

What the ‘lost children’ helped us find

Emily Rowe and Jenifer Smith

ABSTRACT

The public emphasis on ‘lost learning’ and hapless child victims fails to acknowledge children’s drive to learn and misconceives the role of the teacher. Through direct conversations and close observations Emily Rowe, class teacher, and Jeni Smith, school governor, worked together to learn from year 5 and 6 children about their experiences of learning during the pandemic and to reflect on what children learn at home with the adults there and alone, and on the role that teachers play in children’s intellectual growth. They reflect on the centrality of listening and careful observation, on children’s resilience, ambition and intellectual engagement, and the significance of a community of learners in a primary school. The paper ends with a compilation of all that the children listed they had learned at home, at school and on-line during the time of lockdown.

Keywords: listening; observation; home-learning; Covid-19; community of learners

March 2020 brought the beginning of the most turbulent disruption to education in living memory. While media storms continued to rage with news of a ‘lost generation’ and a billion pound’s worth of catch-up plans were set afoot, we wanted to step back and look at our pupils individually to see what have they actually lost. What have they gained? And what should we be doing? In doing so, in the past year, I found that I came closer to understanding the heart of teaching, whilst teaching much less than ever before.

We have been working together for five years in a relationship that began as new teacher and mentor and developed into one of co-researchers. Whilst our main focus has always been English and drama, we are both committed to learning more about the ways children learn and what it is that teachers do.

Emily teaches a mixed year 5 and 6 class in rural Suffolk. During the first lockdown, we sent packs of work to our families every two to three weeks. Come late autumn term when a positive Covid case sent us into home learning and then with new restrictions in January 2021, we became fully versed in the world of Google Classroom and created a more structured home learning experience. Children engaged in daily Google-Meet sessions with their class teacher and all work was assigned virtually. Our school gates remained open to the children of key workers and vulnerable children. Staff juggled a rota system of being in school and working from home.

As the year progressed, teachers in the school found themselves thinking deeply about what was important for children isolated in rural homes; and then they began

to think about what is important for our children, whatever the circumstances. Remote schooling meant that teachers not only extended their technological skills but were constantly reinventing their ways of working. The first pack of home-schooling materials was thoughtfully conceived and beautifully presented, full of activities based on what might have happened in school. But these were activities that would have been mediated by teachers. Now they had to be managed by the children themselves, and by their different families with varied skills and many demands on their time.

On our full return to school in September 2020, I wanted to understand the effect the pandemic had had on children and how they themselves felt it had affected their education. I asked my year 6 children to write their own 'Covid chronicles', which became poignant snapshots of how their lives had changed, for better or worse, in small ways or bigger. The chronicles were short pieces of freewriting. The children could write as many as they wanted about different aspects of their experiences. Although they never used the word themselves, I was struck by the isolation that the children had each lived through, in as many different ways as there were children. Their worlds had shrunk overnight. They had enjoyed many aspects of being at home; developing hobbies and some learning skills from their parents but they were restricted by being away from their class peers and regular learning environment.

Before long, we were cast into another period of uncertainty, with the school gates again closed to the majority of children and an unknown number of weeks of online learning stretching out ahead of us. I had been struck by the vignettes written by my year 6 children and wanted to find a way to delve deeper into the personal effects of the pandemic.

Jeni and I decided to focus attention specifically on learning and education and what the pandemic had taught our pupils about them. We tentatively came up with ways in which to elicit the thoughts of our pupils but we worried about how the project would be received. Would the children have the required metalanguage to explore what they themselves were living? How could we productively discuss curriculum and pedagogy without alienating our nine, ten and eleven year-olds? However, these children were in a unique position in terms of educational history and they would all have something to say that was worth hearing. We called it the Reimagining Education project.

Not quite sure when we would return to school, but hopeful that it would be 8 March, we began our project via Google Classroom after the February half term. Children participated in virtual class discussions and completed a range of tasks which explored their relationship, and that of the people around them, with learning and formal education. The children began by completing this grid (below) to encourage them to think about the different kinds of learning that they have experienced in different environments.

The children also examined themselves as learners, using sentence stems: I know... I

	At school	At home	Online
3 things I have learned to do			
Things I have learned about myself			
Things I have learned that were new and surprising			
Things I have practised and improved			
Things I haven't liked			

Figure 1: Myself as a learner

understand... I can... and then repeating the exercise, thinking about what they want to know, want to understand and want to be able to do. Pupils interviewed an adult in their household or a grandparent via telephone to find out what their experiences of learning were, in order to be able to draw some comparisons and more carefully consider what they themselves receive as an education. Children drew and wrote about their current educational spaces and then reimagined those spaces. The pupils approached this project with much more fervour than their other home learning tasks. Interestingly, they found it easier to be specific about things they had learnt at home, for example: how to cook chicken nuggets, touch type or garden, whereas their responses about what they had learnt at school were much more general, for example, maths, English.

They returned to school with three weeks left of term to draw the project together in the classroom, just as we had hoped. The children brought in armfuls of jottings, drawings and prose and we showed them that their opinions are valuable by helping them to make handsewn books in which to compile their work.

I think it is important to say that the children in this school are valued. They are listened to, and they listen to each other. They have an ease, when it comes to writing, which stems from the way they are encouraged to trust their own voices, where they are happy to free-write and where they frequently work within and in response to poetry and prose. They are encouraged to think for themselves and express their ideas and imagination. Teachers read aloud to them every day and they work in small groups to discuss novels. They have an alertness to language, to story and to people, especially each other, that is strengthened by the culture of a school that genuinely values these things. And so when we tell the story of this year of disrupted school and unsettling times, I think it is important to draw attention to the habits of thinking and being that are promoted by this school. This is a school where teachers take children seriously and where their teaching is informed by what they learn about each individual child. When Emily and the children returned to school, she found herself observing and listening to children more intently than ever. Her chief concern was the impact of the past year on children's well-being, and she was drawn towards the ways in which she saw they were learning.

Two boys, aged 10 and 11, are crouching over an old, battered baking tray. There

is a stash of cotton wool pads and a pot of Vaseline next to them. They are engaged in conversation about how best to use the flint fire striker. The older boy suggests adjusting the angle of the striking component and the younger adds that he should tighten his grip too. One boy works on perfecting his grip and angles while the other uses a knife and block of wood to make kindling by hammering down on the handle of the knife, easing it through a scrap of splitting wood. He gathers up his French fries of kindling and carefully arranges them in the baking tray. Another child who has been playing nearby bends over to inspect their progress. He then races off to forage for dry leaves and twigs to nestle between the freshly cut kindling. The dry materials are arranged between the kindling, with the eldest boy explaining that he thinks it should be an 'A' shape. Their helper disappears to focus on how to use willow branches to build a tent instead of poles. Sparks fly into the cotton wool pad, which has been smothered with Vaseline and both boys lean their heads simultaneously to puff oxygen into the burgeoning flames. The fire progresses nicely and the boy who made the kindling decides he would like to start another in a neighbouring baking tray and wants to experiment with burning different types of plants. The boys remark that they are a bit close together to have two fires going. The younger boy goes to pick up his baking tray and the older boy lets out a little cry to stop him. 'Aha' says the younger boy, 'It might help if I put these gloves on because this tray is going to be really hot!'

Here are the seeds of science: combustion, friction, conductivity, plants, properties of materials; and the seeds of friendship too. Two children working towards a common goal are unconsciously learning about each other. Children need each other, to be better socially and intellectually, and to spark interest and ideas. Children need enabling adults, such as teachers, to root them in their learning. And within that relationship between teacher and pupil there is trust and hope. Make no mistake, this is not about being popular or 'down with the kids'. It is about valuing each child as an individual and helping them to see themselves as part of a community of learners; a group of children and adults who share a curiosity and a desire to learn and grow with each other. The teacher understands that this may develop at a different pace and with varying levels of ease or difficulty between individuals.

I really noticed the ease with which children learned from each other. The difference between peers, even for those with significant educational needs, is so much smaller than between adult and child. The adult is constantly having to gauge how much or how little to intervene. Peer to peer feedback is natural and unthreatening.

The children are fresh from roaming the perimeter of the school field and they are tasked with scaling down their skills to the confines of the classroom. Children work together in groups of four to six to measure the perimeter of their tables. The tables

are arranged irregularly to give each child their own space in a way that wouldn't have occurred before the pandemic. There is a natural mix of abilities within the groups and I am struck by how much this contributes to the success and depth of learning. At ease with each other, children draw their peers' attention to edges that have been missed, they steady tape measures for another's hands. On each table there is at least one child who is flummoxed by the seeming constraints of a one metre tape measure. 'Oh, I'll just measure to here then...?' says one child. In each group there is more than one child to offer a solution – 'stand still and I'll add my tape measure on the end'; 'Put your finger there and I'll move the tape along'. Before long, all of the groups have decided to make drawings of their tables on mini whiteboards in order to collate the measurements. Some groups cottoned on to the regularity of the tables, meaning they didn't need to physically measure every single side. Most of the children recognised that column addition would round off the task nicely. Everybody can make a real contribution in a task like this.

There is not one single curriculum learning objective at play here. Children are learning how to question, build academic stamina, acquire knowledge, and learn right from wrong, the joys and difficulties of friendship, personal resilience, the list is huge and varied. The teacher creates a safe environment in which to learn how to be, to think, and how to grow; they weave the delicate threads from which learners gain the confidence and security to see their learning as vital. And the teacher achieves this through listening: listening and responding to children. But above all by listening. Children know, instinctively, what they need. We need to allow them the space to communicate their needs. They begin to learn about the world and their place in it from the moment they come into it. Somewhere along the line, test results and external requirements have forced us to forget this fact, and in many ways, trivialise their education through gimmicks and quantifiable statistics.

I have been left feeling hopeful and reassured about teaching. I absolutely know my purpose as a teacher. As a younger teacher I was more focused on getting them to learn the things I thought they needed to learn in order to pass a test. Children need adults who are prepared to listen and move their learning forward with the child as the starting point; not looking backwards from a checklist of requirements, but always looking to the next step however small it may be.

The teacher listens and learns how to respond appropriately to each individual. How to encourage and move children forward in their learning through a few words exchanged, a nod of the head or smile, a lengthy discussion. The teacher knows when to intervene, preempt misconceptions, encourage debate, challenge ideas, and give constructive criticism and meaningful praise. The teacher knows there are ideas and knowledge that she would like her pupils to know of and about but understands that getting there could include

as many different paths as people. Ultimately, the teacher knows that you cannot make someone learn. But you can certainly make someone want to learn. I don't want to be someone whom they just want to please. I want them to genuinely take up my offer to learn and to join the class venture where there is a culture that includes everyone.

Children have been denied the rich, enabling environment of a classroom which seeks not to keep them busy but to develop their mind and character, to challenge them intellectually and socially at every turn. That is not to say that the home is not a learning environment, but it could not sufficiently replicate the experience of learning in the company of others who are also at a similar stage of education. Children may not have had the range and depth that a school curriculum seeks to provide but they haven't stopped learning. And what they have learned has depended on who they are and on the adults who have cared for them. For teachers, this has always been the challenge; to look at a child's whole life experience and to find the strengths and the gaps. It is complex and subtle and not done in an effort to pigeon-hole children and their families, but as a necessity in order to fully understand them and build the best possible education around them.

We asked the children to free-write about the things that they had learnt at a certain time or place in their lives. I gave them the example, written by a teacher friend, of all the things he had learned while swimming in the sea at Southwold. It was apparent through reading and discussing the children's writing that their experiences of learning almost all involve other people, a community of two or more learners who support each other in shared experiences. This chimed with the fact that many children talked about the isolation that they felt during home learning. Many felt that they had not learnt as much as they would have at school. Their learning had become a checklist of assigned tasks which had made the children run a virtual treadmill of submitting in order to submit rather than experiencing deep learning.

Things I learned at my nanny's house

Which words are spelt right which words are spelt wrong. When it is time for cards. I know when I'm up with a rummy and catch Grandad out for a lot. That Nanny is very clever with her cards and usually doesn't get caught. How to ride a bike and stick my arm out to signal. The difference between a screwdriver and a wrench. How to set up a rat and mouse trap. How to cook and bake. How to climb a ladder. How to water plants. How to give big bear hugs.

Florence, year 5

There are many things I like about this piece, not least the way it captures a multi-dimensional sense of the things one learns at home. There is a vitality about out-of-school learning. What is learnt here is what these adults know and has purpose.

It is part of the fabric of being at nanny's house: the practicality of it, the essential skills, the knowledge of strategy and relationship, the grounding nature of love. Everything learnt here will find its place in Florence's future. The writing captures something of what was learned during school closure, and how. It also reflects what Florence has already learned in school and developed through her own imagination and intellect. You can hear her own confidence and control in the writing. She gives us a picture of the place and people as well as what has been learned; the language is beautifully precise both in terms of visualising Grandad and Nanny and their different card-playing strategies and the concreteness of 'screwdriver' and 'wrench' and 'rat and mouse trap'. Children's experience in this school, where they are respected as individuals and given space to make reading and writing and thinking their own, has provided them with a powerful foundation for personal growth. They feel, acutely, what they have missed – friendship, community, the inspiration and dependability of trusted teachers – and they are able to draw on their capacity for talk and the processes of writing to help them make sense of it.

Florence knows she has learned to use her initiative and that she is a hard worker; and that other people are a vital part of being able to learn well, so she welcomes her return to school. Her ambition is to be a doctor. She will make a very good one. She has a sense that she has not learned as much as she would have done if she had been at school. Maybe so, but she is not lost. She has learned a great deal this year, even if not all of it is in the curriculum or will contribute to passing a test. Here is a child with a capacity to learn and a very good sense of herself. That is what we should attend to in school. Her family don't pretend to be able to provide the depth and breadth of education that is available in school, but they are strong in their intellectual and emotional support of her. We have teachers and schools so that children may go beyond the skills and expertise of their own family. In school, we want to harness Florence's strengths, listen to what she knows and understands, and to her ambitions, and make available to her the things that will take her towards medical school. In the same way that her grandparents teach her, there needs to be purpose and practical engagement.

John Dewey suggests that even the humblest experience is capable of carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content). 'But a theory apart from an experience cannot definitely be grasped even as a theory'.¹ Even Florence's perceptions about different card-playing strategies, even ladder climbing, trap-setting and bear hugs will contribute to her greater aims. There will be a to and fro between the practical and theoretical as she is increasingly exposed to and immersed in both experience and theory. This is not to be romantic about what has been learned at home, but a call to reappraise what school has to offer these serious learners who are ready to take what is offered and make it their own and to enter into a truly reciprocal dialogue with their teachers. Although, for some children, the isolation of home has brought with it unbearable sadness, they

not only continued to learn but also came to understand what they value about being in school. Every one of them, like Florence, returned to school with a new respect for what is on offer there and maybe a new respect for themselves as learners.

We are thinking of children not as lost and needing to catch up, not fragile, needy and incapable, not confronted with a terrible chasm of missed education but as active, competent and strong. If one were to cut the trunk of the human tree and look at the ring of growth for the past year there would surely be signs of stress, but there would also be signs of significant growth. There has been too much talk of children as objects. Things are done to children. They are rarely spoken of as growing imaginative individuals with minds of their own. We are presented with a deficit model of childhood rather than one full of potential. If only we were to give those individuals the space to flourish if only we were to pay attention.

This has been a year like no other. At the end of the summer term, Emily fell ill and missed that important last week of her year 6 children's life in primary school. She missed the gathering together, the giant puppet, the amazing child led samba band and the significant goodbyes. In the summer holidays, she made a card and wrote to each child individually. What she wrote is personal to them. On the front of the card, she returned to them all that they knew they had learned during the time of lockdown. Such is the relationship that is possible between teacher and those who learn.

I have learned about the scale of the solar system and the names of the eight planets
The route from home to school How to spell lots of words Ride a quad motorbike
Make coffee Be helpful How to code How to sew on my sewing machine How to use
my own initiative Why we wash our hands How to analyse text That I need to be
patient How to weave How to play rugby How to play board games I learned how to
cook and bake Light a fire Use a hot glue gun Code in Javascript Ride a bike without
touching the handlebars How to make a presentation How long multiplication
works That I am addicted to Harry Potter How to replace a valve Make beans on toast
and scrambled eggs Bike ten miles What kind of strokes my pets like That I kinda
like school A lot about animals How puppets work How to use a calculator What
deoxyribose nucleic acid is That an octopus has blue blood and three hearts and 9
brains That I have a great family I have learnt to use computers a bit more How to
crochet Make a cuppa tea Cook an egg That Monopoly never ends well That I am
rubbish How to play the cornet Why we have to share How to play games When a
horse trusts me How other people feel What my name means (friend of the deer)
How to ride a bike and stick my arm out to signal. That there are nine muscles in the
pad under your thumb How seeds grow That I love my family How to fix a puncture.
Songs and music How to train Blaise to guard. How to cook chicken nuggets. That
I'm great and I can do anything if I put my mind to it When I should stop eating

chips. That horses are becoming the centre of my world That I'm more confident in division How to unload the dishwasher How to sharpen my pencil before I ask for help. The unspoken seating plan How to play online with my friends How to use a mouse I can find a picture online and copy it into a document I hate maths videos That I always burn myself when I cook pancakes but I can still flip them well How to play bananagrams Make an igloo Fix a starter on a tractor How to regulate my energy That too many videos bore me That my imagination rides with the horse Which books I like That I give up quickly I know how to work tech Solder electronics Jump on a trampoline From my grandad: love, care and kindness and respect. How to canter Garden for wildlife Make some dinners without mummy About Ancient China That I much prefer going to real school That I like maths When to stop answering back I really like making things I read books fast I learnt new card games with my family My times tables Coding, cycling, CAD (computer aided design) I learned to skip Be a good footballer Practised the piano Read more often That I get bored on my own I learned how to use Google Meet and Classroom Drawing Touch typing Gardening (names of plants and animals) I learned to be independent That I enjoy being with other people How quickly we can switch to virtual school and get used to it Maths was harder at home than at school My typing has improved That I need to mute myself when I see someone walk to the door That I have Chronic Fatigue That I feel more comfortable at school and in taking part in the lessons than online Hatching chicks and how the mummy chickens fought over the babies How climate change works How to use the Internet What a fieldfare looks like Definitions of words Giving it a go Not everyone will like me and that's OK Even though I struggle with reading and writing, I am still able to google things online Each family is different and has different rules Namibia waterhole camera - I was surprised by how many animals came to visit (ostriches etc) Being more organised How to cook beans on toast I like playing Risk but it is long! I have learned how to write stories, do sports and multiply I have learned how to use Google docs and Slides That I am a hard worker That I like to play football and that I'm creative Learning about the slave trade surprised me I like to look after my friends I have practised and improved my division I'm not very organised I have improved at sports like football and catch and to play tennis That I am rubbish at maths How much you can find out online ... there are things I have looked up that I did not know about How to go onto online lessons Change batteries All about American history and so much about it I've got better at doing the White Rose lessons Getting myself ready to go out Improving my skills at drawing How to organise my work and to use Britannica I am good at maths I'm good at biking Learning and performing poems Looking after our animals That I learn better when I am with other people You can donate bone marrow I have written to operation ouch with an idea I have practised the cornet I don't like playing the cornet I can make

good puppets I have got much better at lots of video games How to make myself a sandwich To watch videos and take notes and how to make different things on YouTube Plug a speaker into a laptop That I can do things even though I doubt myself I am good at painting I am funny I am bad at typing I thought I would like being taught from home but I don't Navigating the system The amount of things you can do on YouTube How to fry an egg and make bacon Decimal/fraction and percentages equivalents To find my own work and be independent That school isn't that bad and not only maths and English it's fun stuff too How to do rollerblades Printing things I prefer talking to people in real life than online That there are ingredients you use in baking (like putting oil and salt in cakes) that you would not expect That I'm loved

Emily Rowe is a class teacher for years 5 and 6 and language coordinator in a small rural primary school.

office@occoldprimaryschool.org

Jenifer Smith is a school governor and teacher educator.

jenifersmith1967@gmail.com

Note

1. Dewey, John (2008), *The Middle Works, 1899-1924, vol. 9: 1916: Democracy and Education*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p151.