

Wimmera Development Association

DRAFT FOR REVIEW

Learning from Home Report during COVID 19

“I’m mum, not the teacher...”

November 2020



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Background

The COVID 19 pandemic in Australia during 2020 impacted upon the educational experiences of children across the nation. In the state of Victoria, which includes the Wimmera Southern Mallee region, disease outbreaks led to two periods of school closure across the State impacting the end of term 1 and most of terms 2 and 3 during the 2020 school year. In the Wimmera Southern Mallee the actual case numbers were small, with no local disease transmission in the first lockdown. Despite this, schools required all students to learn from home, unless students were identified as being “at risk.”

The Wimmera Development Association (WDA) conducted social research exploring the challenges and impacts of learning from home during the first learning from home directive March – June 2020. The research was designed to gather information about the experiences of parents and to understand who was most impacted by the Victorian Government’s learning from home directive and how Wimmera parents were supported to provide learning outcomes for their children in their households.

Participants self-nominated to participate in the project by responding to email and newsletter requests to participate which were circulated through WDA networks, local newsletters and media communications.

50 interviews were conducted with Wimmera people during the month of May 2020. All interviews were conducted over the telephone, due to COVID 19 restrictions. Four local journalists were engaged to conduct interviews. Each journalist was provided with an information session on social research methods, research ethics and confidentiality, data management and mandatory reporting requirements prior to commencing the work.

Qualitative research questions were developed to collect information in the following areas:

- Gender of person primarily responsible for learning from home education in Wimmera households
- Level of education and primary language spoken by Wimmera households providing education
- The extent of the additional time commitment learning from home has created in households
- Articulation of some of the challenges of this experience (positives and negatives)
- Internet connectivity, digital literacy and access to devices to support learning from home
- Communications with the school and class teachers

- How households are supported (or otherwise) by workplaces to provide caregiving and educational support for children
- Whether the household sought additional support from others to deliver learning from home actions.

The focus of this work is on understanding and documenting the experiences of Wimmera Southern Mallee families and their experiences of learning from home. The experience provided a sudden and sharp shift in the way in which families engaged in education, related to educators and accessed some social welfare supports. In developing the research, it was also understood that the Wimmera Southern Mallee also has a highly variable situation regarding internet access, and the lowest digital inclusion index score (ADII) in Victoria (Thomas et. al, 2020). This has implications for how families in some areas may have engaged with online school and learning from home supports.

Overview of the findings

This study was intentionally broad, with the objective of capturing a range of individual experiences and perspectives that formed the learning from home experience in the Wimmera Southern Mallee. This has led to several findings demonstrating a level of consistency in experience. However, the research also points to matters of equally significant inconsistency in the experiences of those providing learning from home support as parents and caregivers of children in the region. Research findings are summarised as follows:

1. Learning from home was overwhelmingly delivered by women who were expected to juggle work/study with childcare and educational responsibilities.
2. People with primary school/younger children reported greater dissatisfaction with the experience, and many identified teenaged children as much more capable of self-directed learning.
3. A significant proportion of the people interviewed noted that they had to take leave, reduce hours or work additional hours in the evening and on weekends to manage work responsibilities due to additional impacts created by needing to provide care and educational support for children.
4. Some households reported relying on included grandparents and occasionally siblings for support with learning from home. There was also a significant level of engagement with family or friends who were teachers (not necessarily local) to

provide advice, reassurance and support to Wimmera households providing learning from home support.

5. Internet connectivity was highly variable with households in Horsham noting better connectivity overall than households in other locations. Good connectivity also noted in some other townships such as Warracknabeal. Access to hardware (computers, laptops etc) was an issue for many households and many made additional investments to support children's learning.
6. The opportunity to engage more deeply with children and have a deeper appreciation for the level of study expected of their children was noted as a positive from the experience
7. Parents of younger children found the experience of learning from home more difficult and labour intensive than parents of teenaged children, particularly when having to juggle work.
8. Variation occurred in the level of flexibility provided by employers around work activity, but most employers were supportive of parents juggling the needs of children
9. There was also substantial variation reported from participants about the level of support and engagement provided by schools in the region to support learning from home.

Recommendations

The interview discussions revealed that expectations regarding learning from home were placed on parents during the pandemic, with support from schools as educational providers developed and implemented in a way that reflected the individual approaches of schools. The impacts of learning from home were managed by individual families, and often one parent, and in the study area, this parent was more likely to be a mother or female caregiver.

The impacts on the family member providing learning from home support as well as the children engaging in learning from home are important considerations for public responses and further considerations for this approach going forward. There is a likelihood of learning from home being required while isolation remains the most effective management approach. As a result, consideration needs to be given to the impacts of learning from home on rural families, as well as the physical and social infrastructure that supports (or fails to support)

them. of an approach that will ensure. Efforts to reduce issues of inequity in education and support for children in the Wimmera must ensure essential access to necessary technology for students to meaningfully engage with their learning and provide ways to engage with educational support outside of the home.

The learning from home experience has presented an opportunity to revisit elements of educational provision and support to families. There is considerable benefit in using this experience to better understand the way in which schools can effectively engage and support the learning experiences of children and families and to plan for future needs. This will help to alleviate the pressure and expectations placed on individuals to address gaps in responses.

Limitations

Participants to this study self-nominated their participation and held a level of engagement with their children's education during the first learning from home directive from the Victorian Government. While the data produced a reasonable geographic and gender spread of parents for this study, those who engaged with the research were likely to have been more engaged (either positively or negatively) with the experience of supporting their children to learn from home. Parents and caregivers who were disengaged from the process of learning from home or had 'given up' on the whole experience, were less likely to have sought to participate. As a result, this work provides a snapshot of some Wimmera families' experiences, during the first COVID 19 lockdown period, it is not a comprehensive demographic cross section of the whole Wimmera region.

Results and Discussion

This report explored issues associated with learning from home for families during the first stay at home order between March and June 2020. The research area was open across the Wimmera Development Association catchment area which covers five local Government areas, West Wimmera, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Yarriambiack and Northern Grampians. People self-nominated to participate, and the work was not targeted to deliver a set range of participants from each local government area. As a result, self-nominations came mostly from Horsham, and the Western part of the catchment area.

50 interviews were conducted during the month of May 2020. 23 interview participants were residents within the Horsham Rural City Council local government area. Other participants were from locations across the region, including Edenhope, Warracknabeal, Rainbow, Kaniva, and Nhill. 82% of participants were female and 18% were male. The households that participated in this study were predominantly made up of heterosexual married

couples/partners (*n*39) and some single parent households (*n*5) with the relationship status of (*n*6) respondents not identified.

Parents or guardians who had children who were currently learning from home, or had been learning from home were included in the study sample. A small number of parents had arranged a full or partial return of their children to school after commencing learning from home, as they found the situation difficult or unworkable. Interviews were conducted during business hours at a pre-arranged time with each interviewee, and those who participated were provided with a verbal overview of the research purpose, method, privacy and consent arrangements prior to commencing interview discussions.

There were a range of impacts on parents, families and caregivers which resulted from the requirement to support children to learn from home for an extended period between March and June 2020. The primary findings of the research are discussed below.

Learning from home is impacting women the most

From the sample of Wimmera families interviewed, the results show that learning from home was much more frequently the responsibility of women with only 6 per cent of men assuming primary responsibility for learning from home, while 68 per cent of women assumed this role. A little over one in five Wimmera families (26 per cent) acknowledged that responsibilities for learning from home were evenly shared between both parents (mother and father).

The following table illustrates how home-schooling duties was being managed in each household:

Only Mother	Mostly Mother	Mother & Father (50/50)	Only Father	Mostly Father
23	11	13	1	2

The gendered nature of home-learning responsibilities in the study sample appears to reinforce traditional delineations with regard to care and caregiving of children in individual households in the Wimmera. However, there is significant complexity to this issue and this outcome is also a reflection of the differences in male and female work in the region, and the different industry requirements regarding working from home and workplace restrictions under Stage 3 COVID restrictions.

In the Wimmera region men are statistically more likely to be employed in agriculture, manufacturing, essential services (electricity, gas and waste management), construction, transport and logistics (Australian Government, 2020). The nature of these roles provides very little scope for this work to be done from home. By contrast women in the Wimmera are more likely to be employed in healthcare and social assistance, retail, accommodation and food services, administration, professional services and education and training (Australian Government, 2020). With the obvious exception of healthcare and some social assistance professions, many of these roles are more suited to a temporary transition to home-based work, while other areas such as accommodation and food services experienced business restrictions under stage three restrictions, which impacted on employment.

Several female interviewees acknowledged their male partner was continuing to work outside the home under stage three restrictions due to their role/s as an essential service worker.

However, as the pandemic situation extended and women are by default taking on this additional expectation for learning from home responsibilities it has implications for female workforce participation, and the mental health of parents and children as these responsibilities are expected to be juggled. The stress caused by additional responsibilities related to children's care and education due to school closures was keenly felt by women. Several women in the study sample acknowledged impacts on their capacity to work and significantly increased stress levels resulting from juggling the needs of their children and workplace:

Its been really stressful, worrying about them falling behind and trying to support them in school work that's really challenging, so you've got the pressure of trying to help your child with algebra on top of trying to get all your work done on top of trying to get the other two, their work done and trying to keep everyone happy, and their mental health and wellbeing through all of this because it's a very stressful time

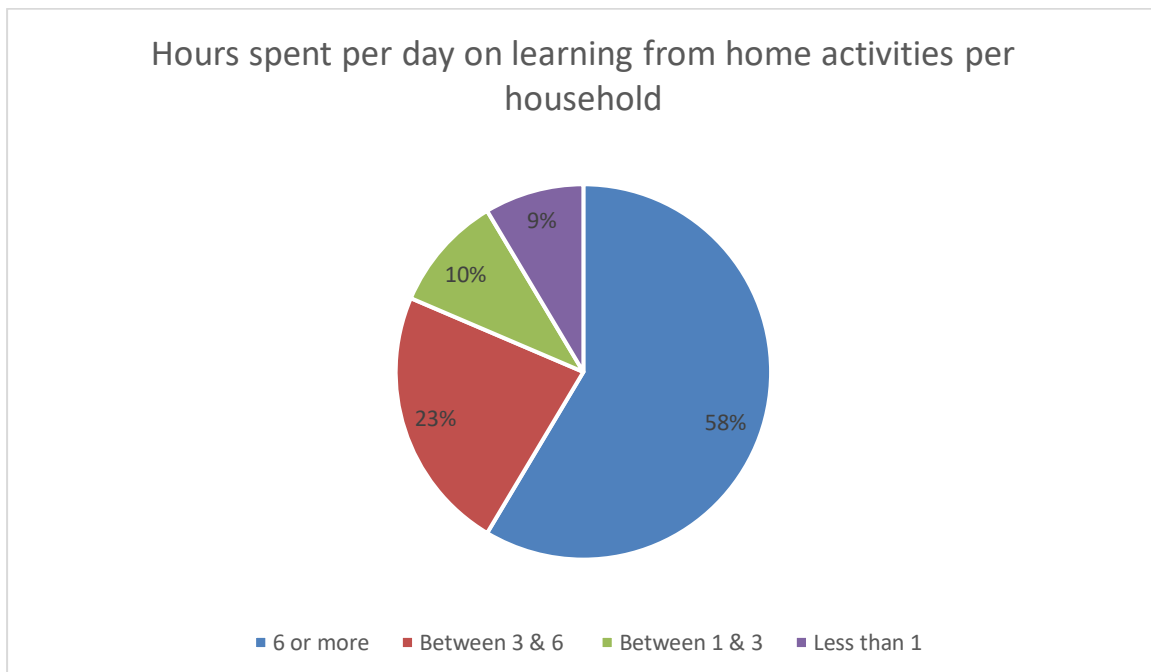
I've got quite a stressful job myself and I'm working from home trying to look after my team at the same time and so it [schooling] just becomes a big argument

People with primary school/younger children strongly identified as having more negative experiences with learning from home, stating that the experience was incredibly labour intensive - particularly when having to juggle work with learning from home duties. In contrast, parents of teenage children were generally reported their children were much more capable of self-directed learning, and the engagement and support required by parents to direct the learning from home experience was less demanding.

Five interviewees responded that their older children were mostly self-directing their own education with minimal parental support. In four of these households the mother provided all or most home-schooling support and in the remaining household the father was the primary support.

Time spent on home-schooling

There was a wide variation on the amount of time each household spent on learning from home activities, ranging from very little to the equivalent of full school days or longer. The age of the children was an important factor, with older VCE students spending significantly more time home schooling than younger children, although the time commitment by a parent to support education was more significant in younger children. The following figure provides a breakdown of time spent on home schooling support by parents per household:



This finding is significant in that it shows that just over half of parents interviewed sought to provide home learning that matches a school day. A disconnect may well have existed between what a school thinks is an acceptable workload in the classroom and what is achievable in a home learning setting as some parents felt their school had unrealistic expectations:

They're [school] still sending things through like work for the electives, like textiles, oh mate I've just got to prioritise what's important here, and those things are just dropped off basically.

Nevertheless, for parents who are juggling work or study responsibilities with learning from home, learning from home is creating a significant additional time impost. The impacts of

learning from home expectations on parents was acknowledged by one interviewee who was also a manager of a business:

I'm trying to manage a team of people and it's really challenging and add in the learning from home for some of my workers its more around how they're struggling to cope and trying to support them to do their jobs ... some of my staff have certainly had to take time off to help their kids do study from home

The role of businesses in supporting educational outcomes for children in the Wimmera region at this time also needs to be acknowledged. As schools reduce their delivery focus to that of curriculum delivery under learning from home conditions, businesses have been required to increase their level of flexibility and support to allow working parents to achieve learning from home outcomes. This is a significant shift in responsibilities for businesses, whilst also reflecting a sharp contraction in the responsibilities of schools to parents and their student cohorts.

Support from schools

Under normal circumstances, schools provide parents and children with a network of support, which extends well beyond the provision of educational information. These supports include social welfare, monitoring educational and behavioural difficulties, providing a place for social interaction and a level of structure to foster individual and collaborative peer learning. This support network experienced a radical shift with the abrupt move to remote learning required by the COVID 19 pandemic and the elements that parents and young people could expect from schools was radically altered.

This shift was further compounded by the loss of extra-curricular social activities including organised sporting, cultural and recreation activities which provide opportunities for children to engage with others outside the home. Stage 3 restrictions in Victoria prevented households from having social visitors although it was possible for people to attend homes “for care and compassionate reasons, and for work and education services” (DHHS, 2020). Childcare services and kindergartens remained open during the restrictions.

From the interview research, it appeared that the focus of schools at this time was on the provision of curriculum, and the broader social supports and interactivity of education was severely reduced in an online learning setting. It was notable that communications with the school was primarily directed to the students, and a number of parents found it difficult to access and engage with material set by schools to support their children. Parents operating across multiple schools (primary and secondary) also found it challenging to navigate different platforms for the provision of information:

Different schools in the area have different ways of delivering stuff online, there's no consistent way.

It was also clear from interview discussions that schools varied widely in the level of online engagement and interaction provided. For some schools in the region, interaction was very basic with the provision of photocopied worksheets which had to be collected by parents weekly, while some parents reported schools providing daily online classes for their students.

There were mixed reviews from parents about the level of support provided by schools to support learning from home. A minority of parents found their school to have been supportive, and were encouraged by educational materials that were easy to interpret, access to equipment and the availability of follow up support from teachers:

I feel schools have done a good job in providing the curriculum online. Generally, it has been quite self-explanatory or they [the children] have been able to talk to classmate or teacher

And another:

School [was] responsive to questions, difficulties with IT. I just picked up a laptop yesterday because I was having trouble with the sound on our WebEx sessions, so they just gave me a laptop to try

However, this was not consistent. Other parents advised that they had received little to no support from their school despite reaching out for help and their efforts to engage their children with their schoolwork were not well supported:

I rang the school and asked for extra help. The first time I heard from the school was two weeks ago, a phone call to see how we were doing

Another expressed great frustration at the school's management and administration of learning from home:

The school didn't initially have any resources but later sent out a physical learning pack full of photocopies. The school was so underprepared. The school sends out learning from home packs every two weeks, we then send them back - but no feedback. Nobody has gotten anything marked and returned. Parents have rung up school and issued major complaints. Half hour WebEx meeting. Teacher said no feedback because she said didn't want it to be damaging to self-esteem

A different parent reported that some additional support promised by the school has not materialised:

My daughter has really struggled. She did [schoolwork at home] for a few days but has now refused to log on. I'm at wit's end and don't know what to do. The school is meant to be providing a mentor. Quite a few other kids are having challenges as well. Others have started back at school as well who found learning from home difficult. We are all under a lot of stress at the moment

Other parents indicated that they were frustrated with their role as educators and were unable to keep their older children motivated or to get them to do the work.

My daughter is not motivated enough to do it [home schooling] remotely, she's sleeping in. I didn't have much time to help her, thought she would self-motivate. I have tried to encourage her to log on - have consequences if she did not do it or incentives but didn't want to rouse on her too much

And another:

It has been difficult with the few things [subjects] daughter doesn't want to do. Difficult to structure our whole lives around 7-year-old learning when we have a 4-year-old that is not used to structure. We try to involve them both - in about 1 or 2 activities a day. Some of the activities are easy enough for the 4-year-old to participate in. Only tension comes when I don't really have the energy to engage

Several parents also acknowledged their children were struggling with combining a parental role with having to be a teacher too:

Convincing son to do the work- I'm mum, not the teacher so they don't necessarily listen to my authority

Being a parent is different to being a teacher support

Getting the children motivated is another big one. I imagine they would work better for their teachers at school than for me

Others acknowledged the difficulty in communicating ideas and engaging academically:

I'm not a teacher and I've learned that the hard way. I don't know what I'm doing when it comes to explaining things to my kids academically speaking

Interview research also showed that parents felt a level of pressure to provide educational support for their children, and most felt under-supported by their school in achieving this:

When you know that essentially that it is up to you that your children continue with their education, I don't know, it's a very interesting situation to be in. All of a sudden you do have that extra pressure and you actually don't know how to handle it either. That's what I found. When my younger son doesn't do any of his schoolwork I get text messages from the school.

He hasn't done this, he hasn't done that. And I'm like, I know he hasn't and I know you need to tell me this but it tends to make me feel really crappy.

Two mothers reported feeling harassed by the school's efforts to monitor and report to parents on student progress:

I get messages - text messages from the school - he hasn't done this, he hasn't done that. And I'm like I know he hasn't, and I know that you need to tell me this but it tends to make me feel really crappy

It's a lot, they've got to navigate all the tech, learning platforms as well as the work. Middle son disengaged from schoolwork. I keep getting emails saying middle child is behind and there's little I can do. I'm getting every day what they're missing and they are speaking to the wrong person - Krista

One parent stated that she felt very anxious regarding her son's home-schooling, who is in Year 12:

He is not taking to studying from home. He is very much an interactive learner, so all the reading and watching doesn't work well for him. Because year 12s aren't doing assignments or being graded, he feels directionless with his studies - Sally

This same parent also stated that their children were receiving (and providing) more support from their peers than their teachers:

Seems like students have pretty much been helping each other out. The kids are already video messaging people - group video calls informally among some students where they are supporting each other

An overwhelming majority of participants advised that the school was expecting too much of both the parents and the children by insisting that learning from home be equivalent to a 'normal' school day and learning workload:

You have to focus your entire attention on primary school child for that period of time. We thought we might be doing stuff in the kitchen and giving advice here and there but you have to actively work and sit with your child and devote yourself to that and nothing else

I really thought they might have to complete three or four hours - especially the two in high school - but they are expected to do a full day's school work and I find that to be far too much

Finding the schools are trying to run it like a normal school day and it's "too much". I'm juggling the school's expectations with what my children are willing to do

The load is too much. My 6yo can barely read and there is content for them to read so unless it is one-on-one, he would not be able to do his work - you need to be there to go through the maths, the reading and things like that. I think they should be concentrating on reading,

spelling and bit of maths and all the other fiddly theories should just be done when they get back to school

Eldest daughter had a very tech-savvy teacher, so all her work to start with was computer-based. We had to go onto various websites to do different tasks, so her work required one-on-one attention, which I couldn't give with other kids. Probably took her 4 weeks until she gave a task on paper like the other teachers did, then it became a lot easier to do that work

There is such a huge expectation from schools that kids do some amount of work, but they don't take into account fact parents are working. Too much demand to have both done

Conversely, one parent advised that her school had considered learning from home to be non-compulsory and up to the discretion of parents:

School wanted learning from home to be "optional and laissez faire". It's not a realistic model

Overall, the discussions indicated a high level of inconsistency from schools in terms of what was expected from parents and how schools supported student performance and engagement during learning from home. Parents reported very mixed experiences when in contact with schools and obtaining resources to support their children's learning efforts.

Non-school supports

As the responsibilities and decisions regarding educational engagement were devolved to individual parents and caregivers of school-aged children with this shift to learning from home it is perhaps unsurprising that there is a varying degree of resourcefulness expressed by parents and caregivers to access assistance in achieving educational and care outcomes during stage 3 restrictions. Access to support was varied and did reflect the level of social capital available to families and has some correlation to the education levels of parents, the extent of their level of embeddedness in the community and family dynamics.

The research found several households relied on grandparents, friends or other relatives living nearby provided a level of assistance in providing care and educational support. This ranged from support with housework to educational provision for children and childcare:

My mum stayed with us for the last eight weeks. She was up here when lockdown started and then she just stayed. Mostly because she felt that she was going to be safer here as someone over 70 than she was in Melbourne. So yeah, we've had my mum for 8 weeks. She's been incredible, incredibly good support. It definitely would have been harder without her here – but mostly she was kind of took on some of the housework, she didn't really take on care for [child] or homeschooling, but she just sort of took on some of those jobs that would otherwise have taken up some of our time.

And another also acknowledged the involvement of grandparents:

One of the kids' grandparents is assisting sometimes with work as well.

A small subset of those interviewed acknowledged using other supports such as friends or neighbours, although this was less common:

We have friends and stuff we can call, I guess. If I had to be in town for meetings at the office I've got a friend I can call to help with the kids. We have those supports

There were several people interviewed who acknowledged immunocompromised grandparents that they were not visiting or having their children engage with, in order to ensure they were safe during the pandemic.

A few parents acknowledged using older children to support the learning outcomes of younger siblings. Most commonly this was in the form of creating a positive atmosphere and support for younger children to engage in learning from home in the form of a peer support network:

My older daughter has been helping out. Definitely, it's just that encouragement like, 'come on, get yourself dressed. You've got to get that room organised.'

Several parents also accessed support remotely from outside the region, engaging with friends who were teachers outside of their child's school system. For some of those interviewed, friends and family who were teachers provided a level of reassurance and support about learning from home efforts for parents in the region. One parent acknowledged using material from another school to support learning or their child as it was more manageable than that which was locally provided:

[I have] support from a friend who is principal at a Bendigo school. He sent me through learning tasks. I used that at times for easier to follow structure for home schooling

Another parent employed an external online tutor to provide additional support for their children to extend their learning beyond that which was provided locally.

However, almost half of the parents interviewed (42%) reported that they had no other supports whatsoever and had to manage learning from home and associated child supervision and care on their own. Migrant families, women with full-time professional roles and single parent families were most likely to indicate no external or family support and relied on themselves to deliver:

My whole family is overseas

[My] parents are essential workers so they can't help

I'm largely on my own when it comes to supporting [the children]. Ex-husband and his family work full-time

This is an indicator of the varying levels of social capital able to be utilised by families to support children's learning from home experiences. Almost half of those interviewed indicated that they had no external supports and were reliant on their own efforts to support their children and juggle other family, work or study responsibilities.

Positives of the home-schooling experience

Despite the many challenges the home-schooling experienced by Wimmera families, participants reported several positive outcomes of the process. Almost all parents were able to find some positive experiences within the novel experience of learning from home, and the experience has, out of necessity, provided a shift in parents' engagement with their children's learning.

One mother, who was alternating home-schooling responsibilities with her husband, described how it gave her an opportunity to understand more about how her children learn and what they were learning about:

I really enjoyed it, it has been a great window into kids' learning and tools they are using now. Our two kids have very different styles of learning

This couple have a five-year-old and a 10-year-old child and both parents work full time, however the mother does all her work from home while the father works shifts at a health service.

Another mother who was working from home as a teacher as well as home-schooling her two teenage children, speculated that if her children had been younger, she may have needed to provide more home-schooling support to them:

Kids are good at staying on task and if they work hard can have it done by lunch time and have free afternoons. My eldest in year 12 [and] is hoping this could continue for a lot longer - he says there are no distractions. If there is one subject, he wants to spend three hours on before moving on he can do that, whereas lessons change after an hour at school. By choice both kids chose to congregate at the kitchen table, I think because they like the social interaction of being together. The [eldest] gives younger one a hand with work and vice versa. Being a teacher myself, if they were younger, I know the role I would be playing would be much larger

As observed elsewhere in this report, the data indicates that home-schooling older children is generally easier and less challenging than home-schooling young primary school aged children. One mother, who had reduced work hours during the pandemic described how the experience had allowed her to reconnect with her two children, aged seven and nine:

[I'm] Enjoying it. Normally I work long hours so the chance of reconnecting with my kids is fantastic, despite the challenges of keeping my patience and convincing my son to do his work

Another said that she noticed a positive difference in her children without the pressure of having to attend school each day:

[with the] social and the you know, academic capabilities – trying to keep up at school, they're just so tired and grumpy, whereas they are not at home. They are still learning and doing stuff and you know using their brains but you can see when they've had enough and give them a break.

Others found the experience of engaging with their children's schoolwork as a positive for understanding what their children did at school:

Being forced to understand their learning and what systems they use has been beneficial... better appreciation for the work and the workload they've got and what they're achieving.

Another simply said:

I'm actually rediscovering my children.

For some parents, the experience of home learning led them to acknowledge problems with their children's education and level of knowledge:

I've sort of realised as well that he's off to high school next year and doesn't know a lot of the basics. So, yeah, its sort of made me a little bit more aware of what he obviously isn't learning really well in the classroom... I think he's going to have to have some additional assistance, there's certain things we'll have to talk to the school about.

Another parent found that one-on-one learning had allowed them to tailor an educational effort that was improving the academic outcomes for her child:

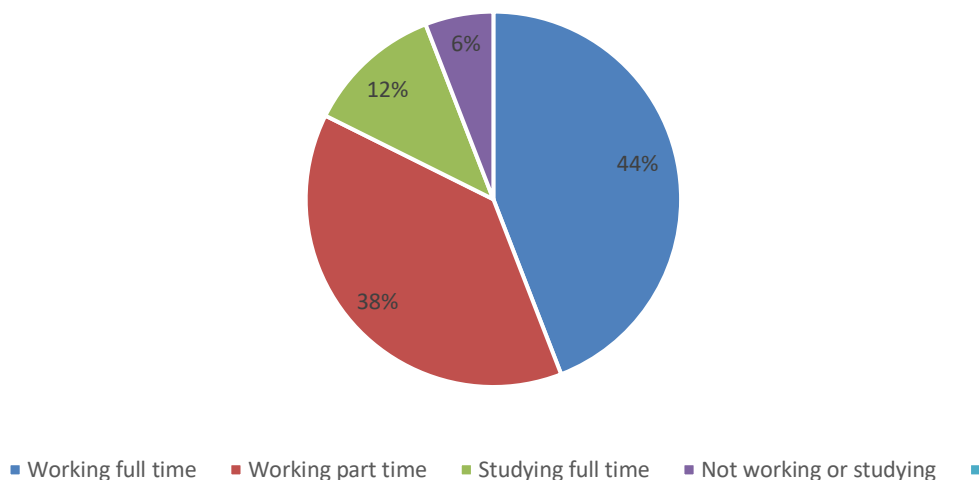
One child, the youngest, has a learning difficulty and routine has been key to getting him to study. He probably does more work at home than he does at school because it's one on one

Parents highlighted several positives resulting from their experiences of home learning, which included time with their children, engagement with their learning experiences and acknowledging academic issues requiring attention.

Managing work and study while home-schooling children

The data indicates that women were not only more likely to be the primary parent responsible for home-schooling, but they were doing so while juggling employment and/or study. Of those who were mostly or the only parent responsible for home-schooling their children ($n=34$ or 68% of those interviewed) 32 were working or undertaking full time study:

Mothers primarily responsible for home-schooling -
work/study status



For the women mostly or only responsible for home-schooling their children and who were working or studying as well, workplace flexibility was of particular importance. Working from home was extremely challenging for those with younger children. Several mothers had to reduce work hours in order to provide home-schooling support to their children.

One respondent had to drastically reduce her work hours because she could not manage a full day's work:

[I'm] lucky to do two-three hours a week. My youngest is attending primary school in person one day a week so I can get work done

Other respondents have had to spread their normal work week across the week, into weekends and across entire days:

Normally I would work three full days and a half day, but I have had to spread that over the five-day week. So I'm doing five or six hours every morning. My husband can look after the twins and support our daughter with some of her maths or take them on a mission somewhere, which is usually the best idea. Then I will generally support my daughter when I clock off

Another parent highlighted a need to extend working hours to accommodate parenting and learning from home responsibilities, but acknowledged that she was not confident this was enough to maintain her work performance:

[It's] very tricky because working from home, normal hours of six hours a day while being constantly interrupted. Luckily, I have a supportive boss and that my children understand when things get too stressful. Definitely working a longer day. My hours are usually 9-3.30

with a half an hour break. Now I am usually working until 5pm and adding some hours on the weekend. My day is being stretched but I couldn't even tell you if I was completing that work

Another woman had to juggle caring for her child with physically presenting at work for meetings, which was particularly challenging during the school holidays with no support programs for children due to the pandemic:

I tend to start work at 6.30am get rid of backlog before meetings start around 9am. Because I can't leave him [young child] home by himself and have face-to-face meetings he has to come and sit in car for two hours. He's a pretty good kid in that he will entertain himself, but there was no school holiday program

Parents consistently reported needing to extend hours worked, change hours worked and juggle responsibilities for the care of children between parents (when that option was available) to manage work responsibilities and deliver on learning from home support for their children.

Employer support

A strong, positive finding from this research is that overall, the majority of interviewees reported that their employers had been supportive and 'flexible':

[My boss] offered to change meeting times to be more suitable. He is aware sometimes the children will take precedence over work, kids interrupt meetings. He is not frustrated by it at all, often checking in with me to see how things are going. He has made it very clear that he's aware of the situation I am in and that it's not normal

Others spoke about employers showing flexibility in sharing work tasks between employees to ensure people were coping with the added personal challenges of learning from home:

Absolutely supportive. [Employer is] great at getting things in place. We're working as a team - so if I can't do things I can pass it onto someone else

For the six parents who identified as self-employed (including farmers), trying to balance work with home-schooling proved more challenging:

It's probably been more a challenge finding quiet places for us all to work, especially if there are two interactive lessons going on at the same time. I'm also lucky in that my work is primarily bookwork, so if there has been a rough day it just means I don't work so much during the day and more at night. It isn't ideal but it means I can still do it [work]

Another acknowledged she had to focus less on her business activities as a result of having children learning from home:

I don't do formal paid work. Normally keeping extremely busy with farm support and tourism stuff but have had to put this on hold - a bit like school holidays

Only four participants reported that their employer had not been supportive, or only provided minimal support:

There's been no support, apart from flexibility to work from home. I will probably be one of the last coming back to the office when restrictions start to lift

We've been told we need to be working the equivalent of our hours online. But I also have children at home so I find that difficult to manage.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the four participants who reported receiving either no or minimal support from their employer also reported greater levels of dissatisfaction in their home-schooling experience. As one interviewee stated, she has found the experience to be:

Absolutely terrible. It's a struggle making him [son] do his work, I go in and check and find he's using the internet to check on games. I have a stressful job myself, trying to look after my team at the same time, so it just becomes a big argument

All four parents who reported limited flexibility at work were women and had the primary responsibility of home-schooling their children.

Parental level of education

For those parents primarily responsible for home schooling their children, the following education attainments were reported:

Masters Degree	Bachelor Degree	Post Grad Diploma	Diploma	Certificate	Year 12	Apprenticeship (completing)	Year 10
4	17	4	7	12	2	1	1

Parents who had attained post-secondary school levels of education reported a range of responses when asked about their experience.

An interviewee with an MBA found home-schooling her younger children:

...exhausting and awful and I don't like it

Another with a Masters degree found the experience relatively undemanding:

16 yo self-managing. 12yo has contact with teacher online, like a normal school day

Parents with a Bachelor Degree reported experiences ranging from largely positive to the very stressful:

It has been largely positive. My husband and I really like to support learning but we have very different approaches. I tend to stick to what the school has set while my husband goes with the flow. It's been relatively good -

[It has been] Pretty good. Both kids taken to it really easily

Both [children] very self-motivated. They've been doing a good job of it, but they're over it

It's great to be part of learning and great for older ones that are self-directed, for those still getting used to school environment it's more challenging

[It has been] horrendous. It took a while to get into a routine with it, because they are three very different kids, plus a 2yo in the mix

Participants with Certificate and Diploma level education also reported a range of responses, from enjoyable:

We've actually enjoyed it as a family. Some families have had more difficulty. Keeping structured time eg. for lunches and breaks has been important. Trying to make sure the kids aren't eating lunch at 9am. In the evening we will go through everyone's scheduled

To demanding:

It's challenging to be able to supervise while we've got such busy jobs. It's challenging for the kids because they haven't been able to connect with their friends

To "horrible":

[It's] horrible: very stressful, a lot of anxiety with it all because I'm juggling work myself and expected to do 24 hours a week of work, had to take special leave to focus on kids' work. A lot of ups and downs, kids stressed as well because different environment for them, grumpy because we teach them differently

While participants with higher levels of education related a range of experiences, those with the lowest levels of education reported the worst experiences overall. For the two participants with a Year 12 secondary school qualification the experience of home-schooling their children was both demanding and difficult. One reported that she found the experience to be much more challenging than she thought it would be, while the other stated that it was:

Extremely stressful. [I'm] taking lot of responsibility for being a parent, but I'm not prepared to be teacher too

The one participant who had completed Year 10 described the situation as "traumatic" as a single parent teaching with children with additional needs:

both my boys have ADHD and are on the autism spectrum

The parent who was undertaking an apprenticeship reported feeling stressed by the experience:

Trying to control a 2yo at the same time is not fair - the 2yo is missing out and just needs to be shoved in front of TV while you do one on one with the children. The 6yo can't negotiate a computer to get work. I detest computers and I don't have a mobile phone

Somewhat predictably, the participants with qualifications in education (or who had partners with these qualifications) generally reported positive experiences of home-schooling:

[I] love it... being a teacher makes it a lot easier and [daughter] was already very engaged with their learning

When balanced against the other findings in this report, the levels of education attained by participants did not have a great deal of bearing on their experiences with regard to learning from home, with other factors more likely to be of influence, such as how supportive or otherwise a partner was, workplace flexibility and age of children. The exceptions were for those with no post-secondary education, who all found the experience to be demanding and stressful, and those with qualifications in education, who generally reported a more positive experience of home schooling.

Internet connectivity and technology

Internet connectivity and access to technology was also discussed as an issue for learning from home, as parents sought to access school information and have their children engage with their learning in an online environment. Parents reported highly variable levels of access and engagement with technology and interview discussions also showed significant variation in the extent to which schools engaged in this format with families.

Internet connectivity was highly variable across households, with families home-schooling in Horsham and other towns such as Warracknabeal reporting better connectivity overall than households in other locations. Participants in smaller rural communities and outside of towns reported significant internet connectivity issues:

We are in a black spot, to talk on a mobile phone we have to go outside our home because we have no service in this house. We can't get the NBN here

Most of time have to have be outside to use phone, don't have unlimited internet when we go. Hard when all three kids are on computer and I'm on one too because it smashes through all our data

[Internet connectivity] Useless. The coverage isn't good enough out here. First zoom meeting they tried to have with the school, we couldn't even log on

We don't use tech as well as we could, just have a basic internet plan and no Netflix, and still found when kids on computer, some things slow down and cut out. Son downloaded virus by accident, and couldn't see online classroom for next few days

The research also highlighted that many families have needed to purchase extra data and also hardware in order to be able to engage with the school and support their children's learning from home:

We just have wireless broadband where we are, and with all three of us working remotely on internet at once in house there are times when it's not great. Had couple of days where it really drops in and out. Probably only 70 per cent satisfied with that. I've had to increase data plan and billing has gone up

Had to buy data boosting equipment to cope, spent over \$800

We didn't have internet at property before, because... I got internet through work. We only had one iPad used for emails. I didn't want internet at home for work separation. Had to pull old laptop out of the cupboard, and now have new iPad as well, about \$3000 out of pocket. Now paying extra \$70 a month for internet

Upgraded plan in response to learning from home, spending an additional \$400 hardware and an additional \$10 per month in plan upgrades.

Used to not use internet much, did everything from workplace until now. Don't have a Google Chrome browser, and you need that to access Google Meet. Needed to buy new laptop to download Chrome browser. It should not specify only one browser. I can afford it but how about other families? \$1000 cost

Wifi hasn't been great, speed is appalling but it has been enough. Went to a higher plan but hasn't helped. \$20 bucks more per month for this plan

Some families had to persevere without having adequate internet or technological hardware or software:

Internet can quite frequently be a bit patchy (that is nothing new), most disruptive is those outages where we haven't had reception for a week

Don't have a printer at home - never needed one before - so a lot of things have been sent that they have to print off to complete. Had to either go over it on the screen with children or put that one on the side and do other activities

We have had internet issues. We have a very poor feed. Home phone hasn't worked for weeks. Trying to get onto Telstra but not getting assistance and the fix didn't resolve problems. Unreliable - with drop outs and speed. 5mbs most of the time

Not completely connected yet, running off smart modem with sim card as our house doesn't have phone connected. Our house is in an NBN area, but we need to get connected

One parent sought support from the school to access internet at home for her child:

We've had nothing, nothing. I've actually said to them [the school] you know where's these laptops or you know can we get a dongle in the interim when we didn't have the internet – and the school didn't know how to get that equipment... I actually spoke to the principal about it, but then luckily we got the internet on, and this is all coming out of my pocket

This same parent stated that they had never had the internet on at home before and the cost of buying new equipment and an internet plan left her, in her own words:

probably \$3000 out of pocket

However, some parents reported being able to access technology support from school, and significant variations in supply and support were discussed:

all kids were given a laptop and dongle but no IT training. [school] seemed so far behind the eight ball. There was a google classroom where kids could ask questions but the questions were so basic it was stunning.

No we didn't [have technology access at home] but the school was pretty well-resourced, so they sent us home with iPads and a laptop

This data highlights the major inequalities across households in the study area, and variations in the support schools had or made available to connect students to the internet to access school resources. This has possible implications for student learning outcomes, household finances and family wellbeing more generally. The immediacy of expectations around learning from home, coupled with a need for many families to upgrade or access technology at home made it more difficult for individual families to manage these costs.

Concluding Remarks

This research report has provided a snapshot of learning from home experiences for Wimmera parents during the first COVID 19 lockdown between March and June 2020. While there were both positive and negative experiences from this situation, learning from home responsibilities impacted disproportionately on women, and their work. The involvement and engagement of schools in the process of supporting parents and caregivers to learn from

home was variable, with employers providing the flexibility for many parents to cope with this sudden, sharp change. This research also found that learning from home also resulted in families and caregivers incurring significant additional costs to provide access to internet and appropriate technology to support children to learn from home. Connectivity and access were ongoing issues for many families, despite these investments.

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