

The effects of schools' social restriction measures on education of children and young persons with sensory needs: perspectives from students and practitioners

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In a recent research study funded by the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust, we investigated blind and deaf children's perceptions of the COVID pandemic to understand how the issues pertaining to schools' response to the pandemic had affected them and to draw out more general principles pertaining to inclusion – particularly in terms of communication and socialisation. 17 students aged 12–18 years participated in this study, consisting of 12 deaf children and five vision impaired children. Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) students were recruited from five mainstream programmes, two with a hearing-impaired unit and three without, as well as from two Deaf schools. Blind students were recruited from four mainstream programmes (two with/two without a VI unit) and one special school.

Data were collected in two stages: during the first stage, Children and Young Persons (CYPs) between the ages of 12-18 years completed an online survey with questions related to the schools' measures to reduce the risk of COVID 19 spreading and their experience of these new measures. During the second stage of data collection, nine survey respondents took part in a follow up interview. During this stage, we also collected interview data from a small group of practitioners ($n=3$) working with DHH students. The interviews with respondents from the DHH/VI groups were meant to provide detailed personal experiences of the impact following the schools' risk prevention measures on their inclusion with particular regard to their communication and social needs.

Schools' social restriction measures to reduce the spread of the pandemic: most social restriction measures put in place were very similar across school types (and populations). Where the schools differed was in the way these restrictions were enforced. For instance, some schools allowed students to take off their masks in the classroom while others did not; most schools formed bubbles for each class while in one school the whole student population was considered one bubble. A comparison across programme type suggested a slight advantage for special schools over mainstream programmes to address possible barriers created by the restriction measures, e.g., face covers, simply because they seemed to be more aware of the unique needs of their student population. However, for some of the other programmes, the pandemic turned out to offer an opportunity to raise awareness of the unique needs of students with sensory needs within the school community.

Face cover restriction posed a challenge to the group of DHH participants as this had an impact on their communication needs. One positive 'side-effect' of the introduction of face masks was that it created a stronger awareness by teachers (and some of the students, themselves) about the importance of lipreading as a mean for communication with deaf people. At the same time, some deaf students refused to take off their face mask despite its limiting effect on communication with their peers because of fear of COVID. Blind/deaf students across programmes were told to maintain a distance to other peers but less so to teachers (interviews with students and practitioners suggest that teachers were trusted to monitor/maintain social distance in the classroom; also, where possible, seating arrangements were adjusted to assure there was extra space between students' desks; in some cases, student numbers/room were reduced).

The majority of schools introduced one-way systems, but only some of them, e.g., a school for the blind, a school for the deaf and a mainstream school without a hearing-impaired base) provided students with support to help familiarise themselves with these new systems. In the case of one blind participant, students had to walk all the way to the back of the school in order to enter the building, which made their way to class longer and frequently resulted in late arrival in class.

Schools differed in the ways they supported students' social lives and wellbeing. While some schools offered social activities during lunchtimes, monthly cohort quizzes, access to (online) counselling/therapy, regular checks in with teacher or social events, other schools mainly provided their students with learning materials by post or via an online learning platform. In some schools, social support or activities, e.g., counselling service, school orchestra, stopped or were moved online. In case of the school orchestra, this move was not successful due to the latency during online rehearsals.

One reoccurring theme was the increase in the involvement of peripatetic teachers in mainstream programmes, specifically during the lockdowns when learning took place at home. During these periods of time, many peripatetic teachers worked even more closely with the deaf students and communicated students' needs back to the schools. In some cases, they trained parents to take on more active roles, e.g., by teaching them the deafblind manual alphabet or by instructing them on how to regularly check their child's hearing devices.

Students' perceptions: students differed in their personal evaluation of the social restriction measures, some found the (online) learning experience during the pandemic quite frightening, stressful and isolating while others stated that it had little effect on their lives and even embraced their new-found independence and increased ability to self-organise. One blind student reported that she had to learn how to become organised in order to deal with the increasing amount of learning materials that she received from the school.

Both deaf and blind students reported the challenges of receiving support during COVID, specifically during the first lockdown. One blind student described her struggle with mental health during lockdown and that the school did not provide any support for students' mental wellbeing and some teachers acting 'very pushy' towards students. At the same time, many students acknowledged the efforts made by their school/teachers and the extra help provided to support their learning.

Practitioners' perceptions: apart from facemasks, the new restriction measures stimulated a lot of discussions among students and staff in some of the participating schools around the needs of the larger population of vulnerable students, including students with an EHCP (Education and Health Plan) students on the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) register. Practitioners felt divided about the progress that students made during lockdown with regard to their (online) learning. Some felt that the online format enabled students to be more focused on what was happening in the 'cyber' classroom. They enjoyed learning with their subtitles on and the usual classroom noise was suppressed because everybody except the teacher was muted. Still, other students were less positive about the online learning as it (still) lacked the social element; these students tended to engage less.

Addressing the increased involvement of peripatetic teachers in students' learning during the pandemic, one QToD raised the question whether mainstream teachers should have (more) Deaf awareness in their training, referring to the increased awareness face masks had raised at her school about the function of lipreading for deaf people.

The findings have possible implications for teaching as they raise the question how practitioners can apply lessons they have taken away from the pandemic rather than going straight back into 'normal' teaching. The next steps will include looking at a larger sample, exploring the long-term effects of social restriction measures on the education of CYPs with sensory needs. The team would also like to include hearing/sighted children as a comparison group to explore differences/similarities with specific regard to the effect on CYPs social and mental health.