

## **Study Buddy Club: A Novel Response to the COVID-19 Lockdown, Remote Working, Homeschooling, and Higher Education Work Placements**

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Doi:10.23918/ijsses.v8i4p1

**Abstract:** This position paper evaluates a response to challenges faced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The creation of 'Study Buddy Club,' saw Childhood Studies undergraduate students operate daily online sessions with children of university staff. This provided much-needed respite for parents and carers working from home, as evidence outlines negative impacts of reduced peer interaction for children, and the loss of routine associated with school settings. With a focus on the educational needs of young children, 'Study Buddy Club' appealed to a 'family-friendly' working policy, acknowledging the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on parents, particularly working mothers. A second aim of the project was to offer work experience for undergraduate students, who need to meet a compulsory requirement for their degree. The aims, impact and features of the 'Study Buddy Club' align in this paper to expose the difficulties families faced in the pandemic and the role of a simple, yet effective solution.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Remote Education, Online Engagement, Homeschooling, Parents, Families, Work Placements, Working from Home

### **1. Introduction**

The impact of Covid-19 on families across the UK has been profound, with mounting pressure associated with house-bound children and parents working from home (Williams, Mayhew, Lagou & Welsby, 2020). For full time working parents, this has meant balancing homeschooling with professional responsibilities, additional stressors and background anxiety (Salari et al., 2020), with little evidence of any respite to remedy these challenges. In light of school closures, varying types of education provision was delivered online (Department for Education, 2021a), and the resultant report highlights several factors affecting 'pedagogical fidelity' (p. 9). The loss of 'whole class teaching', 'difficulties with direct instruction', 'reduced practical activities', 'reduced content/knowledge' and 'greater focus on independent learning'. These threats to learning are further supported by Bozkurt et al.: 'The crash nature of emergency remote education inevitably results in its weakness in theoretical underpinning' (2020, p.2) and this questions the effectiveness of what has been offered. With children missing valuable social interaction with their peers and school environment, 'reduced content and knowledge' has become an ongoing concern for parents, educators and the government.

Received: October 20, 2021

Accepted: November 25, 2021

Pinnell, J., & Sabine, A., & Carroll- Meehan, C. (2021). Study Buddy Club: A Novel Response to the COVID-19 Lockdown, Remote Working, Homeschooling, and Higher Education Work Placements. *International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies*, 8(4), 1-16.

Adding to this context are the challenges faced by professionals working in universities, where, largely, the pandemic has meant business as usual, with staff working to maintain an often higher level of service despite closures and growing demands. For those professionals balancing homeschooling and full time work at home, the relentlessness of time demands and expectations can be overwhelming, as reflected in reports of breakdowns in family relationships (ACAMH, 2020). Behavioural problems have also increased (Thorell et al., 2021) with female professionals experiencing disproportionate impacts, as mothers' heightened responsibilities widen gender gaps in employment outcomes (Petts, Carlson & Pepin, 2020).

In response to both of these factors, the 'Study Buddy Club' aimed to provide respite for parents working at a UK university by engaging children between the ages of 8-12 in online activity sessions of 90 minutes (3 per day). This provision was supervised centrally by university staff via a main Zoom room, but planned and delivered by Childhood Studies students in separate Zoom 'Breakout Rooms'. Designed by the education department, the approach to the online delivery was rooted in pedagogic principles and was ultimately designed to allow for interaction between children and their peers, and with the 'Study Buddies' themselves. There were two strands; one that offered 'fun' activities, and another to help with homework assigned by schools. The final challenge that the project hoped to address was the closure of settings for professional placements for Childhood Studies students. These are required to fulfil professional, academic and vocational requirements as part of their degree programmes by reflecting on experiences and building extensive professional portfolios to evidence their competency (ECSDN, 2020; DfE, 2021b). Childhood Studies students must meet a minimum requirement, with sector demands outlining the importance of practical experience to graduate with an 'appropriate qualification' (DfE, 2021). Without access to vocational experiences, the essence of the degree programme can be compromised and outcomes impacted.

The 'Study Buddies' programme was created to respond to three novel challenges (see Fig. 1).

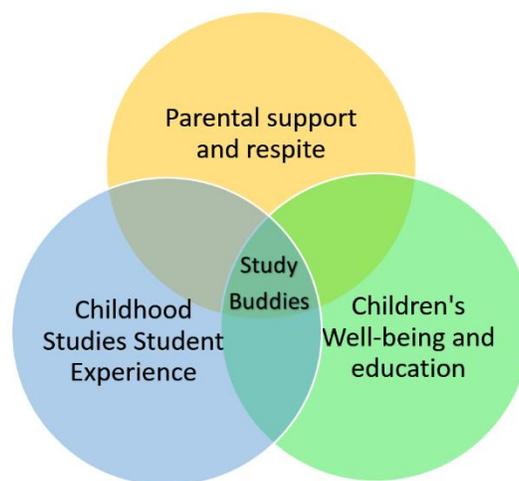


Figure 1: The three 'problems' in need of Study Buddy Club

In summary therefore, the project was not intended to supplement existing school support structures, but instead to appeal to three compound challenges: pressure on families to homeschool their children whilst working at the same time, providing Childhood Studies students with professional experiences with children and aiding children's education and social interaction. Old answers were not enough to provide solutions and in this instance, it was understood that the role of education would need 'to embrace novelty and allow new practices to emerge' (Raaper & Brown, 2020, p. 344). The university acknowledged the pressure and potential for expectations to suffer during the pandemic, supporting the suggestion for an internally derived solution. The Study Buddy project provided a safe, Covid secure, family-friendly approach, changing 'business as usual' to 'how can we help'?

## **2. Parents, Homeschooling & the Impact of Covid-19**

Covid-19 as an unprecedented worldwide crisis, has had a particular impact on education (Letzel, Pozas & Schneider, 2020, p. 159). With schools closed and routines disrupted, families have experienced 'domestic conflict, parental alcohol use and poor quality home schooling' experiences, with academic progress for children halted or even reversed (Thorell et al., 2021, p.8). These detrimental impacts cause an increase in already existing attainment gaps, with reports describing the uptake of homework for children being 'at best very unequal' (Pensiero, Kelly & Bokhove, 2020, p.16). In a pressure cooker environment, parents attempting to work full time from home, whilst responsible for their children's education, meant adaptations in working patterns and the requirement to fulfil an unexplored role- teaching their own children (Pensiero et al., 2020).

In the emergency response adopted by schools, knee-jerk solutions combined online learning and homeschooling (Bozkurt et al., 2020), but when this encompassed 'set exercises' and not live interactions, responsibility for participation was placed in the hands of parents. There emerged huge disparities in teachers' digital skills and general school approaches; in some cases, varying differently between class or year groups, providing some children with extensive guidance and others with a need for parents to be heavily involved. Specific resources were also required for successful homeschooling, including access to the internet, digital devices and the ability to use them, with some families reporting a lack of equipment or needing to share one device between multiple family members. This provides a substantial challenge for families having to balance internet access, homeschooling and additional time engaging with children whilst working from home (Letzel et al., 2020). In light of the continued high infection rates, this temporary solution inadvertently became a 'semi-permanent' solution, with the reliance on limited home resources seeing some children unable to access the internet, and others with unlimited access (Parczewska, 2020). This exacerbates the divide between those children with and without, doing more to heighten attainment gaps and delay progress in education (Pensiero et al., 2020). It is not doubted that lockdown education provision has led to a growing concern surrounding 'existing social inequalities' and widening educational gaps (Letzel et al., 2020, p.160).

The idea that education is in constant the need for 'genuinely creative adaptation' to keep 'abreast of the kaleidoscopic change in the world' (Rogers, 1961, p.348) has been accelerated by Covid-19, with both families and professionals thrust into uncharted territory, leaving many unprepared. To remedy this, the university's Study Buddy project provided families and students as employees with digital devices, aiming to increase access and provide further opportunities for children and students to get involved.

## **2.1 Impacts on Working Mothers**

Universities as employers are gendered in favour of male academics, with structural inequality amplified by childcare responsibilities at home. During lockdown, male academics ‘were relatively less affected’ (Yilidrim & Eslen- Ziya, 2020, p. 244) than female academics, showing the impact on productivity was not equally felt. This risks employers measuring or comparing the performance between both genders and being disproportionately ‘managed’ at work, adding further stress and pressure. In general, it is important to note that homeschooling in lockdown has had a disproportionate impact on working mothers; with mothers’ responsibilities widening gender gaps in employment outcomes (Petts, Carlson & Pepin, 2020). With homeschooling, women have experienced ‘greater reductions in work hours than men,’ noticing significant changes to their work compared to those reported to men’s working lives (Petts et al., 2020). As children have been at home and the routine of schooling has been lost, work and family boundaries become indistinct, with ‘gendered distribution’ of household responsibilities more apparent (Yilidrim & Eslen- Ziya, 2020, p.244). The demand on working mothers in university jobs coincides with the additional pressure on universities to provide quality student experiences, and arguably for academics, where work is characterised by the number and quality of publications and securing research funding, the role ‘is basically incompatible with tending to children’ (Minello, 2020, p. 1). Added to this is guilt, a feeling widely associated and non-contested as part of motherhood, and a further challenge for working mothers needing to homeschool, with competing priorities and unrealistic expectations to complete both tasks well. This leads to significant impacts on mothers’ mental health and productivity at work (Sutherland, 2010).

The Study Buddy Club, whilst not only available to working mothers, acknowledged the context of parenting in lockdown, the demands on mothers and how this can affect productivity. Bypassing the requirement to consult multiple stakeholders in developing full working policies, the project was a quick and welcome solution to easing the pressure on workloads and providing much needed respite.

## **2.2 Homeschooling and the Impacts on Children**

When faced with prolonged periods of homeschooling with family members, and an extended, uncertain lockdown period, children may ‘exhibit behavioural and emotional changes’ (Bayar & Zontur, 2020). This has a direct impact on families as a whole, and with a multitude of changes to daily life as a result of Covid-19, child disruption within the family can lead to frustration and worry, with family overreactions to these challenges. Behaviours can ‘escalate to repetitive cycles’ leading to a breakdown of family relationships and an ‘exacerbation of problems’ (ACAMH, 2020). Children lacking stimulation provided by the school environment are more likely to exhibit challenging behaviour, and this, added to pressure to ‘complete assigned school work from home’ is presenting a significant challenge (ACAMH, 2020). A study by Parczewska (2020) found that around a third (32.7%) of Polish parents stated that home education was ‘beyond their capabilities’ during the coronavirus pandemic (p.10), with other studies reporting parent’s feeling stress, anxiety and tiredness with homeschooling, namely in relation to explaining new topics to children or helping with educational tasks (Letzel et al., 2020, p.165). This anxiety is arguably transferred to children, heightening the risk of irritability and aggression, with homeschooling itself highlighted as one of the ‘activities associated with the strongest negative effects’ (Thorell et al., 2021, p.2).

Homeschooling is not necessarily the main cause of challenges in this context however, with the separation from friends and prolonged time in the same home environment causing children to feel introverted and unhappy (Bayar & Zontur, 2020). This could be linked to the lack of social interaction with studies proving the need for live interaction and for learning activities to be associated with ‘real life,’ making full use of the home environment (Zhao et al., 2020, p.6). The study buddy model engages children in short 20-minute activities, with 10-minute session introductions and conclusions. Between activities, students build in 5 minute ‘brain breaks’ for children to stay engaged (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021). In order to be effective, this is rooted in the need for interaction, not simply between the child and ‘buddy’ but also with other children. When learning from home, the main factor lacking for effective children’s learning is social contact with classmates, ‘curiosity about new topics’ and being part of the school community (Letzel et al., 2020, p.169). Despite these findings detailing a need for constructive interaction, offline lessons and learning activities have been a dominant offering from schools, requiring more initiative and planning from families (Ponsiero et al., 2020). This adds pressure to parents to facilitate all learning in the home, and added to professional work responsibilities, causes further concerns for families in isolation. The role that parents play in the engagement with online activities for their children relies on ‘modelling’ positive working from home behaviours, setting an example to encourage children without ‘telling’ (Zhao, 2020, p.9).

Within this is children’s mental health, as the loss of interactions with peers and a learning community omit valuable ‘supportive interpersonal interactions’ closely linked to emotional wellbeing (Lades, Laffan, Daly & Delaney, 2020, p. 903). Wellbeing is also increasingly fragile with how children and families spend time when in isolation as higher levels of social media engagement and news consumption elevate the negative impacts (Lades et al., 2020, p. 908). In contrast, however, as people become more accustomed to virtual interactions, wellbeing benefits may follow (Lades et al., 2020, p. 909). It can be in this context that the Study Buddy Project can be further justified as a solution to lockdown challenges, expanding children’s virtual interactions and contributing to wellbeing. The continuation of the Study Buddy club can be beneficial with educational disadvantages caused by the pandemic as the reduction in school hours causes further differences in children’s knowledge and academic progress, causing future challenges for teachers (Thorell et al., 2021, p. 11). With varying degrees of homeschool and levels of isolation amongst children, the option to continue with the provision of study buddies when schools return can maintain additional emotional support beyond the emergency isolation of the pandemic (Thorell et al., 2021, p. 11). This can be a positive outcome from global emergency, as ‘potential for good things [can] be achieved in response to the pandemic,’ sharing good practice, gaining new knowledge but mainly not seeing what we have done as a ‘deficit model’ (Bubb & Jones, 2020, p. 211). The ‘societal crisis’ caused by covid-19 can be seen as both ‘destructive and productive,’ able to ‘dissolve but also reconstitute’ communities (Raaper & Brown, 2020, p. 344).

### **3. Doing Business in a Global Pandemic: Working Policy and Organisational Pressure**

The higher education sector has not escaped scrutiny in light of Covid-19, with students continuing studies remotely with novel digital approaches that ‘typically take many years’ to master for academics, but were forced to be ‘presented quickly within a limited number of days’ (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020, p. 2). This has naturally caused challenges for the consistency of teaching provision, and with students lobbying for ‘value for money’ as ‘customers’ (Modell, 2005), this resulted in greater time pressures and competing

demands on academic staff (Por & Barriball, 2008). For many staff working in universities therefore, 'business as usual' has largely been expected, but at what cost? In addition to this was mounting pressure in the media about universities' responses to lockdown, with reports of 'broken and defeated university students,' feeling 'forgotten by the government' and facing a 'mental health crisis' (Blackall & Mistlin, 2021). The workforce in universities has largely needed to bear the brunt of these sector demands, with every university service mobilized in the effort, not just academics. For example, news reports identified university wellbeing and mental health services as being integral to plug 'the gaps in NHS services' (Universities UK, 2021).

The conflict therefore lies in these rising demands on workload, the uncertainty of expectations, and the challenges faced by employees in lockdown- more so with working parents. One of the obvious solutions to this is to implement flexible, family-friendly working policies, and adapt them to meet the challenges of lockdown. Flexible working practices are essentially defined as allowing employees to 'vary the amount, time or location of their work,' and must now be considered as a 'permanent feature of an organisation' (Wiatr, 2021, p.67). The impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent emergency response to remote working has arguably created a working culture that employees perceive as unfair or that threatens wellbeing, leading to 'counterproductive behaviours such as reduction of effort' or 'deliberately doing tasks incorrectly' (Medina- Garrido et al., 2021, p.1007). With this a risk of working in lockdown and balancing homeschooling, a solution was needed to ease pressure at home, thus the Study Buddy Project was created, a small step in being 'family-friendly' and acknowledging the challenges. This project as a 'flexible solution' can be one of the main motivators for attracting talent to workplaces, having a positive impact on collaboration, innovation, employee commitment and productivity (Wiatr, 2021). To show a willingness to offer respite for working parents and promoting work-family policies is an 'intangible capital within corporate social responsibility' and reduces the occurrence of work-family conflict, where work interferes with employee's activities with their families (Medina-Garrido, Biedma-Ferrer, Ramor-Rodriguez, 2021, p. 1007). These policies are not always apparent however, with employers more likely to vary the timing of work, but still expecting maintenance of the same amount as outlined in contracts, and keeping usual workflow targets and deadlines.

Of existing employment policies in universities, those relevant typically encompass flexible working (flexitime), working from home, Covid-19 workload planning and parental leave. The relevant implications from these policies blur the lines between employer expectations and what is realistic for homeschooling parents, and in light of Covid-19, policies showed no specific reference to parenting or managing family time (or the disproportionate impact on mothers as employees). Within typical working policies, a flexible approach to work aims to improve work-life balance for staff by allowing earlier or later start and end times but holds the expectation of accountability to 'make up' hours not worked as set out in working parameters. In the context of lockdown, 'flexitime' however may be of little use, with work life balance being compromised with the added pressure of homeschooling children (Pensiero et al., 2020). For flexible approaches to work, it is vital that the 'experiences, views and perceptions of all stakeholders, especially the employees,' is investigated to identify challenges (Downes & Koekemoer, 2011, p. 231). This however was not a feasible undertaking in the emergency approach to lockdown and homeschooling thus not tailoring to the needs of employees, especially those who are facing unprecedented stress and pressure.

If flexible working only encompasses timings and not the level of work or amount of time needed to complete tasks, the impact of lockdown does not make it a viable option to ease the workload, stress and need to fulfil 'business as usual' at work. With emergency procedures in place for working at home, these have included requiring employees to actively work from home, but has typically encompassed the possibility to 'agree alternative working hours' with line management if caring responsibilities disrupts the usual working pattern. Advice from Unison (2021) about remote working in lockdown whilst homeschooling is that parental leave can be suggested but the statutory entitlement is that this can be unpaid. It also goes on to suggest that reducing hours, targets and being flexible about work deadlines can release some pressure on employees, but again this is at the discretion of the employer and not feasible for all roles (Unison, 2021). This background context about working policy and the pressure on staff further appeals for a solution to ease the pressure on working parents. The Study Buddy Club served to engage children whilst being remotely supervised by parents, releasing valuable time to continue home working and meet the sector demands. This unique solution adopted by one UK university shows the potential to meet a variety of organisational challenges and benefit multiple stakeholders within the university.

#### **4. Undergraduate Work Placements & the Student Experience**

With the aforementioned focus on the quality of the higher education experience, concerns around 'value for money,' and how universities met the challenges faced arose (Kulkarni & Chima, 2021; Office for Students, 2020). Aspects of degree programmes found themselves at risk of being deemed inadequate or infeasible given anxieties and safety regulations, creating pressure on the Childhood Studies sector to fulfill expectations (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2021). Added to this is a perceived risk that social science and humanities degrees may be classed as 'low value' provisions (Britton, Dearden, Van der Erve & Waltmann, 2020), in spite of the value that graduate leaders have placed on Childhood Studies as a provision (Sylva et al., 2004; Pascal, Bertram & Cole-Alback, 2020; QAA, 2019; Early Education, 2021; DfE, 2021).

The requirement for students to gain experience with children marks a key part of their degree journey; the loss of which would naturally have a significant impact on the quality of undergraduate provision (Early Education, 2021; Jones & Warnock, 2014). In the context of Childhood Studies, professional experience is of paramount importance to the sector (Early Education, 2021; ECSDN, 2019; DfE, 2021), and, furthermore, provides significant esteem for the student in relation to their post-graduate employment prospects (DfE, 2021). In general, higher education students who have gained professional experiences show higher academic achievement if typically, on track for lower than average results (Mansfield, 2011, p. 941), with higher levels of motivation and improved attitudes to study (Brooks & Youngson, 2016, p.1566). Covid-19, however, has seen UK universities under increased financial pressures, and with online learning dominating attention, the focus has been taken away from the student experience and students' specific support needs (Raaper & Brown, 2020, p. 343). Without remaining mindful of degree requirements, the student experience is substantially hampered, leading to increased student concern and anxiety.

Student experience is said to be vastly enhanced by participation in professional work placements, focusing on skills for employment but also in developing self-awareness and building confidence (Little & Harvey, 2006; Jones & Warnock, 2014). Work placements embedded in degree programmes, or those

encouraged by lecturers, arguably enable students to ‘own their learning, rather than to just ‘accept’ it’ (Little & Harvey, 2006, p. 60). Brooks & Youngson (2016) state that work experience within a degree can be ‘a key differentiator for securing employment upon graduation in a competitive employment market’ (p. 1536), and in higher education, expectations for professional destinations are a key determinant of quality and ‘value.’ This places them under increased scrutiny as the sector responds to pressures on the economy known as the ‘Rab charge’ (Adams, 2021).

With Covid-19 also having an impact on the availability of university accommodation, (Bozkurt et al., 2020; ONS, 2020), the opportunity to participate in degree-specific work placements whilst studying has further suffered, with many students having to abandon their plans for work experience (Wall, 2020, p. 3), increasing existing inequalities in higher education (Allen, Quinn, Hollingworth & Rose, 2013; Kulkarni & Chima, 2021). As some students are socially given ‘positional advantages’ (Allen et al., 2013, p. 432) for work experience in typical circumstances, the depth of inequality brought on by the pandemic has seen a further increase.

The practical inception of the online ‘study buddy club’ aimed to remedy the loss of work placement opportunities for students, mainly by offering experience with children without needing access to public transport or risk virus exposure. It was a paid role and with many students losing part time jobs due to Covid-19, increasing financial pressures could be somewhat relieved by the role. This made the online Study Buddy Club an attractive offer, as unpaid work is often the only option for undergraduate work experience. As the time investment without financial gain can disadvantage some students, some students are more likely to succeed than others (Allen et al., 2013, p. 432), so Study Buddies was able to make this a more level playing field.

## **5. Engaging Children Online**

A fundamental ingredient of the Study Buddy Project was effectively engaging children online, being mindful of safety procedures and the need for social interactions. In lockdown, it was found that maintaining children’s engagement through online activities is ‘stress provoking’ for teachers (Miulescu, 2020, p. 213), and that barriers to online learning can be categorised into 4 areas- a lack of ‘confidence and competence in pedagogical and technological skills; the integration of digital media; maintaining children engagement and poor technological infrastructure’ (Miulescu, 2020, p. 212). This led to schools providing set tasks for children to complete with parent supervision that lacked child to child interaction, thus having an overall negative impact. Participation in online activities is not enough; ‘educators must put considerable effort in to increase engagement, retain attention, take feedback and assess’ (Dhawan, 2020, p. 11).

The replication of common tasks in a classroom also proved to not be effective when delivered online as isolation limits children’s ability to seek approval and ask relevant questions. It has been found that online learning is heavily reliant on ‘visual representations and auditory means,’ and the development of reading and writing abilities is limited, with concerns raised about a lack of ‘children’s direct tactile and hands on experiences’ (Miulescu, 2020, p. 216). With engaging children online, the concepts of ‘interaction’ and ‘collaboration’ can be used synonymously, but it is important to note that they are ‘distinct and separate pedagogical strategies.’ Interaction allows opportunities to ‘share and discuss content’ with collaboration

about sharing and discussing but with the ‘purpose of producing a shared product,’ such as a project or presentation (Davis, 2015, p. 64). In the emergency response to lockdown, lack of digital resources for all children and varying degrees of teacher confidence has meant that collaboration in learning has been largely lost in approaches taken by schools (EEF, 2021). With only written instructions and parents expected to support the completion of school work, the parameters of what is required are not always clear, despite personalised ‘live’ instructions being ‘foundational for a positive experience,’ alongside clear opportunities for interaction and collaboration to sustain a learning community (Davis, 2015, p.64).

The design of the Study Buddy model for engagement allowed participants to share resources with both interaction and collaboration, personalising the online experience and focusing on social interaction.

### **5.1 An Emergent Model for Engagement**

The model of the study buddy sessions aimed to reflect pedagogic evidence surrounding engagement in learning activities and the nature of online or remote learning. With engagement online largely linked to distance learning (Hilliam & Williams, 2019), sessions of this nature did not have strong theoretical roots to base the model on, with its inception linked to evidence of participation in online activities (Dhawan, 2020; Miulescu, 2020; Potts & Potts, 2017; Davis, 2015), and general pedagogic principles of engagement, such as ‘chunking,’ and being mindful of ‘attention spans’ (Fontana, 1995, p.153). With interaction at the heart of effective online engagement, there were structured activities to introduce, provide breaks and conclude the sessions. Activity times were kept to 20 minutes as a maximum (see fig.2), with study buddies available to interact with children, answer questions and change, end or extend activities depending on children’s needs.

SESSION MODEL	
Introduction (10 minute activity)	<p>Outline the structure for the 1.5-hour session. Remind children of rules and expectations.</p> <p>An activity to ‘warm up’ the session- there were a list of these provided for Study Buddies to choose from (e.g. think of an animal that begins with the first letter of their name, think of as many uses for a paperclip...).</p>
Activity 1, 2 & 3 (20 minutes each):	<p>There were 2 types of activity here, assisting children with school set tasks/ homework (these were set and structured by the children’s schools), and engaging activities not linked to school work. For example, these included ‘design your own theme park,’ Pictionary, story writing, storytelling, researching cultures and countries, etc.</p> <p>The study buddies were given and collaborated on an activity idea document to share ideas and assist with planning.</p>
5 minute brain breaks (These were between each activity)	<p>These were 5 minutes between activities to allow a ‘break’- children were encouraged to have a drink, use the toilet and get up from their seats. Some activities for brain breaks included- ‘Show and Tell,’ 5 minute exercise/ dance routines, standing yoga, finding a specific household item, etc.</p>
Session Plenary (10 minutes):	SEE THE ACTIVITY IDEAS SHEET AND CHOOSE AN OPTION

Figure 2: The model was structured in 90 minute sessions, split as follows

It was imperative that relationships between study buddies and children were prioritised in the design and delivery of the online sessions, with the activities coming second to the children’s needs. Parents were responsible for the physical supervision of children in the home, with the university providing devices to those children who needed them. With evidence suggesting that children were lacking in valuable social interaction during lockdown (Letzel et al., 2020), and schools not providing these experiences (Ponsiero et al., 2020), the study buddies focused on this, involving children in decision making about the activities and encouraging group work and collaboration wherever possible.

## 6. Conclusion

The position presented in this paper supports that 'Study Buddy Club' provided an effective solution for multiple challenges faced by a UK university during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rapid turnaround of the project, with the limited resources available remotely, further justified the success of the project, resulting in an emerging model for future practice. The compound benefits for children, university staff and students working with children easily outweighed the challenges faced and provided an opportunity to develop future recommendations for effective online provision. As a creative solution, the Study Buddy Club provided some immediate respite for a significant number of staff and provided a unique placement opportunity for students, as well as reflective insight for the staff creating and facilitating this university-wide programme.

The online Study Buddy Club service was designed to facilitate socialisation with peers, whilst offering support with set homework activities by the students operating the club. In this way, the provision supported the children of university staff, many of whom were designated as 'key people' during the pandemic. Furthermore, the additional burden felt by working mothers during lockdown presented a risk of exacerbating gender inequality in favour of men (Petts, Carlson & Pepin, 2020). The adaptive response of Study Buddy Club aimed to mitigate the immediately visible practical challenges impacting on children's home education and also went some way to addressing some tacit structural issues affecting the sector as a whole.

For most parents and carers, the pandemic meant homeschooling for the first time. Although resources for home education support were made available by schools and various organisations, the experience was largely felt to be one of disorientation and mixed emotions (Bayar & Zontur, 2020; ACAMH, 202; Parczewska, 2020; Letzel, 2020; Thorell et al., 2021). Furthermore, these additional burdens were skewed toward detrimentally impacting mothers who are still predominantly recognised as primary caregivers. Despite a shift of trajectory toward more joint conjugal relationships in the 21st Century, women experienced a greater reduction in work hours than men and foregrounded the gender dissonance between male and female roles (Petts, Carlson & Pepin, 2020; Petts et al., 2020; Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2020; Minello, 2020). In the gendered politics of Higher Education, this meant that the Study Buddy programme had an ethical impact beyond the pragmatic function of daily care; by helping to mitigate the pressure felt by working parents at the University.

Furthermore, the rapid transitional experience of lockdown presented a number of unforeseen psychological, social and emotional challenges for families who were now spending long periods of unbroken time together and often in home environments which were now doubling up as office spaces (Bayar & Zontur, 2020). ACAMH (2020) have highlighted the exacerbation these issues present, and the often fractious challenges presented by prolonged exposure to family members or to environments that limited the brain's exposure to novel stimuli (Zhao, 2020; Thorell et al., 2021; Letzel et al., 2020). Internal feedback surveys suggested that the parents and children both appreciated the social interaction provided by the Study Buddy programme and many comments were focused on the valuable social interaction that the student practitioners facilitated between children on Zoom.

The Study Buddy programme was a small bubble of creative innovation operating, at short notice, in the context of significant structural challenges presented to the Higher Education community. Additional fiscal pressure from the government led to increased stress on the financial functioning of universities which further exacerbated the feelings of anxiety and uncertainty already felt by teaching staff in the new business-model of Higher Education (Por & Bariball, 2008). The implementation of a family-friendly policy that recognised the additional burden felt by working parents was welcomed by staff accessing the service, many of whom were overt in thanking their employer for recognising their needs; offering a novel solution that was unanimously celebrated by the community of staff parents (cf. Wiatr, 2021). The internal survey responses seemed to highlight the importance of recognition, understanding and mutual trust for an effective organisational culture (Medina-Garrido et al., 2021). In comparison to the staff perception of flexitime and alternative working models, which are often contested (Unison, 2021), the Study Buddy programme seemed to afford the kind of flexibility and recognition required to inspire authentic appreciation from employees.

One of the most immediately obvious benefits of the Study Buddy programme was the positive impact on our undergraduate students who had missed out on what would have otherwise been an invaluable vocational experience in a childcare and education setting. The Study Buddy programme was launched in an economic climate in which universities were focusing on ensuring value for money and, moreover, adhering to the promises made by degree specifications at the point of sale (Kulkarni & Chima, 2021). The pressure to ensure high quality pedagogic provision, in spite of the context, was felt throughout the HE sector and, in the context of Childhood Studies, meant ensuring that students were afforded opportunities for practical experience, professional reflection and personal growth (Price et al., 2021). Furthermore, the direction from the government was focused on ensuring that our degree offers had clear professional destination trajectories into employment or further study. The need for our courses to be perceived as having a civic value beyond learning for learning's sake alone was paramount.

The Study Buddy programme provided an innovative way to offer students an experience they would not otherwise have had. It was felt that the knowledge and skills learnt when facilitating pedagogical and social experiences via Zoom would be welcomed in the renewed economy as people adjusted to remote video calls. The prospect of modelling and enterprising remote private tutoring experiences for families presented a potentially lucrative business opportunity for students and led to some exciting conversations in relation to the university's Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) agenda, and in accordance with its aspiration to be a leading Civic university. Indeed, it is expected that the Study Buddy programme will continue to form part of our core pedagogical offer beyond the pandemic, given the importance of remote learning skills and the opportunities presented for levelling up children and families in a 'post-pandemic' world.

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