

Learning from lockdown - special issue of Primary Science, deadline 17th Oct 2022.

Verity Jones, Amanda Webber, Luci Gorell Barnes, Sarah Williams, Laura Hobbs, Laura Fog Rogers, Lindsey McEwen, Deepak Gopinath

Learning from Children's Experiences of Lockdown: talking about invisible threats

In this article, the Voices in a Pandemic: Children's Lockdown Experiences Applied to Recovery (VIP- CLEAR) team talk about the research they have undertaken in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and how the voices of children need to be listened to in order to prepare for future social shocks.

We all know how our lives were turned upside down during the COVID-19 pandemic. But children in particular saw huge changes to their childhoods. While the virus united the scientific community like never before – with the common goal to produce a vaccine and treatment - children were often overlooked.

Children were not necessarily deemed as vulnerable as others to the virus. However, their routines and support structures were instantly shattered. Contact with important family and friends were often severed. Access to familiar and important spaces for learning and play such as parks were restricted. Education was disrupted with a move to unfamiliar online learning platforms. Important milestones were missed, like, the opportunity to learn to ride a bike or get the first 5 m swimming badge. Other milestones were experienced differently, such as a birthday parties and religious celebrations. COVID-19 was an invisible threat. Whilst children could not see the virus, they recognised the differences in their everyday lives and had to make sense of changes as policy and guidance switched, sometimes overnight.

Between Spring 2021 and Summer 2022 the VIP-CLEAR project saw our interdisciplinary teamwork with 6–11-year-olds from four primary schools in socially disadvantaged areas of Bristol, UK. The team – made up of experts in education, health, psychology, geography and arts-based practice - created a series of four child-centred creative activities that gave pupils the time and space to explore their experiences of lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic, looking both retrospectively and into the future. We also interviewed teachers and members of the senior leadership teams. Combined, this allowed us to gain insight into not only how children experienced COVID-19 but learn lessons to help prepare for future similar threats. For the purpose of this article, we will reflect on the first two activities, which analysed 190 children's maps, and what lessons may be learned from them and the process.

Finding out how children feel in a crisis

Children were asked to 'make a map of their world' at the time on a small, A6 sized postcard using coloured pens. Children were encouraged to add labels, emojis, annotations and text to the back of postcards. Here, the emphasis was not on geographical or artistic skill to draw a map, but on supporting ways in which children could communicate their experiences of the pandemic. This activity allowed the children to reflect on their emotional response to a time of crises. Later in the school term, children returned to these maps. The original maps were glued to a larger A4 sheet. Pupils were then asked to add to extending their larger drawings, with prompts such as, 'has

anything changed?', 'can you tell me more about this?' and / or 'is there anything you would like to add?'

Many of the first maps reflected the diversity of children's experiences at the time. There was a focus on homelife, with many referencing time spent with immediate family. Others told of how these young people struggled at home, psychologically, due to a lack of space, resources and support. Direct reference to the pandemic was articulated through images of isolated houses, closed schools and parks and occasional images of 'the virus' and injections to represent vaccines. Animals were often included in maps in the form of pets (both owned and yearned for – perhaps for social and emotional support). Science and technology in the form of the internet, social media platforms (e.g., TikTok) and gaming platforms were also frequently represented as a way of maintaining social contact with family and friends as well as being something to do when access to the outside world was limited.

The second mapping activity highlighted the opening up of local areas as lockdown restrictions were lifted. The necessary buildings of the first maps (with a focus on food shops) were now inclusive of non-essential destinations such as hairdressers, Lego shops and fairgrounds.

The value of mapping in a crisis

The two mapping activities undertaken highlighted the importance of public natural spaces and interactions with animals within urban settings. Digital space was considered important as a way of communicating with valued others (friends and family). However, the inequalities around home learning (having room, quiet space, availability of hardware and internet access etc) was also seen to be amplified as learning at home often became difficult as work, school and family demands mixed in new ways. Our research showed the diversity of experience of children through the crises and the conflicting emotions. This changing meaning and attachment children have to different places through a social crisis requires careful reflection, not only by teachers, but also whole school approaches, health professionals, employers, town planners, public health departments and policy makers and the team are communicating these recommendations through a series of policy briefings (see website: <https://www.vip-clear.org/>).

What about next time ...?

Unfortunately, COVID-19 is not a singular, contained event. As we move into the winter of 2022 cases are rising. But this is not the only crisis children are dealing with. Throughout the latter phases of the VIP-CLEAR research, as COVID-19 restrictions began to be lifted, children spoke of other big issues that were worrying them: big and often invisible threats, such as climate change and news of war. In addition to this, the current period of response and recovery to the pandemic has been particularly difficult for children who may already be dealing with social and economic challenges. We know that teachers recognise these issues, but sometimes appropriate resources are difficult to find to support pupils in thinking and talking about their experiences.

Based on 18 months of research with the 6–11-year-olds, we have developed a free children's book entitled 'Learning to Live with Fog Monsters' and accompanying teachers' notes (please see web links below). This resource aims to engage and enable pupils in Key Stage 2 while supporting teachers to deliver high quality, research informed lessons. The linked teachers' notes aim to make a difference to children's wellbeing, resilience and understanding of challenging times as we prepare our children to be active citizens. These resources can also be used to facilitate cross curricula

learning where the impact of science can be linked with PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic), English, Geography, Art and Music.

The book highlights the impacts threats such as COVID-19, other global disease, climate change and conflict may have. In addition, it attempts to identify how such crises may be mitigated through the eyes of two 10-year-olds. The importance of sharing worries, working together, and planning for hopeful futures at home, in school and in the wider community is introduced as a springboard for discussion and further work.

Both the e-book book and teacher's guide are free resources and available online for download from the VIP-CLEAR website.

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Useful Resources:

The research website for this project: <https://www.vip-clear.org/>