

**Exploration of Participants' Perspectives of  
Exclusion Around Digital Inclusion and the Impact  
of this for Parental Involvement in their Children's  
Learning During a Global Pandemic.**

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this research to the many practitioners, organisations and volunteers, who strive to support families to learn, achieve and aspire. For the many who believe that change can happen in small steps and do their best to ensure no one is left behind.

I also give thanks and am grateful for my parents. For their belief in me and in their unwavering encouragement to always see the possibility in absolutely everything. My achievements are a measure of their belief. I am incredibly proud to be Mustafa and Sabera Dadabhai's daughter.

Thank you also to my wonderful family; to Salim, Summaiya, Muz and Safah, for your constant support, enthusiasm and pride. You have all made me live up to my mantra "I can do it. I will do it and World watch me do it!"

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## **Abstract**

A digital divide has been one of the key social issues of the internet since its inception. With governments, local and international authorities, companies, charitable agencies and educational institutions all seeking to address the challenges of 'digital inclusion' for all. Frequently it has been perceived firstly as a problem of access, infrastructure and a lack of digital devices closely followed by an emphasis on supporting people to learn digital skills.

Often a complex set of circumstances exist around those who are not yet able to benefit from the digital age (Hayes 2021), including interconnected forms of disadvantage, that different organisations, Government Departments and charities try to address - in isolation of other aspects of disadvantage (Hayes et al. 2020). As access to the Internet has become increasingly central to everyday life, those without access to broadband infrastructures, digital devices, and digital skills remain socially, politically and economically disadvantaged a case heightened during the global pandemic of COVID-19 (WHO, 2020) for economically disadvantaged families who since early 2020, continue to struggle with the acute inequalities that a digital divide reinforces. Further as increasing government services and more and more democracy services increasingly move online they face being further isolated, without a voice and visibility in an increasing technology driven world (Good Things Foundation, 2021).

Whilst much emphasis is placed on national measures to support internet and device access for children during lockdown, much less effort has been spent on critical questions about the levels of access and the essential digital literacy skills required for effective usage of the internet and the difference this makes to children and parents' lives with the interaction of individuals and data- driven technologies now being realised in education, health, industries, social inclusion and online settings.

This is a small-scale interpretive study to explore parents' views of praxis and their lived experiences of the additional barriers and inhibitors faced by parents and families from diverse and marginalised communities in urban societies and their experiences of digital exclusion during national lockdowns, as parents seek to support their children's learning (DfE, 2020).

## **Acknowledgment**

This research follows a multi-year project on digital exclusion and disadvantage, which included a series of roundtables focusing on digital exclusion, impact, and addressing approaches, an international conference on, and a number of workshops, symposia articles and news reports all exploring different facets of exclusion ranging from fuel, data and devices poverty. These activities brought together academics, policymakers, officials and practitioners, some of whom are represented in the following contributions. The views expressed in the research are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed, but I hope are commended as contributing to the public debate on digital and poverty.

## **1. Introduction**

A digital divide has been one of the key social issues of the internet since its inception. As access to the Internet has become increasingly central to everyday life, those without access to broadband infrastructures, digital devices, and digital skills remain socially, politically and economically disadvantaged. This has been particularly heightened during the global pandemic of COVID-19 for economically disadvantaged families for more than 9 million people struggling to use the internet independently (Digital Nation UK, 2020). During a global pandemic schools and organisations have needed to innovate to survive, from moving transactions and work online. Families too, have had to innovate to ensure their survival. For families facing deprivation the challenge to innovate has been difficult with a lack of access and skills, compounded by the exposure to vulnerabilities of being online. From facing the challenges of digital poverty, to supporting partners struggling with an online gambling addiction.

Whilst much emphasis is placed on national measures to support internet and device access for children during lockdown (DfE, 2021) much less effort has been spent on critical questions about the levels of access and the essential digital literacy skills required for effective usage of the internet and the difference this makes to children and parents' lives. My research will address this and also seek to identify the additional barriers and inhibitors faced by parents and families from diverse and marginalised communities in urban societies, their experiences of digital exclusion during national lockdowns as parents seeking to support their children's learning.

As part of my rationale I will explore how parental engagement has helped or hindered the discussion on the digital divide. Parental engagement for young children is a key factor in achievement at school and in dictating their outcomes in life. 'Parents are six times more important to children's academic success than the teaching they receive in schools'. (Desforges et al., 2005). However from a school's perspective, parents' engagement and involvement is not recognised as a key motivator for their children's attainment at school. Schools curricula, Government agendas on education and the pressures of Ofsted mean that parental involvement for schools sits as a low priority (Learning and Work Institute, 2007). The Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation report, (2017) found a supportive home learning environment and effective parenting was found to be more powerful than parental background, again reinforcing that the home learning environment was a stronger predictor of child outcomes than

social economic status or parental qualifications. Although much is known about parental behaviours that help promote a good home learning environment, much less is known about the efficacy of interventions and the resources required to help parents.

COVID-19 has increased the need for parents to support and home school their children. The disparity in parental support has been heightened by COVID-19 with widening gaps in children's attainment (Eivers et al., 2020). Further, Baroness Lawrence vocalises the voices of many in asserting that black ethnic minority groups have been "overexposed, under protected, stigmatised and overlooked during this pandemic" (Lawrence, 2020: 4). It begs the question that if schools supported parents – as individuals, to achieve confidence in their own digital, numeracy and literacy skills, would children be better placed to adapt to home learning? The reality is that many settings lack resource and staff skill set to support parents. Where the support is present it is more about developing skills that will support the child's learning directly rather than developing the parents' skills. This lack of resource and skills development has manifested in many parents not having the digital literacy to support their children (Digital nation UK, 2020).

The inequality of access to digital devices, skills and connectivity coupled with a lack of language and literacy has created additional barriers. Ofcom (2020) estimates 1.78 million children have no access to a computer with 35% of families lacking sufficient access to devices, compared with 11% of their higher income peers. This equates to a third of low income households not having the access to devices.

The Government has provided investment to ensure 1.3 million devices are given to schools to help them support their most disadvantaged pupils (DfE, 2020). Whilst welcomed, this valued commodity has been criticised for the delays and governments slow approach given the challenge of increased remote learning for families.

### **1.1 Research questions**

The focus of my research was to explore and analyse participants' experiences of exclusion from digital inclusion and frame the study in the context of parental engagement during Covid-19 with the following questions:



1. Understanding and evaluating the research literature and national and local policy documents and what they state about current digital inclusion, practices and approaches (RQ1)
2. What are parents' perceptions of 'real life' experiences of digital inclusion and what additional barriers present for diverse urban communities during a global pandemic? (RQ2)
3. What can we learn as practitioners from parents' perceptions of digital exclusion and how can this learning be used for effective future development and policy? (RQ3)

## **1.2 Positionality**

As a practitioner, researcher, a community activist, and a “radical” (Friere: 1970: 13). I am confident in challenging organisations' beliefs, practice and traits to ensure many diverse opinions and voices are captured in the development of their services and products. Through reflection and peer review I am aware that I enable parents, using research based theoretical practice, and yet I feel jaded in my own self-awareness and plagued by Imposter Syndrome (Clance and Imes, 1978). During the COVID-19 lockdowns I have witnessed the different faces of a digital divide for Black, Asian and minority ethnic families facing multiple layers of deprivation. This has raised my interest around how families experience the digital divide and their experiences of imposter syndrome. At times I feel complacent and compliant to the rhetoric used for children and families experiencing challenge and deprivation and the impact on their development (Wedell, 2019).

As a Family Learning practitioner; working in an area of high multiple indices of deprivation (Birmingham.Gov.UK, 2019) I am involved in many national projects that aim to address the digital divide, through providing disadvantaged families with devices and connectivity. As an Online Centre I am also part of the network of 5000 national centres commissioned to provide online courses, Learn My Way (LMW) to adults. This is a national programme that is delivered throughout England and Wales, through Good Things Foundation. With permission I have adapted this programme and its aims to contextualise the learning and digital skills to provide parents with the skills to further support their child's learning and development in the home. To

evidence the effectiveness of the intervention and to measure the progress achieved by the child and parent pre and post assessments are used.

The Learn My Way programme promotes the use of their resources and the free nationally accessible Essential Digital Skills assessments toolkit which in 2019 was mapped to be in line with Government's Essential Digital Skills Framework. This is widely used within England and Wales to define and measure the digital skills adults need to benefit from the digital world (DfE, 2019). This recommended framework of adult learning and progress is lengthy and its format does not complement our service delivery of LMW, or our ethos of working alongside parents to support and focus on their developing skills and their child's strengths.

I believe that the value of assessment has evolved from evidencing and celebrating achievement to an all-encompassing digital skills framework. My work alongside my peers has shown the shared burden of ensuring all learners assessed achieve and progress with little thought of how the digital skills learnt will support them and their children and also how disadvantaged parents, with no access to shared civic spaces can access computers and connectivity to practise their skills. Disadvantaged families are already vulnerable and their disadvantage can feel that this is the priority, rather than the reason.

*"I have so many food parcels given to me from different groups, yet no one thinks about how I feel queuing up at the school to get a homework pack for my child, because I can't afford a laptop. He can't use the Google Classroom. It's not fair. Food parcels is all they think we need. He needs teaching, not another packet of dried pasta"*

Feedback from a parent (Shaikh Reflective Journal, 2021).

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Through active reading and reflection on relevant research articles I had begun to question my own pedagogy and practice. The segregation of ability and opportunity caused by disadvantage is becoming ever more present within the current education system for children of all ages. Parents and children are often fighting against an educational system that disempowers and demoralises with the additionality of poverty

heightened by COVID-19 will leave children and parents feeling self-conscious of their disadvantage resulting in under performance at school and unfulfilled lives for adults. It may also lead to a lack of self-confidence and contribution to their community (Frieire, 1993).

Thus the rationale for undertaking this study is to develop greater understanding and effectiveness of digital inclusion for the children and families with which I work, as my positionality suggests. The wider rationale for this study is that it may have relevance for practitioners in the field and support policy makers and schools to consider the realities and challenges for families facing deprivation and disadvantage. Further by sharing the research with parents and drawing awareness of it through the Family Learning groups I facilitate, I aim for parents to recognise the barriers they face and in turn for this recognition to be used as a motivating influence to increase their participation. My research has focussed on the challenges faced by three families and in particular the women and their roles as mothers. This was a specific decision on my part as I wanted to explore the additional complexities faced by women and in particular Muslim women. From research already conducted on British Muslims we know that identity and representation issues relevant to Muslim women (Phillips 2009; Dwyer 1999) and men (Hopkins 2004) can be gender-specific.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The following literature review was undertaken through extensive reading of scholarly and legislative text. I have considered the available research and identified the themes that relate to the research questions and as such are relevant to this study.

### **2.2 Method**

This literature search has presented me with a number of challenges from the outset. My approach was to use keywords that were within my research proposal and input these into BCU library database and Google scholar to elicit significant texts and literature. As per BCU requirements, I hoped to limit my field by considering only journal articles from England within the last five years. The table below highlights the number of articles produced. The articles generally discussed how schools engage parents and the methods that are successful.

Table 1 - Numerical evidence of searches of the BCU Library using keywords relating to the study.

<b>Keywords used in search databases</b>	<b>Volume of results</b>
<i>“Parental engagement”</i>	87,828
<i>“Parental engagement during COVID-19”</i>	404
<i>“Digital exclusion during COVID-19, disadvantaged communities”</i>	517

The majority of the articles tended to be generic and did not explicitly discuss disadvantage communities and the impact of digital exclusion. I therefore excluded their relevance within this literature study. However, worthy of note is the work of Desforges and Abouchar (2003) in clearly documenting the vast benefits of parental involvement for children’s learning, which still today inform much of current thinking and practice.

In order to ensure that this literature search was fully relevant and securely fixed within my field of research I looked specifically in Early Years journals, beginning at the most recent then searching backwards, chronologically, for five years; ending in 2016. Using the titles and abstracts, I searched for articles which related to parents and digital exclusion perspectives of parents or were specifically relevant to the field of study.

The new information available to me was drawn from international contexts. I selected articles that consider issues investigating working with vulnerable groups, which are relevant to the research context of this paper. The challenge being to ensure that the relevance and application of the knowledge gained is clear and explicit.

In addition to journal articles, I looked at databases, reports and considered a number of seminal texts. My intention has always been to set this research within the current political context. Therefore a portion of this literature search is concerned with government papers and policy documents pertaining to digital exclusion and disadvantaged parents. I am interested to discover the government’s attitudes to parent’s through their own publications.

## **2.3 Results of literature search**

Through my literature review clear key themes emerged: the scale and impact of digital exclusion, the relationships of parents, professionals and organisations, influences on practitioners and professionals' attitudes, culture, aspirations and home learning. Both these will be critically analysed and explored further.

### **2.3.1 The Location of Parent and Professional**

Professionals cannot assume that they know what is important to parents in relation to their child's learning'. (Mackenzie, 2010) The position the parent and professional occupy in relation to each other is complex with professionals, often unconsciously, placing the parent in a position of inequality (Alasuutari: 2010, Cottle and Alexander: 2014, Dalrymple and Burke: 2006, Greenfield: 2011). This seems to be in conflict with the current and established narrative in Early Years where the notion of working in partnership with parents is firmly established (Every Parent Matters: 2007) and currently enshrined in law (Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: 2014:5). Further Cottle and Alexander (2014) discuss this dichotomy as they explore practitioners' perspectives regarding parent partnership: a "discourse of deficiency" and a "discourse of agency" (Cottle and Alexander 2014: 639).

The 'discourse of agency,' refers to the belief that people have agency and are able to make decisions, take responsibility and self-determine. Further both assert that, from 1997, the policies of the New Labour government place this concept of partnership working "central to the development of public services" (2006:129). A rhetoric that is present today in government and many organisations policies underwritten in their Corporate Social Responsibility work. However, even with a legislative backdrop of partnership working a 'discourse of deficiency' is present, with practitioners viewing themselves as "official protectors of vulnerable people" (Dalrymple, and Burke 2006:134). The relationship is therefore one of imbalance with the parent deficient and the professional the expert holding the tools and knowledge. This phenomenon was also explored by Greenfield (2011) in his research of Wilderspin (1824); reputed for setting up the first infant schools in England with his ultimate mission of educating 'poor children'. Greenfield compares this to health visitors and family support staff visiting parents in their homes in creating the same

vertical frame with practitioners positioned as experts. In Early Years practice Birbli and Tzioga (2014) suggest that although staff may be working with parents to support their child's learning, the vertical frame is still in operation with the discourse of deficiency behind practitioners' attitudes and perceptions. Though professionals and organisations espouse the beliefs of a horizontal frame or a discourse of agency, their practices are vastly different.

I reflected on this many times during my research and constantly considered how I could lead practitioners and organisations I work with to engage in a more collaborative and thus make it a more horizontal and equal relationship with parents. I reflected on and found evidence of the balance of discourse, parents feeling a lack of agency and a feeling of deficiency perpetuated by school staff, Government and organisations. I felt that many professionals and organisations stigmatised those in poverty for not having the tools and skills to support their children's learning during a global pandemic.

When considering the positionality of parents and professionals, issues of power and its distribution are important. A point made by Friere (1970) who suggests that when there is a disparity in wealth or empowerment in an educational context, there are then issues of power and control that need to be considered. Through this research, I intend to investigate how disadvantage is perceived and heightened through the lack of digital skills and access during the COVID-19 pandemic, in light of central and local government's shifting priorities of supporting the most vulnerable families. In addition, my intention is to raise awareness of the impact and to, as Friere, states share the realities for parents during the pandemic. In doing so, I consider the issues of power and control possibly perpetuated through current structures of family support within Early Years, schools and organisations. I will also explore if Friere's idea of a repressive banking system of education, where power is located with the educators whilst those in receipt are merely passive "containers" ... to be "filled" (Friere 1970:53) still resonates.

Further research of note is the conceptualisation of labelling children and families in disadvantage as vulnerable. This places increased risk of exclusion from education (Lehane, 2017), and yet the wider influences such as government policies continue to insist that the most effective way to support vulnerable children is to identify the needs

and label the child. Hodkinson and Burch, (2019) argue the deficit approach taken by the government in differentiating reduces the control of individuals to access equality within education. These influences on wider society do little to implement a value based or an inclusive system when data indicates that children in poverty are more likely to be excluded from education either through absenteeism or exclusion (Graham et al., 2019:30). A point, that appears to have been widely accepted or normalised within education. Further, children and families face an increased risk of marginalization when labelled as vulnerable and the macro influences of policy often result in less opportunity to contribute their voice in decisions directly and indirectly affecting their lives (Mckay and Garratt, 2013). Research suggests that children classified as being disadvantaged continue to face further adversity through their vulnerable home environment (Parsons and Platt, 2017; Wedell, 2003) and the stigma attached to their poverty has the potential to reduce equality within our culture (Freire et al., 2019).

Many reports have shown families from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have lower parental literacy levels, poorer health (Marmot et al., 2020), increased crime exposure, stress, and work in less secure jobs (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). It is accepted that none of these in themselves influence low achievement and neither is family background in itself a barrier to achievement with families who are given the opportunity being able to achieve and learn. Evidence does show that there are correlations between aspiration and attainment (House of Commons, 2014).

The literature also suggests that families from disadvantaged backgrounds have high aspirations but lack the information and understanding on how to utilise these to improve outcomes for their children (House of Commons Education Committee, 2014). Home and family influences can be associated with underachievement as children and young people spend the majority of their time outside of school. Rabash et al, (2010); Save the Children, (2013) suggest that around 80% of the difference in how well children do at school depends on what happens outside the school environment with Desforge and Abouchar pointing out that providing a 'stimulating learning environment outside of school can be crucial for children's educational achievement, as well as for their social and emotional development' (Save the Children, 2013:13).



All the participants in my study were families I had initially engaged with through language, literacy and Digital Family learning programmes. I wanted to explore if this too, may have served benefits for the parents. The literature review indicates family learning starts from a 'wealth model' building upon the existing skills, knowledge and experience of parents (NIACE, 2013). With Goodall et al, (2011) asserting that family learning has benefits that are shown to last beyond the duration of the intervention for disadvantaged families and that through the intergenerational transfer of skills and attitudes, the parents' education can influence the subsequent educational achievement of their children' (Sticht, 2010). Harding and Ghezalayagh, (2014) assert that family learning is most effective in reaching those who are more likely to be living in the most deprived Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles, in receipt of benefits, from an ethnic minority background, with low educational attainment and women. Harding et al. (2013) also refers to the many unintended impacts of involvement in family programmes including; wellbeing, keeping participants' minds active, improvements in familial relationships, confidence and ability to share the gained new skills and knowledge with other family members, as well as wider social and community benefits. For children, family learning benefits include increase in the overall level of children's development by as much as fifteen percentage points for those from disadvantaged groups and an improvement in average reading equivalent to "six months of reading age" (NIACE, 2013: 9 and Swain et al., 2015). Further comments by Ofsted, (2013) and UNESCO, (2015) assert that family learning provides "routes out of poverty" (Ofsted, 2013: 4).

### **2.3.2 Digital divide**

The literature review also enabled me to question language defining digital divides based on digital literacy. Jaeger et al. (2012) refers to digital literacy as including the skills, abilities, a understanding of the language the hardware and software required to successfully "navigate the technology" (Jaeger et al., 2012: 3). However, others refer to these being the skills relevant to keep children and young people safe arguing that definitions of digital literacy differ for each individual (Unsworth, 2006; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Livingstone, 2009).



The research also discusses issues around digital divides which have focused on multi dimensions and multi - disciplinarily of digital inequalities, arguing that other issues impact and influence digital inequalities, such as political economy (Dahlberg, 2015), gender (Cooper, 2006), internet cultures (Dutton and Reisdorf, 2019), class and status (Wessels, 2013; Yates et al., 2015; Yates and Lockley, 2018) and life events such as aging and parenting (Robinson et al., 2018).

Issues relating to class and poverty were reinforced and debated by the panel discussion which included myself at the 'Digital Literacies for a Healthy Democracy' event hosted by The Department for Culture, Media and Sport Committee on 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2021. With the panel agreeing that those less digitally literate are also more restrictive parents, with a narrower understanding of issues around cyber bullying, online safety and revenge porn (Livingstone et al., 2017). This supports the view that other factors like culture, communities and education have implications on digital literacies. Yates et al. (2020) addresses that many participants lack the digital literacy to understand how their data is shared with digital platforms and how their data is used, with the connection between poor literacy and low language skills limiting ability to support children's learning and ability to engage and participate in a digital society. Blank et al. (2020) demonstrates how parents perceive the impact of it on their children and the home leaning environment and offers policy recommendations to support parents from disadvantaged communities.

### **3 Methodology and ethics**

#### **3.1 Research paradigm**

My research will be qualitative in both nature and design, it will be located within a praxeological paradigm (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho, 2012; Pascal and Bertram, 2012). It will be conducted in a 'real world' context (Robson, 2011) where I will be a participant researcher, collating data over a short period. I intend to also use an alternative approach outlined by Thody (2006: 10) that acknowledges the subjective nature of the participants' narratives. The research will be participatory and reflexive, in that participants will not just be subjects, but I hope, for their reflections and thoughts to be used in the development of future partnership working approaches with communities and families.

Within the paradigm of the research I will also consider the research through the lens of an interpretivist, as it is based on qualitative data obtained from participants with experience of the research subject matter. Through curious exploration of the parents' experiences I aim to understand their realities of digital exclusion during lockdown in comparison to their peers. As my research data will collate the experiences and opinions of parents from marginalised communities, I recognise the challenge I face due to my professional heritage, social and cultural disparity and varying language and literacy skills but also understand that this will provide rich data (Geertz, 1973). Of key here is also the flexibility it allows in recognising any potential variables and subjectivity of the participants offers valuable research epistemological data (Mukherji and Albon, 2015: 7).

### **3.2 Methodology**

The methodological approach will be undertaken using a qualitative paradigm and a praxeological stance. However the phenomenon of the assessment event and the multiple perspectives of the parents will be explored therefore the study may also be viewed as ethnographic (Robson 2002: 89; Atkinson et al. 2007).

The data will be gathered and presented within a qualitative paradigm. My aim for the study to contextualise practice means it can also be viewed as having a praxeological approach and in doing so may also be considered through an ethnographic lens (Robson, 2002: 89; Boellstorff et al., 2012: 35).

Everett (2002) suggests that empirical data can be justifiably gained through research into behaviours and beliefs, but only if the study of social construct is considered as an influence on naturalistic behaviours, values and beliefs. He further suggests the use of a praxeological approach to gain the voice of people marginalised within society. This is important for my research as it will capture the voice of participants who feel marginalised and I as the researcher, need to exercise caution and realise the value to be given to the data analysis through recognition of my own beliefs and values and how this may influence the objectivity of my findings (Robson, 2002). The nature of my study will rely on the gathering of largely descriptive and subjective views therefore the depth of quantitative data provided is representative of a small group of participants' views and experiences (Geertz, 1973).

I will capture my views, experiences and emerging data through a reflective personal journal (Mukherji and Albon, 2015: 24), (Ortlipp, 2008: 695-705). The journal will provide an audit trail of my research process, my reflections, development and critical incidents. This will develop both my knowledge and my understanding of the research process and will help me to process my self-inquiry. It will also provide support for my wellbeing, particularly as I expect to hear narratives which may make me feel emotional in not being able to solve the participants' problems. In addition, I will use "member checking" (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 314) by discussing the synthesis of the results with participants for comment or challenge. I will also use triangulation as a strategy to promote rigour. Using multiple methods will provide triangulation of data. The process and the audit trail will help establish systematic enquiry and rigour and thus 'trustworthiness' (Shenton, 2004).

### **3.3. Setting and research participants**

The research took place in Balsall Heath, Birmingham. According to the Index of Multiple Indices, (2019) Balsall Heath is ranked as the most deprived from Birmingham's sixty-nine wards. I hoped for my research to consider the impact of deprivation and digital inclusion and hence felt it appropriate for my research to be based here. The research group participants are known to me as they are students from English and Digital Skills courses I organise. Further during the pandemic I have continued to support them, therefore the relationships of trust have been maintained.

Of note here is the space where all the participants met on a weekly basis, prior to COVID-19. The library in Balsall Heath has been a space of importance for the participants and their children both in terms of providing a learning space and also a socialising space. Attending the learning programmes in this space has enabled all the participants to join the library, access other services and support and importantly provided with access to computers and Wi-Fi.

#### **3.3.1 Research participants**

*Participant A*. is a mother with four young children ranging from ages 6 years to 18 years old. She came from Yemen at the age of 18 for marriage purposes. For many years initially, she lived with her in-laws who felt she did not need to learn English.

Joining classes and learning new skills has transformed *Participant A's* life. She is now more engaged and has aspirations for both her future and for her children. *Participant*

A's husband works as an UberEats delivery driver. He battles a long term gambling addiction with slot games on his mobile phone. This has caused immense financial hardships for the family, resulting in bailiffs and loan shark visits.

*Participant A* has always maintained her own bank account, but a few months ago her husband accessed her account and withdrew all her savings. Following this and an incident of domestic violence she left him and moved into temporary accommodation with three children. During the period of the research, *Participant A* was in the process of being offered alternative temporary accommodation. During this time her teenage daughter developed an eating disorder and poor mental health. *Participant A's* young son has chronic asthma – a condition she asserts is worsened by the pollution of living in the area. Currently, *Participant A* has returned home and her husband has moved out. *Participant A's* life is busy with medical appointments for her children and managing her home.

*Participant B* is a young woman with 5 children, originally from Yemen. The children's ages range from 2 to 11 years old. *Participant B's* marriage broke down some time ago and she lives alone in a flat with her young family. *Participant B's* husband has threatened her on many occasions resulting in police call outs. *Participant B* has social workers and many other agencies supporting her. As a single parent with low language, literacy and digital skills *Participant B* is often confused with all the information and advice given to her. During the time of the research, *Participant B* had also received support with school issued devices and data.

*Participant C* is an older mother with 3 children ranging from 11 years to 21 years old. *C* came from Yemen more than thirty years. *Participant C's* husband left the family home many years ago leaving the *Participant* to raise the children. *Participant C* has poor English language and low digital skills. She relies on her children to help her understand her finances and benefits. Often she has become overdrawn on her account and has only realised when her daughter has called her from a school lesson to advise her. *Participant C's* youngest son has autism. During the period of the research she was struggling to manage his behaviour which had worsened considerably due to his change of routine.

### **3.4 Research methods and experiences of a shared space**

My research consisted of weekly virtual semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data. I used a mix of both Zoom and WhatsApp calls. My intention being to create a realistic environment where participants would feel able to share and disclose their realities, enable me to see their body language, to look out for any verbal cues of distress, and also to develop participants' confidence in using a platform they were not too familiar with. The participant observation via Zoom also provided validity to the research study and was fundamental to the ethnographic view (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 66). My hope being that it would allow me stay true to my aim, to observe and understand the science of the research as opposed to changing the outcome (Formosinho and Oliveira – Formosinho, 2012). Whilst this allowed participants with an indication of my expectations, I was also keenly aware that I could not be too restrictive if I wanted to gather rich and thick evidence (Geertz, 1973).

My aim was to identify common themes from the participants and use a methodological approach to collect qualitative data to understand the barriers they face. In considering this real-life enquiry I was fully aware of the juxtaposition of deep diving into governments and organisations actions in donating digital devices, alongside learning more about the potential social injustice within society for disadvantaged families and its potential to create dichotomy. It was not the dichotomy itself that was concerning but moreover how I may present credible quantitative data that could inform future practice and how best to distinguish this.

Initially I had hoped to meet and discuss situations and observe participant's body language cues in person, but the challenges presented by COVID-19 meant there were urgent and emerging changes in how we and others delivered services. Given the language and literacy needs of my participant group I felt that I may be able to elicit more meaningful data through observation or 'shadowing' and have a deeper understanding of my participants (Hognestad and Boe, (2016). Whilst all my research sessions took place virtually I considered the efficacy of the sessions and how I could develop and maintain honesty from the participants. This was further heightened when I realised that the participants were receiving at least one wellbeing phone call per week per child from school staff. For these participants this equated to a minimum of at least four calls per week where they felt the expectation to say that they and their children were coping well with life during lockdown. During the few weeks of data

gathering I wanted to develop my relationship and trust with the participants for them to distinguish from what they felt was my expectation and to share their realities and challenges.

Their experiences of being part of a learning group meeting at the local library gave the women an identity and helped me to establish my research relationship with them quickly. Over the period of working with them their narratives had revealed the value of the library space for them, both in the physical and emotional sense. The library united them and provided them with a safe space to occupy (Worpole & Greenhaugh, 1996). It was a space where many of them developed independence, confidence and shared moments of rupture; times of great significance in their lives as they learned new language, digital skills and new social skills from their peers. The library sessions gave them space to claim time for themselves “beyond the reach of work and family” (Middleton, 2014: 93).

The importance of this had been particularly relevant during the early days of the developing global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The women shared their understanding of a new virus and what they had learned about it, seeking clarity and new information from each other aiming to gather more information which could then be shared at home. On a practical note they also shared information on where to purchase scarce essential groceries as the growing pandemic led to empty supermarket shelves. Their growing unease and panic eased, only by the shared experience of their peers. As their teacher and mentor, I too shared their panic at preparing for an imminent national lockdown. I too needed to shop and prepare for my family. The reality of competing to purchase scarce resources is something I reflected on when my reality afforded me digital privilege to shop in contrast to the women’s experiences of queuing and traipsing from one shop to another. The digital inequality, being just one area where the women faced being “multiply marginalised” (Walby, 2009).

All the women in the group of twelve were invited to participate in my research. I did this via a voice note recorded on a WhatsApp message. I then forwarded on a link to the research information letters and consent forms, thus formalising the process and providing consistency for information sharing. Three participants agreed to support my study and returned consent forms. To initiate the research study, I began with virtual semi-structured interviews. Embury (2015) asserts that using virtual platforms is often

less of a barrier for research than its face to face alternative due to the ease of accessibility, less travelling and conflicting time commitments.

I used a range of closed and open-ended questions enabling opportunities for discourse and further probing of the subject matter (McIntosh and Morse, 2015; Roberts–Holmes, 2005: 109). I was very aware that my involvement, not influence the participants' responses through the students'/ teacher lens. Freire (1970: 45) states that the influence of leaders is often accepted, without question, by those they manage. The vulnerabilities and culture of the women meant that they would often seek guidance and affirmation on their decisions from me in my classes. I was aware of the possibility of this over the course of the research and adapted my questioning skills to avoid this. In doing this I was aware that a co-constructive enquiry can be used to explore subjects deemed as 'socially controversial'. (Yorks, 2015: 267) and Koshy (2005: 9) both place value on the act of information gathering and suggests that "the process of inquiry is as important as specific outcomes".

In considering the potential of my own bias, it was imperative to accurately record the interviews, share my positionality, including my self- questioning of the language used to differentiate vulnerability, and to be analytical in my approach (Mukherji and Albon, 2015: 147). Studies from Pigott et al. (2013: 424) suggest that the avoidance of bias is set within the methodological approach taken and that interpretive studies can be as objective as statistical data. Whilst the statistical data provided detailed insight into the research matter I believe, the praxeological paradigm demands the consideration of values both of practitioners and of the research participants. Praxeology offers an opportunity to explore and challenge our individual bias. Clough and Nutbrown (2012:27) concur that practice can be improved if we are willing to challenge, explore and learn from our own beliefs through applied research and practice. To support my weekly interviews with the participants I recorded the conversations with ongoing consent and then transferred the conversation onto a Word document. Member checking (Birt et al., 2016) with the participant ensured that the transferable data was taken within the context that it was narrated and discussed, thus assuring credibility and trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004; Guba and Lincoln, 1985: Chase, 2017).

On completion of the weekly individual interviews and member checking over a period of three weeks emerging themes were shared and explored thus providing an open



opportunity for further discourse. By collecting the weekly narratives; ranging between thirty minutes to up to an hour I felt the participants' confidence grow as they started to narrativise their experience of the pandemic and their role in it (Bruner, 1990: 115). I enabled them to "take the lead" (Bruner, 1983: 70) and talk, without interruptions, on their reflections of the week. In capturing the events of the week, the narratives discuss the women's experiences using language learnt in the classes and from each other. However I was unable to limit all interruptions and my own "semi-verbal cues" (Sealey, 2012: 207), influence the narratives to some extent. On reflection I query if this is an inevitable consequence of the research.

The final session was used to discuss key points, consider any ethical, cultural and social stance and possible conflict of experiences narrated and captured (Yorks, 2015: 262). This practice supported triangulation of the data (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Formosinho and Oliveira - Formosinho (2012) consider it essential that the researcher declares their own positionality. This transference of information captured also supports the triangulation of theory, practice and personal views.

Further the use of a reflective journal (Ortlipp, 2008) enabled me to review, analyse and make sense of information, thoughts and theoretical content. The value of this practice is found in the evolution of reflective practice, considering the views of others and oneself in addition to the how and why ideas and praxis are formed (Koshy, 2005: 97). Bassot (2016: 2) asserts that critical reflection should be meaningful, linking theory to practice and providing opportunity for '*paying attention to your emotional responses and being prepared to challenge your assumptions*'. I found this invaluable in helping me to rationalise and deal with the emotional aspects of the women's narratives; as for the women the pandemic had removed the emotional scaffolds I used pre-pandemic. The journal enabled me to scribe and provided a way to explore my emotions, thoughts and align this with what was happening for me off - stage too.

### **3.5 Additional considerations regarding my position**

I have strongly considered how the use of practice-based research to inform theory may lead to a dichotomy of influence between the researcher and the research (Robson, 2002: 11). To ensure ethical research, the researcher must remain objective and willing to learn from the praxis. Freire (1970: 45) suggests that the interface between the researcher and research participants is crucial in developing critical



thinking rather than simply repeating the learnt narrative. Through my studies with The Centre for Research in Early Childhood and my tutors' support, I have been encouraged and enthused to carry out practitioner led research, with both Dr Pascal and Dr Bertram (2012) promoting this as a democratic process fundamental in understanding and developing early years education practice. Both also assert that a praxeological approach may be influenced by the need for a deeper understanding of the political agenda by the researcher and must therefore be rigorous and aligned in ethical considerations. I believe that supporting the development of practitioner's theoretical knowledge, alongside their practice, encourages their personal and professional development. (Koshy, 2005: 25). I acknowledge that I have a vested interest in the outcome of the research as an online centre for Good Things Foundation but ultimately I want to ensure that the impact of digital poverty on these vulnerable families can be captured and shared.

Further I have considered the views of Rothbard (1976) who asserts the ethical stance of the researcher to be fundamental to the validity of a praxeological methodology. Rothbard is sceptical of the objectivity of qualitative data where the researchers may gain personally or where variable cultural heritage, personal experiences and opinions can influence the outcomes of the research. However errors, personal gain and misconduct are possible within both the interpretivist paradigm and the praxeological approach as the data is gathered via opinions and thus is open to interpretation (Formosinho and Oliveira-Formosinho, 2012). Robson (2002: 217) too, considers the researcher to be both a "*collaborator and a facilitator*" but insists they aim to remain democratic in their approach and neutral to the research data. This methodological approach also supports the awareness of the potential power relationship between researcher and the participants. It is fundamentally enshrouded in ethical consideration thus providing valuable quantitative data (Pascal and Bertram, 2012).

### **3.6 Data analysis**

This was an important part of my research as it was imperative to avoid bias that may have manifested from the analysis and subsequent presentation of the data. Koshy (2005: 83) asserts that it is not imperative to use a variety of methods to collate data but that it is the depth or quality of the data that is more important.

### **3.6.1 Coding**

I used coding during the data analysis of my qualitative inquiry. As a tool this helped me to identify the most often used words and phrases used that contributed to the summative and salient opinions. It also helped me to identify emerging key themes, differentiate threads of thinking and to create sub groups of the collated quantitative data. Whilst the coding offered an analytical lens from which to navigate the process of understanding the raw data I was aware of my own challenges in exercising caution. Elliott (2018) asserts that the nature of coding can be experimental as often the method of coding is self-taught with ineffective frameworks. Whereas Mukerji and Albon (2015) argue that using coding can help to identify emerging patterns when using systematic depiction and formation of data. The analysis and patterns can then be shared with the research peers as a measure of accuracy (Mukerji and Albon, 2015: 267-269). And finally, the data can be collated and presented as research findings.

### **3.7 Ethics**

Throughout the duration of the study, I adhered to the ethical guidelines of EECERA (Bertram et al., 2016) this allowed me to ensure inclusive practice of all individuals involved and reduce inequality and bias. I was mindful that the nature of our professional interests is often initiated through our own lived experiences. My personal involvement of supporting marginalised and vulnerable communities over many years and being witness to their everyday challenges has led me to pursue this research but I am also acutely aware that their lived experiences and hardships continue. For this reason participants were offered every opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. The ongoing assent was sought explicitly throughout. Shenton (2004: 66) considers this good practice is essential to ensure that the data is valid and trustworthy.

I ensured confidentiality was maintained through by using a numerical system for each of the participants, again this is recommended in the EECERA code for researchers (Bertram et al., 2016). The study complied with GDPR (EU, 2018) regulations and I ensured all written information was stored in a secure and encrypted database. I used the Zoom platform and WhatsApp calls and with permission, I used a recordable option within Zoom and recorded the calls to enable accuracy of the research discussion.

My position as both the researcher and as the participants' teacher caused me to question the ethical stance of power in relation to the participants. I was aware of the potential that they may afford compliance to my positionality. Gaventa and Cornwall (2015: 466) assert that, through the lens of participatory research practice, the redressing of the power imbalance lies within the awareness raising and open discourse of the situation. I was also aware that by contrast the research participants held greater power as I was wholly reliant on their cooperation and contribution to gain meaningful data (Ross, 2017). I believe that the teaching model of empowering the women, I used provided them with the confidence to share their opinions.

#### **4. Research investigation and challenges**

The rapid and daily changing face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Velavan and Meyer, 2020) meant that I was constantly adapting my research. Coupled with this I faced the same struggles as my participants with trying to understand the situation, maintain the smooth running of my family, home, business and my own mental health and wellbeing. At times I have stepped away from a research session and cried. The emotional impact of listening to participant's narratives has been draining and initially whilst I had hoped to continue the research over a five to six week period I had to curtail this to half the time as I was so emotionally distraught at my perceptions of my inability to help. On reflection, I should have used the scaffolds and support offered by my tutors and peers at CREC, but at the time I was also aware that many of my peers too were struggling with the demands of their own studies and managing the change to online remote learning.

The demands and worries of maintaining and running my own enterprise and income also meant that I was working very long hours allowing the weeks to merge with weekends and days to merge with evenings. I was apprehensive to turn any work or opportunities away for fear of appearing uninterested. My stress levels were at a constant high. With adult children also working from home the burden of cooking was shared as they experimented and prepared meals using YouTube tutorials. On reflection this perhaps helped me to continue with my working practices and maintain my acute stress levels. Chanana and Sangeeta, (2020) talk about Staff '*burnout*' as a risk for those working from home as staff work longer hours to prove themselves. This is how I felt. I was constantly proving myself to my learners, the families I was

supporting, funders and to myself that I could manage. Myers-Walls, (2020) found evidence of the impact of '*acute stress*' caused by dealing with Covid- 19, hampering the ability of professionals; who were parents themselves, in their working and decision making to support families.

My nature and personality means that I am quite a reserved person and not adept at sharing my emotions openly. I found that this trait also manifested itself many times with my research participants who needed encouragement to talk about their difficulties and challenges. I have since questioned if this is a cultural attitude or do factors such as economic disadvantage, family, language and education intersect for the women to feel marginalised to the point where they will not talk about their despair. Thompson (2000) speaks of intensifying marginalisation as something that women experience with other factors that intensify this position. Being aware of this I made a conscious decision to openly share some of my emotional wellbeing and digital challenges of the week with the participants to encourage openness from them and for them to realise and see my vulnerability and to understand there are no right or wrong answer and that I am merely interested in gathering data. On reflection I felt that the interview questions were open ended enough to invite critical reflection and themes emerged that I had not yet fully considered.

The follow on weekly calls to each of the participants enabled further in-depth discussion on the emergent themes, these in turn supported personal reflection, emotional support and practical options that each participant could follow. By the final session all the participants were able to share not only their challenges but one participant was also able to identify how she could resolve an issue requiring an email response and an online payment by asking for her son's help on his Smartphone rather than wait for the library to reopen and book an library computer.

Maintaining and using a reflective journal (Ortlipp, 2008), has helped to contribute my own observations and offer subjective and objective opinions. I have captured data pertinent to this study and I have considered this when analysing all of the data and when drawing conclusions. Undoubtedly, though obtaining qualitative data and through avid analysis of relevant literature throughout, this research study has influenced my thoughts and practice. Through my work as a community organisation, I have been able to present my anonymised findings at roundtables and seminars to

influence telecom providers and organisations to commit, support and implement solutions to resolve data and digital poverty.

#### **4.1 Research challenges**

The challenge of supporting vulnerable parents was heightened by continuing lockdowns due to the global pandemic (WHO 2020), constant changes to how school professionals were supporting families and their expectations of children's learning. There was increasing disparity between schools and geographical areas of expectations and the availability of digital technology and data. Birmingham schools received in excess of nine-thousand laptops to support their pupils (DfE 2020), whereas other areas received as few as a hundred.

The laptops loaned from school came with specific instructions that they were to be used only for doing school homework. Many laptops had been disabled and set to prevent access to many internet sites. This included Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The fear of damaging a laptop and receiving a repair or a replacement bill meant that families would restrict the use of them to children completing the homework, submitting it and then placing the laptop in a safe place. A bigger problem facing the families was of data poverty. The parents in my research group were facing the challenge of buying food, fuel or data. The pressure of ensuring their children completed and submitted online homework meant they were often using their personal phones hotspots and data which they could ill afford. Andrew et al. (2020) states that children from low socially economic backgrounds are most at risk of not receiving adequate home learning opportunities during lockdown. The following quote from a participant highlights that not only is she aware of the lack of learning opportunities, but acutely feels the stress of having to financially comply with the school's expectations.

*"I wish the school did not (sic) give my child a laptop. There is more pressure now for me to buy data. Last week my husband's friend gave us data. I asked the teacher and she just told me, I have to buy it. (sic) The school have given him a laptop to use and they cannot do anymore. He is not learning much. It is very easy work for him, but they still ask him to do it"* (Participant C, 2021).

As one of my preferred ways to engage with the participants was via Zoom I questioned the ethical risks of using this online platform. I was developing my skills and confidence in using Zoom and wanted to support participants' skills in using this

too. Through my involvement on a national devices and data project with Good Things Foundation I was aware that all the participants fitted into the criteria of disadvantage with device or data poverty, I could therefore support them all with a device and data. The ethics of doing this for my research and how it may be perceived by the participants bore heavily on my mind. I did not want them to feel obligated to participate and more so to provide the answers they assumed I may want to hear.

*“This is a real challenge for me. These families clearly meet all the criteria and more to receive a device and data. By giving them the data I know their world will open up. This is something that has the potential to change their lives for their children to be able to learn freely and search for things that may ignite a passion for a future career. My dilemma is how do I give them this without them thinking it is from me”*  
(Reflective Journal, 2021).

Initially I had thought to counter this by suggesting that the participants could use either Zoom or WhatsApp video calls, thinking that the WhatsApp platform did not need data to work. My decision was made easier after a participant called me; using her friend’s phone to explain that she would be unable to continue with the research as her children had broken her phone. Further, one of the participants also currently lived in temporary hostel accommodation with no Broadband provision in her room.

Through peer discussion, I made the decision to provide all the participants with a donated Google Pixel phone, a tablet and a data card. I made it clear that this was part of a national project and was not being gifted by me in any way. I arranged to deliver the devices and data to the participants following and adhering to COVID-19 safe practice with strict protective clothing awareness, maintaining safe distance rules and wiping down the equipment (Gov.UK, 2020) Delivering the equipment to the participants also enabled me confirm their understanding and consent to the research as well as providing instruction on how to use the devices and data. I was also able to emphasise that their use of the equipment was not just limited for the research. This was an important point as I was to later realise. At different times all the participants reflected on how the device and access to the internet helped them.

*“I called my mum in Sana and she was so happy to see the children...”*

*(Participant C, 2021).*

*“I use the data to check on my bidding for a house...”*

*(Participant B, 2021).*

*“The children can watch their cartoons and I can watch my films in the evenings.*

*There is nothing to do in the hostel. The TV does not work”*

*(Participant A, 2021).*

A further challenge in doing the research was the timing in making the calls to participants. Many times my pre-arranged calls were unanswered with long delays before my calls were returned. To support the research I changed the timings of the weekly calls, with the caveat that the participant would call me back if the time was inconvenient. However, I reflected on this, particularly when participants apologised for missing my calls as they had been sleeping. The explanation of watching a film until 2.00 am and sleeping the morning away was perceived as a norm for families, without the structures and routines of daily school and work life. Whilst my initial thought was to question and then suggest change to the participant I considered that it was not my role to do this. I also considered that any suggestion of a change in behaviour would imply that that change is needed as the parents' behaviour was deficient in how they were raising their children and adopting the changed behaviour would be better for the child.

I did not have the mental wellbeing to suggest this nor could I view myself as the agent for change. I was also aware that they were subject to the frequent calls from many professionals working with them and the possibility of their unconscious belief that parents are powerless, willing to change, but unable to do so without the support of the professional (Prochaska and Di Clemente, 1982). I find it difficult to reconcile these unspoken assumptions about parents to the pedagogical understanding of parents as a child's enforced teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic. These assumptions create a power imbalance in favour of the professional and more so given that the Government's narrative in relation to “troubled families.” (2011) which includes those parents and children who may have experienced domestic abuse, poor mental health, life within dysfunctional families or have been looked after by the local authority (Casey 2012) are described as, “both troubled and causing trouble” who need to change, “for their own good, and the good of their communities” (Pickles 2011). All the participants



fell within these bands and I was aware that their professionals and schools interventions may have caused them to feel *troubled* and in need of rescuing. The devices and data enabled the participants to also engage and communicate with the professionals working and supporting them. On hearing the following comments from two participants

*“...they know I have this phone, so now the school and the social worker call me every two days. I am fed up – always the same talk”*

*(Participant B, 2021).*

*“I hate the Zoom calls with the Social Worker. I make sure the children and the room look clean. I do not want her to think I am not being a good mum”*

*(Participant A, 2021).*

I reflected on how my actions had contributed to the parents feeling powerless in their dealings with professionals. And in also how the devices contributed to the parents feeling like imposters in their parenting (Clance and Imes, 1978). My intention in providing a tool and data to broaden their world had in fact narrowed it with its ability to allow others to infringe and check on their whereabouts and the wellbeing of their children – without their consent.

Additionally, as a result of the lack of routines I found all the participants wanted to talk at times that were convenient to them and at times in the evenings after 9.00pm. One participant tried to call me at 11.50 pm and on not getting a response sent me a voice message. I found this challenging as my family had maintained our pre COVID-19 routines and timings. The video WhatsApp calls caused some tension within my family, as I interrupted mealtimes and family time to attend to what my family saw as the ‘needs’ of the participants. I pride myself on my availability and particularly during COVID-19 felt attuned to my perception of their needs. My work phone was rarely switched off and I constantly made myself available. Realising that my constant availability had removed social barriers and etiquettes where they had stopped seeing me as a professional, working business hours and more as a ‘remote friend’ – always available like the internet.



On reflection whilst the data collection was pertinent to my research, I should have demonstrated my professional distance. Abbott (1988:36) describes professionalism as the assigning of human problems to experts. The distance created would have enabled me to manage the emotional impact of this challenging research. Again the availability and access to the internet at all times coupled with the lack of routines with COVID-19 meant fuelled the participants' understanding that everything and everyone was available at all times. The need to adhere to safe practice impacted on my ability to set realistic contact expectations and prevented the additional layer of scrutiny and deeper understanding of the participants' inhibitors a face to face interaction would have provided. For the participants the impact of delivering home learning, managing a daily and ever changing routine, providing nurture and stimuli, worries over finances, low language and digital skills whilst also balancing their children's behavioural changes has meant these parents have felt an acute sense of failure (Canning and Robinson, 2021).

#### **4.2 Layered approach**

In my approach to the data I have considered the manner in which data is elicited, to ensure the trustworthiness of the research (Shenton, 2004). I have aimed to present a descriptive narrative with '*thick, rich data*' (Geertz, 1973) obtained and triangulated using a layered approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Through the use of an expert witness each stage and point explored to provide credible reflections based on their knowledge, skills and training in the subject matter. The diagram (figure 1) indicates the methods I used:

- Stage 1- Interviews with participants
- Stage 2 – Further checks and discussions with peers and reference groups to identify emerging themes and findings
- Stage 3 - Reference check with expert witnesses and peer reference

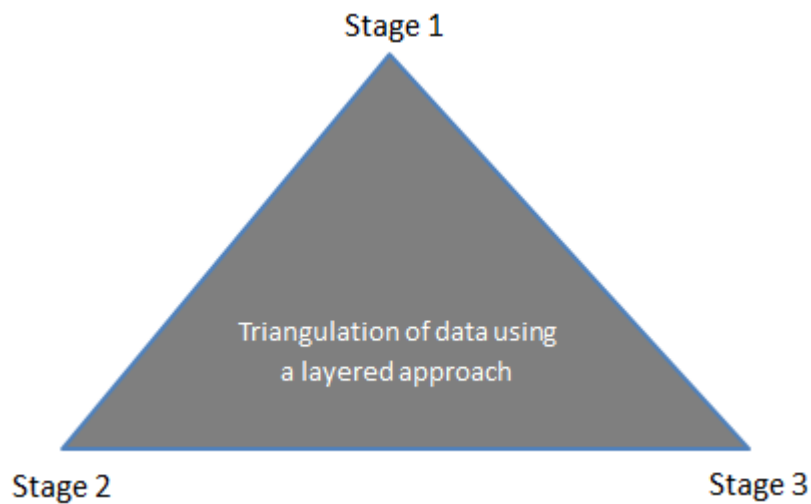


Figure 1- Triangulation of data

## 5. Findings and Analysis

## Research

### 5.1 Coding

I have used the ‘*open coding*’ technique (Robson, 2002: 194) to analyse the raw data and from this categorised and identified themes. These themes formed the basis for further analysis with the emergent themes further sub categorised for discussion with the peer group and supported the research outcomes. This due diligence also helped to ensure that the factual content gained through the investigation was accurately reflected.

Table 2 - Analysis of data

Common Themes	Implied and Impact
<p><b>Agency and Power</b></p> <p>Remote/virtual conversations with family and professionals.</p> <p>Feeling that professionals talk and using knowledge against them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling connected and supported networks across the world.</li> <li>- Being spoken to and of being checked on.</li> <li>- Participants feeling they are part of a tick box exercise</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resistance - Retaining Power</b></p>	<p>Able to use social media to suit their needs, but unable to access key</p>

Using Instagram, TikTok and Facebook.	government digital services, health information and school websites and remote platforms.
<p><b>Financial Vulnerability</b></p> <p>Participants use of digital technology leading to financial vulnerability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Selected understanding of using skills to shop online.</li> <li>- Unable to pay bills online and manage online banking.</li> <li>-Clothes shopping online “all the time” (Participant C, 2021).</li> <li>- Lack of understanding of security settings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Negotiability - Inequality of the uses of digital technology.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants knowing they lack skills and understanding to participate in many online activities that would enhance their lives.</li> <li>- Participants demonstrating newly learnt skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unable to understand and access health information. Relying on unsecure sources for information on COVID-19pandemic.</li> <li>- Developing confidence in being able to use digital tools for collating evidence.</li> </ul>

Much of the data analysed centred around the themes of the:

- **Agency and Power** – this related to the inequality of power between the participants and professionals.
- **Resistance** – whereby participants viewed their strengths in retaining, selecting and limiting their use and knowledge of digital technology.
- **Financial Vulnerability** – This was increased by the participants’ use of digital technology and their lack of skills and knowledge in being able to recognise and manage online risks and harm.
- **Negotiability and recognition of the inequality in the use of technology** Implying that through this participants recognise and use technology to enhance their lives and try to avoid using those parts that they perceive as

controlling. Thus being able to influence professions in how they perceive and communicate with the participant. There is also realisation that technology changes and develops so rapidly thus increasing their feeling of always being left behind.

I planned for the remaining ungrouped data to be collectively analysed and summarised or discounted based on its relevance to my research. I found minimal data that could not be grouped into one of the identified themes. This indicated the strengths and viability of the themes.

The themes enabled exploratory of the participants' narratives. There was a distinct feeling that the devices and the data now being used by the school and other professionals to check on participants' parenting abilities and keep tracks on children's whereabouts. Participant A explained how she had been unwell with asthma and called an ambulance. With no family support for childcare she refused the advice to go to hospital as she did not know where her husband was. The following morning her neighbour took the youngest two children to primary school. Soon after she was called to collect the children, as the paramedics had advised the school about a potential COVID-19 diagnosis. The participant was then asked to keep the children at home and help the children with the home learning resources on Google Classroom. She received daily phone calls from the school and the social worker, often leaving her exhausting.

*"They call me at any time from 8.00 am. I have no rest. They ask me where I am and where the children are. I hate the phone. I cannot switch it off as the children want to play on it. At least I can rest when they play on it"*

*(Participant A, 2021).*

For this participant, the phone was seen as a tool to control and monitor her movements. A tool used to question what the children had eaten for lunch and to check what and if homework was completed. She saw the phone as a tool to take away her agency. The parents' opinions here are in direct conflict with the value based on parental contribution to their child's learning embedded within the current Early Years and Education policy (DFE, 2017:5) however the pedagogical approach of home

learning during COVID-19 is based on a participatory model that seeks the child and parents to be active co-constructs and partners.

Also of note is the feeling of control the phone exercises over her. She feels she is unable to switch it off as it is as she uses it as a *loco parentis* – a tool to take on some of her functions and responsibilities as a parent and fundamentally to exert control over her children. A tool which she can use as part of the participatory model to co - construct learning and behaviour management in her home.

The participants also manifested their retention of power by exercising their digital skills to do online shopping. One participant spoke about how she was unable to help her children with online learning, but delighted in her ability to do online clothes shopping; late at night with limited digital skills. This was about this mother carving out time and space for herself, finding time to address her own needs creating those moments of escapism in the “silences and blanks” (Lefebvre, 2004). This mother’s power lay in buying and paying online, paradoxically not for herself but for her children and in using the instalment payment facilities offered to her. The lack of understanding also raised issues of financial vulnerability due to her limited financial literacy in understanding APR rates and balancing the many final demands on essential bills.

The discussions also raised concerns around digital literacy with the participants having little knowledge of online scams and the potential usage of their data and privacy (Yates and Lockley, 2019). The lack of language and literacy also increasing their vulnerability to read and evaluate information critically and consider its source rather than taking it at face value or to use their skills of decoding data (Yates and Lockley, 2019) This barrier providing another example of exclusion and the inequality of power central to the pedagogical approach and values of professionals and schools that the parents countered in everyday life. Friere (1970:45) opposes this argument asserting that by preventing and excluding access to learning opportunities we are creating and supporting an oppressive regime.

The lack and accessibility of data was also considered an essential need. (Digital nation, 2021) Participant B spoke about the four months she had spent in a hostel room with her three young children, without Broadband or data, during lockdown. Prior to the move to temporary accommodation she enjoyed spending whole days cooking and baking with her children, following recipes on many social media sites. This was

the family's "le quotidien" (Lefebvre, 2004: IV) the ordinary and the routine, as they escaped their reality of gambling debts and loan sharks. Their time in the hostel meant limited time in a shared kitchen, with different cooking smells and functions.

*"My little boy used to be chubby chubby, but now he is skinny. My daughter will not eat. She is never hungry. The GP said I have to take her to hospital for blood tests"*  
(Participant B, April 2021).

I reflected on this comment at the time with some emotion.

*"The hostel kitchen and its food smells from diverse families cooking one after another, evoke memories of past shared happy times. The children barred from the kitchen, due to their age and forced to watch their mother working alone. They have been on their journey to escape together and yet now they abandon their mother to fend for herself, in this unfamiliar space. They felt at ease in their home kitchen, playing and learning whilst searching online and following recipes – always together.*

*The lack of data and access for her teenage child; so used to sharing and meeting friends in online spaces and spending her days scrolling, watching and learning from online sites is devastating. The online isolation has caused this young child to become ill with a potential lifelong condition. Where is this family's professional support? The social inequality of digital access and knowledge has many unseen facets. Today I just feel like crying at the sadness of it all"*

(Reflective Journal, April 2021).

Again, my study found a dichotomy within the professional support and services for families: on one hand professionals face the daily challenge of working with families whose lives are disrupted by COVID-19 and by many different elements of social, economic and digital exclusion and on the other, there is a continuing and strong national narrative which apportion blame and describes families as deficient in their inability to Home School their children and access increasing digital services online. Equally, within schools and services, there are many 'professionals' who set themselves up as experts, offering advice and support to parents who lack knowledge, both of which create a huge power imbalance weighted always against parents.

I reflected on the participants' perceptions of me as one of the many professionals, occupying a space which they saw as "critical site of knowledge acquisition" (Livingstone, 2010: 780). I had introduced them to the library, encouraged and helped them to select books for their children to read with them, helped them to develop their early digital skills and helped them to learn the cultural rules and behaviours expected in using the library. I questioned if I too was complicit in creating and perpetuating the power imbalance weighted against them.

There is also a sense of abiding by the "rules imposed by authority" (Lefebvre, 2004: 99) in using the devices. All the participants spoke about how their children supported them in using the phones and tablets. The perception being, of their child, being the expert and holding the authority and knowledge. A participant explained how her child had shown her how to search for flight tickets to Yemen, adopting the same gentle voice she uses when she teaches him.

*"He put me on this site and I saw pictures of Sanaa Airport. It has changed so much. I felt really happy. He told me not to press any buttons"*

*(Participant C, 2021).*

This comment also shows the flight cost is irrelevant as given the expense of travel this is not something she can consider, but what is important is how she has been able to escape her reality and have a glimpse of the world outside, through the internet. Underlying it all is the reverence she has for her child's authority and knowledge in being able to do this. Again we see the dichotomy of a power imbalance of the parent passing power to the child in using a digital skill.

The participant's awareness that there are skills that she is unable to do was reiterated in different guises. She explained how she was able to use the computers in the library, but could not use the school laptop as it did not have a separate mouse. And another included taking photos of the chaos left in the shared hostel kitchen by the previous user to show her Housing Officer on the next appointment, as opposed to developing her skills further and learning how to forward these on, via email and WeTransfer or another portal. All these interactions contain features of Epstein's model of Overlapping Spheres of Influence (Epstein, 1987) in evidencing the learning that takes place outside of the classroom and through interactions with

family and community. Whilst Epstein work relates to a child's learning the model is of relevance here as it demonstrates the clear congruence between the parents and children learning from each other, from school and from the community through mutual support and respect.

## **5.2 Expert Witness Perspective and Responses**

My research and reflections with my peer groups and expert witnesses found increasing digital skills gaps within professionals' knowledge, with school staff struggling to know how to work many functions on remote learning platforms. During my research one participant spoke about how she had been recalled to the school on four different occasions for replacement laptops as the teacher did not know how to reset her son's password for access to the Google Classrooms. During one visit she had been accused of damaging the laptop settings. This parent was left questioning her own skills whilst the teacher tried to maintain her façade of professional knowledge and power. The Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index, 2020 found that 31% of the UK workforce developed work related digital skills during lockdown.

For school professionals, the challenge being to learn new skills with some urgency and then to demonstrate their experiential learning (Kolb, 2014: 1) with confidence to parents. A comment from a participant shows the parents' awareness of the professional's struggles.

*"His teacher does not mark his homework on the Google Classroom. It must be hard to do this"*

*(Participant C, 2021).*

*"I liked seeing the teachers' living rooms when they were doing the online classes"*

*(Participant A, 2021).*

With the immediate pace of digital learning and working from home (ONS, 2020) forced upon many professionals, it is understandable that professionals have not had the time to hone and develop their digital skills before sharing knowledge with parents. The expected ideal is always that parents and professionals work as equals in



partnership, and have a balanced relationship in terms of in terms of power and participation. The continuing disconnects between the ideal and the practical reality, evidences considerable work still needs to be undertaken on many aspects. This is an area where further research is needed and in hindsight an area, I regret not including within the parameters of this study.

I have also reflected on the lack of privacy and how digital devices are used to intrude private spaces. The participant's explanation of helping her child to attend an online class which was being delivered from the teacher's home thus allowing her to see a part of her child's teacher's private space, that ordinarily she would not have been able to. And, the feeling of power that this gave the parent in comparing the background setting with her own home. Of key also is the professional's openness or a lack of awareness in knowing how to avoid this voyeurism. Again this is an area that was not included within the parameters of the study.

Grouping parents and children in schools is a long practiced way of teaching and a way for teachers and professionals to know how to engage and manage their contact with parents. However I have often questioned whether this practice of labelling is enabling or disabling within an educational system (Hodkinson and Burch, 2019). And, if we also use this as a means to excuse low attainment and engagement in home learning, I question if it is easier for a professional to excuse the child's low attainment due to the parent's low language skills and limited access to digital technology and skills.

## **6. Recommendations**

The learning that has taken place throughout this study has provided many opportunities to reflect on and provide insight on communities' digital inclusion and exclusion. The wider implications are it provides an abundance of opportunity for organisations, schools and professionals to understand and tailor how they provide access and resources to enable communities with low language and literacy to engage in their services and learning opportunities. COVID-19 presents as a norm, the societal shift in the structure of the workplace and enables fundamental changes to how learning is delivered to both adults and children (Beech and Anseel, 2020).

My proposed recommendations are by no means exhaustive, but I hope provide a starting point for this enquiry:

1. For organisations and professionals to promote and use the opinions of intended users prior to digital service design. This best practice would include learning about the challenges and inhibitors faced by their intended users.
2. For all user research to be carried out in an ethical and respectful manner with participants involved and for professionals and organisations to demonstrate their inclusivity through a willingness to understand how others view and experience the world, with a tolerance for ambiguity (Dillon & Bourke, 2012).
3. For organisations and schools to see parents as participants and potential users of their services, rather than as a customer who will not engage. With this in mind for schools to actively work with organisations to support their parents and communities engagement and inclusion.
4. The above point will require specific training for school staff which would include raising the awareness of the implications and impact of digital exclusion, both for the parent and for the child. I have long held the view that school staff are not effectively trained on parental engagement, with many staff acquiring informal skills, knowledge and approach from their peers in the setting. This coupled with doing their daily tasks means that parental engagement is seen as a chore done in a repetitive and one size fits all manner. The research and participants' narratives through this study has affirmed my view.

*"They just talk and talk at me. I stop listening".*

*(Participant B, 2021).*

*The teacher has taught all four of my children, but still she does not know my first name. I am not just Abdul or Haji's mother. We need WIFI and a laptop for all of us not just for the children's schooling. My language is Arabic and I am learning English. I can understand everything - if it is in Arabic but now I am forgetting my English. I have not had any classes for a long time".*

*(Participant C, 2021).*

5. A further point on this would be to include as mandatory, training for all school staff on the challenges of parents being digitally excluded. This would include

from a financial literacy perspective how digital exclusion intersects and overlaps energy vulnerability with other disadvantage and the relationships between energy poverty, water poverty, air quality, climate change and health inequalities to digital exclusion. This would include cross partnership working and engagement with a range of Agencies and organisations.

6. For schools and organisations to develop a deeper understanding of individual's digital behaviours, rather than just basing decisions on the analysis of algorithms. This can only be achieved through a willingness to actively listen and understand what may be behind behaviours. I developed much insight from looking deeper into why a mother struggling financially shopped online whilst her children slept through the night. And also why parents are able to compartmentalise their skills and needs
7. For progress, there is a need for organisations and schools to respect parents' prior learning and to use this to develop and build on a strength model of learning rather than a deficit model and to understand parent's strengths and build on these assets (Janjuha-Jivraj and Chisholm, 2016).with respect for their cultural and familial values. There is a clear need for digital learning to be based on the relevance of what a parent's needs and uses are rather than following a defined scheme of work aimed at achieving qualifications and formal progression.

*"I thought I did not know how to get on the internet, but now I realise that by watching Tik Tok and Instagram videos I am on the internet. We learn more from Tik Tok than just Google Classroom".*

*(Participant B, 2021).*

*"I want to learn how to make Tik Tok videos. This could be my career".*

*(Participant A, 2021).*

Schools and professionals have a huge long term opportunity presented by COVID-19 lockdowns in engaging and supporting parents in home learning, both by providing the skills support and ways to overcome the inhibitors and barriers disadvantage present.

## 7. Final Reflections

The research questions outlined provided a structure to the research and I systematically explored these in depth:

I explored participants' perspectives of exclusion around digital inclusion and the impact of this for parental involvement in their children's learning, during a global pandemic. My sub-questions included:

1. Understanding and evaluating the research literature and national and local policy documents and what they state about current digital inclusion, practices and approaches. (RQ1)
2. What are parents' perceptions of 'real life' experiences of digital inclusion and what additional barriers present for diverse urban communities during a global pandemic? (RQ2)
3. What can we learn as practitioners from parents perceptions of digital exclusion and how can this learning be used for effective future development and policy? (RQ3)

(RQ1) I have completed a literature review and whilst finding considerable literature also found many gaps. There is emerging literature of the digital divide and growing learning of the impact of this on both children and adults, but I found little that connects all three from a parental engagement perspective. Further research is required in this area.

(RQ2) Taking part in the research has helped the study participants explore their own beliefs and all agree that they have increased their awareness of digital exclusion and also developed confidence in their skills to be included in the digital world and participate in the parts they perceive useful. The findings suggest that the digital landscape and its many uses is vast with inclusion being relevant to what the user deems appropriate at the specific time in their lives.

(RQ3) At the outset of this study, its purpose was ultimately to identify new learning from parents' perceptions of digital exclusion and how the findings could improve practitioners' ability to support parents as their child's educator and promote a more empowered participatory model. Shier (2010) highlights the concerns facing

practitioners with this challenge in needing to “*navigate the tensions... around the constraints imposed by different social, organisational and political contexts, with their sights firmly set on a more effective empowering practice that resonates with their personal beliefs and values*” (Shier, 2010:35).

I believe to use these findings to develop praxis, it is essential for an understanding of the tensions and constraints imposed on both parents and practitioners and for a change in the narrative of viewing parents as implicitly helpless and in need of the support and expertise of practitioners. Much could be garnered by considering the work of Levitas et al (2007) and their approach in using the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix, which identifies areas of exclusion and provides solutions to remove the barriers that exclude. An approach that asserts practitioners as enablers rather than experts helps parents to be seen as excluded rather than deficient. Most of the research participants felt practitioners saw them through a lens of deficiency. I believe the fast pace of change forced by daily changing guidance of the COVID-19 pandemic meant practitioners focussing on the essentials of food, safety and shelter for families (WHO, 2020) has served to increase this.

Assumptions should be challenged that parents are not able to understand, decipher or learn digital skills and digital language to support themselves and their children. Using parents to co-construct learning and enabling them to become true partners working alongside the professionals, allowing them greater access to participate in their child’s learning would serve huge benefits to everyone, particularly in the ever changing landscape of COVID-19.

I find it difficult to conclude this research paper because the very nature of my research is praxeological and is concerned with the ongoing development of my own and other professional’s practice. My intent was to carry out an ethical, participatory piece of research within a real world context sharing the narratives of participants. I remain confident the process remained rigorously ethical. The research has changed my thoughts and I believe it has influenced organisations’ digital policies regarding their Corporate Social Responsibility, in providing free data and devices to communities. One example of this was my keynote speech at the Lloyds Banking Group Consumer Digital Index, 2020 where my reflections of the impact of digital poverty were later

discussed at The National Energy Action event, 2021 and how energy vulnerability intersects and overlaps with other disadvantage.

*“Deprivation is cyclical and intergenerational. Energy poverty leads to low aspirations. How do you charge up the school loaned laptop if you cannot afford the electricity top up? There is no loose change”*

(Shaikh, NEA Conference, 2021).

There is scope for my research to be developed and for future research to consider practitioners’ expectations and perceptions of parents and their views of digital poverty in the home learning environment and how this affects and impacts not just life chances and opportunities for the most disadvantaged in our communities, but also how it affects us all and our part in a global economy.

The research has taught me the self-awareness of how I allow my life to be driven by technology from devices and technology to manage my health, sleep, exercise, work and social life. I allow it to permeate and dictate all aspects of my life with no shutdown facility at any time. My use of technology no longer allows me to distinguish between the weekday and the weekends. In contrast the participants use technology when they want to and when they need it. Their self- imposed digital exclusion enables them to have the digital silences, we all crave at times.

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