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Lessons from Covid-19:
Blended learning,
social inequality and
educational underachievement

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“Covid-19 has highlighted many fundamental issues that plague the UK’s education system. Chief among them is the relationship between social inequality and educational underachievement.

For years, studies have demonstrated the clear correlation that exists between a child’s home learning environment and their academic performance. It was one of the main learnings, for instance, of the [Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education project](#) (EPPSE), which ran from 1997 to 2014 – the study underlined the importance of high-quality early years education, particularly for children who have a “less stimulating home learning environment or who were from families where parents had poor or no qualifications”.

The UK Government published a [2018 report](#) on home learning environments and how they shape educational performance. Citing leading studies, it stated that “low-income children often have language skills that are below the age-related expectations at the time

they enter reception – putting them at an educational disadvantage from the start”.

A [2017 study](#) from the University of Newcastle offers another useful summary of the problem: “The quality of the home learning environment pertains not only to the amount of verbal stimulation children receive but also the extent to which children are exposed to other enriching learning activities, such as regular visits to libraries, parks and museums, shared parent-child reading, having high-quality toys, and parental monitoring of television viewing. These activities are not only associated with positive learning outcomes during the preschool years but also predict children’s academic achievement once they enter school.”

SHINING A LIGHT ON THE ISSUE OF INEQUALITY

It should come as little surprise, then, that with schools forced to close during the pandemic and home schooling becoming the norm, those children from less affluent households will, generally speaking, have suffered the most. Put another way, Covid-19 has exacerbated the problems highlighted in the aforementioned papers (of which there are dozens upon dozens that could be cited), widening the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children.

This is a topic that must be handled with compassion and understanding. Covid-19 has been a challenge unlike any that educators and leaders in the UK will have experienced in their professional lives; like all parts of society, organisations in the education sector are having to respond to a new, evolving crisis.

Indeed, in my view it would be unfair to level heavy-handed criticism at schools. These establishments are increasingly being asked to compensate for social inequality, which is simply a task too great for any primary or second school.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish to ignore the fact that the pandemic has shone a far brighter light on the relationship between the home and educational outcomes. Rather, we must take this opportunity to confront the problem and see what learnings can be applied in the long-term.

EMBRACING BLENDED LEARNING MODELS

It would be simple for schools to assume that the easing of lockdown rules – and, perhaps more importantly, the rollout of the vaccine programme – will result in a return to the standard education practices. Schools have re-opened and, all being well, will not close again. So, learning will take place in the classroom and that can once again be educators' primary focus.

However, as we are so often told, there is unlikely to be a return to life exactly as it was. We are acclimating to a "new normal". And where education is concerned, this is likely to mean greater emphasis on blended learning: a combination of in-school and at-home learning.

It is essential that educators learn key lessons from Covid-19. One of those must be how to build effective partnerships between schools, parents and communities.

In being forced to close, schools have had to significantly increase their communication with, and support to, parents. They have had to offer guidance to parents with regards to what their children should be learning, and how to home school effectively. Long after the pandemic has passed, this practice should remain.

Educators and parents must form closer relationships; and crucially, infrastructure must be put in place (if it is not already) to enable remote learning, such online platforms that can be used by students, parents and teachers, so all parties can access the curriculum, learning tools, assessments and necessary supports.

Some of these solutions have been put in place over the past 12 months. Covid-19 left schools with little choice but to invest in technology that would enable remote learning. But these systems can now be refined and built upon further – this should be done with both parent and child in mind, helping to engaging the entire household in the education process and, ultimately, creating a more level playing field that accounts for social inequality.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The above scenario hinges upon bridging the so-called digital divide. For instance, some [96%](#) of UK households may have access to the internet but, as of 2019, just three million homes had access to full-fibre broadband connections. Many millions more will struggle with poor or unreliable internet connections, making downloading or uploading learning material cumbersome.

Then comes the bigger issue of devices. [A survey from the education charity Teach First](#) in November 2020 revealed 84% of British schools with the poorest children lack devices to ensure their pupils can study at home. The figure was better (66%) but still very problematic in affluent schools, too.

There is a third issue: digital skills. Do parents and children have the requisite skills to use both the hardware and software involved in remote learning? Using a tablet to access a cloud-based learning platform might be second nature to some people today, but millions will find the process alien. This includes teachers as much as it does children and parents.

Again, these were problems long before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, with the digital divide a critical part of the relationship between social inequality and educational underachievement. Simply put, poorer households are less likely to have the connectivity, devices and skills to use remote learning tools effectively.

Schools, education leaders and the state must work in unison to address this digital gap. Only by implementing the infrastructure and training evidently needed (again, including training for educators themselves) will a blended learning model prove effective. And only with a well-functioning blended learning model will schools be able to better engage with home learning environments, bolstering the at-home learning potential of students regardless of their socio-economic position.

Positively, Covid-19 has brought these issues into sharp focus. Now, even with schools re-opening, is the opportune moment to focus on and invest in blended learning, ensuring students across the UK benefit from a balanced, fair education system.

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