



Education findings from The Big Ask

October 2021

Education – Findings from The Big Ask

Introduction

In April 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale ‘state of the nation’ assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner’s priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children’s needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge.

The 6-8 and 9+ ‘Big Ask’ surveys included one free-text question each. To ensure the survey was age-appropriate, the questions asked to the 6-8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to capture the same theme and underlying issues.

The 9-12 and 13-17 surveys asked:

- ‘What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?’

The 6-8 survey asked:

- ‘If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?’

Education was the most frequently mentioned topic, 31% of all qualitative responses mentioned this. To some extent this is unsurprising since many children will have interpreted the word ‘achieve’ in the survey question in the context of educational or career success. Furthermore, many children – if not the clear majority of children – completed the survey at school, and so issues to do with school will have featured in their thinking.

This analysis summarises the quantitative findings from the survey and explores what children said about the value of school, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for support in education. The methodology for how the qualitative data were analysed is available [here](#) and the quantitative methodology is available [here](#).

Quantitative findings

Happiness in life

Children aged 9-17 were asked ‘how happy are you with these things in your life now?’ and were given a list of aspects of their life to consider which included: ‘my progress in education’ and ‘life at school or college’.

Most children (84%) were happy or ok with their life at school. Similarly, 90% were happy or ok with their progress in education. However, 16% of children were unhappy with their life at school or college making this the third most common aspect of life that children said they were unhappy with, after mental health (20% unhappy) and the choice of things to do in their local area (19%). Children who were unhappy

with life at school were 10 times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall.

There were differences by age, younger children were more likely to be happy or ok with education than older children. Ninety per cent of 9–11 year olds were happy or ok with their life at school compared to 80% of 16-17 year olds. Ninety-five per cent of 9-11 year olds were happy or ok with their progress at school compared to 85% of 16-17 year olds.

For most of the aspects of life asked about in the survey there were not clear or substantial variations in rates of happiness by ethnic group. However, for life at school or college, Asian children are slightly more likely to be happy or ok than White children (87% compared to 84%) while Black children are slightly less likely to be happy or ok (82%).

Vulnerable children and happiness

Children who were identified as being part of the SEND proxy groupⁱ were slightly more likely to be happy or ok with their life at school or college (87% compared to 84% of other children). It is important to note that children in the SEND proxy group were more likely to be receiving support for their need/s and therefore may not be representative of the population of all children with SEND.

Children supported by children's social care, young carers and children living in kinship care were more likely to be unhappy with their life at school than other children (18%, 20% and 21% respectively compared to 16%).

Children receiving mental health support were the most likely to be unhappy with life at school with 30% unhappy with this aspect of life. They were also more than twice as likely to be unhappy with their progress in education or life at school than children not receiving mental health support.

Priorities for a good future

Children aged 9-17 were asked 'when you grow up, which things, if any, do you think will be the most important for you to have a good life? Choose up to 5 things from the list below'. The list included 'having a good education' alongside other things such as 'good friends' and 'a good job or career'.

Most children want to leave school with a good education. Fifty two per cent of all children aged 9-17 chose 'having a good education' as one of their top 5 future priorities. Children aged 9-11 were the most likely to select 'having a good education' (63% chose this) compared to 12-15-year-olds (51%) and 16-17-year-olds (36%). By gender, boys were slightly more likely than girls to choose having a good education (55% compared to 50%). By ethnicity, White children were less likely to choose having a good education compared to BAME children (49% compared to 60%).

Children in the SEND proxy group were slightly more likely to choose having a good education than other children (58% compared to 52%). Similarly, children supported by children's social care, young carers were slightly more likely to select having a good education as a priority (57% and 58% chose this respectively). Children from the most deprived areas were also more likely to select this as a future priority (57% chose this, compared to only 49% of children from the most affluent areas).

Future worries

Children aged 9-17 were then given the same list of options and asked ‘when you grow up which of these, if any, are you most worried that you won’t have? Choose up to 5 things’.

Only 18% of children chose a good education as one of their top five future worries. Children who had said that having a good education was important for their future were around 50% more likely to choose this as one of their future worries.

By age, children aged 9-11 were the most likely to choose having a good education as a future worry (22%) compared to only 17% of 12-15-year-olds and 12% of 16-17-year-olds. There was little difference by gender, 18% of boys chose this as a future worry compared to 17% of girls.

Children in the SEND proxy group were slightly more likely to select having a good education as a future worry (22% compared to 18% of other children). Similarly, young carers were more likely to choose this (27% compared to 18% of other children).

Qualitative findings

Statistical overview of children who mentioned education in their response

Table 1 - Percentage of children whose response referenced ‘education’, by demographic characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage of responses which referenced education
Age	
6-8	11%
9-11	33%
12-15	42%
16-17	44%
Gender	
Male	35%
Female	37%
Self-identified gender	41%
Ethnicity	
Asian	38%
Black	33%
Mixed	37%
Other	38%
White	36%
Ethnicity not given	30%
Happiness with life at school or college (9-17)	
Happy with life at school or college	51%
Neither happy nor unhappy with life at school or college	19%
Unhappy with life at school or college	28%
Happiness with progress at school (9-17)	
Happy with progress at school	64%
Neither happy nor unhappy with life at school or college	22%

Unhappy with life at school or college	12%
Future priorities and worries (9-17)	
Chose 'a good education' as one of their top 5 priorities for the future	54%
Chose 'a good education' as one of their top 5 worries for the future	19%

Table 1 shows the distribution of responses which mention education by demographic characteristics and responses to other questions. Those aged 16-17 were the most likely to mention education in their response, 44% mentioned this, compared to only 11% of 6-8-year-olds. Children who chose to self-identify their gender were slightly more likely than girls or boys to mention education in their response (31% compared to 37% and 35% respectively).

Around half of all children aged 9-17 who mentioned education were happy with their life at school or college and 64% were happy with their progress at school. Mentioning education in their response does not therefore mean that children were unhappy with their school. Children aged 9-17 who mentioned education in their response were not much more likely to have chosen 'a good education' as one of their top 5 priorities or worries for the future. 54% chose 'a good education' as a priority for the future compared to 52% across all respondents and 19% chose 'a good education' as one of their top 5 worries for the future compared to 18% across all respondents.

Importance of school

Despite the question asking children to consider the potential barriers to achievement, some children chose to share positive thoughts on school, and many children clearly understand the value of their education.

'[...] school is an important and helpful part of my life and I honestly I do like school. [...] School are not there forever so I am trying my best to learn and abide by the rules set by the school I attend' – Boy, 13

'I really want to learn even if it's hard because education is important to me!' – Girl, 11

'Good education is important as you need a school that will be able to know your ability and challenge you in order to help you succeed and reach your full potential' – Girl, 14

'In reality the existence of school is for education and great opportunities' – Boy, 14

'Luck' was frequently used in this context, with children saying they feel lucky to have access to good opportunities, and being aware of the barriers that less fortunate children might experience:

'I feel lucky that I have the opportunity to go to a school that offers a wide range of activities, sports and clubs that help to make my life varied, and can offer me skills to draw on as I grow older' – Girl, 15

'Sometimes a bad education but I am lucky and have a good education!' – Girl, 9

'Bad education stops some children from being able to achieve something great in life but I am lucky because I have a great education' – Boy, 12

'I am so lucky to go to the school I go to' – Girl, 14

'England is a lucky country for school children as we are provided with education needed for a good job or career' – *Boy, 11*

'We are lucky to go to school and learn about important things' – *Girl, 10*

'I am very lucky at my school to have amazing opportunities and people motivating me to do the best I can' – *Girl, 14*

Impact of the pandemic & catch-up

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a huge and well-documented impact on children's educationⁱⁱ, so it is unsurprising that some children mentioned the pandemic itself as a barrier to achievement. Children raised issues that we are now, unfortunately, well familiar with, such as lack of access to equipment, falling behind in class, and the impact on their exams and future:

'I did not have the proper equipment to attend online classes for the majority of our lockdowns, only some of friends who already had equipment (such as computers and printers) could keep up and had little problems during lockdowns since their parents could actually afford them. Compared to me, who was a mess without this extra help' – *Girl, 14*

'During covid, I believe that the effects on education have been underestimated, even at my school where online lessons were common, I picked up on a very small percentage of the information given and was forced to do several hours of catch up extra every night' – *Boy, 16*

'Personally, I think that lockdown had impacted so many children's life in the future I think this because with online school I found I was behind on work and was feeling more down as the days go on' – *Girl, 13*

'Some schools don't give you the support you need in lessons if you are confused. Especially in home learning I struggled with ratios and I didn't get any help from teachers.' – *Girl, 11*

'Lockdown really stops children because they can't do that much stuff we love and it makes them go all shaky like they can't study the normal day and if they need to achieve a job they want to do it will be hard for them to pass the exams' – *Girl, 9*

Some children were optimistic about catching up on missed learning, as one 11-year-old boy said: 'I think we can catch up if we try hard'. However, the majority of children who mentioned catch-up showed that children were anxious about catching-up and how the lost learning may impact their future.

'I do believe that Covid-19 is going to stop children achieving because I wanted to have a good education so I can have my dream job but with covid I have missed out on a lot of learning and I need a lot of support with learning!' – *Girl, 11*

'Even though we are back at school now we can't fully catch up on what we have missed making it hard and stressful for both students and teachers' – *Girl, 15*

'I have wanted to be a police officer and I have been struggling to catch up on my online work so I think I won't be able to access my dream job anymore' – *Girl, 12*

'School pressure, especially with the work missed through online learning that we have to catch up before exams next year' – *Girl, 17*

'Covid 19 has stopped a lot of youth's education including myself I feel like that has put pressure on children to catch up on work they have missed out on and could cause children stress for the future that they may not have a good enough education to move on in life' – *Gender not provided, 11*

'I feel that there is not enough support in place to help me catch up on the time I missed at school during lockdown. I have missed an awful lot of learning and I'm very worried that will affect my future in a very negative way' – *Girl, 13*

Children are looking ahead and are thinking of catch-up:

'We have so much work to catch upon and we have to work twice as hard but that can be very overwhelming for some young people' – *Girl, 13.*

'We've missed so much and we have not quite enough time to catch up as were still going over topics we did in lockdown instead of learning content we should be doing now, even though our mocks are coming up next month. As well as this we're still unaware on what we're doing for our exams in year 11, so teachers are unable to prepare us now in advance' – *Girl, 15.*

Support with learning

As well as needing support to catch-up in the wake of COVID-19, some children talked about the need for support with their learning more generally, to help them to keep up with schoolwork:

'My reading and spelling is not very good. All the words get muddled up and I need more help in class but I can't all ways have it we don't have extra helper every day' – *Boy, 10*

'I struggle with focus on class and remembering what I learn and I am not sure they my teachers are aware of this. It would help if they knew' – *Girl, 12*

The need for more support was primarily raised by children with special educational needs or disability (SEND). These children wanted teachers to have more training to equip them with learning materials and teaching approaches that would work for them. They also wanted easier routes to diagnosis within school, easier access to treatment, and more awareness within school of different types of SEND. Where children did not get the support they wanted, they often felt excluded, and unable to form relationships with children their own age:

'I am dyslexic and I don't feel there is enough support and resources in school to help me. Teachers are not trained in dyslexia so it takes a long time to be diagnosed so you just feel stupid for a long time which makes you unhappy' – *Girl, 12*

'Our current education system is not suited to... those with ADD, ADHD and autism. Teachers aren't educated in the teaching styles that are appropriate' – *Girl, 16*

'I can't concentrate I have ADHD and aljaspers [aspergers] and I don't feel as though school does enough for people like me, I think they should do assemblies to raise awareness for them' – *Boy, 13*

'Not enough mental health help or educated teachers in noticing students who may have issues. In my case, I was recently diagnosed with ADHD at 17 and for the whole of lower school only 2 teachers listened when I was frustrated' – *Girl, 17*

'I also think teachers should be very understanding if a child has any disabilities like I do because I have dyslexia' – *Girl, 9*

'Lack of SEN support for children who do not meet the requirements an education support plan such as myself who has dyslexia' – *Boy, 14*

ⁱ The Big Ask Quantitative Methodology, Children's Commissioner for England 2021, link: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/childrens-commissioner-the-big-ask-methodology.pdf>

ⁱⁱ School attendance since September, Children's Commissioner for England 2021, link: [School attendance since September | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/school-attendance-since-september/)

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