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Children's Covid-19 writing and drawings and the existential imperative to educate for uncertainty

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic provokes a pedagogic crisis: education is ill-adapted to accommodate multiple uncertainties in students' lives. We examine how pandemic uncertainty is registered in a global collection of writing and drawing from 4 to 17-years-old, during the 2020 lockdowns. The study engages with Biesta's (2021) philosophical work on 'world-centred education', offering empirical examples from the collection that goes beyond the immediacy of everyday lives. We identify educational implications: acknowledging students' present experiences of the world; a slowing of pedagogical tempo; supporting students to navigate desires and fears; a language for expressing uncertainty; and engaging students in ethical and existential difficulty.

KEYWORDS
Covid-19, education, uncertainty

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic provokes a pedagogic crisis. In its unexpectedness and provocation of a myriad of uncertainties, it collides with a dominant global educational model that asserts the

world as certain. The pandemic exemplifies the way global education systems are ill-adapted to accommodate multiple uncertainties in children and young people's lives that exist (and have always existed) within and beyond the current moment of immediate challenge. Within a modern, technical society, it becomes difficult to read and accommodate uncertainty as only ever something to be overcome. In this paper, we examine the writing and illustrations of those aged 4–17 years, in nine countries, when much of the world was in lockdown in spring 2020. We call this data 'the collection'. Our focus is on foregrounding how the collection engages with lived uncertainties of Covid-19.

The study is situated within a discussion of the recent work of the educational philosopher, Gert Biesta (2021), on 'world-centred education', offering a rich empirical illustration of the contradictions and tensions, as well as existential and ethical concerns, in students' lives that extend beyond the immediacy of everyday individuated lives. Crucially, it goes beyond a legitimate, dominant concern about delays and growing gaps in learning across disparate student groups (e.g., Weidman et al., 2021). In so doing, this paper's contribution is to focus on what the data might reveal about the imperative to educate for uncertainty, with an emphasis on interruptions to 'our normal ways of doing', that demand 'attention and judgement' (Biesta, 2022, p.222). We offer a diverse repertoire of practice-pedagogic examples, grounded in the analysis of the collection, of how teachers might engage students more deeply with uncertainty. This includes acknowledging students' present experiences of the world; a slowing of pedagogical tempo; supporting students to navigate desires and fears; a language for expressing uncertainty; and engaging students in ethical and existential difficulty. This would, we suggest, create possibilities to cultivate habits to engage with uncertainty, such as patience and endurance (Biesta, 2017a), that are necessary for the seismic human adaptations required in the 21st century, not least because of climate change, mass migration, artificial intelligence and further pandemic threats, as well as the complexity of everyday relationships.

We begin the paper with an overview of the purpose of foregrounding uncertainty within education, before outlining our methodology for framing, analysing and interpreting the data collection, and then detailing our reading of the collection and the educational possibilities that follow. We conclude by asserting what societies might require of global 21st century schooling which includes also what schools might legitimately ask of society.

LITERATURE: AN EDUCATION FOR UNCERTAINTY

Global education: Assuming certainty, embracing uncertainty

Global models of education, in their bid to promote wider inclusion and to drive up standards to improve quality of life, have become caught in something of a bind, premised on the illusion of certainty. Firstly, such models are based on the assumption of what it is that students need to know now and for the future, which excludes other knowledge and other ways of knowing (Andrews, 2021). Secondly, they make an assumption that knowledge taught can and should be measured and compared, in order to ensure equality of opportunity through the transparency of markers of achievement. This approach is challenged by Biesta (2017b) as only ever being future orientated and concerned with the deferment of how students might engage. What becomes valued is what can be measured, rather than engaging with difficulty, contingency and diversity: all markers of an education for a world in which uncertainty is an 'enduring feature of life' (Novotny, 2016, p.4).

The pandemic is the most recent global societal challenge to foreground the need for an education that can do more than rehearse the certainties of what has gone before. It highlights the need for creative, critical and resilient civil societies, as identified by UNESCO (2016), the OECD (2018) and the European Union (2015) in their calls for education to respond to contexts where solutions are as-yet-unknown. This is not about ensuring an education that supports students to adapt to a fast-changing world, argues Biesta (2021). Firstly, it is important to ask whether there is a need to resist, rather than simply adapt, which demands thoughtfulness. Secondly, much of the world remains unchanged and everyday life includes multiple contexts requiring ongoing consideration and negotiation. Thirdly, students are educated 'in the here and now' (p.11), and educators must work with the present, which, we suggest, includes everyday uncertainties of living with a global pandemic.

The role of the educator: From student to subject

So what is the role of the educator in supporting students to negotiate the uncertainty of the pandemic in their lives? For Biesta (2021), she must draw students' attention to the present so that they 'can encounter the world, can encounter themselves in relation to the world, and can explore what it means to exist in and with the world' (p. 51). Being taught is not about what is desired but comes from elsewhere and always involves an 'interruption' (p. 59) in which the student is summoned to encounter, attend to and experience the world and their own subjectness in relation to it. Core to a 'world-centred education' (p. 70) are revelatory possibilities, where 'the leading question here is not what I might want from the world, but ... what the world is asking from me' (p. 91).

Such encounters are not about engaging with what-is-already-known but are inherently uncertain: the summoning call is beyond our control and the response is unknowable in advance. Biesta emphasises that interruptions are an inevitable part of life, and do not necessarily emanate from a human educator. His post-human (i.e., more-than-human) reading of the possibility, and indeed desirability, of the interruption, includes the nonhuman, the material and nonmaterial. Post-humanism has a broad focus on the everyday and momentary interconnections between nonhuman and human materiality, including how humans emerge from their relationship with everyday encounters with the world. The pandemic is an extreme example of interruption, both in its unpredictability and its shared global threat and rupture to everyday routines. In this paper, we are concerned with the possibilities for students encountering the interruption of the pandemic. We translate what might be read from the collection into the education sphere, with a discussion of the role of the educator who is interested in the student as subject.

METHODOLOGY: REGISTERING UNCERTAINTY

The collection: Children and young people's diaries, letters and drawings

The collection draws together data from 112 children and young people (see Table 1 below) from two sources. The first, a research project conducted by Villani (a Swiss researcher of Italian origin, based in Brazil at the time of the study), includes letters and drawings from 62 children and young people in Belgium, Brazil, Cuba, France, Italy, Mozambique, Switzerland and Thailand,

TABLE 1 Participants' country, gender and age, and the language of their texts

Country	Gender			Age (years)				Total (N)	Text language
	Female	Male	Not known	4–6	7–11	12–17	Not known		
Belgium	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	French
Brazil	2	4	0	0	6	0	0	6	Portuguese
Cuba	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	2	Spanish
France	6	4	0	1	8	1	0	10	French
Italy	2	2	0	1	3	0	0	8	Italian
Mozambique	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	Portuguese
Switzerland	2	4	0	5	1	0	0	12	French
Thailand	24	7	0	8	18	5	0	31	Thai/English
United Kingdom	24	21	5	3	21	22	4	50	English
TOTAL (N)	62	43	5	18	62	28	4	62	

produced early in the pandemic (March to July 2020). She utilised existing research networks to support the recruitment of participants online (Facebook and partner websites). The final sample reflects those teachers and parents across different countries who responded to the call; higher numbers were recruited in Thailand where the research was more actively promoted through a publishing house. The children were asked to describe their home, a typical day at home, what they see through the window, emotions (including fears) and what they imagined post-pandemic to be, but in Thailand the instructions were to write or draw on a blank sheet, with no prompt questions. The second project drew on 50 diaries, selected randomly by Kirby and Webb (UK researchers), from those submitted to the Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex) on 12 May 2012,[1] as part of a national annual call to 'document' lives on that day, including an instruction that diaries could be written in any style and could include drawings (individual numbers for all cited participants from this dataset are included). Diarists responded to a well-publicised call, including through school networks. In the study, all primary carers and children gave their informed consent to participate and personal data is anonymised.

At the time of the research, high levels of uncertainty ensured diverse pandemic experiences. Government issued lockdowns limiting movement outside the home were in force across the countries in this study, although specific strictures differed and in Switzerland this was guidance only but still widely followed. Research participants had experienced varying lengths in lockdown, as these began at different points between January and March 2020. All were expected to do their schooling from home, but there will have been large variability globally and locally in access to the internet and educational support. Systemic and structural inequalities will also have shaped families' possibilities for engaging with children's COVID-19 queries and feelings, for example with regard to issues such as time poverty, heightened economic insecurities, as well as access to home-schooling resources (e.g., technology, gardens).

What is known about the writers and illustrators is their age, gender and geographic location, but not, for example, their social class or race. Methodologically, however, this 'lack' of information becomes an analytic affordance. Rather than analysing this material in terms of the children's capital and skills, we pursue a Rancière (1991) logic that is necessarily ignorant of (most) pre-figured structural factors, reflecting our more-than-human sensibility. We do not dismiss

material inequality, but rather act conceptually as if equality were true 'to see what follows from it' (Biesta, 2017c, p.64). We acknowledge that we can never entirely erase what we know in order to focus on the text and image, and therefore we share what is known is about the gender, age and country of participants cited in the paper.

The study does not aim to be representative. Instead, it is illustrative of how those who were able and willing to participate in the study-registered uncertainty, including examples common across diverse country contexts, with the aim of exploring possible educational implications.

Registering the pandemic

Addressing onto-epistemological challenges posed by the principles of the 'more-than-human', we draw on Scoones and Stirling's (2020) work on the politics of uncertainty in the Global South, with its different categorisation of dimensions of uncertainty that expanded our focus on how the pandemic might be engaged with and experienced in the collection. We coded all data using four slightly adapted categories, that we call 'registers' of uncertainty:

- Practices and Materiality (everyday activities, undertakings and resources);
- Existential and Ethical (values, questions and concerns accorded to making meaning of life);
- Knowledges (multiple and diverse sources including epidemiological, local and governmental);
- Affects and Embodiment (associated with senses, feelings, imaginaries and bodies).

In our analysis, the first two registers became foregrounded. Within the telling and showing of everyday practices (which interact with diverse materialities) and existential and ethical concerns, were entangled diverse knowledges and multiple affects and embodied engagement. We have therefore structured the paper around the two dominant registers, with the others interwoven into these discussions.

Care was taken in the analysis to ensure equal attention to the works of all participants, including the youngest who tended to produce more drawings and shorter texts. Not all groups are included equally in the cited examples in this paper, however. We have selected those that are illustrative of different registers in the collection, rather than aiming to be representative of the range of experiences within each age, gender or country.

In our analysis, we paid close attention to the material and discursive composition of the writings and drawings, including the interrelations (and any contradictions) between the text and images. This included a focus on what is being shown and how, including the content (topic/people/objects); grammar, narrative styles and tropes; colour, size and spatial organisation of compositions. Equally, we attended methodologically to the overall effect of our own encounter with the works, an aspect of analysis which is in part 'intuitive' (Rose, 2013, p. 73), and required a process of attending to the participants' 'creative force' that might surface other ways of being, doing and knowing in relation to pandemic uncertainties (Davies, 2014, p. 32). As a research team, we shared and discussed our observations and responses, while verifying these through reference to the texts/drawings. We aimed to 'read what the language is doing, not guess what the author was thinking; how to take in evidence from the page, not seek a reality to substitute for it' (Johnson, 1988, p. 68; cited in Dunne, 2016, p. 21).

The UK diaries and the wider global writing/drawings were analysed separately at first. For data collected in different cultural contexts, researchers with local knowledge provided translation and collaborated in interpretation through discussion of context and nuance of meaning.

The two datasets were then analysed together, paying attention to their resonance and dissonance. The process disrupted and unsettled the close identification of the researchers to the texts produced in their own contexts. It offered the possibility of shifts between the micro-analysis of two researchers (Kirby and Webb) working with the specificity of one country context, and the wider angled lens of the researcher (Villani) working with data from diverse contexts. The analysis, informed by wider educational literature on uncertainty, identified educational implications that are explored in the 'Discussion' section.

The writers and illustrators had access to the socio-cultural capital that connects them to the research and supports their participation. We know nothing else about the wider discourses or pedagogic conditions under which the collection was produced, except what is revealed in the collection and our broader knowledge of global education, and relevant political and pandemic contexts. We do not know how much others (e.g., teachers, carers and siblings) are present and might shape what is contributed to the collection. In some instances, diaries submitted to the Mass Observation study indicate that they were completed as part of a school literary assignment. We see the collection as an apparatus (dispositif) that catches the writers' and illustrators' gaze at the time of the pandemic, including 'literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings' (Agamben, 2009, p. 24). Our approach recognises that the collection is borne out of sets of writing and drawing practices that vary across socio-cultural, technological and governmental ways of doing things. In this sense, the dispositif can act as a 'system of constraint' (Foucault, 1980, p. 197). Nonetheless, our aim is to focus on the dynamics of the collection to exemplify encounters with pandemic uncertainties. We emphasise varied 'possibilities' for children and young people and describe what the 'collection' might reveal rather than categorically determining what it does reveal. We do not suggest a universal experience of the pandemic or analyse how the diversity of experience is structurally configured across different categories of participating children and young people. We ask what this framing might tell us about what students need educationally to engage with global uncertainties.

THE COLLECTION: ENGAGING WITH PANDEMIC UNCERTAINTY

Everyday practices and materialities

Domestic practices: Foregrounding the relational, material and the playful

Foregrounded in the collection, are everyday embodied practices that engage with material artefacts offering physical and creative opportunities around the home. They include playing and gaming; crafting and listening to music; cooking and eating; gardening; walking, cycling and exercising; and using technology to keep in touch with friends and family. The heartfelt reflection, below, offers an exemplar of the possibility for the drama and excitement of such domesticity, as well as capturing the breadth of everyday domestic practices and materiality that infuse the collection. We see the value placed on time spent with loved ones (including celebrations); a slow attention to one's locale; as well as careful navigation of Covid-19 mandates and all that follows, such as where to play and how to maintain contact with others. Cooking and food are frequently mentioned in the collection, evoking as it does below the relational and social, as well material sensory

qualities. The expression of such activities contrasts with schoolwork: often presented as though in parenthesis, and therefore necessary but unwelcomed (see 'School Work' in a later section).

> In the morning the first thing I saw as I looked was really amazing, out the window was a truck lifting up the old deserted car on my road, my heart was beating fast because I thought the machine was going to drop it on our car. I am not making this up, trust me. So after all of that excitement, I had to sit at the table to do my schoolwork. A hundred sums and English questions later, I had finished my work for the day. Then I went outside in my garden to play football, I would go to the park but because of lockdown we are only allowed out once a day and the park is too busy and not that essential. After about an hour we came back inside and started making chocolate brownies for my birthday in three days. We made them specially because I love them and they are fun to bake, I was really excited. We let them bake and cool down and then the rest of the day was free time and we played and talked to my Auntie from a distance which is one of my favorite[2] times of the day. [137: 10-year-old female, UK]

The functionality of domestic practices can be seen to extend into play. In the letter and accompanying photograph below (Figure 1), the domestic becomes 'game' like, without contradictions between play and necessity, or the concrete and imaginary.

> 'With all my family we do gardening: we remove weeds and we water the plants. From time to time we go to the Couas [river] not far from our house. We take our chickens with us and watch them on camping chairs. With my mum and my 5 year old brother we cook a lot! We also do sewing with the whole family, my mum and dad made masks and I made a blanket, I used the sewing machine. I hand sewed accessories for a Playmobil house because I am very creative!'
>
> <div align="right">(9-year-old female, France)</div>

This child entangles human and nonhuman materiality to create something new. The humans in the picture are small, and are placed in nature without dominating it. It would seem that there is a safely encircled (possibly a family?) unit; two other figures placed higher up the tree have a panoramic perspective, affording a different view to those remaining in the familiarity of the circle. It is this movement, incorporating different perspectives, we suggest, that offers the possibility to avoid simple binaries, including an openness to walk alongside nonhuman animals.

The collection conveys an engagement with a limited range of similar home practices. What makes them worthy of note, however, is that they are narrated with multiple affective tenors, that engage with contradictions and tensions. Feelings are evoked, often in descriptive language, about familial relationships and sensory engagements with everyday worlds. Being at home appears to facilitate a different relationship with time, offering the possibility for contemplation and noticing a whole gamut of feelings, sometimes those that compete. This might include the pleasures of more time at home, while also acknowledging boredom and the difficulties of being without friends and extended family – such as the loss of the sociability of school and time with friends at home, in parks, shops, sports halls and at parties.

FIGURE 1 9-year-old female, France

> My days are going well even if they are a bit monotonous. I'm a bit bored, my dad tries to find ball games or racquet games but the only games we've found so far are badminton, tennis and volleyball.
>
> (12-year-old male, France)

The writing navigates the complexity and strong emotions of spending a lot of time with close family, as well as identifying the hopefulness of new possibilities that comes from the 'quality time together' of different family configurations borne out of lockdown.

> I think that lockdown has two sides: one good side and one bad side. The good side is that you can do things that you couldn't do before. We are less stressed, we can do things together as a family: cycling, games, and so on.And on the bad side: I find that I see too much of my family, so I shout and get angry. Plus you don't see anyone else apart from your family, and sometimes the work is hard and the teacher isn't there. And there are people who are dying. That's my point of view.
>
> (9-year-old female, France)

Lockdown allows the possibility for time to expand and contract in ways that enable liminal ('unproductive') moments to be mined and morphed into different embodied, affective and relational possibilities, with quick games fitted in between schoolwork, for example. The collection conveys multiple comportments that offer the possibility to play with different roles and ways of being together, and to be transport to other spaces and times.

> I have breakfast and sit on the sofa to watch a film. When the movie is over, I do my homework. It's lunchtime, I eat quietly and then I look at the phone. It's afternoon, so I decide to go out for a while with my dogs and my brother. I chat with my best friend and make a video call.
>
> (12-year-old female, Italy)

> I laid on my bed put the tv on and stare into space for a while wondering what I'd do if we weren't in lockdown.
>
> (112: 11-year-old female, UK)

In the collection, there appears to be a particular relationship with lockdown time that allows for the noticing of the mundane, including surfacing of unconscious meanings into language. This might emerge through the (slow) embodied practices of writing and drawing: creative methods are ways of engaging with uncertainty, and the collection demonstrates nuanced engagements with complexity, rather than only describing days. The writing, for example, draws on diverse literary practices, including grammars for indicating uncertainty, such as verbs ('I hope that everything will go back to normal') and the subjunctive ('if we weren't in lockdown. ... '); utilising apocalyptic genres (discussed later); engaging repetition, punctuation and illustrations for emphasis; and deploying humour. This includes ironic echoing of government directives: 'Hey. ... clownfish, stay away! - It is said that the dignity of our nation must be preserved by 1. Wash your hands 2. Wear a mask 3. Keep a distance of 2 meters'

(10-year-old male, Thailand). There are also examples of nuanced wit that plays with contradictions, such as mockery, embracing the tenderness of the relational: 'old bald one (my dad)' (135: 15-year-old male, UK).

Reflective practices: Finding new ways

The slowing of time allows for the type of reflection that amplifies the complexity of feelings. For some this includes an awareness of their capacity, pleasure and investment in 'finding ways to do things' in lockdown (139: 15-year-old female, UK). The collection mentions diverse forms of adaptation including finding ways to keep family tensions running low and the 'drive somewhere in me' to continue exercising (139: UK). There is acknowledgement of the challenge, but also a hopeful recognition of this process of adaptation of finding ways to reconfigure the world:

> On writing this, I realise looking back that the lock down, how at times it has been very frustrating and confusing, but I am reminded this morning just how much my family and I have adapted.
>
> (141: 10-year-old female, UK)

Such adaptation is not simply about learning 'many new things like cooking, washing up and many other domestic activities' (9-year-old male, Brazil) or only about developing skills involved in trying to 'figure things out on my own (since we don't have teachers around)' (138: 11-year-old female, UK). It is about an independence of thought and action, and the possibility for 'pedagogical subjectivisation' (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, p. 156): the recognition of one's equality to figure things out and to come to a unique position in an unforeseen context with an unknown future.

> I, personally, have enjoyed being in lockdown. It has allowed me to self-reflect, become more independent, and most of all realised how annoying my family is. School work has kept me busy and active along with playing video games, decluttering my room and practicing more football.
>
> (134: 14-year-old female, UK)

The collection suggests sustenance through creative, physical and playful activities, including making kits, exercising, gaming and following food recipes. These activities shift between modes: rules must be followed, but uncertainties remain about when not to and the consequences. Absorption in activities can also offer solace in a period of pain, including those that may seem 'pointless' and, in current education terms, unproductive:

> 'Life. Life is painful but sometimes peaceful. I spend my time listening the music, watching anime and doing other pointless things just to be at peace with the world and the people on it.'
>
> (166: 14-year-old male, UK)

Time afforded by lockdown offers opportunities to engage in multiple activities together with adults, including exercising, playing and cooking. Such shared (non-instructional) 'common third' activities

are theorised as offering possibilities for shared thinking and exploration, where neither 'know what the outcome will be, but all continue to contribute to it' (Petrie & Chambers, 2009, p. 9).

> On my family games night (which is tonight) we play games as a family. ... Me and my family have tones of conversations it changes a lot from new things to help me and my brother learn then it changes to our new garden so it varies from what comes on our minds first.
>
> (210: 12-year-old female, UK)

The examples above were identified in the UK but not the wider global data. The latter included reference to emotions and practices, but not reflections on these. This might be a function of the letter versus the diary format.

Schoolwork: Onwards and upwards with certainty

There are frequent references to schoolwork undertaken at home and the descriptors deployed are often truncated, using rational language, rather than evoking an affective encounter: 'For Maths I did relative probability and for English I read my book, Noughts and Crosses and I wrote this! For Art I am doing a pop art project and I did a design of toothpaste and a toothbrush out of clay' (146: 12-year-old female, UK). The writing suggests an engagement only with conforming school practices and students' own efforts to fit in with teacher expectations: 'My quarantine days are very uninteresting because every day is pretty much the same. I am in grade 7 and my classes are on the internet. I am trying to use this time to study more for school as it is becoming more difficult' (12-year-old male, Brazil). Many offer a muted reference to practices related to schooling and schoolwork: 'there are no more creative projects. In science, you just read articles. In math, we type numbers on the computer. In Language Arts, you write paragraphs. Sometimes I feel a bit empty' (13-year-old female, Thailand).

A frequent (but not the only) evocation of schoolwork draws on a recognition of school as dull and repetitive: 'BANG it hit me I had two lots of English, a French quiz, a French power point, science, maths, drama and PE. Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!' (112: 11-year-old female, UK). This echoes the '100 sums' in the first section (above). An emphasis in the collection on what has been lost is the lack of relational contact with friends: 'I am 4. I at home. I play and learn. I miss my friends' (202: male, UK). Youthful curiosity and discovery of the 'new' is evoked through references to missed opportunities to meet 'anyone new'. Rarely, the writing suggests a loss of engaging in-person with teachers.

Some writing describes the 'pressure' of school being eased, while other writing references the loss of adequate teacher support: 'I don't really like these classes ... I don't really understand the teachers who give the lessons, but my mother explains them to me' (8-year-old male, Cuba). The following diary evokes the intensity of a day of studying: 'I spend a lot of time doing my homework because it is very important: from 10 AM to 6 PM, then I rarely take a break, and after 6 PM I take a break, correct and send my work to my teachers' (10-year-old female, France). A similar intensity is conveyed below but is contrasted with the womb-like desire for an embodied affective connection, evoking the closeness and idea of family, and a retreat from the pressures of school-life. What is lost is the fast-paced business of school days, but this accommodates a different timbre of thinking, feeling and doing.

> It's a nice interruption from home schooling which can get very tense as we are expected to hand in assignments, I try as best as I can to stick to my timetable as I am constantly worried about falling behind ... I'm looking out the kitchen window. It isn't as sunny today as It has been which in some ways is helpful as I don't want to go in the garden as much as I have wanted to when it is really hot. Although right now I would love to curl up on my sofa and watch a movie with my brother. He keeps going upstairs to play with his toys and my mum is trying to get him to do his spellings. It's hilarious (not for my mum though).
>
> (141: 10-year-old female, UK)

This highlights the affective demands placed on adults to keep children focused on schoolwork. In England, the 'on-task' classroom ensures students do not 'look out of the window for a second' with teachers fearing this signals their failure (Kirby, 2019, p. 5). The gaze through the window, above, connects with recent hot weather, revealing what helps (cooler weather) to be on task, as well as deep desires for sibling love.

In the collection, both the 'fun' and 'hardship' of home schooling are held in tension: 'I liked doing all my learning today and I was feeling mostly happy ... Home-school is quite fun and quite hard work. I would prefer to be back at school' (161: 8-year-old, UK). This extract conveys an affective dimension of schooling in which students are required to adhere to conforming practices. Home can offer the possibility of more familial support: 'In school sometimes I get uncomfortable asking teachers for help because I think that my question might be silly but at home I feel comfortable asking' (146: 12-year-old female, UK). But working alone can be difficult. The following suggests feelings of entrapment where lockdown keeps us in the present: beyond contact with pets nothing supportive is identified:

> School is hard when I am at school and have the teachers there to help me all the time, but now its just insane. I can't concentrate, work Is piling up and my anxiety is increasing. I just want lockdown to be over... I can't leave the house, not even to go to the shops. Because I am in the 'shielded group'. I am starting to get cabin fever in here. I mean, at least I have my bunnies and my cats but still, how long am I expected to survive in this house? I miss my friends, I miss school.
>
> (187: 17-year-old female, UK)

Sticking at schoolwork, not falling behind, and keeping 'one step ahead', comes through strongly in the collection. This emphasis nullifies what it means to learn, because the currency of education is always deferred to the promise of future citizenship. Writing on the cancellation of the national exams conveys feelings of loss:

> 'Unfortunately due to the outbreak all my exams, that I had spent the last 5 years of my academic year preparing for, have been cancelled ... I can't help but feel cheated and angry towards the virus that has taken the most important year of my life so far away from me' (127: 15-year-old female, UK).

There is also the mourning of rituals imbued with traditions of schooling transitions, which celebrate the hard work of schooling but are also marked by their difference to daily classroom practices: 'no prom, no music festival, no graduation, no time to say goodbye' (13-year-old female, Thailand). A deep sadness is conveyed here about missing the end of school rituals overturning the affective paradigm of youth as embracing free time, in the expressed desire to 'return to school'.

In the collection, only one example (below) is given of teachers offering explicit support to navigate the vicissitudes of the pandemic.

> Once a week I get a reminder from my English teacher to 'Keep Reading' and occasionally the head of year encourages us to 'Stay Productive' and 'Be inspired by these unprecedented circumstances' however I think they forget that we have lost our end goal and if we do not receive teaching then we will lose our learning too. (127: 15-year-old female, UK)

Such motivational slogans are disconnected from the embodied and relational practices that foster community resilience. The writing expresses how such messages can be experienced as a metaphorical tightening of the meritocratic ratchet emphasising 'that we are responsible for our fate and deserve what we get' (Sandel, 2020, p.73). The feeling is conveyed of having slipped the minds of teachers and the anxiety of the certainty of the education contract annulled.

EXISTENTIAL AND ETHICAL

Existential engagement: Apocalypse and captivity

The collection grapples with existential questions of life and death, and what this means for how to live (Figure 2). There is mention of relatives infected with Covid-19, questions about how the

FIGURE 2 'Normal, other infected, it's him, dead, sad'. 6-year-old male, Switzerland

virus might affect people, and the responsibility of not infecting others, described as a 'drowning fear of falling ill or passing the virus on to a vulnerable family member' (142: 15-year-old female, UK). A vulnerable body exposed to potential and imminent danger is evoked, with Covid-19 described as something that can 'attack' and 'kill'. The threat is represented as real and daily; it worries adults; it can fall on grandparents or those who have not been 'careful'; and it requires the avoidance of seeing much-loved family members, including parents in blended families, within a world 'in danger' (10-year-old male, France). It requires people to 'stop seeing each other'; 'stop touching each other'; 'stop hugging each other' (10-year-old female, France). The Covid-19 safety 'barrier gestures' are well-learnt and understood as practices that 'protect' people (11-year-old female, Thailand).

There are a few examples in the collection of the apocalyptic, used as literary devises. For example, hailing an audience: 'Today in 2020 we are in lockdown due to apocalypse virus' (13: 13-year-old female, UK). Figure 3 evokes the apocalyptic rupture as harrowing. The accompanying writing explains that the illustrator is unable to see their parent, because of the risk of infection: the agony of separation and fear of parental death is etched onto the drawn child's face, in the presence of a 'zombified' mother figure. The full-colour image of the child (contrasting with the grey-toned parental figure) is sanitising a dangerous world.

FIGURE 3 'The world separates us. Sorry, Mum. I love you very much but we can't live together.' 11-year-old female, Thailand

Communitarian values: Community-cohesion and morality tales

In a pandemic emphasising human risk of transmitting the virus, the collection highlights multiple examples of ethical concerns towards others, as a facet of community-cohesion: 'we help each other, we finish things faster. Anything that is difficult can be solved more easier' (11-year-old female, Thailand). There is an appreciation of the importance of protection, including displays of gratitude for health and charity workers, and individual acts of kindness to promote wellbeing. There are messages of 'listening to each other', 'generosity', 'respect', 'hope' and not giving up (13-year-old female, Thailand). An attention to those suffering or less fortunate comes through in the collection.

> A man is unemployed and homeless. He lives in an open space by the sea. He fishes every night. Last night, people in my neighbourhood had a problem because they have no electricity for 8 hours. This man lives without electricity every day.
>
> <div align="right">(11-year-old female, Thailand)</div>

Some writing engages in big questions faced by governments on how to balance life and death in the easing of lockdowns. There are some insights that things are far from 'simple', recognising the paradox of the urgency as well as the contingency of the pandemic that demands a slow and careful response. The language of uncertainty comes through in the quote below, by highlighting 'my theory', which acknowledges that the ideas played with might be 'unrealistic' and that any stakeholder (government or young person) might not have the answer alone.

> I'm worried that the government will ease lockdown sooner and there will be another peak of coronavirus or that when we are rightly allowed to go outside with no cases/ deaths or very few of them that the cases and deaths will rise back up again. Therefore, we will have to live our lives indoors for a very long time, this could be a little bit unrealistic, but it is my theory.
>
> <div align="right">(05: 12-year-old male, UK)</div>

The following statement appears to adopt a more moralising tenor, calling on 'fact'. Contingency, however, is still expressed in the inflective reference to both what it feels like and of having only half the reasons. It illustrates the disruption of a two easy division between certainty of facts and uncertainty.

> I know for a fact that some people here ... don't take this lockdown seriously, still going to parties and meeting up, it feels like they're half of the reason why this is getting so bad.
>
> <div align="right">(197: 16-year-old, UK)</div>

The writing below employs the rhetorical devise of poetic licence that takes the edge off a possible moralising tone by becoming metaphorical, with hints of a parable or fable narrating a warning story of individual pursuit and greed. The writing remains uncertain, with the insertion of the caveat 'maybe' in the penultimate line, offering a generous conceptualisation of the human and her foibles.

> Today I drew a boat.

I think that if the boat were our country, then the passengers would be Thai people.

When the boat faces a storm, all the passengers should hold on tightly to each other.

each other.

If someone is going to fall off, we pull him or her.

If we cheer each other on, the boat will get to the dock faster, and eventually escape the storm.

But there are those who, taking advantage of this difficulty, push the others into the sea to

to have more room.

So the boat rocks.

I think these people are like the people who are taking advantage of this crisis to

to get rich.

Maybe they forget that they are also in this boat.
If the boat runs aground, they also fall into the sea.

<div align="right">(13-year-old girl, Thailand)</div>

Human and nonhuman interconnectedness: The 'normal' and the imagined

Within the collection, some writing stresses a precarious balance between the human and the animal world surfaced during the pandemic. The illustration below (Figure 4) captures a binary in which humans need to be contained in order for animals to thrive. We see the imagined nirvana of Covid-19 nonhuman life, in the absence of human defilement through an enforced isolation and cessation of much activity, which in turn allows animals to thrive and humans to be less sad. What is striking in the image to the left is the reference to the scientific, with a graph and personal protective equipment, in which only the human appears of paramount significance, isolated from the transcendence of the interconnectedness of other life forms in the material world (to the right). Elsewhere in the collection, however, conforming scientific knowledge is hailed as the hope 'to find a vaccine ... so we can save people' (201: 8-year-old female, UK).

    An overriding desire, conveyed in much of the writing, is to return to what is unproblematically conceived as 'normal'—'I would like life to go back to the way it was before' (9-year-old male, Belgium)—along with concerns of not knowing 'what will the new normal be after that?' (142: 15-year-old female, UK). Figure 5 offers something by way of response to this question, conjuring an imagined global circle of human harmony.

FIGURE 4 'The sky is cloudless, the water is transparent, rinse, the heart with fog.' 13-year-old female, Thailand.

Solace is sought in the ambivalent possibility that changes brought about by the pandemic cannot endure. However, the writing below engages with the contingency and temporal evolving nature of the pandemic: in so doing, it hints at the seemingly unpredictable shifts in the normal, whilst foregrounding the perpetual importance of the material and the relational. What comes through is the suggestion that the scientific chlorine, which is designed to protect human health, is also a threat. This tension offers another example of contrasting imaginaries in the collection that highlight the human as both saviour and destroyer of planet earth.

> At first I used to dream strange things, one day I dreamt I was living in the US with my dad, another day I dreamt he was pouring chlorine on my hands, now I dream I'm walking on the beach or in the pool with my family and friends.
>
> (8-year-old male, Cuba)

DISCUSSION: EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE COLLECTION

In the pandemic collection, we see the educational possibilities afforded by a time when children were out of school. We consider below the implications of this for the teacher working with

FIGURE 5 'New normal', 7-year-old male, Thailand

students in pandemic and post-pandemic schooling contexts, including the types of adaptations that might be introduced for 21st century schooling.

Firstly, we suggest the collection emphasises the value of acknowledging the present, and students' experiences of the world as it is now, as well as what they might learn in preparation for an imagined future. This allows for the contingency, particularity and diversity of life experiences, including within a pandemic. This might mean giving greater priority to the embodied, affective and relational practices that allow alternative (and necessary) forms of socialisation, such as cooking, play, creativity and being in the outdoors. These can become marginalised in national curricula that respond to globalised learning metrics emphasising core subjects that are more easily measured and compared. Reigniting and transforming domestic practices into schooling spaces can help to create a richer diet evoking deeper relations and a range of feelings, including satisfaction, enjoyment and challenge, where moments of boredom can be the catalyst for something new and unexpected.

Secondly, the collection suggests that there might be scope for schools to move sometimes to a slower tempo to allow ontological possibilities for students to be different: supporting shifts that happen in the moment but that might sustain and continue into the new present and new future. This includes a shift away from the dominant 'ethic of mastery and self-making' (Sandel, 2020, p.41): to allow for a way of growing sideways, rather than 'straight' up into promised futures that may be disappearing (Stockton, 2009).

Thirdly, the collection suggests the relevance of teachers supporting students to navigate their desires and fears, including those evoked against a backdrop of government lockdown and afterwards when transitioning back into school. This includes ensuring students are required and supported to stick with difficulty, to endure boredom and challenge, and to give their desires and fears a 'reality-check', in order to shift what the student might be and do in any given moment

(Biesta, 2021, p. 100). For example, by engaging students in reflecting on the implications of an easing of lockdown where the strictures become more ambiguous and drawing their attention to their own subject-ness when considering how they might live with others under such conditions.

Fourthly, the collection identifies the beginnings of a language for expressing uncertainty (e.g., I believe; if we were) that might be extended, in tandem with increasing opportunities to identify, verify and deliberate different sources of knowledge.

Finally, there is a role for the teacher to engage students in ethical, existential and spiritual concerns, that encourage them to engage more deeply with tensions, doubts, contingencies, inclusions and exclusions. This builds on a recognition that even young children already grapple with such concerns in ways that extend beyond the immediacy of everyday individuated lives. The teacher's role in requiring a reality-check can be supported by diverse philosophical, literary, scriptures, political or other texts and alternative cultural practices that might offer alternative narratives and sensibilities beyond the normative. The teacher might, for example, draw on dominant themes of communitarianism, such as the power of the collective, in mainstream environmental politics, religious ethics and contemporary teen fiction, such as The Hunger Games, which offers a vision of solidarity that might replace the 'disintegrating neoliberal dystopia' (Fisher, 2012, p.33).

References to environmentalism in the collection perhaps evidences a political consciousness, offering further possibilities to engage students more deeply with ways to live differently in the world. This could be extended into a pedagogy of religious education, for example, that engages existentially in ways that emphasise 'intellectual humility' (Biesta & Hannam, 2019, p.184) and utilise 're-imagining' as an educational practice to remove the self from the centre of one's own existence. This offers the possibility for young people to experience agentially an emerging new normal from the pandemic, and an emerging new normal under the threat of climate change: not as something that is being done unto them, but where they are supported to consider how they want to exist in such a world, together with others. Rather than framing the 'new normal' as retreating unquestioningly once more into the taken-for-granted or else being overly idealistic, students can be encouraged to reflect on what a process of transformation might entail. This is where children and young people can explore the possibilities for supporting the engagement of connecting the uniqueness of the 'I' with the enormity of existence and humanity beyond oneself:

> I am 15 years old, I live in a small village in England and I am living through a global pandemic that has changed the life of millions of people.
>
> (124: 15-year-old, UK)

CONCLUSION

Whilst small-scale, this study yields rich insights and a strong empirical reminder for the need to re-engage with the question of what society requires of global schooling in the 21st century. Crucially, it foregrounds how children are already engaging with uncertainties, of which we have a heightened sense through the prism of the unexpected, dramatic quality and global reach of the pandemic. What becomes evident in this study, is that there is an urgent need for an educator to support students to stay with, endure, question and wrestle with uncertainties, while also continuing to share certainties of what is already known. This offers the possibility for students' subjectness to appear through the on-going positing of the question of 'what the world is asking from me' (Biesta, 2021, p.91). The paper contributes examples of how teachers might teach to allow for such possibilities building on existing literature that engages conceptually with the purposes of education.

Engaging with uncertainty requires teachers to make a shift, something that remains a challenge within an education system premised on certainty. If society requires a wide-ranging pedagogic repertoire, what then can the school legitimately ask of society? Our reading of the collection suggests a response: during a pandemic a broad public consensus makes it is possible to shift and change gear: to slow down (as well as to speed up), in order to register uncertainties more deeply, as necessary to exist and act in the everyday.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data is available from the Mass Observation Archive www.massobs.org.uk.The other global data is not open access.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Mass Observation Archive specialises in material about everyday life in Britain, including material collected since 1937. See: http://www.massobs.org.uk/

[2] Note: we use original spelling and grammar.

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