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Schools closed during the pandemic: revelations about the well-being of 'lower-attaining' primary-school children

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ABSTRACT

This article is unique because it fills a significant gap among Covid-19 related educational research in three ways. First, it analyses data from face-to-face interviews with 23 children, whilst most Covid-19 related research has been based on online data collection methods. Second, it involves 'lower-attaining' children who were already part of an ongoing five-year research project set in England, UK. Third, it captures a 'before' and 'after' picture of the children's experiences during schooling-as-normal and after the two periods of school closures, in relation to their well-being. Within the context of Seligman's PERMA theory, we found that the absence-of-schooling-as-normal had adversely affected their well-being, but in so doing, the children's perspective on schooling had altered, as they had missed being part of something bigger than themselves, in a setting which offered socialisation, structure and purpose.

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Introduction

Never since the Second World War has the UK experienced such a major disruption to the nation's home, work, and educational life, as that which has been caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. One ramification is that the mental health of many people, including children, has been severely affected adversely by the pandemic, as the National Health Service (NHS 2020) reported that there was a rise from one in nine young people and children reporting mental health problems in 2017 to one in six in 2020. Furthermore, the number of people requiring mental health support due to the pandemic, is anticipated to triple during the next three to five years (O'Shea 2021).

The impact of Covid-19 on schooling

One corollary has been that the educational inequalities in attainment relating to poverty in the UK (Mowat 2018; Siraj and Mayo 2014), have been brought to the forefront of the nation's attention. During the period of 2020–2021, the devolved nations of the UK (England, N. Ireland, Scotland and Wales) set their own regulations for schools and so in England, schools were physically shut on two separate occasions to pupils, apart from children of keyworkers or those who were considered vulnerable. For those children who remained at home, the schools offered online learning classes, but given the suddenness of these unforeseen major changes to teaching and learning, the rate of this adjustment varied greatly among schools, partly due to the scarcity of the technology

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available to the children in materially disadvantaged homes (Montacute and Cullinane 2021). Correspondingly, when comparing the reading and writing scores of Year 2 pupils in 2020 with those of Year 2 pupils in 2017, Rose et al. (2021) found that the scores of the children from lower-income families, were an additional 5 months behind the scores of those from higher-income families. Although the myriad of reasons for these disparities are beyond the scope of this article, one reason that Moss et al. (2020, 4) identified, from their research among 1653 state primary school teachers during the pandemic, was that for the state schools in which pupils were from poorer homes, teachers were having to operate in 'crisis mode'. Teachers reported working in this manner, using a form of 'ethical triage' (Buchanan and Warwick 2021), in order to attend to the welfare needs of their most disadvantaged families, which invariably left less time to focus on implementing and supporting home learning.

Definitions

As the term well-being is a much-disputed concept (see Williams-Brown and Mander 2020), for the purposes of this article, we chose to situate our analysis within Seligman's (2011) theory of well-being. This psychological theory (PERMA) proposed that in order for a person to flourish in terms of their well-being, they need to experience a combination of the following elements:

Positive emotions: experiencing feelings such as pleasure, joy and love.
Engagement: experiencing a sense of 'Flow' Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997) when they are engaged in an activity that is so absorbing that they lose their sense of time.
Relationships: experiencing positive relationships
Meaning: 'belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self' in order to have meaning and purpose in life (Seligman 2011, 12).
Accomplishment or achievement: being intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to complete a task. Here we opted to use the word 'achievement' only, as it is more relevant to schooling.

The theory itself arose from the positive psychology movement, which advocated the importance of identifying which strategies were employed by people who had stable mental health and appeared to be flourishing. This contrasted with the previous focus in psychology on people who were experiencing mental health difficulties. Seligman's theory has been used in a variety of settings including in the context of children and adults (Seligman 2018; Shoshani and Slone 2017), as well as in schools, due to the development of positive psychology programmes such as SEAL (GOV.UK 2010), aimed at promoting good mental health among pupils. Nonetheless, there have been many critiques of positive psychology generally, particularly in relation to its emphasis on the individual having to take responsibility for their own well-being, which echoes the remit of neo-liberalism (Brown 2016). One specific criticism is that in encouraging children to develop 'resilience', this may have a detrimental effect on those whose lowered well-being is a result of their family experiencing structural inequalities that adversely influence their family lives, rather than the child's inherent lack of personal resilience (Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Gillies 2011; Williams-Brown and Mander 2020). However, despite such limitations to Seligman's theory, it is useful as a framework by which to analyse the children's experiences during the pandemic.

Although many of the reports cited in this article refer to both young people and children, we have used the term children throughout for simplicity, as we are mainly referring to primary-aged pupils. The words education and schooling are often used interchangeably, but from the perspective of this article, they do not refer to the same thing. Rather, education can refer to any form of learning and development, both formal and informal whereas schooling refers to 'a more organised form of education' that takes place in schools (Brint, 2006, 1). Therefore, the word schooling, will be used throughout this article**.** We have chosen to use the word 'lower-attaining' in this

article, as the children were recruited due to their lower-attainment in literacy and/or numeracy tests. We have not used the term 'lower-ability' as we believe that it implies a 'fixity' that labels children in a deficit way, failing to reflect the many other capacities these children may possess, that are not reflected in attainment scores (Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2021, 2). Finally, the word parents will be used throughout this article for simplicity, although it can be taken to refer to parents, guardians or carers.

The CLIPS project

The research project on which this article is based in England, UK is called 'Children's Life Histories in Primary Schools' (CLIPS). This began in 2018 as part of a five-year longitudinal study, of which we are in the fourth year at the time of writing. It involves following 23 children who were designated as being 'lower-attaining' during Year 3 (aged 7–8) in their primary schools, through to the end of Year 7 (aged 11–12) in secondary school. So, although our research work was briefly but abruptly interrupted when schools had to close during two lockdown periods, it presented us with a naturalistic opportunity, rarely afforded to researchers. This was, to capture a 'before' and 'after' picture of our participants' experiences during school and after the school closures, in relation to their well-being. Our pre-pandemic analysis (Buchanan, Hargreaves, and Quick 2021; Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan 2021) had revealed that although the children spoke of experiencing many positive emotions at school in relation to play and good relationships, their well-being was diminished due to their fears about their lack of attainment, as well as feelings of sadness, rejection and embarrassment, contextualised within a culture of performativity (Ball 2003; Bradbury 2019). Consequently, the pandemic allowed us the chance to gauge if these issues had changed and if we perceived their wellbeing to have been diminished or enhanced by the enforced closure of schools.

School closures and children's well-being

Increasingly, thinking about well-being in the context of schools has become an important topic nationally and globally (OECD 2019). When Clark et al. (2018) synthesised several international studies relating to well-being, they concluded that schools can not only positively affect the academic performance and behaviour of children, but also their emotional health. This is an important finding given that prior to the pandemic, the emotional health and well-being of children in the UK was already reportedly declining (The Children's Society 2020). Consequently, we would surmise that the closure of schools, would add negatively to the well-being of schoolchildren.

Most of the research concerning school closures have focussed on assessing the attainment gap that has occurred or by looking at children's mental health from a clinical perspective (see Viner et al. 2021), or by surveying the views of the educational professionals (Moss et al. 2020). However, one study which sought to examine the role of school closures on the emotional and behavioural well-being of children aged 5–11, was carried out by Blanden et al. (2021). Using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, one of their conclusions was that extra support for children's 'mental health and wellbeing is likely to be required for some time and justifies the focus that many schools have been placing on pupil wellbeing' (Blanden et al. 2021, 4). However, few studies have accessed young children's voices directly and especially not face-to-face, outside of a clinical setting in the UK. One small-scale study that did focus on seeking the views of children involved in online face-to-face interviews with 12 primary-aged schoolchildren (Manyukhina 2021). The main findings were that the children preferred learning at school rather than at home due to the opportunities to socially interact with peers as they have felt lonely and sad during lockdown; and that they preferred having a teacher to teach them (as opposed to a parent). It was due to these factors that the children said that they were all pleased to return to school. It was also found that the children spoke of having enjoyed their increased opportunities during the school closures,

enjoying being involved in creative work 'on their own terms' such as art, music and poetry (Manyukhina 2021, 6). However, the author noted that this study used a self-selection sampling strategy, and so it may have inadvertently led to there being a bias among the final sample of children who all came from stable, materially advantaged families. Our study, on the other hand was made up of a larger group of children with whom we were able to carry out face-to-face interviews, and of which almost half of the children had pupil premium status, denoting socio-economic disadvantage. Considering this, this article set out to answer the research question: 'How did "lower-attaining" primary school children experience the absence of schooling-as-normal during the pandemic, in terms of their well-being?'

Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist approach, which advocates that 'social actors negotiate meanings about their activity in the world. Social reality therefore consists of their attempts to interpret the world' (Scott and Morrison 2006, 131). From this standpoint a life-history approach was appropriate, given that the aim of life histories is to 'explore how individuals who share specific characteristics, personally and subjectively experience, make sense of, and account for the things that happen to them' (Goodson and Sikes 2001, 39).

The reason for this study was because there had previously been little research work carried out among 'lower-attaining' children, who were not categorised as needing a state-funded Educational Health and Care plan (EHCP). As there was previous work among children with an EHCP (Webster and Blatchford 2013), we excluded children with an EHCP, although subsequently one participant acquired an EHCP and two children were later considered to have special educational needs. Among the limited work that has been carried out among 'lower-attaining' children, it had been found that there was a prevalence of negative experiences reported including feelings of upset, failure and shame, particularly in relation to 'ability' grouping practices (Boaler, Wiliam, and Brown 2000; Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2021; Gripton 2020; Marks 2013, 2016; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020; Wyse and Torrance 2009). Originally there were two research questions guiding the overall study, but a third one was added during the unforeseen pandemic, due to its relevancy to the second research question, regarding what factors influenced the children's school-life histories.

1. How do children who have been identified as being 'lower-attaining' in either literacy or numeracy, or both, experience school in terms of their personal and social flourishing and their learning, across five years of their school-life histories?
2. What factors influence their experiences?
3. How did 'lower-attaining' primary school children experience the absence of schooling-as-normal during the pandemic, in terms of their well-being?

This article, in which all the schools and children's names have been anonymised, used data that was collected during the third and fourth year of our five-year project, when the children were in Year 6. Originally, we recruited 24 children (six from each school) for the project, but one child moved away in the first term and so 23 children are involved with the project. The children cited in this article were from the following schools recruited for the project:

Schools	
Jayden (inner London)	Alvin, Max, Eleanor, Britney, Landon and Jake
Brandon (inner London)	Zack, Saffa, Mohammed, Neymar, Ryan and Lucy
Sandown (greater London)	Chrystal, Jerry and Summer
Sunnyfields (rural)	Bella, Bob, Anna and Ben

Apart from Sunnyfields, all of the schools had pupil intakes comprising above average numbers of children eligible for free school meals (FSM), of which the national average is 23%, and for two of these schools, the FSM numbers were almost double the national average (42.3% and 40.9%). All four schools had been assessed as good or outstanding by the Department of Education inspections. The children recruited for the study were those whose Year 3 teachers had identified as being 'lower-attaining' in either literacy or numeracy, or both, as these are the core English National Curriculum subjects. Our sample was compiled of 12 boys and 11 girls, of whom 14 were among the youngest in their classes. Fourteen children identified as being non-white British and 10 had Pupil Premium status (pp), indicating socio-economic disadvantage. Although we did not access explicit information regarding the socio-economic status of our participants' families, we surmised from the children's narratives that most of them came from lower-income families, including those with working parents.

Data collection

In this article, we analysed, within the context of Seligman's (2011) well-being theory, what these children revealed to us during interviews that took place after each of the two periods of school closures (visits08/09). Our data collection relating to the pandemic involved 63 face-to-face interviews (40–90 min long) using child-friendly and age-appropriate activities for each interview. The interviews on which this article was based involved the children in:

i. drawing a picture of how they had spent their time during lockdown.
ii. completing sentence starters relating to the lockdown periods, e.g. The best/worst thing about learning at home was … etc.
iii. commenting on 'blob tree' figures' emotions during and after lockdown (Wilson and Long 2018).
iv. Using a rating scale 0 (lowest)–10 (highest) to show where the teacher would place them in terms of their past and present schoolwork.

All these interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed professionally.

Ethics

We adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA 2017) and our ethical approval was awarded by the university ethics committee. This included our commitment to confidentiality, anonymity, non-traceability in line with GDPR (2021), as well as giving informed consent and the right to withdraw. Written consent was obtained from both the children and parents. In the case of the children, we asked them at each stage of the project, if they were willing to continue in the project in case as they grew older, they no longer wished to take part. We were sensitive to avoid the term 'lower-attaining' with the children but rather spoke of them struggling at times, with their literacy or numeracy classes.

Data collection during the pandemic

Prior to the pandemic, we had carried out 107 interviews over six terms, with our participants and although we were unable to continue our termly visits during the two periods of school closures, we did resume them once schools re-opened. To resume these face-to-face interviews, we had to go through several steps involving discussions with the university ethics team, and the school senior staff and teachers, in order to deliver our interviews in covid-friendly ways. We had considered adopting online alternative means to interview our children when the schools initially closed, but we ruled these alternative methods out as they would have required another adult

to have been present in the interview with the child, which would have contravened our promise for confidentiality.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out (Braun and Clarke 2006), which initially began with each of the three researchers inductively developing codes for eight pupils each, using pen and paper. However, after this we progressed to using Nvivo 11 software, to aid collating our analysis. Together we agreed on themes and codes, which were modified after each visit, and which presently has amounted to 36 codes from 107 interviews. These included codes such as 'beliefs about success and failure' and 'effort, self-management, listening and concentrating'. For the pandemic-related data collection we introduced a new code 'Learning during lockdown' and concentrated on this code alongside 'school as safe and enjoyable'; 'school as unfair or difficult', 'relationships'; and 'the cancellation of Standard Assessment Test (SATS)', for the purposes of this article. This present analysis was carried out within the context of Seligman's theory (Positive emotions, Engagement; Relationships; Meaning' Achievement) as this theory provided a useful framework when considering the personal/ social flourishing of our participants. Although these elements overlapped, they are presented here separately.

Findings

Positive emotions Seligman proposed that experiencing positive emotions such as joy, love and hope are essential to a person's well-being but in the post-lockdown interviews, there were few positive emotions expressed, aside from those connected with their family (see 'relationships' section below); the number of negative emotions outweighed the number of positive ones expressed. Although there were some children who definitely enjoyed being at home more, rather than being at school such as Zack (pp), Summer, Bella, Chrystal (pp) and Max, the majority of positive emotions expressed by all children were in relation to how pleased they were to be returning to school, e.g. Alvin (pp) who said: 'I felt very happy, excited and joyful'. Despite this excitement Max, Saffa, Mohammed and Bella expressed mixed emotions about their impending return after the second closure of schools. Max retorted: 'I honestly didn't want to go back. I felt miserable. But when I got back it felt good'. In the case of Max and Bella, their reticence may have been a reflection on the stressful elements of schooling, such as testing, that they previously both had alluded to in past visits e.g. visits 02/04.

The most frequent negative emotions expressed relating to being at home during lockdown were of sadness relating to their lack of opportunities to play and feeling bored at home.

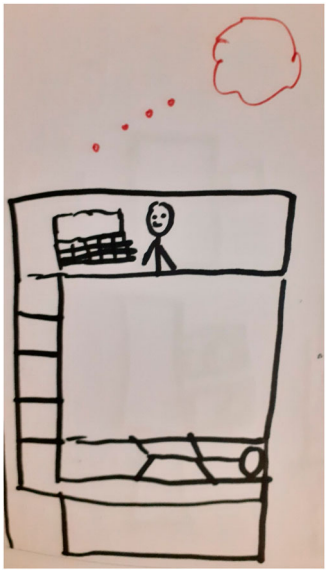
- *Sadness due to missing play:* all of the children mentioned that the worst thing about lockdown was that they could not play either outside their home or with their friends at school. This lack of play opportunities was especially heightened for those children who lived in urban flats, with no gardens. Using the blob-tree figures, when Eleanor (pp) was asked why the figure looked sad, she answered*:*

> Because she doesn't have anybody to play with … I wasn't having fun during lockdown. It was boring. There wasn't really much stuff to do at home. No fun activities. We had nothing to play with.

This was illustrated similarly by Alvin (pp) who drew the following picture about how he had to spend lockdown, in a small flat with no garden and a bedroom which he shared with his grandma.

> So, the thing is that – that's my bunk bed, and that's my grandma, and that's me with my laptop. Then that's my homework; then this is the ladder … I just lay in my bedroom in my pyjamas and then would eat. It was fun at times, but I was sad not to be able to play outside and I was thinking 'When can I go out? I miss school. School is my second home'.

Alvin (pp) during lockdown



- *Sadness due to boredom:* When Neymar was asked how he felt about missing school, he said:

> At first, I was so happy about being off school, then I kept begging my mum 'I want to go to school', because I got bored. When I was at home, I was just sleeping all day and eating, and I was getting fat.

This experience of boredom was echoed by many others, such as Alvin (pp) who said: 'I felt bored, just being on the computer 24/7'. However, it is worth noting that in our pre-pandemic interviews these children also spoke about being bored within school lessons at times.

Engagement Seligman proposed that engagement contributes positively to well-being and, as a result of the ubiquity of the word 'boredom' during our interviews, we would suggest that boredom is the opposite of engagement. When the children were asked how they had spent their time during lockdown, their frequent answers concerned sleeping and eating more and spending much more time playing computer games. Many spoke of having few non-digital games at home. For instance, Saffa (pp)said that she had no toys to play with, until her Mum eventually bought her a game called 'Jenga'. Only a very few children spoke of engaging in other creative activities. Bella spoke of enjoying spending time with her new dog and her horses, whilst Ryan spoke of working on multiple projects at home. These included setting up with his dad's help, a regular zoom meeting for him and his peers called 'Skype a Scientist', in which an invited scientist would speak about their work. Additionally, he carried out lots of digital projects, including making two funny videos which featured his toddler sister and were uploaded to YouTube. Ryan spoke about editing these videos:

> It was fun, and it was also very stressful. It wasn't filming it, but editing it afterwards –it was such a long process.

Hearing how absorbing and demanding Ryan found the editing process to be, was in stark contrast to his previous history, when he spoke of feeling bored in class as he struggled in his numeracy and literacy lessons.

Relationships Seligman (2011) argued that positive relationships were crucial for well-being and observed that 'Very little that is positive (*emotionally*) is solitary … other people are the best antidote to the downs of life and the single most reliable up' (20) and that it is in relationships that we can show kindness to others. Our findings echoed this, as it was striking that when the children were asked to draw a picture of their lives during lockdown, they were solitary, apart from a few who included some of their family in their drawings (e.g. Max; Alvin (pp); Chrystal (pp)) or their

animals (Summer's puppy and Bob's tortoise). The children spoke of three areas of relationships – family, teachers and friends. In terms of family, it became clear was that the children in our study all appeared to be part of stable family groups as when they spoke about their families, it was positive. In terms of their teachers, it was notable that some children mentioned how they had missed seeing their teachers, as Jerry spoke of feeling happy to return to school because 'I'm back at school and I can hug my teachers!'. In terms of their friends, all of the children spoke of having missed their schoolfriends, revealing how essential schools can be in aiding socialisation, as identified by Manyukhina (2021). Even Jeff (pp) who endured many struggles at school, said that during lockdown he was feeling 'sad not to see my friends', although he had loved playing on his computer all day long during the school closures. Ryan, however, was the only child to mention how he felt that the school closures had affected his classmates socially:

> The thing is like when we could not see people for quite a long time, and people had forgotten how to communicate and socialise with people.

Meaning Seligman (2011) proposed that belonging to something 'bigger than the self' (12) was essential for well-being and our findings resonated with this idea. Our findings suggested that after having experienced the absence of schooling-as-normal there was a shift in the children's perspectives in relation to the perceived value of their schooling, as they spoke of how much they had missed it and how pleased they were to return to it. Consequently, the children seemed to have come to a new appreciation of the benefits of schooling. Yet, it could be argued that this seemingly new appreciation of schooling, was merely due to the socialisation that schooling affords. We therefore sought to examine this aspect further, by asking the children what they felt was the benefit of schooling-as-normal, aside from socialising. Zack (pp) answered, 'Because going to school helps you to learn to grow up … and how to make life choices' and many of the other children gave similarly positive answers that were not solely about friendships. Saffa (pp)said:

> I think education is for your benefit and having a good life … You know what they say: 'Knowledge is power', because if you have knowledge, you can do literally anything in the future.

These answers suggested an awareness from the children of how schooling has the potential 'to enable each learner to lead a life that is personally flourishing and to help others to do so' (Reiss and White 2014, 76), which had not been the case pre-pandemic. One pertinent example of this shift was Neymar who, in a pre-pandemic interview had said that he 'hated school' and felt when coming into school that his life was 'getting worser' (visit05), mainly due to the pressure of tests. Post-school-closures, he told us that he had pleaded with his Mum to get back to school early, as he was so bored at home, and this had increased his desire to concentrate better in class now. Another pertinent example was that of Ryan. Previously his family had said that for secondary school he could choose to be home schooled if he so wished, given his past struggles with his academic work and school systems. When asked about this option post-lockdown, Ryan said:

> No um – that would just be impossible to happen really, because I don't think that would really work. I was really bored, and I didn't have a big imagination in lockdown … and I was grumpy in general because I couldn't see anyone.

This new appreciation of what schooling can offer contrasted with our pre-pandemic findings, when primarily the children had appeared to consider that the main purpose of schooling was to be educated in order to gain future employment. This perspective reverberated throughout many of the interviews during visit06, when we had asked the children what they thought was the purpose of learning. A few replies included: 'so that you can carry on your learning, to get work (Chrystal (pp)); and 'to get education, because you can get a better job' (Landon (pp)). Although one should not underestimate the importance of these aspirations, given that these children appeared to come from lower-income families, their answers reflected the instrumental view of schooling. One exception was Ryan, who did not come from a lower-income family. When asked the same question, he answered, 'Well the teachers

always say, 'So you can get paid a lot when you grow older … but I could say different answers … so you could have friends, or so you could be educated'. This comment, in relation to one's earning potential shows how this attitude to schooling, as functioning in capitalist, profit-gaining terms, permeated even the teaching staff and so reflected the social efficiency ideology relating to schooling (Schiro 2013). This hegemony was evident, even when the children were eight years old, as shown by Saffa (pp) (visit01) when she explained the importance of listening in class:

> If you didn't listen in class … then you won't do anything and you'll just be a McDonald's cooker, just flip patties. You will be unsuccessful.

However, we would suggest that the children, as a result of the school closures, had come to view schooling in a less instrumental way. This was in part due to feeling that they had missed being part of a community which was larger than just themselves and their families, and in part, due to missing being in a context that had structure and purpose. Consequently, it could be that although they previously had subconsciously subscribed to the dominant neo-liberal discourse, this may have been overridden by a changed perspective. This perspective now viewed schooling as having the potential to add meaning to their lives, which in turn could enhance their well-being. Although one might speculate that this perspective was more pronounced among the children who came from lower-income homes that may have offered fewer opportunities for engagement, learning and play, our data did not explicitly confirm this. Rather our data found that all the children, regardless of their home environments, appeared to have changed their perspectives in this way. This was significant given that previously they all, as 'lower-attaining' children, had expressed frustrations and stresses connected with their classwork, particularly in relation to testing. Thus, we would conclude that, even for 'lower-attaining' children who had previously found schooling to be stressful, due to the constant emphasis on tests and a curriculum, that did not reflect their non-academic strengths, they still preferred to attend school. It will be interesting to see if these shifted perspectives of schooling persist longer term, once the novelty of returning to schooling-as-normal has dissipated.

Achievement For Anna, Bella and Neymar who were allowed attend school physically during the lockdown period, they all spoke of enjoying the more relaxed classes in which they were able to choose to engage in more creative activities, which Anna had referred to saying: 'We didn't do much learning … but done planting and nice art'. For those who were taught online, most children found it to be tedious and less helpful than face-to-face classes. Practically, a number of children had problems accessing the online classes due to their lack of working equipment (Lucy and Eleanor (pp)) reflecting the digital divide related to socio-economic status that persists in the U.K (Holmes and Burgess 2021). For instance, Britney (pp)struggled to access online classes as she had to share her Mum's mobile phone with her Mum and sister, a mobile phone that did not always work or have sufficient credit on it to work. Unsurprisingly, Britney (pp) (and others) spoke of not understanding parts of the online lessons and missing being helped by her teacher during a she said, ' … you got no help because if you asked for help, they wouldn't come and help you, so you still wouldn't understand'. Mohammed and Eleanor (pp) also mentioned how much they missed being given help by their peers, which may be a particular issue for 'lower-attaining' children a it had been mentioned often in the pre-pandemic interviews.

Achievement and motivation: the majority spoke of doing minimal amounts of schoolwork e.g. Neymar, Anna, Chrystal (pp) and Alvin (pp) and so there were only a few children who seemed to have worked steadily throughout lockdown. One was Bella, who explained her routine of carrying out 1–2 hours per day, before the online classes were provided:

> Because sometimes I wake up at 6 or even 10 and have my breakfast. Then I would get my spelling book. And do a bit of that for like half an hour or something, just doing like letters and words.

Some independent learning was also evident with Zack (pp); Max, Ryan and Landon (pp), whose families had bought them workbooks to use at home, and in the cases of Chrystal (pp) and Ben whose families organised private online tutoring for them.

Achievement and 'lost learning opportunities': when the children were asked where their current teacher would put them in terms of their work attainment on the 1–10 'rating scale', it was interesting that many of them thought that they would be placed lower down the scale than where they would have been placed in the previous school year. It emerged that all of the children perceived themselves to have forgotten some of their previous learning, although this may depend on how narrow their perceptions are as to what constitutes 'learning'. For instance, Neymar felt that his teacher would presently place him at 5/10 whereas before the pandemic he would have been at 7/10 as he said:

> Because in Year 5 I was way smarter than I am now … Because during lockdown, I just didn't want to do my work, as I just got lazy. I forgot a lot of my times tables. It wasn't that necessary at home as I didn't need to do anything there.

Similarly, Jake (pp) commented that 'for seven or eight months I didn't learn'. Ryan also felt that he had declined in specific areas as he said:

> I've got dumber over lockdown, and I forgot lots of things … during lockdown I didn't do much writing apart from writing on the computer, my handwriting was awful when I came back, but now I'm improving'.

When the children were asked how they felt about the cancellation of SATS many spoke of feeling relieved. However, a few spoke of mixed feelings of relief and disappointment, such as Ryan who said: 'I don't like it when people judge me on the work I've done, because I might have done better in a test'. This was an interesting reflection from Ryan given that he clearly had learnt a lot during his filmmaking, but such learning would not have been highlighted in a test.

Discussion

This article set out to answer the research question: How did 'lower-attaining' primary school children experience the absence of schooling-as-normal during the pandemic, in terms of their well-being? Although none of our children spoke of developing mental health problems during the periods when their schools were closed, we would surmise that within the framework of Seligman's PERMA theory, their well-being appeared to have diminished. This concurred with other previous pandemic related studies (Montacute and Cullinane 2021; O'Shea, 2020). This apparent diminution was evidenced as they spoke of how the closure of their schools had hindered their opportunities to play, socialise and learn, which had led to loneliness and boredom. Consequently, many negative emotions were expressed about lockdown during the interviews, and positive ones, in relation to returning to school. Overall, these findings concurred with those by Manyukhina (2021), that nearly all the children were pleased to return to school; that being able to socialise was imperative for their well-being; that learning at school was more desirable than learning at home; and that their teachers were crucial in the learning process. But our findings differed from those of Manyukhina as our children spoke of also missing the help that their peers gave them during class, which may have been more heightened due to the 'lower-attaining' aspects of our children who struggled often with their classwork. Another difference was that our children did not find that being at home had given them more opportunities to be creative, as only a few children spoke of such activities (Ryan, Bella and Max). We would assume that this was probably due to many of the CLIPS children coming from families whose parents were unable to work from home due to their manual jobs (a number of whom worked as cleaners), and/or whose homes contained fewer non-digital games for them to engage with.

The importance of well-being on returning to schooling-as-normal

One surprise during our analysis, was to find that although the children expressed their concerns about having 'lost learning opportunities' during the pandemic, this was not accompanied by their previously articulated fears relating to their perceived lack of attainment (Buchanan, Hargreaves,

and Quick 2021). We would presume that this difference may have been due to the national cancellation of SATS, which impacted the return-to-school curriculum. Consequently, these curriculum changes appeared to have lessened the pre-pandemic often-expressed pressure to attain, that our 'lower-attaining' children had articulated. This change may thus have enabled teachers to prioritise the well-being of their pupils on their return, despite the UK government's emphasis on the need to provide 'catch-up' classes, in order to compensate for their perceived lost learning opportunities. If so, such a focus during the recovery period would by extension, have been advantageous not only for the children, but also for the wider community. Previous research among countries where there have been sudden school closures due to natural disasters or war, have found this to be the case. For instance, following the earthquakes in Japan and New Zealand, O'Connor and Takahashi (2014, 51) found that school staff aimed to 'put the interests of the children in their care before all else', which was found to aid recovery among the whole communities. This resonated with the conclusion from a survey of international literature in this field, (Harmey and Moss 2021) in which they found that prioritising well-being as opposed to catching up with 'lost learning opportunities', was a key element in helping children and their communities to recover post-crisis.

Resolving contradictions

The interviews elicited much evidence that for nearly all of the children, their recurring feelings of boredom and loneliness during the school closures were detrimental to their well-being. The findings showed how being able to play, socialise, have an engaging structure in which to learn with others, as well as be part of something bigger than themselves (Seligman 2011) was essential for the well-being of 'lower-attaining' children. Consequently, the absence of these experiences appeared to have led the children to gain a new appreciation of what schooling could give them. This new appreciation applied not only to the children who had spoken of their lack of engaging resources at home, e.g. Landon, Alvin, Lucy and Saffa, but to *all* of the children.

Nonetheless, these findings contradicted our previous work that had revealed that schooling itself, had led our lower-attaining children to experience many negative feelings around schooling such as fears of failure, rejection and embarrassment. This contradiction was exemplified in Neymar's case as although he had previously spoken of 'hating' school, he pleaded to return to school when they were physically shut. Yet presumably the children would not want to return to an environment that had in the past made them feel fearful and embarrassed at times. So, the question is, how can the potentially beneficial aspects of attending school, revealed in this article be maximised and the negative aspects which we reported pre-pandemic, be minimised? We would ascertain that to achieve this there needs to be a radical re-thinking of schooling-as-normal. This would involve an overhauling of the testing and inspection regimes, which has the potential to reverse the narrowing of the curriculum, which statutory testing has imposed (Bradbury 2021). Such an overhaul may help to redress the balance between 'assessment for accountability and assessment for learning' (Bradbury 2021, 138–139) and so facilitate 'more purposeful and rewarding teaching' in the future (Moss et al. 2021, 2). This in turn may help to challenge the internalised views that our children expressed, as to what they understand as constituting 'learning', as illustrated by Anna ('We didn't do much learning') and by Ryan when he spoke of becoming 'dumber' during lockdown, despite learning how to make and edit videos during the school closures. We would therefore advocate that only when such rethinking is carried out, might it be possible to maximise the potential benefits of schooling-as-normal and minimise the harm schools can do to a child's well-being, particularly for those children who are regarded as being 'lower-attaining'.

Conclusion

Asking the children about the absence of schooling-as-normal, revealed how this absence played a detrimental role in the lives of the CLIPS children which reinforces how vital it is for schools to remain

open during a national crisis. Consequently, we would conclude, in accordance with Blanden et al. (2021), that it is important that the return to school in the short term, should be focussed on aiding recovery in terms of the children's well-being, particularly in allowing them time to play and reconnect socially. In the longer term, we would propose that it is important that the opportunity which the pandemic has afforded, i.e. to see how the absence-of-schooling-as-normal can affect the well-being of children, is not wasted. This will involve needing to rethink how we can maximise the beneficial aspects of schooling-as-normal and minimise the negative aspects, particularly for those children who are considered to be 'lower-attaining'. Lastly, our findings concur with the conclusion reached by Moss et al. (2020, 4) that 'Schooling is about much more than learning' and of how there is a 'duty of care' for the well-being of pupils, aside from the 'duty to teach'; an idea that resonates with that of Noddings (2013) who argued that an ethic of care *is* part of teaching.

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