

# Representations of schooling and childhood during the COVID-19 pandemic in England

Kate Bacon<sup>1</sup>  | Sam Frankel<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

<sup>2</sup>Learning Allowed, Church Stretton, Shropshire, UK

## Correspondence

Kate Bacon, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6GX, UK.  
Email: [k.bacon@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:k.bacon@mmu.ac.uk)

## Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, questions abounded about how best to support children during the 'new normal' where homes, often instead of schools, were identified as the usual sites of learning. Educational research has explored the impact of COVID-19 on schools, education and learning, and childhood studies research has shown the impact on children's rights and paid attention to how constructs of childhood have shaped government responses. In this paper, we bring these fields together through exploring constructions of childhood alongside those of schooling. We systematically analyse the representations of schooling and childhood in 72 BBC news articles published on 1 June—the day that primary schools started to reopen in England. Our findings show that the dominant 'frames' of reporting centred around risk and fear. COVID-19 risks exist to health and safety, to children's education and to childhood more generally. The news media portrayed schooling as synonymous with learning, children as passive and childhood as a time of both happiness and 'loss'. We argue that these normative discourses exploit children as symbols of hope, conceal alternative ways of thinking about learning and are restrictive and unreflective of children's agency and real-life experiences. In the aftermath of the pandemic, academics and policymakers need to continue to debate and explore the nature of learning and children's perspectives on school in order to critically examine the current system of schooling.

## KEYWORDS

childhood, COVID-19, learning, schools

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper explores media representations of schooling and childhood during the COVID-19 pandemic as a means to reopen debate around the necessity of schooling.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper reveals how normative discourses of schooling and childhood can exploit children as symbols of hope and conceal alternative modes of learning.

## INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold in England, schools were forced to close, the nation was plummeted into 'lockdown' and most children's schooling was relocated to the home. Since the first lockdown in March 2020, England had a series of further lockdowns and schools opened and closed a number of times. Our focus, in this paper, is when schools reopened on 1 June 2020. In June and July 2020, schools began to reopen for key year groups and attendance was not compulsory. During the spring and summer terms of 2020, most teaching and learning was conducted remotely. Typically, many students studied asynchronously through worksheets and pre-recorded videos. Online 'live' lessons were less common. By the time school reopened in September 2020, it was being noted that COVID-19 safe practices and periods of self-isolation meant that 'usual teaching in some subjects suffered' (Howard et al., 2021: 5). When England went back into lockdown in the spring term of 2021, teachers had more experience of remote teaching and students' access to digital resources was improved (Howard et al., 2021).

International educational research exploring schooling and COVID-19 has tended to draw attention to the negative impact that COVID-19 has had on children's learning and attainment (see Education Endowment Foundation, 2022 for an overview) and on children's mental health and wellbeing (Spiteri, 2021). Children from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' have been identified as being particularly affected by learning losses and at risk from poor education attainment. Research has highlighted the unequal experiences of home schooling between affluent and poorer households and the intensification of the digital divide (UNICEF, 2022). Parents, especially non-graduate parents, found it difficult to help their children with the required learning, and the students who were most deprived tended to have home environments that were less conducive to learning—lacking suitable IT access and a quiet place to study (Howard et al., 2021). Such research suggested that where there is limited access to computers and the internet, and children are expected to log on to classes at specific times, children from families where there are multiple school-going children can miss out.

Research within childhood studies has examined the impact of COVID-19 on children as a social group, and how particular constructions of children and childhood have framed government responses to COVID-19 and the impact of these decisions on children's rights. In the United Kingdom, Holt and Murray (2022: 487) have concluded that 'Children have been impacted severely (and unequally)'. They have pointed to the deepening of existing social inequalities such as poverty, educational attainment and domestic violence (Holt & Murray, 2022). Tisdall and Morrison (2022) have shown how policy constructions of children as 'vulnerable' and 'best protected by their families', coupled with a social propensity

towards privileging adult norms and legitimising adult power (adultism), served to disappear children from view. This meant that whilst children's rights to protection from abuse and harm were recognised, their rights to participation were compromised. Children were not involved in decisions around exams and school closures and the rights of those children who did not neatly fit normative, idealised constructs of childhood were especially negatively impacted. Similar conclusions were drawn by Lundy et al. (2021) following their 'CovidUnder19' survey of 26,258 children in 137 different national contexts. Recurring survey themes were that there was widespread breaching of children's rights to participation and these children did not feel like a government priority.

This paper brings together the fields of education and childhood studies through a simultaneous focus on school and children. Taking our lead from childhood studies, we explore constructions of childhood and schooling in the popular media during COVID-19, precisely at the time when an emphasis on the value of schooling was heightened. We use our analysis to invite reflection on these dominant ideas as part of a wider discussion about the necessity of schooling and the nature of childhood.

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a qualitative case study research design through a detailed examination of a single depository of BBC news documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In order to establish some clear and fixed search parameters for our investigation of media images, we systematically analysed all the news articles that featured on the 'family and education' section of the 'Coronavirus in England: Schools Reopen' [BBC news webpage](#). The BBC is a prominent news organisation that, with its regular 'COVID press briefings', positioned itself as an important source of public information. Two central (interlinked) research questions guided our investigation:

1. How is schooling represented?
2. How is childhood represented?

The theoretical framework underpinning our study emerges from the key premises of childhood studies (see Tisdall & Morrison, 2022). Namely that childhood is a social construction and children are worthy of study in their own right. Seeing childhood as a social construction means paying attention to how discourses of childhood are produced and reproduced. Discourses (collections of words and images) construct and give meaning to social reality. From this perspective, language continually creates and recreates the world and, as such, embodies words *and* actions. It conveys meaning and *does* something. Thus, as well as exploring the content of the news articles, part of our exploration is about what these representations are doing and achieving (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 5). Hence, we examine, within our defined sources, the narratives that are constructed. Of course, this is not to deny the reality of COVID-19 or its impact on society, schools and human beings, but to underline the role of news in the selective construction of reality, in communicating moral messages to a mass audience and characterising particular roles, identities and social groups in certain ways.

More especially, we are exploring what images of childhood reveal about the motivation to *school* the child. In order to launch our enquiry, two key terms need defining: the 'image of the child' and 'motivation'. Within this paper, the image of the child is a socially constructed interpretation of the child held by *adults* (children themselves can hold an image of the child, but that is not part of our initial focus). The image is shaped by a range of social forces (Qvortrup, 2009) including customs, traditions, law and media that impact attitudes

and assumptions and shape understandings. These discourses about children create a certain 'noise' that informs and shapes our everyday opinions (Frankel, 2018). Notably, the way we come to think about children and the image we hold about them will then impact on the practices we create and the experiences that children ultimately have. A powerful example of this lies in the work of Paul Connolly, whose research in schools (Connolly, 1998, 2004) saw teachers unwittingly drawing on these wider social discourses to inform their attitudes towards children in their class, with an impact on the practices they then employed. Images of childhood, then, are connected to and frame our personal and public 'motivation'—why we respond to and treat children as we do. For instance, if we adopt an image of the child that is focused on the future child (and therefore children's value lies in what they will become), then our practices might be motivated by a desire to, for example, respond to what children 'lack', as institutions work to 'complete' the child and prepare them for taking their place as adults within society.

In order to explore the image of the child and the themes of motivation linked to the mission to 'school' the child, we examined the ways in which schooling and childhood were represented in BBC news articles on the day that schools in England reopened—1 June 2020. We reasoned that this could provide us with opportunities to explore discourses around the nature and importance of learning and the purpose and value of schooling, as well as offering opportunities to examine constructs of childhood prevalent during reporting amidst the pandemic. These dates are not chosen in order to make broad generalisations about depictions of childhood, schooling and learning in the news media but to investigate *examples* of the kinds of images and ideas conveyed and what they reveal. The news stories were all short in word length, so key messages had to be relayed quickly (with limited detail). Exploring news media representations offers one way to explore the meanings that can feed into and shape public opinion (Allan, 2022; Mach et al., 2021).

The reliability of our research is not based on replicability but on the dependable and transparent research process (outlined here) that gives rise to our context-specific findings. The validity of our study is not founded on claims that we are measuring a reality, only that we are building a credible research study that uses data to address our research questions (which are themselves centred around discursive formations) (Noble & Smith, 2015). As such, we are not presenting these news stories as 'factual' accounts, rather we are positioning them as *representations* that build up particular discourses of childhood and schooling.

The notion of 'framing' has been used in media research to explore how media organise and structure information in news. Through framing topics in particular ways, media promote a particular definition of the situation, selecting and highlighting certain aspects (Zhang, 2021). Of course, news-making and reporting is a political process; news is produced through powerful social groups (Richardson, 2007). Generation is one important structural dimension of inequality in our society (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2002) and of particular interest to us in this paper is how adult journalists create pictures, images and narratives on behalf of (less powerful) children, who still have very limited opportunities to influence the ways in which they are represented in news.

Reflecting its social constructionist theoretical framework, this study used thematic analysis in order to analyse the data/news stories and uncover key discourses of childhood and schooling. This approach involves a series of important stages, including familiarisation with data and generating and then reviewing codes and subcodes that summarise the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following this process, our first step was copying all the text from the articles over into an Excel database and reading each article at least three times. Tentative codes were then noted and stratified into possible themes and subthemes. Text from each article was then positioned and listed under the relevant code-named Excel column, enabling us to see the detail of language used within each code. Thereafter, the codes were scrutinised again to ensure the breadth of detail from

the articles was adequately captured. We then explored the photographs that accompanied these stories to try to get a sense of the visual semiotics that supported the written messages.

Five main codes emerged from our analysis:

1. School as risky.
2. School as necessary.
3. Children as challenging.
4. Children as passive.
5. Childhood as a time of happiness.

The next part of this paper presents our findings for these key themes. Where we quote from the news articles, we list the reference for that article in brackets using a number system (1–72). The numbers and references for each article are indicated in [Table 1](#).

## FINDINGS

On the day that primary schools started to reopen, the dominant narratives across the day were centred around risk and fear. *'Covid risks exist, to health and safety, to children's education and to childhood more generally. Notwithstanding these risks, schools have taken measures to mitigate risks and will prevail.'* Below we unpack the discourses that built towards this narrative.

### School as risky: Protecting children

Media reporting on 1 June overwhelmingly presented schooling as a risky experience. This was emphasised through talk about the disease itself, the language used to depict the emotional response of adults (parents and teachers) and the repeated attention given to the need to minimise the threat to 'safety' posed by COVID-19. Because this is the context (frame) within which other themes emerged, these are depicted in detail in [Table 2](#).

Interestingly, few of the articles on 1 June made explicit reference to risks to 'health' (often choosing to talk about 'safety'), however, the risks to health were continually implied. In contrast to the positive and encouraging arguments presented by policymakers, there was a sense of doubt around the level of control that government was seen to have over the virus. Stories told of how local councils were choosing not to reopen schools (2), of how schools felt they had not been given sufficient time to plan and *'get things right'* (15); that there was contradictory guidance and advice provided to schools and members of the public (11, 37) and there were concerns that schools were reopening too quickly (19).

Unsurprisingly, the articles reflected on the concerns associated with catching and spreading the virus (4, 43, 48, 53). Although one article presented this in the starkest of terms, as they reported a teacher who said reopening would *'cause suffering and death'* (11), many took a softer tone, reflecting a sense of uncertainty around the impact that COVID-19 could have (5, 43). In one article, the risk to children's health is described as *'tiny'* (43) but there is discussion and some uncertainty about children and young people's role in spreading the virus to others (4, 43, 48).

Many articles relayed parents' worries as stories reflected on the 'choice' that parents were, at the time, able to make about whether to send their child to school or not. Some stories reported the different attitudes and behaviour of parents, including the proportion of parents keeping their children off school and the extent to which parents felt that a return

**TABLE 1** List of BBC news sources.

1. Good morning
2. Primary schools start to bring back some pupils
3. Nearly half of parents will keep children at home, survey suggests
4. Can children catch and spread coronavirus?
5. We have concerns about schools reopening
6. How will school be different?
7. Scouts lend school outdoor classroom
8. Children's questions about going back to school
9. How many children can go back to school?
10. BBC Breakfast: Live from the classroom
11. Teachers 'scared' over plan to reopen schools
12. What do the new classrooms look like?
13. Schools delay reopening due to Weston hospital closure
14. Children, parents and teachers share their back-to-school thoughts
15. School return plan 'like a jigsaw puzzle'
16. School to remain closed after positive coronavirus test
17. School return is a challenge for teachers and parents
18. First morning back
19. The five tests 'haven't been met'
20. How many children have been going to school?
21. Parents share their back-to-school thoughts
22. Air of excitement as schools reopen
23. Headteacher shares 45-page risk assessment
24. In pictures: Back to school
25. Why can't all primary school children go back?
26. Changes to school day as Year 6 pupils return
27. It was like the first day of school all over again
28. How to help children who are missing their friends
29. Returning pupils welcomed by rainbow head
30. Excited to see friends, but not to work—a pupil's verdict
31. Schools reopening: 'We have to learn to live with Covid'
32. Bizarre break time at reopened junior school
33. What's happened to penalties for unauthorised absence?
34. In pictures: Back to school in England
35. I quite like the extra space—a pupil's verdict
36. Calls for 'summer classes' for children missing school
37. Parents still wary despite schools reopening
38. Primary school head not taking any chances
39. Floor markers remind pupils to keep apart
40. Parents won't be fined if children don't attend—council
41. Primary schools prepare for a 'new normal'
42. We don't want COVID-19 lost generation

TABLE 1 (Continued)

43. Is it safe to send children back to school?
44. Watch: Parents share thoughts on school return
45. Surreal lunchtime 'couldn't have gone better'
46. Mum wary of school return after virus 'fright'
47. It's up to you if you want to send your children into school
48. How many children live with someone over 70?
49. Attendance will increase over time—Number 10
50. First day back 'smoother than expected'
51. It's not a risk I'm able to tolerate
52. [...] back at school after making superhero badges
53. Parents shamed for back-to-school choices
54. Mum reassured by school's reopening plan
55. Crazy to suggest all pupils can return—head
56. Unions and government agree on local flexibility
57. I've really missed my lessons
58. Opening schools part of 'very cautious' easing
59. My son can go to school but my daughter cannot
60. How many working people can stop homeschooling?
61. Returning pupils taught in small groups
62. Attendance level of pupils 'highly variable'
63. Older children to wait 'an awful lot longer' for school
64. Navigating the first day at school since March
65. Supply teachers could 'fall through cracks'
66. Schools back but mixed picture on pupil turnout
67. Worried mum praises staff for easing back-to-school fears
68. I personally don't think it's safe
69. Social distancing is second nature to our five-year-old daughter
70. We need to think about a route to normality
71. You can't tell a kid not to play with their friends
72. Thanks for joining us

to school was safe (44, 53). Some stories identified specific concerns from parents, including fears that teachers would not be able to keep children socially distanced (37, 51, 71), that the infection rate was not yet low enough to reopen schools (68) and that the track, test and trace system was not sufficiently developed (68). Similarly, stories about teachers' fears presented teachers as being worried about the impact COVID-19 could have on their own health and others—the health of their families, parents, other teachers and children (3, 65). The stories told of teachers worrying that they would be unable to sufficiently control children's behaviour to make it 'safe' (11, 17) and that they would not have enough capacity (space or teachers) to receive lots more children onto school grounds (15, 55).

Alongside these tales of risk were stories about the ways in which schools had responded to the pandemic. Some of these simply outlined the kinds of practical safety measures in place, such as one-way systems, extra hand washing, socially distanced tables and so on (e.g., 6, 18). But some stories also emphasised the *effort* that this reorganisation took:

TABLE 2 School as risky.

Epidemiological risks	Emotional responses to risks	Ways to minimise risks
<p><i>Tales of disease, death and spread</i></p> <p>The problem is that COVID-19 is a new disease. (4)</p> <p>A teacher working in the classroom [...] has said reopening schools today would 'cause suffering and death'. (11)</p> <p>Schools [...] have delayed reopening after the spike in COVID-19 cases. (13)</p> <p>How likely children are to catch and spread coronavirus has been talked about a lot when deciding how and when to reopen schools. (4)</p> <p>Children seem to be at low risk from the disease, but can they still spread it? ... The risk of children becoming seriously ill from the virus is tiny.... (43)</p> <p>It is still not known whether children, who are among the least at risk from coronavirus, pose a risk of transmitting it to those who the NHS says are 'clinically vulnerable', such as the over-70s. (48)</p>	<p><i>Parents worry</i></p> <p>Up to half [of school children] were potentially kept off [school] by worried parents, according to a survey. (2)</p> <p>Parents of primary school children have said they are worried about today's limited reopening. (5)</p> <p>[parents are] 'scared' and 'confused'. (11)</p> <p>Unions estimate that only half of the kids eligible will return to take up their places today because of the worries of parents. (17)</p> <p>A key worker said he was happy his daughter was getting 'as much protection as she would at home'. (44)</p> <p>At the moment, it just feels a lot safer for her to be at home. (46)</p> <p>... concerned that there is no adequate track and trace system in place. (51)</p> <p>'I [parent] was worried about the social distancing.' (67)</p> <p>'I [parent] will be keeping [my child] safe at home with me—I'm not putting her life at risk.' (53)</p> <p>'I personally don't think it's safe', ... 'Some people have to send their kids back to school and they are doing so with a lot of anxiety.' (68)</p> <p>[parents] decided to not send their son back to school due to concerns about social distancing guidelines. (71)</p> <p><i>Teachers worry</i></p> <p>... reopening schools today would 'cause suffering and death'. (11)</p> <p>[The Assistant Head] had been particularly worried about lunch as it was when most of the pupils would be moving. (50)</p> <p>Teaching assistant ... said they did not feel comfortable returning to a face-to-face role with pupils ... Head teacher [...] said the idea all children could be back in school by the end of the term was 'crazy'. 'We don't have the capacity, in terms of space or teachers.' (55)</p> <p>[A teacher] says she has declined returning to work for health reasons. (65)</p> <p><i>Adults are confused/unsure</i></p> <p><i>Teachers:</i></p> <p>'scared' and 'confused'. (11)</p> <p>'There's not been much guidance from the government so we're just having to use our best judgement.' (32)</p> <p>'The 1 June date might be convenient for being after half-term but it's not given us anything like the time we need to put things in place.' (15)</p> <p><i>Parents:</i></p> <p>There is a big case of 'wait and see' around sending children back to school, and that is what you hear from parents—who perhaps do not want to be the first to send their children back. (17)</p> <p>'... the contradictory information is infuriating'. (37)</p> <p>[Mother] said: 'I was in two minds about sending them back, I was worried about the social distancing.' (67)</p> <p><i>Adults are not concerned</i></p> <p>'I have no concerns about sending them back [to school] at all' [Father]. (31)</p> <p>'I was 10% worried but 90% thinking it was the right thing to do' [Mother]. (21)</p> <p>[Mother] wrote that she'd be happy to send her son back to school. (53)</p> <p>[Dad] continued: 'Our school has been amazing and we've had no concerns around safety. The children play in their bubbles whilst maintaining social distancing.' (69)</p> <p>[Dad] told me he had no concerns about his children ... returning. 'I wasn't at all worried about them going back' ... 'The government has scientific backing for it, we need to start thinking about a route to some normality otherwise we'll be stuck in a rut for months or years.' (70)</p>	<p><i>Being cautious and safe</i></p> <p>'Safety measures that have been put in place.' (12)</p> <p>'There will be a few nerves.' (36)</p> <p>A primary school ... says it has introduced strict safety measures ... 'we have an awful lot of safety measures in place'. (38)</p> <p>A primary school ... says it has introduced strict safety measures so it is safe to welcome back some pupils today. (39)</p> <p>'We have done everything we possibly can to ensure it's a safe environment.' (47)</p> <p>A cabinet minister has insisted the lockdown is being eased in a 'very cautious' way as thousands of children in England began returning to school ... 'These are very cautious steps that we are taking. They are phased ... the government had taken steps to ensure schools are safe to return.' (58)</p> <p><i>Effort of teachers/schools</i></p> <p>Some schools across England have had to be creative with the little space they have. (7)</p> <p>The classrooms have been completely reorganised. (8)</p> <p>School will be 'way different'. (35)</p> <p>The classrooms look incredibly different and things are set further apart. (38)</p> <p>Some teachers and other school staff were still on duty, even when they would normally have been expecting their time off. (20)</p> <p>'An awful lot of work has gone in to comply [with coronavirus regulations]', [headteacher] said. (22)</p> <p>'We have a 45-page risk assessment.' (23)</p> <p>'There's not been much guidance from the government so we're just having to use our best judgement.' (32)</p> <p>It has been left to headteachers to manage this themselves. (17)</p> <p>[Children's Commissioner for England said] 'the work and planning to make schools a safe, welcoming and nurturing place has been outstanding'. (36)</p> <p>'It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle where all the pieces are green.' That is how [head teacher] described remodelling her school during a pandemic.... (15)</p> <p>'We [staff at the school] have done everything we possibly can to ensure it's a safe environment.' (47)</p> <p>[Headteacher] has spent the last few weeks redesigning classrooms, reconfiguring timetables and totally rethinking school policy on everything from PE to uniform. (64)</p> <p><i>Safety measures by schools</i></p> <p>'Deep clean'/ 'Deep cleaning' process. (16, 35)</p> <p>Social distancing/markers. (6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 17, 25, 26, 32, 37, 38, 50, 54, 61, 69)</p> <p>Bubbles/smaller class sizes. (6, 10, 12, 17, 25, 35, 38, 69)</p> <p>Handwashing/sanitising/cleanliness. (6, 10, 11, 12, 18, 22, 40, 50, 54, 61)</p> <p>Classroom doors/windows open. (6, 18, 40)</p> <p>Use of outdoor classroom/space. (7, 10, 38, 50)</p> <p>Outdoor play space cordoned off. (12)</p> <p>One-way systems. (6, 17)</p> <p>Staggered break times, start and finish times. (6, 26, 61)</p> <p>Less sharing of equipment. (6, 10, 12, 40, 54, 61)</p> <p>Parents should not gather at the school gates. (6, 27)</p> <p>Carers should only enter school by appointment. (6)</p> <p><i>Parental choice</i></p> <p>[The] City Council said: 'We want to reassure parents that at this stage if your child is not able to return, it is not compulsory for them to do so.' (40)</p> <p>'It's got to be what suits you, your family and your current concerns or worries.' (47)</p>



*The practicalities of this are very difficult.* (17)

*An awful lot of work has gone in to comply [with coronavirus regulations].* (22)

*We have a 45-page risk assessment.* (23)

*... the work and planning to make schools a safe, welcoming and nurturing place has been outstanding. Thank you [Children's Commissioner].* (36)

With a little adult sacrifice, children could again be given the opportunities that the pandemic had robbed them of. Despite the risk (which for some remained too great, as noted above), the dominant message from the news coverage was that schools could prevail. Indeed, this was the most prominent theme of the stories throughout the day. Each of these stories reflected the centrality of teachers enabling children's learning, as we hear account after account of how adults had to find ways to follow the guidance so that they could open their doors (2). This involved the need to be 'creative' (8) and to provide additional guidance, for example on washing hands (19). It included schools making use of equipment from local youth services, such as the Scouts, to offer an outdoor learning space in a tent, as well as logistical changes (27). There was a clear tone within such accounts of the 'sacrifice' that teachers had made to enable children to get back to the task of learning in school again (16, 21, 65).

Often the stories about efforts to mitigate risk were also tales of reassurance. One head teacher spoke of their being an 'air of excitement' and a 'positive feeling around school' (22), whilst another took the opportunity to tweet a picture of himself in a rainbow striped suit (29). Teachers, parents, news reporters and 'experts' were variously drawn upon in some of the stories to demonstrate, explain and/or endorse COVID-19 safety measures, taking the viewer on tours of the school or offering praise for the efforts of the school (10, 50, 58, 67). In one case, it was obvious that this reassurance was meant for children (41) but more commonly the information seemed to be aimed at parents—one way to encourage adult trust in the institution and their commitment to protect their children from harm. Although some of the news stories relayed some parents' distrust of schools' ability to do this, the children's attitudes towards trusting (or otherwise) their schools were not featured.

## School as necessary provision for children

Another risk identified was the risk to children's education and it is here that we see narratives about the value of schooling being played out, largely by stories identifying the 'problems' presented by children *not* being in school. These are largely voiced by adults (parents, teachers, officials/professionals) for children.

He says he has kept up with the home schooling '*but it's nowhere near the amount we normally do*'. (30)

He [father] added he was more concerned with his daughter missing out on six months of education, than he was of sending his children back to school. '*However good the schools are, you can't compare to face-to-face teaching*'. (31)

Councillor [...] said: '*Clearly for us, we are keen to get children back to school because what we don't want is a COVID-19 lost generation of children who did not get the education they deserve*'. (42)

The Prime Minister's official spokesman has said [...] *'It's hugely important that children do have the opportunity to get back into school and to learn but we are doing this in a very cautious and safe way.'* (49)

*'... at least if my daughter went back, she would be learning',* she [Mother] said. *'There is still a lot of learning that we can't do at home.'* (59)

[England's Children's Commissioner advises a summer school programme] for older children who may have to wait longer before returning to school *'to compensate for their lack of education'*. (63)

The absence of schooling during lockdown is thus presented as being synonymous with lost education and learning. Very few articles explore the experience of learning at home and those that do point to the difficulties involved in home schooling for adult parents/carers or the 'family' (balancing home schooling with paid work, being unable to provide the extra help their children need):

*'It [a return to school] really is best for the family',* says mum as she drops her two sons. She has managed to do some home schooling with the boys over the past few weeks but it hasn't always been easy. (21)

What we see is the learner presented in terms of missed 'school-based' opportunities, rather than any recognition of the possibilities that home learning might/did provide for others.

## **Children's participation: Children as challenging and passive**

Children's role in adapting to these changes is marginalised in the stories. There are only two stories that explain how children (albeit in adult organisations or under parental supervision) have helped other children (7: a local Scout group donates an outdoor classroom space; 52: a young boy creates badges to explain lockdown to his classmates). One story implies that children have competence in adapting to the new normal:

*Our five-year-old has no problem with social distancing and finds it second nature just like the teachers now.* (69)

More commonly, children are the focus for discussions about the *challenge* of children's uncontrollable behaviour:

*'During the course of an afternoon, I saw a child insert the end of a pencil into his nose, a child chewing the end of a pencil and twice when I was talking to a child their spittle flecked my face,'* the letter said. *'We are prohibited from having any cleaning products in classrooms. Therefore, I was not able to use any antibacterial products to clean the pencils which had been inserted into various orifices.'* (11)

[teachers] *try and enforce social distancing on a group who may not always be able to manage it.* (17)

She said she finds it difficult to understand how young children are expected to remain socially distant, *'especially as all they want to do is play together and hug each other'*. (51)

Sometimes stories remark in shock on how *'responsible'* children have been:

The PE coordinator at a primary school said seeing today's break time was *'bizarre'*. *'Usually they would be much closer together but we've not had to enforce the distancing yet'*, he said. (32)

*The kids have been really good at social distancing, they've actually done it.* (54)

The discourses of childhood employed here, then, centre around notions of incompetence.

The marginalisation of children is further expressed through the limited 'voice' given to children through the text of the stories. It was mainly in relation to narrating the 'risks to childhood' that short snippets of children's voices (about reconnecting with friends) were heard. More commonly adult reporters, teachers, parents and experts spoke on behalf of children.

## Childhood as a time of happiness and loss

Although children's voice was limited, the images used alongside the stories were heavily dominated by children and not just any children, particular children; mainly female, white and blonde haired. From the 54 still-image pictures accompanying the headlines, 28 (52%) featured children, 10 were profile pictures of single adults, 10 depicted the emptiness of school spaces such as classrooms and playgrounds, 3 focused on displaying specific safety measure/s (e.g., footprints on the floor) and 3 were miscellaneous. The 28 pictures including children were mostly pictures of smiling, happy children, often in school uniform. Other images showed them learning in classrooms with a teacher directing the learning activity. Alongside this, the pictures of empty playgrounds and classrooms conjure up the sense of loss that having these 'happy' spaces hollowed out creates. In both cases, present and absent children are objectified as idealised symbols of a carefree and happy childhood.

In contrast, repopulating these spaces through a return to school is associated with children's happiness and a restoration of 'normality'. Many of the articles associate school with children reconnecting with friends and re-establishing important relationships with teachers.

*'The main thing is for normality and for his mental health. He needs the interaction with his friends. He's been begging to come back'*, she says. (21)

[Child, aged 5] said he was *'so excited'* to see his friends and teachers today. (52)

[Primary school] pupils say they are pleased to be back at school after coronavirus lockdown restrictions were eased. [Pupil], 11, said he was *'excited'* to get back to school after 10 weeks away, while [Pupil], 11, said she had missed her lessons and her teachers. (57)

*The kids were getting sick and tired of the same surroundings. The government has scientific backing for it, we need to start thinking about a route to some normality otherwise we'll be stuck in a rut for months or years.* (70)

Notably it places the role of school as absolutely central to what that perceived 'ideal' childhood should include. School thus becomes an imagined source of friendship, fun,

social skills, knowledge acquisition and more. School is a place of 'joy', necessary to shape childhood.

## DISCUSSION

Schools can offer rich learning opportunities and facilitate children's social and emotional development and skill-building. They are spaces where children can meet with friends, develop meaningful connections with teachers and access extra advice and support programmes if needed (The Children's Society, 2022). We acknowledge the wider strategies, approaches and opportunities that schools implement to advance children's learning, including the valuable role they play in offering learning opportunities outside of the school (e.g., through school trips, after-school clubs and outdoor learning activities). Teachers can work as partners in learning with students and parents to support the transfer of knowledge, children's rights and children's personal development and wellbeing. UNICEF's 'Rights Respecting Schools', built on the four tenets of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (non-discrimination, best interests of the child, the right to survival and development, the right to be heard) have had some positive influences on schools—including relationships, school ethos, inclusivity and the overall wellbeing of the school community (Sebba & Robinson, 2010).

In this paper, we are not disputing the expertise or commitment of teachers and parents. We are not disputing the skills and expertise that children bring to learning. Rather, we have used this small sample of media reports as a case study through which to identify the power of media narratives to promote particular ideas about learning, schooling and children/childhood. In this section of the paper, we now use this analysis to open up a critical (questioning) discussion of these dominant ideas.

### The value and necessity of schooling

What is striking (but not surprising) when we look across these narratives, is how the value of school is taken for granted. Underpinning the news media articles we have explored is an assumption that schools are both necessary and valuable. Over 50 years ago, Ivan Illich controversially argued that schools did not function as learning institutions: 'neither individual learning nor social equality can be enhanced by the ritual of schooling' (Illich, 1970: 38). Illich argued that schools justify the need for their own existence through establishing and perpetuating a certain logic. The logic is that schools teach and children learn, therefore society needs schools in order for children to learn. According to Illich, schools are endorsed as being able to provide the 'treatment' needed to educate the masses, therefore if inequalities in educational outcomes exist, more treatment should be applied. We can see this logic in government attempts to deal with low levels of attendance at schools; the Conservative government introduced attendance hubs (where lead schools share effective strategies for improving attendance) which, rather than challenging the current status quo about how to educate, apply more of the same 'treatment'. Illich argues that this logic is itself underpinned by three myths. First, that children belong in school. Second, that children learn in school. Third, that children can be taught only in school.

First is the notion that children belong in school. This implies that school is the natural place for children. History, however, teaches us that the birth of 'compulsory' mass schooling is a relatively new development, tied to the emergence of childhood (Cunningham, 2003). Childhood and schooling are intimately bound together. Hendrick (1997) has shown how compulsory schooling served to reinforce and institutionalise key features of modern British

childhood: children's innocence, dependence and incompetence. In this context the school, as the location for education and learning, is a symbol of the relative ignorance of children, of their status as apprentices and as social and moral subordinates. The latter is embedded and reproduced through an age-graded system that, over time, sees the child move towards fuller social membership. In the context of COVID-19, a return to school therefore represents a return to 'normality' on many grounds: children are learning in their rightful space and they are also back in their rightful (moral) place as pupils.

Second is the notion that children learn in school. Illich (1970: 12) argues that 'most people acquire most of their knowledge outside school ... most learning happens casually'. A key concern during the pandemic has been how children from low-income backgrounds are further disadvantaged by the absence of school. In these arguments, schooling is often positioned as a pro-poor strategy—a way of building human capital and addressing social issues such as poverty, social exclusion (e.g., of minority groups) and low social mobility. Putting aside questions about the nature of learning for now, there is a lot of evidence to show that the education system gives some children more opportunities to learn than others and perpetuates rather than diminishes social inequalities linked to social class (McArthur, 2023; Reay, 2017). Whether or not accruing certificates really constitutes successful 'learning' and having an 'education' is another aspect of this debate.

Third is the notion that children can only be taught in schools. Within our knowledge economy, schools have become established as systems that reward academic skill (Goodhart, 2010). Not surprisingly, then, 'In everyday usage, learning generally denotes the deliberate acquisition of information or skills' (Ireson, 2008: 6)—a 'banking' concept of education (Freire, 1993 [1970]). Learning in schools is often associated with learning the prescribed curricular content (Ireson, 2008), where risks are mitigated rather than mistakes valued. 'Education' and 'school' have been conflated together; seen as interchangeable (Wyness, 2019). However, much learning can be overlooked if we maintain such a narrow definition of learning focused on formal, structured, teacher-led, school-based learning. Learning could be reframed as a lifelong journey, part of our human experience (rather than something mainly associated with children), and a vital resource that supports humans to tackle wicked problems and navigate a changing world (Frankel & Whalley, 2023). Learning can be non-formal (guided learning that happens outside of a school context, e.g., through a class visit to a museum) and informal (spontaneous and unintentional, e.g., learning cooking through a leisure activity). Indeed, 'whether we plan it or not, informal learning occurs everywhere all the time' (Eshach, 2007: 175), in the everyday spaces of the home and wider community (e.g., outdoor learning; Hume, 2023).

Indeed, research suggests that learning at home during COVID-19 brought new advantages for some children. Home confinement created opportunities for families to learn from each other. For instance, in China, Lyu et al. (2020) document how the implementation of an intergenerational learning project in seven primary schools meant generations gained more knowledge of health and life skills, grandparents recognised their value as teachers, and grandchildren gained a concrete rather than an abstract concept of lifelong learning.

For some children, learning at home allowed them to document their learning through a broader range of media such as drawing and videos, as well as linguistic modes (Chamberlain et al., 2020), and learn new kinds of things. Bubb and Jones (2020) surveyed 1995 participants during the pandemic in one Norwegian municipality. They gathered the views of children (grades 1–4 and grades 5–10), parent/carers and teachers following around 1 month of home schooling. They found that 88% of pupils in grades 1–4 and 80% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that they have become better at using technology. 70% of pupils agreed that more creative tasks had taken place during home schooling (e.g., digital escape rooms). 79% of grade 1–4 pupils and 65% of grade 5–10 pupils said that they strongly agreed they had learned a lot of new things (e.g., learning to measure, cook, get better at

reading) and 74% of teachers, 64% of parents and 71% of grade 1–4 pupils and 78% of grade 5–10 pupils said that pupils became more independent during home schooling (e.g., taking responsibility for their own routines and learning, figuring things out, what to do and how to fix problems). Importantly, the schools involved in this study all had points to make about what they would take back to school after the pandemic crisis—integrating more creative and practical tasks, more regular communication with parents/carers through using digital tools.

Of course, it is vital that we appreciate the social, political and economic context within which these results sit, and learning happens. Taking the latter example, Norway is a rich country (in oil, gas and per capita income) and is the second highest spender on education in the OECD. In Norway, as in other Nordic countries, education is for democracy; democracy and participation are key components of the Nordic national curriculum. The schools within this research all had digital learning well established, and children and teachers had a tablet or laptop. This was also a close-knit community, where relationships between parents/carers and teachers were well established prior to the pandemic crisis.

In England, deep structural inequalities were further exacerbated during lockdown's demand for 'home schooling'. In these circumstances, parents (mainly mothers) were tasked with administering the 'treatment' of schooling and, as Reay (2017) notes, parents with a negative prior experience of schooling, who feel they lack educational competencies, are in a less advantageous position than their middle-class counterparts who possess the social and cultural capital to feel more confident and familiar with the challenge of being their children's 'teacher'.

Post-COVID-19, many children have not returned to school, with absenteeism in England doubling since lockdown from 10% to 22% of pupils (Jenkins, 2024). Children with special educational needs and disabilities (especially those diagnosed with social, emotional and mental health needs, or autism) have seen especially high rates of absenteeism post-COVID-19 (Education Policy Institute, 2023). According to the Education Policy Institute (2023), 'There is a more general sense that after a long period of school closures, some children have lost their academic and social confidence, exacerbated by the pressures to catch up on lost learning'. Yet the 'problem' of absent children has often been individualised as the fault of parents or teachers. For example, former Education Secretary Gillian Keegan has argued that head teachers should drive to collect children from their homes to make them attend school, and the General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers has argued that 'we should not lose sight of the basic reality that bringing children to school on time is the role of parents' (Jenkins, 2024).

These recent interventions show the ongoing connection between those 'images' of the child that emerged in our analysis and current discussions about schooling. Notably, what continues to be missed in these kinds of public exchanges is any questioning (however briefly) of schooling as a learning experience—are schools the best way for children to learn? Whilst there is some evidence that some parents are starting to question the value of schooling (e.g., see Dow et al., 2023; Hinsliff, 2023), and there has been a continued rise in elective home education post-pandemic (Gov.uk, 2023), the government emphasis on enforcing attendance helps to keep the mainstream public debate framed within the logic that schooling for education and learning is necessary.

## **Somewhere over the rainbow? Discourses of idealised childhood**

During the pandemic, the child was once again positioned as a symbol of virtue and hope. Indeed, one striking feature of our analysis is the disparity between the narrative in the news story and the accompanying image that sits alongside it. We see pictures of happy,

smiling, mainly white and blond-haired children, dressed in school uniforms, eating packed lunches, washing their hands, socialising with friends. Pictures of empty childhood spaces—parks, playgrounds and classrooms—take on an eerie tone, precisely because they lack the ‘childhood’ they are supposed to represent. Children and childhood are symbolised as sites of idealised happiness and innocence. These pictures of childhood are presented as images of back to school ‘across the country’ (34).

These linked associations between schooling, innocence and childhood help to portray school as a safe haven that protects and enshrines children’s innocence—a place, surrounded by gates/railings, set apart from the outside ‘knowing’ world. Within this context, and to borrow imagery from Illich, the classroom is a kind of clinic where children and their childhoods can remain uncontaminated. This image takes on additional layers of meaning and significance during COVID-19, where the classroom is not only a learning space, but a space at threat from contamination which must be cleansed.

Childhood ‘happiness’ is also epitomised by the pictures and cartoons of rainbows that featured on windows up and down the country as a sign of support for the NHS. These ‘child-like’ drawings and prints, erected to ‘cheer up’ passers-by, were an effort towards building social solidarity. Importantly, rainbows, associated with the fairytale of discovering gold, in lockdown were images either drawn by children, or made to look as such. Children then (real or otherwise) were tasked with helping to generate happiness at a time when there was also much grief, despair and anxiety. That this responsibility fell to children is no coincidence. As Jenks (1996: 106) reminds us:

Late-modern society has re-adopted the child. The child in the setting of what are now conceptualised as post-modern cultural configurations, has become the site or the relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration and the social bond.

As other forms of collective attachment (e.g., marriage) become less permanent and more flexible, children become the very essence of dependability—a human relationship that adults can count on against the vanishing possibilities of love. Adults need children ‘as the sustainable, reliable, trustworthy, now outmoded treasury of social sentiment that they have come to represent’ (Jenks, 1996: 108). Images of the ‘smiling child’, then, help to cement our valuing of human social bonds. This longing for connectedness and longing for the past were exaggerated during the pandemic, when lockdown and social distancing meant very limited contact with other human beings.

However, a return to school does not necessarily equate to happiness for children. Research also reveals that schools can be problematic places for some children. Childhood studies and education studies research has repeatedly shown us that, as well as being boring and hierarchical, schools can be scary and physically and emotionally harmful places. They can be spaces that perpetuate social exclusion, discrimination and disadvantage, and stigmatise difference (see Bacon & O’Riordan, 2020 for an overview). For many working-class children, schooling is boring and something you ‘get through’. The best thing about school is meeting friends rather than any aspect of learning (Reay, 2017). Black children continue to report racism in schools (YMCA, 2020). A Newsround report found that out of a survey of 2013 6–16 year olds across the United Kingdom, 53% said they were either happy about not going into school in 2020–21 or didn’t mind either way (Atherton, 2021). A more recent report from the Children’s Commissioner (2024) found that children are less likely to say that they enjoy going to school as they get older.

Despite the fact that children have been so adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, our research also reiterates conclusions drawn by others (Holt & Murray, 2022) that there are limited public accounts which foreground the voices of children. Yet, in reality, this

marginalisation was to some extent countered during the COVID-19 pandemic by children's own lived efforts to spill over into public space—'artwork began to emerge out of houses and spill over into gardens, on walls and into public spaces' (Chamberlain, 2020: 249). In the moment of social isolation, children claimed the edges of public space, a space that is often the reserve of adults (Valentine, 1996). This pays testimony to children's agency; how children can and do intervene to shape their own lives and the lives of other people. More attention needs to be paid to publicising children's own perspectives on their experiences of learning during and post-COVID-19.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to reignite discussion about the meaning of childhood and the nature and places of children's learning. We are not arguing in favour of a particular kind of learning, but are using a sample of media reporting on COVID-19 to promote the questioning and discussion of popular normative discourses of learning, schooling, childhood and the generational ordering of society. We have examined media reporting alongside academic research to demonstrate some of the ways in which popular accounts of education and learning can be restrictive and unreflective of children's agency and real-life experiences, as well as exploiting children as symbols of hope at a time when adults are publicly allowed to feel 'worried'. There are many ways of learning, inside and outside the school, and many ways of being a child. The aftermath of the pandemic presents us with opportunities to explore and debate broader understandings of learning and childhood, including the voices of children themselves, and we should not miss this important opportunity to engage in this dialogue.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was conducted under BERA ethical guidelines and ethical approval was granted from Manchester Metropolitan University.

## ORCID

Kate Bacon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0385-1949>

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