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# 'I am not a teacher!' The challenges of enacting home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic among low-income families of primary-aged children

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the policy enactments of education and care during the COVID-19 pandemic to understand the unique challenges facing low-income families in England as they sought to navigate this exceptional period of time. The global pandemic was a challenging time for all families as all but key worker parents/carers of primary school age children (5–11) were forced to become their child's educator. But the effects were experienced very differently by diverse socio-economic groups. Taking an interpretive approach based on the auto-biographical reflections of six low-income families located in the Greater London area, we carried out online family interviews using zoom to examine the problems created by government policy guidance in England during 2020–2021. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure space and coverage for the participants to share their unique experiences. Using policy-enactment theory, we add to existing knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on low-income families by analysing the effects of enacting care and education on daily life, rhythms and routines. The intersections between gender and social class are also explored to show the disproportionate impact on women.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Policy enactment; social class; gender; children; mothers

## Introduction

The closure of schools to all but key worker children<sup>1</sup> in England in March 2020 moved formal education into the 'home' for most children. This unprecedented situation required a reconfiguration and reorganisation of family life. Research highlights the challenges facing families across the global north and south during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoskins et al. 2022) including managing work and facilitating education, ensuring access to electronic devices for all and navigating the limited space of the home (Hoskins et al. 2022).

For the first time in their lives, many parents and carers had to support, enable and provide for, their children's education (Khan 2022). There was guidance to parents provided by the English government through the Department for Education (DfE 2020a) to support their home-schooling efforts, but there was no specific guidance for supporting low-income families despite other vulnerable groups being identified, e.g. those with an Education, Health Care (EHC) plan, to support their additional learning needs.

Between September and December 2020 when schools were fully re-opened, many children experienced further and recurrent periods of home schooling due to self-isolation for suspected and actual

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COVID-19 cases and school staff shortages. Schools closed again in January 2021 and re-opened in March 2021 in England. This exceptional and changing context centred the burden of educating children within the family and placed new expectations on parents/carers especially women (Khan 2022). It also placed a burden on the space and materiality of the home with education, work, care and other activities competing over finite space and resources (Wainwright and Hoskins 2023).

Several quantitative studies highlighted the likely and estimated impact loss of learning could have on low-income families in England (see for example Pensiero, Kelly, and Bokhove 2020; Andrew et al. 2020), but limited qualitative narrative research has been carried out with low-income families to better understand the complexities and nuances of their home-schooling efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The wider study that informs this paper sought to gain an understanding of the home-schooling challenges and negotiations that low-income households with primary-aged children faced during the pandemic whilst complying with government lockdown/stay at home/self-isolation policy requirements. The guiding research questions that informed the project are as follows:

1. How have home and household spaces and times been re-negotiated and transformed to meet demands of periods of home schooling in relation to local and national lockdowns and self-isolation?
2. How are everyday rhythms of care and education enacted, and by whom? What challenges did households face in the process of enactment?
3. What are the ongoing financial and resource implications for households of these changed and changing arrangements?

In this paper, we consider the second and third of these questions. The pandemic raised lots of questions about education provision such as how did parents cope with supporting their children's full-time learning? Did they have the digital and material resources required to meet the needs of their children? Did those families on free school meals afford to feed their children an additional meal each day? The answers to these questions very much depended on parents' and carers' socio-economic status and their own educational experiences and background. Set against this dynamic and changing context and the gap in existing literature, we examined how six low-income families have responded to juggling care and education through online interviews with mothers and their children. The accounts gained from our participants reveal how the intensification of social and educational inequalities unfolded over two periods of lockdown in England.

Our data confirm that for low-income families who were struggling economically and socially before the pandemic, these struggles intensified during the pandemic and were exacerbated by the pressure to support their child's education. Of particular concern to parents was the lack of confidence they had to become their child's teacher and the lack of time and/or material resources required to meet their child's needs. Resourcing the digital demands of home schooling and the loss of free school meals (FSM) created considerable parental stress. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of our findings for potential further lockdowns or extraordinary situations where normal education provision is disrupted, and learning must take place online.

## Literature review – challenges facing low-income families

The purpose of this literature section is to frame and locate our project's focus within existing research. Low-income families have always faced the brunt of wider social disruptions (Butler 2004). From the miners' strikes in 1980s England to the financial crisis of 2009, they have been the first to experience welfare and benefit cuts (Reay 2017), increased precarity in employment (Millar 2017), and real-term funding reductions to the education system, which is so necessary to any hope of individual social mobility (Hoskins and Barker 2020). Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for all families in England, the specific challenges facing low-income families were, we argue here, far more demanding and stressful (Goudeau et al. 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, there was a well-established perception that low-income families typically lacked commitment to and experience of formal education and the academic attainment gap pointed to evidence of multiple inequalities (Reay 2017). These challenges intensified during the pandemic; from difficulties with providing digital devices and reliable Wi-Fi, to parents/carers perceptions that they are less equipped to teach their children at home, low-income families struggled significantly (Weale, Stewart, and Butler 2021).

Research confirms that for many families gaining access to online materials provided by schools created significant challenges, in part due to limited devices (Holmes and Burgess 2022) and it often meant hard choices like reallocating funds earmarked for food and energy bills (Watts 2020; BBC 2021). But access to Wi-Fi was also a key challenge. Indeed, as Holmes and Burgess (2020, 1) point out from their research:

The likelihood of having access to the internet from home increases along with income, such that only 51% of households earning between £6000-10,000 had home internet access compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,001. The link between poverty and digital exclusion is clear: if you are poor, you have less chance of being online.

This study notes that digital exclusion is not new but represents further evidence of profound inequality in England. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this inequality was even more pronounced as families struggled to access the digital devices required to meet the learning needs of their children (Holmes and Burgess 2020).

A further aspect of our research was to understand families' opportunities to enact education in the home during the extended periods of lockdown. Having additional time to spend with children creates parental space and opportunities for learning. However, as Andrew et al. (2020, 4) note parents use of that time varied significantly, with some focusing on educational activities whilst others did not or could not. These differential uses of time will have had significant effects on child development (Andrew et al. 2020). A pre-pandemic study by Bono et al. (2016), found that the 'positive effects of time spent with parents are stronger for children of more educated parents' (cited from Andrew et al. 2020, 4) as they were more equipped to meet the learning needs of their children. These findings point to differences in outcomes based in part on parental levels of education.

From a material and practical perspective, the closure of schools meant that children from low-income families lost an important hot meal each day. As Loopstra (2020, 4) noted those parents with children in receipt of free school meals were themselves at 'heightened risk of food insecurity arising from a lack of money'. In England, the provision of free school meals is made to schools and distributed to families on the basis of annual income. The loss of free school meals has, according to Lalli (2023, 54), 'exacerbated the continuity of how the state relies upon schools and third-sector organisations to continue feeding children'. Lalli's (2023, 56) findings confirm that the pandemic increased food insecurity and inequalities and this has had an impact on nutrition and health. The consequences of this loss of state support resulted in hungry children and have had consequences on their capacity for learning.

To better understand the challenges of teaching children at home, The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)'s rapid evidence assessment on remote learning (2020), albeit largely based on other (non-pandemic) situations, provided understanding on core areas that were likely to be impacted. The review concluded that:

- Teaching quality is more important than how lessons are delivered.
- Ensuring access to technology is key, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.
- Peer interactions can provide motivation and improve learning outcomes.
- Supporting pupils to work independently can improve learning outcomes.
- Different approaches to remote learning suit different tasks and types of content (cited in Bubb and Jones 2020, 210).

Several of these recommendations speak to the objectives and key findings from our study. We explored parents' perceptions of their teaching ability, access to technology and Wi-Fi in the home and the impact of food poverty as these areas of social welfare policy were reconfigured by the pandemic.

## COVID-19 and education: a policy overview

The pandemic required multiple and rapid policy responses across all areas of social, work and educational aspects of life to stem the spread of the virus. In England, the first education focused policy change was announced on the 18 March 2020 by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and required all schools to close until further notice to all but key worker children and other exceptional categories including looked after children and those with an EHC plan. Very little guidance was made available to support parents' and carers' efforts to home-school children. The policy guidance available was from pre-pandemic 2019 and early 2020 (DfE 2019a, 2019b, 2020a) and provided a generic overview of hours to be spent engaged in education depending on the child's age and stage of learning.

In June 2020, nursery schools and key stage one (KS1)<sup>2</sup> classes reopened to children, but this was staggered and geographically varied across the country (Blundell et al. 2021). But the path of the pandemic once again accelerated, and schools were forced to close to all but key worker children between January 2021 and 8 March 2021 requiring a further period of home schooling (Khan 2022). Schools resumed full time for all children from 9 March 2021, but many children endured ongoing periods of isolation at home because they had come into contact with the virus. There was divergence in education provision for children isolating at home and those needing to catch up on missed content from state schools across the country in the post-lockdown return to education (Blundell et al. 2021) and there is little doubt that this will have social mobility consequences for future generations in England and across the globe (Azevedo et al. 2020; Cullinane and Montacute 2020).

Guidance for parents and carers to enact home learning policy was scarce in both lockdowns and most were subject to school-level and local-level provisions available. Kallitsoglou and Topalli (2021) sent questionnaires to 55 mothers to capture their experiences of home schooling whilst working. They found that the mothers reported mixed support in terms of learning materials, provision of devices and levels of confidence to teach their own children. A key issue was the limited and disrupted time for work and home learning reported by the majority of the sample.

Andrew et al. (2020, 3) suggested that the impacts of the inequalities related to the time children spent learning are further compounded by the material resources of the home and those available from the school. Their findings point to the impact of the 'absence of significant policy intervention in the short-term', particularly in terms of study space at home but also lack of access to digital devices and reliable Wi-Fi (Andrew et al. 2020, 5).

By the summer of 2020, there were deepening concerns about food poverty and half of children entitled to FSM could not access this entitlement in April 2020 in England (Parnham et al. 2020), highlighting the negative impact on children from low-income families who were losing access to FSM and breakfast clubs. The policy context informing food provision during the pandemic, as indicated above, was disjointed and disorganised. Initially, the English government refused to make alternative provisions through meal vouchers to low-income families to replace FSM, although this was later reversed (Weale, Stewart, and Butler 2021). There were also concerns about how low-income families would cope with feeding their children during the school summer holidays of 2020. Campaigners led by Marcus Rashford appealed to the government to provide £15-a-week food vouchers for some of England's poorest families over the summer, which the government eventually agreed to through a policy U-turn in June 2020 (Syal, Stewart, and Pidd 2020).

Set against this context, we wanted to qualitatively understand how low-income families navigated and enacted care and the education policies mandated at that time (DfE 2019a, 2019b, 2020a)

to provide home-schooling to their child(ren) and how their responses to national policy were enacted relationally to their identity and material reality.

## Framing and locating policy enactment and intersectionality theory

The project is informed by two sets of theory. The first is policy-enactment theory which has enabled us to interrogate what constitutes policy and provides practical and theoretical strategies to examine how national policies are translated and enacted at a local level (Ball et al. 2012; Braun et al. 2011). Policy, according to Ball et al. (2012), is not simply a government's attempt to solve problems. Viewed in such normative, linear and definite terms, conceptualising policy in this way elides 'all the other moments in processes of policy and policy enactments that go on' rendering these 'marginalised' or 'unrecognised' (Ball et al. 2012, 2). By focusing on the 'jumbled, messy, contested, creative and mundane social interactions' required to enact policy, there is an opportunity to provide unique contextual insights into the resources, strategies and practices that form the basis of local enactments of ever-changing national COVID-19 policies. In this research, we take the local level as the family unit and examine the rich textures and daily rhythms of similarity and difference that are enacted by a group that share similar 'conditions of existence' (Bourdieu 1977). Policy enactment offers a way to draw attention to the nuances of contextual enactments of COVID-19 education policies (DfE 2019a, 2019b, 2020a) within the home as it seeks to 'put policies in context and understand more about the processes behind their enactment' (Ball et al. 2012, 148). In doing so, we uncovered tensions between national policies and local practises, priorities and resources, and this enabled us to examine the effects of government guidance/policies and initiatives for parents/carers during the period of home schooling, lockdown and social isolation.

The second is intersectionality theory which examines how aspects of identity including social class, gender and ethnicity influence participants' experiences of enacting the everyday rhythms of care and education (Collins and Bilge 2016). Intersectional analyses draw attention to the interplay between axis of structural inequality combine to produce multiple disadvantages. Crenshaw (2006, 1990) wrote primarily about the intersections between race and gender but also acknowledges the role of class in lived experience. Drawing on an intersectional approach (Brah and Phoenix 2004), we foreground an analysis of gender and social class to highlight the complex subjectivities and circumstances families experience. We were unable to include race in our intersectional analyses due to the composition of our sample (details below). Intersectional analyses of identity provide space to move beyond one-dimensional forms of analysis to investigate and theorise the operation of intersectional identity as a complex, contradictory and ambiguous process (Hoskins 2017).

## Methodology

The research project on which the paper is based was conducted in 2021–2022 as England emerged from COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures. It arose from our acknowledgment that only a very limited range of typically middle-class voices was being commonly heard in relation to home-school experiences in spite of a consistent acknowledgement that COVID-19 was exacerbating existing social and educational inequalities (Darmody, Smyth, and Russell 2021; Dimopoulos, Koutsamelas, and Tsatsaroni 2021).

To better understand the complex and nuanced lived experiences of low-income families, the project took a qualitative and interpretive approach to address the following two research questions:

- How are everyday rhythms of care and education enacted, and by whom? What challenges did households face in the process of enactment?
- What are the ongoing financial and resource implications for households of these changed and changing arrangements?

Our data collection was based on semi-structured interviews carried out on zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. The aim of the interviews was to explore the auto-biographical reflections of low-income families during the two COVID-19 lockdowns in England. To address the research questions, we asked the parents to describe how care, work and education were enacted and how they felt about educating their child(ren) at home. They were asked to reflect on the challenges they anticipated and those actually encountered. We asked the children similar questions, framed in age-appropriate ways to capture what they missed about school and how they experienced education at home. In interviews with parents and children, we asked about the experiences of the return to school and any periods of further lockdown due to self-isolation. We wanted to understand how they navigated the challenges of home schooling, including access to devices and food poverty.

Our sampling strategy involved working with a national charity operating within the London area with snowballing through initial participants to locate a demographically representative range of low-income family households across Greater London (including two-parent and lone-parent and single-child and multiple-siblings) to be interviewed, as highlighted in [Table 1](#) below. In response, six mothers came forward and indicated they and their child would be happy to participate. All of the children in our study are in receipt of free school meals. By engaging low-income parents/carers and their children and focusing on relations within the home as shaped by wider policy discourses we give voice to this groups' experiences, which have remained marginalised in existing literature (Smith and Barron 2020; Pascal et al. 2020).

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to allow for rigorous data coding and analysis. Data analysis of the transcripts is informed by a social constructionist perspective which understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr 2015). We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematically code our data. To begin, the research team familiarised ourselves with the data and searched for themes to establish a provisional framework relational to our research questions. The research team then independently coded the interview transcripts by reviewing the relevant themes. These themes were then compared, defined and named, with any differences on the identification and application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. The codes identified then informed the production of this research paper (Braun and Clarke 2006).

## Ethics

We paid careful attention to research ethics. The proposed research complied with the ethical protocols set out by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018), the British Sociological Association (2017) and Brunel University London. The research team applied for institutional ethical approval prior to fieldwork commencing. The research involved

**Table 1.** Demographic details of family interviews.

Parent	Total number of children	Child interviewed	Age of child	Ethnicity	Household	Employment status
Rita	1	Aleena	5	Asian British	Single parent	Unemployed
Rosa	5	Amber	8	White Danish	Single parent	Unemployed
Laura	1	Karla	8	White British	Single parent	Part-time call centre worker
Michelle	1	Anna	9	White British	Single parent	Full-time student
Patricia	1	Tia	11	White British	Single parent	Part-time hairdresser
Alisha	3	Kareem	9	Asian British	Two parents	Full-time student



semi-structured interview data with adults and children, therefore the ethical concerns addressed are issues of confidentiality, anonymity in terms of protecting the respondents' identities and obtaining informed consent. A consent form was signed by the parent participants and verbal ethical consent was sought from the children. Informed consent set out the conditions of participation in the study and this included anonymity of identity, deletion of audio files once fully transcribed, the right to withdraw at any time and the right to not answer questions throughout the interview process. Anonymity has been ensured by removing any identifying factors and through using pseudonyms.

We followed Kvale (2012, 242) and ensured that we built 'verification into the research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of the findings'. Techniques to assure reliable, valid and ethical research included: asking open-ended non-leading questions in the interviews; sharing data and preliminary analysis with colleagues at international peer-reviewed conferences and seminars.

In what follows, we address the second research question from our project through the theme of the challenges of education a child at home from both child and parent perspectives. We address the third research question through the themes of the challenges of enacting digital learning and the effects of food poverty. Each of the findings sections present and discuss the findings in tandem, with reference to our theoretical framework and relevant research literature.

### **'I am not a teacher!'**

To address the second research question from our project, that is how are everyday rhythms of care and education enacted, and by whom, we considered who in the home was supporting the child's education and how this fitted in with other care commitments and responsibilities. The first point of note was that only mothers came forward to be part of our project, highlighting a gender bias at the outset. All these women reported that they were solely responsible for supporting home learning, alongside other care commitments to younger preschool age children and/or elderly parents. This finding concurs with Chung et al.'s (2021) study which noted that women had borne the brunt of home-schooling, childcare and housework duties during the pandemic.

All of the mothers we interviewed commented on the challenges they experienced when enacting the government's home-schooling policy (DfE 2019a, 2019b, 2020a) in relation to their child(ren)'s continuing education. Amongst the many concerns they had, they expressed particular concern about supporting their child with content they might have a limited understanding of themselves.

Laura experienced constant arguments with her eight-year-old daughter and gave up on school work, choosing instead to focus on life lessons such as cooking and helping out around the home. She told us 'I'm not a teacher, and it's really hard anyways to do schoolwork. It was constant arguments and misery and we both end up in tears and it's just ... it was enough'. The disagreements were felt by Karla, who told us that she struggled with some difficult subjects.

Rita limited lessons to 10 min in the morning, 10 in the afternoon and 10 in the evenings. But this was also fraught with emotional challenges between her and her six-year-old daughter and lessons were abandoned. As she noted, when in school, children 'learn at their own pace, the teachers know them very well and it's just a different atmosphere. I'm not an educated person, you know, I'm not a teacher'.

Rosa explained that she felt 'horrified' when she first heard about home schooling because, 'from a parent perspective I don't think that it (home learning) gives the same quality of learning ... I was more worried about the topics that I wouldn't be able to teach them, especially the older ones'. Her eldest daughter had started her final year at college which Rosa described as very challenging for her.



Alisha was also concerned about home schooling her two primary-age children as well as looking after her three-year-old son. She told us 'I was concerned at the beginning ... I was not sure if I can help them ... there are two of them and my husband was still working, and it was quite difficult for me'. She had to 'juggle the household and then going to my son and then back to my daughter ... for me it was quite stressful as well'.

Patricia's daughter Tia did not understand the work and as Patricia noted 'you couldn't ask questions because there was so many kids in the room ... she was missing bits and not getting the whole of the lessons ... it just did not work at all'. As a single parent, Patricia had no help at home. Eventually, the school asked for Tia to come in for a few days a week as her EHCP classed her as vulnerable.

Michelle felt Anna's school was 'overly optimistic about how long it would last, so they weren't very prepared in terms of administering their own work'. There were no zoom class meetings during the first lockdown, just videos from the teachers setting up the work. This context meant that Michelle supplemented a lot of work herself for Anna which was difficult and led to arguments between them.

Policy enactment theory requires researchers to 'put policies in context and understand more about the processes behind their enactment' (Ball et al. 2012, 2). These examples highlight the lack of resources and in the cases of all but Michelle, confidence to teach their children at home and adhere to the policy guidance at that time (DfE 2019a, 2019b, 2020a). The context framing these low-income families' lived experiences reveals the difficulty of enacting home schooling in terms of the lack of confidence they felt they had to support their child (Patricia, Rita, Michelle, Laura) or children (Alisha, Rosa). Of key concern was the sense they did not have the knowledge and educational background needed to provide support across the range of curriculum subjects and topics.

Four of the six children interviewed concurred that their mum was not a replacement for their teacher and noted some of the challenges this created for home learning. Karla (Laura's daughter), told us that she struggled with hard maths sums and this meant that she 'did work quite hard as well ... when I was at home, I'd always have to work the stuff out myself' which made her feel 'annoyed'. Similarly, Amber's mum (Rosa) was unable to support her with her schoolwork and Amber had to seek help and support from her sister to understand the topics covered. For Kareen (Alisha's son), the impact of limited support was felt 'as soon as I went back to year three after lockdown ... my handwriting had gone low, and I went down a level' despite his mum's best efforts to support his learning.

The multiple distractions at home, in part due to Patricia trying to undertake housework, were a challenge for Tia (Patricia's daughter) who found home learning 'hard' and 'quite boring'. The Google classroom format and her own learning challenges did not help her efforts. Although Patricia would sit with Tia for some of the time during lessons, she felt unable to fully support Tia leading to frustration between mother and daughter.

Conversely, Anna's experience was of a lot of additional work set by Michelle, who was the only parent in our sample to express relative confidence about home schooling. This divergence is perhaps explained by Michelle's own student experiences in higher education at the time of the pandemic.

Drawing on intersectionality theory enables us to understand how five of our six participants' class and gender identities entangle together to produce heightened disadvantage. As women from working-class backgrounds, they perceived that they did not have the educational capital to support their child's home education. The only exception was Michelle, a university student. We acknowledge that the home learning context was challenging to many middle-class families (Darmody, Smyth, and Russell 2021), but a notable difference amongst our sample was the lack of educational confidence experienced by five of the parents in our study. This lack of confidence was in some ways carried by their children, who were aware of their mother's limitations (real or perceived) to support their learning.

## Digital divide

From our data, a further key challenge identified by participants was having appropriate electronic devices to use for study. At the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, five of the six parents interviewed did not have the devices they needed to meet the needs of their children. Rosa, a single mother to five children, had to share devices between her older children. Rita only had an iPhone. Patricia had no laptop and Alisha and Laura had old laptops that did not work. Michelle did have a laptop her child could use from the start of the first lockdown, but ironically her child did not have Google classroom lessons until the second lockdown.

Patricia struggled with accessing a laptop for Tia adding stress and pressure to an already challenging context:

It took a while ... I mean Tia was supposed to have one straight away because she's under the SEN so she was supposed to have one straightaway, but it took, it's got to have taken a good month before she actually got one ... So it was you know chasing, chasing I did a lot of chasing and with everything going on, you didn't want to be doing that.

Rita explained that

I did ask the school for a kindle but they said that they never had any available ... And I thought it was a bit unfair for the child to do anything on a small phone – I mean we only have a small iPhone.

Rita's daughter also wears glasses for her study and trying to view learning material on an iPhone screen was challenging. But there was a further concern as Rita commented that 'I don't really want my child to be using a phone anyway'. There are tensions with children accessing learning materials of phones, when they also have access to the internet, gaming and social media sites. This highlights a real challenge for parents trying to manage their child's interactions online.

Kareem struggled with a poor internet connection and explained that 'at first it was working. But then it was lagging and it wouldn't be actually working properly ... I was really struggling with the internet ... It would have to load for a very long time'. Kareem's family had to find the funds to purchase a new laptop to ensure he could access his learning. This put pressure on the already squeezed finances, where accessing any state support was described by Alisha as a long process that was a struggle itself, she said 'there is a lot of procedures and bureaucracy and this was the hard part I would say'.

Prior to the pandemic, Michelle would not generally work at home. This meant she had a basic internet subscription that was limited in terms of the data provision available. But both her and Anna were using devices during the lockdown simultaneously and Michelle 'was having to pay as well for boosting my internet so I had to pay for an upgrade because I needed to boost the speed ... so it was able for somebody to actually work from home'.

For Laura, the key challenge was navigating the submission of work through Teams and the guilt she experienced when other parents were able to do so with ease. She explained that:

We had like an old netbook type thing but Windows didn't really work ... so we were doing it on the iPad. But then trying to do the work, format it and submit it, it was just all so frustrating and hard and work wasn't going in. And you could see some of the competition as well. For parents who weren't working they could support their kids during that time and as a parent you feel more rubbish as you can see all these kids interacting and you just haven't got the time to do it.

There were differences between the first and second lockdown for Rosa's family as she separated from her husband in the time in between the lockdowns. By the second lockdown, this separation meant that 'we didn't really have so many devices to use for home learning'. The second lockdown impacted upon her young daughter who did not want to do the home learning anymore. It took until the third lockdown to get a laptop for Amber but her reluctance to home learning meant that she went back to school and although there were very few children in, she was happier to return.

Much has been written globally about the digital divide during COVID-19. Coleman (2021) notes that it 'has various dimensions: as well as access to devices and internet, digital skills are important, as are external factors such as parental support, teacher skills and learning environment'. In our sample, all these dimensions were evoked as parents grappled with structural access problems and skills and spaces within the home needed to meet the learning needs of their child. The struggle to access digital devices confirms that despite the government's policy initiative *Get help with technology for remote education* (DfE 2020b), which provided laptops to low-income families via schools, for our participants the enactment at a local, school level, did not happen until well into the second lockdown, by which time over six months of learning had been missed.

## Food poverty

The final theme discussed in this paper is the food poverty experienced by the families in our sample. As noted above, all of the children in our study received free school meals. As highlighted in the literature section of this paper, the policy context was chaotic, changing and poorly conceived from the outset of the pandemic (Loopstra 2020). Thus, it was not surprising that our families both explicitly and implicitly discussed the financial difficulties they encountered when trying to provide enough food for their child(ren) was a real challenge. For example, Rita told us:

It was difficult with money and the child obviously being home the whole day ... I mean the child has to eat, so you have to cook extra, you have to buy extra groceries.

Michelle also expressed the stress and financial strain of providing extra food, explaining:

... food is massively expensive and at that time we weren't getting any help, she's (Anna) on free school meals, which obviously guarantees me at least one solid meal a day that she's being fed that I was now having to provide.

Anna's loss of her hot lunch was a real concern to Michelle who was struggling with increased electric and Wi-Fi bills in addition to increased food prices.

Rosa commented that she found providing additional food to her five children was much easier when the provision changed from being a bag of food provided by the school, similar to the photo below and which sparked outrage in the media due to the insufficient quantity and selection of food, to a £15 voucher. She found 'it was easier when we had the value of £15 compared to what you got in those bags. I think I could have coped better with getting £15 and not a bag of food'. When the vouchers came, Rosa could make the food go further.

Patricia explained that

we got food parcels which were delivered to the door that's what started, but it was just like an extra you know pint of milk, cheese, butters some fruit ... then eventually OneCan took over so we would get three or four bags dropped at the door and that was a real help.

She needed this help because as she noted:

I'm used to going to the cheaper shops like Lidl or Aldi ... which I couldn't do that, so if I actually got a delivery slot it would be Tesco so you'd find you'd be spending more money and I was running out of stuff and I had no one to get it ... And I was spending more money ordering shopping online ... It did take its toll.

Laura noted that early in the pandemic she was really struggling to make ends meet; 'at one point I had to get a food parcel ... and we still got a charity fruit and veg box every other week ... but it just feels crap when you're not self sufficient' (Figure 1).

The provision of food represented a policy reversal that was championed by the Premier League footballer Rashford and represented an important change for our participants. But there was evidence in our sample that participants were reliant on charities to support and supplement the food they had access to, as in the case of Laura. We note that the theme of food poverty is distinct from other areas of home schooling discussed in this paper, as Crew (2020, 7) notes 'many families



**Figure 1.** Free school meal food replacement parcel for one week's worth of lunches (Whittaker 2021).

have been unable to access food, support and items needed to engage in education' and without sufficient food, the possibilities for a child to learn are significantly diminished.

## Conclusions

The key aim of this paper has been to provide empirical, qualitative insights about the challenging context experienced by our sample of low-income families as they enacted home-schooling policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper has focused on the impact in relation to parents' confidence to teach their children, providing enough digital devices and a stable Wi-Fi connection and managing with limited food.

Through the paper, we have addressed the following two research questions:

- How are everyday rhythms of care and education enacted, and by whom? What challenges did households face in the process of enactment?

- What are the ongoing financial and resource implications for households of these changed and changing arrangements?

To address the first question, we argue that women bore the brunt of enacting care and education, in some instances alongside paid work. Our qualitative accounts highlight the stark and emotive accounts of mothers not feeling good enough or educated enough to support their child(ren). Research argues that the social, economic and educational effects of the pandemic were felt much more acutely amongst vulnerable populations (Maestripieri 2021). Examining the intersections of class and gender confirms that this was the case in our study as the mother was balancing multiple stereotypical gender roles (housewife, child care, elderly parent care) whilst feeling inadequately equipped to do so. The enactment of home learning during the first and second lockdowns was at times a crushing experience that only further entrenched a sense of failure and inadequacy compounded in part by perceived middle-class competitiveness through, for example, engagement in online lessons and homework.

The effects of increased structural inequality were apparent amongst our sample in relation to the digital divide and food poverty. Ironically, policies aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 led to an 'increase of inequalities compared to pre-pandemic times' with the most socio-economically disadvantaged experiencing a sharp increase in material deprivation (Maestripieri 2021, 642). As Maestripieri (2021, 644) also noted 'digital inequalities strongly affected the capacity of families to cope with online teaching' highlighting the tension of enacting national policy within individual households and at the level of individual schools. COVID-19 policy guidance did not take account of the nuanced circumstances facing households and communities, confirming once again that policy is a crude and at times cruel tool for mitigating against the effects of socio-economic inequality.

Our findings confirm that five of our six mothers found supporting their child's home learning a difficult experience in the context of their homes and daily family life. The national policy mandate to close schools to all but key worker children left our participants with no choice but to provide home schooling. The challenge of providing quality digital devices and Wi-Fi was stressed by all the mothers and five of the children in the sample. Drawing on policy enactment theory, we highlighted that despite the policy provision for low-income families to obtain a device from their school, this was not the case for our sample and many had to struggle on phones or very old laptops that were not fit for purpose. The lockdown meant a daily loss of a free school meal adding further strain to our families who all noted the expense of food on top of all the other additional experiences (e.g. electricity, gas, Wi-Fi).

As with any research project, there are limitations. In our study, the small sample size and lack of ethnic diversity limit the comparative and intersectional analyses provided here. With a larger sample of minority ethnic low-income families, we could have explored the intersections between ethnicity, class and gender. There is a continued need to listen to these voices and ensure they are not lost as we move into post-pandemic life. The findings from this small-scale study are nonetheless insightful and of use to policymakers. The narratives shared here confirm that low-income families require immediate and effective state policy support to mitigate against disproportionate losses in learning opportunities. For children to learn effectively at home, they need access to a quality laptop and Wi-Fi, and they need to have enough to eat. These findings seem obvious and common sense, and yet our six families all reported these needs were not met and their child's education and quality of life were significantly impacted.

As Wilkinson and Pickett's (2010) study comprehensively highlighted, there is a strong relationship between high inequality and greater health and social problems, with the least unequal states having better outcomes in education, health and social mobility than more unequal states. In England, a country with some of the worse inequality gaps in the world noted over a decade ago (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010) and evidence that this has worsened due to the pandemic (Cullinane and Montacute 2020) there is clearly much more work to do post-pandemic to accelerate the progress of low-income families, those who suffered so much during the COVID-19 lockdowns.



## Note

1. Keyworkers were defined in England as Education and childcare, key public services, local and national government, food and other necessary goods. Public safety and national security, transport and border and utilities, communications and financial services (DfE 2020a).
2. Key stage one refers to the education provision for children aged 5–7.

## Disclosure statement

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