COVID–19, Education and Learning: Amplifying Young Children's Voices

Research

COVID–19, Education and Learning: Amplifying Young Children's Voices

Audience   This document is aimed at anyone who has an interest in young children's experiences of education during the Covid-19 pandemic, and/or accessing young children's voices through creative participatory methods. This includes teachers, education policy makers, parents and community organisations, and researchers.

Overview   The document provides a report on a study that sought to amplify the voices of young children, aged 3-6years during the Covid-19 pandemic, about their experiences of education at that time. The report details the methodology adopted during the study, which includes the use of creative and participatory methods designed to ensure that researchers could access and record the experiences of the young children. Considerable detail about the experiences of the young children is included in the findings chapters.

Action required   This report includes a range of recommendations. Education policy makers and teachers should attend to these in planning curriculum experiences for children in the early and foundation years, as well as primary years of schooling. Parents and community organisations may wish to consider which recommendations might be supported by their activity and conversations with the school sector. Researchers may wish to consider the methods used in accessing young children's experiences in their own research with young children.

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction and background

The Coronavirus pandemic has caused the largest global disruption to world–wide education systems in history (Engzell et al., 2021; Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). It is estimated that around 1.6 billion children in more than 200 countries have experienced disruptions in their learning and teaching, with children in the early years to learners in higher education all being affected (UNESCO, 2020, Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Pandemic school closures have altered the daily lives and routines of children, parents and their educators (Garbe, et al., 2020), with children and schools needing to rapidly adapt to new ways of learning, primarily in a distanced manner. This has seen the majority of children undertake learning within the home either through the online medium or via school–distributed paper packs, with parents and additional family members adopting or enhancing their roles as facilitators in their children's learning (Garbe et al., 2020; Cullinane and Montacute, 2020).

The Policy environment for ECEC during COVID-19

The COVID –19 pandemic saw a range of lockdown measures implemented which directly impacted all adults and children's lives, with people directed to stay at home (Institute for Government, 2020). People's movements were restricted and their access to goods and services were either reduced or removed (Institute for Government, 2020). On January 30th 2020, The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID –19 had met the criteria of being a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (WHO, 2020). The first coronavirus case in Wales was confirmed on February 28th, and by the 18th of March the Welsh Education Minister announced schools would close for statutory provision although some would remain open via the establishment of 'hub systems' to children of key worker parents or for children classified as vulnerable. A vulnerable child included those with:

> 'safeguarding needs and supported by social care, which include[s] children with care and support or support plans, children on the child protection register and looked after children, young carers, disabled children and those with Statements of special educational needs' (Williams, 2020, p.1).

Childcare and play settings were asked to restrict provision to only vulnerable children and the children of key workers between 23rd March and 21st June 2020 and were not operating as normal (Tyrie et al., 2021). Similarly, maintained school provision restricted access to school sites for approximately three months in the summer of 2020 (Tyrie et al., 2021). The 2020/21 academic year began with children attending schools, although with 'bubble' systems in operation, meaning that individuals, classes and year groups of children were required to isolate if a positive COVID –19 case was detected. The second national lockdown from January 2021– March 2021 saw the re–closure of schools, although some early years provision remained in place.

Whilst concerns were raised around the impact of the schools' closures on children and young people, evidence from past epidemics suggest that the closure of schools can have a significant impact on reducing infection rates and flattening the curve (Ferguson et al., 2006). Nonetheless, parents, schools and early years experts have raised concerns about the impact of the lack of access to ECEC provision on young children's development (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021).

Motivation and rationale

This research explores the educational experiences of young children who were aged 3 to 6 in Wales during the COVID –19 pandemic: during lockdowns and the subsequent return to school. The voices of young children were accessed especially those that previous research has indicated may have been most negatively impacted (e.g., Chamberlain and Tyrie 2021; Tyrie et al., 2021a). Whilst research has begun to explore this area from the perspectives of significant adults (i.e., parents, teachers), (e.g., Goodall, 2021) and some research has accessed the voices of older school–aged children (e.g., Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021), there is little research that has successfully accessed the voices of the youngest children in our education system. Through participatory methods in multiple sites, this research offers a better understanding of the experiences of COVID –19 for this demographic group from their own perspective, supported by the voices of the adults around them. The project provides insight into the experiences of this group in order to make strategic recommendations that a) mitigate adverse impacts of COVID –19, and b) highlight any positive impacts in order to inform the direction of travel through recovery.

Evidence gap

Due to researchers having limited access to educational settings during the COVID–19 pandemic and the challenges of remote research with younger children, little research to date has enabled young children to offer their perspectives on the impact of the COVID–19 pandemic within education (Mantovani et al., 2021; Pascal and Bertram, 2021) and none has been undertaken within Wales. This research focuses on this 'gap' and is important for a number of reasons:

1. The longer–term effects of detrimental early childhood experiences.
2. The unequal impact of the COVID –19 pandemic.
3. The importance of the voice of the younger child.

Younger children's voices are recognised as valuable and important (Groundwater et al., 2015; Lancaster and Kirby, 2010; Lomax, 2012), with Children's Rights Wales (Welsh Government, 2021) acknowledging children's capabilities to have a voice in matters that impact on their everyday lives. Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) describes in article 12; *'The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognized as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view'* (UNCRC, 1989).

Alongside the value of children's voice, it is also recognised that what children experience in their early years can have long reaching effects. The importance of the earliest years of a child's life cannot be underestimated with longitudinal evidence suggesting that early experiences can shape children's outcomes into adulthood (Melhuish, 2016; Sylva, 2010; Goodman and Sianesi, 2005). Life experiences in the early years have been found to impact a range of broad developmental areas including: educational outcomes (Sylva, 2010), cognitive development (Lloyd and Hertzman, 2010), social development (Sylva, 2010) and neurological development (Shonkoff, 2016; Huttenlocher, 2002; Fox, 2010; Bernier et al., 2016). Given the importance of early years in longer term development, it is vital to understand the educational experiences and impact of COVID –19 on these children in Wales in order to support the renewal and recovery for children and their learning at the start of their educational journey.

There is also on–going evidence of the unequal impact of COVID –19 in society, particularly on children and families (Academy, 2021; Tyrie, Knight and Borras, 2021; Waters–Davies et

al., 2021). The central findings from previous research (e.g., Waters–Davies et al., 2021), indicated that during the pandemic the disadvantages that came to light were not 'new', rather, many existing disadvantages (Patel et al, 2020; Withers, 2020) were exacerbated by the pandemic, though for some children there were positive education–related experiences and outcomes (Waters–Davies et al, 2021).

The results of this project support several key areas in the policy context:

1. Provide clear and direct views and lived experiences from children themselves.
2. The evidence base of this project and the direct views from children can help support ministers' decisions and announcements on future restrictions.
3. The children's views, along with the adults around them, will help support a child centred approach, where children's views are at the heart of any future decision making.
4. Inform the development of the new curriculum and begin to support schools as they develop their bespoke curriculum ready for implementation in 2022, allowing them to hear directly from their youngest children.
5. Highlight the importance of the early years and the significance of supporting children at this crucial stage.

Additionally, the results will help schools in recovering from the pandemic by highlighting:

1. Parents/carers experiences of the pandemic in relation to home schooling during the lockdowns; the accessibility of online learning; the impacts on the child and carer relationship; the ways learning trajectories were affected; and the social and emotional consequences of the return to in person teaching in the school context.
2. The barriers teachers faced during the pandemic and the strategies that they have put in place to support children and their carers, which can be shared with a wider range of teachers and other educationalists with the publication of the research report and associated outputs.

Literature review

This literature review will provide an overview of evidence on the impacts of the COVID –19 pandemic on young children primarily within the early years, from the ages of 3 to 6 years at the time of pandemic lockdowns, and from the ages of 5 to 8 when the data was collected. The search terms used to gather evidence for this literature review were 'early childhood', 'preschool', 'early years' and 'foundation phase' as well as 'COVID' and 'pandemic'. Due to this research focusing on children aged 3 to 6–year–olds at the time of the lockdowns, a relatively small age range, the literature review broadened search criteria to include research focused on children of primary school age. The literature review has collated both national and international research evidence within the area of interest due to a limited number of Wales–based studies on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) COVID –19 research. Nonetheless, the literature review concludes with a review of Wales–focused research evidence to provide understandings of the experiences of children in Wales and to highlight existing gaps in research.

The substantive focus of the literature review is on how the pandemic has affected children's learning and development, their mental health and wellbeing, as well as understanding socioeconomic inequalities in children's experiences during the pandemic. The research aims to amplify young children's voices and therefore consideration of children's voice and their experiences during the pandemic is fundamental. For the purpose of this literature review, previous research on the perspectives of children has been reviewed. However, due to limited studies from children's perspectives aged 3- to 6-year-olds at the time of the lockdowns, the literature review mainly evidences the perspectives of significant adults (i.e., parents and educational practitioners).

Early childhood learning and teaching approaches to remote learning

UK–wide studies have indicated large disparities in school–level approaches to teaching throughout the pandemic, both at the ECEC, the primary and the secondary level (Andrew et al., 2020; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020; Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Due to the multi–faceted nature of early years education, the shift to remote learning has proved a challenge for children, practitioners and parents (Timmons et al., 2021). Prior to the shift to online learning as a result of school closures, many schools report utilising blended approaches to learning with schools using devices in the classroom to support and enhance learning (Egan and Beatty, 2021). However, the reliance on technology to support and facilitate learning during the COVID –19 pandemic was unprecedented (Egan and Beatty, 2021).

There is growing evidence on early years teaching practices during the pandemic and teachers' perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and development (Egan and Beatty, 2021; Nikololpoulou, 2022). However, evidence on the extent to which remote online learning was used for early childhood education during the pandemic is mixed (Dayal and Tiko, 2020; Steed and Leech, 2021). Research indicates that approaches to remote learning varied with some teachers offering synchronous instruction to children via online platforms, some teachers uploading content to online platforms for families to complete in their own time and some teachers delivering paper–based education material to children with the aim of addressing inequitable access to digital devices (Steed and Leech, 2021).

Online synchronous learning was seen as positive for young children as synchronous learning not only allowed children and teachers to connect but allowed peers to socially interact and connect with one another, which was seen to have the potential to positively

impact children's mental and emotional wellbeing (Dayal and Tiko, 2020; Timmons et al., 2021). The shift to online learning required primary school teachers to adapt their approaches to account for the home–learning context and the young age of their children. A survey of English early years and Key Stage 1 (KS1) teachers indicated that the key factors teachers considered in terms of the provision of learning content to children online was creating fun and enjoyable activities (78%), ensuring all children had access to opportunities (51%) and providing activities which the whole family could partake in (48%) (Moss et al., 2020b). In terms of engagement in online learning, Egan and Beatty (2021) found that, parents reported (n=506) children's daily screen time engaging in educational activities had increased during UK national lockdowns with parents estimating on average children (aged 1–10 years old) spending at least an hour on screen in a typical weekday. This not only included school provided learning but children watching educational content online or playing educational games (Egan and Beatty, 2021). Furthermore, younger children were also seen to need greater assistance from their parents, and therefore teachers reported trying to not overburden children and parents with work related to the curriculum but provided work which supported the maintenance of study habits (Thorn and Vincent–Lancrin, 2022).

Although some studies noted the advantages of synchronous learning, Steed and Leech (2021) argue there was more of an emphasis on providing families with activities rather than providing children with direct instruction, which could be attributed to the relatively fast shift to remote learning and educators lack of time to prepare for this move online. A small–scale qualitative study of teachers' (n=14) practices in early primary years (children aged 4–8) in Greece similarly found that initially, teachers provided asynchronous resources and information to families whereas teachers provided greater amounts of synchronous online learning further into the pandemic (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Reports from the Sutton Trust also support these findings indicating increases in the use of live online lessons and a significant decrease in the use of physical workbooks in the January 2021 lockdown in comparison with the initial school shutdowns (Montacute and Cullinane, 2021). In addition, during the initial lockdown, teachers noted that children required help with the use of technology whereas as a greater amount of time was spent learning from home some children were able to learn to use technology for learning independently (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Nonetheless, online learning and online synchronous learning, in particular, raise concerns around equity, access and an inflexibility in the approach which will be discussed in further detail below (Timmons et al., 2021).

Several pieces of research have explored ECEC providers and practitioners as well as primary school teachers' views on the impact of the pandemic on children's outcomes (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Egan and Beatty, 2021; Nikololopoulou, 2022; Ofsted, 2020, Tyrie et al. 2021). Moreover, research has found ECEC professionals felt that mathematics, literacy and communication, and language development had been negatively impacted by the first national lockdown (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021). Within Wales, there was also challenges with the provision of education delivered via the Welsh–medium to children living in non–Welsh speaking homes as access to support for learning oral and written Welsh was removed (Thomas et al, 2021). Whilst the Welsh language skills of some children flourished, many who were not in regular contact with the Welsh language in their day–to–day lives required additional support getting back on track upon their return to school (Thomas et al, 2021).

In England, differences were found in the cognitive development of those that attended ECEC and those that did not during the pandemic, with children who accessed 1 day of ECEC understanding 24 more new words during Spring to Winter of 2020 compared to their peers that did/ could not access ECEC (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021). In terms of measuring

engagement in learning within the home by early years children and their parents, Kartushina et al.'s (2022) international study surveyed caregivers (n= 5,494 across 13 countries) to analyse the associations between caregiver–child learning activities and language acquisition during the pandemic. The research found that children who had less passive screen time and those whose parents/carers read to them more were seen to have larger gains in vocabulary after controlling for socioeconomic status and other caregiver–child activities (Kartushina et al., 2022). Research focused on young children's readiness for school has also shown that the pandemic has had a negative impact on children's readiness for nursery (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021; Nicholls et al., 2020). Areas of particular concern as noted by schools included communication and language development, personal, social and emotional development, and literacy (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021). Early years and primary school teaching professionals surveyed (n= 528) reported that 46% of children who arrived in reception/ primary 1 were not school ready, noting children struggled with tasks such as listening/ responding to instruction, holding a pencil and playing with other children (Nicholls et al., 2020; Hobbs and Bernard, 2021).

Impact on mental health and wellbeing

The limited data available on the impact of the pandemic on pre–school aged children's mental health and wellbeing suggests that the impact of the pandemic on younger children will be seen at later stages of development (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021). The COVID –19 pandemic has been seen to intensify the known risk factors for child mental health disorders and lessened the support structures in place (Bunn and Lewis, 2021). However, a rapid evidence review on the impact of COVID–19 on primary and lower secondary children in Northern Ireland and England during school closures, found that findings on the impact of school closures and lockdowns on children's mental health and wellbeing were mixed (Moss et al., 2021). Studies were seen to report both positive and negative impacts on mental health from the disruptions to education and therefore findings were difficult to generalise (Moss et al., 2021). Nonetheless, subgroups of the population were disproportionately negatively impacted. For example, children from low– income families and children with special education needs faced greater challenges with their mental health and wellbeing (Moss et al., 2021).

There has been limited research into the impact of the COVID –19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children aged 3 to 6 years old during the national lockdowns. Research into the impact of the COVID –19 pandemic and school closures on older children's mental health and wellbeing during the national lockdown has shown:

- Primary school-aged children reported increased experiences of feeling unhappy, being worried or being clingy when wellbeing was examined over a one–month period in lockdown (NHS, 2020).
- When pre–pandemic and post–pandemic data was compared, there were substantial higher estimates of emotional difficulties in post–pandemic data, with one in four pupils (10–11 years old) reporting elevated emotional difficulties in 2021 compared with one in six pupils in 2019 (Moore et al, 2021).
- Lack of interaction with peers was reported by school staff to negatively impact children's wellbeing, with children with no siblings being of greatest concern of experiencing loneliness (Timmon et al, 2021; Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).
- Primary school children were reported to experience poorer symptoms due to less contact with peers and greater parental distress (Bunn and Lewis 2021).

- Teachers noted a need to prioritise children's wellbeing upon returning to schools, with schools reporting a need to provide necessary foundational learning with support for wellbeing (Moss et al, 2020a).

Moreover, concerns were raised over child safety within the home in terms of potential abuse (Dayal and Tiko, 2020; NSPCC, 2020). The imposed lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures made some children at greater risk of experiencing abuse (NSPCC, 2020; Hobbs and Bernard, 2021). Research has shown:

- Key concerns raised by young people in ChildLine counselling services indicated that the most prevalent forms of abuse experienced from the perspective of the child or young person were emotional abuse, sexual abuse and online sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect (NSPCC, 2020).
- Schools reported challenges detecting safeguarding issues due to school closures and challenges were raised with moving safeguarding practices online (Khan and Mikuska, 2021).
- There were widespread concerns around the loss of children's voice, with children's right to be heard in safeguarding work being severely impacted (Driscoll et al, 2021).
- Duty of care for children was seen to fall unevenly on schools, with schools acting as one of the main service delivery mechanisms in the community. Schools were not only providing education but checking in on family's wellbeing and how they were coping in terms of basic food and general health (Moss et al, 2020b).
- Families experiencing hardship prior to the pandemic often experiencing increased hardship. Schools in more deprived areas report having to implement support service to mitigate some of these challenges which included opening food banks, delivery food parcels and providing parents with information on additional financial support (Moss et al, 2020b).

Parental engagement in learning within the home

Research literature shows that formal learning accounts for only a small proportion of a child's overall learning, with learning and cognitive development beginning and continuing throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood, both at home and in the community (Goodall, 2018). In recent decades there has been a growing 'responsibilisation' of parents, with greater education responsibility placed on parents, with them being regarded as the sole contributing factor to a child's educational underachievement, reinforcing deficit approaches to parental engagement (Vincent and Maxwell, 2015; Ishimaru et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2018). In line with existing parental engagement literature, the home learning environment, parent created opportunities for learning (drawing, reading etc) and demographic characteristics (parent education level and parent SES) were the strongest predictors of children's early years development during the pandemic (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021).

The pandemic placed a greater emphasis on parental engagement in learning and cognitive development. Parents themselves noted a sense of responsibility in teaching their child basic concepts, supporting them to develop skills, devoting time to partaking in their learning activities and communicating with their teachers (Yildirim, 2021). Teachers recognised that there was a certain reliance on parents due to the distanced nature of learning and that parental engagement was fundamental to children's learning and development (Steed and Leech, 2021), particularly for younger children who arguably required greater levels of support. Families played a crucial role in supporting their children's learning during the pandemic and effective communication between teachers and parents was highlighted as a key facilitator to learning (Nikolopoulou, 2022). A range of communication methods to maintain contact between schools and families were noted

including email, messaging applications and via social media, although telephone calls were noted as the primary communication method (Atiles et al., 2021; Nikolopoulou, 2022; Steed and Leech, 2021; Yildirim, 2021). Effective teacher–parent communication was seen as a key mechanism in the success of children's learning within the home (Yildirim, 2021). However, teachers noted challenges working with families, including difficulties contacting families, or families being unable to support their younger child due to work commitments or supporting older children, which was seen as a priority over their child in the early years (Steed and Leech, 2021).

As with existing parental engagement literature, research has indicated that parental engagement in learning is socioeconomically differentiated (Auerbach, 2007). COVID –19 is likely to have exacerbated inequalities in support for children's development, with parents from less affluent backgrounds being less able to provide safe, stable and stimulating environments, provide food security, and invest appropriate time in supporting their children's learning (Conti, 2020). Moreover, research has found that UK lockdowns have had direct negative impacts on parents and carers, particularly mothers, single parents, care experienced parents and parents on lower incomes (Christie et al., 2021; Hobbs and Bernard, 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). Literature has raised concerns around the quality of home learning environments and children's access to digital devices, material devices and the internet, the provision and quality of distance learning materials, and the availability and ability to parents to support their children's learning (Jæger and Blaabæk, 2020; OECD, 2020; Reimers, 2022; Thorn and Vincent– Lancrin, 2022; Waters–Davies et al 2021).

Challenges to remote learning and the exacerbation of educational inequalities

Preschool education is fundamental to the development of cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills and to children learning basic concepts (Yildirim, 2021) and therefore evidence suggests the COVID –19 pandemic has had adverse implications on early–years education. Teachers noted that communicating with young children via a screen is not the most effective way to connect, with it being even harder for young children with disabilities (Steed and Leech, 2021). Schools can be seen to provide all children with an opportunity to learn, however during the pandemic it was very challenging to level the playing field for all children due to their social circumstances (Reimers, 2022). Teachers have reported that the pandemic has negatively affected children's emotional, cognitive and psychomotor skills as well as impacted the teaching of basic concepts (Yildirim, 2021). Early years providers noted being most concerned about the learning and development of children living in poverty, children with SEND and children whose second language was English (Hobbs and Bernard 2021; Waters–Davies et al, 2021). Children's experiences of the pandemic are seen to be socioeconomically differentiated and whilst children from less affluent backgrounds were likely to have needed the greatest amount of support, these children are more likely to have challenges accessing support and resources (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020).

The Education Endowment Foundation conducted a large–scale quantitative study with 12,311 children from 168 primary schools in England and investigated the impact of COVID–19 school closures on the attainment of children in Key Stage 1 in reading and maths (Rose et al., 2021). Analysis of pre–pandemic reading and maths data (autumn 2020) was compared against outcomes data collected in spring 2021 and summer 2021 (Rose et al., 2021). The inequalities gap between the reading and maths attainment of disadvantaged and non–disadvantaged children was also explored (Rose et al., 2021). The findings indicated that compared to pre–COVID attainment samples there were attainment gaps in reading and maths for both Year 1 and Year 2 children, with children's overall

learning estimated to be 1–3 months behind when compared with pre–COVID samples (Rose et al., 2021). Despite schools being open in the Autumn and Summer terms of 2021, Year 1 children remained 3 months behind expected standards in reading and Year 2 children remained 2 months behind expected standards in reading (Rose et al., 2021). However, there was some recovery in maths with children in Year 1 ending the summer term 1 month behind expectations and Year 2 children recovering to or exceeding expected standards (Rose et al., 2021). The findings also showed that there was a wide disadvantage gap in the autumn of 2020, which remained large and increased for mathematics in Year 2 (Rose et al., 2021). Factors attributed to this disadvantage gap were limited access to IT and challenges to parental engagement in learning for children from disadvantaged homes (Rose et al., 2021; Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Moss, 2020; Department for Education, 2022).

The use of technology for learning creates equity issues for socioeconomically disadvantaged children, and concerns have been raised over the widening of learning gaps due to inequitable access to digital devices or support for learning (Timmons et al., 2021; Nikolopoulou, 2022). Egan and Beatty (2021) indicate that findings from their study demonstrate that access to digital devices was key to supporting schoolwork during lockdown, with children spending more time on schoolwork if they have access to a laptop or computer. Therefore, no or limited access to a digital device, insufficient internet or parents not valuing online educational learning (i.e., educational TV or games) acted as a barrier to children's engagement in learning and had the potential to increase educational inequalities (Egan and Beatty, 2021; Waters–Davies et al 2021). The challenges of accessibility to online learning alongside low parental confidence, parental working commitments and parents' capabilities to support learning from home all accumulate to disproportionately affect children from lower–socioeconomic status backgrounds (Andrew et al., 2020).

Despite the challenges associated with limited access to technology, inadequate internet connection or limited access to other resources for learning, teachers attempted to equip children with the necessary resources to support their learning (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Timmons et al., 2021; Steed and Leech, 2021). For example, teachers reported distributing resource packs which included storybooks, paper, marker pens, colouring pencils and playdough (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020; Timmons et al., 2021; Atiles, 2021), with some schools delivering food alongside educational resources (Atiles, 2021). The provision of paper learning packs was socioeconomically differentiated with 48% of surveyed teachers in the most deprived schools utilising this approach whereas only 17% of surveyed teachers working in the most affluent areas noted utilising this approach (Moss et al., 2020b).

Moreover, the physical distribution of paper learning packs from schools to parents was seen as fundamental. Research from the Child Poverty Action Group (2020) research conducted in the first lockdown highlighted parents (n= 3,600) and children (n= 1,300) reported not having access to a printer or being about to afford the cost of running a printer and therefore were unable to print off learning resources for their child. The challenges and concerns raised around digital devices were well publicised and recognised by the government with the Welsh Minister for Education responding to these challenges with a £3 million commitment in the 'stay safe, stay learning' policy which intended to support digitally excluded children (Welsh Government, 2020). This funding was utilised to provide digitally excluded children with WIFI devices and software licences (Welsh Government, 2020). The Welsh Government collaborated with partners across the education system to support children and families to get online and get used to using online education platforms (Welsh Government, 2020).

Impact of COVID–19 on children in the Early Years in Wales

There has been an emergence of research exploring the impact of COVID–19 on children around the world, with several studies focusing on children in Wales (Chamberlain et al., Chapman et al, 2021; Children's Commissioner, 2021; French et al, 2021; Goodall et al., 2021; James et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2021; Tyrie et al., 2021; Waters–Davies et al. 2021; Walters et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the research in this area is primarily from the perspectives of significant adults (i.e., parents, carers and teachers). A small number of studies have accessed the voices of school–aged children (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021; James et al., 2020; Walters et al., 2021; Waters–Davies et al., 2021), however, little research has successfully accessed the voices of the youngest children in our education system. Whilst internationally there has also been research undertaken around the impact of COVID–19 on young (under 7–year–olds) children, as detailed above, there is limited knowledge around the impact of COVID–19 on the youngest children in Wales.

There are a few studies which have gathered the voices and experiences of children in Wales with some of these studies focusing on education (Walters et al., 2021), some on mental health and wellbeing (James et al., 2020) and other focusing on both education and health and wellbeing more generally (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021; Chamberlain et al., 2021). For example, Walters et al. (2021) survey of girls aged 11–18 in Wales found that the girls interviewed reported concentration and engagement were lower during online learning when compared with classroom learning. This difference in concentration was attributed to the girl's ability to concentrate less at home due to more distractions in terms of noise and devices (Walters et al., 2021).

The 'Coronavirus and Me' Report by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) surveyed 23,488 children aged 3–18 years old to find out the impacts of the pandemic on their mental health and wellbeing and their education. Of the 23,488 participants, 50% completed the 7–11 survey, 47% completed the 12–18 survey and 3% completed the 7–8 accessible survey (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). Over half of the children interviewed reported feeling happy most the time during the pandemic (58%), with over three quarters reporting feeling safe most of the time (84%) (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). Children reported positive aspects of their experiences including enjoying spending more time with their family, learning new skills and enjoying outdoor spaces (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020), however it is important to note that pandemic experiences are socioeconomically differentiated, and these positive experiences will not have been experienced by all children in Wales. Nonetheless, when children were asked what has impacted them the most, they reported 'not be able to spend time with friends' (725) and 'not being able to visit family members' (59%) as having the biggest impact on how they felt (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

In terms of children's perspective on their learning, 51% of children surveyed by the Children's Commissioner in Wales (2020) in January 2021 reported feeling confident about their learning, 25% reported lacking confidence and 10% reported not feeling confident at all. However, the confidence of older children raised concerns as only 11% of 12–18–year–olds surveyed stated they did not feel worried about their education, with the most common concern (54%) reported by children being falling behind educationally (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). Furthermore, the 'Coronavirus and my life: What children say' report details further the first–hand experiences of 3–12–year–olds (Chamberlain, 2021). Although the research is not entirely focused on the voices of young children in Wales (n= 240) the research gathers the voices of children from a range of English, Icelandic, Norwegian and Slovenian speaking countries, with 22.1% of responses being from children in the UK (n= 53). Similar to the 'Coronavirus and Me', findings indicated that

children expressed disliking having fewer social connections, missed playing with their friends and being cut off from their wider circle of loved ones (i.e., grandparents). The benefits stated by children included being at home with their family, spending more time outdoors and enjoying the greater flexibility with learning from home (Chamberlain, 2021; see also Waters–Davies et al 2021). Moreover, children aged 3–12 years old showed an understanding of the context which shaped their experiences expressing an awareness of global issues and facts related to and knowledge of the pandemic within their own and other countries (Chamberlain, 2021).

In addition, one piece of research has been undertaken around the impact of COVID–19 on ECEC and practitioner's views on the impact on themselves, their setting and the children within the setting in Wales (Tyrie et al., 2021). The expert panel reached a consensus that there would be four demographic groups that would be most negatively impacted by the COVID–19 pandemic; children who had suffered bereavement, children with ALN/SEN/learning disability/difficulty, children experiencing poverty and children whose parents had contracted COVID–19 with these children needing the most support to mitigate these negative impacts (Tyrie et al., 2021). In terms of the impacts of COVID–19 on children the experts also agreed there were four areas of impact: cognitive development, social and emotional development, speech and language development and physical development. Whilst the research provides a greater understanding on the impacts of COVID –19 on children and young people, the research is from the perspective of adults and does not consider the voices of the young children.

A review of the literature has documented evidence which highlights children's experiences of COVID–19 in Wales, and a limited number of studies have engaged directly with children to explore their perspectives. However, there is paucity of existing research that had explored the pandemic experiences of children in the early years in Wales through the eyes of these young children. Therefore, the current research aims to provide a platform for the voices of young children in Wales and is so doing attend to the following questions:

Research questions

1. What are young children's perceptions of their overall educational experiences during the pandemic?
2. What are young children' perceptions of their experiences of online learning during the pandemic?
3. What are adults' perspectives on the impact and recovery from COVID-–19 on young children? (Adults, for example, may include school–based staff and parents /carers).

Methodology

This study was interested in the subjective experiences and perceptions of young children and the adults who have supported them throughout the pandemic, namely their parents / carers and teachers. The study explored how children engaged with learning within the restrictions of lockdowns, social distancing and the advent of online and remote teaching, as well as offering a platform for children to communicate their recommendations for the future. Accordingly, a qualitative approach was taken which involved creative activities, group discussions and individual interviews with children (aged 5 to 8 at the time of data collection and aged 3 to 6 at the start of the pandemic), their parents/ carers, and teachers. This section outlines the research design that was utilised, the data collection methods used, along with details around the recruitment, access and sampling of participants.

Research design

Aligning with the Welsh Government's formal commitment to children's rights and participation in research studies (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004, Children's Rights Wales 2021), central to the research design was a belief that children are experts in their own lives. As such children were positioned as 'experts by experience' (Staples et al., 2019). Accordingly, the research adopted participatory creative methods for eliciting young children's experiences, perceptions and recollections. Drawing on the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2001; Clark and Moss, 2011, 2017), and informed by the Reggio Emilia experience in the early years and its philosophical approach of listening to children (Fernández–Santín and Feliu–Torruella, 2020), the study introduced a number of creative activities to elicit conversations and interviews. Although creative approaches are not a guarantee of full and active participation, they have the potential to engender more collaborative forms of data production (Mannay, 2013, 2016). These participatory methods of data collection were adopted to provide a space where children could have more control in leading the conversations and directing the data that was generated. The interviews with teachers, and significant adults (parents and carers) also adopted a semi–structured approach to enable a space for participants to introduce new topics and reflect on their interactions with young children during the pandemic. In order to engage with a range of young children, their teachers and their parents/ carers, a qualitative multi–site case study design was employed (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010).

Methods of Data Collection

The methods of data collection were 1) participatory creative methods with children, 2) online interviews with children and their parents/carers and 3) face to face interviews with teachers. Data was collected with children and teachers within the public spaces of the school and remote interviewing methods were also undertaken that engaged parents and carers from the private spaces of the home.

Recruitment and sampling

In line with the multi–site case study design, the research sites included four schools in South Wales. In terms of the socioeconomic composition of the schools in the sample, the three year rolling average of the free school meal (FSM) entitlement data from the case study schools was 25.1% which is slightly higher than the national average for primary schools in Wales (21.3%). The schools FSM percentages ranged from 10.5%– 38% with a standard deviation of 9.8 showing there was variation in the sample and therefore meaning the research included children from schools of differing socioeconomic compositions. A noted limitation of the study was the lack of involvement from a Welsh medium setting.

The four schools were recruited via email in January 2022. These schools were purposively sampled to ensure a diverse sample of children. From these schools, eligible classes were pragmatically self–selected by the schools based on age of the children and class/teacher availability. For inclusion in the study, children had to be aged 3 to 6 years during the pandemic and be enrolled in a primary school in Wales at the time of the study. Research evidence highlights that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted those of particular groups (Richards–Belle et al., 2020), including those of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (Platt and Warwick, 2020), lower socio–economic status (Patel et al., 2020; Shoari et al., 2020; Waters–Davies et al., 2021), experience of the care system (Roberts et al 2021), and with disabilities or underlying medical conditions, (Masi et al., 2021). Therefore, it was important to represent children with various diversities and gain an understanding of a range of children's educational experiences during the pandemic. Accordingly, teachers at the four sample schools were asked to 'select seven children of as diverse a range as possible (e.g., those of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, from lower socioeconomic background, with known underlying medical conditions, or those of higher weight), whose families you feel might be able to engage in the study' (from research project documents). Teachers from the current and previous academic year, as well as parents/carers of the purposively selected children, were subsequently invited to take part in an interview. The current and previous class teachers were invited in order to contextualise the experiences of children during the pandemic over the course of the two–year period from March 2020.

This purposive sampling frame aimed to facilitate an exploration of a range of children's experiences. However, the general representativeness of these findings should be assessed with caution, as the current study is qualitative and conducted within a pragmatic paradigm. While this report is not claiming to find a generalisable truth (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019) for all children in Wales, it does acknowledge that children will have potential shared experiences of their education during the COVID–19 pandemic. The study therefore recognises that providing a platform for the voice of young children potentially speaks to other children's experiences across the Welsh education system.

Across the four schools, 30 children (girls n = 14; boys n = 16), aged 3 to 6 years at the time of the first lockdown, were included (see Table 1 for sample characteristics). Additionally, 6 teachers (female = 6, male = 0), and 20 parents / carers (mothers = 17, fathers = 1, other = 2) who had been involved in the participating children's lives during the process of COVID–19 were included in the study. There was a clear gender imbalance in the recruitment of teachers and parents/ carers, which was not intentional but is important to note as the findings from the adult's perspective in this research are primarily from the perspective of females.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

	Child	Teacher	Parents / carer	Total
Female	14	6	19	39
Male	16	0	1	17
Total	30	6	20	

It should be noted that all participants are referred to in this report using a number, this can sometimes be seen as dehumanising participants, however due to cultural sensitivities of giving children pseudonyms which may or may not represent their cultural context, it was most ethical to use a reference to participants that held no socio–cultural meaning (e.g., a number).

Data collection process

The process of data production was completed between January and March 2022. There were five discreet stages.

- In Stage 1, researchers attended the schools to familiarise themselves with the children and teaching staff and to work with teachers to gather demographic information about the school and the participating children.
- Stages 2, 3 and 4 included a series of visits to the schools for the researchers to conduct three creative activities with participating children.
- Stage 5 was conducted after the activities with children and included interviews with teachers and parents / carers.

Teacher interviews were conducted in person, and the creative activities with children were generated in person, while the family interviews (child and carer/parent) were conducted via video call or telephone.

All schools in the study received the same information and materials. The research tools were created collaboratively by the research team who had experience of designing and facilitating projects that drew on visual and creative methods with children. The guiding principle in the design of the tools was to centre children as experts in their own lives and offer creative ways for young children to tell a story about their educational experiences. Thus, creative and child–friendly methods of data production were designed to enable children to actively participate in knowledge exchange during the research process (Greene and Hogan, 2005; Kara, Lemon, Mannay and McPherson, 2021).

Creative activities with children
Drawing on earlier studies with children during the pandemic (Boffey et al., 2021; Lomax et al., 2022), draft activities were designed and reviewed by the research team. Three were selected for the project as they provided children with variety of creative methods, including drawing and building, as well as meeting the requirements for the research questions. All activities were developed to be completed in the classroom, but they were also appropriate to take home and share with parents/ carers. Table 2 provides an overview of the three finalised activities. After each of the activities children were offered a one–to–one interview (chat) with a researcher which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analysed in NVivo by the research team alongside the drawings created by the children in the activities.

Table 2: Finalised activities

Activity	Brief description
1) What is in my world	This activity is designed to provide an insight into what is in children's everyday worlds and how these were impacted by the pandemic. Children have a piece of drawing paper each. The centre would have a photograph of the child. Children are asked to draw the important people, places, and things in their everyday life, with researchers asking questions as the drawings develop about what is being included. Children are then given stickers to place next to the things they have drawn which they did not have access to during the pandemic. When the pictures are completed, researchers would talk to the children (one–to–one) about the things that they did not have access to in the pandemic - what things temporarily left their everyday worlds.
2) Fly away and create a new school	The children and researcher built a plane together. Once the planes are built, they are flown to an imaginary new world (on the other side of the classroom) where there is no pandemic and no schools, and the children are asked to create their idea of the perfect school. The researcher helps the children to draw all of the things that children will need to learn and enjoy their time at school. An interview (chat) between the researcher and individual children is undertaken to explore the material produced.
3) Bins and keepsake boxes	The researcher reminds the children of when it was the pandemic lockdown, and they were not allowed to come to school and only did learning at home and online. Children would be invited to decorate two boxes: one box to keep memories of the things that they liked doing when they were in lockdown and one box to put all the things they did not like. A researcher would assist with decorating the boxes and where children had ideas about words to go in the boxes, write these down, as conversations take place in the making process. A researcher would then speak with each child, one-to-one, to explore their thinking.

Childhood is frequently presented as a state of becoming and these everyday constructions of children engender a climate where policies and practices often omit the subjective lived experiences of children themselves (Mannay et al. 2019). Therefore, it was important that the research design privileged the perspectives of children. Overall, the activities with children worked well to engage them with the topics of interest and they worked well with the researchers to co–produce data. Children reported that they enjoyed the activity and that they fully understood the purpose of the research and their involvement. This was illustrated in visits to schools where the children were keen to remind the research team that what they had said needed to be 'reported to the Welsh Government'. Some of the children involved in the study had limited verbal skills and others found it difficult to be involved in the making process where this required fine motor skills. Therefore, following best practice from earlier studies (see Pickering, 2021), the activities in Table 2 were adapted to ensure that all children were able to participate in the research. This meant that not all children could participate in the same way or to the same extent, but creating adaptions and modifications enabled an opportunity to hear and respond to the perspectives of all the children.

Semi–structured interviews with teachers and parents
Following the creative activities, interviews were conducted with teachers face to face and interviews with parents/carers were conducted online (children were also invited to the first section of the parent/carer interviews). These interviews were semi–structured in nature and whilst an interview guide was developed to guide the interview, the interviews were flexible and allowed for participants to guide the conversation. The interviews explored adults' perspectives on the children's experiences of education during the COVID–19 pandemic (see Appendix 5: Parent Interview Schedule and Appendix 6: Teacher Interview Schedule).

The creative activities and conversations with children, and the interviews with teachers, parents/carers and children, generated a nuanced data set, as illustrated in Appendix 2-4.

Ethical considerations and process

The study received full ethical approval from Swansea University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee in January 2022. Research with younger children can have its methodological and ethical challenges, such as issues with informed consent and confidentiality (White, 2020). However, younger children are an unreported source of knowledge about their own lives and experiences, and these experiences must be given due recognition (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Therefore, ethical guidelines by British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) were diligently considered and adhered to, including (but not limited to), respect for participants, age–appropriate participant information, confidentiality, voluntary consent and the right to withdraw without consequence. Information was provided to participating schools, teachers, and parents/ carers of the selected children and opt–in consent was required from schools and parents/ carers before children were informed about the study.

All children were required to assent to participate in each activity in order to take part and were reminded that they could stop taking part at any timepoint, without providing a reason. The research team worked carefully with children to communicate their right to give and withdraw consent throughout the process. Researchers were aware that their position as adults was likely to create a power imbalance between the adults and children and it was consequently essential for researchers to tune in to the subtleties of the body language of children and to note when assent might be being withdrawn. The children's understanding of their rights and choice was illustrated by one child who had engaged enthusiastically in the school–based activities. Despite having established a good relationship with the researcher in the home–based remote interview with their parent the child continually turned off the microphone. The child explained to their parent that they did not want to '*share everything*' with the researcher. This evidenced the ways in which children were ethically involved as active co–producers of data. Children generated data with the researchers on their own terms and continually negotiated their level of consent and involvement, rather than being positioned as passive actors in the process.

Data collection activities were audio recorded and transcripts were anonymised, with numbers replacing names and identifiable information removed. All data were stored securely on Microsoft Teams and only accessed by the research team. In line with GDPR requirements all data is securely stored for the duration of the research and until the data is no longer required at that point it will be securely disposed of.

Due to the nature of the data collection process, which featured photographs and audio recording, it was important only the participating children were included. In order to ensure no other children were included in the data collection process, activities were completed with researchers in a separate place within the schools. This was organised with the school during the setup process.

Parents / carers and teachers of participating children were provided via email with separate information and consent for them to opt themselves into an interview. An initial invite was sent to parents/carers and they were contacted an additional two times, either via phone or email, if the initial invite was not acknowledged. If invitees did not respond after the third invitation, the lack of opt–in correspondence was taken as unwillingness to participate and no further invites were sent. For those who opted into an interview and provided consent, they were reminded at the start of the interview that they could stop participating at any time and they may decline answering any questions if they do not feel comfortable to do so.

Notes on methodology: Marginalised groups and research 'reach'

We wish to note three methodological reflections

1) This research is qualitative in nature and does not aim to be generalisable for all children in Wales, though we expect the findings are highly relatable. Each of the 30 children taking part in this study has a different context in which different factors will be in play. Contextual home factors impacted on how this period was perceived by children, parents and carers; this will be the case for all children.

2) Ethically, there is an issue around accessing marginalised voices within a group already rarely heard – some pupils were not allowed to engage due to perceived 'poor' behaviour and some voices were heavily monitored and censored by settings when they said things that adults found problematic. Whilst this occurred infrequently, nonetheless, it was likely to have affected what data was collected, in particular, for children viewed as having behavioural challenges or ALN.

3) We would also note that children who attended non-maintained settings were not able to be included. We feel that this is a limitation and would advocate that their voices should be amplified in a future study.

Main findings

The six main themes that were constructed from the data are:

1. Missing friends and a sense of loss
2. The importance of family and the home
3. The importance and enjoyment of school
4. Remote learning through the COVID–19 pandemic
5. Challenges of schooling between lockdowns
6. The longer–term impact and lessons learnt

Each of these themes is discussed in-turn. It should be noted that while the research was intended to generate information about the broad experiences of the pandemic many participants, child and adult alike, focused on the lockdown periods in their responses. The year group shown is the child's year group at the time of data collection.

Theme 1: Missing friends and a sense of loss

The initial theme extracted from the data, that was prevalent in both the children, teacher and parent/carer data, was that children spoke about missing something and a sense of loss. This was further broken down in to missing people, missing places, missing activities, and a lack of freedom/a feeling of isolation.

Missing people
Key within the theme of missing and a sense of loss was missing people. There was a real emphasis on being unable to be with peers with many children saying: "I missed seeing my friend" (Child 14, Year 3). In figure 1 a child has drawn some of the things they missed, and this includes teachers and friends from school (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Missing friends (Child 16, Year 3).

When discussing learning online, one child (Child 14, Year 3) said "Yeah, you don't get to play with them. All you do is show them online, play the game and then you can't [see] them. You can't see everyone at the same time".

Another compared online learning with school in relation to the people they see:

> "But when you're on Zoom you can't see your friends but when you're in school it's actually really different 'cause you can see your friends in real life n".
>
> (Child 12, Year 1)

Parents and teachers also spoke about the impact of the lack of socialising on their children "I think it was just she just missed socialising with her friends the most" (Parent/Carer of Child 16, Year 3). A teacher commented that children missed friends stating it was good for them to "see their friends because they really did miss their friends. So even if it was a little glimpse of them on the screen, they did really enjoy that" (Teacher 3, Year 3).

Children also spoke about missing their teachers "You could, like see your mum and dad but you didn't see the teacher, that was a bad bit, I missed him" (Child 14, Year 3) and being unable to see wider family members:

> Researcher: "What else did you miss?"
> Child 14, Year 3: "My family."
> Researcher: "Your family live in England, don't they? And how did that feel?"
> Child 14, Year 3: "Sad, because I missed them."

Being isolated and lack of freedom
Central to the theme of missing and sense of loss, was children's lack of freedom and experiences of social isolation and loneliness. The restrictions imposed by national lockdowns inevitably impacted children's freedom. Children reported that they were unable to do the things they enjoyed outside of the home such as going to school, doing enrichment activities, or seeing their friends. For example, children noted "When, when at lockdown, I didn't like that we couldn't go to school. I missed the school" (Child 3, Year 1) and "I missed the theatre…because I couldn't go" (Child 27, Reception year).

Another child discussed the infectious nature of the virus and showed understanding of the intention of the nationally imposed restrictions.

> "And also, all the people in the world wasn't allowed out either, and some people and others didn't have COVID because they stayed in the house".
>
> (Child 22, Year 1)

Children spoke about experiencing negative feelings as a result of not seeing others with children noting feeling "sad" (Child 23, Year 1) about not being able to play with their friends and "feeling a little bit sad because I didn't get to see my teacher and my friends" (Child 15, Year 3).

Teacher also noted that children experienced social isolation due to school closures with one teacher stating, "My class closed down for two weeks, you know, it's a lot, and then children were isolated" (Teacher 1, Year 1). Further concerns were raised by parents and teachers around the loneliness of children who do not have siblings to socially interact with in the home.

> "That's all about the loneliness again because she, she is an only child she doesn't have siblings to play with at home and other children to run around with".

"I think a lot sort of struggled, you know, you did have some that would go out and break the rules and they'd go meet up with people. But there were children that were stuck at home if they didn't have siblings or even if they did have siblings that be arguing that social element, I found was difficult".

Missing going places and doing things

The children spoke about missing going to places and doing things during the COVID–19 pandemic:

"I wasn't allowed to go dance because I wasn't allowed to go places because of the virus".

Children reported that they "couldn't go anywhere" (Child 11, Year 1) and "missed going somewhere" (Child 26, Year Reception) during the COVID–19 pandemic. and in particular these places were places where the children would undertake enrichment activities. For example, children noted "I missed the play centre" (Child 29, Year 1), "I missed the beach" (Child 29, Year 1) and missed "going places, like laser zone" (Child 5, Year 1). An example of this can be seen in figure 2 where a year 3 child has drawn the sports (basketball) that they missed.

Figure 2: Missing doing sports during lockdown (Child 15, Year 3).

Many of the things that children missed doing or the places children missed going were associated with sports or involved physical exercise, with these including dance, football, cricket and basketball. Children also spoke about how they have now returned to these activities.

"You know football training, I play for the [sports team] on Sunday I get up at 9 o'clock in the morning to play on all different teams and today I am going to be learning how to do football tricks like a rainbow flick and a bicycle and all those".

A parent also spoke about how children experienced boredom due to not being able to go places or do things stating, "they're bored you know they couldn't go anywhere. And they wanted stimulation" (Parent/Carer of Child 12, Year 1). As well as enrichment or physical activities, children spoke further about missing going to school.

> "I missed going to school in year one. And you had to do it all on the computer instead of going into school".
>
> (Child 18, Year 3)

> "I missed the school".
>
> (Child 14, Year 3)

Children noted that there were certain education–related activities at the school that they missed doing or being involved with. For example, reading with their teacher or "the star awards" (Child 16, Year 3) which saw children receive an award for reaching a particular achievement or goal at school.

> Child 16, Year 3: "There were two–star awards… if you work really well you might get a star award."
> Researcher: "So, you still got star awards even though you were working online*?"*
> Child 16, Year 3: "[No] we couldn't do the star awards online which is why I put it in my sad box" [In Bin and Keepsake Boxes Activity].

Children missing out on these school–based educational activities or going on educational trips was also of concern to a parent who feared their child had missed out on educational experiences and milestones due to the closures of schools and COVID–19 restrictions.

> "The fact that they've missed out on so much, you know, my eldest is going to comp in September and he has missed out on two years of schooling. My youngest haven't had a proper year in school. You know, so the fact that they've missed out on so much, you know, school trips, and with my eldest is residential, you know, stuff like that".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)

Missing enjoyment of festive periods
In the 'What is my world' activity children drew and discussed the importance and enjoyment of Christmas, Easter, Halloween and birthdays, whilst also reporting how these events/activities were not the same during the COVID–19 pandemic. This indicated that children recognised how the restrictions imposed impacted on how they celebrated certain festivities and who they were able to celebrate these times with:

> Researcher: "So, you just stayed at home?"
> Child 21, Year 1: "Yeah, we were only allowed to stay in the house, we wasn't allowed to go places we were only allowed to stay in the house for Christmas."

Figure 3: Child's illustration of the importance of Christmas (Child 21, Year 1).

At the same time, children also noted how online technology supported social interactions and was used to facilitate some celebrating of festive events. Whilst a child stated they did not enjoy wishing people happy birthday online and missed going to parties, the child recognised that technology at least allowed them to say happy birthday.

> Child 14, Year 3: "I had to wish people happy birthday online."
> Researcher: "Is that a good thing?"
> Child 14, Year 3: "Not a good thing. You couldn't go to parties, but you could say happy birthday online."

The child data generally saw children discuss not being able to spend Christmas with family or friends from beyond their household. However, one child spoke about how they did see their extended families over the Christmas period saying, "In fact, over Christmas, we went to see them [referring to their cousins in London]" (Child 3, Year 1).

Theme 2: The importance of family and the home

The second theme was constructed primarily from children's and parent's data; this was that lockdowns afforded an increase in families spending time together and using this increased time together to engage with the outdoors, learning, and available activities in a more personalised way, which focused on children's wellbeing and enjoyment. Conversely data around this theme also highlighted the importance of extended family, living outside participants' homes, as children were either unable to see them during lockdown, or were dependent upon them for childcare or support with online learning.

The data highlighted how important family, extended family and pets are to children, both through the enjoyment of more time together and upset caused by the absence of time spent together. Additionally, it became clear that family members were important in terms of children's success in accessing online learning. Related to this was data which emphasised the increased ability to spend time outside and with nature, as well as for children to do things enjoyable to them, alongside their learning.

More time with family and liked staying at home
Children expressed lots of appreciation for having more time with their families. This increase in time with parents, carers and siblings tended to come through as a positive outcome from lockdowns.

> "I liked, I loved doing um, being with my mummy".
>
> (Child 26, Year Reception)

> "I like being at home because you spend more time with your family. My brother is small and he's four. And I like playing with him because he's really funny."
>
> (Child 18, Year 3)

> "And in lockdown I did kind of like it because I got to spend time with my [child]".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 12, Year 1)

The benefit of this time together was recognised by teachers as well, recognising that children spending more time with their families was actually creating unique shared experiences.

> "A lot of the siblings joined the lessons. Younger siblings and older. Yeah, older, and I'd have a lot of the juniors joining into my lessons, which was lovely, because it was obviously a shared experience and that was that was something I should have mentioned earlier, that was a big positive that families were a lot more involved. That was nice."
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

Staying at home also afforded children specific enjoyments such as staying in bed, having their toys and other home comforts to hand, and being in their pyjamas.

> Researcher: "What would you take from this school to your new school?"
> Child 10, Year 1: "My dinosaurs and my Lego dinosaurs. Just my Lego people and my dinosaurs and my pillow."
> Researcher: "You will take your pillow. You like your pillow, don't you?"
> Child 10, Year 1: "Yeah. I liked laying in bed and watching the telly".
>
> (Child 23, Year 1)

Importance of family and extended family
One of the ways in which the importance of family came out of the data was through children identifying that they missed certain family members due to them living far away, and therefore not being able to travel to visit them during parts of the pandemic.

> Child 9, Year 1: "That is my grandpa he lives in Spanish."
> Researcher: "Oh he's in Spain, is he?"
> Child 9, Year 1: "Yes"
> Researcher: "Did you used to go and see your grandad?"
> Child 9, Year 1: "Uh, I went to Spain before by didn't know if I went there or not because it was a super long time ago."

However, for some children, the physical absence of family members was rectified somewhat by the ability to connect with them using technology.

> Researcher: "And how about your family?"

Child 13, Year 3: "I missed my family."
Researcher: "I bet you did."
Child 13, Year 3: "My dad said that I could see my family on my tablet and phone."
Researcher: "So you were in contact on your tablet and your phone."
Child 13, Year 3: "Yeah."
Researcher: "Could you see them on Zoom and…"
Child 13, Year 3: "Yeah. They used screens and video."
Researcher: "How did that feel when you saw them on the screen?"
Child 13, Year 3: "A little bit happy."

Parents, carers and teachers also noted the importance of extended family in terms of childcare and support with learning and education during the pandemic.

"The boys were in the hub you know like half nine to half two to have to and then we had different grandparents to look after them ... we (also) had my in-laws who looked after them on a Friday, so most of the time, they wouldn't do any like learning on a Friday with my in laws, I don't expect."

(Parent/Carer of Child 22, Year 1).

Importance of pets
One teacher acknowledged that the novelty of learning online meant that children could show their friends their pets.

"Just telling us things about the house or getting things that were personal to them and pets were being dragged on to the screen. And I know my dog came on, which they enjoy doing that".

(Teacher 3, Year 1/2)

Children often talked about their pets being important to them. Some children also commented on the fact that being able to play with their pets more was one of the positives of lockdown and learning from home.

Researcher: "And who are they?"
Child 20, Year 2: "Roxy, butch, gypsy, gypsy is a puppy, and she could fit in my hands"
Researcher: "So you were playing with them or going out with them during COVID or not?"
Child 20, Year 2: "I was"
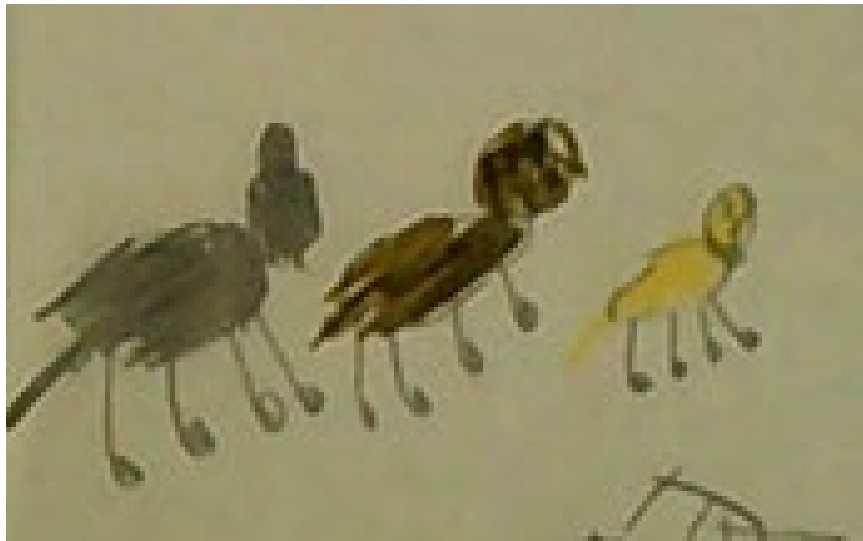
Figure 4: Child's drawing of their pets (Child 20, Year 2).

Spending time outside and with nature

Many parents and caregivers reported that during this time they spent time outside in the natural environment:

> Researcher: "Is anything in this school perhaps, because in this school there is no pandemic, no COVID, that you have not been able to do because of the pandemic that you would like to do here in this school, because there won't be pandemic?"
> Child 21, Year 1: "We play outside".
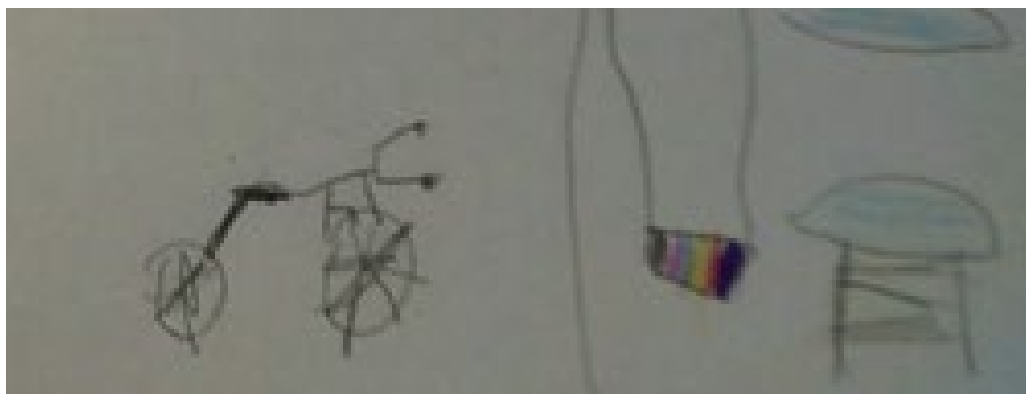
Figure 5: child's drawing of playing outside with a bike and swing.

Many children included various aspects of nature and the outdoors in their drawings throughout the activities. The importance of this was loosely divided into two issues: missing being able to access certain things such as playgrounds; and enjoying the increase in time spent outside and in nature during lockdowns. Trees, animals, and the weather were common features of children's drawings:

> "I have drawed a rabbit on top of the school with a carrot and some grass and flowers and a tree with nests in a bird in and I drew a really shiny star and a sun in the sky."
>
> (Child 2, Year 1)

One parent noted that the restrictions placed on communities as a result of lockdowns led to much more engagement with nature and time spent outside.

> Researcher: "are there any other positive outcomes that [Child 24] experienced as a result of online learning?"
> Parent/Carer of Child 24, Reception year: "Probably like more exercise, I mean, we come out a lot walking, we've got a lot of forestry around us here around the house and [they like] to go into the forest. So, we're walking and doing things all the time."

Additionally, there was a recognition of the differences between the first and second lockdowns. As the first lockdown coincided with the start of spring, the good weather seemed to increase children's desire to be outdoors:

> "The sun was shining, it was in March, with the pool out in the garden, trampoline out. What more can you want? And it was a holiday."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 11, Year 1)

> "Obviously, it was nice weather, so he wanted to be out in the garden."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 15, Year 3)

Theme 3: The importance and enjoyment of school

A theme highlighted across the child, parent and teacher data was the importance and enjoyment of school and the school environment, as well as the enjoyment of festive periods and special holidays.

A multitude of reasons were given to why children and parents valued and saw the importance of schools and in particular teachers. These included teachers being seen as fundamental to the learning process, children missing the school and activities in the classroom during the pandemic, and children missing face–to–face social interactions with teachers.

The importance of the school environment
Findings showed that children seemed to enjoy school with children saying, "I like school" (Child, 28, Year 1) and a parent claiming "he just loves to go to school" (Parent/Carer of Child 30, Year 1). Central to the importance and enjoyment of school theme was the importance of the classroom environment. The classroom environment was seen as key to supporting children's learning whether this was the physical environment itself, or teachers in–person support within the classroom environment.

> "I think not being in that class environment with support from the teachers, and you know, his friends, he just, he just wasn't feeling it. So, we had to put in a lot of incentives there for him to like, do the work. But he's more than capable of doing what was said. I think it's just a lack of interest because of the environment."
> (Parent/Carer of Child 15, Year 3)

Parents perceived that their children were less willing to engage in learning within the home environment compared to the classroom environment. Lack of interest in learning within the home environment, discomfort with online learning which used video software and the absence of teachers and other school children were all factors attributed to challenges to children engaging in learning within the home.

Children also spoke about missing doing educational activities within the classroom environment.

> Researcher: "What do you mean when you say this [the school the child has drawn where there is no COVID pandemic] will be a happier school?"
> Child 14, Year 3: "They wouldn't have to do home learning."
> Researcher: "So, they wouldn't have to all of that learning at home. Where would you prefer to do your learning?"
> Child 14, Year 3: "In the classroom."
> Researcher: "Why's that?"
> Child 14, Year 3: "Because you can do different things."

The importance of the teacher
Earlier findings [Section 1.1 etc] indicated that children experienced missing their teachers during periods of COVID–19 pandemic school closures. Children were noted saying "I miss the teachers" (Child 23, Year 1) and "I missed some of my teachers" (Child 3, Year 1).

Figure 6: Child missing class teacher (Child 20, Year 2).

This emphasis on children missing people during the COVID–19 pandemic, and in this case teachers, is a key finding in this research. The physical absence of teachers in the learning environment was also seen to have a detrimental impact on children's engagement in learning opportunities.

> Researcher: "And Child 16 when you were at home, in lockdown, how was it different when you didn't go to school, and you stayed at home with your mum to learn?"
> Child 16, Year 3: "I couldn't see my teacher. And I couldn't learn properly because I have lots of things to do when I was stuck at home."

Parents also discussed how children were not engaging in their learning due to an absence of a teacher and children not listening to their parents.

> "Honestly, I think most children don't listen to the to their parents… The situation is the thing, because our problem was the absence of teacher." (Parent/Carer of Child 3, Year 1).

Parents noted how their role is as a parent and having to play a greater educational role alongside their parent role posed challenges. The pandemic pushed some parents to increase their levels of parental engagement in learning within the home and contributed to parents recognising the challenging nature of teaching.

> Researcher: "And what are the important lessons learned from the impact of COVID–19 on Child 16's education?"
> Parent/Carer of Child 16, Year 3: "I think, well, I think teaches how, what a good job teachers really do. I didn't realise how hard it is to do their jobs. And I think how much she benefits from school."

Theme 4: Remote learning through the COVID–19 pandemic

The research aimed to surface young children' experiences and perceptions of online learning during the pandemic. With regard to remote learning the data indicated: the transition to online learning; doing activities online instead of face to face; the increased use of technology and digital devices; and the preference for in person learning. It was felt by some that the COVID pandemic had led to greater child agency over their learning and an improvement of some of children's skills. There was some blurring the lines between school and home life. It was a mixed picture in terms of how children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) were supported and further work would be needed to explore this better.

Transition to online learning
Findings from different participant groups in relation to the transition to online learning varied. Children's responses were focused on the enjoyment – or lack of enjoyment – of online learning activities; parents and carers responses reflected difficulties with regard to adapting to new routines and processes, as well as the practicalities of the transition; and teachers' comments were focused more on the difference in quality of outcomes produced as a result of online learning.

Teacher 2 (Year Reception) stated that the engagement with online learning at the very beginning of the first lockdown was "not great". This was consistent with comments from parents explaining that adapting to the new routine, as well as tackling the blurred lines between home and school, meant that online learning was "a bit of a battle most days" (Parent/Carer of Child 15, Year 3).

> Some difficulties with the transition were shared by children and parents alike. Child 29 (Year 1) described the social aspect of the experience as "scary" because there was a 'woman' on screen that they didn't know. Child 29 (Year 1) also said that "working on the computer…took a long time".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 20, Year 2)

Child 7 (Year 1) felt that there was "lots of talking and lots of writing' in comparison to learning in school. Again, this idea was supported by Child 11's (Year 1) Parent/Carer, who stated 'I don't think it was stimulating enough", when asked about Child 11's (Year 1) experience of online learning.

Further criticisms came in the form of difficulties with audio. Child 12 (Year 1) shared that it was "hard to hear the teacher" during online lessons. Child 1's (Year 1) Parent/Carer echoed the frustration of this when explaining how audio quality – and therefore learning – were compromised when "30 children all talk at the same time".

Teacher 1 (Year 1) addressed the fact that the quality of completed work was inferior to that which would be expected from learning in school "also found that I was leaving or doing a lesson leaving them work online. It wasn't the standard we did in school". Moreover, a parent noted similar frustrations with the internet and their child's dislike of using video conferencing software which contributed to the child not joining in with live lessons.

> "Well, our internet's not the best. So sometimes, you know, the internet wouldn't work, and we couldn't get him on or it just, he doesn't like being on camera. You know, is genuine anyway. So, he wouldn't join in with the live sessions, because he just didn't like being there. You know, and if he's busy doing something else at the time, he hates being interrupted".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)

Another parent had experiences of challenges of trying to engage their children in learning if they were experiencing annoyance or in a negative mood.

> "If and when they finally woke up and she wasn't in the best of mood, you know..., you was never gonna get anything out of it that day and it was out".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 13, Year 3)

Despite the negative feeling that came from discussions around the transition to online learning, parents from across the schools shared how the experience improved once they had settled children into the new routine.

> "But yeah, it was hard at first. But we did get into some kind of routine. In the end when we were doing it Monday to Friday, just not at a set time, I think."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 16, Year 3)

One parent remarked that their children became so engaged with their new routine of online learning, that they were reluctant to return to school:

> "Well, they started to really enjoy it. And then they were like, you know, you can go back to school now. And they were like, but we don't want to."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)

Learning resources

> "A bit boring because you can't actually do stuff like, in the school to do all the stuff they need in school, but you had to do it at home. You have all the stuff you need in school but not at home".
>
> (Child 18, Year 3)

In terms of learning resources, it was prevalent in the child, teacher and parent data that some children did not have access to the resources required for learning within the home. When a parent was asked what other factors may have impacted their child's education they noted "apart from the internet, no home resources" (Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1). A teacher also stated that "you know, in our catchment area, we do have quite a few families who don't have access to things" (Teacher 3, Year 3).

Concerns over access to resources for learning led to schools distributing a range of resources of families.

> "If they didn't have devices at home to learn, we did say we would provide them with paper, copies of workbooks and pencils. So, we had things all set up in the office. So, they did booklets. They were provided a pencil cases workbooks, especially foundation phase, we printed off loads of worksheets and bits and pieces if they wanted that as well."
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

Teachers also spoke about learning making tasks accessible to children to ensure that learning opportunities could be embraced by all children.

> "But also it depends on tasks to set, you know, if you need loads of resources, and things like that, as in children aren't going to be able to complete activities and things like that, it sort of depends, it depends what it is, and whether the activities need to be brought up the work for you, you know, that can be done however they wanted. So, I think any tasks needed to be broad for them, otherwise, they're not accessible".
>
> (Teacher 4, Year 3)

To combat the challenges of inequalities in access to learning opportunities and resources one parent suggested schools collaborated with other educational stakeholders to design

and distribute home learning packs which can provide equal opportunities to all children in Wales.

> "In the region all teachers and schools get together then to make kind of similar, education, I mean, Home Learning package or something. And, and everybody can get equal opportunity to improve their skills throughout Wales or, I don't know. So, if then, if someone can one authority can do that, and that would help all the children in Wales. Equally, they can improve their skills, they're not going to miss out anything and they're not different to other school or something like that".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 17, Year 3)

Increased use of technology and digital devices

One of the issues posed regarding remote learning was the need to ensure that all children and families had access to the internet via suitable devices. Teacher 1 remarked that "making sure everyone had devices and internet" was one of the most essential aspects of the transition to online learning, as without these, children would be isolated, with no access to learning, unless they were entitled to attend hub provision. One child shared their appreciation for the school lending out devices:

> Child 11, Year 1: "I liked the school iPad"
> Researcher: "Yeah, the school lent you an iPad, didn't they?"

Some children disliked the increase in technology:

> Teacher 8, Year Reception/1: "Did you like the computers?"
> Child 30, Year 1: [Shakes head]

With another child expressing frustration over the quality of online communication platforms on multiple occasions, both in relation to learning with their teachers and taking part in activities outside of school:

> Child 12, Year 1: "I didn't like the online reading"
> Researcher: "No? Why not?"
> Child 12, Year 1: "Because it used to glitch when she was reading the story and so I couldn't really hear what she was talking about".

Despite the negativity shared by children in relation to the sudden increase in using technology to access learning and other activities, parents and carers were more positive about the impacts of it. Teacher 3 (Year Reception) shared that, now back in school, children are more likely to use IT in lessons because of their increased capabilities, familiarity and confidence with the technology. This was echoed by a parent:

> "I think this generation is gonna be very savvy, isn't it with all the IT stuff and the virtual kind of, you know, online stuff? ... it's forced us and them ... for that to be normalised I think, not to be familiar. It's, I don't think that would have happened otherwise."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 18, Year 3)

However, another parent spoke about the wider potential benefits for children being confident with using technology:

> "Actually, I believe that digital learning can develop children's social abilities or learning competencies, I believe that."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 3, Year 1)

Preference for in person learning

Some of the difficulties expressed in relation to the transition to online learning and the increase in use of technology fed into comments which exposed a preference for in person learning. This sentiment was shared across all participant groups.

> "Hmm I didn't like being on the [Zoom] meetings, I actually wanted to go to school".
>
> (Child 21, Year 1)

The need for children to have a clear routine related to their education was a key reason that parents showed a preference for in person learning.

> "He sometimes rejected his online lessons, because he couldn't understand how to sit still and quiet and listen to his teachers, it was really hard, especially at that time, he was just five years old."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 3, Year 1)

> "Um, yeah I think you needed the routine because when you were like I said in school you know we did struggle with it, but it wasn't a structured then as in school so it's definitely a positive that he's, he's back in into a class environment"
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 7, Year 1)

One child had criticised the activities provided during remote learning as they felt they were too easy. Perhaps the blurred line between home and school also added to their subsequent comment:

> Researcher: "Ok, ok and how did you feel in lockdown when you didn't have school?"
> Child 2, Year 1: "Sad."
> Researcher: "Why's that then?"
> Child 2, Year 1: "Because I like to learn."

Nonetheless, Child 12 (Year 1) reiterated Child 2's (Year 1) dislike of remote learning and preference for being in school:

> Child 12, Year 1: "I didn't really like lockdown (laughs)"
> Researcher: "No. Why didn't you like it then?"
> Child 12, Year 1: "It was just terrible. I like, I wanted to be back in school."
> Researcher: "So that day you walk back into this beautiful school, what did you think?"
> Child 12, Year 1: "I am so happy"

The preference for in person learning was also evident in the data collected from teachers. In particular, the difficulty of differentiating feedback and support and the practicalities of being responsive to children's needs were problematic:

> "And I try and help them over the screen, but without being there physically. And I found that really, really hard. When the young children were in class, I would, see them struggling with a letter and we'd sit down, you'd help them and show them that for me. I just couldn't do it through a screen."
>
> (Teacher 2, Year Reception)

Reflecting on the fact that children mostly adopted and settled into a new routine whilst learning remotely, Teacher 1 (Year 1) talked about the fact that children may have been reluctant to return to school when the time came, however stated:

> "I think they think, 'oh, hang on. No, I would prefer to be in school', I hope".
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

Nonetheless, one child discussed how learning within the home has the benefit of having more adult support for their learning during lockdown; they recognised that the adult to child ratio in school is much higher than when at home and showed appreciation for the increased support gained whilst learning at home.

> "Because it's only kids in the class I can get much help because there were only two teachers, but the one's left now so it's probably even harder. But when I'm at home there are only two of us so Mum can help me a bit more."
>
> (Child 16, Year 3)

Greater child agency over their learning

One of the positive themes indicated by data relating to remote learning was the increased control children had over their learning. Child 11's (Year 1) Parent/Carer shared how Child 11 (Year 1) was curious about the coronavirus and therefore utilised remote learning time to independently research and "investigate all the viruses". Child 8's (Year 1) Parent/Carer shared that their child "developed some more skills in the home than…if he wasn't at home."

While, Child 12's (Year 1) Parent/Carer reflected that they were "pushing [Child 12] far too much" as a result of the increased agency over their child's learning; they felt that, on reflection, they were able to support their child through increasingly difficult levels of work, perhaps because the one–to–one support meant that they could progress at a quicker rate.

Lots of children fondly recalled enjoying "making stuff" (Child 8, Year 1) and Child 8 (Year 1) also paired this recollection with that fact they "liked it when [lessons] were recorded"; the agency over when learning would take place, when instructions were accessed and how frequently, points to a personalised approach to learning that is not as easily provided within the live, classroom environment.

On the topic of greater agency and its links to a more personalised learning experience, Teacher 4 (Year 3) had the following to say:

> "I think online learning gave them a chance to develop in their own way, because I find that from the classes I've been in, a lot of them, they do compare themselves to the children in the class. So, at home, it was just positive for them just to focus on their own learning, and they could explore in any way they want to. . And then as a result, they're going to develop their skills more effectively. And so, I think that was a positive, perhaps a little bit more in tune with their own learning."

Improving on skills

The data suggested that IT skills have improved as a result of learning and education during the pandemic. One parent/carer compared the skills of participating children with those of previous cohorts of children:

> "I wouldn't expect any sort of six/seven year olds, to be able to log on to teams ordinarily".

This improvement in IT skills was also acknowledged by one teacher, who also noted the potential positive long–term impact of this:

> "We ourselves are far more open to technology and to doing things online. And I think, yeah, just I think having that experience has got to have changed the way that they view technology and the learning now".
>
> (Teacher 2, Year Reception)

In addition to upskilling with technology use, children expressed enjoyment of engaging with various arts, crafts and cooking activities which increased their creative skills:

> Researcher: "So what kind of things did you like about learning at home?"
> Child 21, Year 1: "Yeah, colouring, reading, and colouring, reading and"
> Researcher: "No, that's fine."
> Parent/Carer of Child 21, Year 1: "She learnt to read in the first lockdown"
> Researcher: "Yeah, oh wow did you"
> Parent/Carer of Child 21, Year 1: "We learnt at home didn't we, because she was only in nursery, so that is how she learnt to read"

Blurring the lines between school and home life
The lack of clarity between school and home life is a theme which was extracted from the data in a range of ways. Children were sometimes confused by the fact they were expected to complete schoolwork whilst at home. This was exacerbated by children feeling confusion about why they were being taught by parents rather than teachers.

> "And so, to get him to sit and do any task for any length of time was absolutely impossible, because he's, you know, he doesn't do school at home, so why's he got to do it at home he couldn't understand that. So, very much a blurred line… He didn't understand why he was doing schoolwork at home."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 30, Year 1)

> "He is not expressing himself very well. Sometimes he would say, Mama you are not a teacher, and a teacher can teach me so he was not understanding that Mama needs to be Mama and teacher needs to be teacher and why he needs to do hard work at home. Sometimes it was really challenging to force them to work."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 4, Year 1)

One carer expressed frustration as a result of the blurred lines between home and school as learning, at times, would encroach upon family time:

> "I want quality time because this was eaten away in the house. It was encroaching on it."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 11, Year 1)

One parent commented on the fact that their child was easily distracted by being at home as they had all their toys nearby:

> "I think when there's too much of the written work then I suppose if when he was sat here for such a long time, there's so many distractions at home. I mean, it's easy then for him to sort of say Oh, well, you know, what about this? What about that at home? I know it's he likes it in school, but at home there were a lot of distractions."

(Parent/Carer of Child 24, Year Reception)

The increase in screen time when children were learning online posed difficulty for them maintaining focus for extended periods:

> "Teaching over the internet was strange in the beginning, and, and even, you know, getting the parents or the parents getting their children to sit and actually stay in front of the screen that was quite hard to do sometimes, you know, they wanted to go off and do other things."
>
> (Teacher 3, Year Reception)

Social issues were also spoken about by one parent; socialising and engaging in learning online has practical differences to socialising and learning in school.

> "So I think that's, I think because it's like a teacher and classroom environment so that would work but when he was in the house, he was a little bit shy to be like face to face, like looking, he thought like he didn't like everyone looking at him so we'd be online but sometimes I'd be in the video and he'd be there but his face would be there [pointing at her shoulder] yeah, so we tried, we didn't do it every day we just, we tried like the Mondays and Tuesdays I was off then so yeah"
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 22, Year 1)

One parent described taking on the role of teacher and consequently blurring the lines between home and school as *'the hardest thing I have had to do'* (Parent/Carer of Child 12, Year 3). For this parent, contextual factors had exasperated this since she had just given birth to a new baby and was going through the process of adopting the school aged child who had SEN.

> "Juggling a baby and then trying to sit with my daughter … she is behind and we were trying to sit there and help her as much as we can but I ain't no teacher …I'm dealing with a newborn… It's like 'Oh my God!' I've got a baby crying but she is asking me questions… It sounds hard, but I wanted her to go back to school because I know she needed it and I know she would have preferred going into school… there's a difference in being a parent to being a teacher…..you can't disconnect from it because then in the evenings when she's gone to bed, you're trying to plan for the next day. …you got to plan the (work)sheets for the next sequence."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 12, Year 3)

A sense of frustration for having to take on the role of the teacher whilst also attending to other parts of live was also present in the data of Child 12's father:

> "we didn't feel like we were getting anywhere…She was unable to retain information….it felt like we were constantly fighting a bit of a losing battle ..… you know we are full time workers at the time as well, so it was difficult to try and juggle… we were constantly busy and didn't really know what the answers were .. how to best meet her needs."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 12, Year 3)

Provision of Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

There were some discussions around provision for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), with the parents and children who have an ALN who participated giving very different accounts of their experiences in their schools. In School 4, children with profound and complex ALN had daily one–to–one online learning sessions with a Teaching Assistant

during the second lockdown. Alongside this tailored support, parents openly praised teachers for their commitment to their children's learning.

> "Yeah, I mean she's [teacher] so good with him…he reacts to everything that she asks him to do"
>
> <div align="right">(Parent/Carer of Child 30, Year 1)</div>

This praise for teacher's support and commitment to children with ALN was echoed across the schools:

> "It's a wonderful school. My eldest wouldn't be the person he is without it. He has learning difficulties and speech problems, you know, so without the school and actually putting the time and the effort into sorting out extra help for me"
>
> <div align="right">(Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)</div>

Theme 5: Challenges of schooling during a pandemic

A range of challenges of schooling between lockdowns were reported by children, parents/carers and teachers. These included the transition back to school after the lockdowns, accessing learning/school resources during lockdowns, children and schools having a desire to keep COVID–19 away and children struggling with the 'bubble system' upon their return to school. The pandemic and these challenges also impacted children's mental health and wellbeing with children reporting experiencing, annoyance, boredom, confusion and anxiety.

Transition back to school
Children spoke about missing their family upon returning to school post lockdowns. Children noted "I missed my mom and my sister and my dad" (Child 16, Year 3) and "I missed my parents because I had spent so much time with them" (Child 17, Year 3). Findings from parents'/carers' perspectives indicated their children experienced polarized feelings in relation to the return to school, with some children feeling positive about their return to school and some children experiencing more negative feelings such as anxiety. For example, some parents spoke about how their child transitioned back to school remarkably well attributing the ease of the transition to children being excited to see their friends or having limited concept of the time they spent away from school. The extract below gives an example from an online interview between the researcher and Child 30 and their parent:

> "I don't think so I think we were worried that perhaps it would be a big change for so long, but he settled in straight away like you've not been away…He hasn't got any concept of time he probably didn't realize how long you've been off for anyway. So, for him to go back might have just been normal like a normal six weeks holiday so yeah yeah so, he's there was no hesitation, you. You didn't have any problems to do going back. And he was just pleased to see friends"
>
> <div align="right">(Parent/Carer of Child 30, Year 1)</div>

In contrast other parents discussed their child struggling with adjusting to the return to school (see the two quotes below), with this transition felt to have a negative impact on their child's mental health and wellbeing.

> "He struggled, at first. You know, he wanted to just stay home, he didn't want to go to school. Once he was there, he was fine. But just trying to get him to school. He was like, I don't want to go I'd rather stay home. And you know, it was nice for him to see

his friends. And it was a bit of a strange setup for him. But he seemed to cope pretty well".

(Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)

"I think he's got a bit anxious maybe it is from lockdown, isn't it, because he spent that time, because I remember when he was in nursery, he didn't cry going to school… I dunno it has made him more of a worrier. Like you said, he cries going into school and he wears his ear defenders in school because of the noise and stuff as well, maybe because he was home, and it was so quiet for so long".

(Parent/Carer of Child 22, Year 1)

Moreover, one parent spoke about how there were certain aspects of returning to school that their child did not enjoy:

"She did say when she went back to school that she didn't like it because they couldn't hug their friends, or like touch her friends, it wasn't the same. She enjoyed me back in school, but she didn't enjoy it as much as before COVID".

(Parent/Carer of Child 21, Year 1)

Teachers noted that in relation to the transition back to school there were concerns around children getting back into routines stating "they're tired very quickly. You know, the hands were aching" (Teacher 3, Year Reception).

"They have as well sort of struggled coming back to the routine of writing again, reading. They've, I mean, they're okay now, but it's like the difference you see when they come back in September".

(Teacher 1, Year 1)

Furthermore, a parent also noted how their child was physically tired from the transition back to school.

"I would say the only negative the first week or so, he was physically quite tired. But I think that's because, you know, he was back to a six–and–a–half–hour day, you know, back get getting back up at 6:30/7".

(Parent/Carer of Child 15, Year 3).

Teachers also spoke about children losing their ability to be independent, be patient and turn take, all skills teachers noted may have been developed in the early years of school which children have missed.

"Like their socialisation skills, their ability to be independent, their ability to turn take, it is almost like everything has shifted, everything that I was doing in reception would have been done in nursery, so that turn taking, the playing, the working things out together you do naturally through play and nursery because there isn't so much formal learning, there was a lot more of that, I felt like I was going back a level and the children were so much more needy, they had had an extra year at home basically".

(Teacher 6, Year 1/2)

Whilst there are positives of one–to–one parental support, teachers attributed the challenges children faced upon their return to school to children receiving one–to–one parental support within the home, and children missing out on a year of schooling which is fundamental to the development of these skills.

Desire to keep COVID-19 away and masks

Children had an awareness of how the coronavirus impacted their lives and one child showed understanding of how the vaccination process was key in them returning to the activities they would do prior to COVID–19.

> "I was just waiting for some days and some days, but they never came, and then when the COVID started to like, when they like started to have the vaccinations and stuff".
>
> (Child 19, Year 2)

One parent also spoke about how their child was interested in the virus and understanding the different types of virus.

> "He really wants to investigate with all the viruses, you name it… He wanted to know everything. It was you know… and he's learned a lot about the virus".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 11, Year 1)

Teachers noted how parents were fearful of children's return to school with some parents opting to keep their children off school.

> "There were several children that were still kept off. A lot of parents were extremely worried, or they had vulnerable family members that they were looking after or living with them. So, there were a few parents that said, no, I want to keep my child off".
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

Interestingly, a teacher also noted the schools support for children and parents and family's perception of blended learning changed over the course of the pandemic. Whilst the first lockdown saw the school primarily focus on offering pastoral support and checking in on families' wellbeing, the second lockdown saw an increased focus on education.

> "You know, I think it was kind of like, everything was shut down, wasn't it and everybody's watching the telly and everybody's waiting out a time for this deadly disease to come and kill us all. And, you know, so everybody was really focused on that and staying safe. And I think that progressed people's perceptions of what they wanted from blended learning in schools changed as well, you know, when I think it got tweaked slightly, then for the second one, there was more of that onus be more on screen, handing in assignments where there wasn't really that pressure to do it in the first one, you know, it was very much you know, like, we're here to support you, your wellbeing and still for the second time".
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

In terms of mask wearing, one child spoke about how the masks didn't stop the virus spreading stating a need to "make masks more protective because they, they don't stop it" (Child 14, Year 3). The Parent/Carer of the child also noted how the child has been frustrated with people wearing masks during the pandemic as this has meant the child had not been able to recognise others.

Difficulties with 'bubbles'

> "We couldn't mix bubbles anymore. We couldn't do any of that stuff and we couldn't go in the cafeteria anymore. We couldn't like go on each other's 3D playground to

play actual football matches, we couldn't do that anymore. We couldn't do any of that stuff. Now we can we start again".

<div align="right">(Child 15, Year 3)</div>

Children placed an importance on being a part of the wider school community, whether this was sharing lunch time and play with friends or attending school assemblies. It was prevalent in the data that the implementation of school 'bubbles' had an impact on children's ability to socialise with others. For example, children noted the restrictions the bubbles placed on their freedom and socialisation stating, "I can't go downstairs and mix bubbles because my friends are downstairs" (Child 16, Year 3) and "when COVID came we had to eat in our classrooms instead of the hall" (Child 18, Year 3).

A class teacher also noted the 'bubble' systems upon returning to school create challenges as children were not able to mix or socialise with children outside of their class or bubble.

> "I mean straightaway with bubbles, we were locked in our own classes. And when we go out, we only shared the class with the next year too. And our yard was divided. And that was very hard because you couldn't mix at all. But they will stand in sort of near the cones waving to the other class".

<div align="right">(Teacher 1, Year 1)</div>

One child spoke about having to adapt how they would play with a friend due to the bubbles keeping them apart.

> "We are in bubbles. I am on one side, and she is on the other side, and we race each other".

<div align="right">(Child 16, Year 3)</div>

Parents also spoke about the impacts of the bubbles on their children's happiness, noting the bubbles made their child upset as they were separated from friends.

> "What is that upsetting most this year is in a year there's two classes in the same year. And her best friend was put in the other class. So, they are not allowed to play together on the playground. Obviously, they're not allowed to mix classes and so I think that is difficult".

<div align="right">(Parent/Carer of Child 16, Year 3)</div>

Another parent recognised how the bubble system and the number of rules implemented at school were a challenge for their child, particularly in terms of their child's freedom to socialise.

> "He still has got a big struggle with the bubble thing. So, he is a sociable child. I think it was just getting his head round, you know, you can't mix bubbles, you can't go down this corridor. You have to wash your hands like after every everything that you do".

<div align="right">(Parent/ Carer of Child 15, Year 3)</div>

Nonetheless, some teachers recognised that the bubble system was implemented to try and ensure the safety of children which was viewed as paramount. This sense of children feeling safe within their environment was also seen by some teachers to support child development.

"I mean, what I know, I know that the bubbles caused some conflicts and issues but, in another way, you know, we're a very close class community. And this, it's their safe space, the bubble is a safe space for children who need it. That's very positive. And if the children feel safe, safe and content, they're gonna be able to develop, you know, to be the best that they can be if they feel safe in that environment".

(Teacher 4, Year 3)

Child annoyance and unfairness

Children spoke about not enjoying lockdown, and how lockdown created feelings of annoyance and frustration both in relation to schooling and restrictions more broadly, with one child stating, "It was just terrible, I like, I wanted to be back in school" (Child 7, Year 1). Another child disclosed particular frustration with engaging with online learning saying:

"Cause sometimes when you're on Zoom, it glitches a lot so you cause, sometimes it's hard to hear what the teacher's saying really".

(Child 12, Year 1)

In the child data there was also discussion around annoyance at the government for their actions and governance, showing that younger children have some understanding of the government and politics behind decisions related to the COVID–19 pandemic. Children noted "It's not our fault, it's Boris' fault" (Child 6, Year 1) and "BJ, he got sacked because he had a party in lockdown" (Child 5, Year 1).

In addition, another child and parent discussed how their child may have picked up on conversations the family had around the government and Boris Johnson.

Researcher: "What didn't you like?"
Child 13, Year 3: "The government."
Parent/ Carer of Child 13, Year 3: "That must have just been like 'cause we're watching more news and stuff like that and whatever. And there's obviously a lot more scrutiny now over them over the government and stuff in there, 'cause we're not hugely political in this house. We don't sit and have massive debates or anything like that. It's only if the news is on and you know. Makes sense, I mean whatever we might have disagreed, she might have taken that and so I'll disagree with him as well."

Child confusion and anxiety

It was prevalent in the data that children experienced feelings of fear and confusion during the COVID–19 pandemic, whether this was in relation to the pandemic itself or whether this was due to the effects of the lockdown period of the pandemic, or on certain aspects of their lives such as moving into a different classroom.

Researcher: "Right. And what about [child] overall experiences of his in–school learning since the pandemic began?"
Parent/Carer of Child 28: "What do you think darling? You coped well, and you know moving into a different class it was strange at first."
Child 28: "It was so strange."

Feelings of fear were also discussed by a child when discussing the pandemic and the lockdowns with a child stating "Like, I, I thought, it was a little bit scary, scary" (Child 11, Year 1). Teachers also noted how schools were focused upon supporting children's mental health and wellbeing upon the return to school.

> "With the mental health side of things, it's something that our school is very focused on is supporting them with their emotional, any emotional issues that they might have. You know, we've done a lot of training and a lot of our staff have been training for anxiety, but we've all done training for anxiety and managing worries and things like that".
>
> (Teacher 2, Year Reception)

> "So, I think we did we did focus a lot on wellbeing as well as education, especially in the first one".
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

Whilst some parents raised concerns over children's wellbeing, other parents viewed children as relatively resilient and noted how they have been amazed with how they have dealt with living through the COVID–19 pandemic.

> "Yeah, but I know that the children coming back themselves, as a whole, they were nervous, it was the unknown again, they just didn't know what they were going in to and everything seemed to be new, with so many different rules that they have to follow. You know, things were so different and perhaps that's what they were nervous about, but they were OK, they are quite resilient the kids aren't they; you know they, they are quite good with things".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 21, Year 1)

> "It's incredible to think, you know, the resilience, you know, that we all kind of showed during that and the kids as well. We were lucky really with both of them. None of them I don't think really suffered mentally during it".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 18, Year 3)

Boredom and monotony

Children and parents noted children experiencing boredom and monotony during the period of the COVID–19 pandemic when there were restrictions on movement outside of people's homes. Feelings of boredom were attributed towards having to stay within the house and not being able to see those from outside their household.

> "So really, I was really bored because I didn't get to see, I didn't want to do any of the stuff online at the start but when I got to learn I wanted to".
>
> (Child 15, Year 3)

Children also spoke about getting bored with the home learning tasks set by the school within the home with a parent stating, "some of it was just quizzes like crosswords and things like they think we've got so many of those puzzles and she got a bit bored of it" (Parent/Carer of Child 16, Year 3). Moreover, a child noted that "sometimes I was sleepy and very tired" (Child 4, Year 1) when being at home and doing online learning.

Another parent spoke about how their child's demeanour went downhill over the lockdowns and the child got bored of the routine the child and her parents set up for the child by the second lockdown.

> "Uh, like her whole demeanour went downhill… Like beforehand she would get up actually do the Joe Wicks and fitness classes every morning… She was willing to try and set up a routine for herself and like the second time around, it was just non–existent".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 13, Year 3)

Nonetheless, one parent discussed how their child wanted to complete the home learning due to them experiencing boredom and needing the structure and routine of doing home learning. In relation to completing home learning, a parent noted:

"She wanted to do it, it like broke up the day. Because she's constantly on the go, she needs structure. she needed a routine, because she would just get quite bored".

<div align="right">(Parent/ Carer of Child 21, Year 1)</div>

Theme 6: The longer–term impact and lessons learnt

Longer–term impact of COVID

Primarily, adults were the participants who had thoughts to share regarding the potential longer–term impacts of learning and education during the pandemic. Responses regarding long–term impacts focused on three areas: children's capacity to move beyond the experience and recover from it, in particular with relation to their social skills and wellbeing; academic progress and learning; and socialisation and experiences.

When asked if they thought there would be any impacts on their children's learning moving forward, multiple parents stated, "No, I don't think so". The Parent/Carer of Child 12 (Year 1) suggested that there would, in fact, be "a positive effect" on Child 12 because "[they were] in a safe place" and had been "more focused on" by their parents and had "adapted...[to] different learning styles and different people teaching [them]".

Conversely, some parents and carers expressed concern about the "bad impact [of lockdown on children's] self–confidence" (Parent/Carer of Child 3, Year 1):

"It is hard to say because it is not a standard situation. Emotionally he is affected. Inside his thoughts and feelings and how he sees the world."

<div align="right">(Parent/Carer of child 4, Year 1)</div>

The Parent/Carer of Child 1 (Year 1) noted that Child 1 (Year 1) had "spent so much time just her, and not with other children [that they are] becoming shy in school" and that this is not being successfully remedied by the return to school and the push to "learn, learn, learn" rather than "having the chance to play as little ones and get…used to mixing again."

Some concerns regarding wellbeing and children's missed experiences, such as residentials, were supported with suggestions of priorities moving forward:

"You know, school trips that are a must really."

<div align="right">(Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)</div>

"We haven't gone on any trips. year six, and year five, especially missed out on things like their residentials, which is a huge thing that they really look forward to that age."

<div align="right">(Teacher 2, Year Reception)</div>

Although the majority of comments from parents and carers regarding long–term impacts focused on children's wellbeing and social and emotional education, there were some acknowledgements of the potential impact of the pandemic on academic learning and progress. Child 11's (Year 1) Parent/Carer suggested that home–learning has "slowed [them] down a bit" and Child 15's (Year 3) Parent/Carer queried of children: "Will they ever catch up?" There was a sense of worrying about the unknown, with parents and carers

unsure of how to accurately gauge whether their children were making sufficient progress in spite of the pandemic:

> "I think they need to check their levels. They need to check where they are. For us, I need to know if they are real year two or real year one. For me, (inaudible) I want to know where they are. I am worried about how fast they are catching up."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 4, Year 1)

> "The fact that they've missed so much, they'd always can be playing catch up. So, you know, they're not going to be learning the new things, and they always still going to catch up on what they've missed. So, there's bits of education that they might not learn, or they might not know about because of the no catching up."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)

This was particularly poignant for children with profound and complex additional needs with Child 30's (Year 1) Parent/Carer remarking:

> "Because of [Child 30] and [their] delayed learning, would [they] have been more advanced by being in school over the last two years or not, because we don't know…we don't know if it affected [them]."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 30, Year 1)

> "I don't know whether they would be further ahead than maybe they would have been, it's hard to tell because [Child 18]'s, you know, the oldest, I've got nothing to compare it to".
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 18, Year 3)

Parents and carers also spoke about the potential long–term impacts of the pandemic on how the school operates and communicates with families:

> "It seems to be more child friendly now than before."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 8, Year 1)

> "I felt like I could message them a little bit more if I needed to since they went back or when they were off."
>
> (Parent/Carer of Child 7, Year 1)

Teachers noted that there have been some long–term impacts on children's learning, with handwriting, sharing, turn–taking and basic numeracy and literacy skills – such as letter formation – amongst the skills negatively impacted by the pandemic.

> "And I think as time gone on, I have found bad handwriting and things like that have slipped a bit they've had a long–term impact."
>
> (Teacher 1, Year 1)

> "They missed out on so much about the phonics work."
>
> (Teacher 2, Year Reception)

Despite this, teachers did comment on the benefits of the pandemic in terms of children's advanced IT skills:

> "I think we do a lot more online now. And I think with especially the key stage two, that because we all got in the routine of using more ICT."

"I would say that's a big positive, the fact that they've had access to this technology they wouldn't have had before."

In anticipation of increased issues with mental health and wellbeing, schools are preparing for the increased need for support by training staff:

"we're trying to make sure that we've got staff that can support children, with those sort of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues that might come up as a result of a pandemic."

The future: longer term impacts and lessons learnt
For many participants, one of the lessons learnt from the –19 pandemic was how to use technology for learning. For some parents, digital learning was seen to be a positive, Whereas other parents were not sure of how online learning compared to in–person learning.

"Whether it was productive for them I really don't, I don't think online learning didn't suit them that capacity you know as an education"

"Online learning for me was more social, not like proper learning for this age"

There was a recognition by parents and teachers that the pandemic has affected children's learning and development and longer–term outcomes [See Section 6.1]. To overcome some of the impacts of time away from school parents' recommended that schools adopt more individualised approaches to supporting children's learning.

Researcher: "Your suggestion really is that there needs to be totally individualised approach, it would have to be for children with extra needs?"
Parent/Carer of Child 30, Year 1: "Yeah. Yeah, because you cannot generalise the abilities."

There were also concerns raised over potential increases in pressure on children and their learning now children have returned to school. A parent said, "they've gone back, and they are learn learn learn learn learn because they have to, but they are not having the chance to play as little ones" (Parent/Carer of Child 1, Year 1) Whereas the parent felt that a play–centred approach to learning would be more suitable noting "As a parent, thinking of my own child. I would be thinking of you can teach kids through play" (Parent/Carer of Child 1, Year 1).

In terms of moving forward, one of the main lessons learnt from the teacher's perspective was there was a greater need for the school to be more prepared for having to deal with unexpected periods of crisis. One teacher noted a need for the school to step up if another pandemic was to hit, however, the teacher adopted a relatively deficit view of parents and their engagement, suggesting their engagement in children's learning during the pandemic was limited.

"We definitely have to step up so that if we have anything like a lockdown again something needs to happen at home. We need to support learning at home and not just left for school. You can see there is an impact on their education. It does scare me when they don't have support from home. What worries me is a lot of parents don't know how to support. In the past we did have parents in to support them. We have done reading and cooking. We did know that parents didn't know how to teach reading."

<div align="right">(Teacher 1, Year 1)</div>

Summary of Findings

The findings are presented in six themes that were constructed from the data:

1. Missing and a sense of loss
2. The importance of family and the home
3. The importance and enjoyment of school
4. Remote learning through the -19 pandemic
5. Challenges of schooling between lockdowns
6. The future: longer term impacts and lessons learnt.

Missing and a sense of loss
A large number of children reported a sense of loss, mainly missing their friends as well as the ability to engage in physical sports activities. On returning to schools after lockdowns, older children (those in year 3) seemed to have a greater sense of loss and concerns about bubbles, this may be due to them remembering pre-COVID education. This was a common theme that children expressed during the research.

The importance of family and the home
Due to the imposed restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic children reported increased time with family members which they liked and appreciated. Whilst children enjoyed increased time with family members, they reported missing extended family members although technology was often used to rectify their absence. Children reported enjoying spending time playing outside in nature and with their pets or animals.

The importance and enjoyment of school
The data indicates the importance that children place on being part of a wider school community, sharing lunch time and playtimes, seeing friends in assemblies and being able to eat lunch together. Children missed physically attending school, seeing teachers and being within the classroom environment.

Remote learning through the COVID-19 pandemic
Data indicated the transition to online learning was challenging, specifically, the need to ensure that all children had access to the internet. Some children were not as keen on the increased use of technology for learning as reported by the adults who were more positive. There was a clear preference from the children for in person learning. In terms of some of the positive impacts of remote learning , it was felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to the children having greater agency over their learning and an improvement of their IT skills.

Challenges of schooling during a pandemic
One of the key challenges experienced by children was the transition back to school after the lockdowns. Although some children found this a positive experience, other children found it a more challenging. Teachers and parents noted that children had more fatigue in school, including writing fatigue, which is similar to the impacts of returning to school following a long school holiday. Teachers also spoke about children losing their ability to be

independent, be patient and turn take, and children struggling with the 'bubble system' upon their return to school. The COVID pandemic and its impacts also effected children's mental health and wellbeing; children reported experiencing annoyance and frustration with the restrictions and situation, boredom, confusion and anxiety.

The longer-term impact and lessons learnt
In general parents did not feel there would be a negative long-term impact of COVID-19 on their child's learning. However, some parents did worry about 'catch-up' and their child's learning level. Many parents were concerned about the impact of COVID on their children's self-confidence; social development was highlighted as a concern for some parents. Teachers noted that there have been some long-term impacts on children's learning, with handwriting, sharing, turn-taking and basic numeracy and literacy skills – such as letter formation – amongst the skills negatively impacted by the pandemic.

Conclusions

This study aimed to explore the educational experiences of young children who were aged 3 to 6 in Wales during the COVID-19 pandemic during lockdowns and on the subsequent return to school. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are young children's perceptions of their overall educational experiences during the pandemic?
2. What are young children' perceptions of their experiences of online learning during the pandemic?
3. What are adults' perspectives on the impact and recovery from COVID––19 on young children? (Adults, for example, may include school–based staff and parents /carers).

There are a number of interconnected issues evident in the process of analysis in terms of children's perceptions of learning experiences during this time which were often mirrored by the significant adults around them. We see some similarity in what children and adults experienced and expressed such as a sense of social isolation, the negative impact of COVID on children's wellbeing and the challenges for children and carers/parents of online learning. Some factors were only evident from the adults' perspective, for example, a concern about the potential longer-term negative impact of COVID on learning and social development for young children. The findings provide insight into the experiences of our youngest children regarding their experiences of education, broadly speaking, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such insight allows us to consider provision for these children in terms of both curriculum-making within the Curriculum for Wales and approaches to assessment.

Research Question 1: What are young children' experiences and perceptions of their education during the pandemic?

Children experienced a lack of socialisation and a sense of social isolation: Whilst technology attempted to mitigate children's social isolation, the lack of socialisation with people from outside of children's household (friends, extended family members and teachers) resulted in children reporting feelings of loss, sadness and loneliness which are indicative of negative impacts on wellbeing. Children missed physically attending school, seeing teachers and being within the classroom environment. In terms of relationships, pets were viewed as a positive contributor to their experience during the pandemic, alongside the ability to spend more time at home with family and siblings. These findings reflect the findings of a number of studies reported in the literature review, and as such provide a strong message about the value of early childhood educational experiences that support relationships, a sense of belonging and being part of a community. Additionally, the insight provided by the children about the value of spending time with pets, as well as family, offers an opportunity for teachers to pro-actively use these strong emotional bonds as foundations for curriculum-making within the CfW.

Since CfW offers the opportunity for teachers to build curriculum around the interests and experiential context of the children in their classes, this study offers key messages about what is important to the young children who experienced such disruption to their early education. Curriculum-making that explores, respects and celebrates children's diverse experiences of home and family, including diverse experiences within the community and, indeed, the shared experience of the pandemic, may support the design of content for the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience, as well as support the experience of Cynefin within the CfW curriculum in the early years. We have used the term Cynefin and understood it as stated in CfW (2022): "the place where we feel we belong, where the

people and landscape around us are familiar, and the sights and sounds are reassuringly recognisable. Though often translated as 'habitat', cynefin is not just a place in a physical or geographical sense: it is the historic, cultural and social place which has shaped and continues to shape the community which inhabits it."

Children discussed how the restrictions imposed on them both during and after lockdowns impacted upon their lives and in particular who they could/could not see and what they could/could not do. These imposed restrictions saw children experience boredom and monotony due to confinement within the home and concerns were raised by parents and teachers over the impact of the confinement on children's anxiety levels. Moreover, concerns were raised over children's wellbeing being negatively impacted due to children missing experiences and people during the pandemic and also often feeling frightened by lockdown messages and measures (e.g. mask wearing and what this symbolised).

Research Question 2. What are young children' experiences and perceptions of online learning during the pandemic?

Some children were not as keen as others on the increased use of technology for learning, with many expressing a preference for in person learning. The school was viewed as a source of routine learning and social engagement and the loss of routine learning and seeing friends and teachers was clearly reflected in the children's experiences including anxiety over COVID measures and associated unknowns.

Some children highlighted the benefits having more choice and agency over their learning during the pandemic. The potential of greater freedom in home learning sometimes led to children making active decisions over what they would like to focus their education on, outside of the confounds of school timetables (e.g., drawing or mathematics).

This study explicitly recognised the capability of young children to express and articulate their experiences. That they have done so, and in an eloquent and clear manner, is further indication that they should be enabled to do so more usually, if not routinely, in studies about educational experience. In addition, the finding that some children enacted agency over their learning in an online environment but also report that they enjoyed and benefitted from such enactment demonstrates further children's capability in making choices about learning, and indeed their metacognitive capability to reflect upon this process. As teachers come to recognise young children's capabilities these may become cornerstones for the process of curriculum-making. Children's voices, their experiences, and interests should, according to the CfW, be central to the process of curriculum design; this study emphases young children's capability to voice their experience and also enact agency in curriculum-making and the direction of their learning.

Research Question 3. What are adults' perspectives on the impact and recovery from COVID—19 on the youngest children? (Adults, for example, may include school–based staff and parents / carers).

Teachers' perspective on the impact of lockdown on children: Teachers reported that some children are exhibiting behaviours not common in previous cohorts, such as interrupting, not understanding or adhering to turn taking. However, there was also a perception that some relationships had been strengthened: Teachers and their 'lockdown' classes have often developed close bonds; relationships between teachers and families have often been strengthened and there is more communication both ways.

Parents' view on online learning: some parents reflected on the difficulties of getting their children to engage in learning outside of familiar cues of the school environment. There was also some data that suggested a perception of improvement in digital skills beyond age related expectations which had stemmed from the necessity for children to engage with technology for the purposes of engaging in school learning. Some parents reported issues with technology and access to the internet, especially at the start of the pandemic.

Adult concerns about longer term negative impact on children: Significantly, parents and teachers raised concerns over children's capacity to move beyond the experience of the pandemic and recover from it in relation to the longer-term impact on children's social skills and academic progress. For example, teachers noted some long-term potential impacts on children's learning, with handwriting, basic numeracy and literacy skills and social skills such as sharing, turn-taking being noticeably impaired when compared to age related expectations. To overcome some of the perceived negative impacts of time away from school, some parents recommend that schools adopt more individualised approaches to supporting children's learning. There were also concerns raised over potential increases in pressure on children and their learning now children have returned to school.

The Curriculum for Wales, arguably, offers a structure through which curriculum-makers/teachers can resist the pressure for an overly heavy emphasis on academic 'catch-up', and 'recovery', especially in the early years and primary school, by responding to consideration of what young children **can** do and what they have experienced as a start point for planning for progression. This study indicates that both teachers and families report some benefits for children and home-school relationships as a result of lockdown. These may form a good foundation upon which to continue to build positive home-school relationships that may enrich the process of curriculum design, and provide opportunities for relevant and relatable curriculum content. Also we would note that while the list of what children *cannot* do, socially and emotionally, as well as academically, can appear daunting, this may be overcome if schools are empowered to work from a competency-based model of children. Such an approach would allow planning and curriculum design to be relevant to the children in front of the teacher, rather than some notion of 'normalcy'. Such a recommendation is not to deny the need for appropriate support and signposting to referral agencies should the need arise, however we seek to guard against a cohort of learners being labelled by what they cannot do rather than recognised for the resilience demonstrated by children and their families in coming through the pandemic, and the happiness (of most) at the return to school life.

Lessons learnt from the COVID pandemic
For many participants, one of the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic was how to use technology for learning, most of this data stemmed from adults rather than children. For some parents, digital learning was seen to be a positive, whereas other parents were not sure of how online learning compared to in-person learning. This was often related to the role of adults during the pandemic and their availability to support their children.

In terms of moving forward, one of the main lessons learnt from the teachers' perspective was there was a greater need for the school to be more prepared for having to deal with unexpected periods of crisis.

In line with other studies reported in the literature review such findings are not new. This study does however support the need for ongoing professional learning opportunities for teachers to remain actively engaged in technological developments that may be pedagogically relevant for teaching day to day, and/or in response to a crisis. It cannot be left to chance whether other adults (e.g. parents) are able to support children's learning, remotely or in school; technology and familiarity with it is required so all children can be well

supported by the learning on offer at – or from -school. Additionally, this study supports the need for ongoing and meaningful family engagement processes, including the provision of technology hardware and software, if needed, to families if this is required to facilitate learning.

Recommendations

There are a series of recommendations, arising from this research, relevant at national, regional and/or school level. Many of these recommendations would need implementation at the school level because this is where the data was focused – on children's experiences at school and home.

Recommendation 1: Opportunities for social development and reengaging with the wider school community
A finding of this study is the emphasis that children themselves place upon friends, socialising and being part of the wider school community, especially the importance of social relationships to their wellbeing. Parents were also vocal about the need for social skills to be learned and focused on, moving forward, as these have been largely missed. Lots of children also talked about feeling shy about going back to school but also really missing friends during lockdowns.

We recommend that there needs to be recognition at all levels of the significant impact that this period has had on social development in particular. This needs to be a focus for schools and local authorities as they develop recovery plans, since wellbeing underpins other developmental domains. Children (and families) should have a range of opportunities which support them to fully reengage with the wider social life of the school in order to engender a sense of belonging; *we would caution against a focus on academic learning at the expense of opportunities for social development.*

Level of implementation: School, local authority and regional consortia with support from National Government.

Existing Initiatives: Whole school approach to mental health and well-being; Curriculum for Wales; Community focused schools.

Recommendation 2: Opportunities for play and social experiences
Findings from this study make it clear that missing out on trips, events and playful experiences was seen as a negative consequence of this period of time. This occurred both in lockdowns but further in the return to school through the use of bubbles and subsequent reduced opportunities to mix with the wider school community. Children talked a lot about the importance of play, and some parents and children suggested that the return to school has been overly-focused on academic progression.

We recommend that schools need to acknowledge these missed opportunities and plan for children to play, go on trips and have playful social experiences together and that this should be beyond the age range of what was Foundation Phase. We anticipate that such opportunities will support children's wellbeing and healthy development. Accountability systems should take account of children's opportunities to play and socialise as well as to develop academic skills in recognition that academic skill development tends to be supported when children can self-regulate. *Children should not be put under pressure to attain academic skills in arbitrary time frames at the expense of opportunities for playful and social engagement.*

Level of implementation: School level with support from local authority, regional consortia and National Government)

Existing Initiatives**: Summer of Fun; Winter of Well-being; School holiday enrichment programme; Reform of the school day/week

Recommendation 3: Opportunities for children to talk sensitively about their anxieties

This has undoubtedly been a time of great anxiety for children and their loved ones, and some children continue to be worried about aspects of the COVID pandemic. Whilst recognising that teachers are not counsellors, we recommend that where appropriate, children are given opportunities to discuss their worries, and/or undertake play-based or therapeutic interventions where children remain highly anxious, and/or unable to socialise. It may be necessary for schools and teachers to be supported to do this confidently via externally funded training or external experts to undertake this recommendation.

Level of implementation: School level school with support from local authority, regional consortia and National Government.

Existing Initiatives: Whole school approach to mental health and well-being (school counselling and training).

Recommendation 4: Opportunities to reassure and work with parents

There is further recognition that for some children there has also been a negative impact on academic learning; data indicates some parent/carer anxiety about reading, writing and maths progression in particular. This was often driven by comparison to other pupils, previous cohorts and government and local targets. Parents and carers want to understand where their children are in terms of progress – almost all parents (and teachers) seemed to comment on this whether in reference to academic or socio-emotional learning – some exhibited anxiety about their inability to measure whether their child was 'doing ok'. This means that parents and carers will also need opportunities for reassurance and more communication from schools, and this would help to maintain engagement with families borne out of the lockdowns. Schools need to be clearer and more explicit in their communications.

Level of implementation: School level with support from local authority, regional consortia and National Government.

Existing Initiatives: Community focused schools – family engagement officers.

Recommendation 5: Research into the use of technology to enhance learning

Many children developed digital skills during this period and teachers were able to 'upskill' and develop their pedagogy in a way that may not have previously been considered for this age group. We would suggest that more research is needed in this area so that (a) digital skills of children can be both maintained and developed for this age group (b) that the potential use of technology can be continued to be explored to enhance more traditional pedagogical practices.

Level of implementation: National Government level

Recommendation 6; Further research which focuses on amplifying the voices of children in relation to issues that are significant for them

The voices of young children are rarely articulated within research studies, and we would recommend that more research is needed to amplify the voices of young children not only in relation to experiences of COVID but further, in relation to other aspects of their lives. This

study has demonstrated that when children are offered the opportunity to give their opinions, they are not only capable of doing so but that they take this seriously. In line with the UNCRC, research should also explore children's own suggestions of what should happen next. This may be particularly useful for marginalised groups such as ALN children and their families.

Level of implementation: Supported by National Government level, implemented at School Level

Recommendation 7: Further research which focuses on amplifying the voices of parents and carers in relation to COVID recovery
This study recognises that the wellbeing of children cannot be viewed in isolation and is heavily shaped by their experiences at home. This means that the levels of anxiety felt by parents/carers is highly significant. We recommend that there is a need to further explore the perceptions of parents and parents/ carers and that they should also be consulted with in relation to COVID recovery plans for children.

Level of implementation: National Government level

Concluding comment
Lastly, we would like to again thank the children whose voices we have a sought to amplify in this report. It is also important to reflect on the question, *'what impact does voice have if no one is listening?'* (Alexandra, 2015 p.43). As the children instructed us we have '*reported to the Welsh Government*' and we hope that this report and our further dissemination activities will provide opportunities for these children's voices to be not only heard, but to be acted upon, contributing to informed policy and practice.

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Appendix 1: Table of Participant Characteristics

School 1

Participant	Gender	Year Group
Pupil 1	Girl	1
Pupil 2	Girl	1
Pupil 3	Boy	1
Pupil 4	Boy	1
Pupil 5	Boy	1
Pupil 6	Boy	1
Pupil 7	Boy	1
Pupil 8	Boy	1
Pupil 9	Girl	1
Pupil 10	Boy	1
Pupil 11	Boy	1
Pupil 12	Girl	1
Teacher 1	Female	n/a
Teacher 2	Female	n/a
Teacher 3	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 1	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 2	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 3	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 4	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 7	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 8	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 11	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 12	Female	n/a

School 2

Participant	Gender	Year Group
Pupil 13	Girl	3
Pupil 14	Boy	3
Pupil 15	Boy	3
Pupil 16	Girl	3
Pupil 17	Girl	3
Pupil 18	Boy	3
Teacher 4	Female	n/a
Teacher 5	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 13	Male	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 14	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 15	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 16	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 17	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 18	Female	n/a

School 3

Participant	Gender	Year Group
Pupil 19	Boy	2
Pupil 20	Girl	2
Pupil 21	Girl	1
Pupil 22	Boy	1
Pupil 23	Girl	1
Teacher 6	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 20	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 21	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 22	Female	n/a

School 4

Participant	Gender	Year Group
Pupil 24	Boy	Reception
Pupil 25	Boy	Reception
Pupil 26	Girl	Reception
Pupil 27	Girl	Reception
Pupil 28	Girl	1
Pupil 29	Girl	1
Pupil 30	Boy	1
Teacher 7	Female	n/a
Teacher 8	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 24	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 28	Female	n/a
Parent/ Carer of Pupil 30	Female	n/a

Appendix 2: Child Activity 1: What is in my World?

For researchers: brief activity overview	Activity resources needed* (per school): Researcher A
- This activity is designed to provide an insight into what is in children's everyday worlds and how these were impacted by Coronavirus. - Children have a piece of drawing paper each. The centre will have a polaroid photograph of them. - The aim is to use this activity to fully explore children's perceptions of important people, places and things in their everyday life. - When pictures are completed children will be asked to put a smiley face sticker next to the things which **temporarily** left their everyday worlds due to the pandemic. - The activity should take approximately 1-hour.	1. **Consent forms for children** (print out paper versions to take). 2. Additional magazines for teacher to use with class if useful. 3. Copy of activity description for teachers should they want to run with whole class. **Materials** 7 pieces A3 paper (1 per child) 7 glue sticks (1 per child) 7 pencils (1 per child) 7 scissors (1 per child) - Magazines 14 sheets smiley face stickers (2 per child) 1 pack of felt tip pens 1 pack of colouring pencils - Pen and paper for both researchers to take notes **Technological devices** 1 polaroid camera 1 pack of polaroid film (8 images) 1 digital camera (check SD card inserted) 1 audio recorder (check charge/batteries)

Once children are present and verbal assent from all children is obtained:
- Let children know they may come in and out of the activity if they need to (toilet, concentration break etc)
- Take a picture of each child using the polaroid camera and put this with their materials.
- Place the audio recorder in the centre of the table and begin recording.

<u>Starting the activity (5 mins):</u>

Read to the children:
- *"Today I would like you to show me what is in your world.*
- *To do this, put your picture in the middle of your piece of paper. Around the picture of you, can you draw what is important to you in your life.*
- *What people, places and things do you really love in your life?*

- *For example, some people really love their dog and taking them to the park, or some people really love reading a book in bed. What is important? What you love in your life?"*
- *I will be here to help you with this and will be taking some pictures too – does this all sound okay?*
- *Right, let's get started!*

During Activity (up to 45 minutes to 1 hour):

Step One:
One researcher will take photos with digital camera and write up field notes as the activity unfolds, other researcher:

- Facilitate or help children draw and write what it is in their world, which they enjoy/ love.
- Continuously check children are comfortable through body language, if any children look uncomfortable, check they are okay to continue and remind them of right to withdraw.
- During the activity suggest they think about a range of things in their life including people, places, things, times (e.g., summer). Also talk to them about **school** and what they think about that.

Step Two:
Ask the children:

"Now we have finished our pictures can you put a sticker over the bits of your life which stopped or where missing or happened a lot less during the pandemic" (use what words they seem to use in their lives) – *e.g. when school was shut, or the whole time, talk to them about this.*

When it is time to place the smiley stickers, make sure children are thinking about all things in relation to the pandemic (e.g., I could watch TV, but I couldn't see my friends' dog).

Step Three:
When activity time is up, **explain to children you will now be discussing what they put or that they will come back to these later today.**

This can be done with an individual child or small groups – no more than 2/3 children.
Make sure you state the child's/children's name(s) at the start of the recording.

Prompt questions:
o *Can you describe what you did?*
o *What was it like to not have this thing?*
o *A lot of you / you still had this thing, why do you think that is?*
o *Was there any of you that also felt X but didn't put it? Why do you think that might be?*
o *Do you have any final things to say about what we did today?*

Appendix 3: Child Activity 2: Fly Away and Create a New School

For researchers: brief activity overview	Activity resources needed* (per school): Researcher A
• This activity is designed to get children to think about how they perceive their experiences in school would be in the absence of the pandemic. • Children will create a new school on a planet where there is no pandemic and highlight what is really important about their education. • The aim is to use this activity to fully explore children's perceptions of what things would change and what would stay the same if the pandemic didn't happen. • Children will build a plane and create drawing to facilitate this activity's aim. • The activity should take approximately 1-hour.	1. **Consent forms for children** (print out paper versions to take). 2. Copy of activity description for teachers should they want to run with whole class. Materials • Foam plane kits (1 per child) 7 or for whole class • 7 sheets of A1 flipchart paper • 7 pencils (1 per child) • 1 pack of felt tip pens • 1 pack of colouring pencils • 12 assorted sticker sheets • Pen and paper for researcher to take notes Technological devices • 1 polaroid camera • 1 pack of polaroid film (8 images) • 1 digital camera (check SD card inserted) • 1 audio recorder (check charge/batteries)

Once children are present and verbal assent from all children is obtained:
- Let children know they may come in and out of the activity if they need to (toilet, concentration break etc)
- Place the audio recorder in the centre of the table and begin recording.

<u>Starting the activity (5 mins):</u>

Read to the children:
- *"For our next activity we will be building our own planes and flying them to a different planet. On this planet there is no coronavirus pandemic and no schools.*
- *Can you fly to this planet and build a new school. So you can draw what your new school would be like if there was no pandemic*
- *First you will build your plane and then you will fly it to your plant on the paper and start to build your new school full of things you would like a school to do, that the pandemic doesn't let happen.*
- *We will be here to help you with this and will be taking some pictures too – does this all sound okay?*
- *Right, let's get started!"*

More detailed…
- What would the school have?
- What would it not have?
- Really think about what you enjoy about school and what you like to learn.

- Also, think about what the pandemic might have stopped you doing in your school and what this new school can do instead!
- Maybe you wanted to hug your friends and you couldn't – but in your new school you can!

During activity (45 minutes to 1 hour):

Step One:
One researcher will take photos with digital camera and write up field notes as the activity unfolds, other researcher:

- Assist with building the planes and drawing/creating the new school. Using your researcher knowledge, continuously check children are comfortable through body language, if any children look uncomfortable, check they are okay to continue.

- During the activity ensure children are fully focusing on a new school without the pandemic – it is the absence of that they can't do in their current education which will help understand their education during the pandemic.

Further prompt questions:
o *What did you not get to do with friends in school during the pandemic?*
o *What did you want to learn about that you couldn't because of the pandemic?*
o *What is it you love about this school that you would like to keep in your new school even though this school was in pandemic?*

When activity time is up, **explain to children you will now be discussing what they put or that they will come back to these later today.**

Step Two:
Bring children in individually or in small groups – no more than 2/3 children. Children will be asked to explain what their new school what look like including what and who will be within the school.

Make sure you state the child's/children's name(s) at the start of the recording.

Prompt questions:
o *Can you describe what you did?*
o *Why did you include X?*
o *A lot of you drew you would like Y, why do you this that is?*
o *Was there any of you that also felt Z but didn't put it? If not, why not?*
o *Do you have any final things to say about what we did today?*

Appendix 4: Child Activity 3: Bin and Keepsake Boxes

For researchers: brief activity overview	Activity resources needed* (per school): Researcher A
• This activity is designed to get children to think about their experiences when they were learning online during the pandemic. • The aim is to use this activity to fully explore children's perceptions of the influence the pandemic had on their online learning, **when not allowed to come to school.** • Various boxes and post-it notes will be used to facilitate this activity's aim. • The activity should take approximately 1-hour.	1. **Consent forms for children** (print out paper versions to take). 2. Copy of activity description for teachers should they want to run with whole class. Materials • Enough boxes for whole class if required • 16-star shaped boxes (2 boxes per child x 7 children and 2 boxes for researcher) • 1 pack of glitter gel pens • 9 tubes of glitter • 7 glue sticks • 2 pads of post-it notes • 12 assorted sticker sheets • Two flashcards for assent • Pen and paper for researcher to take notes Technological devices • 1 digital camera (check SD card inserted) • 1 audio recorder (check charge/batteries)

Once children are present and verbal assent from all children is obtained:
- Let children know they may come in and out of the activity if they need to (toilet, concentration break etc)
- Place the audio recorder in the centre of the table and begin recording.

<u>Starting the activity (5 mins):</u>

Read to the children:
- *Today we are going to be doing an activity where you will be decorating your own boxes and filling your 2 boxes with lots of words about what you think.*
- *For this activity we would like you to think back to when there was the coronavirus lockdown, and a lot of you were not allowed to come into school. Put your hand up if you remember this?* Wait for a show of hands and maybe some comments.
- *So yes, you were either at home or some of you may have been able to come into school, but it was very different.*
- *We would like you to think back to this time, when you were learning online and not really in school. We would like you to remember what you <u>liked</u> back then and put what you liked in one box* (pick up one box to show) *and in the other box we would*

like you to put what you <u>did NOT like.</u> You will all be decorating your boxes with the pens, glitter and stickers and putting your liked and not liked words into them.

- *We will be here to help you with this and will be taking some pictures too – does this all sound okay? Right, let's get started!*

<u>During activity (up to 45 minutes- 1 hour):</u>

Step One:
One researcher will take photos with digital camera and write up field notes as the activity unfolds, other researcher:

- Assist with decorating boxes. You may want to decorate your own 2 boxes to help generate more discussion.
- Continuously check children are comfortable through body language, if any children look uncomfortable, check they are okay to continue.
- During the activity ensure children are putting liked and not liked words about the pandemic whilst being at home and online learning.

Prompt questions:
- o *Was there anything you really liked/did not about being at home with family/carers?*
- o *Was there anything you liked/did not like about not seeing your friends?*
- o *Was there anything you liked/did not like about not coming into school like normal?*

When activity time is up, **explain to children you will now be discussing what they put or that they will come back to these later today.**

Step Two:
Bring children in individually or in small groups – no more than 2/3 children. Children will be asked to talk about what they wrote/drew and placed in their keepsake boxed or bins.

Prompt questions:
- o *Can you describe what you did?*
- o *Why did you put that you liked X?*
- o *A lot of you put Y, why do you think this is?*
- o *Was there any of you that also felt Z but didn't put it? If not, why not?*
- o *Do you have any final things to say about what we did today?*

Appendix 5: Parent interview Schedule

**and Young Children's Voices (CYCV)
Interview Schedule for Parents/Carers**

Procedure
1 Ensure the participants (parent/carer) has read the information sheet, signed the consent form, and is happy and able to talk. Get verbal assent from child to take part.
2 Introduce self (name and project) and explain the following:
   Aim: The aim of the interview is to hear in a bit more detail about your perspective of young children's education and learning during the -19 pandemic and the subsequent return to school.
   Process: This interview will take approximately 1 hour in total - where you and your child will take part in a short 5- minute task at home, followed by an interview; the interview will be split into two sections:
   Part 1: interview with you and your child (20 mins): Firstly, there will be a conversation between you and child and the same researcher(s) who worked with your child in school. The questions will be about the activities your child did in school.
   Part 2: interview with you (30 mins): Your child will only need to be present during the first part of this interview, as the second part will be with you alone. In this process you will be asked a series of questions with the young person and respond to them as honestly and openly as possible. Make sure they are happy to respond to questions.
   Confidentiality: The session will be audio recorded in order to access information at a later date, you and the young person will not be identified. Pseudonyms will be used in any reports or publications.
   Voluntary: You can choose how much you want to say, and do not have to answer anything you do not wish to.
3 Start the audio recording and conduct the interview using the semi-structured interview schedule below as guidance for
   discussion.
4 When time is up, thank parent/carer and the young person for their support in conducting this research.

Task:
• Get child to share items from activity(ies) completed in school – perhaps week 2
   OR
• Maybe get the child and parent to do the 'Bin and Keepsake Boxes Activity' together.

Parent/carer and child interview questions:
Child
• What did you like about doing these activities in school?
• What did you not like about doing these activities in school?
• Was there anything you learnt doing these activities?
• Do you think it was different when you didn't go to school and stayed at home with (parent/carer) to learn? Why was that?
• What did you like about learning at home with (parent/carer)?
• What did you miss or not like so much about learning at home with (parent/carer)?

- Do you think it was different when you went back to school to learn after being at home for a long time? Why was that?
- What did you like about learning when you went back to school?
- What did you miss or not like so much when you went back to school to learn?

Parent
- What do you think about the young person's responses to the task?
- How well do you think the young person's responses reflect their experience during those times?
- Was there anything you found particularly surprising?
- What did you like about doing this task?
- What did you not like so much about doing this task?

Parent/carer only interview questions:

Online:
- How much online learning has your child had since the start of the pandemic?
- During the beginning of the pandemic how well or not so well do you think your child coped with the transition to online learning? Were there any factors which impacted them during this transition?
- What do you think were the overall experiences of your child's online learning during the pandemic?
  - What were the challenges your child faced regarding online learning during the pandemic?
  - What positive outcomes do you think your child experienced as a result of online learning
- Do you think your child's educational experiences have changed as a result of online learning? If so how?
- How well did you as a parent/carer coped during the transition to online learning?

School:
- During the transition back to school, how well or not so well do you think your child coped with their in-school education during the pandemic? Were there any factors which impacted them during this transition?
- What do you think were the overall experiences of your child's education in school during the pandemic?
  - What were the challenges your child faced regarding in-school learning during the pandemic?
  - What positive outcomes do you think your child experienced as a result of in-school learning during the pandemic?
- Do you think your child's educational experiences have changed as a result of in-school learning during the pandemic? If so how?
- How well did you as a parent/carer coped during the transition back to school?

Recovery and going forward…
- What are the important lessons learnt from the impact of COVID-19 on your child's education?
- What long term impact do you think COVID-19 may have on your child's education?

- Going forward, how do you think your child can be supported within their education from the potential long-term impact of COVID-19?

Is there anything we did not discuss which you would like to add?

Appendix 6: Teacher Interview Schedule

COVID and Young Children's Voices
Interview Schedule for Teachers

Procedure
1. Ensure the participant has read the information sheet, signed the consent form, and is happy and able to talk.
2. Introduce self (name and project) and explain the following:
   - Aim: The aim of the interview is to hear in a bit more detail about your perspectives of education and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent return to school.
   - Process: This interview will take approximately X. In this process you will be asked a series of questions and respond to them as honestly and openly as possible. Make sure they are happy to respond to questions.
   - Confidentiality: The session will be audio recorded in order to access information at a later date, you will not be identified. Pseudonyms will be used in any reports or publications.
   - Voluntary: You can choose how much you want to say, and do not have to answer anything you do not wish to.
3. Start the audio recording and conduct the interview using the semi-structured interview schedule below as guidance for discussion.
4. When time is up, thank teachers for their support in conducting this research.

Questions/areas to explore:
Impact of online environment
   - During the beginning of the pandemic how well or not so well do you think your school children coped with the transition to online learning? Were there any factors which impacted them during this transition?
   - What do you think were the overall experiences of children's online learning during the pandemic?
   - What were the challenges your school children faced regarding online learning during the pandemic?
   - What positive outcomes do you think your school children experienced as a result of online learning
   - Do you think the pandemic had an equal impact on young children's online educational experiences? If yes/no, why?
   - Do you think your school children's educational experiences have changed as a result of online learning? If so how?

Impact of school environment

   - During the transition back to school, how well or not so well do you think your school children coped with their in-school education during the pandemic? Were there any factors which impacted them during this transition?
   - What do you think were the overall experiences of children's education in school during the pandemic?
   - What were the challenges your school children faced regarding in-school learning during the pandemic?
   - What positive outcomes do you think your school children experienced as a result of in-school learning during the pandemic?

- Do you think the pandemic had an equal impact on young children's in-school educational experiences? If yes/no, why?
- Do you think your school children's educational experiences have changed as a result of in-school learning during the pandemic? If so how?

Recovery and going forward…

- What are the important lessons learnt from the impact of COVID-19 on young children's education?
- What long term impact do you think COVID-19 may have on young children's education?
- Going forward, how do you think young children can be supported within their education from the potential long-term impact of COVID-19?
- What would be useful for policymakers and schools to implement in the future as a result of the pandemic?
- Is there anything we did not discuss which you would like to add?