



Education Services:
Glasgow Stories of Recovery,
Resilience and Re-connection
Capturing the experiences of
our ASL schools
February 2021



GLASGOW: Nurturing City





GLASGOW STORIES

OF RECOVERY, RESILIENCE AND RE-CONNECTION

CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCES OF
OUR ASL SCHOOLS

1. WHAT WENT WELL DURING LOCKDOWN?



Parents said that schools provided excellent home learning through learning packs and online lessons. Staff sang, danced and talked to children online to keep them engaged

Parents found schools to be a safe base where they could get emotional support as well as help with home learning



2. WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES?



Children who attend ASL schools can have complex needs and lockdown was hard for some of these young people

Not all families were used to using online tools and they had to learn a lot in a short space of time



Some young people weren't able to have the traditional transition into secondary school or celebrate moving into adulthood

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3. WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The nurturing approach can strengthen the bond of trust between schools and families

Staff learned lots of new skills while teaching online

Some families actually thrived during lockdown due to their child's particular needs. This has led to changes in the curriculum in some schools



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4. NEXT STEPS

Examples of good practice found within ASL schools during lockdown will be used to enhance children and young people's learning in future





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The photos in the publication were not all taken during the lockdown period.



Introduction from the Executive Director



Glasgow's Additional Support for Learning (ASL) schools are vibrant, creative and hardworking establishments which educate those young people who require a curriculum which is individualized.

The first lockdown, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, began in late March 2020. This required all schools and nurseries to close, except for hubs which were opened for the children of essential workers to attend. This meant that the majority of those who attended ASL establishments (and mainstream schools) were learning at home. During this time, the Family Fund, a charity who supports children with disabilities or are seriously ill, undertook a survey of 257 families across Scotland who were linked to their work. Fifty percent of the families noted a reduction in their income during lockdown with 41% stating they were having to use savings and other means to meet expenses. Family Fund saw a significant increase in requests for materials that could be used for home schooling. In addition, 9 out of 10 parents said that the impact of the pandemic had negatively affected their child's health and wellbeing.

As part of our series of Stories of Lockdown, we want to capture the experience of families with children with significant additional support needs during a time of change and potential stress. To explore issues related to the lockdown experience as well as highlight good practice within ASL establishments, online focus groups were held with 10 headteachers of ASL schools. The headteachers then supported researchers to make contact with families so that their lived experiences could be shared.

To get a variety of narratives, the headteachers came from different establishments – some which are co-located with a mainstream school, others which are standalone schools. The establishments support young people who have a range of needs e.g. complex physical and learning needs; social and emotional needs; young people with learning difficulties across the curriculum and those young people who have speech, language and communication needs.

Maureen McKenna

February 2021



Focus Groups



Six questions were used to stimulate the focus group discussions (appendix 1). The Educational Psychologist facilitating the focus groups allowed the conversation to develop naturally in response to each question. The discussions were transcribed by two trainee Educational Psychologists, who later collated the transcriptions and conducted a thematic analysis.

Experiences During School Closures

The first theme relates to the experiences of adjusting and responding to school closures. The primary barrier was the lack of physical interaction between staff, pupils and families and so technology became an essential tool. This was not a new development, as many of the headteachers reported using online platforms such as Seesaw prior to lockdown. However, the frequency and way in which they were used changed dramatically.

Teaching staff were noted to have “really upped their game in relation to digital learning and communication - singing and dancing; talking to children”, which helped maintain a personalised approach. The feedback highlighted that the use of technology was not one-way... “It was also used by families to share pictures, notes and examples of pupils activities at home which families found was a really positive experience”.

There was reportedly no pressure placed on families to respond using the technology either, rather... “parents could dip in and out as it suited them”.

Not all school staff and parents were experienced in using digital technology and some families had limited WiFi and data access, all of which were cited as significant barriers to engagement during lockdown. Consequently, the use of technology was supplemented by providing families with personalised learning resources and activity packs designed to fit the needs of pupils. However, there was consensus that it is... “not as straightforward to send home learning packs for ASL as it may be in mainstream. ASL learning context is unique”. Families were perceived, by school staff, to have responded best to resources that were tailored to the specific needs of their child; easy to access and use; not overly complicated; and could involve other members of the household.

As may have been anticipated, most families were thought to have coped well with lockdown, while others were less resilient. Those who coped best were those that... “engaged a lot with the school” and “tried to maintain some kind of routine for young people”. The factors identified as contributing to the increased stress and anxiety for other families and young people were lack of routine and structure; disruption to sleeping



patterns (“turning night into day”); and a lack of respite care. While school staff were repeatedly acknowledged to have “gone above and beyond” to support families during lockdown, headteachers were keen to further praise these efforts by highlighting that the challenges of doing so were compounded by the fact that staff... “also faced the challenge of supporting their own families at this time as well. Including home schooling their own children”.

Support Offered During School Closures

The second theme concerns the various aspects of support offered during school closures. Existing relationships with families were identified as a strength that school staff built upon in order to provide support. A whole family approach was taken, not just focussing on the needs of the child. Physical and mental wellbeing were given the priority, before home learning issues were addressed. Therefore, support was offered on a range of issues including food parcels/vouchers, power cards, money problems and work issues. One headteacher highlighted that “some parents don’t know who to contact to ask for help – parents can at least rely on the school to help them or point them in the direction of help”.

Befitting of the nurturing approach which underpins all work in schools and nurseries across Glasgow, “relationships and trust” between families and schools was a consistently cited by headteachers as being an essential component in providing support. They reported that parents would... “let their guard down and opened up a lot more” safe in the knowledge that... “schools could sympathise with families and offer advice”. School staff adjusted their frequency of contact based on the needs of each family. All families received a weekly “check in” phone call or email, while those that required it were contacted multiple times per week as necessary. In addition to telephone and technology-based support, staff also did ‘doorstep visits’ to vulnerable families, with one headteacher commenting that... “relationships were sustained and improved throughout lockdown by the fact that staff often physically delivered resources. This enabled staff to see children and parents from a safe distance. Parents valued this communication”.

Frequent telephone and communication via TEAMS and other online platforms was noted as being an equally important source of support for school staff, who also missed the routine of typical school life. Again, headteachers praised staff for their efforts in undertaking professional development from home and even “visiting colleagues in their gardens to show them how to

set up/use iPads etc”. In addition to supporting families, staff would call each other and even arranged morale boosting activities such as bingo and quizzes. One headteacher summed it up as “a real coming together of staff”.

One major source of frustration was the perceived lack of multi-agency support during lockdown. Third sector services, which are usually invaluable supports to vulnerable families, had to withdraw input due to safety advice. Schools continued to link with Social Work departments regarding existing and new concerns. Senior staff in Education and Social Work Services met regularly during lockdown. However, with school support being the one constant for families throughout lockdown, there were multiple headteacher accounts that schools felt they were the lead agency and a “sense of it being our [schools] fault if something wasn’t done. This was very hard”. This is perhaps indicative of the pressure and frustrations experienced by everyone during lockdown.

Health, Mental Health and Wellbeing

Unsurprisingly school closures and the speed with which they had to be enacted were particularly difficult for some children with additional support needs. Loss of structure and contact with key

adults who could initiate and lead activities meant that some families saw heightened sensory needs, increased distressed behaviours and difficulties engaging children in home-based learning activities.

Some parent/carers found these changes very difficult to manage and relied upon school staff to offer support through telephone calls.

Children returning to school in August also required staff to have a good understanding of needs which had developed as a result of school closures. Staff relied on skills of co-regulation and engagement in learning activities to support the transition back to school while increasing school-based physical activity mitigated some of the impacts of reduced activity levels and dietary difficulties at home. This skill set that the staff demonstrated supported a positive return to school.

Through focus group discussions head teachers noted that during lockdown they faced a number of challenges in supporting the wellbeing of families and their own staff.

At the time of the first lockdown many were experiencing anxiety in relation to COVID-19 as well as adjusting to new working/learning requirements and heads had to frequently remind everyone to have realistic expectations of what





could be achieved and to have balance and pace in what they were doing on a day-to-day basis.

For headteachers, managing the delivery of remote learning, supporting families and helping remote staff teams whilst offering Hub support combined to produce a unique, intense and challenging work environment which had not been experienced before. Managing their own stresses and maintaining their own wellbeing through this time became just as important as the work they were doing to support others.

Transitions

This theme broadly applies to all pupils as schools resumed following lockdown. On reflection, headteachers would have preferred to have planned more tailored approaches to pupils returning to school which took into account the individual additional support needs.

Two groups were identified as being particularly adversely affected by lockdown: those moving from primary to secondary provisions; and those transitioning to post-school destinations.

For the 2020/21 cohort of S1 pupils, the lack of transition preparation was described as having... “a massive impact on them and how they have

settled into their new school. The first few weeks in the building were just alien to them – they didn’t know their new staff – perhaps needed a slower transition”. However, an acknowledged protective factor for these pupils is that they continue to benefit from the supports available within Glasgow’s schools.

For the other group, similar to their mainstream peers, school closures in March meant a premature end to those pupils’ school careers without a proper celebration. This also meant that options available to them could not be fully explored nor could enhanced transition processes be successfully carried out. The ongoing COVID restrictions meant that virtual college course options are no use to many of these pupils. These young people had very limited options available to them and it may have appeared as though ‘lockdown’ continued for them.

COVID-19 Guidance/Restrictions

The final theme relates specifically to the COVID-19 virus and the effect this had on the school community. All headteachers commented on the pressure of keeping abreast of the latest government guidelines and lockdown restrictions. This information had to be interpreted and communicated to staff. One of the challenges was that staff had to consider how to

meaningfully explain the COVID-19 restrictions to young people, especially those with language and communication difficulties.

Similar to their mainstream peers, headteachers were responsible for the safety of the building, working with staff to develop risk assessments and considering what steps to take to mitigate risk. This was very challenging in the context of an ASL school where corridors are not always spacious, rooms are smaller to better meet the additional support needs of pupils and PPE was needed to undertake specific tasks.

Headteachers reported that this task was made all the more difficult as... “social distancing is more difficult in ASL schools” due to... “higher staff to pupil ratios”, “impossible if a child needs comforting”. All headteachers felt it was important to contain and manage the anxieties of staff in order to minimise or prevent the anxieties being transferred on to pupils and families.



Parent Interviews

To capture the voices of families around their lockdown home learning experiences, the Educational Psychologists undertook telephone interviews with parents from across the ASL sector. The questions were similar to those asked of the headteachers in order to map on to the topics covered in the focus groups, and those questions can be seen in appendix 2.

Engagement with schools over lockdown

All parents interviewed said that their child's school provided excellent home learning materials that were tailored to their child's individual interests and support needs. Activity ideas and boxes that the whole family could do together were provided, and parents spoke of schools not bombarding or overwhelming them with school work and advising them to only do what was manageable in relation to context and time. Learning was delivered through both physical packs and via online platforms:

"The school also sent us some home learning activities through SeeSaw."

"One of the best things was the fact that they actually gave you paper/ written activities."

"There was a (activity) box for each of the boys and the school curated it for each individual."

"They also provided information packs with laminated cards for things like routines."

All parents emphasised the excellent two-way communication they had with schools through a range of channels. Support and advice from school staff could be accessed easily and parents expressed that they felt supported as a family rather than help and advice only being offered for their child's learning. All parents interviewed felt that school was their main source of support with their children over lockdown:

"They were always there in the event that I needed someone to speak to."

"Without the school offering so much support, lockdown would have been much more of a struggle for us. They were a godsend."

"There was also a blog for the school that you could access if you needed more information. It was absolutely brilliant."

"The school kept in contact mainly through Seesaw every day. We could send a message and ask the teacher anything."

"They contacted me once per week during term time and every other week during the summer break."

"If I needed to speak to them, it was just a case of sending an email and someone would get back to me. I felt that was really, really good."

Parents highlighted that through schools food parcels were offered to those who needed them. One parent talked about a third sector worker linked to their child's school who contacted them to offer support with grants and foodbanks. They appreciated the proactive nature of the schools in organising this.



Pressures for families during lockdown

Parents explained that one of the key pressures for them during lockdown was to explain to their child why they could no longer attend school or do the things they would normally do. Those pressures were further compounded by the nature of their child's additional support needs, as this impacted on their understanding of why their daily life and routines had suddenly changed so significantly. This, in turn, led to increased levels of anxiety and distress.

"I suppose it would be the understanding factor, that being told this Covid, this virus, this horrible thing. You can't go to school, can't see your friends, can't go to swimming lessons. It was just difficult for a kid with additional support needs to understand that you can't go to school."

"Our younger boy was a bit distressed at times during lockdown as he couldn't understand why they just couldn't go out or see family."

"He's used to having a set routine, and didn't cope very well without it"

Parents also spoke about the challenges related to their child's difficulty in understanding the need for face masks and social distancing rules:

"Our family worked on helping the boys get used to the masks during lockdown"

"When we went out walking, some people would react by saying "Oh don't come near me", as they were unaware that our child had additional support needs."

Parents expressed that the pressures of lockdown, along with not knowing when and how schools would return, led to their own pressures and increased anxiety levels:

"I had no time to myself, which was hard going at times."

"Initially during lockdown you didn't know what was going to happen – blended learning or full time."

Some parents explained that their children did attend school for some time over lockdown and this provided much-needed routines and structure along with respite for the parents:

"Our younger boy could go into school every Friday morning during lockdown. He stayed outside in the playground [which was what he preferred] and this helped him stay in contact with some staff and pupils. It kept the familiarity going which was helpful for him."

"Our child loves routine, so it was great that she could still go to school for at least some of the time. That allowed us to do things at home (and) it allowed us to have a break for a few hours."

Parents detailed how proactive they were in providing consistency in their child's day to day life as much as they were able to:

"We kept our routines the same, as far as possible. For example, she got up at the same time, fed at the same time and went to bed at the same time as before lockdown."

"We were lucky because we went out on bikes and scooters quite a lot so we were able to keep as much normality as possible."

"They were used to bundling into the car and going somewhere (so) running of the car was quite relaxing for the boys."





Returning to school

Parents reported that the return to school in August has been very positive for their child and they had adapted back into school life extremely well. It was felt that this enabled a sense of normality along with the school structures and routines. Parents also described the support that their child's school provided to help aid the transition back into school after being off for so long:

"They sent us photos of the new class teacher and our child's new classmates before the new term, so that she could get used to it."

"[Child] has the same Class Teacher – someone who knows him – which was a big help when he went back."



Summary



The parents interviewed expressed how well the schools engaged with them in not only providing a range of online and physical learning resources for their child but were a huge support for them as parents and supported their family as a whole. The parents strived to try and maintain a sense of structure for their children at home as far as they were able but all commented on how crucial their school was in supporting them to get through the period of school closures:

"I just can't speak highly enough of the school, the way things are managed and it's just a really, really good school."

"They're a fantastic school and very supportive for their parents and children."

"I can't fault the school at all, not just during lockdown, they're amazing."



Conclusion



The consistent message that came from the families that were part of this study was how much the school was a safe base to turn to. Although school couldn't provide all of the normal things that families value – routine, structure and a curriculum – families valued how quickly schools responded to any questions or requests. And they valued how much schools cared about the families and young people.



Appendix 1

Focus Group Questions

Question 1 - Of the families who engaged well with the home learning activities over lockdown, what do you think contributed to this? That is, did they respond to particular resources, or relationships or approaches? And, can you give details on the different resources?

Question 2 - What have you learned about your families and staff over the last few months in relation to resilience levels and resourcefulness?

Question 3 - What pressures did you find during the lockdown and on return to school specifically related to being an ASL HT?

Question 4 - In your view, were there particular pressures during lockdown that affected the children in families from your school which related to their additional support needs?

Question 5 - Has there been an increase in the number of wellbeing concerns in relation to when the children were in lockdown or on their return? Can you give some detail about these concerns and any pattern you see in your establishment?

Question 6 - Finally, Education Services would like to gain the voices of children and their families about their experiences during lockdown. How best do you think this could be done?





Appendix 2

Parent Interview Questions

Question 1 - Did your school provide home learning activities over lockdown? If they did, what did you most enjoy about the activities?

Question 2 - Did the school keep in contact with you? How was this done?

Question 3 - What helped you most during the lockdown? For example, family, school staff, neighbours or anything else?

Question 4 - What pressures did you find during the lockdown and on return to school specifically in relation to your child?

Question 5 - Was there something specific about your child's additional needs that resulted in more pressure during lockdown?

Question 6 - Did you have any wellbeing concerns about your child during lockdown or their return to school?





Appendix 2

Heads of Establishment

Emily Dixon – Croftcroighn Primary School

Adele Flynn – St Philomena’s Primary School ENP

Peter Johnstone – Cardinal Winning Secondary School

Donna McKay – St Kevin’s Primary School

Fiona McLean – Drummore Primary School

Fiona Shields – Broomlea Primary School

Patricia McGowan – Abercorn Secondary School

Lisa Monaghan – Langfaulds Primary School LCR

Julie Steel – Hazelwood School

Virginia Smith (Acting) – Hampden Primary School

Alexis Grant – Govan High Inclusion Base

Jackie Newell - Hollybrook Academy