently no official education department figures on attendance, in a BBC report on April 9th, Katie Razzall reported that as few as 10% of vulnerable children allocated a school place during closures, were attending school in some parts of the UK. One survey of members of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, revealed that in 94% of schools no more than 20% of pupils had attended (NAHT, 2020). These figures indicate that for many families, the teaching and learning of their children became the responsibility of the parents. This sudden and unforeseen switch to home-schooling, coupled with measures such as social distancing and self-isolation has presented numerous challenges for most families. More so, for those with special educational needs and disability (SEND), who may usually rely on routine, professional support and specific equipment to maximise their child’s learning opportunities (Asbury, Fox, Deniz, Code & Toseeb, 2020). An additional challenge is faced by those families who are financially disadvantaged, where unequal access to technology, reliable internet access and educational resources are impacted by socio-economic status (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). Researching for the Sutton Trust, Stewart and Waldfogel (2017) found that children from poorer families were already 11 months behind their better-off peers in early years` provision, proposing that the attainment gap will widen both in the short and long term. These findings are corroborated in a recent report by Time (2020) which found that the impact of COVID-19 was most severe for children from financially disadvantaged families, again suggesting that socio-economic status (SES) has lifelong implications for learning.

As defined in the Education Act 1996, children identified as needing additional school support have a “significantly greater difficulty in learning” than their peers which calls for special educational provision to be made for them (Welsh Government, 2015: 9). In England and Wales at the start of this year, there were 1,318,300 (14.9% of all pupils) and 97,551 (20.8%) pupils with SEND in maintained schools (Welsh Government, 2020). These figures suggest that pre-COVID-19, a large percentage of children with SEND, were not attending schools and were being home-schooled. It is the responsibility of local authorities within the UK to ensure that home education provision is suitable to the child’s age, aptitude and ability, and any special educational needs.

Despite the number of children with SEND being home-schooled in the UK, currently very little is known about their experiences. One source that examines general home-schooling is the Office of National Statistics `Opinions and Lifestyle Survey` (Smith & Nelson, 2015). They reported that 1.1% of the UK population have engaged in home education at least part of the time and 2% did so on a full-time basis; roughly equating to a population of 80,000 upwards in 2013. Moreover, within this data, 23% of home educators were doing so with their SEND children. Reasons provided for this were varied, but most commonly cited were frustrations with the school system, concerns around their children’s mental health and well-being, dissatisfaction with the school provision and often as a decision of last resort.

In 2010, Parsons and Lewis examined parent’s experiences of home-schooling their children with SEND using an online survey. They reported that overall, parents (and their children) were positive about their experiences with home-schooling. Parents stated that children had played a key role in determining the structure and content of their home-schooling and that their approach to home-schooling had been rigid at the start, but over time parents had become more flexible in their approach. When asked about their planning of lessons and activities, a majority of parents responded in the mid-range (not highly-planned or unplanned). In particular, parents spoke of planning some materials and activities to accommodate the needs of their children. Parents relied heavily on home-education websites, the internet and family for support and indicated that local authorities and schools provided the least help and guidance. A majority of parents did not follow the national curriculum or any other guidelines as they found them to be unhelpful. Despite the relatively positive experiences reported, these parents had chosen to home-school their children, which is very different from the current situation parents find themselves in during the pandemic. Moreover, the survey only reported on the views of twenty-seven parents who were part of a home-education support group, which makes generalisation of their findings difficult.

More recently, Kendall and Taylor (2016) conducted a small-scale study investigating the perspectives of the parents of children with SEND who had elected to home educate in England. The authors interviewed seven parents and identified three main themes; motivations and reasons, attitudes of staff and lack of partnership, and impact upon the child. They concluded that effective communication, the development of a partnership between parents and staff, flexible provision and parental choice were all necessary factors for a positive experience in the home-schooling of children with SEND.

Despite the limited research that examines the home-schooling of Children with SEND, it is clear that it poses many challenges for parents (Forrester, Maxwell, Slater & Doughty, 2017; Kendall & Taylor, 2016). For example, children with SEND often have multiple issues that require specialist care, support and equipment, which can result in higher-than-normal levels of family stress and dysfunction (McConnell & Savage, 2015; McStay, Trembath & Dissanayake, 2014). Coupled with the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, parents face increasing pressures, responsibilities and potential distress. Indeed, the recent brief report by Asbury et al. (2020) revealed a negative effect on a parent’s mental health during the current Coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, steps must be taken to understand the impact on parents home-schooling their children during this time, so that they can access the appropriate help post-COVID-19.

*The present study*

The present study adapted the questions posed by Parsons and Lewis (2010), to examine the experiences of parents home-schooling their children with SEND during the school closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it aims to explore the resources and support parents have received from their schools and/or local authority, and how satisfied they were with these resources. Parents will also be asked about their preparedness, management and feelings concerning home-schooling. As a proxy measure of Socio-economic status (SES), parents will be asked to indicate their highest level of educational achievement. The final aim was to understand what parents believe the impact to be on themselves and their children. This research offers a unique opportunity to explore a parent’s perspective of home-schooling their children with SEND in these extraordinary times.

Research questions

1. What are the experiences of parents access to resources and support during home-schooling
2. Did parents feel prepared to home-school their children
3. How have parents managed their home-schooling
4. How do parents feel about their experience with home-schooling?
5. What do parents believe will be the impact of home-schooling and not attending school on their children?
6. What do parents believe has been the impact of home-schooling on their well-being?
7. What is the impact of SES and SEND type on parents` preparedness, management of, access to, and satisfaction with, resources?

**Method**

***Participants and procedure***

The study population consisted of parents home-schooling a child with SEND during the Coronavirus pandemic. Two hundred and thirty-eight parents, aged 20 to 59 years, across the UK, voluntarily completed an anonymous online survey. The survey was released three months into lock-down to ensure that parents had experienced enough home-schooling to express their thoughts and views. Data were collected from June to July 2020.

Using Qualtrics Survey Software, a paragraph outlining the research, data protection and a link to the questionnaire was posted on several social media platforms. Once clicked, parents read an information sheet explaining the study and what was expected of them. They were assured that the survey was voluntary, anonymous and confidential and that they could stop the survey at any time by closing the browser. If they agreed to take part, they were told that by continuing they were providing consent. Once completed, the parents were presented with a debrief page explaining the aim of the study and their right to withdraw. The questionnaire took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

***Materials***

The present study adapted questions posed by Parsons and Lewis (2010). There were five main sections to the survey: (1) background characteristics of the parents such as age, gender and the occupational status during the pandemic (2) background characteristics of children being educated at home such as age and nature of SEND (3) questions relating to the resources and support received by parents (4) management of/pedagogical approach to home-schooling (5) feelings about home-schooling in the context of their experiences. The 49 questions included asking parents to rate responses on a five-point rating scale – ‘how satisfied are you with the educational resources you have received from your child’s teacher/school?’ (very satisfied, quite satisfied, neither/nor, quite dissatisfied, very dissatisfied); categorical responses – ‘are you working from home during the pandemic?’ (yes, no,); and open-ended questions ‘what do you think the effects of your child not attending school during the pandemic will be?’

**Results**

The data presented here represent the five main sections outlined above. The summed data and percentages are presented in five tables that correspond to each section. The *n* number differs for some of the responses due to the inclusion of optional questions and non-responses. Several chi-square goodness-of-fit tests and chi-square tests for independence were calculated to determine differences across responses relating to the resources and support received by parents, their management and feelings about home-schooling. Additionally, chi-square tests for independence were used to examine the impact of a parent’s socio-economic status (SES: measured by Parent’s education) and the child’s SEND-type on some of the above responses. Parents were asked to provide information on nine open-ended questions to allow for information regarding the resources and support received for home-schooling, their management of/pedagogical approach to home-schooling, their feelings about home-schooling and its impact on their children and themselves. Open comments were analysed following the principles of content analysis (Krippendoorf, 2018). Content analysis is a systematic coding and categorising approach used for exploring textual information (Mayring, 2004) that allows the researcher to analyse personal experiences through the identification of codes based on the frequency of occurrence (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The first author coded the entire dataset and the second rated every 10th response (10% of the dataset) in an attempt to ensure inter-coder reliability. Disagreements were discussed between the two raters until an agreement was reached. The exact responses and codes are not included in the tables but summarised under each of the relevant sections.

*Background characteristics of the parents home-schooling their children with SEND*

Table one shows that two hundred and thirty-eight parents from the UK completed the online survey. The majority of respondents were female and aged between 30 and 49. For ninety-two percent of parents, this was their first time home-schooling their child with SEND. Chi-square analyses indicated that significantly more parents attained higher-education status (31%, *x2*(4) 33.218, *p* = .000) compared to the other education attainment categories. Twenty-six parents were qualified teachers. The majority of parents were employed either full-time or part-time (29% and 34%, respectively). Almost a quarter of parents were keyworkers who continued to work during lock-down and just over a quarter were working from home alongside home-schooling with a further twenty-seven percent being furloughed during the pandemic.

Table 1. Background characteristics of the parents home-schooling their children with SEND

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Parent responses |  | *n* | % |
| Gender  Age (in years)  Is this the first time you have home-schooled your child/children?  Educational attainment  Employment status (before lock-down)  Formally qualified teacher  Key-worker (so working during lock-down)  Working from home (during lock-down)  Furloughed (during lock-down) | Male  Female  20-29  30-39  40-49  50-59  Yes  No  Secondary school  Sixth form/FE  Higher Education  Postgraduate Study  Other  Employed: Full-time  Employed: Part-time  Self-employed  Unemployed  Yes  No  Yes  No  Yes  No  Yes  No | 13  225  18  97  94  29  219  19  44  60  74  37  23  68  81  25  64  26  212  57  181  64  174  53  185 | 5  95  8  41  39  12  92  8  19  25  31  15  10  29  34  10  27  11  89  24  76  27  73  22  78 |

*Background characteristics of the children with SEND being home-schooled*

Table two presents the characteristics of the children with SEND being home-schooled. The majority of children were male (63%), and of primary or secondary school age (55% and 38%, respectively). Over half of the children had a statement/EHCP and received learning support at school. The most cited special educational need and disability came from the two main categories of *Behaviour, emotional and social development* and *Communication and interaction.* A chi-square goodness-of-fit test supports this, *x2*(5) 222.034, *p* = .000. Within these, the most prevalent disorders were ADHD (49%) and ASD (73%). Seventy-four percent of parents reported that their child attended mainstream school before lock-down. Over three-quarters of the children had siblings, with a quarter of siblings holding a statement/EHCP and sixty-eight percent of the siblings were also receiving home-schooling.

Table 2. Background characteristics of the children with SEND being home-schooled

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Child characteristics |  | *n* | % |
| Gender  Age (in years)  Formal statement/education health care plan  Teaching assistant/learning support at school  Special need or disability (more than one could be ticked)  Education before the pandemic  Siblings at home  Receiving home-schooling  Siblings: formal statement/education health care plan | Male  Female  0-4  5-10  11-16  17+  Yes  Unsure  No  Yes  Unsure  No  *Cognition and learning:*  Specific learning difficulty  Moderate learning difficulty  Severe learning difficulty  Profound and multiple learning difficulties  *Behaviour, emotional and social development:*  Behaviour, emotional and social difficulty  Specific mental health needs  ADHD/ADD  *Communication and interaction:*  Speech, language and communication needs  Autistic Spectrum Disorder  *Sensory needs:*  Visual impairment  Hearing impairment  Multisensory impairment  *Physical needs:*  Motor disability  Other physical disabilities/conditions  Mainstream  Special School/unit  A mix of special/unit and mainstream  Always educated at home  Other  Yes  No  Yes  No  Yes  Unsure  No | 151  87  14  130  90  4 128  31  79  124  43  71  39  50  15  13  75  11  82    44  118  5  19  27  20  38  175  37  16    5  5  180  58  123  57  31  3  89 | 63  37  6  55  38  1  54  13  33  52  18  30  33  43  13  11  45  6  49    27  73  10  37  53  34  66  74  15  7  2  2  76  24  68  32  25  2  73 |

Table 3 presents the responses relating to the resources and support received by parents for home-schooling. Sixty-eight percent of parents reported receiving educational resources from their school. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test reached significance, *x2* (1) 14.134, *p* = .000, suggesting that more parents had received educational resources than not. However, just over half of parents indicated that the resources were not appropriate for their child’s needs, and one-hundred (42%) parents said they were dissatisfied with the resources they had received. Both appropriateness and dissatisfaction with the resources did not reach significance, *x2* (1) .151, *p* = .697 and *x2* (1) 32.538, *p* = .000, respectively. Further analyses with chi-square test for independence found no association between the receiving of resources and SES and SEND-type, *x2* (3) 1.052, *p* = .789 and *x2* (12) 10.294, *p* = .590, respectively. Similarly, no association between satisfaction with the resources and SES and SEND-type was found, *x2* (7) = 3.31, *p* = .913 and *x2* (5) = 6.081, *p* = .298, respectively.

Parents were asked to comment on why they believed the resources were not appropriate. Sixty-four parents responded to this question and the main issues related to the content of the resources. The comment that no differentiation had been made between the work for SEND and non-SEND children was mentioned 21 times, with a further ten parents explicitly saying that the work was not tailored to their child’s needs.

They [school] said it was appropriate for my child, but it was set out for all the class, the only difference I noticed was she had less spelling than the others.

The tasks set were set for the whole class and were not tailored to our child; there were no alternatives or multiple options to complete.

Sixteen parents said that the work was of an inappropriate level (of understanding) for their children, in addition to a further 11 comments stating that there were no clear guidelines to follow which made tasks and activities more difficult, for example:

The SENCO sent general year one work for my child who is working at below reception.

Often work was sent home with no instruction on how to complete. My son has difficulty with maths work and struggled to know the best way of working things out. With no instruction, I couldn’t help.

Twelve parents claimed that there was too much work and that the resources were too difficult and not age-appropriate:

Too much work. Also, using acronyms that were a mystery to all.

My child said it was not what they did in school. A lot was not age-appropriate and was hard for him.

Eight comments centred on access to appropriate resources to enable parents to carry out the tasks set by the school. These included poor internet access and the cost of ink to print out the resources. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant difference between the above comments on inappropriateness of the resources, *x2* (5) 8.615, *p* = .125. Similarly, no significant associations were found for SES or SEND (*x2* (15) 9.757, *p* = .835 and *x2* (15) 16.986, *p* = .320, respectively).

The schools had contacted significantly more parents than not (62%: *x2* (1) 14.134, *p* = .000). However, almost half said that they were dissatisfied with the level of contact that they have had with their child’s teacher/school. Eighty-one percent of parents had not been contacted by their local authority or any other department Of the parents who had, thirty-four of them provided information on who had contacted them. Still, only sixteen parents were offered help or resources. The contact came from a range of sources which included speech and language therapists (six parents), CAMHS (five), the local authority and council (six) and social services or social workers (five). The SENCO contacted only one parent. In terms of help and resources, parents stated:

We received an online behaviour management course to develop new strategies. I also received positive parenting books to help me with this.

When asked if they had received enough support for their child’s educational and psychological needs, the majority had answered no (72% and 85%, respectively), with both responses reaching significance (*x2* (1) = 47.210, *p* = .000 and *x2* (1) = 118.588, *p* = .000, respectively) indicating that both educational and psychological support was lacking. Parents appeared to rely on a range of support; the most prevalent was online resources (61%) followed by family, school/teacher and friends.

Table 3. The resources and support received by parents for home-schooling

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Resources and support |  | *n* | % |
| At the start of home-schooling, did you receive educational resources from your school?  Were the resources appropriate for your child’s needs?  How satisfied are you with the educational resources you have received?  Have the school/teachers/TAs contacted you personally  during the pandemic?  How satisfied are you with the level of contact that you have had with your child’s teacher/school?  Has your local authority or any other department been in contact with you?  Do you feel that you have received enough support for your child’s educational?  Do you feel that you have received enough support for your child’s psychological needs?  Which of the following sources of support have you drawn upon during the pandemic? (more than one could be ticked) | Yes  No  Yes  No  Very satisfied  Quite satisfied  Neither/nor  Quite dissatisfied  Very dissatisfied  Yes  No  Very satisfied  Quite satisfied  Neither/nor  Quite dissatisfied  Very dissatisfied  Yes  No  Yes  No  Yes  No  Family  Friends  Home-education websites  Home-education groups  Local Education Authority  General online resources  Other community groups  School/teacher  Other | 163  75  116  122  36  55  47  68  32  148  90  54  45  32  64  43  45  193  66  172  35  203  111  66  56  8  6  145  26  70  13 | 68  32  49  51  15  23  20  29  13  62  38  23  19  13  27  18  19  81  28  72  15  85  47  28  24  3  2  61  11  29  5 |

Table 4 shows the responses to the parent’s management of/pedagogical approach to home-schooling. One-to-two hours per day was the most cited time allocated to home-schooling (*x2* (3) 101.429, *p* = .000), accounting for just over half of all parents. Forty-three parents were unable to home-school their children, and 14 managed only a few hours a week. A quarter worked 3-4 hours a day. Further analysis revealed no significant association between hours of schooling and SES or SEND-type (*x2* (9) = 3.906, *p* = .917 and *x2* (6) = 4.153, *p* = .656, respectively).

When asked how they approached the structure and content of home-schooling, thirty-nine percent of parents worked with their children to decide in advance or on the day (18% and 21%, respectively). Parents were asked to rate their general approach to home-schooling as rigid, neutral or flexible. Over half of parents said they were flexible in their approach and over a third said that their level of planning of lessons and activities were unplanned. Over two-thirds of parents followed the National Curriculum, the choice to use it was not influenced by SES or SEND-type (*x2* (3) = 6.709, *p* = .082 and *x2* (5) = 10.765, *p* = .056, respectively). Less than half of all parents believed the national curriculum to be helpful. Thirty-five percent of parents used alternative guidelines or curricula, which included mainly online resources such as Early-years foundation stage government resources and Twinkl. The most cited alternative curricula followed was the BBC (almost a quarter). Similarly, the most common activities were carried out using online resources; these included Makaton, Mathletics, Reading eggs, TT Rockstarts and Sumdog. These activities were cited fifty-one times; thirty-three percent of the tasks were taken from Twinkl. Thirty-four parents said that they had followed general curriculum tasks such as Maths, Science and English (and reading), through the use of books they had specifically purchased or by using google classroom. Another popular task involved outdoor activities such as walking, gardening and exercise (cited by 22 parents). Parents also spoke of tasks that they had used to ‘help disguise’ the core academic subjects, these included baking (cited by 22 parents), arts and crafts (cited by nine parents) and learning through play (cited by four parents). A chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed significant differences between the parents’ choice of tasks used for home-schooling, *x2* (7) 101.264, *p* = .000. Parents were more likely to use online resources and less likely to use more structured platforms such as google classroom.

Table 4. Parental management of/pedagogical approach to home-schooling their child with SEND

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Management of/pedagogical approach |  | *n* | % |
| Approximate hours of home-schooling a day  Which of the following best describes how you approached your home-schooling (choose  one)?  How would you describe your general approach to home-schooling?  How would you rate the level of planning of lessons and activities?  To what extent have you followed the National Curriculum?  How helpful have you found the guidance in the National Curriculum?    Are there any other guidelines or curricula that you followed and find useful? | 0  1-2  3-4  5+  A little across the week  I create a timetable/plan well in advance  I create a timetable/plan a day or two before  I decide on the day  My child decides in advance  My child decides on the day  My child and I decide together in advance  My child and I decide together on the day  Rigid  Neutral  Flexible  Planned  Neutral  Unplanned  Not at all  Somewhat  A great deal  Not at all helpful  Somewhat  Very helpful  Yes  No | 27  123  60  14  14  16  26  37  20  36  40  47  35  60  137  68  80  84  82  130  25  62  73  17  83  155 | 11  52  25  6  6  7  12  17  9  16  18  21  15  26  59  29  34  36  35  55  10  41  48  1  35  65 |

Table 5 presents the feelings reported by parents during the home-schooling of their children. Significantly more parents felt negative towards their experience of home-schooling, *x2* (2) 28.294, *p* = .000 (43%). A similar number of parents believed that their children had felt the same. The majority of parents felt unprepared (80%) and based on their experience would not consider home-schooling in the future (71%). Ninety-nine parents provided reasons for feeling unprepared. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that parents were more likely to report ‘not being up for the job’ (mentioned by 30 parents, *x2* (6) 30.926, *p* = .000). In particular, parents spoke of a lack of confidence and knowledge surrounding the needs of their children. Another issue that caused concern was balancing home-schooling with work and family commitments. This concern was mentioned seventeen times and included comments such as:

Balancing my work as an educator online to others with my own children’s educational needs.

How would I fit in working and home-schooling with three children?

The fear of feeling unprepared also led parents to say that they were afraid of ‘letting their children down’ (cited by six parents) and that their home-schooling would be inadequate which would result in their children falling behind (cited by eleven parents). These feelings are expressed in the comments below.

Not knowledgeable enough to support and meet their learning needs.

Letting my child down and not being good enough to teach him.

My greatest fear is that the home-schooling has been inadequate, and my son will be behind in school.

It also appears that parents had fears over a lack of time to prepare and the absence of help and resources. These concerns were raised by thirteen parents and included comments such as:

It happened so quickly. Had no time to prepare, no resources.

Not having enough laptops and devices to do work, making sure there’s enough paper and ink in printer etc.

The final concern relating to comments about feeling unprepared was how they [parent] would manage their child’s behaviour and non-engagement in home-schooling. Thirteen parents included this as an issue, and a further five mentioned their concerns of how their child would cope with home-schooling, for example:

Not being able to get my son to engage or concentrate, worrying about activities that spiked an angry or emotionally out of control response.

Generally dealing with meltdowns, screaming and tantrums and behaviour issues.

The reasons behind feeling unprepared were not associated with SES or SEND-type (*x2* (18) 14.244, *p* = .713 and *x2* (18) 19.524, *p* = .360, respectively).

Over three-quarters of parents thought that their child had been disadvantaged by not attending school. Despite the majority believing this, analyses found no significant association between the belief that their child had been disadvantaged according to SES, *x2* (3) = 1.249, *p* = .741, or SEND-type , *x2* (5) = 3.635, *p* = .603. One-hundred and three parents had included written comments about the type of disadvantages they believed their children faced. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test reached significance, *x2* (5) = 60.266, *p*=.000, with the most prevalent disadvantage being the lack of social contact and peer interaction (almost half of all comments). Parents also stated that the lack of social interaction had affected their children’s mental health (eight comments). A second concern cited by twenty-one parents was the lack of structure and routine that their child usually gains from attending school. A quarter of parents also raised the issue of missing tailored education and essential work to enable them to progress to their next class in September. In particular, many parents spoke of a fear that their child would fall behind. Comments included:

They’ve not had the same level of input from teachers/me as they would do normally and have missed out on the social support and networks usually present in school.

He learns better in the school environment and is able to focus more with encouragement from his specialist teachers.

Table 5. Parental feelings about home-schooling their child with SEND

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Feelings |  | *n* | % |
| How positive or negative do you feel about your experience of home-schooling?    How do you think your child feels about their experience of home-schooling?    Did you feel prepared for home-schooling?    How likely are you to consider home-schooling in the future?    Do you think that your child has been disadvantaged by not attending school? | Positive  OK  Negative  Positive  OK  Negative  Yes  No  Not at all likely  Maybe  Very likely  Yes  No | 41  94  103  41  102  95  47  191  169  51  18  189  49 | 17  40  43  17  43  40  20  80  71  21  8  79  21 |

Parents were also asked what they believed the effect of home-schooling would be on their child with SEND. One-hundred and twenty-eight parents included comments. Significantly more parents cited comments related to the negative impact of not seeing friends and peers (36%) and having no routine or structure (36%) than any other effect, (*x2* (6) = 29.143, *p*=.000). Comments included;

She has missed her friends.

The lack of structure will make it hard to get her back into the swing of things, and the lack of socialisation will cause problems maturing.

Parents also spoke of their child falling behind in their education (24 comments), and the education/learning their child had missed may affect their progression to the new academic year (14 comments). Twenty-six parents also raised concerns about the length of time spent out of school may make school re-integration and re-adjustment difficult for their child, a further twenty-nine comments relate to the impact this will have on the child’s mental health. For example:

I think returning to school will be very challenging for my son, who has now become ‘comfortable’ with being at home, out of the routine of school. I believe there will be another long period of adjustment while my son overcomes the anxieties connected to transitioning back to school and a new normal.

Eight parents believed that home-schooling had had a positive effect on their children in terms of improved academic performance and less stress (compared with attending school).

The final open-ended question asked parents what they believed the effects of home-schooling had been on their well-being. One-hundred and fifty parents added comments. Significantly more parents cited stress as a major factor affecting their well-being (41% of parents: *x2* (11) =194.674, *p*=.000). Twenty-one percent said that they felt tired and exhausted. Twenty-three of the parents had experienced an increase in anxiety levels; fifteen reported that the experience had affected their (or their households) mental health. For a further nine parents, home-schooling had changed their behaviour (irritable, frustrated, reduced patience). Comments included;

Stressful! I feel it has been detrimental to my relationship as a mum with her son as I’m having to make him do work that he struggles with and doesn’t want to do. This has led to battles and tears from both of us. Also, I don’t get a break, so I feel exhausted.

Raised anxiety levels for everyone.

Eleven parents found it hard juggling home-schooling, work and home-life with a further eight expressing the negative impact upon the relationships with other family members. In terms of negative feelings about themselves, ten felt inadequate, and seven felt guilty that they were not providing adequate support or education, for example;

Feel like I’m failing as a parent because I couldn’t get him to do what school had sent home.

It is very tiring trying to get everything done. I feel guilty when I can’t give her all of my time.

A small number of parents (13) cited the positive effects of home-schooling on their well-being. In particular, they spoke of the joy of spending more time with their children and the whole experience being enjoyable. Further chi-square test for independence analyses revealed no significant association between the effects of home-schooling on parent well-being and SES or SEND-type (*x2* (33) 30.919, *p* = .571 and *x2* (55) 38.524, *p* = .955, respectively).

**Discussion**

The current study aimed to explore parents` experiences, feelings and management of home-schooling their children with SEND during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first section of the survey focused on parents’ access to resources and support. Although a majority of parents had received educational resources from their school, many expressed their dissatisfaction with the guidance and appropriateness of the resources. However, the likelihood of receiving and satisfaction rates with resources were not associated with SES or SEND-type. The lack of appropriate contact from their school/local authority and belief that they had not received support for their child’s psychological needs had left parents feeling disappointed and anxious, leading them to seek help from their family and friends. These findings mirror a recent report exploring `learning during lock-down` where Andrew et al. (2020) found that nearly sixty percent of families were struggling with home-schooling, due in part to the variations in the support and resources they received.

Given the need for home-schooling at such short notice and over half of the parents were key- workers or working from home, it is not surprising that the majority felt unprepared and unable to provide adequate hours of learning within a day. Half of the parents managed only 1-2 hours per day, which appeared not to be influenced by the parents’ SES or the child’s SEND. Reasons behind the low number of hours were evident in the comments of parents struggling to balance their existing commitments with the task of home-schooling, and in many cases, having to home-school siblings and a second child with SEND. Another explanation may be the nature of the SEND in the current sample of children. Three-quarters of parents selected the behaviour, emotional and social difficulty category for their child’s SEND, with the majority selecting ASD and ADHD. The symptoms of these disorders would have exacerbated the difficulties faced by parents in controlling behaviour, engagement and lack of structure or routine. Children with ASD have communication deficits and are overly dependent on routines; whereas children ADHD are easily distracted, which makes task completion and following instructions difficult (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Thus, the sudden change in routine and the home environment with many distractions (toys/computer games/siblings) brought about by lock-down has made home-schooling these children a challenge for parents.

It appears that to help parents deal with these challenges, many parents adopted an unplanned flexible approach to lesson/activity planning and involved their children when choosing the content and structure. This supports Parsons and Lewis (2010), who reported that many parents favoured a flexible approach, including the child in decisions. Contrary to Parsons and Lewis despite some not believing it to be helpful, many parents followed the National Curriculum. However, chi-square analysis revealed their choice to do so was not influenced by their SES or their child’s SEND. To counter their disappointment with the National curriculum, many parents `disguised` learning, by utilising extensive online resources, games and outdoor activities; a practice recognised in the literature as integral to home-schooling (Bachman & Dierking, 2011; Kraftl, 2013). Having the freedom to customize learning experiences according to a child`s capabilities has many advantages, allowing parents to make use of learning through real-life scenarios rather than highly structured curricula (McQuiggan, Megra & Grady, 2017).

Questions that explored parents` feelings towards their experience of home-schooling their child with SEND revealed negative feelings for a significant number of parents, to the extent that the majority would not consider it in the future. This finding is in contrast to much of the literature associated with home-schooling (Lois, 2006, 2009; Parsons & Lewis, 2010). Lois reported that over time, home-schooling mothers were able to let go of control, recognise the importance of informal and spontaneous interactions and learn to enjoy the experience. For the parents in the present study, feelings of inadequacy, a lack of knowledge and concern of letting their children down were commonly cited reasons behind their negativity, with parents also expressing concern for their children’s educational and psychological welfare as a result of reduced social contact and school routine. These findings are not surprising in light of the speed at which parents were required to ‘become a teacher’, and the concerns raised over inadequate resources, support and guidance. If parents had more time to prepare and received the appropriate level of support and guidance, they may have reported the kind of positive experience reported in previous literature.

When asked about the impact of home-schooling upon their children, parents` concerns centred on its psychological impact. In particular, parents spoke of the disruption to their children’s social life, children falling behind in their progress, and the potential problems for children when having to re-integrate and adjust to a new academic year. Similar findings were reported by Toseeb, Asbury, Code, Fox and Deniz (2020). Parents expressed their concerns regarding the transition back to school and a `new normal`. Toseeb and colleagues also found that school closures affected the mental health of parents as well as that of their children. This corroborates the current findings that the impact on parents` psychological welfare was apparent, with many parents reporting feelings of anxiety, guilt, inadequacy and exhaustion. Parents also spoke of the negative impact upon their relationships with other family members, with many expressing the negative effect the experience had had on the mental health of the whole household.

Despite the expectation that those from different socio-economic backgrounds may have a different experience of home-schooling (Stewart & Waldfogel, 2017), for parents in the present study, this appeared not to be the case. Parent views on the resources, management and feelings surrounding their experiences during the pandemic were very similar suggesting that a widening attainment gap is likely to occur across all children as a result of the pandemic and not SES per se. Also, the lack of significant differences in responses as a result of SEND-type suggests that generally, parents struggled to a similar degree with home-schooling due to the limited support, lack of preparation and balancing work and family life. However, to assess the true extent of the effects of the pandemic on attainment, research needs to measure children’s performance and attainment over the coming months and years.

Notwithstanding the negative feelings and experiences outlined above, a small number of parents reported a positive impact on their children’s academic performance and a reduction in stress due to being home-schooled. A similar number of parents also described their joy of home-schooling and spending more time with their children.

The findings discussed above have several implications for schools, teachers, and policymakers.For policymakers, the differing resources, parental understanding of materials and often limited-time spent on home-schooling risk inequalities and delays in children’s learning and development. Local Governments may need to counter these potential gaps in development through structured ‘catch-up’ programmes. The limited routine, structure and lack of social interaction experienced during lock-down will make re-integration difficult for many. This raises questions for schools in how they will address the re-integration of these children, and how they aim to deal with the psychological impact of months out of school.

Although a majority of parents received educational resources, over half of them stated that they were not appropriate for their child. For many parents, the lack of guidance had led them to seek alternative resources and activities. Therefore, schools and teachers may need to prepare more tailored resources and informative guides to help parents navigate through the activities and tasks ahead of a potential second or third wave and subsequent home-schooling periods. Additionally, with the reported reliance on online resources and alternative ways of learning, teachers might want to re-think the way SEND children are educated in the classroom. Also, encouraging schools to develop alternative curriculums that include more non-traditional and outdoor activities could be used as we prepare for the ‘new normal’ living alongside COVID-19.

There are also important implications for the parents who overwhelming reported the negative effects of home-schooling. Many of these exhausted, stressed, and anxious parents have already, or will return to work. What will be the short or long-term impact of these feelings, and how will they be managed if a second wave hits the UK and they find themselves having to home-school for a second time. Therefore, there is a need for public health initiatives to support the current well-being of parents (and their families) and to develop coping strategies for further home-schooling in the future. Policymakers may wish to consider the positive experiences reported by parents in this study when creating such initiatives. Many parents described their joy in spending more time with their children and witnessing the progress and reduced stress in their children. Focusing on positive educational opportunities for parents and their children with SEND can encourage continued learning and development and help foster resilience for the future.

Finally, in view of the findings, consideration must be given to several limitations. The use of online surveys may have produced a response bias, in that only computer literate parents with internet access could take part. Furthermore, the parents who responded to the survey may not represent families with the most severe needs. Those who were the most overwhelmed by the home-schooling experience may not have been able to spare 10-15 minutes to complete the survey. Although using parent’s educational attainment as a proxy for SES is considered good practice (Harwell & LeBeau, 2010) its use in the present study could be inaccurate due to the different ages of the parent and self-reporting information bias. A more reliable proxy for the future would be the parent’s occupation (Mueller & Parcel, 1981). More generally, the use of self-reported questionnaires tends to evoke socially accepted responses (King & Bruner, 2000). However, socially accepted response bias appears not to be an issue as a high number of negative effects of home-schooling were reported in the open-ended questions.

***Conclusion***

This unique study provides initial insights into the experiences of parents home-schooling their children with SEND during the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, parents were dissatisfied with the resources and support they had received for their child’s educational and psychological needs during the school closures. The inherent challenges faced by children with SEND, coupled with the need to become teachers overnight, had left parents feeling inadequate and unprepared for home-schooling. In a more positive light, many parents had involved their children in decisions and used a variety of self-initiated sources to try to make the best of the unprecedented situation and offer a few hours of home-schooling during the day. However, regardless of SES or the nature of their child’s SEND, parent’s experience of home-schooling was negative, causing much distress and anxiety about their child’s future.

Consequently, in the first instance, schools need to work closely with parents to ensure that gaps in learning and development are addressed and that children are supported back to school in a way that will not exacerbate any existing anxieties in the children or their parents. Then, schools need help to create appropriate resources and guidance materials to ensure more positive home-schooling experiences in the future if they were to arise following a second or third wave of COVID-19. Finally, the increase in community spirit seen as a result of lock-down should be harnessed to strengthen links to develop initiatives that deal with the effects of lock-down on the well-being of children with SEND and their families.

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