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# Leading school recovery from the impact of Covid-19: two birds, one stone

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore how best to enact recovery in British schools impacted by the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic; and the significance of well-being. Specifically, this research investigates 'How do we improve children's mathematics, reading and writing through the promotion of wellbeing?' Within the constructionist paradigm, an interpretivist study was conducted. The methodology chosen to construct meanings through capturing the context of the school was an evaluative case study. Methods engaged so as to enable the precision of details included semi-structured and focus group interviews, reflective journal, observations and document analysis. Leading curriculum recovery in a school community during this challenging time contributed to a UK Government school leadership initiative with the aim to prepare teachers to be high-performing senior leaders; National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership (NPQSL). A key finding was that well-being provided a strong platform for educational recovery and should be prioritised. This case study models how school leaders can optimise recovery within their context and is therefore nationally and internationally significant.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Well-being; curriculum reform; Covid recovery; education; primary

## Introduction

The case study school was a maintained government school of England, two-form entry (3–11 years; FS1 – Year 6), had approximately 350 students and followed the National Curriculum of England. Within the school, one of the two Year 6 class teachers raised children's mental health concerns in 2019. There was also a connection between the children's mental health concerns raised in this particular class and lower than expected progress in Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) results across children's mathematics, reading and writing (Table 1). SATs papers are administered by the government to children in England at the end of Year 2 and Year 6 for mathematics and English.

Analysis of data (internal and external, quantitative and qualitative) indicated child well-being as a key school priority. The case study 2020 School Improvement Plan stated goal 5 was to continue to promote case study school's values and pupils' learning behaviours, personal development and safety to ensure pupils can become responsible global citizens. Child well-being relates directly to the variation in pupil performance and deserved its place as a key priority; as research suggests that there is a connection between well-being and academic achievement (Djambazova-Popordanoska 2016; Lynch 2019; Public Health England 2015).

External reviews of the case study school involved quality assurance inspections conducted by the local authority. Trends over the previous three years specifically identified variations in

**Table 1.** Year 6 SATs results falling short of expected KS2 score (progress).

Year	Maths	English Reading	Spelling, Punctuation & Grammar (SPaG)
2019 (class with well-being concerns)	69.23% (9/13)	69.23% (9/13)	No predicted KS2 scores
2018	43.5% (10/23)	43.5% (10/23)	No predicted KS2 scores
2017	37.5% (12/32)	15.63% (5/32)	No predicted KS2 scores

teacher quality as an area for further development, along with KS2 consistency in challenging all students (of various abilities) and teachers giving quality feedback. Feedback from external reviews also recommended regular moderation of children's work be conducted by teachers across English writing and maths, in year levels and across year levels, so that the grading of pupils (data gathered from teacher judgements) could be valid and reliable (trustworthy).

The case study school supported families of serving military personnel. Hence, the school had high mobility; 45-60%. According to the report 'Kin & Country: Growing up as an armed forces child' conducted by the Children's Commissioner for England (2018), multiple school moves leave children feeling unsettled and anxious about their learning. Additionally, children find difficulty settling into new schools and experience a range of emotions that they are not always able to understand or express. Research also indicates that another contributing factor to pupil well-being and academic achievement is the student's sense of belonging within school (ACER 2018; Lynch 2019; OECD 2004; Pedler 2018).

The wellbeing priority was exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic. This resulted in case study school closure, remote learning taking place and then a return to school under strict social distancing regulations – bubbles of no larger than 15 pupils and 2 m distancing. With new rules and the easing of 'lockdowns', schools prepared for children to return, which again prioritised children's well-being (Weale 2020). A well-being survey (UNESCO 2020) was completed by the pupils across the case study school (Years 1–6) in mid-June, 2020. The data was analysed and findings suggested that the pandemic, remote schooling and social distancing had a negative impact on children's social, physical and community wellbeing (Goal 1, cf. 2). The key finding was that the children wanted the school to get back to normal as soon as possible. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered indicated eight KS2 goals as priorities for improvement:

Goal 1 – Pupil well-being

Goal 2 – Reading for comprehension

Goal 3 – Quality feedback

Goal 4 – Balance of the three curriculum drivers (Learning Powers [metacognition], citizenship [values] and community [partnerships and belonging])

Goal 5 – Increase challenge for all pupils

Goal 6 – Progress in maths

Goal 7 – Year 6 attainment in maths

Goal 8 – Moderate and monitor across learning areas

Local Authority social workers and teachers were concerned that many case study school pupils were spending too much time being sedentary in their place of residence, exacerbated by limited socialising during the covid-19 lock-down period, March – June 2020. The case study school prioritised implementing a recovery curriculum, so that children could cover gaps in their learning due to the inconsistencies associated with remote learning, specifically to improve children's maths, reading and writing. 'Recovery' and 'gaps' in learning intrinsically relate to social and emotional well-being. The UK Government's research into recovering from the pandemic found; 'Primary school pupils' learning was often dependent on the level of support parents were able to give and the confidence parents had in helping their children in different subjects'. Furthermore, the research illustrated the pertinence of well-being for recovery in pupil attainment:

School leaders described the continued impact of the pandemic on pupils' education and personal development. Leaders said that the newest cohorts in primary and secondary schools have arrived with lower starting points than previous years. Schools have also found that some pupils are taking longer than usual to settle in and get used to the school routine, which they attribute to the pandemic disrupting the previous academic year and pupils' transition arrangements. The pandemic continues to affect pupils' attendance and leaders also reported an increase in pupils with poor mental health and well-being. (Ofsted 2021)

A requirement of the National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership (NPQSL) assessment is for candidates to design, lead and evidence an improvement project (research study) across their school context, lasting at least two terms. The purpose of the project was to investigate the reduction of variation in pupil progress and attainment (Part A) and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching (Part B). The qualification is designed to advocate and enhance: strategy and improvement, teaching and curriculum excellence, managing resources and risks, leading with impact, working in partnership and increasing capability. Graduation for the qualification depends on evidence of readiness to be an effective senior leader.

NPQSL candidates are required to track effective leadership against criteria. Online courses provide a range of content and compulsory core and optional task activities. However, it was the 5000-word Assessment Submission Form task and supplements that contributed to the whole and final grade. The range of content supplied in the NPQSL included a base of scholarly readings and research articles. As part of the criteria, it was expected that candidates evidence their analysis of research to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. This could be supplemented by further research but was not a necessary expectation. The literature provided contributed towards the base of the literature review for the purpose of this research study.

The leader in this research study was a Senior Fellow in the UK Higher Education Academy (2021), recognising expertise across professional development and senior leadership. 'Demonstrating commitment to teaching, learning and the student experience, through engagement in a practical process that encourages research, reflection and development' (Higher Education Academy 2021). Senior Fellows are described as experienced, able to demonstrate impact and influence through leading, managing or organising programmes, subjects and/or disciplinary areas.

As the title of this paper suggests, this study accomplished two outcomes; one, and most importantly, it models how school leaders can optimise recovery from the unprecedented Covid 19 pandemic by investigating the role of well-being. Two, it was successful in gaining the National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership (NPQSL). Hence, two birds, one stone.

## Literature review

The research question to emerge from the literature was used to guide this investigation and test the assumption, 'How do we improve children's mathematics, reading and writing through the promotion of wellbeing?' The literature that formed the landscape relating to school leadership and curriculum reform/ improvement was explored by investigating the NPQSL material and further research relating to well-being and benefits to pupil attainment. In exploring the school's response to the impact the unprecedented Covid 19 pandemic had, it was necessary to understand the relevance of major underpinning themes:

- School change and reform
- Effective leadership
- Teaching and Curriculum

## *School change and reform*

The terms 'curriculum change' and 'curriculum reform' are often used interchangeably. However, they are distinctly different; curriculum change must occur in order for curriculum reform to take place. Ewing (2010, 148) describes the terms with clarity:

Change arguably refers more generally to undertaking something new: a movement from one state, form or direction to another. Curriculum reform implies more than change – it is a direct assertion that this change will bring about improvement or enhancement. Curriculum re-form therefore suggests that students will benefit from the innovative practices, materials or the teacher's change in beliefs and pedagogical approach. In other words, their experiences at school will in some way improve.

Hence, curriculum change and curriculum reform is a socially complex process (Fullan 2001b; Sparkes 1991). Policy construction, implementation, and evaluation are designed to bring about curriculum change, which according to Dinan-Thompson (2001, 9) 'implies a level of metamorphosis in the overall plan of education, including teachers and their ideologies'. Subsequently, Fullan offers a criterion for leading change in schools (2001a) which includes leaders disposing: moral purpose; understanding change; developing good relationships; able to build knowledge; and coherence making.

Changes have been made to national policies and guidelines [policy construction] as a direct result of the Covid pandemic; the intentions are for education improvement and, therefore, curriculum reform.

Our inspection handbooks [Ofsted] have been amended to consider the impact of the pandemic on schools. We have looked at the evidence collected from a sample of 98 routine inspections carried out this term. It is clear from our findings that the effects of the pandemic are still being felt by pupils, staff and leaders. (Ofsted 2021)

While policy construction has occurred as a direct result of the Covid pandemic, the implementation and evaluation of the curriculum change process are not clear.

The connection between 'recovery in pupil attainment' and 'well-being' was advocated from early in the pandemic;

Child mental health experts have urged the government to prioritise children's play and socialising with friends over formal lessons and academic progress when schools in England reopen and lockdown restrictions are eased. They say they are 'extremely concerned' about the impact of the lockdown and more than six weeks without face-to-face play with peers on child mental health. (Weale, 7 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/07/prioritise-play-when-schools-reopen-say-mental-health-experts-coronavirus-lockdown>)

In educational contexts; 'It is widely recognised that a child's emotional health and wellbeing influences their cognitive development and learning, as well as their physical and social health, and their mental wellbeing in adulthood' (Public Health England 2015, 4). The Public Health England document (2014, 4) offers a synopsis of the research regarding well-being of children in schools:

1. Pupils with better health and well-being are likely to achieve better academically.
2. Effective social and emotional competencies are associated with greater health and well-being, and better achievement.
3. The culture, ethos and environment of a school influences the health and well-being of pupils and their readiness to learn.

Hence, a positive association exists between academic attainments, physical health and subsequently, physical activity levels of pupils. (Lynch 2019).

Health curriculum has impacted many parts of the world as evidenced by curriculum policy as the Health, Well-being and Physical Education (H, W & PE) revolution. This revolution has and continues to grow globally. Furthermore, the World Wide survey of school PE found that countries of 'Best Practice' had a common theme

relating to ‘promotion of health and healthy lifestyles’ (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2014, 10). Hence, when considering QPE [Quality Physical Education] implementation in primary/elementary schools around the world, the promotion of health is of major significance. (Lynch 2019, 43)

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic curriculum change has involved the introduction of UK Government statutory guidance for Physical Health and Mental Well-being in primary and secondary schools. This guidance advocates that ‘Physical health and mental wellbeing are interlinked, and it is important that pupils understand that good physical health contributes to good mental well-being, and vice versa’ (Ofsted 2021). The guidance states that by the end of primary school children should know the fundamentals of mental health – being a normal part of daily health (similar to physical health); internet safety and harms; physical health and fitness; healthy eating; drugs, alcohol and tobacco; health and prevention; basic first aid; and the changing adolescent body. The Physical Health and Mental Wellbeing guidance followed closely from the UK Government’s ‘Relationships education (and sex education) and health education’ statutory guidance, which covers five main areas:

- Families and people who care for me
- Caring friendships
- Respectful relationships
- Online relationships
- Being safe (DfE 2020).

This is supported by Lynch, who states ‘Research findings strongly suggest that holistic QPE [quality physical education] enhances children’s wellbeing, arguably more so than any other curriculum area offered in schools’ (2019, 199). Physical education optimising well-being in schools is represented by a four pillar framework:

1. Curriculum, teaching and learning—this focus prioritises movement in lessons, enabling inclusive experiences where all children are given the opportunities to develop the necessary movement skills (beginning with FMS [Fundamental Movement Skills]). While having a physical (and cognitive) focus, children are able to engage and enjoy moving, which sets the platform for a lifetime.
2. Whole child development – Educators and students are aware and constantly work towards the bigger picture; the holistic ‘Health and physically educated’ child. Evidence-based research (quantitative and qualitative) illustrates how the various dimensions of holistic PE compliment one another: spiritual; social and emotional; physical; and cognitive. All dimensions are enhanced through QPE and the more any one of these dimensions is enhanced the more the other dimensions can benefit.
3. School implementation (organisation, ethos and environment)—the HPE curriculum area is implemented using an inclusive socio-cultural approach, consistently throughout the whole school. This requires leadership and strong communication. School leadership was a pertinent issue raised, specifically the role of principals/headteachers in deciding who they employ within the school to coordinate physical education and health.
4. Community—strength-based partnerships are developed and maintained to optimise teaching and learning resources and opportunities, subsequently optimising children’s well-being. (Lynch 2019, 200–201).

As shared above, the reduction in variation in pupil progress needs to be inclusive, ‘raising the bar and closing the gap for all children’ (Fullan and Boyle 2013, 2). This is a modern-day challenge for teachers:

Educators are therefore challenged to be creative when implementing education adopting a social cultural approach. At all times, the aim should be to maintain inclusivity, by catering for the

diverse needs of the class. This is easier said than done and is the greatest modern-day challenge for educators. The ability to implement strategies that cater for all needs, while enabling enjoyment, engagement and challenges, is evidence of a teacher's expertise as a quality educator (Lynch 2017b, 86).

### ***Effective leadership***

The UK Government has acknowledged the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic, the need for reform and significance of leadership. 'Leaders faced challenges in managing the logistics of COVID-19 safety measures, delivering education remotely and identifying gaps in learning' (Ofsted 2021). For implementing change successfully requires leadership, underpinned by clear communication (Lynch 2017a). An effective senior leader would 'role model the organisation's values and behaviours and be the change you want to see elsewhere.' (University of Salford Manchester 2016, 4). The leader's purpose of the communication was to have all stakeholders also believe – appealing directly to a strong sense of moral purpose (Sergiovanni 1992; Lynch 2017a). The leader in this research study had evidence of success (Lynch 2016; Higher Education Academy 2021), where communication was also illuminated as a strength.

Leaders are required to understand what the teachers and community are experiencing if they are to then motivate them. The Psychological Recovery Model (Hobfoll et al. 2007) was developed using research and evidence when responding to significant events involving loss, change, grief and disruption within communities. The model illustrates that in a crisis such as the Covid pandemic, it is important that everyone feels safe. Secondly, community members are likely to experience a range of emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant. They may need reassurance that these are all normal reactions; support is required to help members manage their emotions and return to a state of calm. Thirdly, people need to feel they have some control over what is happening to them and that their actions and those of the community will lead to positive outcomes. Fourthly, all members belong and are supported. Finally, community members need to be provided with reassurance that eventually they will feel positive again.

Leaders need to be knowledgeable and confident, having 'a ruthless ability to focus on the problem and to ignore the siren calls of the sceptics and the cynics' (Grint 2005, 1468). Hence, Grint (2008) emphasises the ability of leaders to identify the problem and consequent approach to resolving it. They need to be able to interpret data and identify the next steps for academic improvement (Fullan and Boyle 2013); even if their vision differs from traditional British schooling and curriculum expectations. Furthermore, the leader's vision needs to be clearly developed and passionately communicated (Lazenby 2008). 'Passionate leadership is about a deep-rooted belief in better opportunities and alternative outcomes' (Davies and Brighouse 2008).

Staff members feeling valued is imperative. In Singapore and Finland, for example, nations that have been regarded as world leaders in education over the last 25 years, teachers are highly valued. Furthermore, quality talent management values every individual (Mindtools 2021). Hence, as an effective senior leader, strong professional relationships with teachers need to be developed and their contributions valued. The leader needs to know his/her team well, each individual's strengths and motivators, and they need to be respected for being fair and ethical (Day and Sammons 2014).

Kelly (2013) argues that effective Professional Development (PD) plays a role in members feeling valued and should involve a distributed leadership model, providing opportunities at all levels. This relates to the Spectrum of Power (Huxham and Vangen 2004), moving towards greater collaboration and the equitable distribution of power and control. It capitalises on the knowledge that the best leaders have of individuals in their teams, enabling effective collaboration and deployment of expertise. PD plays a pertinent role and as needs change with time, optimal effectiveness must be maintained (Bubb and Earley 2007).



## Teaching and curriculum

The UK Government encouraged a recovery curriculum from very early in the pandemic

Understanding what pupils do and do not know and using this information to make necessary adjustments to the curriculum is an important part of education recovery. However, effective approaches to assessment and catch-up will be different in different subject areas. In terms of adaptations, most teachers were providing lots of opportunities for pupils to revisit and consolidate previous learning and were focusing on areas of the curriculum that have been missed and need to be covered. (Ofsted 2021)

Research suggests that ‘curriculum must be developed, implemented and evaluated-based on evidence-based research’ (Lynch 2019, 207). Mathematics, reading and writing were the key subjects that required priority.

Gaps in literacy and language were frequently noted across both primary and secondary schools. Specific areas of learning loss include: writing stamina, spelling, vocabulary, punctuation, handwriting, and – in particular – phonics knowledge. One school noted that the latter had negatively affected pupils’ ability to properly access other subjects, which all require reading.

School leaders said that most pupils had some gaps in mathematics knowledge that they had identified and were addressing this term. In primary schools, teachers identified common gaps in key stage 1 pupils’ knowledge of place value, number and symbol recognition, and number bonds. (Ofsted 2021)

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943) supports having well-being as the platform for the maths, reading and writing recovery curriculum: physical needs, safety, belonging and love, feeling good about yourself, desire to learn, artistic and creative, and reaching your potential.

Teachers need to be challenged – to continue to be reflective practitioners as lifelong learners. The following excerpt explains why teachers need to be given opportunities by leaders to reflect on why they believe the way they teach is the best for their children.

Approaches to education and health evolve from the psychological perspectives which frame the theory of knowledge: biological, behavioural, cognitive, psychoanalytic and phenomenological. Educators’ understanding of the various approaches will only strengthen practice within schools as they enable teachers to identify the most appropriate approach, subsequently influencing pedagogy within particular teaching and learning contexts.

When an approach dominates practice, then this ‘reflects perceptions, values and knowledge’ (Ornstein and Hunkins 2017, 2) within society. Furthermore, they reflect the teacher’s belief about how children learn, how children are supported by families, communities and educators, as well as what is important for children now and in the future (Arthur et al. 2015). We are reminded that schools do tend to commit to one particular approach although many educators do not (Ornstein and Hunkins 2017). This is why it is pertinent that all educators continue to develop their understanding about education approaches: behaviourism, constructivism and critical ... (Lynch 2019, 202)

Ornstein and Hunkins suggest that when considering education and in particular the curriculum covered that there are no precise answers to which approach should be used and this is intentional (2017, 1); it is about increasing understanding with regard to the complexities surrounding this issue. They argue that schools do tend to commit to one particular approach although many educators do not, ‘Rather, they emphasize one approach in some situations and advocate other approaches in other situations’ (Ornstein and Hunkins 2017, 2). This is why it is so important that curriculum designers, curriculum specialists, curriculum students and teachers need to continue to develop their understanding.

In the latest Australian curriculum reform review, it was encouraged that teachers should use an eclectic choice of approaches to suit the context, as advocated by Lynch (2014). Ornstein and Hunkins (2017) support and emphasise the importance of context. Hence, the purpose of education is to achieve all approaches:

1. Develop practical skills, strengthen productivity (utilitarian).
2. Prepare and deal with the future (twenty-first-century learning).
3. Develop the child (personalised learning).



4. Critique society (equity and social justice).

5. Introduce students to the best that has been thought and said (enculturation) (Australian Government 2014, 24).

All approaches have a place and evidence-based research suggests that there should not be a prevalence of certain approaches (and pedagogies embedded within) over others. However, the 'curriculums for geography, history and science [also HPE] all privilege inquiry-based and student-centred teaching and learning' which sit within constructivism (Australian Government 2014, 5). (Lynch 2019, 29–30)

However, there are arguments based on research into how humans best learn that explicit instruction is the preferred pedagogical approach. 'We should be teaching domain-specific knowledge, not generic skills' and 'Initial instruction when dealing with new information should be explicit and direct' (Australian Government 2014, 125). For the example of acquiring basic mathematical skills, 'the research clearly shows that teacher-directed learning is better suited. Needless to say, these basic skills must be firmly in place before students can approach problem-solving questions with any degree of competence' (2014, 126). (Lynch 2019, 20)

Hence, teachers need to reflect on the balance offered within the curriculum. Balance takes account of both subjects (content) and pupils (process), where both teacher-centred and pupil discovery methods to learning are connected (Kelly 2009). While all educational approaches have a place, some subjects align better with certain approaches (Australian Government 2014) and teachers have the responsibility to choose the most appropriate pedagogy (Tracey and Morrow 2017).

## Methodology

### Research design

The purpose of this study was to explore how best to enact an educational recovery in a British school, which had been impacted by the unprecedented Covid 19 pandemic. While it was referred to as an NPQSL 'project' in layperson's terms, a deeper interpretivist study was conducted within the constructionist paradigm. The participants shared their experiences and perspectives, which are never wrong. A constructionist epistemology frames the research as meaning-making and was developed from engagement and interaction with the participants sharing their lived experiences and interpreting those experiences. The methodology chosen to construct meanings through capturing the context was a case study (Merriam 1998). The study was a storytelling case study as it is a 'narrative and descriptive account of an educational event, program or system which deserves to be told to interested audiences, after careful analysis' (Bassey 1999, 58). Specifically, the educational event was the recovery from a pandemic. The methods engaged so as to enable the precision of details within the chosen theoretical framework were semi-structured and focus group interviews, reflective journal, observations and document analysis.

Semi-structured interviews were held with each of the KS2 teachers at the end of the third week in term one and later in the term (November 2020). There were two lots of eight interviews with KS2 teachers; 16 in total. The student participants were also chosen to be interviewed to seek their responses. Hence, at about the same time as the teacher's, focus group interviews were held with the KS2 students.

There were four focus group interviews. One focus group with representatives from the two Year 3 classes, one with representatives from the two Year 4 classes, one with representatives from the two Year 5 classes and one with representatives from the two Year 6 classes. Maximum variation representation (Glaser and Straus 1967) involved 'identifying and seeking out those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study' (Merriam 1998, 63). A maximum variation representation process was employed, by means of the well-being questionnaire, to select two student representatives who indicated they had higher than average well-being (one boy and one girl) and two student representatives who indicated they had lower than average well-being (one boy and one girl). The questionnaire results were confirmed by each focus group's respective classroom teacher.

The researcher conducted observations of teaching and learning (informal drop-ins) to support teachers during the first six weeks of the year. In week 7 of term 1 (2020–2021), the researcher conducted formal drop-ins as part of a deep-dive (Ofsted 2019), involving informal lesson observations, book scrutiny (document analysis) and pupil feedback analysis; and were followed later with semi-structured interviews with teachers, allowing them to share deeper insights. The researcher conducted formal lesson observations (November 2020) where teachers evidenced how they addressed ‘challenge’ (Goal 5) and Pupil Progress meetings were also held (March 2021).

### **Verification and ethical issues**

Two ethical clearances were granted before this research was conducted. An ethical clearance was awarded from the school (Headteacher, SGC and Local Authority) and from NPQSL (tutor). A conscious effort was made by the researcher to be fair in the generation of data, in the interpretation of data, in the formulation of theories and in the presentation of data. Member checks were used, when necessary, which involved soliciting informants’ views as to the credibility of findings, and these were utilised to confirm the plausibility and credibility of interpretations. Themes and conclusions were checked within the other data-generating methods, for example, a finding during an observation was further explored during an interview. This addresses the issue of public disclosure of processes and gives the themes congruence and verisimilitude (Anfara, Brown, and Mangione 2002). The credibility of the study was achieved by employing triangulation, the process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning (Stake 1994). The multiple perceptions were obtained from observing and interviewing a variety of participants.

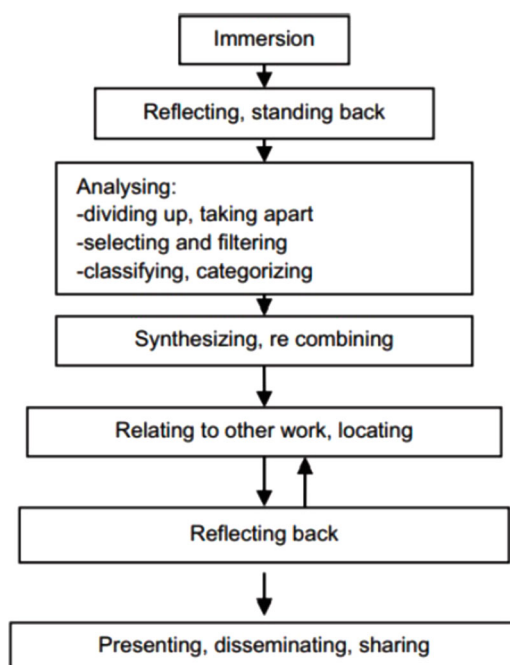
### **Analysis of data**

An interpretivist data analysis strategy was used for the purpose of this research study. A case study investigates a particular context and the narrative/descriptive analysis strategy was deliberately chosen to enable the communication of the case study’s story (Merriam 1998). As an interpretivist is committed to hearing the stories of the participants, their perspectives of the world they experience (Taylor and Bogdan 1998). The researcher attempted to capture the stories by interpreting the culture of the school through reported experiences, understandings and other collected data, resulting in a learning episode for both reader and researcher (Glesne 1999). The case was analysed using Wellington’s (2000) simplified version of the ‘Constant Comparative Method for Analysing Qualitative Data’ (Figure 1) and was described. All data findings of the case study school were reported using a narrative/descriptive report. Units of meaning were formed, coded and categorised with other similar units. The general stages include immersion, reflection, analysing, synthesising, returning and presenting. There was one researcher who conducted all interviews and analysis.

### **Discussion and findings**

The key finding of this study was that well-being is essential to curriculum recovery. Moreso, as research in the field suggests, well-being enhances learning generally and should be prioritised. ‘It is widely recognised that a child’s emotional health and wellbeing influences their cognitive development and learning, as well as their physical and social health, and their mental wellbeing in adulthood’ (Public Health England 2015, 4). To grow the school curriculum, the case study school had a wellbeing focus during term 1 with a weekly well-being (PSHE) session (Goal 1, cf. 2–3).

Informal drop-ins were conducted by the leader to support teachers during the first six weeks of the year; observations evidenced well-being regularly prioritised by the teachers. In week 7 of term 1, the leader conducted formal drop-ins as part of a deep-dive (Ofsted 2019), involving informal lesson observations, book scrutiny and pupil feedback analysis; and were followed later with semi-structured interviews with teachers (Goals 1, 2, 3, 6 & 7, cf. 2–3). The book scrutiny revealed that teachers were consistently following the feedback policy, which promoted the learning process (learning



**Figure 1.** General stages in making sense of qualitative data (Wellington 2000, 141).

behaviours/values) (Goal 3, cf. 2–3). Observations and book scrutiny verified that well-being (Goal 1, cf. 2–3) was being prioritised in the curriculum through circle time, reflections on learning, identifying feelings and emotions, identifying talents, ‘choices and impact’, learning behaviours and school values. Furthermore, Assessment for Learning (AfL) was implemented by teachers; the identified gaps in children’s learning were evidenced as being successfully addressed in work books (Goals 2, 6 & 7, cf. 2–3). Also, formal lesson observations were conducted (November 2020) where teachers evidenced how they addressed challenges inclusively (Goal 5, cf. 2–3); and Pupil Progress meetings were held in March 2021, in support of teachers, which along with internal data indicated a full academic recovery.

Teacher training about Boxall Profiles was held during staff meetings and Boxall Profiles were completed. This was a large, arduous task that was prioritised by allocating staff meetings and time towards this purpose. Teachers were given 5 h directed time to complete the Boxall Profile for the children in their class and the leader offered one on one support at the end of term 1. Results were consistent with those from the well-being survey (November 2020).

The Boxall Profile (BP), the most popular tool used by schools in the UK to measure the social, emotional, mental health (SEMH) and well-being of children (Marshall et al. 2017), was completed by teachers for every child late in term 1 (November 2020) and revisited in term 2. Findings indicated that the children’s well-being had improved significantly as a result of the well-being initiative. The children flagged as having well-being needs in KS2 (and across the whole school) were already being monitored by the Special Educational Needs (SEN) support team before remote learning. There were no new well-being cases of concern – an ideal outcome. On average, there were approximately one (0.9) case study school child per class identified as having any difficulty. In the UK, the average primary school class has seven children with one type of difficulty (either social, emotional, or behavioural) and 4 children with high levels of needs in both domains (developmental and diagnostic) (Nurtureuk 2020a, 2020b). When compared with other UK primary schools, the case study school was in an excellent well-being position which positively impacted upon pupil progress. Pupil Progress meetings were held in March 2021 and the development of the new whole school Relationships (and sex education) policy and programme (DfE 2020) were implemented by the leader.

Pupil Progress meetings (March 2021) evidenced excellent pupil progress across maths, reading and writing. Thus, supporting the internal data collected at the end of term 1 and term 2, indicating that children had made a full academic recovery. To enable the data to be valid and reliable moderation/standardisation took place during staff meetings across year levels and key stage 2 – looking at children’s work samples and comparing against a success criteria. The internal data indicated that the recovery curriculum was very successful.

Another key finding was the importance of the leader’s effective communication. This was essential if partnerships were to be developed and maintained. This is supported in research, identified as one of four pillars which form a framework for optimising well-being in schools (Lynch 2019, 200–201). The leader’s vision for a well-being platform was developed and passionately communicated (Lazenby 2008) to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), School Governor’s Committee (SGC), teachers, children and wider community; ‘Passionate leadership is about a deep-rooted belief in better opportunities and alternative outcomes’ (Davies and Brighouse 2008). Hence, for the first-time well-being was explicitly made the focus in the case study school (Goal 1) and all stakeholders were on-board. Furthermore, to improve performance in priority areas, partnerships were established and sustained with SLT, SGC, children, parents, other Local Authority schools and members of the wider community (Kelly 2013). Also, partnerships were established and sustained with the school bus escorts, UK Healthy Schools, Community Cookhouse (school lunches), Community Medical Centre (PSHE Relationships) and Educational Psychologists (Davies and Brighouse 2008; Lazenby 2008; Mindtools 2021).

The leader offered two-way communication across: the SLT, first staff meeting for the 2020–2021 academic year (August 2020), first SGC meeting for the year (September 2020), and children in the first Assembly (October 2020) – celebrating World Mental Health Week. Furthermore, it was presented to other Local Authority schools (Teams video conferencing) in term 2 (March 2021) and also to parents and members of the school community as a Family Learning Programme (FLP) (February 2021). Feedback was very positive and communications were strong across various stakeholders (Fullan 2001a). More so, social capital (West-Burnham, Farrar, and Otero 2007), was built as community members worked together for this essential community need, supported by the Psychological Recovery Model (Hobfoll et al. 2007). Sharing the vision and inviting various stakeholders to believe in the difference they could make adopted the Spectrum of Power (Huxham and Vangen 2004); moving towards greater collaboration and the equitable distribution of power and control.

Curriculum change and curriculum reform is a long and complex process – this is another reason why communication is vital. The case study plan was designed (8 Goals) to enable curriculum reform. Before communicating with teachers, the leader reflected upon what would be the most effective means of communication within the context, asking ‘How can I bring this message to life in a way that’s meaningful for my team?’ (University of Salford Manchester 2016, 4; Lynch 2016). Furthermore, it was made simple to follow; feedback was invited and valued through regular two-way, face-to-face communication; teacher’s efforts were praised and acknowledged, and they were empowered, motivated and inspired to improve the well-being of the children in their care (Baguley 2009; Djambazova-Popordanoska 2016; University of Salford Manchester 2016). Communication techniques witnessed in other educational institutions (primary schools and universities), were valued and implemented. These included: class dojo, short youtube videos and zoom meetings.

The leader’s ability to establish and sustain partnerships was demonstrated when KS2 teachers agreed that the eight goals were representative of areas to focus on for improved pupil performance. Also, through communications with various specialists and staff members when evaluating the whole school curriculum, environment and partnerships using the Health Promoting Schools model (World Health Organisation 1996). Teacher partnerships were evident during observations, book scrutiny and pupil and teacher feedback. Formal lesson observations were conducted where teachers showcased how they challenge pupils of all abilities (Goal 5) and evidence of the three curriculum drivers (Goal 4). It was pleasing that KS2 teachers consistently evidenced teaching quality lessons, improving performance in priority areas for the school.

A whole school curriculum approach is recommended by research and was significant to the success of curriculum recovery. This began in early June 2020, when the implementation of a whole-school approach to health and well-being was initiated (Lynch 2019), presented to teachers as the school returned from closure. A well-being survey was conducted and findings were shared in mid-June. Baseline assessments were coordinated in August 2020, and teachers began focusing on gaps shortly after. Specifically for this project, the leader focused on:

- Using the strengths of teachers in the school to share their views and research (expertise with other teachers) during staff meetings and the evaluation of the whole school curriculum, environment and partnerships; adopting the Health Promoting School model (McCuaig, Quennerstedt, and Macdonald 2013; World Health Organisation 1996).
- Allowing teachers time to reflect on their practice during KS2 staff meetings.
- Using curriculum as the base of professional development during staff meetings.

The case study school was awarded UK Healthy Schools status in September 2020, evidencing effective senior leadership during the School Health Check, which involved whole school partnerships (Lazenby 2008). Ofsted style descriptors were used to identify and celebrate strengths, as well as set targets for improvement. School strengths enabling improvement included: leadership, pupil voice, support services, partnerships, school ethos and 'teaching and learning' (Ewing 2010).

Research suggests that 'curriculum must be developed, implemented and evaluated-based on evidence-based research' (Lynch 2019, 207). Evidence-based research guided this process and staff meetings were used to provide learning experiences where teachers could exchange ideas, support one another, and share positive feelings about their work (Fullan 2001b). Fullan and Boyles' change leadership framework (2013, 8) was enacted; from identifying the eight goals for improving teaching and learning (KS2) to having goal 1 (well-being) as the platform for improvement; there was a clear purpose and direction articulated to all stakeholders. Furthermore, the unique contextual need for the case study school and returning from a pandemic was addressed. Collaborative leadership was embraced, where all insights were valued and teachers were open to learning from one another. The leader was also open to learning from and sharing wider leadership across schools in the local authority. Observations and interviews evidenced Fullan's criteria for leading change in schools (2001a):

1. Moral purpose – the leader was driven to improve the learning experience of all children by implementing evidence-based research.
2. Understanding change – the community members were invited to come on the journey with the leader (Authoritative leadership).
3. Relationships, relationships, relationships – the project leader focused on self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Trust was a strength in relationships with staff and had been developed over four years.
4. Knowledge building – the leader enjoyed collaborating with colleagues with an openness to learn.

Another key finding was that children's physical health is a key to promotion of well-being. Physical education was prioritised by the school with a specialist teacher employed to passionately implement one hour of PE each week for all pupils. This was supplemented by the classroom teachers implementing another hour, giving the children two hours of PE each week. There were also lunchtime, inter-school and intra-school competitions organised for children from Year 2–6. Experiential learning and learning through movement were further prioritised with the introduction of nature-based Forest School (Tiplady and Menter 2020). This was a 2-h lesson per fortnight. Holistic education through movement was also enabled through play-based education in the early years (Lynch 2019). Learning through the physical dimension offered balance to the content across

maths, reading and writing. Teachers' well-being was also an essential variable to curriculum recovery and was prioritised by offering Pilate's classes every Monday afternoon, free of charge. This was implemented using a strength-based approach (Lynch 2019) and again by using staff meetings to complete work that would normally have to be done after school (Maslow 1943). Through discussions, observations and interviews (assessing and monitoring), teacher's well-being improved as did the children's.

Another finding of the research was that although the NPQSL project offered guidance in curriculum recovery, it did have limitations and even at times presented obstacles to well-being promotion. As an effective senior leader research and case study data analysis was reflected upon to design the project. The eight goals had been identified and Goal 1 (well-being) was to act as the platform for improvement in mathematics, reading and writing (Djambazova-Popordanoska 2016; Lynch 2019; Public Health England 2015) through a balanced educational approach, including both content and process (Kelly 2009; Lynch 2019).

In order to improve children's academic achievements, a recovery curriculum was recommended (DfE 2021), where children could cover gaps in their learning due to the inconsistencies of remote learning. 'Recovery' and 'gaps' in learning intrinsically relate to social and emotional well-being. In the second week of term 1, 2020–2021, as part of the NPQSL project, the leader coordinated all KS2 classes (Years 3–6) to implement 'Rising Stars' summative assessments. They were collated, data analysed and baseline gap findings suggested that many pupils had regressed. Reading comprehension was identified as a key focus area. Furthermore, number (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division), fractions and punctuation were also gaps identified as areas of attention.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the KS2 teachers at the end of Week 3 term 1. Findings suggested that teachers felt the Rising Star summative assessments were not in the children's well-being interest (Goal 1, cf. 3). Semi-structured interviews were also held with the KS2 students and findings supported the teachers' sentiments; they 'couldn't do their best because they hadn't been at normal school' (Goal 2, 6 & 7, cf. 3). However, semi-structured interviews held with teachers and pupils later in the term (November 2020) along with the Boxall Profile data analysis indicated remarkable improvements in children's well-being. It is suggested that the baseline assessments were not necessary and were counterproductive to the well-being platform being developed.

Leaders need to be knowledgeable and confident, having 'a ruthless ability to focus on the problem and to ignore the siren calls of the sceptics and the cynics' (Grint 2005, 1468). The data strongly suggested that well-being needed to become the platform for inclusive academic improvement (Fullan and Boyle 2013); a vision that differed from traditional British schooling and curriculum expectations and the NPQSL programme. During the planning process for the NPQSL project, the leader was told on numerous occasions that relating the project to well-being did not meet the requirements of assessment; evidencing reduction of variation in pupil progress and attainment (Part A) and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching (Part B).

Another finding was that challenging deeper thinking is necessary for teachers and not only the children. Effective senior leadership in this project enabled refinement of the twenty-first-century curriculum and development of core drivers. The curriculum having a well-being platform was supported by the sequence of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943): physical needs, safety, belonging and love, feeling good about yourself, desire to learn, artistic and creative, and reaching your potential. Thus, belonging, love, and feeling good about yourself gave impetus to the case study school's core curriculum drivers of Citizenship (values) and Community (partnerships and belonging). Furthermore, desire to learn, artistic and creative, and reaching your potential is aligned with the core curriculum driver Metacognition (learning powers). Examples where the curriculum was embedded with deep values (and empathy) included the Year 4 pathway 'A long walk to freedom – Nelson Mandela'.

The leader was inclusive to all teachers and teaching approaches; using an inclusive socio-cultural approach (Lynch 2019). This is identified as one of the greatest modern-day challenges for leaders in education (Lynch 2017b) and was targeted during a two-hour workshop presented to small groups over 4 weeks, 'Digging Deeper: Learning that is intriguing, engaging and purposeful'. While it was



acknowledged that the National Curriculum for England predominantly sits within the constructivist approach to education, the previous curriculum did sit predominantly in the behavioural approach. Emphasis was placed on the premise that all educational approaches have a place; however, some subjects align better with certain approaches (Australian Government 2014) and that teachers have the responsibility to choose the most appropriate pedagogy (Tracey and Morrow 2017). This was a targeted strategy to reduce variation in pupil progress. Another contributing factor shared by teachers for the lower-than-expected results for progress in 2019 SATs was that there was previously a heavy focus on a constructivist approach (process) to education across all subject areas and that the balance needed during implementation was limited.

The leader deliberately asked teachers to place an explicit focus on the 'how' of learning (implementation) to exploit learning opportunities, where the curriculum is interweaved by learning power (process) threads: creativity, energy, resilience, curiosity, courage, exploration, reflection and communication. Teachers chose pedagogy with a deliberate aim to nurture children's emotional literacy and develop consciously their deep-thinking, where they improve their skills and knowledge through solving problems, explaining concepts, investigating, designing, creating, understanding, evaluating, analysing, communicating and applying. Grint (2008) emphasises the ability of leaders to identify the problem and consequent approach to resolving it. The three drivers had been a whole school focus for the last two years, but this project exploited their meaningfulness and connection to all learning areas.

Another key finding was that teachers as reflective practitioners are researchers, they just do not always realise they are. Education constantly evolves and is contextual – there is no magic NPQSL formulae (using a predominant behavioural approach to education which has a history of failure in developed countries). Hence, the leader deliberately led Professional Development (PD) workshops to challenge staff across the project's eight goals with a focus on research, reflection and development. Through engagement in a practical process, teachers reflected on their teaching careers and identified their personal goals in teaching and how they can be developed. All teachers were challenged, especially the experienced teachers, across varying contexts and as their careers have evolved. Research provided a platform to provoke teacher's thinking about their practice, feedback strategies, pedagogy, approaches being used for different subjects and generally why they do what they do? Furthermore, teachers were challenged to conduct their own research as a successful way of thinking more deeply about education and development. The project leader had completed a doctoral dissertation on curriculum reform, published two research books (Palgrave Macmillan, London) based on child well-being and was listed as an international expert in this field (UNESCO). Hence, the leader's experiences clearly evidenced his belief and expertise to passionately and effectively lead during the curriculum recovery (Lazenby 2008).

One key strategy implemented was to utilise the strengths of teachers for staff meetings, thus having more staff meeting leaders who felt valued and allowing for smaller groups (Huxham and Vangen 2004; Kelly 2013). This created a welcoming, inclusive and respectful environment where all teachers shared insights (Mindtools 2021). Thus, PD contributed to the strengths and passions of staff and offered support across the whole school to improve areas identified as priorities (Goals 1–8).

## Conclusion

This study accomplished two outcomes; firstly, it models how school leaders can optimise recovery from the unprecedented Covid 19 pandemic. Secondly, it was successful in gaining the National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership (NPQSL). Hence, as the title states 'Leading school recovery from the impact of Covid 19: two birds, one stone'.

The research involved an improvement project across the school, lasting at least two terms. The purpose of the NPQSL project was to reduce variation in pupil progress and attainment (part A) and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of teaching (Part B). Internal data indicated that the recovery curriculum was very successful, evidencing the leader's ability to demonstrate: strategy and



improvement, teaching and curriculum excellence, managing resources and risks, leading with impact, working in partnership and increasing capability.

Within the case study school context, an analysis of data (internal and external, quantitative and qualitative) indicated child well-being as a key school priority; this was exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic and high pupil mobility. Multiple school moves leave children feeling unsettled and anxious about their learning. Data gathered indicated eight KS2 goals as priorities for improvement:

Goal 1 – Pupil well-being

Goal 2 – Reading for comprehension

Goal 3 – Quality feedback

Goal 4 – Balance of the three curriculum drivers (Learning Powers [metacognition], citizenship [values] and community [partnerships and belonging])

Goal 5 – Increase challenge for all pupils

Goal 6 – Progress in maths

Goal 7 – Year 6 attainment in maths

Goal 8 – Moderate and monitor across all learning areas

The research problem, ‘How do we improve children’s mathematics, reading and writing through the promotion of wellbeing?’ was explored. The data strongly suggested that well-being needed to become the platform for inclusive academic improvement. Explicitly identifying well-being as a platform was a first for traditional British schooling, curriculum and the NPQSL programme – this was questioned and opposed at the time by the NPQSL tutor. An interpretivist study was conducted within the constructionist paradigm. The methodology was a storytelling case study of a significant event in the history of education; recovery from the Covid pandemic.

The key findings of this study were:

- Well-being is essential to curriculum recovery
- The leader’s ability to communicate effectively is very influential to the success
- Curriculum change (and curriculum reform) is a long and complex process
- A whole school curriculum approach is vital
- Physical health is a key to the promotion of well-being
- Programmes such as the NPQSL need to be flexible and open to the most recent research findings in education
- Challenging deeper thinking is necessary for teachers (and not only children in schools)
- Leaders need to be inclusive to all teachers and teaching approaches
- Teachers as reflective practitioners are researchers, they just do not always realise they are

Furthermore, effective leadership, ability to build effective teams, analyse data, build impactful interventions and communicate with inspiration and clarity was evidenced by:

- Case study school was awarded UK Healthy Schools status (2020).
- Boxall Profiles indicated incredible improvements to children’s well-being.
- Formal drop-ins evidenced challenge for all.
- Pupil Progress meetings evidenced children’s progress.
- Teachers understood and identified the need for various approaches in education.
- Teachers understood that everyone was responsible for achieving the Goals.
- Internal data collected at the end of term 1 and term 2, indicated a full academic recovery.

The project lead demonstrated strong communication skills, was knowledgeable of the context and built a mutual trust with the teachers. The Psychological Recovery Model (Hobfoll et al. 2007) formed a framework for the project offering a well-being platform and a clear message to be communicated:

we are safe because we are following the expert advice; experiencing different emotions is perfectly normal, but it is important to be calm; our actions individually and collectively will have positive outcomes; we are all valuable members of the case study school and we support one another; and it will be difficult at times, but it is getting better. Context and pedagogy were reflected upon by teachers so that balance in the curriculum could be achieved across content and process.

This study does illustrate the significance of research for school improvement, whether through formal postgraduate education qualifications or professional development. The NPQSL uses research as a framework for improvement in leadership and school performance. This does raise questions about recognised prior learning within the education realm. The project leader would have designed a similar initiative for academic recovery given they are a Senior Fellow in the UK Higher Education Academy (2021); identified as an experienced educator able to demonstrate, impact and influence, responsibility for leading, managing or organising programmes, subjects and/or disciplinary areas within Higher Education (in the UK). However, this educational accreditation, evidencing a readiness and ability to be an effective senior leader, was not recognised by DfE. A recommendation to come from this research would be that all NPQSL programmes be aligned with other UK Government education accreditation programmes.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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