How children and young people in Telford & Wrekin and across the whole of England experienced the ever changing landscape of the Covid-19 pandemic - the return to school and onwards

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1. Introduction

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously
(Article 12: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

The Covid-19 pandemic has had, and will continue to have, a massive impact on the lives and educational experiences of children and young people. This impact cannot be underestimated or simplified. It has had and will continue to have positive and negative repercussions and everything in between. The only way we can truly make sense of what Covid-19 has been like for children and young people is to ask them directly. Following up on the collaborative pupil voice work between Southend EPS and Nottingham City EPS in May 2020, our work in Telford & Wrekin (TAW) began in October/November 2020, when EP Dr Jane Park and Live Scribe Artist Hannah Williams devised and delivered a small scale project with local children across the age ranges to gain an idea of their experiences of what is now referred to as the 'first lockdown' (March - July 2020). Feedback from the project led to the creation of a follow up survey which went out to all Telford schools in April 2021. Our Telford survey linked with a nationwide Pupil Views Collaborative Group survey, the findings from which offer a deeper extensive insight into the experiences of our children and young people locally and nationally.

This report provides an overview of the views that over 150 children and young people in TAW shared with us and the themes that came from these words. We compare our local data with that of the national picture. We explain briefly the psychological frameworks we have drawn upon and – most importantly – what we believe will be the most productive and proactive next steps to ensure children and young people thrive in Telford & Wrekin.

2.Quantitative Data

The quantitative data gathered from the survey is presented below, comparing our Telford data with the national picture, representing 5,268 pupil views from across England.
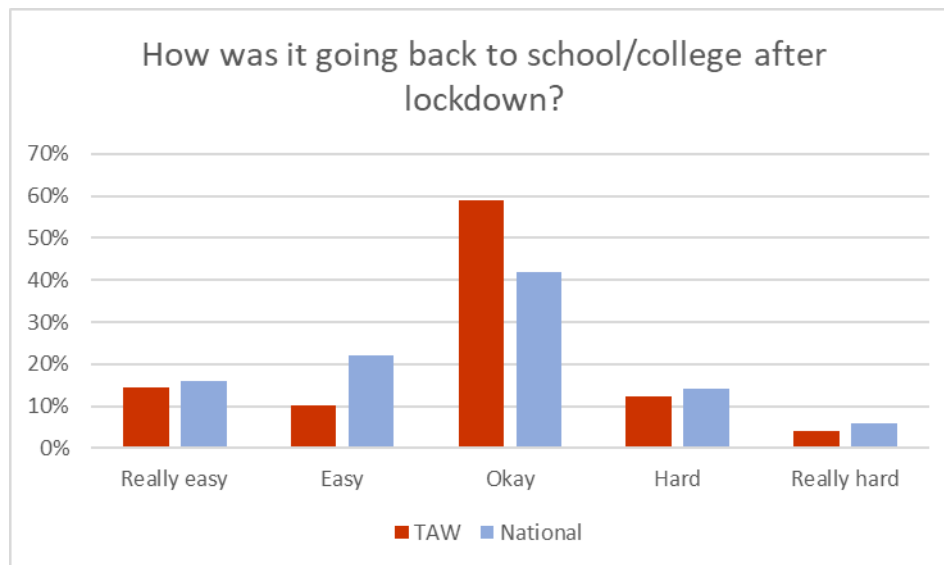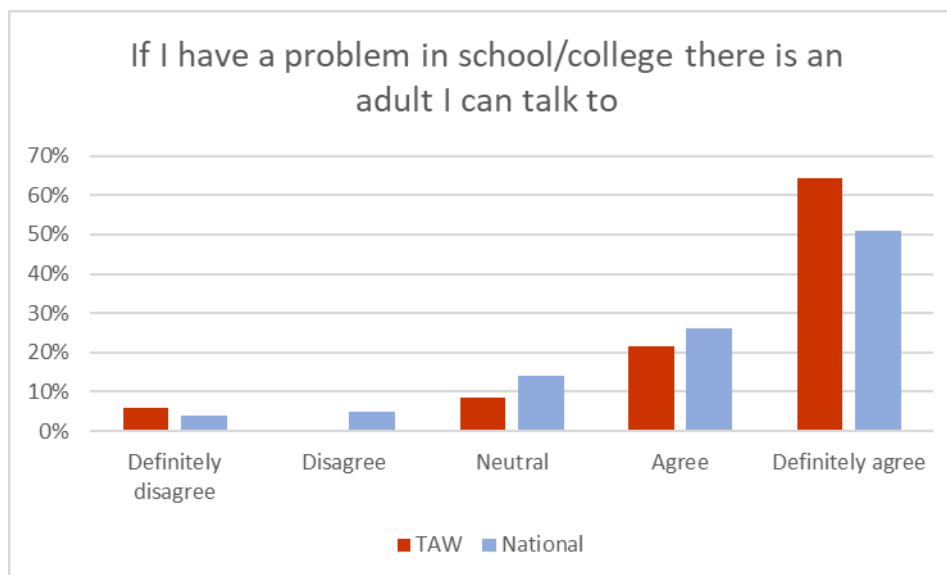

Graph 1: Pupil responses to the question 'How was it going back to school following lockdown?'

Analysis: It can be seen from the data above that responses from TAW pupils broadly map onto the national picture, with 83% of children rating their return to school post-lockdown as Okay, easy or really easy, with 80% of children reporting a similar rating nationally. At 4%, the proportion of children finding the return from lockdown 'really hard' was slightly lower than the national figure of 6%.
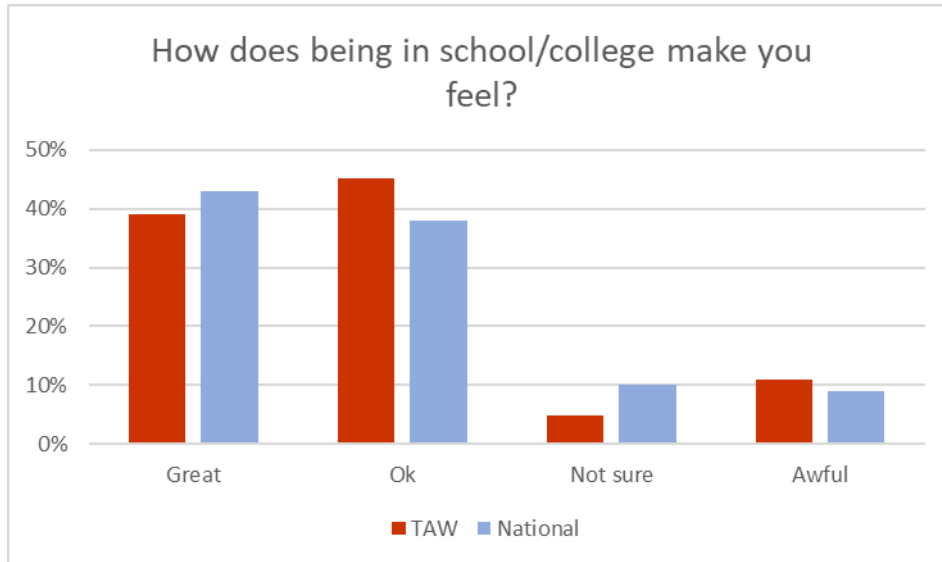
Graph 2: Pupil responses to the question 'How does being in school/college make you feel?'
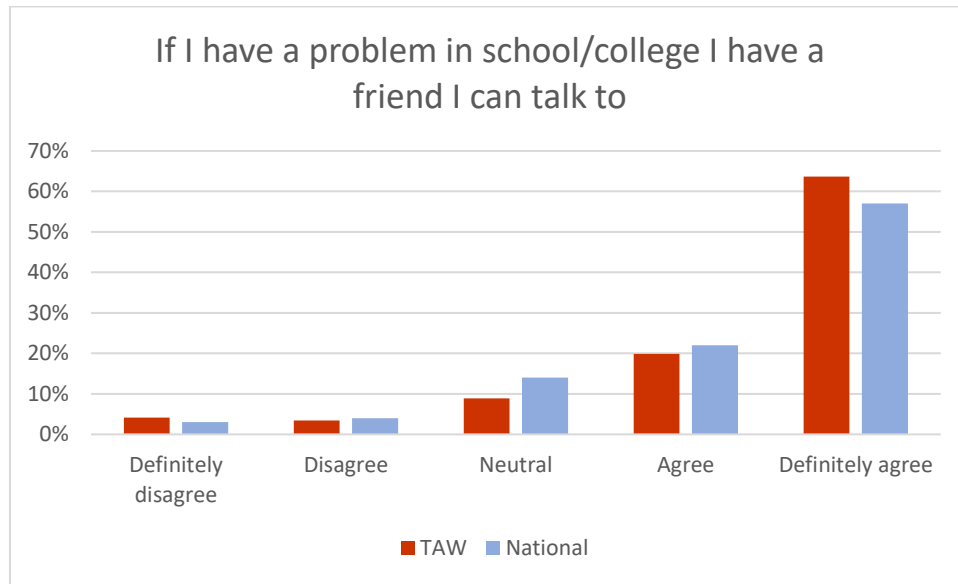
Analysis: It can be seen from the data above that responses from TAW pupils again broadly map onto the national picture. 84% of children let us know that school makes them feel 'great' or 'ok', with 81% of children reporting a similar rating nationally. At 11%, the proportion of children finding the return from lockdown makes them feel 'awful' was slightly higher than the national figure of 9%.

Graph 3: Pupil responses to the question 'If I have a problem in school there is an adult I can talk to'
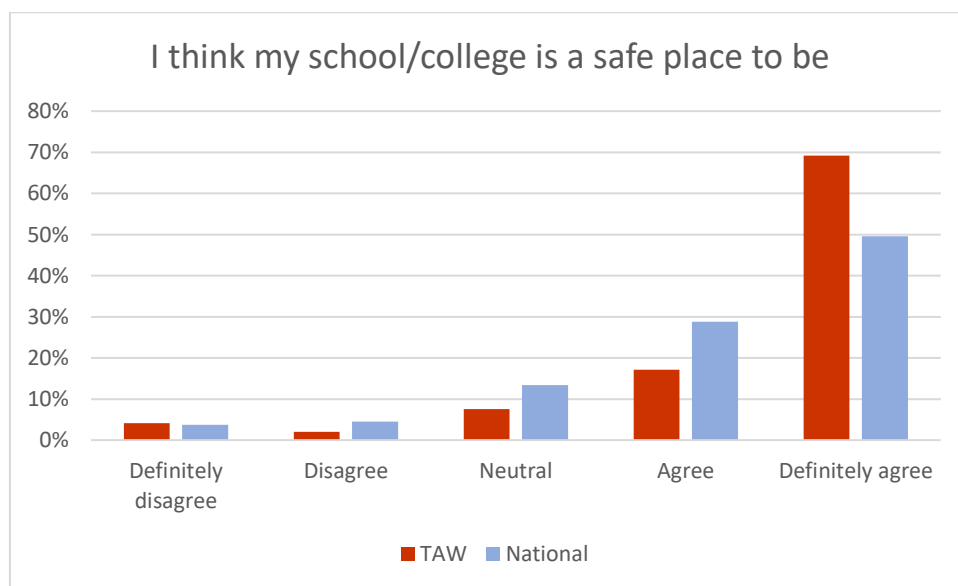
Analysis: It can be seen from the data above that responses from TAW pupils broadly map onto the national picture. 85% of children that they 'definitely agree' or 'agree' that there is an adult they can talk to in school, with the national percentage being 86%. At 6%, the

proportion of children feeling that they don't have an adult they can talk to was slightly higher than the national figure of 4%.

Graph 4: Pupil responses to the question 'If I have a problem in school/college I have a friend I can talk to'

Analysis: It can be seen from the data above that responses from TAW pupils again broadly map onto the national picture. 84% of children in TAW felt they 'definitely agree' or 'agree' that they have a friend they can talk to, which is somewhat higher than the national picture of 79%. At 7%, the proportion of children feeling that they 'disagree' or 'definitely disagree' that they have a friend they can talk to equates to the national figure.

Graph 5: Pupil responses to the question 'I think my school is a safe place to be'

Analysis: It can be seen from the data above that responses from TAW pupils broadly map onto the national picture. However, at 69%, the percentage of children in TAW who feel that they 'definitely agree' that their school/college is a safe place to be is again higher than the national percentage of 52%. At 4%, the proportion of children feeling that they 'definitely disagree' that school/college is a safe place to be is the same as the national figure.
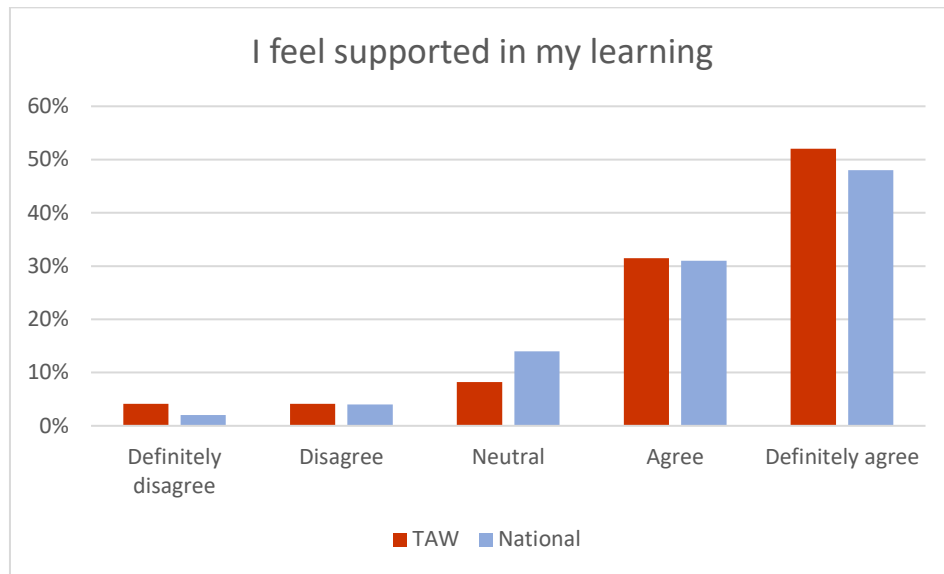
Graph 6: Pupil responses to the question 'I feel supported in my learning'

Analysis: It can be seen from the data above that responses from TAW pupils broadly map onto the national picture. At 52%, the percentage of children in TAW who feel that they 'definitely agree' that they are supported in their learning is again higher than the national percentage of 48%. At 8%, the proportion of children feeling that they disagree or 'definitely disagree' that they are supported in their learning is slightly higher than the national figure of 6%.

The quantitative data above is best understood in the context of the pupils' voices, which are described below.
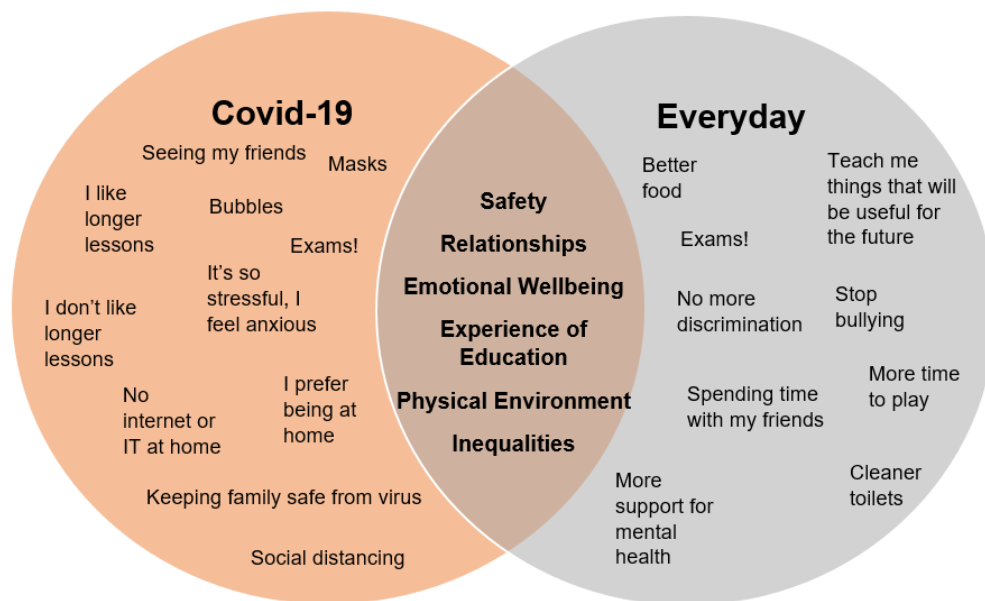
3. Qualitative Themes

Figure 4: Themes generated from pupil views

3.1. <u>Overarching theme - Covid-19 vs Everyday Life</u>

One of the most fascinating themes that was generated from the children and young people's views across England was the merging of Covid-19 and everyday life considerations. Through our ongoing collaborative analysis it was agreed that this was an overarching theme. The children and young people were not all-consumed by the impact of Covid-19; it was clearly a big part of their existence (as it was for us all), but not all encompassing. In fact, the amount of everyday elements surprised us, because as researchers we were seeking to find out what Covid-19 had been like for them: instead they showed us that life did go on, in very important ways.

Quotes in **bold** are representative of the views of children in Telford, with other quotes coming from the voices of children across the whole country.

3.2. <u>Theme 1: Safety</u>

What the pupils said...

Students were asked to *'share your views on school safety'* and although the questionnaire was intended to focus on their experiences in light of Covid-19, students highlighted the impact of a range of other factors on their sense of safety. Two major themes emerged from the data exploring children and young people's views of school safety: a sense of feeling safe and feeling unsafe. As can be seen in Figures 5 and 6, numerous sub-themes emerged which explored what helps

students to feel safe or unsafe at school, these include: emotional wellbeing, relationship safety, physical safety and Covid-19.
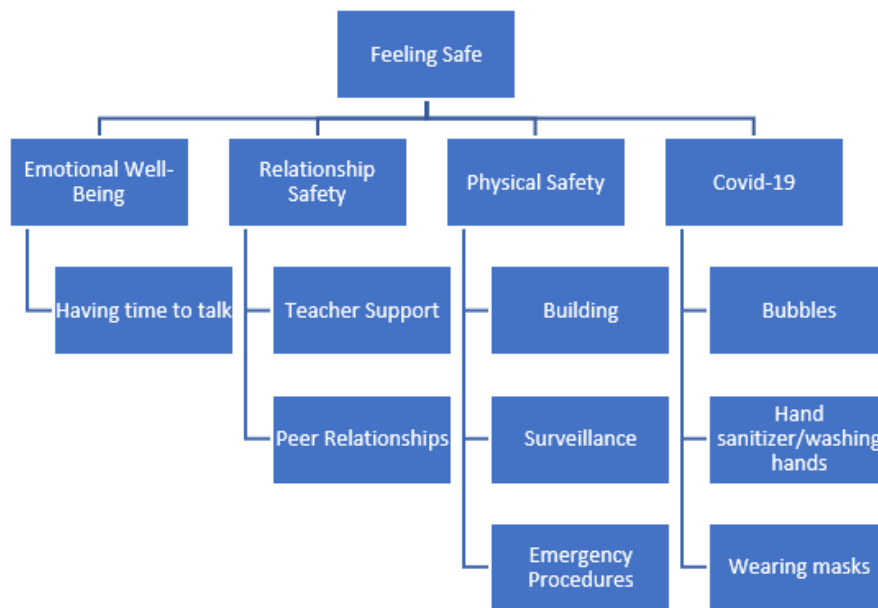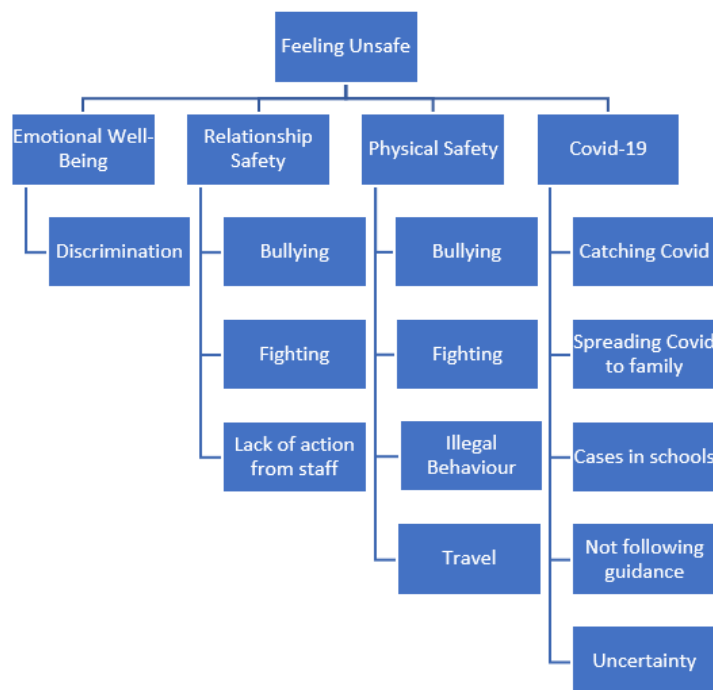

Figure 5. Feeling Safe sub-themes

Figure 6. Feeling Unsafe Sub-Themes

Discussion

Pupils appear to feel safe when they have good relationships with staff and their peers, which allows for time and space to talk about their feelings.

Pupils described feeling safe when they felt school staff were available and present around the school:

> ***"I think my school is really good on making us feel safe, because they make sure we are ok and whenever they think we look worried they try everything they can to make us feel safe."***

> "*I feel safe at school because there are lots of staff around at all times.....there is always a teacher checking on everyone*".

Children and young people shared that surveillance kept them safe:

> ***"There are fences around the school and cameras watching us. We have an alleyway we can escape through."***

> "I *think our school is safe because there are electric gates and security cameras…"*

The importance of these features are highlighted as some students shared concerns that current security features are not good enough:

> "*Our school field makes me feel like unsafe. I think this because the fence we have is easy to jump over and someone could be dangerous."*

Young people valued being well-drilled in emergency protocols:

> "*It's good because we do lessons on what to do when we meet a stranger or say if a break-in happens or a fire starts we know what to do*".

It is unsurprising to find that incidents of bullying and fighting lead to young people feeling unsafe:

> "*There are a lot of fights and disagreements between pupils and I have experienced bullying where that person has physically harmed me.*"

> ***"I feel a bit safe in school but some people pick on me because I am different from them."***

Covid-19 featured heavily in terms of feeling safe and unsafe. Pupils felt safer when they were encourage to follow procedures and valued the efforts of their teachers:

> ***"I feel safe at school because of teachers."***

> ***"I feel safe because all staff are wearing masks or face shields and all teachers clean all tables at lunch so over all I feel safe."***

> "*I feel they are really trying to keep us safe... we are doing everything we can such as social distancing and washing hands and keeping in our bubbles. I feel safe and happy as I'm with my friends and still learning.*"

There were pupils, however, who did not feel safe at school, because of Covid-19 and these answers tended to be around catching the virus, spreading it to others - especially family members- and the uncertainty of the rules and regulations:

"Schools are not safe and it annoys me when the government says that they are. It may be beneficial for me to be in school as my risk of the virus is low but don't lie to me and say they are safe because they are not. I don't want to bring the virus home to my family."

"*I don't understand how the government can say children are the problem and that we can't mix households but yet they are sending us to school where we have to mix households*" while another added "*I could catch covid at any moment and give it to my family who are more at risk*".

"I don't feel safe, there are so many kids not sticking to guidelines so I feel we will end up getting ill."

Psychological frameworks that support the interpretation of what pupils are saying

Two key psychological frameworks of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943; 1954; 1987) and Brofrenbenner's Ecosystemic model (1979; 2001) helped make sense of this theme. These frameworks also threaded through all the themes and these are considered in depth on p. 36 to avoid repetition.

Further to Maslow and Bronfenbrenner, Borba's building blocks of self-esteem (Borba, 1989) offered a further helpful psychological perspective on the theme of safety. Separating self-esteem into five sequential components, Borba theorises that 'security', encompassing emotional and physical safety, is the foundational building block of self-esteem. Children who are high in security are able to handle change or spontaneity without undue discomfort and know that there are people in their lives that they can count on when needed. A high level of security is essential for healthy emotional development. Children who feel safe in their setting and able to trust the adults supporting them will have a strong foundation for self-esteem, itself a vital component of emotional wellbeing and achievement.

Implications

It is important that young people feel they have people around them that care and are available to offer support. Evidently having a sense of belonging and connection to others is central to their well-being. Schools could consider having clear behaviour and bullying policies that are accessible to children and young people. E.g. visual representations, social stories, class discussions.

There have been multiple changes to the rules and regulations around Covid-19 and it is important that young people have a clear understanding of the expectations. Young people will also feel safer when they observe others following these procedures.

3.3. <u>Theme 2: Relationships</u>

What the pupils said...

School-based relationships were a topic respondents commented on at length. Pupils identified lots of positive aspects of their peer relationships. Peers provided a sense of safety with pupils feeling that their friends were good at supporting them and that they felt:

"Safe in school because I have friends to talk to."

"You can tell a TA, teacher, friend, lunch time supervisor, parents, or any adult in that matter if you have any problems in school. It doesn't have to be a teacher it can be anyone you trust."

Pupils also felt that their peers positively impacted their learning experience and along with adults, allowed them to:

"*Feel more confident in exploring different activities*".

Additionally, during lockdown:

"Learning was made much more enjoyable when I had a friend on FaceTime so we could do work together."

For both primary and secondary pupils, Covid-19 could be seen as having had an impact on friendships. For younger pupils, this was expressed as missing their friends, having fewer opportunities to play and less physical contact. For older pupils, not having opportunities to socialise was mentioned as well as experiencing worry about friends:

"It is a lot harder to socialise" [post lockdown]

"I feel less comfortable around my friends than before."

It was clear that pupils were glad to reunite with peers after lockdown as they noted:

"It's good to see friends and have some normality"

"I like finally being able to see my friends after so long".

Being back at school with their peers gave pupils the opportunity to socialise and play with one another once again, as well as providing the opportunity for some to make new friends. Pupils did express wanting the opportunity to work with peers in other year groups as they are:

"*curious about what they do differently than us*" and "*you can get to know more people".*

Relationships with teachers have clearly been impacted by pupils' experience of the pandemic and school closures. Pupils' sense of safety seemed to be largely reliant on teachers who:

"T*ake great care*", "*Are always looking out for me*" and "*Make sure to check up on me and make me feel safe*".

Some said teachers were:

"*Going above and beyond to help*".

"My teachers are the best and I am very looked after with all my friends."

Again, primary pupils mentioned physical proximity from teachers as being a difficulty:

"School is not the same, I cannot hug my teachers".

There was recognition from some students, even at primary level, of the impact of the Covid situation on teachers, who are understood to be:

"*Clearly stressed but they are doing their best"*

Although, a secondary pupil commented that they felt their teachers:

"Allow their emotions to change their learning and yell at students for asking a question".

"Because of the teachers sometimes telling us off for talking to them about problems (They say things like "Well, there's nothing I can do about it," or "Okay." in an uncaring voice and carry on to do whatever it is they were doing.) I sometimes feel like I have to keep everything inside me and I worry I'm going to get told off or have done something wrong."

Another discussed the way teachers' lack of control within the situation impacted their pupils as they felt that:

"*It seems like some don't really know what to do... that leaves a lot of students confused.*"

Other comments from pupils made reference to feeling teachers did not offer enough mental health/well-being support or understanding, were overly strict or punitive, had favourites or singled out particular pupils in lessons.

Some pupils identified limited communication as being a barrier to relationships with teachers, saying they wanted them;

"To listen to students more" and *"to be more supportive of our stressed situation"*.

All of these are issues which may have been exacerbated by school closures, or may have existed prior to lockdown. Some pupils expressed not feeling as though there were many staff members they could talk to if they were struggling. However, across the Key Stages there seemed to emerge a desire to establish and maintain a dialogic, collaborative relationship with teachers, an aspect which would benefit from further exploration both within the school setting and at a wider government level.

Psychological frameworks that support the interpretation of what pupils are saying

The positive impacts on pupils' well-being can be related to the "Relationships" element of Seligman's (2012) PERMA Model of Wellbeing which suggests that positive relationships such as those with peers increases well-being as they bring us joy and provide support in difficult times.

The theory can also account for the opposite situation: pupils who experience social exclusion, maltreatment and a general lack of connectedness are likely to suffer negative impacts on their wellbeing. Indeed, bullying was a key theme that was apparent across age groups. For primary pupils, this was mostly other pupils being "*nasty*" or "*rude*", with some mentions of physical bullying. For secondary pupils, physical threats were more prevalent as well as pupils facing discrimination and ignorance from others due to being a minority (e.g. a member of the LGBTQ+ community). Lack of safety came up for both primary and secondary pupils as well as not fitting in and feeling excluded by others.

From a theoretical perspective, the Academic Resilience Framework (2012; adapted from Hart & Blincow, 2007) provides an insight into how the pandemic, as well as school life more generally, has impacted on many of the protective factors ('resilient moves') individuals rely on during times of adversity, particularly in terms of belonging and even many of the 'basic' necessities needed for functioning such as safety, play and leisure and being free from discrimination. Masten (2001) identified amongst the Protective Factors of Resilience the significance of a closely nurturing relationship with an individual adult, as well as constructive, positive relationships with a range of other adults, highlighting the important role that teachers play in child development, even more so during a traumatic experience, which many will have experienced as a result of the lockdowns.

Implications

In light of what pupils have told us, there are a number of implications for schools and policymakers to consider. There was a strong desire for collaboration with peers

in their friendship groups, peers in other year groups as well as peers of similar abilities. Schools may wish to introduce schemes facilitating these opportunities such as mentoring schemes. Schools should also think about how they can increase the opportunities for play and socialising with one another. The positive mental health implications for pupils being around their peers was clear to see and as such every effort should be made to promote friendships and the opportunities to stay connected when in school and should remote learning have to take place. Furthermore, the teacher-pupil relationship needs to be cultivated and more routes of communication encouraged in the event of subsequent school closures, for example, as some pupils suggested, more availability of online chat facilities.

The impact of the pandemic on staff wellbeing should not be underestimated. Many of the comments from pupils relating to negative aspects of relationships may stem from teachers feeling overwhelmed, stressed and worried about their pupils, colleagues, family members and themselves. Therefore, strategies to support and promote staff wellbeing are crucial. This could be in the form of supervision to provide a sense of 'containment', either conducted formally or via regular 'check ins'. Additionally, the use of interventions such as Video Interaction Guidance (VIG: Landor, Todd & Kennedy, 2011) could be implemented to facilitate positive staff-pupil relationships by drawing on positive aspects of relationships.

It should be noted here that relationships were usually reported to be either extremely positive or extremely negative, which may indicate evidence of response-bias, with only pupils who had particularly strong views regarding the relationships completing these aspects of the questionnaire.

3.4. Theme 3: Emotional Wellbeing
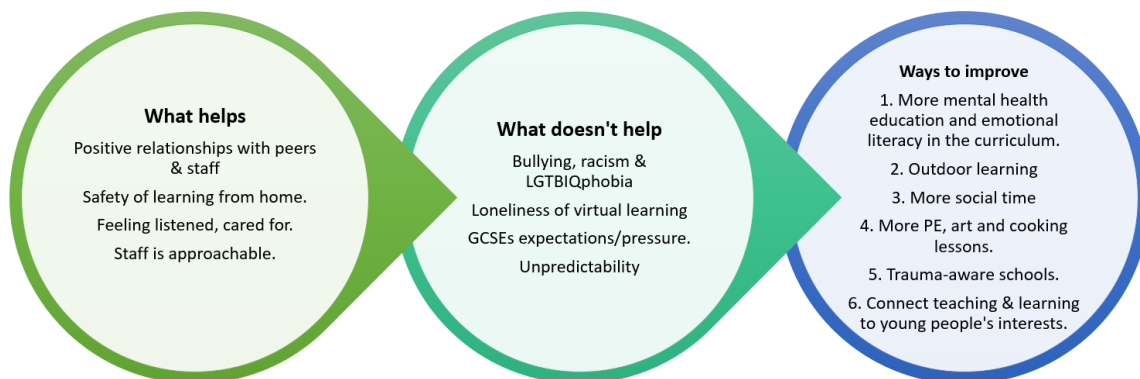

Figure 7: Emotional wellbeing theme

What the pupils said...

Emotional wellbeing and mental health was a strong theme that ran through the data. The language used may have varied depending on a child or young person's

age, but there were clear and shared narratives of "stress", "anxiety" and feeling "sad". These feelings were connected with the experience of living through Covid-19 alongside life in general; with learning, exams and/or assessments; with relationships and with belonging. Thoughts shared about emotional wellbeing and mental health threads through each theme in this report, but stands alone as a theme because of the emphasis the children and young people placed on it and the ideas they had to change and improve wellbeing.

"Sometimes I feel stressed because I have a bad morning but when I get help I feel confident in my work."

"School can get really stressful, especially the work, but the work we do is important."

"It's just stressful"

"School is often quite stressful, which adds to the general background stress of being in a pandemic"

"I'm feeling a bit anxious because I won't be able to see most of my friends"

"It's nice to see my friends again, but I wish there was more understanding of mental health"

What was clear from the thoughts shared by the pupils was many of them were already experiencing difficulties with their mental health before Covid-19; the impact of the pandemic was varied. Some pupils shared that they had flourished by being at home and this had reduced the "stress" and "anxiety" they experienced in school. Other pupils shared how their mental health had deteriorated during the pandemic and how many factors such as not seeing friends, concerns about learning and many other factors had made them feel worse:

"My mental health has decided to go on a bit of a rollercoaster without my consent."

Many pupils were able to identify or link physical aspects or reasons to their lowered emotional wellbeing and there was mention of lack of sleep, lack of exercise and "*feeling drained*". Pupils also spoke about their appearance, identity and factors such as special education needs, health needs or disabilities as reasons for experiencing poor mental health. There was a sense of not belonging or "not fitting in" which threaded through many pupils' experiences.

"I am not getting as much exercise, not fulfilling life and getting out there as much in the real world due to covid"

"Body imagery issues are not really taken seriously"

The pressures and changes of learning during Covid-19 was something that was spoken about a lot in terms of feeling anxious, stressed and worried. There was also a more general narrative about not feeling confident as a learner and again the sense that Covid-19 had just made them feel worse. Meeting their families and teachers' expectations were often mentioned when the pupil felt worried about their GCSEs. The unpredictability of the academic year and the pressure they had built up through their education appeared to be two contributing factors to feeling negatively about assessments and school work in general. There was also a mix of feelings with some pupils preferring to work at home and others feeling happier in school:

"It's too hard [learning] and I get very frustrated and anxious"

"It makes me anxious as it's all unknown" [if exams will go ahead]

"Sometimes I feel anxious about joining [online] calls it makes me depressed that i'm sat inside all-day"

"I love online school I'm much happier than I am inside of school"

"GCSES put too much pressure on children."

However, there were also some positive aspects and there was also a narrative of resilience, learning from the experience and the importance of relationships. The support of friendships and important people was a common protective and comforting factor and a sense of gratitude to those who had been there. There were frequent mentions of the importance of feeling safe, listened to, thought about in school. There was also an incredible amount of forward thinking, about what should be put in place to support emotional wellbeing and mental health.

"Because of the pandemic I've learnt to be resilient and live during tough times"

"I am very grateful for my counsellor and key worker, because I can talk to them and they take action"

Psychological frameworks that support the interpretation of what pupils are saying

The way the children and young people spoke of emotional wellbeing and mental health reflects all sections of Seligman's positive psychology PERMA model (2012); this is illustrated in Figure 8.
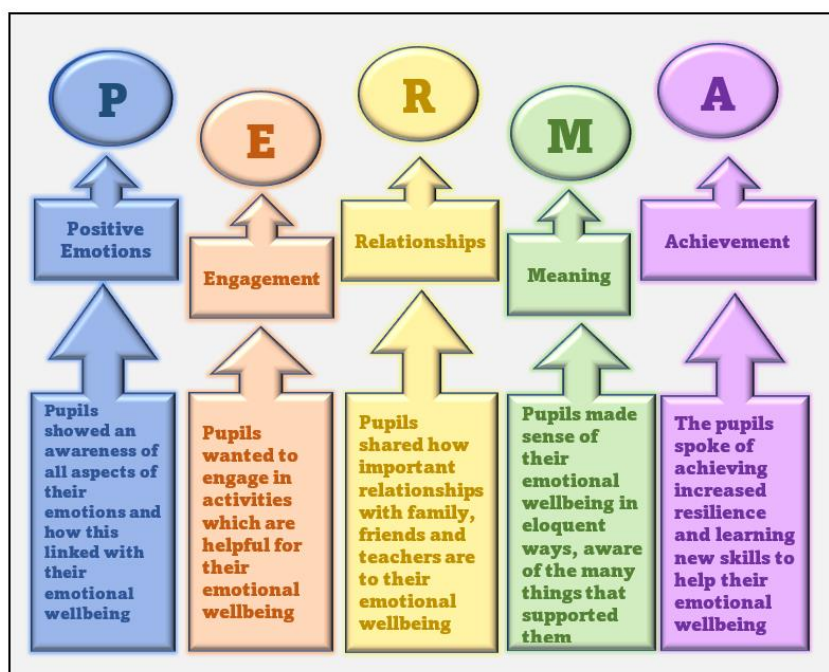
Figure 8: Pupils emotional wellbeing and the PERMA framework

There are also strong links with the five steps to the emotional wellbeing framework suggested by the New Economics Foundation (Aked et al., 2008), which are: *connection with others; being active; noticing and trying new things; keep learning* and *to give*. Gillard et al (2021) have produced a paper which offers evidence-based programmes and strategies based on the five steps and applicable for primary and secondary pupils. These five steps are reflected in the ideas that the pupils shared in relation to supporting emotional wellbeing which are outlined below.

Implications

The pupils' ideas for improvement and change in emotional wellbeing support

The pupils shared many relevant, pertinent and practical ideas about what they would like to see in school to support their emotional wellbeing and mental health,ideas which are realistic and achievable. These ideas are outlined below using direct quotes from the national survey of pupils' ideas.

1. **Someone to talk to**

    "I would like time to talk to an adult"

    "More school counsellors so we have people to talk to"

2. **Spaces and activities to support emotional wellbeing**

    "More outdoor crafts and gardening, more drawing and painting, music and after school clubs."

"I would make it so we had more mindfulness and meditation lessons because then you could calm yourself and make sure you are ready for your lessons."

"A wellbeing hub so that those who need it can have their own space to sit in serenity"

"Maybe a little area where you could sit down and pet some animals like an outside petting area."

"More time to play"

"I think there should be more art, pe, cooking lessons etc so that the students can have fun and forget about all the things they are possibly going through"

"Relaxation activities"

"Less homework"

3. **A caring culture**

"Be gentle on us, it's been tough getting back into this routine after being off for so long."

"Mental health needs to be as important as grades"

"For everyone to be nice and kind to each other"

"Everyone should get a say and no one should be excluded. Stop bullying, racist/homophobic and sexist behaviour"

"I think that the school should educate us about being positive, building up self esteem and body positivity"

"I think there needs to be more support for children who are lonely and have no friends"

3.5. <u>Theme 4: Experiences of Education</u>

What the pupils said...

It was clear from all the data that the experience of children and young people, both positive and negative across the country, were very much shared. Individual interests, the engagement of school staff and the impact of friendships were recurring themes. On further analysis it became evident that the factors which lead to children and young people having a positive, negative or a combined positive and negative experience of education are the same and that these are multi-faceted and in turn are reflected in children and young people's emotional well-being.
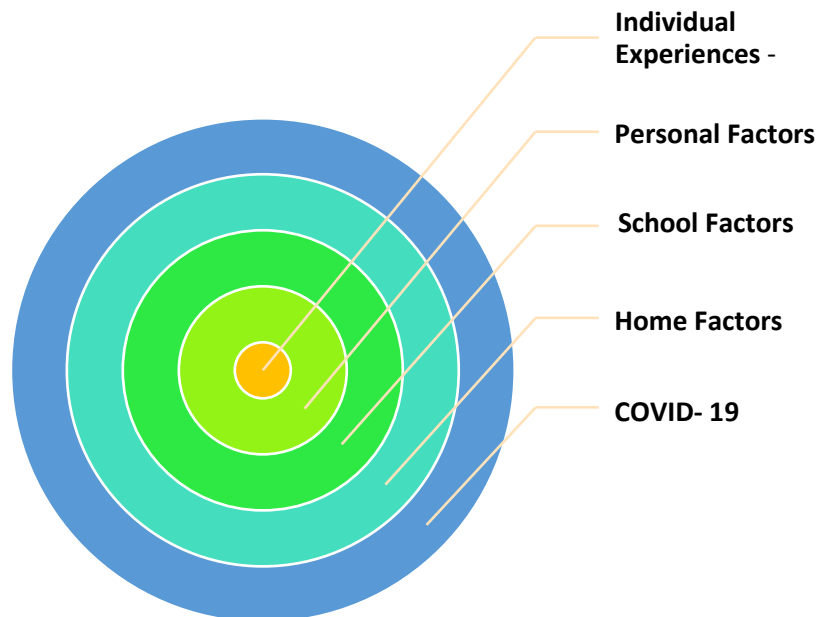

Figure 9. The systems which impact on the Experience of Education.

To make sense of what the pupils were saying an adapted Ecosystemic model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was created (figure 9). In the middle of the diagram is the learner and their individual experience, with the outer layers demonstrating the factors which have an influence on the individual's experience of school. The layers of the diagram indicate the significance or greater influence on the learner's experience of school through their proximity to the learner in the middle. The way the pupils spoke about the order of influence is outlined below:

1) Personal factors: this included the individual's preference of subjects or topics being taught, the structure of the school day, the relationships with adults in school, teachers and teaching assistants, the time spent with friends, pressure

of exams, future ambitions and the learners emotional well-being which can fluctuate.

"I feel like the learning environment at school is positive, everyone wants to succeed and there is the help in place to achieve your potential".

"Too much exam pressure and revision"

"The things I am learning in school is mostly for my upcoming GCSE and I feel like I would be great if we learned other thing about what life would be like after school"

"I miss PE and running around with all my friends. I miss cooking and things to do with my hands"

2) School factors: these included the impact of missed learning, individual school policies and practices, the subject or topic being studied, whether the subject was a choice, only relevant for secondary aged pupils in exam years, the opportunity for extra-curricular opportunity, the method of teaching delivery

"Well it's ok because they don't make the lesson fun. They are trying to make the lesson fun but it not that fun some of the lessons are ok"

"The teachers are trying to do too much way too fast for the average student in a lot of the lessons"

3) Home factors: these included when accessing home learning whether technology was available, including WiFiand devices for remote learning opportunities, family circumstances both positive and less so, support from parents and siblings, or the distraction of other family members, or the opportunity to learn new skills.

"I liked at home I could learn other things that we don't do at school. I also had two hours on my bike or playing everyday. In the first lockdown I did 1000 km on my bike.

"Online is dreadful as i don't have consistent wifi and I have asked for a laptop but wasn't given one, I can't afford a computer for school work and wasn't given paper copies either"

4) Covid-19, leading to a more negative school experience due to the disruption but that overall this was either tempered or enhanced by the factors previously identified. Children and young people were accepting of the impact that the pandemic response was having on their school experience and therefore

Covid-19 became the outer layer of the circle or the overarching "umbrella" which shaped their experience of school both positively and negatively.

" I think the things we are learning at the moment are poor, as mostly we are recapping the work we did in lockdown for people that didn't complete it. So all the students that did complete it are having to go behind on the scheme for people that couldn't be bothered to".

"I don't like school because we just have to sit in front of the screen most of the time now"

"So much uncertainties with what is happening in the world. I wish everything goes back to normal so learning can be fun"

Implications

Although this gives a clear representation of the systems which surround children and young people's educational experience, it was evident from the data that within factors two and four - school factors and Covid-19 - that there are additional layers or microsystems which are evident at a national, regional, local authority and/or academy trust level which have greater significance on the individual's experience of education. An overarching theme being the want for greater access to creative subjects and choice in topics.

"Hobbies that I like doing such as Art, the subject really interests me and I wish I could do more"

"We also need more fun lessons like food tech or PE"

"I want to go on trips and have people come to school and teach things our teachers aren't expert in. Like writers and illustrators and dancers. I want to be able to express myself more in what I can wear and be proud of myself not just the same as everyone else."

Secondary school pupils also highlighted the want for their learning and lessons to be linked to their future and be supportive of them progressing into adulthood. In particular a focus was placed on life skills such as understanding tax and being able to budget and not solely focussing on lessons to get them through exams.

"More life lessons that will help in actual life"

"Learn how to manage your money, how to get a job, how to pay bills, how to buy a house …"

"Learn survival skills (how to make a fire, what to do if you are kidnapped etc)"

3.6. <u>Theme 5: Physical Environment</u>

What the pupils said...

There was a thread of discourse about the physical environment in school that was noted repeatedly across all areas and age ranges; this highlights the importance of the physical environment to pupils in relation to their life experiences and wellbeing.

Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the physical environment of schools and therefore the day-to-day life of children and young people in schools and colleges. Alongside the experience of change, children and young people also took the opportunity to tell us what the physical environment was like in general for them.

The views shared painted a very clear picture of how children and young people pay attention to their environment; school is not just a place where they go to learn, they want the environment to be **safe, pleasant and clean** as Figure 10 and the quotes below illustrate:
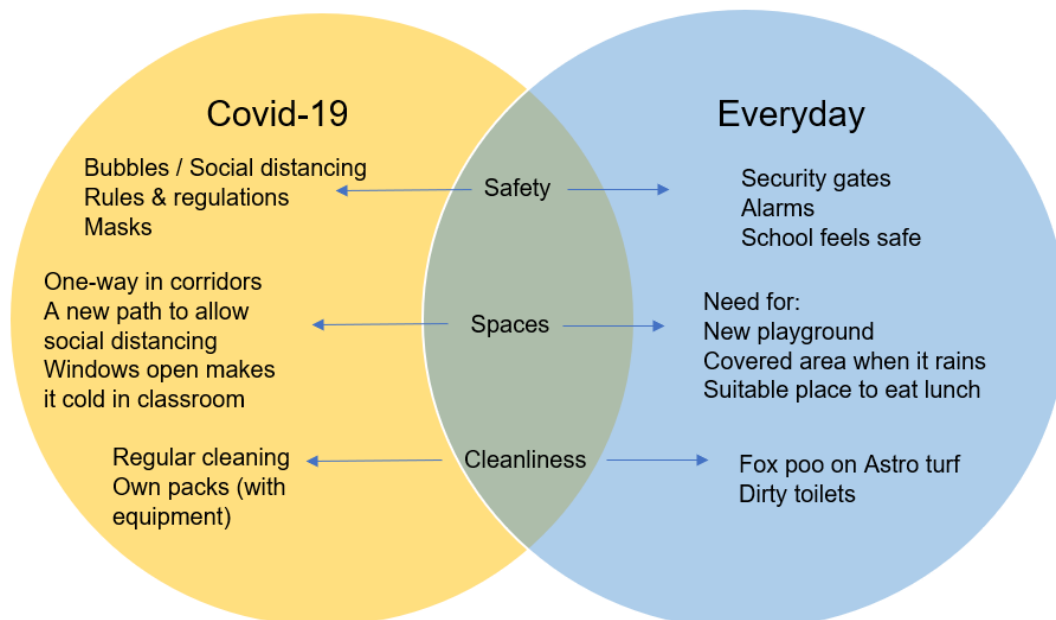

Figure 10: What you told us about the physical environment

"Due to covid we have to socially distance and we are all in a bubble. We also have packs with all our stationary"

"I feel that I am protected against Corona Virus in school because we all have our own bubbles and aren't allowed to mix."
"I don't like how you have to wash your hands almost 5 times a day, but I like how you get to eat in your class room and talk to your friends."

"Great the school has finally got a buzz in system at the front gates"

"The AstroTurf has fox poo all over it, it's pretty disgusting"

"Has Boris actually visited a school that has to socially distance fifteen hundred students in a school built for a number half that size?"

"There has been no soap for 4 days in the toilets I use"

"It's horrible wearing a mask all day, the uniform is so uncomfortable, all windows are open and gets really cold. Constantly washing my hands is making them feel sore. This way of life isn't a nice experience."

"Just the fact that we can't even be kept warm in classrooms which affects my learning as I feel cold all the time especially if it has rained and I am wet because of standing outside in no shelter and lunch and break"

Psychological frameworks that support the interpretation of what pupils are saying

The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF: Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) offers us a way to think about how the physical environment permeates the experiences of children and young people. If we ask the question "what is happening in our schools?" in terms of the physical environment, what would the answers be... There certainly seems to be a lack of funding or focus on improving the school environment. There is talk of building on sports fields, cramped classrooms, security checks and fences and a lack of wider cultural representation in the spaces.

A question remains about the idea of how we amplify messages of importance through spaces. A sense of belonging and community for pupils is surely communicated as much by the physical spaces as the social, emotional and psychological experiences. We could discuss further than the automatic divide this may inextricably create between public and private sector education and pupils' sense of self-worth and connectedness, factors that research tells us contribute to overall academic and social success, and therefore future life outcomes.

Implications

The pupils gave us an insight into the negative impact on their wellbeing when their basic needs are not being met by the physical spaces and environment in school, or

(if this is flipped around) how safe, comfortable and representative spaces give them a sense of belonging and security.

Consideration needs to be given to the messages that are conveyed by the physical environment in school -is it conducive to happiness, wellbeing, learning and belonging? The children and young people not only commented on what was around them, they also shared excellent ideas about what was working, what needed to change and how to do this. These ideas were appropriate and achievable as the quotes below show.

"I want the school to make a rain shelter for when we are out and it starts to rain"

"Every year have their own bathroom"

"More wide food option like vegan, vegetarian or halal or kosher food"

"I would try to improve school life by giving kids a larger amount of space when in break and at lunch. Kids need to run around and if they are just standing still they won't get much exercise."

"We only have hot dinners on Tuesdays I would like a hot dinner every day at this time of year"

"To have a year group common room where reading and revision is allowed (specifically used as a quiet room)"

"I would make a later start to school like 9:00 or 9:30 because in my opinion my brain isn't fully awake and I'm forget full in the morning. Also I think I would enjoy doing a mixture of school and online school because it switches up the week and makes it a bit different"

Pupil participation is the way forward to make school the physical environment where children and young people feel safe, welcomed and most importantly motivated to attend and learn. A place where they know they will be safe and warm, be fed in both body and mind and a space where they can see themselves on the walls, in the curriculum and in the classrooms. A safe and welcoming physical environment creates feelings of wellbeing and belonging.

3.7. Theme 6: Inequalities and Impact

What the pupils said…

One of the key themes that derived from the research was Inequalities and Impact. Many children in both primary and secondary settings expressed their concerns of social inequality:

"Since my family is not white, in Covid it means that we can't do as much fun stuff as white families because white families are safer than mixed race families like me and my mom and it makes me feel a tiny bit sad"

"There has been racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia and overall discrimination against people".

"I don't always have internet so have missed a few lessons and I struggle".

"I'm fine, I'm a white middle-class boy, it's sad, but your colour and gender get you places these days".

"The lockdown has made an impact on mine and my dad's relationship because we have been separated for a long time now."

Pupils felt that aspects of their identity had 'negatively impacted' their lockdown experience. Moreover, many primary school students expressed their views on mental health and wellbeing:

"With no individual help now for English it had an impact on learning and is causing more stress and struggles".

"My anxiety is really bad and gotten worse since Covid".

This reflects the research conducted by Mind (2020), which illustrates that pre-existing inequalities have been worsened by the pandemic and children and young people's mental health has declined at a faster rate during lockdown.

However, students also voiced the importance of relationships and the positive impact this had during lockdown and returning to school:

"Having teachers and peers around to help you get a better understanding of your learning"

"Having my friends makes me happy"

"My tutor helped me when I returned to school after the first lockdown as I suffer with anxiety which develops into panic attacks."

"This school has helped me make friends"

It was apparent that staying connected and reconnecting with friends was paramount for their sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Psychological frameworks that support the interpretation of what pupils are saying

This key theme, Inequalities and Impact is underpinned by psychological theory and can be understood through the lens of the Ecosystemic Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979, described in 'linking psychological framework p.36), the Social Graces (Burnham, 2012) and Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2012; PERMA model).

The Social GRACES framework helps individuals unpick their visible and invisible identities and reflect on privilege, oppression, and differential power. Many students explicitly identified their identity and how this impacted their Covid experience. The PERMA model is made up of five different components that are intrinsically motivating and contribute to our wellbeing. R stands for positive relationships: Seligman states that humans are inherently social creatures and close relationships increase intimacy, wellbeing, and satisfaction. Friendships are extremely important for young people and a direct link can be made between friendship networks and psychological well-being (Miething et al., 2016).

Implications

We need to consider what can be done by schools and policymakers to ensure that inequalities are tackled, and the associated negative impacts are removed. We encourage schools to review their equality and diversity policy, increase opportunities for children and young people to connect and review their mental health and wellbeing provisions. It is important to provide pupils with opportunities to share lived experiences, to learn and grow and have conversations around inequalities in a safe space. Schools may wish to set up a mentoring scheme or open-door policy. In addition, schools may look to increase their extra-curricular activities to allow more opportunities for pupils to connect and maintain positive relationships. There must be an emphasis on supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Schools may want to seek professional support and wellbeing training from their local Educational Psychology Service. Moreover, explore the opportunities of establishing programmes of Emotional Literacy Support Assistant training and ongoing supervision across each Local Authority. Working towards emotional literacy and emotional wellbeing practices which are embedded in schools' universal, preventative provision is key. **We must work together to achieve better for all.**

4. Practical Implications and Next Steps

In this research 5268 children and young people from across the country, including 150 voices from Telford & Wrekin, took the time to share their thoughts and views and we know from research done by others, that the themes outlined here are replicated and supported (i.e. Young Minds, 2021; Children's Disability Council, 2021).

We now have an ethical obligation to actively work with what the children and young people have shared with us to show them that we have listened and we care about what they say. We have done this already by sharing information in our local areas and nationally to raise awareness, provide resources and suggest changes.

As a community, EPs are committed to doing more and creating change through both top down and bottom up approaches, in keeping with our grounding in the Ecosystemic model of development. We have the following questions, which we invite every child and young person, parent or carer, teacher, senior leadership team, EPs, Local Authority and parliamentary ministers to join us in answering.

Questions to guide positive change and innovation in education

1. How do we promote children and young people's agency and autonomy and help them feel seen, heard and appreciated?

2. *"How do we begin with the end in mind?"* How can we involve children and young people in designing a meaningful curriculum which prepares them for 21st Century life and places equal importance on academic, creative and vocational learning experiences?

3. How can we increase the focus on relationships, nurture and belonging and promote the positive impact this has an impact on wellbeing and learning?

4. How can we make the physical environment welcoming, motivational, representative and safe?

We would like to present some possible answers….

Question 1: How do we promote children and young people's agency and autonomy and help them feel seen, heard and appreciated?

How do we advocate for autonomy for pupils, a significant sense of powerlessness and 'being done unto', raises more questions than answers. Perhaps we need to know how schools and LA's and politicians work with young people to involve them in planning.

How do you gain pupils' views and more importantly how do you act on them? Look at ways where your school(s) and community really listen and give agency to the children and young people, how are they really involved. Can we make the shift to genuine involvement with the knowledge that this will teach vital life skills to them? We hope that this report and the resources we have created in connection with this work is a very small contribution towards children and young people feeling heard and having their thoughts acted on.

Question 2: *"How do we begin with the end in mind?"* How can we involve children and young people in designing a meaningful curriculum which prepares them for 21st Century life and places equal importance on academic, creative and vocational learning experiences?

"Education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full"
(Article 29: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

For change in the way we approach teaching and learning so it is meaningful and motivating for 21st Century learners and teachers. This is a perfect time for change and the pupils and teachers we speak to are ready to be innovative, dynamic and creative with education. We need to create learning environments that instill skills for the future, rather than to pass exams; this is what many young people asked for.

"[I want to…] learn how to manage your money, how to get a job, how to pay bills, how to buy a house"

"...also a subject on the real world like taxes and getting a job"

According to Paige (2009) and the World Economic Forum (2015) educational settings need to introduce a 21st century curriculum which blends knowledge, thinking, innovation skills, media, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) literacy, and real life experience in the context of core academic subjects. The Partnerships for 21st Century Skills group (P21: 2006) have created a framework for acquiring skills which is based on the requirements of creating a global workforce (See figure 14 below), outlining four key contributing factors:
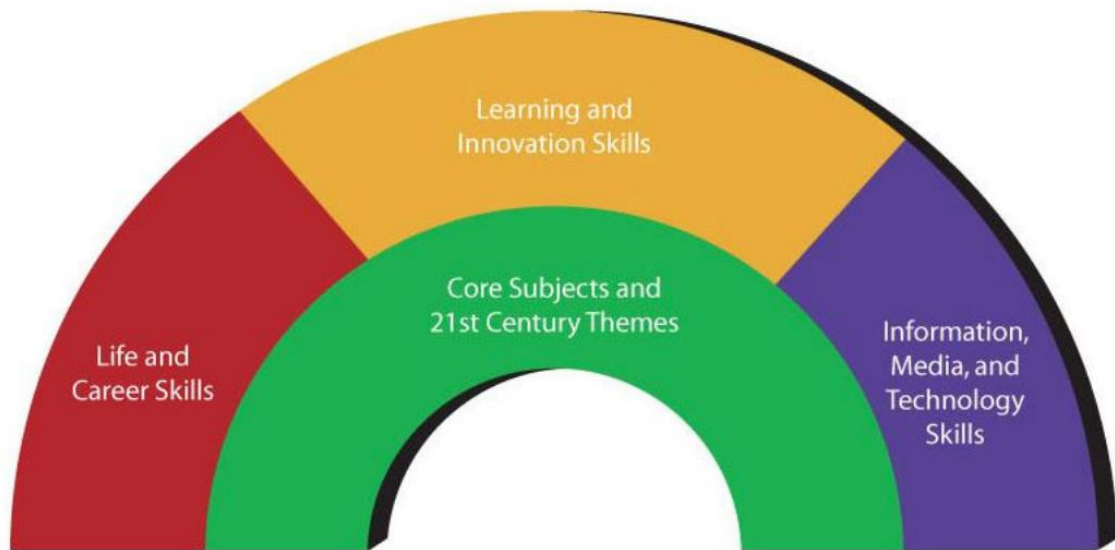
Figure 14: Framework for Skills (P21, 2006)

The World Economic Forum (2015) expands these ideas even further and offers a comprehensive overview of how skills, competencies and character qualities all come together to create and motivate lifelong learners. We have also added more depth to this model by including values, a key element of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and one that can shift thinking about what is important for both pupils and teaching staff (see figure15). This multifaceted framework connects with the idea of having a range of pro-school roles for children and young people to take up in school (Bonnel et al, 2019) as it offers a broad and diverse view of learning and education.

21st Century Skills

Core knowledge	Competencies	Qualities
1. Literacy	1. Problem-solving	1. Curiosity
2. Numeracy	2. Creativity	2. Initiative
3. Science	3. Communication	3. Resilience
4. ICT	4. Collaboration	4. Adaptability
5. Financial Literacy	**Values** Important to the individual and that guide beliefs	5. Leadership
6. Cultural & Civic Literacy		6. Social & Cultural Awareness

Figure 15: Adapted World Economic Forum Framework

This wider view of education and learning will provide pupils with learning which is more meaningful and practical for whichever future career they decide to embark on. These skills are functional and not just content lead, the pupils told us clearly that they wanted to be taught skills for life.

"Teach students what they will encounter in their adult life and what can get them the best jobs out there and not things like Shakespeare."

Therefore, to compliment a functional and skills based curriculum, consideration also needs to be given to explicit teaching and preparation for future employment. Research has been carried out (by a contributor to this report) to establish the key skills and areas of focus needed to ensure employability (Stanley-Duke and Stringer, 2017). See table 2 for an overview of these skills, which can be used as a guide for activities in schools and colleges to prepare and support young people.

Skill	Questions to focus on
Motivation to be employed	Does the young person have an aspiration to work? What values does the young person hold around work and employment?
Time management	Can the young person tell the time / manage their time / be punctual? Do they understand the importance of

	time management?
Problem solving skills	Is the young person creative and flexible in their problem-solving skills? Are they a reflective learner? Does the young person enjoy the challenge of problem solving?
Collaborative working skills	Can the young person work as part of a team? Can they give and take instructions?
Understanding the specifics of business	Does the young person know the specifics of a job and how their own skills could be used?
Functional number skills	Is the young person confident in their functional Maths skills? Are they aware of the type of Maths skills they may need for a particular job?
Functional language skills	Can the young person communicate clearly and confidently with spoken and written language or an alternative if appropriate?
Functional IT skills	Can the young person use IT in the way needed for work?
Work experience	Has the young person had work experience?

Table 2: Skills to support employability (from Stanley-Duke and Stringer, 2017)

Question 3

"The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth" - African proverb

Much work has been done on relational approaches to behaviour in schools and this is something that is advocated by the EP profession. A welcome initiative is the newly funded Senior Mental Health Lead Training for schools, which has a focus on embedding whole school and systemic practises around wellbeing for all.

Many children and young people do not feel safe. We know that some may have experienced additional trauma during the pandemic and resulting lockdown; some may have experienced trauma because of the pandemic. Some children and young people may live in families who are struggling for a range of reasons. They may have

lived in difficult circumstances before the pandemic, which may then have been exacerbated by lockdown. It is likely many children and young people in your setting will have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs: Felliti et al, 1998) as a direct or indirect result of Covid-19. School can often provide a safe space for children and young people, but this is not always the case and work needs to be done to ensure an ethos of safety is present in education.

We know that relational trauma requires relational and trauma-infused approaches to support repair (Treisman, 2017). Relational trauma refers to experiences of multi-layered ongoing stress and disruption in close relationships, this can be intergenerational and across wider contexts such as schools and community relationships (Treisman, 2017; 2018).

Trauma informed practice in schools is advocated for all, to create containing and safe spaces that create a sense of empathy and wellbeing. It is important to note that a trauma informed approach is not a 'program' or an intervention for 'those kids', creating trauma informed and sensitive school environments embrace empathy as a roadmap. Trauma informed means acknowledging the differential experiences of individuals and understanding that uniqueness in experience will enrich and strengthen the village. This starts with systems and policy, school leaders can empower staff in new ways to embark on a relational journey, we encourage the inclusion of all staff and pupils in developing new ways of managing and interpreting behaviour based on empathy, understanding and meeting the emotional needs of the whole community. The table below outlines new ways of thinking based on the principles of relationships and developmental understanding:

Statement :	Punitive/rule based	Behaviourist/ Consequence based	Relational/ Developmental
Children are	Responsible for their actions	Learning	Developing, error prone and highly responsive to environment
Main means of behaviour management	Fear	Consequences	Relationships
Boundaries are to	Indicate right and wrong	Make standards clear	Try to meet everyone's needs
Rules should be	Enforced without exception	Clearly communicated	Developed together and adapted where

			needed
Behaviour is something to	Control	Manage	Interpret & Understand
Consequences are	Sanctions and punishments	Ways to shape behaviour	A last resort, only used within a process of repair
'Inappropriate' behaviour is	Wrong doing, deliberate	Learned	A sign of an unmet need, difficulty coping or lack of knowledge
The causes of difficulties are	Lack of compliance, insufficient discipline	Learned poor responses, lack of appropriate reinforcement	Mostly in the environment, relationship based, developmentally appropriate
Solutions lie in	The child	Adjusting consequences	Understanding what the behaviour tells us about the child and their need
Children who don't manage should be	Excluded or fixed	Helped and given intervention	Understood and included
Policy effectiveness is measured by	Compliance	Behaviour change	Wellbeing

Table 2: Behaviour Model Examples

It is relatively easy to create physical and emotional safe spaces for both pupils and staff. However, these spaces must be integrated into the school system and not just provided in reaction to a crisis. An ethos of safety in school acts as a preventative measure, which can have a wide reaching impact.

Educational Psychologists can help provide safe spaces to promote thinking, sharing and containment to both school staff and pupils. Examples of the type of work EPs can get involved with are outlined below.

Safe Space Interventions
Adults
➔ Individual supervision (for teaching staff and leaders)
➔ Work Discussion Groups (group sessions to discuss work &

jointly share solutions)
→ Staff professional development (to increase knowledge base and confidence)

Pupils
→ Individual or group therapeutic work

Systemic
→ Supporting a shift in thinking to introduce Relationship Policies (rather than Behaviour)
→ Develop Growth Mindset approaches (Dweck, 2017)
→ Support Mediated Learning processes (Feuerstein, 1979)

Question 4

We need to ensure that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be achieved and that children and young people are motivated to develop, look after and feel proud of the spaces they are in. This needs basic needs to be met (food, safety, cleanliness) but it also requires a sense of belonging as a fundamental requirement. The Academic Resilience Framework offers an excellent guide to consider these aspects and the resources created by Young Minds and Boing Boing (links in useful resources section Appendix ?) provide useful starting points to audit what is already happening and what needs to be adapted.

The children and young people who responded to this survey have already given us a range of ideas to work with in terms of improving the environments they are in. These are not difficult or even particularly expensive requests. We are back to the importance of listening to the children and young people in our communities and not just assuming we know what is happening for them.

5.Conclusion

Children and young people have made sense of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of safety, relationships, emotional wellbeing, experiences of education, physical environment and inequalities. However, they did not only share their thoughts about Covid-19 but also interlinked what life was like for them in general. They were not all consumed by Covid-19 and there were elements of life that continued regardless and will out-stay Covid-19 too. The children and young people showed us that their lives are complex and nuanced and even young children are not just passive observers of what is happening to them.

It was very powerful to see the shared experience of the children and young people who shared their thoughts. While there were individual events and thoughts, the themes that were generated did show up in every locality and every age group in some way. The language the children and young people used to make sense of their experiences varied depending on age and needs, but the essence was there. Some had positive experiences of a theme, others more negative or mixed experiences, but again the essence was there of a shared experience of a certain phenomena.

What was wonderful was the passion with which pupils spoke in their qualitative commentary to a) share their experiences and have their say and b) let us know how we can get better through telling us what is important to them. Pupils across the country need to be heard and their voice should be at the centre of change.

One clear message was to make learning more relevant for adult life and more enjoyable.

> *"Teach students what they will encounter in their adult life and what can get them the best jobs out there and not things like Shakespeare."*

Pupils want more say in what they learn and how they are taught. They ask to be listened to by adults, a need for a sense of agency came through in comments about the curriculum and a desire for more dynamic classrooms that enable rich debate and ask for pupil's opinions. This was particularly evident in the secondary data, which in general was much more negative than comments from primary aged pupils in relation to what they are learning.

> *"less test = less stress, you can test our knowledge in different ways"*

Interestingly, pupils repeatedly made reference to improvements to the physical environment, which is discussed in more detail in the theme above. What is outstanding here is that most of the wishes that pupils have for improvements in their

immediate physical environment are very easily implemented/changed, yet may make all the difference to pupil wellbeing.

Relationships are key. The importance of relationships needs to be emphasised across all stages of education and acknowledged fully as the key for emotional wellbeing, belonging and success in learning. Schools need to make time and opportunities for connectedness, pupils need to feel that they are listened to by adults and they want to have a voice in their own learning.

We now need to share the voice of the children and young people. They have provided a rich and powerful narrative of what life has been like. As a collaborative group, our hope is that every child and young person will find something within an education system that brings them a safe space and a sense of belonging. We want them to be immersed in an education system that speaks to them, makes them feel motivated and gives them joy. Our hope is that teaching staff and schools can be dynamic, flexible and creative people and places, offering growth and enjoyment. Our hope is that relationships are acknowledged as one of the key factors in promoting engagement with learning and emotional wellbeing. This is what we will continue to work to achieve.

We would like to thank the children and young people who responded to our research with such honesty and eloquence: we hope we did justice to the experiences you shared with us. This work does not stop here and we will be looking at ways to work in participation with children and young people to explore more voices and views, follow-up and be innovative together.

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7. Appendix: Methodology

Our thematic analysis followed the six recursive phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013; 2021):

1. Familiarisation
2. Coding
3. Generating initial themes
4. Reviewing and developing themes
5. Refining, defining and naming themes
6. Writing a report

The first thematic map was presented to the wider contributors in a virtual meeting that took place during the spring term of 2021. The themes were adapted as the contributors analysed their own data through the frame of the thematic map. New emerging themes were also encouraged, to ensure that the wider body of contributors were able to include their whole data set in the analysis. Further meetings and discussions between all contributors then led to the production of a final thematic map. This resulted in six interconnected themes being generated from the combined data through this collaborative and reflexive process.

There was a constant awareness that the themes needed to reflect the experiences shared by the children and young people: the raw data was therefore revisited constantly to ensure an authentic representation of the pupils' words and constructs.

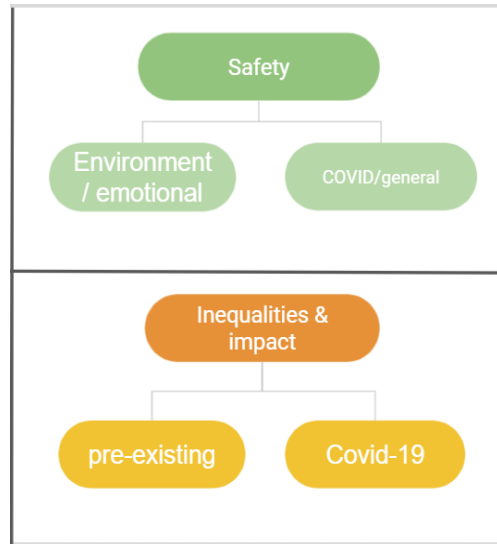The final thematic map is presented in figure 3 below:
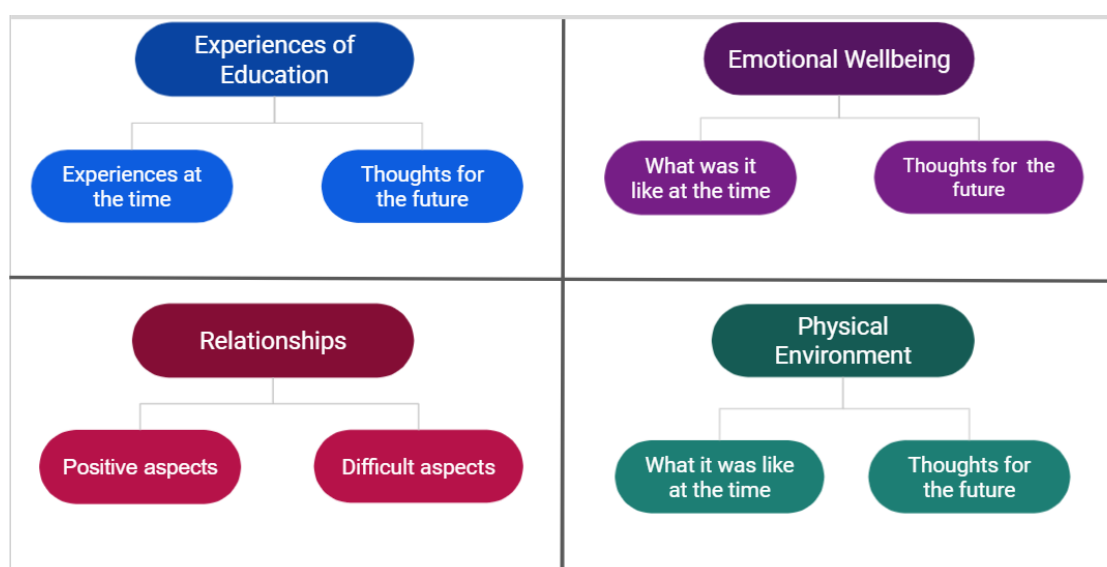
Figure 3: Final theme map

The final phase of the analysis process involved the wider contributor group splitting into theme-based subgroups, to explore all the data generated from each contributing group theme in depth. Data sets across all authorities were shared, and groups examined how the data from each contributing group fitted together to create an overall narrative of the experiences of children and young people from across the 12 areas involved. The primary outcome of this further analysis was a narrative interpretive summary based on three key elements in relation to each theme:

- What are pupils saying about this theme?
- What psychological frameworks can support interpretation of what pupils are saying?
- What are the implications of this data on education?