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Covid-19 and the lost hidden curriculum: locating an evolving narrative ecology of Schools-in-Covid

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic brought seismic changes to children and families, with schools at the forefront of the daily battle to maintain learning. We report on our reflexive thematic analysis of data collected with 28 participants in 14 schools in England during the summer of 2021, following two extensive national lockdowns, and two transition points of returning to school under Covid safety measures. Our data reflects an emerging narrative ecology of Schools-in-Covid, developing as the pandemic continued to unfold for children and families, schools, policy makers and ourselves, in a co-construction of what this pandemic has brought to our lives. We present our findings as a reportage, as our collective experience continues to unfold. Our superordinate themes re-position the UK Government priority of academic catch up as secondary to mental health, and argue the re-establishment of the hidden curriculum was the main vehicle for social and emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing through direct instruction, modelling and practice, typically associated with improved attitudes about the self, others and school and with consequential higher attainment. We report a partial inversion of expectations; rather than a heavy emphasis towards widening disadvantage, our participants report some benefit to vulnerable children and young people who gained from a changed in-person learning environment, and overwhelming distress to those deemed less vulnerable. Our findings identify Schools in the Community, Care before Curriculum, Agility (adapt, survive and thrive), and Reflective and Responsive, as the key aspects of an emerging narrative ecology of Schools-in-Covid.

Introduction

In March 2020, the UK government announced the closure of British schools amid the Covid-19 crisis (Williamson, 2020). Despite remaining open for vulnerable children and those of essential workers, and not closed, but
online for others (DfE, 2020), the seismic events of Covid-19 have impacted every support structure in children and young people’s lives; their schools, health services, activities, family incomes, and routines (Cheng et al., 2021; Fairchild et al. (2022; Khan & Mikuska, 2021). Fears extended beyond the virus to the loss of freedom and control, and separation from loved ones, with a serious impact on mental health and increased risk of suicide (Saldino et al., 2020). Families were separated for months in a bid for survival, becoming displaced from work, learning, and each other. At the time of writing, we are not yet in a post-pandemic world, however, the intensity of the forced change in learning and teaching has already resulted in a wealth of experience from emergency measures. In this paper we consider how these unprecedented events resulted in the loss of the relational space and ethos in which learning and teaching usually occurs, and identify an evolving narrative ecology of Schools-in-Covid (Figure 1), as told to us by school leaders, teachers, and pastoral support staff Table 1.

![Figure 1. Schools-in-Covid narrative ecology.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early Years Leader</th>
<th>Primary HT/SLT</th>
<th>Primary TA</th>
<th>Primary Pastoral</th>
<th>Secondary HT/SLT</th>
<th>Secondary Pastoral</th>
<th>Senior teacher</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2. Table of Themes.

<table>
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<th>Superordinate themes</th>
<th>Sub Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Schools and Families in a Covid Community</td>
<td>Schools in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal of families from view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Covid on Children</td>
<td>Unexpected children struggling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missing building blocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things got worse, things got better</td>
<td>Things just got worse for families (services)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Covid made things better (practice)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Children, Schools, and Families during Covid-19

In the UK, the Covid-19 crisis was preceded by a decade of economic austerity and political turmoil. We entered this crisis with existing concerns about the fragility of mental wellbeing in the contemporary age, with levels of disadvantage which appeared discordant with aspirations for a prospering society, and a narrative which connected being in need with being an economic burden (Levine et al., 2020). The displacement of learning from the traditional, relational space of school provoked much concern, with medical experts citing little evidence for closing schools and illuminating the harm to children caused by their enduring isolation from learning and each other (Lewis et al., 2021).

Lee and Raszka (2020) report that by April 2020, 188 countries had suspended traditional modes of schooling. For schools in England this began in March 2020, with onsite provision for some identified children and online learning for all others. In September 2020 children and young people were reintegrated back, this was followed by a lockdown in January 2021, and a final return to school the following April. Despite the low physical impact of the virus in children, and a high risk of mental distress and disadvantage from learning loss in already disadvantaged communities (Lewis et al., 2021), decisions about school pivoted around the risk that children would spread the disease (Lee & Raszka, 2020). Concerns that children’s mental health and education were being sacrificed at the expense of others’ physical health, raged, (Cowie & Myers, 2020) whilst children and young people were expected to leave their schools and friends in order to protect the adults around them. Lundy et al. (2021) surveyed the views of over 26,000 children internationally, revealing their isolation, disadvantage, and suicidality, amid the public perception of them as vectors of Covid through striking qualitative data.

Seemingly, the lock downs decried the well-established link between learning and wellbeing (Banerjee et al., 2014) and appeared to overlook the impact of familial stress on amplifying risk and disadvantage (Levine et al., 2020). A new wave of mental health needs among children and young people were predicted (Cowie & Myers, 2020) with loneliness identified as a prime instigator (Loades et al., 2020), concerns clustering around a myriad of family stressors known to create additional vulnerability and risk at the intersections of poverty, race, health inequalities, domestic abuse, and mental illness (Maalla M’jid, 2020).
Fears that school closures would increase the widening inequalities gap led to combative narratives between the UK Government and media regarding ‘learning loss’ and poverty (Lalli, 2021) amid an apparent assumption by Government that parents could, and would, homeschool their children, and that schools would somehow mitigate losses.

The UK restrictions allowed for only one outdoor trip per day for exercise, food shopping, or necessary work (Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020). Adults therefore fared three times as well as children in reasons to leave the house, and their one option, exercise, had to be undertaken with immediate family only. Friendships became restricted to online (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021), further exacerbating the drop in independent movement of children and young people outside school (Bains & Blatchford, 2019). A feverish narrative about exam chaos reigned over the fairness of assessment, professional integrity of teachers, and progression of school leavers (Kippin & Cairney, 2021), causing stress and unrest across education and politics. Overall, the academic focus of learning dominated the headlines with government agendas overlooking the social and peer context of learning itself, including the critical nature of play in learning environments, which supports emotional intelligence and key life skills to reinforce pro-social attitudes and behaviours (Nash et al., 2016).

**Covid-19 and the lost, hidden curriculum**

Philosophies of education position teaching and learning as being far more diverse than matters of curriculum and assessment (Banerjee et al., 2014 Other priorities comprise the ‘hidden curriculum’; those factors which nurture children’s spiritual, moral, social and emotional learning, and which impart values; those markers of society and culture, which; Brownell (2017) states only becomes tangible when talked about and reinforced. Indeed, a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs demonstrated that learning social and emotional skills leads to an improved attitude about the self, others, and school as well as increased attainment levels. Moreover, the development of these skills leads to a decrease in conduct problems and emotional distress (Durlak et al., 2011). These expected behaviours reflect learning as relational, occurring in nuanced interpersonal and socially constructed contexts (Higgins et al., 2020). The challenge for some children, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, is their ability to navigate the ‘hidden curriculum’ and the resulting impact on their wider school experiences. These Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) have been found to promote attainment, social experience and attendance (Banerjee et al., 2014; Higgins et al., 2020), and so therefore could be considered as a conduit to future life chances. Indeed, children who do not develop good social and emotional skills are more likely to be excluded from schools, instead
attending alternative provisions (AP; Caslin, 2021) and it is estimated that only 4% of children in AP in 2018/2019 achieved English and Maths GCSEs compared with 64% of children in mainstream education (Centre for Social Justice, 2020). Furthermore, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIE, 2006) reported that, by the age of just 21, young men who had social or emotional difficulties (SEBD) were three times more likely than average to have mental health issues, five times more likely to have a criminal record, and six times less likely to have any qualifications.

Skills of resilience, positive emotion and engagement are taught proactively in learning environments through active collaboration, promoting children’s rights, happiness and wellbeing (Laevers & Declerq, 2018). These need to be expressly taught in class, modelled by teachers and practiced by pupils if they are to be developed and established (McClelland et al., 2017). The peer group is immensely important here (Maynard et al., 2020), acting as the seat of learning through play, friendships, and experiences which build resilience and relationship patterns; a dynamic interaction between the child and their emerging understanding of their world (Hoskins & Smedley, 2018). While play between parents and siblings is also important, it is in peer contexts that children are able to actively interpret their world, negotiating ethics and status through inclusions, exclusions, conformity and identity work (Maynard et al., 2020). While schools strived for curriculum driven agility during lockdowns (Kim & Asbury, 2020), peer interactions and the positioning of learning within the school ethos were largely out of reach.

**Emergency Homeschooling**

This is not to say that school otherwise offers a panacea for all social ills. Acting within a cultural framework and government agenda, parents are expected to overcome their difficulties within neoliberalist discourses (Lambert & Miller, 2011; Nash et al., 2016; Springer, 2016), and schools are required to monitor and respond to potential risks to children. In the initial wave of the pandemic, referrals to children’s social care in the UK actually dropped off, but of those referrals, needs were at a much higher level, indicating escalation of concerns while children were less visible and parents were without support (Pearce & Miller, 2020). It was within such environments parents were expected to assume responsibility for learning despite their usual day-time commitments, and this additional strain on families was set amid the rising mental health crisis, the virus itself, economic strain, and the loss of democratic freedoms.

The mobilisation of learning to family homes was not a global move to home education – it was a crisis response in which the UK Government expected families to top up online learning, and the capacity to do so was variable (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Despite concerns outlined above and the established positive impact of learning on mental resilience,
there was little visibility about the role of schools beyond exam-orientated curricula. Parental depression and stress were negatively associated with homeschooling, and there were positive correlations between parental anxiety and stress, and children’s anxiety. Anzar et al.’s (2021) study of 322 parents reported clear associations between stress during the lockdowns, and a negative impact on confident parenting and discipline while homeschooling. More positive stories reflect increased hugging, playing, watching television together and evidence of more direct caregiving between parents and children (Lee et al., 2021). Further studies have indicated that psychological flexibility, positive coping strategies and creativity enabled individuals to cope with the strain of the pandemic (Dawson & Golijani-Moghaddam, 2020), suggesting perhaps that Covid was more likely to have amplified pre-existing mental health concerns, and that pre-existing mental resilience offered protection.

**Research focus**

This project stemmed from a broader area of inquiry investigating school responses to complex social and health care needs of families. The inclusion of a specific focus on Covid-19 reflected a shared preoccupation about the impact of the pandemic. We report on our qualitative research findings which investigated the experiences of school staff across England regarding the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people, and their own professional experience during these unprecedented times. Ethical approval was gained from the relevant University, oriented specifically to the purpose of our research, which was to understand how key adults in professional roles interpret and respond to children and young people’s needs, denoting the importance of adult nurture and support beyond family. Our research suggests that the loss of relational, collaborative learning communities during the pandemic was key, showing itself in outreach work undertaken by our participants and in the reintegration of children and young people back into school, despite this being overlooked in the Government response. Typically, the wellbeing of children and young people is subjectively interpreted (Maynard et al., 2020), and it is adults’ interpretation about children’s needs that we report on here, based on their professional knowledge. Children’s own experiences will be investigated in forthcoming work.

**Method**

*Participants:* 28 teaching staff, including head teachers, teachers and pastoral leads in Primary and Secondary schools across England (Table 2).
**Materials:** 15 one-to-one interviews with a member of the research team, and 3 focus groups of between 4 and 8 participants. All interviews and focus groups followed the same semi-structured interview schedule, in order to explore participants’ perspectives about the impact from COVID-19 on themselves, their school and their pupils’ and families.

**Procedure**

The research team invited pre-schools, primary and secondary schools in their local areas by email. These emails detailed the research focus, and outline of the research aims and procedure, and a consent form. Questions were invited and willing participants asked to complete the form and arrange a mutually convenient date/time for a face-to-face or online interview or focus group. Interviews lasted approximately 43.4 minutes (SD = 10.69; range = 20 mins – 61 mins) and focus groups lasted approximately 55.7 minutes (SD = 9.7; range = 45 mins-64 mins). Participants were given the chance to ask any questions before and after their interviews and reminded of their right to withdraw their data.

Once all interviews had concluded and been transcribed, thematic analysis was conducted. This followed the 6 stages laid out by Braun and Clarke’s (2006), namely: 1. **Familiarizing yourself with your data** 2. **Generating initial codes** 3. **Searching for themes** 4. **Reviewing themes** 5. **Defining and naming themes** 6. **Producing the report** (p87).

**Reflection**

As researchers and practitioners we co-construct knowledge of lived experiences in collaboration with others in our communities. Reflexive thematic analysis is about meanings, and researcher-led meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2021) being always located and bound by the context it was drawn from. The approach used here was reflexive and inductive (Braun & Clarke, 2021), drawing out the idiosyncratic experiences of participants through active listening and engagement, using a loosely structured interview schedule.

The usual double hermeneutic of qualitative research (Shaw, 2010) is present here, whereby the researcher is actively engaged in drawing out the lived experience of the participants, together exploring the personal meaning they can derive from the effects of the pandemic on children’s learning, behaviour and mental health. This is further amplified during the focus groups, where the participants were co-constructing their knowledge and experience collectively and with the researcher, and where responses were likely to be elaborated upon to ensure shared understanding and confirmation of meaning (Wilkinson, 1998).
For these reasons, we have sought to identify and illuminate narrative by using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which we deemed to be particularly interesting given the circumstances of the pandemic.

The experience of Covid-19 evolved simultaneously for children and young people, their parents and their teachers with no established norms, master narrative, nor received wisdom passed down from more experienced colleagues. In such occurrences we argue there is an existing blueprint; a shared phronesis (Maynard, 2017) as to how such events are treated. The passing down of these practices effectively mentors colleagues and supports the processing of their emotional involvement within their professional role (Cramphorn & Maynard, 2021). Conversely, Covid-19 has lacked forebearers to illuminate anticipated reactions and iterate a master narrative by which to orientate and understand its impact in personal and professional spaces. Accordingly, our data reflects participants’ emergent understanding of the changed needs of their students. There does not appear to be a confident shared wisdom or master narrative about these factors, but our interviews and focus groups which invited participants to reflect on what they were seeing, illuminate a gathering of experience and emergence of Covid-School narratives.

Therefore, we have sought to identify an evolving narrative ecology, donating the emergence of collective experience and values through this reportage as participants have reflected on their own lived, professionalised, experience of the pandemic, as events unfolded across the world in conjunction with our own. We therefore avoid any attempt to pinpoint a realism about these experiences, this phenomena being too nebulous without established norms to guide response, or, stimulate alternative discourses. Rather, we seek to capture the subjective, deeply personal meaning-making revealed within a narrative approach (Adler et al., 2017). We see our participants as having partnered with children and colleagues in building a concept of School-in-Covid collectively, rather than as experts imparting their knowledge as seasoned professionals, and it is the story of their experience that we present here.

**Findings & Analysis**

The themes arising from our research (Table 2) have been grouped in ways which reflect the complexities of this time. Initially we located themes per participant, and then began grouping them together (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). At this level it was evident that participants often spoke about themes in contradictory ways, sometimes inverting the political rhetoric that certain groups would be more disadvantaged than others (Lewis et al., 2021). We have brought themes together in ways which exemplify experience as simultaneously stressful and innovative, locating new ways of improving their practices with families. Similarly, participants indicated their observations of family stress and distress, although we wish to make clear that this is not evidence of family experience, but of our
participants’ beliefs about them. Throughout this study, none of us have known the trajectory, future risk or impact and we note that there is no mention by participants about their own feelings or experiences of the pandemic. There is also sometimes a strange fluctuation between tenses, sometimes indicating that pre-pandemic practice as clearly in the past, but at other times mixing mid-sentence, as though in a state of flux. We have reflected that this is part of the evolution of the Covid narrative ecology, that the position of pandemic-practice is at once past, present, and future, and that its success, or otherwise, cannot be predicted by participants at the current time. Given the mix of early years, primary, and secondary schools we noted a key difference in that participants gave great emphasis to how younger children were less able to cope in friendships and play post lockdown, indicating they lacked their previous ability to negotiate, share, and regulate emotion. Several references regarded children lacking the expected maturity to progress to their next class, compared with expectations. While some emphasis on play might have been expected given the younger age range, secondary school participants reported emotional issues in more generalised ways and did not pinpoint peer group issues.

Our findings are grouped into three superordinate themes, the result of multiple codes which were grouped into seven sub themes, illustrated below;

**Schools and Families in a Covid Community**

Our data indicated a significant professional shift in focus for our participants, especially those in primary schools. Nine of our primary interview participants, three from specialist services, and the one primary school focus group discussed involvement in outreach approaches which were new to them. While participants already undertaking outreach work prior to the pandemic were restricted by emergency legislation, others felt that their new outreach to families and direct offers of help via food parcels and resources helped neutralise the stigma attached to help-seeking, and changed relationships as the crisis reached unparalleled proportions. Contact with home became a vehicle for offering support, a contrast to the more usual cause for overt contact being due to a child’s misdemeanor, even if support was also intended. However, participants also referred to families withdrawing from view. This was perceived as a matter of privacy in some part; that due to restrictions, families were not allowed, by law, to invite staff into their homes and found conversations at doorways too exposing. Pastoral workers in an AP school for children with additional needs, and Portage, who support families in the home for disabled children’s learning, appeared to report greater concerns about visibility than mainstream schools, and this possibly reflects the heightened risk factors and emotional issues at play when working with vulnerable groups.

Sophie, an AP pastoral worker, exemplifies this. She described her ‘previous’ role in the past tense, as though the change in practice felt permanent to her. Although Sophie was focused on the support she could offer families, the extent
of the need is evident in her talk about County Lines, a UK phenomena where children as young as 12 have been recruited into drug running by high profile gangs (Robinson et al., 2018).

So, we used to … [pause] So, … Parents might struggle with getting them up for school. There might be like a pull that sometimes we’ve got to be if they’re involved in County Lines and things like that, then that pull is there. So, we have to be there at half eight in the morning to catch them before they’re out the door. And … we’re not allowed in the house now. We can’t catch them in the room while they’re still half-asleep to go, “Come on. Get out. Get in the car. Let’s go to school” We can’t do that because we’re not allowed in the house. We can’t have that part of our job. And … they don’t want to stand on their doorstep and talk about everything … because they don’t want the whole community to know about it

Sophie, AP Pastoral Support

As a Portage worker, Fiona supports the learning of young children with disabilities in the family home. She explains;

Some families didn’t want online so waited it out. they weren’t comfortable with the tech, or, didn’t have it.

Fiona, Portage Worker

Reflecting on her work with families with English as an additional language, Fiona referred to the flexible approach adopted by her team in maintaining relationships and input with families.

Communication was particularly difficult and so some staff met families in their gardens, or even on the doorstep so they could say “hello, I’m friendly, I’m an okay person, we can have some fun, you don’t have to worry about anything”. Others withdrew, [for example] a completely shielding family who kept everyone at arms’ length. Quite an extreme reaction, actually

Fiona, Portage Worker

Sue described her school’s additional measures for identifying vulnerable children, and the new ways in which they maintained contact and delivered support.

You know, I was in constant contact with all those children, we have a vulnerability pyramid, so within that pyramid everybody in the top … would have to be seen by a member of staff … So, throughout Covid we had food parcels and things, so we will deliver if the parents didn’t pick up and knock on the door, stand back, talk to them.

Sue, Primary Headteacher

Sarah explained the intricacies of getting help to families. Here she explains issues of stigma, and repeated offers of help through different means in order for it to be accepted.
We did so many phone calls [in] the lockdown just saying to families, are you okay, do you need anything. And the teachers would say to them, “Do you need a food bank voucher or anything?” “No, no, no. We’re okay.” Later the same day, the same family would email me to say, “I need some help”.

Sarah, Primary Headteacher

Esther illustrated how her school embraced outreach. Although Esther mentioned home learning, her focus was clearly on supporting families to cope with sustaining themselves, and advising them on how to manage children’s behaviour at a time of stress. She explained:

I’d say the type of issues we were looking at first was probably like money and food which we didn’t really expect . . . like when shelves were empty . . . a lot of parents were worried that they can’t get the basics and how were they going to feed . . . [maybe] eight or nine children in a family . . . and then obviously we were able to put food hampers . . . food, money, how they were doing to do home learning? I’d say parent burnout by Christmas, you could tell - the parents are sick . . . you could see they were just struggling . . . and we’d talk about strategies for the parent to have time to think before they acted.

Esther, Primary Headteacher

The need for this outreach work is also illuminated by Jane, working in Early Years. She emphasised concerns about the loss of face to face contact with parents;

We kept up communication through telephone calls but then you know what it’s like over the phone, some people don’t like to speak over the phone, and you can’t read facial cues and things like that, so, it can be really difficult just to know

Jane, Early Years Practitioner

These excerpts are a few examples of many in the ~30 hours of qualitative data illuminating dynamics between families and schools, from schools’ perspectives. The stories of outreach sat alongside those of families withdrawing from social and learning environments. Although much of the focus was on children and young people, there was significant talk about parental mental health and emotional withdrawal, which participants had responded to proactively, and by increasing support with behaviour and parenting. Participants clearly showed concern that their ability to know what was happening in families was restricted, and that they needed new ways to access this knowledge. Covertly this indicates the perception among our participants that they needed to know about families and we note this reflects the wider issues of risk and Safeguarding responsibilities imbibed to Schools following the Children Act 2004 (Cramphorn & Maynard, 2021). Related findings also arose from this study and will be presented in a forthcoming publication.
The Impact of Covid on Children

Given the concerns about amplified disadvantage and learning loss paraded through media and social discourse (Lalli, 2021; Lewis et al., 2021), we anticipated a similar narrative might be reported by our participants from the coalface. However, such concerns were almost entirely absent from our data. Rather than to ask, leadingly ‘are you worried about academic standards?’, we asked more openly, ‘do you have concerns about the children on return to school?’. We were met with a clear and consistent message about the perceived impact of Covid-19 on children and these concerns were not focused on academic learning.

Instead, participants were worried about mental health, emotional regulation, and for younger children, lost skills in playing, co-operating, and managing friendships. They expressed concern about a lack of cohesion and respect in children’s talk about school, home and community, which in some cases were reported as escalating to ‘violence’ and needing to bring the local police force into school assemblies to talk about antisocial behaviour (Primary Focus Group). In normal times, the hidden curriculum would have contextualised these behaviours (Banerjee et al., 2014; Brownell, 2017), and participants reflected that the loss of this during the lockdowns was seen in the change in children’s behaviour and lack of adherence to school social norms. There were also some inversions of the narratives about increased disadvantage. Several participants said that vulnerable children and young people who remained in school, became more settled in their behaviour and engaged better with learning. They reflected that these children and young people had experienced a markedly different school environment, with less formality and better teacher:student ratios.

It’s allowed those that are most vulnerable to thrive because obviously not everyone was allowed to access the building . . . . And for some of them who, you know, within the class of 25 would get lost . . . . would not have had the one to one support which they received.

Liz, Senior leadership team, Secondary school

By contrast, some children and young people who were stable and engaged prior to covid, returned to school overwhelmed with anxiety, more akin to the predictions of mental stress (Cowie & Myers, 2020). Secondary schools reported teenagers crying uncontrollably and unable to explain why, and others showing signs of aggression and intolerance of others. Primary schools reported children unable to cope with friendships, overwhelmed and with high expressed emotion, as explained below.

Families did not leave their flats and children were missing building blocks in Year R [Reception, aged 4-5]. Year four [age 8-9] children have come back and are really struggling . . . . interesting in a way that I didn’t expect some of those to

Sarah, Primary Headteacher
[there was] lots of anxiety both parents and students, tons of anxiety, the year sevens especially like either very, very bolshie or they’re - like I had a year seven today square up to one of my ADHD students, literally square up

Jane, Secondary school leader

I was having children who, you’d never believe, were very stable children, literally sobbing in the corridors with it, and they couldn’t, they couldn’t tell you why - they couldn’t express. Why? Why are you upset, and they honestly can’t tell you. And it was dozens and dozens and dozens of children

Mary, School Leadership team, Secondary school focus group

Alice, from the Primary Focus group commented;

I personally think COVID has had a massive impact on mental health. So, we already had a big issue with mental health in this area. I think it’s had a bigger impact on the children … [and] how they’re coping - or not coping - which then leads to their behaviours which then leads to their parents not being able to cope which then becomes quite violent sometimes …

[they are] six months behind or eight months behind so it’s had a knock-on effect moving up to the next level

Alice, Pastoral leader, Primary School

This idea was echoed by several primary participants, who commented that year groups appeared to lack the usual maturity expected at that age and stage, in readiness for their next class in September.

Overall, our participants did not ignore the impact on academic learning, but they prioritised the emotional wellbeing and attitude to being in school as prerequisites for learning and catching up. One teacher explained that she felt guilty about being less concerned about learning, but she, and others, felt strongly that the children’s mental wellbeing was the absolute priority in order for learning to be possible at all. Secondly, these concerns were amplified by the loss of some families from the view of public services, and that overall the disadvantages to mental and physical health, and food security, were felt most keenly in disadvantaged groups (Maalla M’jid, 2020).

**Things got worse, things got better**

Our final superordinate theme reflects emotional stress – but also, a time in which participants purposefully re-crafted ways of working with families. They indicated that in their view, changes to the ways in which support services were delivered made things worse for families. They referred to extended wait times to specialist support – delays that were ‘even longer’,
and ‘two years’, especially regarding Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. Chu-Han Huang and Ougrin (2021) report that during March-May 2020, referrals were only 53% of those seen in the same period of the previous year, but that from September 2020 there was a sharp increase to 180% against 2019 data, and that very similar trends were seen in the USA. Many responses reflected their perception that situations had worsened for families, and examples were given with a mix of knowledge about these circumstances, amid their own assumptions about how things might be. Georgina commented;

*But if you’ve got a family that’s struggling, those struggles are only going to feel . . . more intense behind closed doors.*

Georgina, Early Years Practitioner

Similarly, Ingrid, surmised a specific reason for a change in one young person, but also reflects a sense of confusion within the sector;

*I think she was put into care during the lockdown. And she came out and she was, you know, she was absolutely broken [...] You know, there have been families that have literally gone off the radar for the entirety of lockdown. And then its going through the [Designated Safeguarding Lead], but you’re not getting anything back [from external agencies]*

Ingrid, Senior leadership team, Secondary School

This apparent lack of communication is noted by others,

*And we were left with children with special educational needs, social needs, things like that especially our autistic children where people were making decisions without even seeing a child, and that was just daunting to think; “how [are you] making reports about a child you’ve never seen?”*

Hannah, Early years Practitioner

Other accounts gave more tangible examples of family situations which appeared to have worsened during the lockdowns, such as this account by Liz:

*I had a number of school refusers now they’ve just gone to drink, drugs, crime, just over lockdown, which is really sad, so sad. And whose lives I feel, that they were, you know, slightly naughty children, you know, on the edge, but I just look and think, my gosh, you’ve got nothing*

Liz, Senior Leadership team, Secondary School

More optimistically, participants reported perceived improvements in support offered to families, suggesting more conversations were facilitated by enhanced use of technology. Liz also stated:
I think because we always had our vulnerable learners meeting embedded prior to the lockdown, it’s just been a continuation for us. I think that the way that technology [has] moved forward, it enabled a lot more agencies to still facilitate the meetings needed for most of the vulnerable students, and whereas before you would have travelling time, where literally you can jump off one and then attend another. So I think in terms of the scope of the support I think Covid has brought a lot to light about how we utilise our time efficiently to access more of the meetings for our vulnerable students.

Liz, Senior leadership team, Secondary School

Despite this positive outcome, Liz also reflects the relative positions of those who have, and did not have technology, and of those who withdrew from services rather than engage through technology. The data reflects gains for professional people talking about families, but not for the families themselves.

Discussion

We began this research as the UK emerged from its third widespread lockdown, following months of stress and disruption which unsettled assumed liberties and threatened the foundations of our society. At the time, UK death figures topped 1,000 on almost a daily basis, with harrowing news reports predicting further hurdles to overcome. Despite this, not one of our participants reported their own periods of illness, grief, or any form of personal stress despite the inevitable presence of Covid in their own lives as they negotiated their professional role. We see this as testimony to the priority our participants gave to children and families, yet, we also caution that our data reflects an evolving narrative ecology, and that given the this hugely significant event unfolding simultaneously in the lives of adults and children in real time, our participants’own fears and perspectives may be interwoven with their concerns for the children and families in their community, and lack clarity without available hindsight or the forebears of a master narrative through which to make sense. We also note other researchers investigating the impact of Covid-in-Schools, and their findings that teachers experienced a range of stressful and negative emotions including stress, anxiety and anger as the pandemic progressed and social and media rhetoric grew in force (Kim & Asbury, 2020). So too, further findings which pinpoint the pivotal knowledge of schools and school leaders about their children, families and communities (Lalli, 2021), identified as crucial in navigating the return to school sites and responding to the mental health needs of their children and young people (Harmey & Moss, 2021).

Clearly then, schools faced seismic changes to their practice, some laid down in statute (DfE, 2020), and others evidenced here and by others (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Aside from upskilling for online teaching, our data reflects that schools saw themselves as community hubs of outreach provision, delivering food parcels and undertaking doorstep conversations with families. Some participants reported significant improvements in relationships because of this, but others,
especially those with previous outreach roles, reported increased challenges, such as having difficult conversations at the front door, as the emergency legislation prevented them from entering family homes. While the data paints a resilient and responsive picture, we note it speaks to enduring strain and emotional labour of teachers (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021), while continuing to care for their students’ mental health and wellbeing, safety, and engagement in learning. While we maintain our position that our findings reflect perceptions about families during covid, rather than verified facts, we acknowledge the real and present expectation that schools respond proactively to safeguarding issues, and that therefore, the assumptions made by participants are valued here as professionally-informed hypotheses, reflecting their obligations under the Children Act 2004 (Cramphorn & Maynard, 2021). These narratives are counter to the consistently negative UK media commentary about teachers avoiding the classroom and somehow failing in their duty (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Lalli, 2021), despite these dramatic changes happening in context of their own personal experience of the pandemic; the frightening death tolls, separation from family and friends, and their own children’s needs for learning and emotional support.

Our data reflects the key aspects of that narrative ecology of interpretation, values and priorities which we present below.

*Schools in the community*

There seems to be a strong perception among these school-based participants that they dramatically increased their direct support to families, while other services pulled back. We question whether the impact of Covid-19 may have amplified some existing concerns about services clearly positioned as *other*, reflecting an entrenched position that schools are the leading coalface service. We acknowledge that this may not present a balanced or accurate account of which service provided what – rather, that our participants’ perceptions appear cohesive, with a strong narrative identity that schools carried families through the pandemic.

*Care before Curriculum*

The UK media and government rhetoric have presented a fixation on learning loss, albeit with an acknowledgement of mental health needs and a rising inequalities gap. However, our data reflects re-ordered priorities, illuminating that as school became reduced to academic pursuits only, the loss of the hidden curriculum came to bear. Our participants’ first priority has been to address the mental health of children and young people, shown through a range of externalised behaviours. We note that not one of our participants spoke freely about academic worries.
**Able to adapt, survive and thrive**

Our participants reported a shift in the role and position of schools, especially in the primary sector, from school-based teaching and learning to community and family support with an online curriculum, and critically, report that some of these changes were good, and will hopefully continue. For primary and early years this involved an increase in direct work with families, reaching into areas of parenting and mental health. Several primary headteachers reported an improved relationship with parents stemming from these changes.

**Reflexive and Responsive**

We note the partial inversion of expectations; participants reported a marked increase in pupil attendance on return to school, improved relationships, and that some of the more disadvantaged children and young people who continued to access school campuses appeared to gain from a changed environment. In contrast children and young people previously confident and settled were found crying in corridors, unable to articulate their distress, and unable to cope with peer environments. Participants clearly narrated their agility in noticing and responding to these unexpected events.

In conclusion, our recommendations following this research project is that due attention is given to the hidden curriculum in maintaining an emotionally secure learning environment and recovery for children, young people and school staff, and that this has taken precedence over attainment in the concerns of our participants. Secondly, we recommend that further work scopes the role of schools in the social needs of families, in ways which include Safeguarding, but stretch beyond this to establishing the school as a local hub of community support for families.

**Disclosure statement**

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