

ANDRE KUROWSKI

University of Chichester, United Kingdom

ORCID – 0000-0002-8841-3365

COVID, HOME SCHOOLING AND INEQUALITIES*

Introduction: One major effect of the COVID-19 lockdown has been the closure of schools and the switch to home learning for most children through online or hybrid models of teaching and learning. However, questions would be asked about the quality of this model, especially in the light of recent policy moves to reduce educational differences across the country.

Research Aim: The aims of this article are to draw together recent research into home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide a theoretical explanation against a policy background with a stated aim of reducing inequalities in education.

Method: A literature review was carried out of articles that relate to the experiences of home schooling for children and families as well as more general effects of lockdown.

Results: Results show clear differences in home schooling experiences in terms of resources and attitudes, and school provision. Concepts of cultural capital and cultural deprivation have been used to show how inequalities continue to persist despite recent policy aimed at reducing inequalities.

Conclusions: Home schooling has brought inequalities into sharp focus over how schools deliver home schooling and how children and families are able to take advantage of what has been provided. It indicates that a cultural shift is needed. Education has been devolved to the level of the individual and for real change to take place, a more collective approach is needed. Education has been devolved to the level of the individual and for real change to take place, a more collective approach is needed.

Keywords: levelling up, home schooling, cultural capital, cultural deprivation, material deprivation.

INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom was required to “lock down” in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic; this affected virtually the whole of society. Millions of employees were expected to stay away from their workplace, and schools virtually

*Suggested citation: Kurowski, A. (2022). COVID, Home Schooling and Inequalities. *Lubelski Rocznik Pedagogiczny*, 41(2), 41–53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/lrp.2022.41.2.41–53>

closed. Most children except those whose parents were key workers, and some other categories, had to suddenly adapt to not attending school for fear of transmitting the COVID-19 virus. As a result, parents were expected to enter a partnership with schools to educate their children at home. However, the capacity for parents to educate children has been seen to be different by social class and region. Also, schools were required to provide activities, educational resources, and support to children at home, and this varied as well with a connection to social deprivation. The COVID-19 lockdown was implemented soon after major policy about inequalities was introduced. This policy included minimising differences in educational outcomes between regions and social classes. This acknowledged that inequalities in education already existed. Against this background, this article asks whether existing inequalities have been addressed and how home schooling affects these endeavours.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

Home schooling came at a time when a major new policy about addressing inequalities was announced; this referred to economic differences, but the educational outcomes of children were at the centre of this. The policy was intended to deal with inequalities across socio-economic groups, but also regions. The term “Red Wall” was coined by pollster Kanagasoorium in a Tweet in August 2019 (English, 2021), to describe a number of parliamentary constituencies across the Midlands and North-East of England and some parts of Wales. These seats have been held by Labour voters traditionally, but in the 2019 general election, lost 20% of seats to the Conservative party. So-called Red Wall voters are characterised by social conservatism and traditional patriotic views, and the voting pattern in the election has been linked to the Brexit vote of 2016 (English, 2021). Children living in these constituencies are the subject of what is referred to as the North-South divide. This concept goes back to the 1960s and in the last ten years has continued to be a topic of debate (The Economist, 2012).

Differences between the North and South include regional investment, economic growth, earnings, and health inequalities, as well as differential educational outcomes. For example, a child qualifying for free school meals in Hackney, London, is three times more likely to attend university than a child growing up in Hartlepool under similar economic circumstances. Also, pupils in the South are 40% more likely to achieve top grades at 16 years old than those in the North of England, and young people in the North are significantly underrepresented at the top universities of Oxford and Cambridge (UK2070 Commission, 2020). As a result of the election results and by way of acknowledging the support given for the current Conservative government, a new policy initiative was announced; this

was coined “Levelling Up”. The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Michael Gove, eventually announced in November 2021, 447 projects that will help breathe new life into towns across the United Kingdom (UK) (Gov.UK, 2021b). As part of the Levelling Up agenda Prime Minister, Boris Johnson promised “Bold new policy interventions to improve livelihoods and opportunities in all parts of the UK” (Local Government Association, 2021, para. 2), and to improve among other areas, living standards and education. Johnson stated that levelling up education is the key to helping every child reach their full potential and that younger generations will be “front and centre of all that we do” (Gov.UK, 2020). Johnson guaranteed a minimum level of funding for every pupil in every school with a top-class education, so that children in the UK can go on to become the world’s future innovators, trailblazers, and pioneers.

On March 20, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic and on March 23, 2020, implemented a strict lockdown in the country which included schools for most children. Parents were expected to provide education at home for children not attending school. According to government guidelines, if home schooled, a child must receive a full-time education from the age of five, but not necessarily following the national curriculum (Gov.UK, 2020). Home schooling, or “Elective Home Education” requires parents to ensure the child receives efficient full-time education appropriate to his (*sic*) age and ability (Department for Education, 2019). The term “efficient” is used in the guidance but is not defined definitively. Efficiency is loosely explained as when education “achieves what it is intended to achieve”. Likewise, education delivered at home should be suitable; this can be interpreted as age appropriate, enabling appropriate progress, and taking account of any specific aptitudes (Department for Education, 2019). Pressure was also placed on schools to facilitate the unprecedented move to home schooling, by providing learning opportunities for children at home. In practice these ranged from online in the moment lessons, online activities for children and more traditional paper-based activities for children to complete at home. It is against this background that the COVID-19 pandemic struck the UK, and which government policy can be judged on whether it could deliver what it promised.

RESEARCH METHOD

A literature review was carried out on articles relating to COVID-19 and the experience of children and families. By definition, these were all published in the years 2020 and 2021. The subject of these articles ranged from general issues associated around coping with school closures (Del Bono, Fumagalli, Holford, and Rabe, 2021) and children’s and parent’s experiences during COVID (Bray et al., 2021), but also the experiences of online learning (Dimopoulos, Koutsampelas, and Tsatsaro-

ni, 2021) and women and home working specifically (Adisa, Aiyenitaju, and Adekoya, 2021). Focus on children and parents and home learning practices was examined (Andrew et al., 2021) as well as engagement with homework (Sharp, Keys, and Benefield, 2021). The impact of COVID on early years education (UK Parliament, 2021) was also assessed. Literature on power and control over home learning has emerged (Bubb and Jones, 2020), as well as analysis of social class and home learning (Pensiero, Kelly, and Bokhove, 2021). Health also featured in the literature which included emotional well-being (Gibson et al., 2021) and depression and anxiety, and alcohol consumption (Sallie, Ritou, Bowden-Jones, and Boon, 2020), as well as access to health and care services (Tropiceanu et al., 2021). One advantage of reviewing this literature is that, by definition, it is all current or recent, but literature is still being published, so this is a study of literature at the time of writing and may have been superseded by more recent publications. However, the range of literature reviewed provided a wide scope of issues on which to gauge the experiences of home schooling and COVID, and develop a conceptual understanding which in the event, speaks to classic theory on educational achievement and inequalities.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

As the articles reviewed were varied and referred to a wide range of issues around lockdown, as above, it was possible to take these factors and form a broad understanding about a range of issues. These included engagement with home schooling, number of hours spent on home schooling, family structures and socio-economic status. It also included children's reactions to lockdown, the capacity for families to engage with home schooling and differences between outcomes between social groups. The findings of the articles that were relevant to this study were reviewed and collated, and a wide range of issues were considered. In addition, government publications were consulted to review empirical data around COVID and home schooling.

RESULTS

The findings represent a wide range of issues; some were directly related to home schooling, and some were periphery, but also valuable in examining the topic. In terms of general perceptions of COVID-19, Williams, Armitage, Tampe, and Dienes, (2021) found through a UK-based focus group study that many participants felt "overwhelmed" or "scared" due to the inability to go to work or the significant restructuring of work patterns. As well as worry over the virus itself participants had difficulty in balancing home working with home schooling. It must be pointed

out that millions of employees were placed on a furlough scheme whereby the government paid a proportion of their pay because they could not attend their workplace, but millions of others were required to work from home. So, balancing home working with home schooling became a significant issue for some. Bray et al. (2021) found that the significant changes for children's education led to feelings of anxiety, stress, and sadness. This was due to changes in staying in touch with friends and extended family, i.e. via remote methods, but also the switch to home schooling.

Pensiero et al. (2021) found that virtually all school children were provided with schoolwork, and this increased throughout 2020. They also found that better family engagement with schoolwork, as well as what the school provided, improved total hours of schoolwork completed at home. However, the amount of home schooling carried depended on family background and parental occupation. Children of service class parents where both parents worked from home spent persistently more time doing schoolwork than other groups compared to children in families where the main parent was in a routine class occupation. This was more pronounced where a child shared a computer in the household and where the parents did not work regularly from home. Sinha, Bennett, and Taylor-Robinson (2020) make broad comments about children and poverty and the effects of COVID. They compare health and other social issues to the influence on survival on the sinking ship, the "Titanic"; those with wealth survived and those without wealth were left behind and died disproportionately. They also make the point about lack of resources for children in poverty during COVID, and how they suffer "toxic stress". They commend the efforts of teachers for developing online resources in difficult circumstances but point out that for those children with no access to the Internet, necessary electronic devices, and quiet space at home to study, the result will be to further exacerbate inequalities in educational outcomes. This they state, will contribute to the problems of the lives of children living in poverty (Sinha et al., 2020). Tropiceanu et al. (2021) point out wider sex differences and cite home schooling as one of the extra responsibilities that females have undertaken, and Sallie et al. (2020) found that the extra burden of home schooling contributed to higher levels of alcohol consumption as a form of stress relief. Although they found that having children was associated with a greater increase in drinking behaviours during quarantine, depression and anxiety scores were lower than in those without children. This they suggest, is because the additional burden of childcare and home schooling contributed to the tendency towards drinking, possibly in the context of stress relief, even though depression or anxiety did not feature (Sallie et al., 2020).

In general, parents working from home were able to provide more support for children, but there were regional differences. The hours of schoolwork provided by schools were similar for primary schools, the mean figure for the North of England being 2.4 hours and the mean figure for the Southeast being 2.5 hours. However, the differences were greater for secondary schools than primary schools being 2.2

and 2.8, respectively. Pensiero et al. (2021) point out that in terms of schoolwork completed by children, London, the Southeast, and Southwest completed the most with the North completing less than average. As Pensiero et al. (2021, p. 28) state “areas that are doing well improve, and those doing badly fall further behind”, which could have catastrophic consequences.

Access to ICT was a feature in inequalities of home learning. Dimopoulos et al. (2021) found that students from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds had limited benefits from digital schooling, and this also depended on parents’ familiarity with ICT use, but also conditions of overcrowding within the household. This led to alarming levels of educational inequality. According to Andrew et al. (2021), children from poorer backgrounds were less likely to have access to “learning resources”, e.g. computers/tablets and dedicated study space. This was not restricted to the home environment. These children were less likely to be supported by the school with online classes or video conferencing, and more likely to be provided with assignment learning packs, and therefore less able to benefit from more “active” learning than richer students due to lack of computers and Internet access. Pensiero et al. (2021) also found that parental occupation was significant and magnified with access to computers as well as family circumstances and working patterns. They also found that better school provision and better family engagement with schoolwork improved total hours of schoolwork completed. On the contrary, Del Bono et al. (2021) found that parents and children from a variety of social and economic backgrounds generally engaged with schoolwork in similar measure. They found that children with more educated parents or higher household income spent slightly more time on schoolwork than children from less educated or lower-income households – but this was not the main driver. Gender and prior attainment may have been a factor, improved provision of online lessons in primary schools reduced differences between socio-economic backgrounds spent on schoolwork and a higher number of online lessons offered to secondary school children resulted in a decrease of parental time spent helping with schoolwork. They explain this as structural differences across families as affecting parents’ ability to help children effectively. Likewise, Pensiero et al. (2021) found that children of single parents working from home were able to reduce the gap in primary schoolwork when compared with the most advantaged socio-economic group, but overall inequalities between socio-economic groups remained stable between the two closures. This is confirmed by Fensham-Smith (2021) who states that pre-existing structural inequalities have enabled some learners to access and adapt to, home schooling. Not only this, but it also extends to social and emotional welfare; some were able to sustain their well-being while others were not. To summarise, inequalities may have worsened during lockdown between poorer and more well-off families (Andrew et al., 2021). Bubb and Jones (2020) make a useful comparison with a municipality in Norway where the digital communications structure is more well-equipped and

digital skills were improved, learning was more creative and feedback was more useful, and pupils and parents reported positively about their experiences with home learning where they could work at their own pace with more independence, even if pupils felt they had learned more than at school itself.

The research on COVID and home education in this article shows mixed experiences across regions and social situations, and this will have done nothing to promote the government's stated agenda for "levelling up". The empirical evidence, although mixed in some ways, is clear in others, inequalities remain and may have been intensified. A theoretical discussion will follow to help explain this situation and consider what might be done to truly assist the levelling up agenda.

DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence has illuminated a range of issues with home schooling during lockdown in terms of inequalities. These include access, or lack of, to computers and sharing of computer with other family members, the occupation and education of parents and familiarity with ICT systems, and home circumstances and engagement with schoolwork. It also points out the differential benefits that children from different backgrounds can derive from digital home schooling, how children from disadvantaged backgrounds can fall even further behind and reflects pre-existing inequalities. This situation reflects poorly on inequalities in education in the 21st century. Classic theory on educational outcomes has been used to explain inequalities for decades and a review will be carried out to determine if ideas around cultural capital can be applied to this most recent educational issue.

Bourdieu (1978) used the concept of cultural capital to explain differential educational outcomes. He developed the concepts of habitus and field to explain social differences. Habitus refers to the intellectual dispositions inculcated through the family environment and by social interactions with other people in daily life. Field signifies how people settle into a social position as a result of society's resolution over what is considered valued and worthy culture. Although ultimately this resolution can be arbitrary, the result is that culture can be viewed as legitimate or illegitimate (Bourdieu, 1978). Thus, people will defer, through a process of social construction, to what cultural artifacts and practices are more valued by society as opposed to those which are less valued. This presents culture in three forms: objective, embodied and institutionalised. Objective refers to cultural goods, books, and works of art; embodied refers to language, mannerisms, preferences; and institutionalised refers to qualifications, education credentials.

So, how can Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explain the findings of research on differences in home learning during lockdown? In terms of habitus, there is evidence that family situation is important. Del Bono et al. (2021) found

that children with more educated parents and higher family incomes spent more time on schoolwork than those with less educated parents and lower incomes, and structural factors affected parent's ability to help children. Pensiero et al. (2021) also found that parental occupation, sharing access to computers and parents working patterns was a significant determinant in the volume of schoolwork completed. Also, familiarity with ICT was a factor. This contributed to inequalities with home schooling (Dimopoulos et al., 2021). This is confirmed by Sinha et al. (2020) who found that children of lower socio-economic status were disadvantaged.

In terms of field, it may be the case that some parents view education as worthwhile and more valuable than other parents, and this is transmitted to their children. Pensiero et al. (2021) found mixed results for single parents working from home, and this depended on parental occupation, but overall inequalities remaining. Del Bono et al. (2021) found that the more educated the parents, the more time was spent on schoolwork. In addition, Pensiero et al. (2021) found that better family engagement improved total hours of schoolwork completed, and it may be the case that parents who consumed more alcohol due to the stress of home education (Sallie et al., 2020) can be attributed to the cultural values attached to education and the effort involved. These differences could be explained by aspect of cultural capital as outlined by Bourdieu (1978), as preferences and educational qualifications of groups with higher socio-economic status. There may be evidence in the literature that children from homes of deprivation do not have the exposure to these cultural artifacts, or that parents value education less, and that their parents are less well qualified, and therefore less able to educate their children. However, Bourdieu cannot fully explain the recurring themes of access to computers and family situations. This is not exclusively about culture and values; it is also about resources.

In the 1960s, Douglas (1964) developed the concept of cultural deprivation. This refers to the differences in physical resources available for home learning, both at home and by the school. A more contemporary concept of material deprivation (DCSF, 2009) also refers to lack of educational resources, e.g. a desk and suitable environment, i.e. one that is quiet, in the home as a factor that determines the ease with which children can complete their homework. Material deprivation also refers to parental involvement (DCSF, 2009) and interest and confidence in being able to help their children with homework (Sharp et al., 2001). Cultural deprivation and material deprivation can be used to explain the situation some children found themselves in. The unavailability of computers or other electronic devices to work on at home, and crowded conditions that do not allow for quite study time were recurring themes in the literature (Sinha et al., 2020; Pensiero et al., 2021; Dimopoulos et al., 2021; Andrew et al., 2021). Also, the inability of parents to help their children with ICT was a factor (Dimopoulos et al., 2021).

There were also findings that go beyond the scope of cultural capital, cultural deprivation, and material deprivation. For example, these concepts cannot fully ex-

plain differences between poorer and better-off families in terms of better provision by schools (Pensiero et al., 2021), differences between support from the school with online lessons and video conferencing between richer and poorer families (Andrews et al., 2021). They also found that children from more deprived backgrounds were more likely to experience home learning through more passive means, as supplied by the school, e.g. assignment of learning packs, and experience home learning of a “less active” nature. This may be about resources, but also expectations of children from such backgrounds. However, much of the research here, carried out in 2020–2021, fits the concepts as well today through home learning as it has in the past through more conventional learning. Although in a different form, large numbers of disadvantaged children falling ever further behind, students from weaker socioeconomic backgrounds have derived limited benefits from digital schooling and confirm pre-existing structural inequalities in education.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the “Titanic” metaphor where the better-off are far more likely to survive, seems appropriate to all this research. As Fensham-Smith (2021) outlines the situation, structural inequalities have enabled some learners to access, adapt to, and sustain their social and emotional well-being during lockdown, while others have not. This reveals the differences that were first written about decades ago, as still being the case today. Because of cultural capital, cultural deprivation, and material deprivation, educational differences remain. As stated, these concepts cannot explain the situation in its entirety; differences in how schools provide for children of different backgrounds and the expectations they have of children who are less well-off. However, it appears that the habitus of familial environment and the social position of field are still significant determinants of education outcomes, and the cultural and material deprivation still have their part to play. So, where does this leave the levelling-up agenda as proposed by the government? The switch to home schooling failed to consider structural differences and the habitus of familial environment. Policy espouses minimum levels of funding and top-class education for all, but home schooling has brought differences between regions and socio-economic groups into sharp focus. Whatever the government promise, it is cultural and social issues that need to be addressed before there will be any chance of levelling up. Real change to educational outcomes needs to take place for disadvantaged social groups to level up. If the North is to catch up with the South at qualifications for 16-year-olds and more young people from the North are to go to top universities. If young people are to have top-class education and become the world’s future innovators, if livelihoods and opportunities are to be improved in all parts of the United Kingdom, now, as in the past this

will involve some form of cultural shift. Home schooling has shown that education for a nation is about more than what happens in the classroom, and this has been illustrated clearly with the move to home schooling during lockdown. It is about homes and communities and how children and parents perceive education and prepare for it as best they can. Home schooling has shown the importance of embodied preferences and cultural goods in the drive to improve outcomes across the country. Had cultural approaches not been so different, the experiences of children from the North and the South, and from richer and poorer families, would not have been so different. After successive governments that promote individuality over collectivism in the public sphere, education has become a lifestyle choice devolved to the individual. It has become a commodity to be sought after or not, to be valued or not. For the levelling up agenda to work, it needs to be less vague and more specific to engage effectively with inequalities between the North and the South, and between disadvantaged groups and others, and show more leadership in educating children.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This article is based on recent literature from 2020 and 2021 and is therefore highly contemporary. However, COVID-19 is ongoing at the time of writing, and further so-called lockdowns, and home-schooling, have not been discounted. So, this cannot be a definitive account of education during the pandemic. That will have to wait until an effective retrospective view on the pandemic can take place. Also, the literature can only study what it finds and there may be anomalies to the findings of the articles reviewed. Current understanding does not take full account of the wide differences in people's circumstances. So, for example, key workers do not appear in the studies of home schooling because their children were among the few that attended school throughout lockdown. In addition, those workers who were furloughed and at home during lockdown had time to home school their children, whereas those workers who were able to work from home arguably had less time to home school. Those in more service or professional sectors and working from home, may have been better able than those in sectors where home working was not possible. Research has not caught up with these anomalies to unpick ability and opportunity issues and how they may have affected home schooling; this could show even deeper divisions, if professionals had more time, they may have had more success with home schooling. Also, the role of schools seems to be significant, and perhaps more research would be useful in evaluating how different schools supported home learning. However, at the early, or mid stage, of the pandemic, this article shows how home-schooling illuminates general points about inequalities and how efforts to tackle them have been exposed.

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COVID, EDUKACJA DOMOWA I NIERÓWNOŚCI

Wprowadzenie: Jednym z głównych skutków pandemii COVID-19 było zamknięcie szkół i przejście na nauczanie domowe większości dzieci, wykorzystujące internetowe lub hybrydowe modele nauczania i uczenia się. Pojawiają się jednak pytania o jakość tego modelu, zwłaszcza w świetle ostatnich działań politycznych mających na celu zmniejszenie różnic edukacyjnych w całym kraju.

Cel badań: Celem artykułu jest zebranie najnowszych badań dotyczących edukacji domowej podczas pandemii COVID-19 i przedstawienie teoretycznego ugruntowania w kontekście polityki nastawionej na zmniejszenie nierówności w edukacji.

Metoda badań: Dokonano przeglądu artykułów, które odnoszą się do doświadczeń związanych z nauczaniem domowym dzieci i rodzin, a także ogólnych skutków takiej formy nauczania.

Wyniki: Wyniki pokazują wyraźne różnice w doświadczeniach związanych z edukacją domową pod względem zasobów i postaw oraz oferty szkolnej. Wykorzystano koncepcje kapitału kulturowego i deprivacji kulturowej w celu wykazania, w jaki sposób nierówności utrzymują się pomimo niedawnej polityki mającej na celu zmniejszenie nierówności.

Wnioski: Edukacja domowa spowodowała, że nierówności wynikające ze sposobu prowadzenia jej przez szkołę i możliwości korzystania przez dzieci i rodziny z zapewnionych form stały się bardzo wyraźne. Wskazuje się, że potrzebna jest zmiana kulturowa i wykorzystanie podejścia kolektywnego.

Słowa kluczowe: zdobywanie kolejnych poziomów, edukacja domowa, kapitał kulturowy, deprivacja kulturowa, deprivacja materialna.

