Post-lockdown, education, and children's media use

For many families and children in the UK, 2021 kicked off with old and new challenges and uncertainties. Much about this school term has been ambiguous, including how schools will cope with the reopening, how academic assessments will be carried out, and what the long-term effects of lockdown on the mental health of children, families and teachers might be. In this blog, Christine Singer discusses whether educational media content can offer some solutions to the challenges incurred by prolonged school closures.

During this time of uncertainty, digital technologies have become a central part of many children's education. When schools first moved to remote and blended teaching in March 2020, face-to-face teaching was often replaced with online classes, from Zoom story time sessions for little ones to full-length classes on Microsoft Teams for secondary pupils. Digital learning resources became part of teaching routines, such as pre-recorded teaching videos, clips on YouTube, and websites such as BBC Bitesize and Oak Academy.

Digital educational content is, however, not equally accessible by children. An estimated 700,000 children in the UK do not have a desktop, laptop or tablet, and 60,000 children do not have Internet connectivity at home. According to the Child Poverty Action Group, families with low incomes were twice as likely to lack technical equipment to support home learning (laptops, computers, tablets) during the first nation-wide lockdown as families with high incomes. Last October, headteachers lamented the fact that the government had slashed allocations of laptops for disadvantaged pupils by around 80%.

This "digital divide" represents a key obstacle to some children's ability to learn effectively at home. I recently worked on a project by the Open Data Institute (ODI) that explored the impacts of lockdown on education. Interviews we carried out with teachers in the West Midlands showed that teachers identified pupils' lack of access to digital technology and/or good broadband connection as a major obstacle to their ability to teach remotely. Children who had to share electronic devices with parents and/or siblings also have less time to study compared with families where multiple electronic devices are available.

There are rising concerns among teachers and MPs about the impacts of this digital divide on existing disparities in children's academic progress. Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, children from families of low socioeconomic status already had worse academic performance than their wealthier peers. In 2019, of pupils who were eligible for free school meals (FSMs) in England, or who were in care or adopted from care, only 25% achieved grades 9–5 in GCSE English and Maths, compared with 50% of all other pupils.

At the start of the current lockdown, the Department for Education addressed some of these concerns by classifying pupils in England who have no access to laptops as "vulnerable children", and this means they can continue to go to school during lockdown. However, this guidance raised questions about whether schools will have the capacity to teach the more than one million children who fall into this category. What is more, a new government scheme promised to deliver laptops to schools to support pupils who do not have the technology they need to learn from home. And yet, school leaders reported delays in receiving government laptops and facing difficulties ordering them.

The BBC responded to this situation by including educational content for primary and secondary schools into its linear television channels. In early January, CBBC began to broadcast a three-hour block of primary school programming every weekday, including BBC Live Lessons and BBC *Bitesize Daily*, as well as educational programming such as *Our School*, *Horrible Histories* and *Art Ninja*. BBC2, in turn, caters for secondary pupils with programmes aiming to support the GCSE curriculum.

It is uncertain whether children's consumption of educational media content can ever replace face-to-face learning. Interviews with children carried out as part of the ODI project, noted earlier, indicated that the absence of face-to-face lessons often results in a lack of motivation to learn. Some secondary school children said they did not enjoy spending long periods of time learning on the screen, found it difficult to concentrate during online lessons, and missed face-to-face interactions with their teachers and peers when working on learning activities.

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The BBC's decision to provide educational content on linear television, nevertheless, means that children who do not have access to the Internet were able to consume educational content free of charge – provided the family has paid for the television licence. Whether educational media content can offer a long-term solution to the challenges incurred by prolonged school closures remains to be seen.

Notes

This text was originally published on the Children's Media Foundation blog and has been re-posted with permission and small edits.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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