European Journal of Special Needs Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rejs20

Blurring boundaries: the invasion of home as a safe space for families and children with SEND during COVID-19 lockdown in England

Natalie Canning & Beryl Robinson

To cite this article: Natalie Canning & Beryl Robinson (2021) Blurring boundaries: the invasion of home as a safe space for families and children with SEND during COVID-19 lockdown in England, European Journal of Special Needs Education, 36:1, 65-79, DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2021.1872846

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1872846

Published online: 12 Jan 2021.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION
2021, VOL. 36, NO. 1, 65–79
https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2021.1872846

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Blurring boundaries: the invasion of home as a safe space for families and children with SEND during COVID-19 lockdown in England

Natalie Canning and Beryl Robinson

Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines experiences of families and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) with a focus on Autism during a 9-week period in 2020 of 'lockdown' due to COVID-19 where the UK Government's message was 'stay home, stay safe'. For these families, home is where children can be themselves, shut out the outside world and have their own routine. This research draws on interpretative, ethnographic narrative data from eight families of children with Autism/complex needs, aged 5–13 years, and how they have experienced lockdown with competing pressures from school and other agencies. Data was collected from telephone/online interviews and a closed social media platform where parents shared their challenges. Thematic analysis found that home as a safe space was invaded by external expectations. School and meetings with agencies, once separate, became part of home, blurring the boundaries. Home a safe space is examined, as well as children's social/emotional wellbeing and how families negotiate external demands. Home should remain a safe space, boundaries should not be blurred, and families should be supported in understanding learning and development can come from within everyday experiences where children express their interest and engagement.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 28 August 2020
Accepted 13 December 2020

KEYWORDS
SEND; autism; social/emotional wellbeing; home environment; external pressures

Introduction

In April 2020, UNICEF reported that 2.34 billion children under the age of 18 live in one of the 186 countries with movement restrictions in place due to COVID-19. Consequently, 60% of children living in one of the 82 countries experienced full (7%) or partial (53%) movement restrictions (Fore 2020). In England from March to June 2020 a period of 'lockdown' was imposed by the UK Government to guard against the spread of COVID-19. Restrictions included school, playground and public park closures, and restrictions around the frequency and amount of time people spent out of their households without access to social and extended family networks. These restrictions can be far reaching including socio-economic implications and psychological wellbeing (Berkman 2008; Hutchins et al. 2009). For children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) including Autism the lockdown period has been intense; blurring the boundaries between home

CONTACT Natalie Canning Natalie.canning@open.ac.uk

as a safe, autonomous space and outside pressures of continuing 'as normal' with schooling and contact with outside agencies. Although physical safety was a priority during this period, the psychological implications, especially for children with SEND/Autism have yet to be revealed (Armitage and Nellums 2020).

For many children home is where they can be themselves and engage in play and activities that interest them (Brooker 2010). It is also a place where they have a sense of control and the ability to influence what matters to them through their actions and being offered the opportunity for their opinion and views to count (James and James 2004). A regular routine based on children's interests is important for children with SEND/Autism. Routines are used by families to organise and provide stability in everyday life. They stimulate interest and help manage stress levels within a household for both family members and for children who find comfort in knowing what to expect (Larson 2006). Families find routines that best suit their needs usually through trial and error or from other experienced parents/carers through support networks. The most successful routines are when children are at the centre of the process, where they are interested in what is happening and are motivated to engage (Trawick Smith 2015). This sometimes requires lateral and creative thinking in terms of basing everything around a theme/subject that children show interest in. Home environments have the flexibility to do this, as they offer a safe space where children can feel confident. The home also supports children's agency where they have a certain amount of control and choice over what they do (Canning 2020). Listening to children's voices, reading their body language and responding to their needs was a reoccurring theme in this research. It supports Qvortrup et al. (1994, 2) view of children as 'beings not becomings' where children's voices are recognised and are most prominent when children are engaged in something they are motivated to do and where they have control.

Home as a 'safe place' is where children have familiarity, usually a space they can call their own such as a bedroom where they feel a sense of belonging and the ability to have an awareness of their own identity (Schaaf et al. 2011; De Wolfe 2014). However, even 'safe spaces' can trigger extreme responses from children with SEND/Autism. O'Nions et al. (2018) argue that children's sensitivity between the environment and cognitive processing can incite extreme reactions. These can include intolerance of uncertainty (Rodgers et al. 2012), absence of parental attention, provision of specific activities (Marquenie et al. 2011) and changes in routine (Ludlow, Skelly, and Rohleder 2012). These situations have become more commonplace in homes because of the demands placed on families during lockdown. Families have had to adapt to new ways of working from home, whilst contending with homeschooling, not being able to attend face to face appointments and accommodating other agencies such as social services through online meetings. These are all invasions of home as a safe and autonomous space which would not normally happen. O'Nions et al. (2018) argue that in everyday situations parents of children with SEND/Autism already make numerous adaptions to scaffold children's inclusion in activities and completion of routine tasks and make more effort to stimulate their child's development compared to parents of typically developing children (Maljaars et al. 2014).

Prolonged school closures, home confinement and social restrictions have consequences for children's physical and mental health (Brooks et al. 2020). The home is important to provide stability and normalcy and it is left to families to find ways to

cope with external pressures such as maintaining schooling through online platforms, dealing with agencies and juggling work commitments. Consequently, this is a critical moment to better understand the blurred boundaries between physical and environmental restrictions, learning, development and wellbeing.

Theoretical framing

The framing for this research is based on social phenomenology, exploring the subjective experiences of families of children with SEND/Autism. The often taken-for-granted aspects of daily lives are examined through a multiple lenses of layered experiences and interactions in social relationships. Through social phenomenology meaning is given and judgements are made in situations (Schutz 1970). The subjective meaning given to experiences during lockdown and the challenges faced by families are the focus of this study.

Social phenomenology involves two aspects of interpretive understanding; the process by which sense is made or interpreted through everyday happenings and the process by which generalisations are constructed that are then used to interpret what is being researched (Berger and Lukmann 1991). Schutz argued that lived experiences are more than casual events and intersubjectivity that social phenomenology supports, enables common perceptions to be significant. Framing the research within social phenomenology facilitates the families' voices and lived experiences to be exposed within the parameters of a country-wide lockdown.

Methods

The study followed a qualitative ethnographic narrative design exploring the opinions, experiences and motivations of families during lockdown. It specifically looked at the way in which home life was disturbed and how families managed those challenges. The research question asked: *what have been the challenges for your child during lockdown and in what ways have you managed those challenges?*

A narrative methodology sought to understand families' in the moment lived experiences and emotions (Chase 2017). Lockdown for the eight families in the study was different yet had commonalities in terms of accommodating all family members in one space, working in new ways, using technology creatively, supporting family members wellbeing and organising time differently. Their narrative contributed to a portrayal of experiences from the same unprecedented event. Knowledge created through this type of analysis is constantly evolving and understanding is situated within a context; it is not value-free or independent of interpretation (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). However, there is richness in the detail and insight provided through narrative data and the nature of shared experiences.

Data collection and participants

The research used three main methods of connecting with families; a private social media messaging group, telephone interviews and internet video interviews. The research was conducted over a 9-week period of lockdown in England between

Table 1. Participant families and data collection method.

Family	Age and gender of focus child	Data collection method
Agar	'Ben' 10-year-old, Male	Social network group
Brown	'Ella' 7-year-old, Female	Social network group
Crawley	'Samir' 11-year-old, Male	Telephone interview
Dahmer	'Kyle' 11-year-old, Male	Online interview
Elliston	'Jack' 8-year-old, Male 'Albert' 13-year-old, Male	Social network group
Farmer	'Pete' 11-year- old, Male	Telephone Interview
Gates	'Omar' 8-year-old, Male 'Gus' 5-year-old, Male	Social network group
Hassim	'Daniel' 8-year-old, Male	Online interview

March and June 2020. Participants consisted of eight families from the South East area of the UK, all with children with SEND/Autism. Families were existing members of support networks, but children did not know each other or socialise together, and they attended different mainstream schools in the locality. The main data collection methods for each family are outlined in Table 1.

Ethics

Ethical considerations included processes that provided families' ease, familiarity and comfort in order to enable their full participation. This was important, given the aim of gaining insights into experiences of lockdown in relation to the potential invasion of a safe home space. A member of the research team who has a child with Autism already had relationships with families through support networks and an existing closed social media messaging group.

Alongside adhering to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) revised guidelines (BERA 2018) families consented through email and had the opportunity to withdraw from the research before a set date in case they changed their minds. Before any comment or message string was used, individual consent was gained from the family member who made the comment.

The children, aged between 5 and 13 years old, were asked for their assent rather than full informed consent (Hill 2005). This risks not knowing whether children understand the context in which the research will be presented or the implications for them later. Parents and carers therefore acted as 'gatekeepers' for children's well-being and gauged if they were happy to contribute to how, for example, home-schooling and having their routine changed made them feel. All names of participants in this study are pseudonyms. The messages families sent to one another as a means of support were a private closed group and the member of the research team who collected the data was careful not to influence the messages/discussions in a particular direction, giving participants space to express their experiences.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun and Clark 2013). From the messages and interviews (telephone and online) a systematic review was conducted identifying patterns of reoccurring themes including positive/negative aspects of

conversations. The themes identified were analysed in relation to the research questions, whilst reflecting on the theoretical framing of social phenomenology. Thematic analysis as a flexible method enabled focus on analysing meaning across the entire data set of families' experiences and examples.

Limitations

The research was a small study of eight families in a localised area in the UK. It focussed on children with Autism although there are many other issues associated with SEND that could have been included. Although the sample was small the educational experiences came from different mainstream schools indicating that the debates raised in this paper are not local to one educational community. The families in the research are connected through associations with SEND support groups and are not all known to each other.

Findings and discussion

From the data analysis, three main themes were identified: schoolwork demands; interactions with others (family members and other agency professionals) and the use of technology. Within these, sub-themes of the use of space in the home, routine, time limitations and conformity were also identified as reoccurring. Discussion around creative solutions, learning and the significance of wellbeing contributes to the experiences of families and the way in which the ideology of home as a safe space has been deconstructed by the necessity for different living and working arrangements for parents and children.

It could be argued that the themes identified are the same issues faced by any family during lockdown. However, overwhelmingly families reported that these issues are magnified for children with SEND/Autism. The themes resulting from the analysis reflect the lived experiences of families during lockdown. Social phenomenology is reflected in the individual and collective narratives of families supporting their children during this time. The narratives from families enabled thematic analysis to identify shared perceptions and to explore why they are so significant for children with SEND/Autism. The discussion reflects the issues of home being used for multiple purposes during lockdown, which impacts children with SEND/Autism seeing the home as a 'safe space', because of competing priorities taking precedence over the space at home. Framing the research within social phenomenology facilitates the families' voices and lived experiences to be exposed and understood within the parameters of children and family's experiences of lockdown.

Figure 1 is an illustration of the relational intersubjectivity of the themes and sub-themes in the research.

Schoolwork demands

School, once a separate space with its own routines and educational requirements became part of home during lockdown. As well as the logistics of organising home-schooling, some parents felt that their children were overwhelmed by the workload and

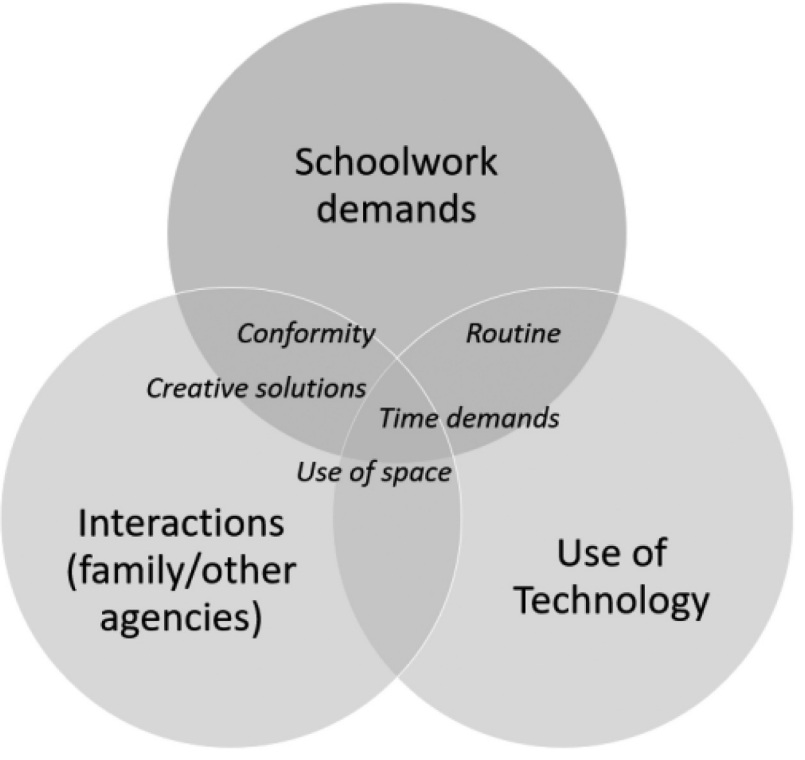

Figure 1. Relational illustration of themes and sub-themes (in italics).

sensory experience of using an online platform. Gus is 5 years old; his mother posted this message on the social network group:

> Gus just completely couldn't get his head around being asked to do schoolwork at home, we couldn't even get him to sit at the table to engage in it without a massive meltdown.

Similarly, Daniel's mother expressed her concerns about the logistics of online schooling for her son:

> There were up to 30 children online which was quite over sensory for him and he kept wanting to press all the buttons and fidget. He was easily distracted as there were so many children on the screen. The teacher used a power point, but Daniel didn't have time to read it as he gets distracted. We had to sit and scribe for him and were his one-to-one support to help him concentrate and listen or explain what the teacher had said (online interview).

This put extra pressure on families to support their children's learning through an online environment. Lockdown was implemented quickly so some children struggled with the transition from school to home learning where a home space suddenly became a school and more formal learning space. Families were also concerned that equity was not addressed by schools in supporting their children or recognising the extra work parents had to do to enable children to participate in online lessons. Parents felt pressure in trying to maintain high concentration and engagement in accommodating the external

demands of online lessons which tried to follow a similar format to face to face interactions. Samir's mother talks about some of her challenges with her 11-year-old son:

> The first week or two was difficult with lots of meltdowns but when I wrote out a routine, he was okay. But it seemed as school caught up with organising online learning, they kept changing what they were giving children and more and more work was set; he was doing 6-7 hours a day. The SENCO [Special Educational Needs Coordinator] teacher said 'he doesn't have to do it all' but he kept getting emails with awards [certificates for completing work] so he didn't want to miss anything. Because of this pressure he got up at 6am to start schoolwork before anyone else was awake. It was difficult towards the end as he was getting tired. In his head he had a routine of what he wanted to do [schoolwork and home life] so when he couldn't fit it all into the day, he had a meltdown. This was because he was spending so much time at 'school' online (telephone interview).

Daniel's mother also felt pressure to make sure everything was organised for her son:

> I downloaded schoolwork from the website, then worked through it and planned for Daniel as he won't do it on his own. I have to print the work and stick it in his book so he can see a beginning and end and what writing he is expected to do. He has issues with physical writing so doesn't like to write for long. But I also work, and this was too much for me to keep up; the planning took a few hours each week just to prepare the work in a format he could do (online interview).

As did the Agar family who posted this message on the social network group:

> Ben did not have a differentiated curriculum from the rest of his class. As a parent it took a huge amount of my time to get him to complete daily tasks as he does not have the level of maturity as his classmates and is far too easily distracted to do them himself.

One of the pressures that parents felt was the difference between their children and children without additional needs, for example the Dahmer family expressed their awareness of reminding their 11-year-old son with Autism to sit still during an online session for children to meet their new classmates for next term because they were concerned other parents would judge their child's behaviour.

Interactions with others

The online environment was not a substitute for face to face engagement. The families reported that they struggled with this aspect of lockdown restrictions. The implication that video conferencing would go some way to mitigate circumstances was more complex for children with SEND/Autism, as the Hassin family explained:

> Daniel had a meeting with his new teacher for next year, but this was with 30 other children, all online. He got anxious and tried to hide from the video. The new teacher didn't know him, and he didn't know her so it was like a stranger talking to him in his home, but he couldn't get away from it. He wanted to switch the computer off …
>
> We have had different teachers doing online sessions who Daniel doesn't know and they don't know Daniel. He had electronic circuits to show as something he had done. (Another parent told us it was a good idea to have something at hand to talk about to take the pressure out of having to talk about himself). He talked about his circuits and the teacher asked questions about it. He also had a teddy to hold as a comfort to help him concentrate. Another

> time there was a teacher who talked too quickly, and he couldn't follow the work. This upset him, and he was quite anxious as he couldn't keep up (online interview).

Families have also been dealing with interventions from external agencies such as social services. The Farmer family are foster parents to Pete, an 11-year-old boy diagnosed with complex needs. They experienced significant complexities in accommodating online meetings because agencies continued with skeleton staff, working with professionals that the family had not met before.

> The whole period has been very unsettling, for example, one adult who we had not met before asked to speak to Pete. I said, 'I have to prepare him for your call because if he doesn't know you are calling it will throw him'. So, she called when everything had been explained, then she said she wanted to turn on her video so she could see Pete and he could see her. We said 'no' as Pete had not been prepared for that, but she insisted even though Pete said 'no' three times. She was a stranger to him, so saying things like, 'next time I will call later so I'm not in my pyjamas' is not helpful. She might think she is putting him at ease by joking about things, but she is a stranger and it did upset him. Organisations that have multiple different people with varied approaches have quite an impact coming into the house online (telephone interview).

For all families the safety and privacy of the home has been paramount during the lockdown period, so online interactions have not been a simple video exchange. Instead, meetings with other agencies, normally held in person in a neutral environment, became part of a home space via the internet. The Farmer family were very aware that they needed to respond to the demands of external agencies and school, but that they were ultimately responsible for Pete's safety and wellbeing. They summed this up when talking about the logistics of video interactions:

> I think it is important that house rules for video meetings should be agreed. So, I did this with Pete's mental health team. Therapy has to be in a safe space but has to be independent. In face to face, I would not be allowed into a therapy session. But online meetings take place in our home, on my laptop and I am responsible for Pete who would not normally be allowed to have the laptop without supervision. So, one of our basic rules is once the laptop is turned on, it will not be moved because if for example he sits on the floor with it, it could be trod on or kicked, or he might say, 'I want to show you this.' and carry it over to something, with the rest of the house on view. We have rules because appointments are continuing in our home and that space is private. I must ensure the other children in our home are being respected or it becomes too invasive (Mother, telephone interview).

This is an example of how the home space has become a work and administrative centre which is challenging for children with SEND/Autism to comprehend. The physical space may be the same, but the way in which it is used has changed in numerous and subtle ways which require new boundaries to be set which is confusing and constrictive for children with SEND/Autism.

The Crawley family had concerns about the impact a lack of contact had on 11-year-old Samir now not wanting to leave the house because he has become so used to being inside and has anxiety about contracting COVID-19. Samir's mother commented:

> Trying to get him out the house now is hard. We were doing an exercise video every day and he didn't want to go outside. Before all of this happened he used to get really anxious when outside and he's still got that anxiety, but we have started trying to go to quiet places to build it up gradually … he's loved being at home and once schoolwork is finished, he's loved

> having control over his stuff; the amount of stuff he's built and designed is amazing (telephone interview).

She went on to say:

> Samir has had online lessons with power point slides but not with seeing a teacher, instead there is a box at the bottom of the screen and if you need to speak to the teacher you type in questions and the teacher will type answers, so there is no human interaction … He needed to 'see' someone before the end of term so we went to see his teacher which the school arranged and they chatted for 45 minutes (telephone interview).

The lack of ability to connect with others has impacted those children already sensitive to change. The adaptability of the home space may be a positive attribute, but can be difficult for children with SEND/Autism to rationalise the need for change as the Agar family explains:

> Ben has become even more introverted to the point it is hard to get him to leave the house … Another issue has been that he has missed out on the special interest groups that formed part of his intervention plan at school and he doesn't understand why these groups aren't happening anymore, even though we've tried to explain (social network group).

Interestingly, the Elliston family had the option of keeping their children in school during lockdown because they had an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in place. Mr Elliston commented on the social networking group:

> For my eldest (aged 13) home and school might as well be different planets. He will not do anything related to school at home. He wouldn't have done any work if he'd stayed at home. However, he'd have also been aware that nothing was getting done which would have made him anxious. We saw this in action one day when he wanted to work at home rather than go to school and was a bundle of nerves by the end of the day. The youngest (aged 8) is less rigid but has really benefited from remaining in school too. Having structure and routine, even if there were significant changes, has kept him calm and comfortable.

Participants in the study reported that getting an EHCP is not straightforward. Only 3.3% of children in schools in England have an EHCP with a further 12.1% having SEN support without a plan (National statistics 2020). With an EHCP the Elliston family had the choice of sending their children to school. An option that some families in the study would have liked because their children see home as a safe space where they are able to express their individual behaviours and have a sense of control over their choices and decisions. For families in the study, one of the main issues has been the approach schools have adopted with their children; including them in large online teaching sessions where in a face to face situation they would receive individual support. Parents already investing huge effort into meeting the expectations of online learning are additionally taking on the role of support teacher (O'Nions et al. 2018). Consequently, families feel that during lockdown SEND/Autism has not been formally recognised and so there is no consideration of extra support and no differentiation in the learning materials expected to be completed at home. This is something that requires further investigation.

Nevertheless, there were some perceived benefits to homeschooling as the Brown family suggested when reflecting on their 7-year-old daughter Ella's experience:

> Benefits have been being able to complete home learning in different environments for example in the garden on the trampoline, on the sofa, and even in a tent. It has also

> enabled us to extend areas of her interest and explore them more deeply (social network group).

The Agar family reported that Ben's teacher helped by sticking to a set routine:

> His teacher set schoolwork in the same format each week making it easy to stick to a timetable that could be ticked off as each task was completed. His teacher made a short video each week giving him encouragement and calling out any great work which really incentivised him. Just hearing her voice made his eyes light up (social network group).

As lockdown continued some families felt empowered to say 'no' to requests from school to send in their children's completed work because they witnessed the detrimental effect of pressure children felt to undertake work. They did not force their children to complete activities, recognising the emotional impact school demands had on their child's well-being. Parents valued their child's mental health above the need for completing school-work as expressed by the Gates family:

> We haven't forced Omar (aged 8) to do any of the school power points for the last few weeks. It was all getting too much emotionally for him (social network group).

And the Crawly family:

> School sent a timetable but I said he could do it in his own order so he could have some power and independence back (telephone interview).

For others, they have continued to try to complete all school requests, believing that although challenging, it is important for their child to feel part of a classroom, albeit online.

Technology

Interactions during lockdown have relied on the use of technology. This research has relied heavily on collecting data remotely through messaging and online interviews. The capability of technology used to connect with others has not always been a positive experience as the Farmer family explains:

> My phone has died because it's been overused, and I've had to download so many apps because the work comes in different formats and the online meetings use different media (telephone interview).

The Gates family on the social network group posted:

> Gus has spent more time than ever using the iPad to learn than we previously would have allowed just to help keep his mind occupied but then trying to get it back off him has been a struggle when his time is up.

The Farmer family have also experienced similar challenges:

> It's my laptop Pete is using, and it has lots of confidential work stuff on it so I must watch that little fingers don't go where they shouldn't. It means I can't leave any time with him unsupervised (telephone interview).

The use of technology has also resulted in adaptations needed to ensure schoolwork being sent through is appropriate for individual children's needs. Samir's mother reflected:

> I was exhausted as I had to second guess everything, check things were in place/working beforehand and if the internet broke we had a complete meltdown as he felt he had to be doing the work straight away (telephone interview).

The Hassin family reported a similar concern, demonstrating how flexible families became to accommodate the needs of their children and the school:

> There was a science day on the timetable, and I mentioned to the teacher that I couldn't get the ingredients. The next thing I knew, someone from the school turned up unannounced with a science pack! It was a kind thought but we were in our pyjamas and did not look ready to start school! Daniel didn't know anything about the science day. I hadn't told him so he wouldn't get upset missing it, so I had to quickly tell him about it in front of the adult from school. We then had pressure all day doing experiments as Daniel wanted to do all of them and my work went out the window (online interview).

The sharing of technology as well as the physical space within the home proved stressful for families:

> I was not able to work when the online school sessions were happening as he needed support. We also had to find a suitable space, making sure there was no mess behind him as this would be seen by 30 other families and the school (Hassin family, online interview).

This meant that families had to come up with creative learning solutions to juggle schoolwork, technology and competing time pressures.

Creative learning

The creative solutions families found as they navigated lockdown revealed creative and experimental responses to learning. How children made sense of what they were doing contributed to their creativity, enjoyment and motivation to want to explore (Pramling Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008). The families reflected that everyday experiences during lockdown provided learning opportunities whereas formal online school caused distress. Families where they did not set a time limit enabled emergent learning, for example:

> Daniel's Dad did an online session with him and the teacher talked about roman numerals. Daniel was interested but didn't understand it, so his Dad spent time explaining it and then writing an excel spreadsheet for him to do different roman numerals. Daniel learnt about excel and can now tell you any number in roman numerals. He loves them and has done a whole project on excel with his Dad (Hassin Family, online interview).

Not having to compete with other children resulted in positive experiences and greater self-confidence. Consequently, when the home environment was used for playful exchanges without set outcomes children in the study wanted to play, learn and discover. The Brown family confirmed that this has resulted in more positive wellbeing for their 7-year-old daughter, Ella.

In the process of analysing the findings, it became clear that there have been many creative solutions found to support schoolwork, promote positive interactions and deal with the logistics of technology. Examples from the Farmer and Agar families include:

> I have made schoolwork as fun as possible and each day, after he has completed work, he can choose from a box of activities I have prepared. Lockdown has been good for his self-confidence as he has not had to deal with competition or work at maintaining relationships with other children. It has been just me and him working together and I have seen his ability shoot through the roof (Farmer family, telephone interview).

> Not having the stress of dealing with other children in terms of social contact, has made him calmer and addressed some of his sensory issues. Also not being pressured to complete tasks under a set time limit produced some great results, especially with creative writing which he usually struggles with (Agar family, social network group).

Wellbeing

The importance of a home routine for children with SEND/Autism highlighted by families was disrupted. All activities were confined to home, challenging children's social and emotional wellbeing and disrupting the status-quo of well-established routines. For children with SEND/Autism, home and school are very separate spaces with different functions, boundaries and expectations. The UK Government acknowledged that the wellbeing of children with SEND was important during lockdown and included the need for personalised learning with support from a key worker (DfE 2020). This was not the experience of families in this research. Each family managed challenges in their own way, yet these have been largely unsupported by schools or other agencies. The overwhelming feeling of being 'left to get on with it' (Agar family, social networking group) has put extra pressure on an already challenging situation. The notion of home as a 'safe space' where children are able to be autonomous, rely on familiarity and have a space they can call their own was disrupted as the change in dynamics at home meant that reliable routines were different. For example, family members not usually in the house at the same time were suddenly occupying the same space. Schoolwork, a separate entity in the minds of the children was expected to take place in a space not intended for such activity. Technology used for fun was now used for formal learning. These small, but significant changes to the home environment altered the dynamics in the concept of 'home as a safe space'.

The balance of creating an educational routine at home alongside continuing home-based everyday activities has been stressful for children and families. The study shows a cycle of not being able to achieve external demands because of extra time needed to organise and complete tasks alongside the effort required to persuade children to engage. Families have been left feeling like they have failed when unable to deliver because for children, their home, not usually used for formal education, has been invaded and they do not understand why they are being asked to do activities at home which are usually done at school.

A BBC news report found that pre-existing inequalities in relation to accessing educational support have been exacerbated with many families being 'forgotten'

(Richardson and Sellgren 2020). Although families in this study felt that there was regular contact with schools the understanding relating to SEND/Autism and adapting learning at home was not accommodated in relation to the expectations of teachers. The Hassin family commented that although they understood everyone was finding lockdown challenging it was more extreme supporting a child with Autism when they were unable to do simple tasks like switching on a computer without support. The pressure of managing different elements of lockdown including homeschooling, other children, work commitments and family mental wellbeing created unrealistic expectations with parents dealing in unknowns. Foster mother to Pete reflected, 'I feel so unsettled and I know what's going on. If I feel like this, then what is it like for children?'

Conclusion

The reflection from Pete's mother encapsulates the arguments of this paper in that home, once a reliable, consistent and safe space for children with SEND/Autism has been disrupted. The boundaries have been blurred, with competing demands and pressure from school, other agencies and home working commitments. Families need support in developing learning opportunities from everyday experiences where children express their interest and engagement because the formal structure and expectations of school cannot be simply transferred to home for children with SEND/Autism. Consequently, there is a delicate balance between supporting children's continued learning, whilst protecting their sense of being safe, autonomous and confident within their home environment.

In this research families have attempted to take away pressure by shielding their children from the demands of schools and adapting learning that is meaningful and engaging for their children. They have assessed the significance of requirements and made judgements about what is appropriate. This approach has also been applied to requests from external agencies as well as educational establishments. In recognising this filtering process is necessary, families have worked hard to ensure positive experiences for their children; reading between the lines to understand the implications for their individual circumstances and therefore minimising the blurring of boundaries to safeguard their children's wellbeing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Natalie Canning http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7683-400X

References

Armitage, R., and L. B. Nellums. 2020. "Considering Inequalities in the School Closure Response to COVID-19." *The Lancet Global Health* 8 (5): e644. doi:10.1016/S2214-109X(20)30116-9.

BERA (British Educational Research Association). 2018. *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Southwell: BERA.

Berger, P., and T. Lukmann. 1991. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books.

Berkman, B. E. 2008. "Mitigating Pandemic Influenza: The Ethics of Implementing a School Closure Policy." *Journal of Public Health Management and Practice* 14 (4): 372–378.

Braun, V., and V. Clark. 2013. *Successful Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE.

Brooker, L. 2010. "Learning to Play in a Cultural Context." In *Play and Learning in the Early Years*, edited by P. Broadhead, J. Howard, and E. Wood, 27–42. London: SAGE.

Brooks, S. K., R. K. Webster, L. E. Smith, L. Woodland, S. Wessely, N. Greenberg, and G. J. Rubin. 2020. "The Psychological Impact of Quarantine and How to Reduce It: Rapid Review of the Evidence." *The Lancet* 395 (10227): 912–920.

Canning, N. 2020. *Children's Empowerment in Play*. Oxon: Routledge/TACTYC book series.

Chase, S. 2017. "Narrative Inquiry: Towards Theoretical and Methodological Maturity." In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 546–560. 5th ed. California: SAGE.

De Wolfe, J. 2014. *Parents of Children with Autism: An Ethnography*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Department for Education (DfE). 2020. *Supporting the Wellbeing of Primary Pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disability SEND*. London: Crown Copyright.

Fore, H. 2020. *'Don't Let Children Be the Hidden Victims of COVID-19 Pandemic' Unicef*. press release. London. https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/dont-let-children-be-hidden-victimscovid-19-pandemic .

Hammersley, M., and P. Atkinson. 2019. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 4th ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

Hill, M. 2005. "Ethical Considerations in Researching Children's Experiences." In *Researching Children's Experiences: Approaches and Methods*, edited by S. Greene and D. Hogan, 61–86. London: SAGE.

Hutchins, S. S., B. I. Truman, T. L. Merlin, and S. C. Redd. 2009. "Protecting Vulnerable Populations from Pandemic Influenza in the United States: A Strategic Imperative." *American Journal of Public Health* 99: S243–S248.

James, A., and A. James. 2004. *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice*. New York: Palgrave.

Larson, E. 2006. "Caregiving and Autism: How Does Children's Propensity for Routinization Influence Participation in Family Activities?" *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health* 26 (2): 69–79.

Ludlow, A., C. Skelly, and P. Rohleder. 2012. "Challenges Faced by Parents of Children Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Health Psychology* 17 (5): 702–711.

Maljaars, J., H. Boonen, G. Lambrechts, K. Van Leeuwen, and I. Noens. 2014. "Maternal Parenting Behavior and Child Behavior Problems in Families of Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 44 (3): 501–512.

Marquenie, K., S. Rodger, K. Mangohig, and A. Cronin. 2011. "Dinnertime and Bedtime Routines and Rituals in Families with a Young Child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal* 58 (3): 145–154.

National statistics. 2020. "Special Educational Needs in England." Gov.uk. July 2. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england

O'Nions, E., F. Happé, K. Evers, H. Boonen, and I. Noens. 2018. "How Do Parents Manage Irritability, Challenging Behaviour, Non-Compliance and Anxiety in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders? A Meta-Synthesis." *Journal of Autism and Development Disorders* 48: 1272–1286.

Pramling Samuelsson, I., and M. Carlsson. 2008. "The Playing Learning Child: Towards a Pedagogy of Early Childhood." *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 52 (6): 623–641.

Qvortrup, J., M. Bardy, G. Sgritta, and H. Wintersberger. 1994. *Childhood Matters*. Vienna: European Centre.

Richardson, H., and K. Sellgren. 2020. "Utter Abandonment of Special Needs Families during Lockdown." BBC News, July 1. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53248609

Rodgers, J., M. Glod, B. Connolly, and H. McConachie. 2012. "The Relationship between Anxiety and Repetitive Behaviours in Autism Spectrum Disorder." *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 42 (11): 2404–2409.

Schaaf, R., S. Toth-Cohen, S. Johnson, G. Outten, and T. Benevides. 2011. "The Everyday Routines of Families of Children with Autism: Examining the Impact of Sensory Processing Difficulties on the Family." *Autism: The National Autism Society* 15: 373–389.

Schutz, A. 1970. *On Phenomenology and Social Relations: Selected Writings*. Edited by H. Wagner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Trawick Smith, J. 2015. "Social Play in School." In *Play Form Birth to Twelve*, edited by D. Pronin Fromberg and D. Bergen, 183–190. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge.