

Strategy as learning in a crisis situation in education: Is there evidence of identity as a core component of strategy as learning in schools?

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY)

Open Access

Baxter, J., Floyd, A. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2008-7831> and Morales, A. (2025) Strategy as learning in a crisis situation in education: Is there evidence of identity as a core component of strategy as learning in schools? *School Leadership and Management*, 45 (1). pp. 53-83. ISSN 1364-2626 doi: 10.1080/13632434.2024.2424281 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/119084/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2024.2424281>

Publisher: Routledge

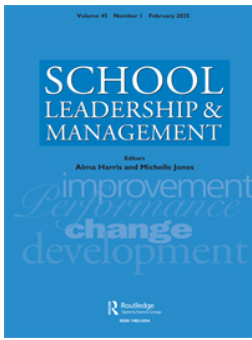
All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Strategy as learning in a crisis situation in education: is there evidence of identity as a core component of strategy as learning in schools?

Jacqueline Baxter, Alan Floyd & Andres Morales

To cite this article: Jacqueline Baxter, Alan Floyd & Andres Morales (2025) Strategy as learning in a crisis situation in education: is there evidence of identity as a core component of strategy as learning in schools?, *School Leadership & Management*, 45:1, 53-83, DOI: [10.1080/13632434.2024.2424281](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2024.2424281)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2024.2424281>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Dec 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 321



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Strategy as learning in a crisis situation in education: is there evidence of identity as a core component of strategy as learning in schools?

Jacqueline Baxter^a, Alan Floyd^b and Andres Morales^c

^aDepartment of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK;

^bUniversity of Reading Ringgold Standard Institution, Reading, UK; ^cThe Open University Business School – Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, Department of Public Leadership and social Enterprise, The Open University, Buckinghamshire, UK

ABSTRACT

Since the Covid-19 pandemic struck, schools across the world closed, either periodically or over a considerable time. The OECD reports that during this period, globally, over 1.2 billion children were out of the classroom. As a result, schools moved part or all of their curriculum online, teaching remotely via digital platforms. Evidence suggests that for digital learning to be successfully integrated into schools, it requires the support and vision of school leaders to create a digital strategy. Our previous research into strategy in schools illustrates that there is substantial evidence that leaders' strategising closely adheres to a strategy as learning model, which appears to link to leader identity. Based on prior empirical work alongside other evidence from the field, this paper explores whether there are links between strategy as a learning activity during a crisis, and leader identity. The paper reveals that there is evidence within this study to support this link. However, this can imply that, whilst there is evidence to suggest this can be a positive influence, there is also evidence that leaders can resist productive innovation due to deep-seated beliefs linked to their identities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 April 2024
Accepted 17 October 2024

KEYWORDS

Digital learning; England; schools; strategy; leadership identity

Introduction and background

Since the Covid-19 pandemic struck, schools across the world, in response to policy directives, closed, either periodically or over a considerable time. According to the OECD (2021), globally, over 1.2 billion children over this period were out of the classroom. As a result, schools moved part or all of their curriculum online, teaching remotely via digital platforms.

CONTACT Jacqueline Baxter  Jacqueline.baxter@open.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Before then, there was already an increasing trend in the adoption of digital learning in schools, with global EdTech investments reaching 18.66 billion US dollars by November 2020 (Insider, 2021), and the overall market for online education projected to reach 350 billion dollars by 2025. Since Covid-19, the uptake of online products and platforms has surged (OECD, 2021 in Baxter, Floyd, and Jewitt 2022). Whilst integrating digital learning into classroom practice has been on the policy agenda in the UK since the early 1980s, it was not until the mid-1990s with the emergence of the concept of a global information society, that it gained momentum. (Younie 2006). The new Labour government of 1997 launched the UK's first national ICT strategy, with the flagship initiatives of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and the New Opportunities Fund (NOF). Yet 22 years on, despite billions of pounds worth of funding, schools are still struggling with the five key areas outlined as problematic when the ICT in Schools Programme was established: 'management, funding, technology procurement, ICT training and impact on pedagogy' (Younie, 2006, 385). In short, the full integration of digital learning into secondary schools in England has not lived up to early initiatives. One reason is that some teachers and headteachers are not convinced that digital learning leads to improvement of learning outcomes for all students – a fact supported by the effects of digital poverty on inclusion and equity, brought into stark relief by research carried out in schools during lockdown (Crick 2021; Rouleson et al. 2021).

Because it has been so difficult to state whether digital learning improves learning outcomes, it is perhaps unsurprising that some leaders have been cautious in embedding it into their plans for the future. But what does emerge clearly from the literature is that in order for it to be successfully integrated into schools, it requires the support and vision of school leaders to create and sustain a culture of digital learning (Eickelmann 2011). For this to happen, it requires a strategy for digital learning (Brooks and McCormack 2020). As leaders are responsible for creating (in consultation with their governors), strategy and have a great deal of influence in the direction of schools, we argue, as several studies suggest, that identity is a key component of strategy as learning, and is worthy of further investigation (Chia and Holt 2006; Fenton and Langley 2011; Oliver 2015). This paper extends previous theoretical and empirical work in this area (Baxter and John 2021), by specifically investigating the link between strategy as learning and the identity of the strategist leader.

English education

Education is an area which internationally has become increasingly decentralised over the last 40 years. Globally, and particularly in Western contexts, bureaucratic forms of governing have shifted to forms of networked governance in which public services and schools in particular, are governed 'at arm's

length' via a constellation of, targets, high stakes inspection and forms of management derived from the new public management techniques of the mid-1980s (Baxter and Cornforth 2018). The last 20 years have seen a radical shift in the English state secondary education sector with the majority of schools converting (whether by choice or statute) to academy status; this follows a range of government policies which have been implemented in an attempt to reduce state monopoly of education and allow for schools to operate in a purported liberal arena of market competition (Greany and Higham 2018).

In England (education is devolved in the UK), academies-state sponsored schools with budgetary and curricular independence-were introduced by the Labour Government to improve standards in poor-performing inner London schools (Woods, Woods, and Gunter 2007). The Education Act 2010, devised by a Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition, placed pressure on all schools to convert to academies, or join a Multi Academy Trust (MAT). MATs are groups or federations of state-funded academies that have grouped or been grouped together in order to rationalise resources and improve standards in education. There is no conclusive proof that this is the case, with many researchers arguing that MATs undermine the democratic purpose of schools, removing them from community control and influence (Baxter and Cornforth 2018), whilst not improving standards in education (Research, 2020). Academies and MATs are part of a constellation of differing forms of school, but in 2023 over 55% of all schools in England were part of MATs; 2000 MATs with 7600 academies, out of 10,000 academies (DfE 2023).

Strategy and the effectiveness of strategy creation has gained increased prominence in the research on school leadership, in order to achieve long and short-term objectives: it has also emerged as a problematic area in large MATs due to their size and scale.

Our previous research into strategy in MATs (Baxter and Floyd 2019; Baxter and John 2021) illustrates that there is substantial evidence that MAT leaders' strategic planning closely adheres to a strategy as learning model, consisting of five elements, as featured in Figure 1. This paper explores one of the questions arising from this and other work in the field, in relation to whether creating strategy is linked to the identity of the school leader-the strategist.

This study is unique in carrying out empirical work that investigates leader identity in relation to strategy creation during and after a crisis. It takes as its starting point, the idea that strategy creation is a learning/schema-based activity (Baxter and John 2021; Casey and Goldman 2010). Specifically asking: Is there evidence to suggest that school leaders' strategy making changed according to changes in their core beliefs, metacognition, and therefore identity, as a result of covid19? What are the implications of the results of this study on literature on strategy as learning as a schema-based identity work approach?

We begin by examining strategy making in times of crisis, before going on to explain our theoretical approach, methods and sample. In common with

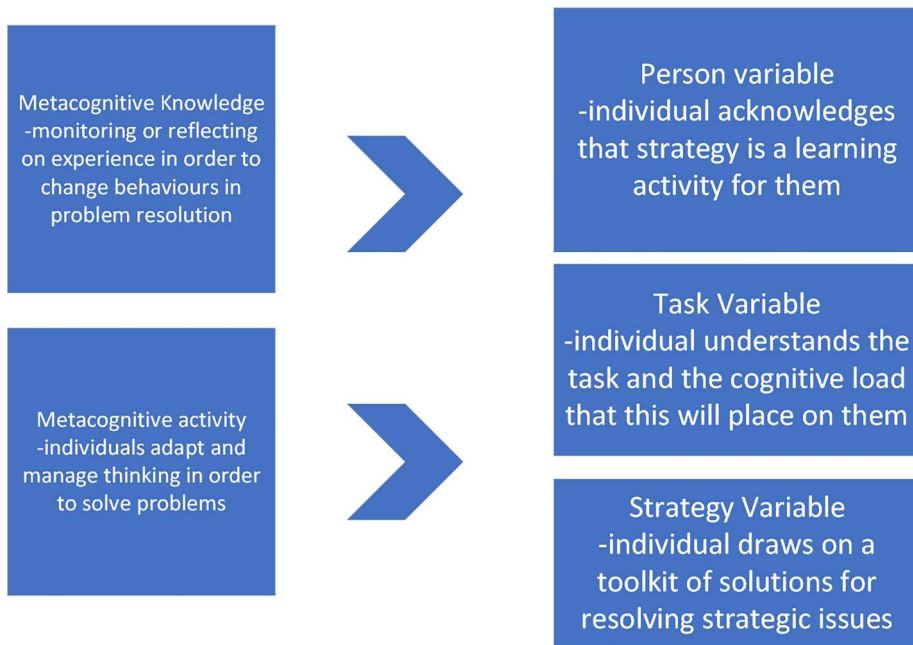


Figure 1. Components of strategy as learning (Baxter and John 2021).

narrative convention, our next section merges a discussion with our findings, before moving to the concluding section of the paper.

Strategy making in times of crisis

During times of crisis, research suggests that leader strategic planning undergoes significant transformations compared to normal circumstances. Crises introduce unique challenges that demand swift and adaptive decision-making. Leaders must navigate uncertainty, mitigate risks, and ensure organisational survival (De Oliveira et al. 2023). Several key aspects in the literature, distinguish strategy making during times of crisis, from activity during ‘normal times.’ Firstly, the urgency and intensity of decision-making increase exponentially: leaders must make critical decisions under time pressure, with limited information and heightened stakes (Grøn, Bro, and Andersen 2020): the need for agility and the ability to adjust strategies quickly become paramount (Wooten and James 2008). Secondly, crisis situations demand a heightened focus on risk management and contingency planning. Leaders must assess and rapidly anticipate potential threats, vulnerabilities, and disruptions (Fleischer 2013). Strategies are therefore designed to mitigate risks, ensure organisational continuity, and protect the wellbeing of employees, stakeholders, and the organisation as a whole (Kim 2021).

Collaboration and coordination too, become essential during crises. Leaders need to foster collaboration across departments, leverage external partnerships,

and engage relevant stakeholders to collectively address challenges and find innovative solutions (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010). This collaborative approach ensures a broader perspective and collective intelligence to inform strategy making. It also demands a reflective mindset, on lessons learned, adjusting strategies based on new insights, and integrating these learnings into future planning. (Noordegraaf and Newman 2011)

The Covid19 global pandemic was such a crisis: a period in which rapid decision-making, risk management, transparent communication, collaboration, and a learning-oriented approach, were needed, in order to successfully manage the lockdown and the period immediately following the lockdown. In subsequent lockdowns, schools shifted to online learning, accelerating the adoption of digital education that was already on the rise in some schools.

Schema-based strategy as learning and its links to identity

There is a vast literature on strategy and its creation, and our previous work in this area sets out in detail, our rationale for approaching strategy creation as a learning activity. This is one of a number of conceptual approaches that fall under the umbrella of strategy practice (Fenton & Langley 2011; Vaara and Whittington 2012). The Strategy as Practice approach conceptualises strategy not merely as a high-level plan, but as something that happens through the day-to-day activities of organisational members. This perspective, pioneered by scholars like Whittington, emphasises that strategy is shaped by the routines, rituals, and actions of individuals at all levels of an organisation (Whittington 2006). It views strategising as a social practice, influenced by the micro-actions of individuals, which collectively contribute to the broader strategic outcomes. This approach argues for the importance of understanding these practices, to fully grasp how strategies are actually formed and implemented in real-world scenarios. Within this concept, strategy is informed by sensemaking and constantly in flux. This is in direct opposition to other understandings of the concept, many of which are outlined in Mintzberg's seminal book, which conceptualise strategy as a plan, or resource-based activity in which competitive advantage is gained via maximisation of organisation-specific resources (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 2005).

Within the strategy as learning school, the term schema, first used by Bartlett in 1932 in relation to his work on perceptual experience, has been widely adopted in the field of social psychology (Janoff-Bulman 1989, 81). A schema is the processing of new information via an existing framework of understanding. For example, a school leader approaching a crisis situation will engage their own schema in order to understand how to proceed. Schemas are key to sensemaking and strategy creation, from a strategy as learning perspective, in lending structure to experience (Holt and Cornelissen 2014; Weick 1988).

Along with schemas, agency is also a key element in the strategy as a learning approach: This assumes that when individuals transform their knowledge and abilities into action, the transformation is mediated by their belief in their capacity to transform (Bandura 1977). This is important in relation to strategy in a crisis, as it has been found to link with; persistence in the face of obstacles; effective control of thoughts that focus on attention to self rather than task; a perception of the environment as controllable; the likelihood of setting higher goals and remain committed to them for longer periods and the increased ability to visualise the future in terms of scenarios of success rather than failure (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 32). A schema is a key component in the formation and evolution of identities, and this process of forming and amending frameworks of understanding has been thought to influence the ways in which leaders carry out their strategic aims (Holt and Cornelissen 2014; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 1988), although there has not been a great deal of empirical work in this area, particularly not in education. In our next section, we outline the links in the literature, between identity work and strategy.

Identity work and strategy

Identity work refers to the active process through which individuals actively construct, maintain, and negotiate their identities in various social contexts. It involves efforts to align personal beliefs, values, and self-perceptions with societal expectations and norms. It is influenced by internal factors such as personal values and motivations, as well as external factors including social interactions, organisational cultures, and societal expectations. This process is dynamic and ongoing, as individuals continually adapt and refine their identities in response to changing environments and life experiences. Identity work is a central concept in sociology and organisational psychology, and it provides valuable insights into how individuals navigate and shape their sense of self within social and professional contexts (Ibarra 1999). Identity work is thought by a number of researchers, to adhere to a strategy as practice approach (Oliver 2015).

As stated earlier, a key part of identity work is the development or adaptation of conceptual schema. The link between individuals' identity and conceptual schema is well established (Brown 2020), along with personal values which inform and shape schema and can also shape strategy (Ashforth et al., 2020). Identity work is therefore an ongoing process, informed by and shaping schema, and which also involves the integration of personal and professional values, beliefs, and behaviours.

In the strategy literature, leader identity has been characterised variously as, 'a strategic resource or asset potentially underlying an organisation's competitive advantage' (Oliver 2015, 333). Oliver's work on identity work as strategic practice identifies three perspectives on the role of identity for strategy,

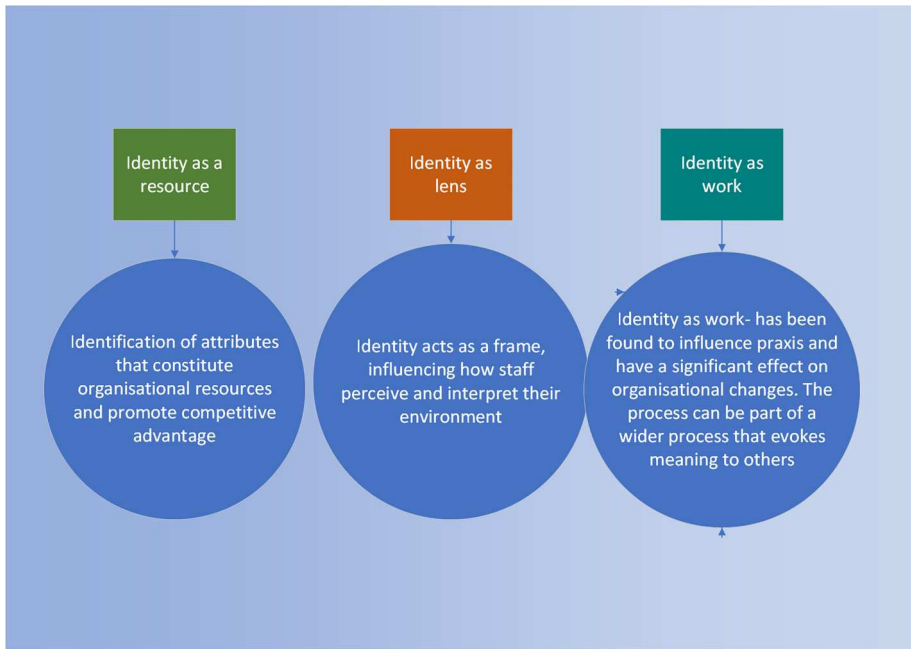


Figure 2. Identity as strategic practice (adapted from Oliver 2015, 334).

outlined in Figure 2. These perspectives address leader identity's, 'mutually shaping relationship with strategic practice' (Oliver 2015, 331). Of the three approaches highlighted in Figure 2, this paper looks to examine the concept of identity as work, in relation to strategic practice. This builds on the work of Johnson, Balogun, and Beech (2010), which examined the identity work of CEOs in relation to their strategic organisational change work. This approach aligns with the sensemaking approach to strategy as learning, in that it possesses the metacognitive element identified as being so important in previous work on strategy as learning (Baxter and John 2021), it also aligns with the strategy as narrative approach outlined in our own work and the work of De La Ville and Mounoud (2010), and illustrated in Figure 2.

Based on this, the study adopts a sensemaking framework to investigate if there is any evidence that strategy making in times of crisis, influences changes to the identity of the creator, articulated via changes to their schema in relation to digital strategy. This builds on and advances our previous work in strategy as learning, along with that of Chia and Holt (2006), in examining this schema change in relation to identity, as a key component in a strategy as learning approach. On this basis, we argue that the four activities of strategy as learning:

Scanning, testing, questioning and conceptualising are based on the existing schema and that in order to adapt these schemas to the crisis, school leaders must understand and acknowledge changes to their identities, through the

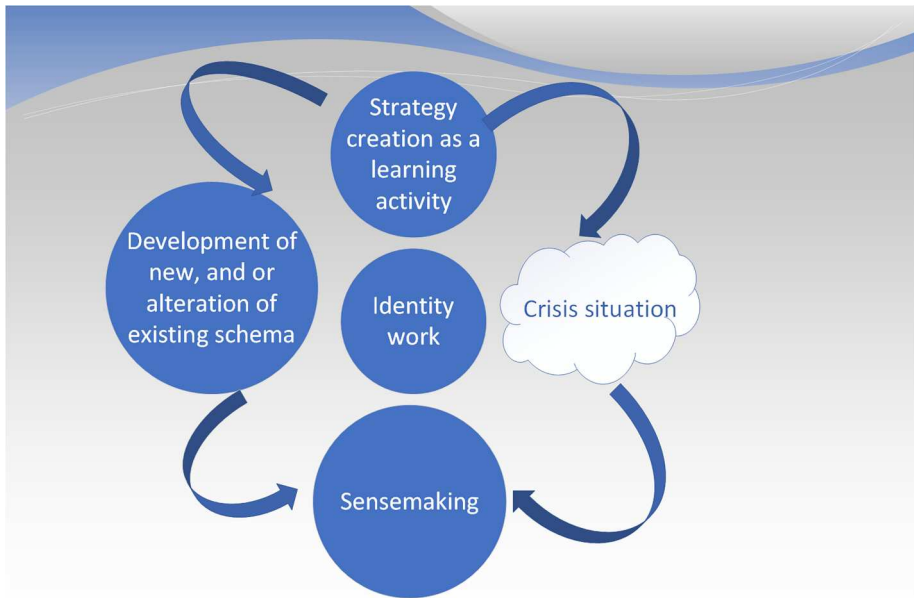


Figure 3. Elements of strategy as learning and identity.

narratives they provide to the researcher (Casey and Goldman 2010; 169 in Baxter and John 2021, 295).

We choose a crisis situation for our focus, as the literature reports that this is a time when the schema of leaders are most likely to change or evolve (Chia and Holt 2006, Brown 2015).

Figure 3 illustrates how our areas of focus fit together for this study.

In what follows, we outline our framework for data examination, our sample and method.

Methods and sample

Following a pilot study, interviews were carried out online using Microsoft Teams with each one lasting between 1 and 1.5 h. The sample consisted of heads of single schools and CEOs of Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) as shown Figure 4. These academies are run by not-for-profit trusts rather than Local Authorities and held to account by contracts held with the central government rather than by the traditional model of school governing bodies. Approximately 40% of the schools were located in areas of high socio-economic deprivation (SED), chosen due to their above-average number of students receiving free school meals (FSM). Participants were recruited through our three school support project partners (Schools North East, Derbyshire Teaching Alliance and The Key for school leaders), and direct approaches via social media. The interview schedule was developed using themes that emerged from an initial

Type of Organisation	Role	Number	Number of schools represented	Abbreviation used throughout
Multi Academy Trust	Chief Executive Officer	4		31 CEO
Community Schools	Headteacher	2		2 CS
Local Authority Schools	Headteacher	22		19 LA
Stand Alone Academy	Headteacher	20		20 SAT
Special School	Headteacher	2		2 SS

Figure 4. Sample.

literature review and from the survey data analysis. These were then peer reviewed by our project partners (all senior educational leaders or researchers) and piloted. The interview schedule is included in Appendix 02.

Sample and design

The data on which this article is based are drawn from an externally funded, two-stage mixed-methods study exploring headteachers' experiences of leading digital strategy before, during and after Covid-19 restrictions in England. In this paper, we focus specifically on data collected from semi-structured interviews.

It should be noted that we refer to organisations throughout the paper, when we wish to capture results from individual schools and MATs. The sample for the interviews is illustrated in [Figure 4](#).

The types of school and their corresponding transcript number are listed in Appendix 4.

Ethics permissions were obtained from all participating universities, in line with BERA (British Educational Research Association) protocols, which included a consent form and information about the project. Online interviews, carried out via Microsoft Teams, were semi-structured, lasted between 1 and 1.5 h and took place between March and October 2021. The school leaders interviewed included both heads of single schools and CEOs of MATs (groups of schools with one executive headteacher along with individual school heads). In total, there were four CEOs interviewed, representing a total of 31 schools in total, 21 of these in areas of high SED. We recognise that strategic management is a key role for trustees and governors, but this project did not consider their views owing to time constraints and the difficulties of contacting governors during Covid. A pilot was carried out in January 2021 and a code book was derived from the researchers, each coding a sample of three scripts within the pilot. This involved all researchers reading and coding each transcript individually, then discussing, merging and reflecting on these codes to form larger categories and emerging conceptual themes, then further analysing these themes by comparing and contrasting them across datasets and with the study's conceptual framework.

We adopted two main coding schemes within the study: The first, we coded for strategy as learning, according to the same framework as we have employed in previous

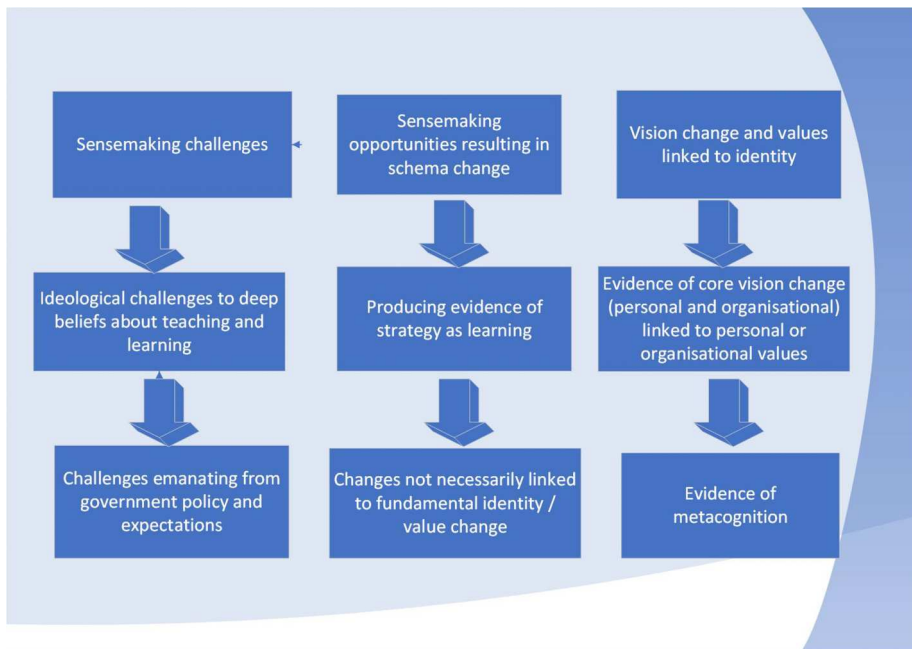


Figure 5. Coding framework for this study.

papers (Baxter and Floyd 2019; Baxter and John 2021), categorising data into the following themes: Person schemas; organisation schemas; object/concept schemas, and event schemas (see Figure 1 earlier in the paper). Our second coding scheme, designed to examine the links between strategy and identity, is outlined in Figure 5. We adopted a narrative approach to data and its analysis, as this worked effectively in similar studies on strategy as learning (Baxter and John 2021; Baxter, Floyd, and Jewitt 2022; Floyd et al. 2023). Once the initial coding was carried out, citations were collated under the three main headings which evidence strategy as a learning activity (sensemaking opportunities, strategy as learning) and strategy as learning links to identity (sensemaking challenges/ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid; vision changes and values), the results of which can be seen in Table 1 in the next section.

Discussion and findings

In line with narrative research techniques, we group together our findings and discussion (Mishler 2000).

Our research looked to investigate two key research questions, which we now respond to, in turn.

- Is there evidence of strategy as learning activity and that suggests that school leaders strategy making changed according to changes in their core beliefs and therefore identity.
- What are the implications of the results of this study on literature on strategy as learning as a schema-based identity work approach?

Table 1. Evidence of links between strategy as learning and identity of leaders.

Sensemaking challenges/Ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid	Sensemaking opportunities – strategy as learning	Vision change and values – core vision change, linked to personal values (identity), and evidence of metacognition
<p>(in relation to Oak Academy) And secondly, and this is my view of a Govian curriculum generally, which is it's all very well to say the best knowledge of da-da-da, but who is choosing? Honestly, some of the lessons are absolute pants. I really was shocked at the lack of quality and the lack of any kind of intellectual depth to them. It's all just so surface and so prosaic. Here you are and now you can go off and do something with it. It's just such a reductive view of the craft of learning and the development that sits underneath it. So, in honesty, no, didn't use any of that. (CEO x due to confidentiality issues)</p>	<p>A big opportunity is shared provision with other schools and trusts. We've collaborated much more and recognised the benefits of working together for both staff and pupils. Where we weren't previously able to offer a particular curriculum subject because of timetable clashes, now we can offer that online and co-deliver with another school. Lots of things will remain online such as parents evenings, assemblies and governor meetings and home learning. Children have improved their skills in independent learning and this has improved home learning and the ability to run flipped learning classrooms (CEO 23)</p>	<p>Looking forward it requires innovation and transformation, but there's been a big emotional impact from 2020, all my staff have been personally impacted. Their wellbeing has been affected and they are exhausted. There's an element of trauma in my workforce and in the community. For all I'd like to develop online learning and not lose the momentum, there's a fine line because staff when they return will look for comfort, they'll want things to go back to how they were because it's a safety net and reassuring. I'm not sure they have the energy for transformation. Everyone is shattered. I question also if I am a good enough leader when the appetite for risk taking is low. Do I have the right skills to inspire staff to continue with online learning. Some worry about online and how it could take their jobs. There's definitely been incubating of different types of provision such as differentiating learning (CEO x)</p>
<p>Well, we always have been to a large extent because it's up to me as the Chief Exec to set the tone whilst keeping Ofsted from the door. And I've always been fairly ... Well, for want of a better phrase, sod them. They're there to do their job but they're not there to tell me how to do mine. But I do think actually, the change will be an empowering one.</p> <p>But if I go back actually to the system, I think some of the ramifications of this in terms of the position of Oak National, the Institute of Teaching, the new Behaviour hubs that have just been announced, suggest an even further march into an expected standard of education which is defined along ideological terms.</p>	<p>There has been some silver linings, for example, building stronger relationships with all our stakeholders. We've been in much more contact with parents. We're a lot more accessible for parents online. Parents evenings, CPD, governor meetings online have all worked well online and will continue. Online has allowed us to work in ways we wouldn't normally and has made us more effective in the engine room of the school, the behind the scenes administration and communication etc. Meetings work so well online, we can quickly get together across the region with other schools really easily when it is online and this has definitely helped us in our strategic planning for online and how it has evolved by talking through issues and problems and sharing ways of how we've done things (CEO 22).</p>	<p>An interesting leadership challenge is to keep up momentum. I need to consider how I embrace online learning moving forward working with online learning. There's so much to consider – 24/7 accessibility, redesign of schooling. It's more than just a school day and homework with online learning. We're not bound to timetables and can build the classroom into homes and bring parents into schooling is powerful for pupils. I'd like to use Artificial intelligence and machine learning much more because the machine can process differentiation quicker than teachers. We can work at scale, more than 30 in class. We can teach whole year group or school using chat bots and have analysis of what we do. We can pace learning and it be much more nuanced than just the teacher. We can pick up wellbeing and motivation but I don't want staff to feel threatened by the technology or feel their job is going to be taken over by a robot, which some do think it has to be carefully managed.</p>

(Continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Sensemaking challenges/ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid	Sensemaking opportunities – strategy as learning	Vision change and values – core vision change, linked to personal values (identity), and evidence of metacognition
<p>Yes. I think the whole point of being a Chief Executive surely is I have a responsibility to speak truth to power. And the truth to power argument for me always rests upon the fact that we are public servants and therefore we subscribe and abide to the Nolan principles. And just because I currently work for a bunch of downs who don't means part of my responsibility is to point out the fact they're not, not to nod away, hoping I get some extra schools as a result of it.(CEO)</p>	<p>I think one of the things I'm most proud of is our pastoral system and how as soon as lockdown happened, we kicked straight into action and it was an army effort – teams creating learning packs, teams printing and packing, teams delivery, teams making phone calls, teams making home visits, teams supporting vulnerable, teams managing calls about logging in and using the systems. In some cases, we were speaking to families on a daily basis, talking through to the child and parents what they needed to work on. Some parents were massively anxious and we had a team for parents to call in talk to. (HT 31)</p> <p>I think we need to take what works well in teaching online and exploit that moving forward. We need to assess its potential Risk management and safety is key and not just in terms of keeping the system locked down and safety but the wider role of the school in supporting and preparing pupils for the real world, like the use of social media, cyber bullying and keeping students safe. We cannot keep them safe by keeping them ignorant. We need to prepare our pupils for the real world. The collaboration with employers that I mentioned earlier is something we have learned is beneficial for pupils. We can use tech to help parents, pupils, staff feel connected (HT 14)</p> <p>Providing a balanced blended approach moving forward is how I see it working and using it for the best of it like group collaborations and building relationships</p>	<p>In many ways, primarily by personalising provision, reimagining schooling. Moving away from one size fits all tyranny and the unit of 30 in a class. We can redesign the whole organisation. Covid has shone a light on schools and shown that they work for those that schools work for, but they don't work for others who either cope or agree to comply or fall out of the system. (CEO 15)</p>
<p>Don't get me wrong, there's often a tension between myself and my board because they know that if I played the game better, we as a trust would be in a better position. But as I point out to them often, if we were in the Olympics and we knew everyone was cheating, it doesn't mean we'd start cheating in order to get on the medal table. We're proud we're just representing in the Olympics, aren't we, that we do it our way?</p>	<p>I think there is real possibility we are developing a shared provision Post 16 between our schools. (Headteacher)</p> <p>I think that we've got to be very careful that we don't allow the notion that there's really good online learning to be a reason for children not to attend school. And if we end up with a massive sense of school refusal and anxiety about coming into school, and an expectation from</p>	<p>I think one of our most interesting areas to explore there at the moment we've got in the trust just one school with sixth form. The others are 11–16 schools. And we've got the other school joining us is a sixth form.</p>
<p>I was, in January, quite concerned at how anxious staff got about having to deliver live learning. And the work they were putting in, 3 h having colleagues plan a 1-h lesson and taking 3 h to plan it, because it was going to be online. And how were they going to do that.</p>		

So, I've been very clear in the message the staff have had, is we need to do what's right for our children.

When I joined this profession in 2002, it's always felt like an additional element. The recent time has made it front and Centre for the learning process and once teachers see the benefits. Everyone – staff and pupils values digital learning skills in a way that they haven't before and then with that came in opportunity to upskill our staff massively. It was that love, that dual combination of them having more time to pursue their own professional development. And I had a real imperative to make those changes

Challenges have been in terms of access to learning, engagement, motivation and managing mental health and wellbeing. Pupils have been worried about grandparents or have been isolating because family members are ill. It's been a tough time. We've had to manage safeguarding. There was also challenges at the start in knowing how to manage safeguarding online and what we could and couldn't do and knowing how to set up the online platform to be safe. (HT 28)

I am genuinely concerned about the breadth of curriculum and opportunity that children would have lost, especially those who are from deprived backgrounds around culture (HT 3)

with those external to the school, utilising the support of employers and other schools. (HT 26)

I won't ever have staff coming into school for parents evenings, governor meetings or on Saturday mornings for classes. All of this can be done online just as effectively. We can offer more GCSE revision classes online. I see it being of real benefit more for the older pupils. I think year 7 need the classroom, but we can utilise it well for independent learning and collaborative learning at GCSE. (HT 14)

Online has allowed us to work in ways we wouldn't normally and has made us more effective in the engine room of the school, the behind the scenes administration and communication etc. Meetings work so well online, we can quickly get together across the region with other schools really easily when it is online and this has definitely helped us in our strategic planning for online and how it has evolved by talking through issues and problems and sharing ways of how we've done things. We've shared what's worked and what hasn't (HT 28)

Online learning has opened up lots of possibilities that we weren't aware of. There are definite positive takeaways from all this. We developed a cross-school online choir during covid and we are in discussion about co-delivering GCSE subjects for small groups where the uptake wouldn't be viable to run face to face. (HT29)

Because so many children have got devices now, we need to keep using them. We've

parents that schools and the system sanctions that and provides remote learning, we need to be very clear that there is no substitute for face-to-face learning. (CEO 4)

I've changed my mind. I think every kid needs to have their own device. So there are some key takeaways off the top of my head. (CEO)

We haven't put any strategies in place yet, but we have the skills and expertise now to put in place for the future. We need to take stock and pick out the best bits. We don't want to lose what we've developed but at the same time online is no substitute for having bums on seats. We believe there's no better place than for children to be in school. Online learning will be built into our disaster recovery and risk planning. (HT 25)

I'd like to recruit a data expert to manage all the data we can now gather from online learning and use this for strategy planning (HT 26)

I think we will now have a blended form of education drawing upon the best of online. I think it's going to lead us to utilise classroom time

(Continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Sensemaking challenges/Ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid	Sensemaking opportunities – strategy as learning	Vision change and values – core vision change, linked to personal values (identity), and evidence of metacognition
<p>So, I'm already thinking about what will our one-year plan, two-year plan, three-year plan be to recapture these lost moments. Because we need to consider that. (HT 3)</p>	<p>got them into this mindset of using it. And how can it compliment their schoolwork, both in terms of a research basis but also web-based etc. How do we develop that learning so it takes the learning into the home and they can do that from home. (HT 4)</p>	<p>more effectively and move things that work better online for home learning (HT 28)</p>
<p>And again, there were still challenges there, as I've mentioned earlier, when you've got young people living in busy homes with several siblings. (HT 50)</p>	<p>And how can we adapt what we've done and what we've got now to make an iteration of where we were at in December and where we're now at in January? And how can the two be blended together into something that we move going forward? There is a chance for us to do some things differently. But the teacher will always be the leader of the learning. (HT 5)</p>	<p>But I think the last year has seen a real move towards better digital literacy. And it will be something we need to harness and develop going forward. (HT 4)</p>
<p>I think we have never more valued the importance of being in a classroom with children in front of you, even being in the classroom, you're stuck in a box at the front of the room where you can't go out and speak to the kids. (HT 8)</p>	<p>I think online learning can open a toolkit up to the kids which would supplement the learning process that we do in school very well. So I think the organisational skills from keeping things organised in Google Classroom, managing their own calendar. I think this is massive. I think we can allow the differentiation of learning in a really low workload way, so I think actually we could reduce staff workload quite substantially through quizzing in forms or whatever app we want to use. (HT 37)</p>	<p>I couldn't comment with any real certainty. But what we have definitely done is we've reflected on where we're at now. And we are saying, right, let's think about schemes of learning, schemes of work, assessment, how is that going to look going forward based on the lessons we've learned from Covid and home learning? (HT 3)</p>
<p>I mean we were dealing with quite a lot of complaints. And I felt and still feel quite unjust comparisons between us as a large state comprehensive and a number of small, private prep schools which were around us. And I think it's a feature of our catchment, particularly around [xxx town], that many of our parents have friends and neighbours and family members that go to the independent sector. (CEO 5)</p>	<p>I think being able to access resources will stay and having more of a dedicated teaching space online learning space for each class will definitely stay and in terms of kind of delivering the live lessons, I'm not sure whether outside of a lock down that will return</p>	<p>I think it will change what goes on in schools. I think there's a real opportunity and a moment for us to reflect on what we are doing and providing. Capacity. If I think of the [xxx] School, capacity for children to learn in a different way. (HT 3)</p>

<p>00:11:59 And everyone understands the pressure that parents have been under. But it was very apparent, certainly in the first lockdown, that these are crude generalisations, but they're based on extrapolating from a number of examples which became quite time-consuming and challenging, where you've got fathers who are suddenly at home with their children and learning.</p>	<p>So, we're actually aiming to have remote education on the side available at all times for those who are either absent for a day or absent for a week or have some other reason why they're at home. And we offer those parents something educational, something valuable that they can work on. It also connects us with our parents really well. Those who engage with online learning support they are actually really grateful for everything we do in school and they are happy to learn more about what we do in school. And I think they're connected better with their child as well.</p>	<p>I see opportunities for us to do more collaboration with schools around the world and to partner with schools. Online opens up a new world to developing global relationships and developing more diverse relationships and learning about other cultures. We've developed a system, we have developed online lessons and resources and we see an opportunity to explore that with other stakeholders and other schools to use it and piggy back on the work we have done. (HT 30)</p>
<p>00:12:24 And who absolutely think that they have incredible knowledge of IT systems and what can be done on the basis of their meetings that they were having online. And felt very able to comment on live learning, often without actually... Some were watching it. But often without experiencing and checking what was on offer. And it was very important to us to be able to go back when people were saying, they only had an hour today. (CEO 5)</p>	<p>es, I think it's going to become a tool to help some of our students engage better in schoolwork. If there is some social anxiety connected to school or school refusal or fear, that can be sorted by doing part-time at home, part-time in school. Or doing some of the work online remotely from a different room in school which is like a step towards actually integrating themselves in school. And it helps them, all of students and staff, develop digital skills, digital literacy, that is really crucial in this day and age. (HT 20)</p>	<p>We're definitely keeping online learning. It will be useful for learners who need to stay home but are well enough to work or if for any reason the school has to close. We'll be keeping in place the flipped model of learning with group work in the classroom. Devices will continue to be used in classrooms. We'd like at least 50% of lessons to be digitally enhanced. We are looking at a BYOD policy and flipped learning within the school infrastructure. (HT 30)</p>
<p>I wonder whether staying at home will increase that and whether they will find it difficult to go back to school and whether there will be a need for online learning to support those pupils? If we say, oh, this kid, bless them, they've got a problem, we can see that, we'll provide online learning. The real sad fact of it is that you're going to get more kids will take the easy option. It's true, isn't it? If we start thinking, yes, we'll do this, that and the other, we'll support you. That sounds great. I've met kids who really do have anxiety issues and you can clearly see there's something not right. (CEO 15)</p>	<p>A long term partnership has been established with schools and local businesses and other stakeholders in the community. We've visited other schools and helped each other and met regularly online. It's collegiate. We help other schools in areas where we are strong and have experience and visa versa. It's about sharing best practice.</p>	<p>I've placed a big emphasis on promoting independent learning skills so that our pupils can become self-directed learners. We've worked with pupils and parents and other practitioners and schools to develop evidence based approaches. We will continue to develop skills in digital literacy for parents, pupils and staff. (HT 31)</p>

(Continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Sensemaking challenges/Ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid	Sensemaking opportunities – strategy as learning	Vision change and values – core vision change, linked to personal values (identity), and evidence of metacognition
<p>We developed an online platform for online and a parent platform to support strong communication with families. We have developed online resources and systems for learning and teaching. We have a curriculum for recovery plan with a focus on engaging pupils not just with learning but also in metacognition and wellbeing. We are measuring and tracking everything.</p>	<p>In our strategy we've made digital technologies the heart of learning and teaching. We've very much painted a positive picture about learning online. We all know we want kids to be in school, but we've shown the positives of online learning that we can continue with and take forward into the classroom. We've shown how it can help to remove barriers – supporting children who are less confident in speaking in the classroom or too shy to say they don't understand or don't want to ask a question. (HT 46)</p>	<p>I want to see how we have a vision in the future and sustainability and guidance on protecting learners. There's lots use free apps and we don't always know where this comes from and where data is going. Teacher training needs to be informed. There needs to be a body for guidance. Share expertise and help people. (HT 32)</p>
<p>IE</p> <p>Our online learning will continue to evolve and develop but will always be based around our school values. (HT 48)</p>	<p>I don't think it's going anywhere now, and I think we've accelerated our learning with online learning and our skills. So much so that I think we will continue to capitalise on that in the future. I will definitely be putting a digital strategy in place and then that's the next step in in what we're looking at (HT 34)</p>	<p>I think that it can work really, really well, I think its changed the way we and I think in terms of feedback, particularly so you know traditional learning, they might do some work in their exercise book. The teacher takes it in they mark it and a week later they give it back and it's too late really for that feedback to make any difference. When we were learning online and on the Google suite, say a teacher would have a slide show of like 30 slides in each child has got a slide which is there as and so they set the task and the child is writing their paragraph whatever on the slide and the teacher can see them all and can give immediate feedback and can say well that first line was brilliant. But I don't like this (HT 28)</p>
<p>Online enables us to offer much more because we can collaborate across schools, providing</p>		<p>Our big why for continuing with online learning is because we think it'll improve the kids employability and life chances if they're well versed</p>

- an enhanced curriculum offering, as well as, wider curriculum activities to support enquiring minds and creativity and develop skills like teamwork, communication, resilience and problem solving. By working across schools, we can offer a wider curriculum and greater GCSE subjects. Where subjects weren't viable to go ahead with due to student numbers when we team up across the trust, the numbers are enough to support pupils in their choices. (HT 49)
- We're creating a more relaxed atmosphere by rearranging the school day and enabling independent learning for those that want it and allow self study time and flipped learning opportunities. Online learning will continue to be developed and utilised within the school day. We won't be waiting for another pandemic to continue with online learning. Parents will continue to use online for parents evening although we will still run a face to face event so we don't stop parents from being in school. (HT 49)
- It will continue to evolve. Our strategy won't ever not have online learning now. We involve pupils in decisions about wider school life (HT 50)
- o, we've had some great meetings where we've been thinking about what we keep hold of and what we continue to develop and move forward with. And, as I've
- in the use of a computer as part of their lives. So that's the headline of the strategy of it really (HT 37)
- I learnt that if children are unwell, if they can't get into school, so for us, at the moment we livestream our lessons if you're absent that's the way it is. So, across the board, talking from the little ones all the way to the top we livestream our lessons. At the moment it's for COVID only, but for us, we'd like to introduce where there are cases where children cannot access their learning for one reason or another and it's not COVID related, then why not give them access? Why can't they join us? (HT 41)
- IE I think it is important we focus on meaningful technology. It's a powerful phrase. We've all experienced meaningless tech with apps and devices being chucked at things without thought or meaning. We need to ask why we are using technology. The SAMR model is important. That is what is important. That's what is exciting and moving learning forward. It's been great to see our curriculum move online and PE teachers teaching live. Looking into the future and use of robot and taking staff with us, not dumping a load of laptops. It's and refreshing. It has changed me a professional. You can't control everyone. (CEO x)
- I think it is important we focus on meaningful technology. It's a powerful phrase. We've all experienced meaningless tech with apps and devices being chucked at things without thought or meaning. We need to ask why we are using technology. The SAMR model is important. That is

(Continued)



Table 1. Continued.

Sensemaking challenges/Ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid	Sensemaking opportunities – strategy as learning	Vision change and values – core vision change, linked to personal values (identity), and evidence of metacognition
<p>mentioned already, some of the real strengths of the online learning. (HT 7)</p>	<p>really, in sharing resources across the country, 'cause that's one thing that national really showed up was the fact that there's so many schools in this country doing great things. But we don't speak to each other enough because you don't need it caught in your own little bubble. And I think there's a lot more networking possibilities to create resources that students can use and access across all the different schools. (HT 8)</p>	<p>what is important. That's what is exciting and moving learning forward. It's been great to see our curriculum move online and PE teachers teaching live. Looking into the future and use of robot and taking staff with us, not dumping a load of laptops. It's and refreshing. <i>It has changed me as a professional.</i> You can't control everyone. I think the use of data has really come to the fore. Yes as a school, it's unavoidable and we have lots of metrics, but being able to utilise learning analytics and gather different data and use it for online learning has made a lot of meaning out of the use of technology. We need to keep lobbying and influencing. We fought tirelessly during lockdown to get what we needed in terms of devices, dongles, support etc. It's about doing all we can for vulnerable pupils and families. Only 50% of households can do online learning in the UK and in between 6–10,000 haven't got home internet access. We have to think about how we can collaborate and share and deepen the work we have done. It's been hugely motivating and inspiring to join together but we need to keep on. (HT 43)</p>
		<p>We have to look back to go forward. Reflect on the challenges and joys. (HT 45)</p>
		<p>I don't think the way I used to before covid, that has all changed. I think I have seen the possibilities now and that makes a difference (HT 5) What I did use as a Chief Exec is working with some other very good trusts where we did some joint working. We shared all of our resources and all of our planning. We didn't seek to reinvent the wheel. And we recognised we are public servants. It doesn't matter whether we're running an academy or a local authority school, we're still public</p>

servants, and so took a lot of both comfort but also resource out of working in collective families of schools. (CEO 15)

Before covid we were exploring its use but hadn't got as far as developing a strategy. We had homework worksheets online which we also used when youngsters were ill and for accessibility needs. I'd like online learning to be transformational. I'd like to use it to reimagine personal care and to develop significant agency in the community (CEO 4).

Before covid we were exploring its use but hadn't got as far as developing a strategy. We had homework worksheets online which we also used when youngsters were ill and for accessibility needs. I'd like online learning to be transformational. I'd like to use it to reimagine personal care and to develop significant agency in the community (CEO 4)

A listing of evidence and exemplar quotes under each heading is given in [Table 1](#). As can be seen by the tables, quotes were examined under three broad headings: sensemaking challenges to ideology and personal beliefs as a result of covid19 crisis; Sensemaking opportunities, evidence of strategy as learning, and evidence of vision change and values, and leaders' recognition of these changes (metacognition). The results were then examined in relation to the research questions.

Evidence of identity change and strategy as a learning activity

There was ample evidence that strategy during the covid crisis was a learning activity, in which leaders constantly evaluated and re-evaluated their approach to digital and online learning. Examples of the evidence are listed in [Table 1](#), under the heading: Sensemaking opportunities, strategy as learning. These data revealed ample evidence of strategy as a learning activity both during and within the period immediately post-lockdown. There were mentions of this in 47 out of 50 transcripts. This occurred in both headteacher interviews and CEO interviews. The learning related to new ideas and opportunities that had arisen during the crisis and were clearly going to change practices in the future. For example, this CEO points out, the will to collaborate with other trusts, something that has been missing from England's heavily marketised system which pits MAT against MAT in a competitive marketplace.

We've collaborated much more and recognised the benefits of working together for both staff and pupils. Where we weren't previously able to offer a particular curriculum subject because of timetable clashes, now we can offer that online and co-deliver with another school.' (CEO 23).

Another CEO saw great potential in much stronger relationships with stakeholders:

There has been some silver linings, for example, building stronger relationships with all our stakeholders. We've been in much more contact with parents. Parents evenings, CPD, [...]online have all worked well online and will continue. (CEO 22)

This was echoed by 41 other schools, who believed that the stronger relationship with stakeholders would influence plans for the future.

Although schools saw many possibilities that heads and CEOs intended to harvest post crisis, it is not certain that this ever happened, as our fieldwork ended 6 months after the last lockdown. In addition, there were myriad concerns about the learning lost during the crisis, and the extent to which schools could hope to recover. In relation to strategy, this was important, as this head recounts:

So, I'm already thinking about what our one-year plan will, two-year plan, three-year plan be to recapture these lost moments. Because we need to consider that. (HT 3)

There was considerable concern and resistance by a number of heads and CEOs, that the government had taken the opportunity to impose their agenda on schools, with the creation of Oak Academy, an online lesson resource bank (also discussed in our conclusion). This CEO explains their position:

[in relation to Oak Academy] And secondly, and this is my view of a Govian curriculum generally [...] Honestly, some of the lessons are absolute pants. I really was shocked at the lack of quality and the lack of any kind of intellectual depth to them. It's all just so surface and so prosaic. Here you are and now you can go off and do something with it. It's just such a reductive view of the craft of learning and the development that sits underneath it. (CEO x for confidentiality purposes)

This suspicion is perhaps unsurprising, as crisis situations are very often used by governments, to push through policies that would never see the light of day under normal conditions, and education is a powerful medium for social control (Hogan and Feeney 2012; Winters 2007). This contrasted with the feelings of relative freedom and creativity that were expressed, in relation to the breaking down of normal decision-making hierarchies. This included the informal collaboration between staff and heads that would have been more constrained during business as usual.

Analysis of the data reveals that there are instances of identity reference in 47 of the 50 transcripts. These references link to the use of the pronoun 'I' in relation to changing beliefs, inherent values (either personal or organisational) and evidence of metacognition in relation to the way that they articulated how the crisis had changed their thinking or beliefs on learning and digital learning. As these headteachers and CEOs report:

I think we've accelerated our learning with online learning and our skills. So much so we will continue to capitalize on that in the future. I will definitely be putting a digital strategy in place and then that's the next step in in what we're looking at (HT 34)

I think that it can work really, really well, I think it's changed the way we and I think in terms of feedback, particularly so you know traditional learning. (HT 28)

That is what is important. [...] It's refreshing. It has changed me as a professional. (CEO x)

The most compelling evidence of identity change occurs within the CEO transcripts, as the example above illustrates. In some cases, the data reveals a total reimagining of education and its delivery, as this example illustrates:

In many ways, primarily by personalising provision, reimagining schooling. Moving away from one size fits all tyranny and the unit of 30 in a class. We can redesign the whole organisation. Covid has shone a light on schools and shown that they work for those that schools work for, but they don't work for others who either don't cope or agree on the surface to comply or fall out of the system. (CEO 15)

This represents not only an important strategic change, but equally a change in relation to their identity as CEO within the future of their organisation. The potential revealed by Covid19, has clearly for some leaders revealed the potentialities in digital. However, this excitement is tempered by the feeling from two out of the four CEOs, that online learning is not the panacea that it appears it may be, as this CEO and headteacher, explain:

I think that we've got to be very careful that we don't allow the notion that there's really good online learning to be a reason for children not to attend school. And if we end up with a massive sense of school refusal and anxiety about coming into school, and an expectation from parents that schools and the system sanctions that and provides remote learning, we need to be very clear that there is no substitute for face-to-face learning. (CEO 4)

We don't want to lose what we've developed but at the same time online is no substitute for having bums on seats. We believe there's no better place than for children to be in school. Online learning will be built into our disaster recovery and risk planning. (HT 25)

There is ample evidence in the study, that the identities of heads and CEOs have been influenced by their problem-solving work during the crisis. However, although the potential of digital learning appears to have been brought to light in an unprecedented way, only three of the respondents indicated widespread and wholesale change to strategy as a result of this, and only three actually indicated recognition they had changed as professionals. The rest of the participants clearly saw tentative potential for digital innovation, but not to the extent that it changed their profound beliefs about how learning should be delivered. The examples below illustrate this:

I'd like to recruit a data expert to manage all the data we can now gather from online learning and use this for strategy planning (HT 26)

I think we will now have a blended form of education drawing upon the best of online. I think it's going to lead us to utilise classroom time more effectively and move things that work better online for home learning (HT 28)

The data revealed no shift in personal values, but rather a deepening of them as this quote illustrates:

I think we have never more valued the importance of being in a classroom with children in front of you, even being in the classroom, you're stuck in a box at the front of the room where you can't go out and speak to the kids. (HT 8)

Where identity shift had occurred, it was unclear how the individual's personal values were altering or aligning with future digital strategy. This is a point for future research.

One element that appeared very clearly throughout the narratives was a discourse of resistance to an imagined, or actual, expectation (by government and

largely emanated from the challenges that emerged during lockdown, and there seemed to be a powerful sense that these challenges confirmed what heads already thought about the wholesale adoption of digital learning in schools. As such, the resistance built on what was already a key element in their narratives *before the crisis*.

Resistance discourse is important here as it has been found to play a crucial role in the formation of organisational strategy by challenging prevailing assumptions, power dynamics, and dominant ideologies within an organisation (Mangan et al. 2018). Through the process of engaging in resistance discourse, organisations can identify weaknesses in their strategies and adapt to changing external environments (Jarzabkowski 2004). The role of resistance discourse in this study appears to be exerting a considerable influence on the future creation of digital strategy. Finances, mental ill health of pupils and staff, and supporting students from troubled backgrounds, are cited in 95% of the data, as being reasons to put a brake on digital innovation, or even, in the case of two schools, to revert completely to previous practices. It also harkens back to a discourse that has been present since technology-enhanced learning was first introduced in schools; the fear that its wholesale adoption will lead to deskilling or a loss of control among teachers and leaders. The shift towards digital learning environments can impact how educators perceive their professional identities and the ways they engage with students and curriculum. In this respect, we argue that the presence of resistance discourse in narratives of strategy, indicates a causal link to the identity of those creating strategy.

Implications and conclusions

This paper set out to establish links between strategy as a learning activity and the identities of school leaders during the covid19 crisis. In what follows we discuss the implications of our findings, for the field of strategy as learning in education.

The paper has contributed two key elements to the literature: evidence of a strategy as a learning approach during a crisis period, and evidence that supports the links between identity and strategy as learning.

Figure 1 (repeated) Categories for the analysis of strategy as a learning activity adapted from Baxter and John 2021.

The links to the former were, seen in the citations emerging from the person, strategy and variables, in **Figure 1**. Examples of these collated under the middle heading is shown in **Table 1**. In terms of the latter, evidence emerged via narratives that illustrated considerable changes to approach, awareness of insights gained during covid, and intention to use these insights to inform strategy. They were also present in the form of powerful resistance discourses that link strongly to deep beliefs about teaching and learning. The discussion which follows examines aspects of each and their implications for practice.

It is perhaps unsurprising that heads and CEOs should take a critical approach to further integration of digital learning in their strategic planning given the resistance to the plethora of large-scale sweeping government innovations in this area, over the last 30 years. In addition the real challenges that they were presented with during the crisis, did confirm the issues particularly around inclusion, that are a real issue in digital learning. This, for a number of respondents did not sit well with future and further digital innovations.

However, this contrasted with the digital innovation that did take place during the crisis, one that reflected core educator values and principles: that education should continue to be offered by whatever means possible. It is perhaps for this reason that the narratives within this study appear, in many cases to be conflicted – on one hand, with a leaders' natural inclination to learn, on the other, a continued resistance to what is perceived as a deskilling of the profession by introducing a hegemony of digital innovation into the professional sphere: a hegemony that often fails to explicitly consider the needs of particular students (see for more detail on this: Baxter, Floyd, and Jewitt 2022; Floyd et al. 2023).

The paper illustrated that in some cases leaders have a deep and abiding belief that digital learning negates important elements of education, such as preparation for living in a democratic society and important elements of the so called, 'hidden curriculum' (Giroux and Penna 1979), that pertains to elements of socialisation, inclusive learning and the principals that underpin a democracy. There is also the fact that education and government in England have long had an adversarial relationship (Childs and Mender 2013). Under the present administration (since 2010, Conservative), the Department for Education and the inspectorate-Ofsted, have long been seen as the means by which the government promotes and pushes its ideological, neoliberal agenda (Baxter and Cornforth 2019, 2021, Greany 2018). This has also been combined with a move to take teacher training away from universities, with the aim of removing any trace of a left-wing curriculum (Acton and Glasgow 2015), something that is seen as an overarching trend to carry out neoliberal assaults on teacher education, internationally (Acton and Glasgow 2015).

In relation to leader identity and strategy, leaders whose identity is based upon resistance to these ideologically driven discourses, this may result in two outcomes: either digital progress will be inhibited, or it will be strategically and discerningly implemented, bearing in mind some of the not inconsiderable barriers to the success of wholesale adopting. Areas such as digital poverty, cannot be overcome by schools alone (Baxter and Hinton 2025), but require holistic societal approaches by government. The lack of this joined up approach by government did offer a rationale for some leaders, in spite of seeing strategic potential for digital learning, to return to former practices. When teachers and teacher leaders were, 'rushing around delivering data dongles,' (Baxter, Floyd, and Jewitt 2022, 333). If learning becomes increasingly digital, students

without proper devices or connectivity face limited access to online resources and remote classes (Bannister and Ehrich 2021). This disparity has and would, jeopardise their academic achievement and future prospects, and invariably widen the performance gap between rich and poor (Judge, Puckett, and Cabuk 2004; Seah 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, this study has contributed to the literature on strategy as learning in several ways: It has found ample evidence that strategy as learning does take place during a crisis and some evidence that it is linked to fundamental beliefs, values and concomitantly, identities of those responsible for crafting strategy. In addition, it has provided empirical evidence that has furthered the idea that the identities of those creating strategy are intrinsically linked to their strategising activities, and that personal views, policy and ideologically driven discourses of digital learning, colour identities and strategy. It has highlighted that this is not only achieved through metacognitive activity, but equally, by *productive resistance discourse as an integral part of both strategy as practice and learning*, and identity work. It is recommended, that further empirical study be carried out, examining how strategy is influenced by productive and non-productive resistance discourse of leaders is influential in a strategy as learning, strategy as practice approach. For example, non-productive resistance discourse as the type of discourse that is based on outdated schema, and that may act as a constraining element on creative strategy. In comparison to productive resistance discourse as those which question imposed ideologically driven policy on education and influences policy in such a way as to enable creative strategy for the future of education.

Disclosure statement

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

Funding

This work was supported by Research England [grant number ES/V016989/1].

Notes on contributors

Jacqueline Baxter is Professor of Public Leadership and Management at the Open University Business School. Her research interests lie in the areas of leadership identities, introversion and extroversion in leadership and strategy creation in public sector organisations. Her most recent book examines various aspects of online learning in business and law (Baxter, Selby-Fell and Gilbert, 2025 in press).

Alan Floyd is Professor of Education at the University of Reading where he has held a range of senior leadership roles. His research interests focus on key issues related to educational leadership including leadership development, leaders' careers and identities, and notions of shared and collaborative leadership.

Dr Andres Morales is an expert in the field of Sustainability, Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship. Co-Founder and COO of Minca Ventures, Lecturer at UNIR and research fellow at Open University.

References

- Acton, R., and P. Glasgow. 2015. "Teacher Wellbeing in Neoliberal Contexts: A Review of the Literature." *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)* 40 (8): 99–114.
- Ashforth, B. E., J. R. Moser, and P. Bubenzer. 2020. *Identities and Identification in Work Contexts: Beyond our Fixation on the Organization*. London: Palgrave
- Bandura, A. 1977. *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bannister, N. A., and J. F. Ehrich. 2021. "Digital Equity and Remote Learning During COVID-19: An Analysis from an Australian Socioeconomically Disadvantaged School." *Information and Learning Sciences* 122 (3/4): 227–238.
- Baxter, J., and C. Cornforth. 2018. Schemes of delegation as governance tools: the case of multi academy trusts in education. *Under review*.
- Baxter, J. A., and C. Cornforth. 2019. "Governing Collaborations: How Boards Engage with Their Communities in Multi-Academy Trusts in England." *Public Management Review* 3 (24): 1–23.
- Baxter, J., and A. Floyd. 2019. "Strategic Narrative in Multi-Academy Trusts in England: Principal Drivers for Expansion." *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (5): 1050–1071. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3550>.
- Baxter, J., A. Floyd, and K. Jewitt. 2022. "Covid19, a Catalyst for Change ? Strategic Planning for Digital Education in English Secondary Schools, Before, During and Post, Covid." *British Educational Research Journal* 49 (2): 329–351. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3845>.
- Baxter, J., and M. C. Hinton. 2025. "Digital Poverty in the UK and Its Impact on Higher Education: A Human Rights Approach." In *Creativity and Critique in Digital Learning and Teaching: Insights for Learning Design in Business and Law*, edited by J. Baxter, H. Selby-Fell, and A. Gilbert. London: Palgrave.
- Baxter, J., and A. John. 2021. "Strategy as Learning in Multi Academy Trusts in England: Strategic Thinking in Action." *School Leadership & Management* 1 (4–5).
- Brooks, D. C., and M. McCormack. 2020. *Driving Digital Transformation in Higher Education*. EDUCAUSE.
- Brown, A. D. 2015. "Identities and Identity Work in Organizations." *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17 (1): 20–40.
- Brown, A. D. 2020. Identities in Organizations. *The Oxford Handbook of Identities in Organizations*, 1.
- Casey, A. J., and E. F. Goldman. 2010. "Enhancing the Ability to Think Strategically: A Learning Model." *Management Learning* 41 (2): 167–185. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507609355497>.
- Chia, R., and R. Holt. 2006. "Strategy as Practical Coping: A Heideggerian Perspective." *Organization Studies* 27 (5): 635–655. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840606064102>.
- Childs, A., and I. Mender. 2013. "Teacher Education in 21st Century England: A Case Study in Neoliberal Public Policy." *Revista Española de Educación Comparada* (22): 93–116.
- Crick, T. 2021. "COVID-19 and Digital Education: A Catalyst for Change?" *ITNOW* 63 (1): 16–17. <https://doi.org/10.1093/itnow/bwab005>.
- De La Ville, V.-I., and E. Mounoud. 2010. "A Narrative Approach to Strategy as Practice: Strategy Making from Texts and Narratives." In *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*, 183–197. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Oliveira, P. H., M. A. Catussi Paschoalotto, F. C. A. Santos, T. B. de Sousa, and M. S. Nagano. 2023. "Systematic Literature Review on Organisational Culture and Strategic Management

- in the Public Sector and School Management." *School Leadership & Management* 43 (3): 210–237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2023.2176483>.
- DfE. 2023. Open Academies, Free Schools, Studio Schools and UTCs. Retrieved 190723, 2023, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-academies-and-academy-projects-in-development>.
- Eickelmann, B. 2011. "Supportive and Hindering Factors to a Sustainable Implementation of ICT in Schools." *Journal for Educational Research Online* 3 (1): 75–103.
- Fenton, C., and A. Langley. 2011. "Strategy as Practice and the Narrative Turn." *Organization Studies* 32 (9): 1171–1196.
- Fleischer, J. 2013. "Time and Crisis." *Public Management Review* 15 (3): 313–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.769852>.
- Floyd, A., J. Baxter, A. Morales, and R. Bari. 2023. "Leading Online Learning During a Pandemic and Beyond: Challenges and Opportunities for School Leaders in England." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 17411432231191171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231191171>.
- Giroux, H. A., and A. N. Penna. 1979. "Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum." *Theory & Research in Social Education* 7 (1): 21–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.1979.10506048>.
- Greany, T. 2018. *Sustainable Improvement in Multi-school Groups*. London: The Institute of Educat.
- Greany, T., and R. Higham. 2018. Hierarchy, Markets and Networks: Analysing the 'self-Improving School-Led System' agenda in England and the implications for schools.
- Grøn, C. H., L. L. Bro, and L. B. Andersen. 2020. "Public Managers' Leadership Identity: Concept, Causes, and Consequences." *Public Management Review* 22 (11): 1696–1716. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2019.1645875>.
- Haworth, K. 2006. "The Dynamics of Power and Resistance in Police Interview Discourse." *Discourse & Society* 17 (6): 739–759.
- Hogan, J., and S. Feeney. 2012. "Crisis and Policy Change: The Role of the Political Entrepreneur." *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 3 (2): 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/1944-4079.1108>.
- Holt, R., and J. Cornelissen. 2014. "Sensemaking Revisited." *Management Learning* 45 (5): 525–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507613486422>.
- Ibarra, H. 1999. "Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44 (4): 764–791.
- Janoff-Bulman, R. 1989. "Assumptive Worlds and the Stress of Traumatic Events: Applications of the Schema Construct." *Social Cognition* 7 (2): 113–136. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.1989.7.2.113>.
- Jarzabkowski, P. 2004. "Strategy as Practice: Recursiveness, Adaptation, and Practices-in-Use." *Organization Studies* 25 (4): 529–560. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840604040675>.
- Johnson, P., J. Balogun, and N. Beech. 2010. "Researching Strategists and Their Identity in Practice: Building 'Close-With' Relationships." In *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*, 243–257. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Judge, S., K. Puckett, and B. Cabuk. 2004. "Digital Equity: New Findings from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study." *Journal of Research on Technology in Education* 36 (4): 383–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15391523.2004.10782421>.
- Kim, P. S. 2021. "South Korea's Fast Response to Coronavirus Disease: Implications on Public Policy and Public Management Theory." *Public Management Review* 23 (12): 1736–1747. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1766266>.
- Laine, P.-M., and E. Vaara. 2007. "Struggling Over Subjectivity: A Discursive Analysis of Strategic Development in an Engineering Group." *Human Relations* 60 (1): 29–58.

- Maitlis, S., and S. Sonenshein. 2010. "Sensemaking in Crisis and Change: Inspiration and Insights from Weick (1988)." *Journal of Management Studies* 47 (3): 551–580. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00908.x>.
- Mangan, A., R. Thomas, A. Davies, and R. Gasper. 2018. "The Challenges of Police-Community Collaboration: Identity Manoeuvres and Power Struggles in a Neighbourhood Based Meeting." *Public Management Review* 20 (9): 1353–1373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2017.1383718>.
- Mintzberg, H., B. Ahlstrand, and J. Lampel. 2005. *Strategy Safari: A Guided Tour Through The Wilds of Strategic Mangament*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Mishler, E. 2000. *Storylines: Craft Narratives of Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morgan, J. 2020. Oak National Academy: Lockdown Saviour or DfE Tool? *TES*. Retrieved from <https://www.tes.com/magazine/archive/oak-national-academy-lockdown-saviour-or-dfe-tool>.
- Noordegraaf, M., and J. Newman. 2011. "Managing in Disorderly Times: How Cities Deal with Disaster and Restore Social Order." *Public Management Review* 13 (4): 513–538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2010.525035>.
- OECD. 2021. *Pushing the Frontiers with Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain and Robots*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Oliver, D. 2015. "Identity Work as a Strategic Practice." In *Cambridge Handbook of Strategy as Practice*, edited by D. Golsorkhi, L. Rouleau, D. Seidl, and E. Vaara. 331–344. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rouleson, S., S. Taggart, and M. Brown. 2021. *Parents Coping with Covid-19 : Global Messages from Parents of Post-Primary Children Across the Island of Ireland Republic of Ireland*. Dublin: Dublin City University/The University of Ulster.
- Satterthwaite, J., Atkinson, E., & Gale, K. 2003. *Discourse, Power and Resistance: Challenging the Rhetoric of Contemporary Education*. Trentham Books.
- Seah, K. T. M. 2020. "COVID-19: Exposing Digital Poverty in a Pandemic." *International Journal of Surgery (London, England)*, 79:127.
- Vaara, E., and R. Whittington. 2012. "Strategy-as-practice: Taking Social Practices Seriously." *Academy of Management Annals* 6 (1): 285–336. <https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2012.672039>.
- Weick, K. E. 1988. "Enacted Sensemaking in Crisis Situations." *Journal of Management Studies* 25 (4): 305–317. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1988.tb00039.x>.
- Weick, K. E., K. M. Sutcliffe, and D. Obstfeld. 2005. "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking." *Organization Science* 16 (4): 409–421. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1050.0133>.
- Whittington, R. 2006. "Completing the Practice Turn in Strategy Research." *Organization Studies* 27 (5): 613–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840606064101>.
- Winters, C. 2007. "Planning for Disaster: Education Policy in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina." *Multicultural Education* 15 (2): 39–39.
- Woods, P. A., G. J. Woods, and H. Gunter. 2007. "Academy Schools and Entrepreneurialism in Education." *Journal of Education Policy* 22 (2): 237–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930601158984>.
- Wooten, L. P., and E. H. James. 2008. "Linking Crisis Management and Leadership Competencies: The Role of Human Resource Development." *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 10 (3): 352–379. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422308316450>.
- Younie, S. 2006. "Implementing Government Policy on ICT in Education: Lessons Learnt." *Education and Information Technologies* 11: 385–400.

Appendices

Appendix 1 National Lockdowns in England

Table A1. National Lockdown periods in England (Newton, 2020).

Date	Announcement
2020	
23 March	Prime Minister Johnson announces first lockdown
25 March	Coronavirus Act 2020 gains royal assent
26 March	National Lockdown England
16 April	Lockdown extended by 3 weeks
10 May	PM announces conditional plan for lifting lockdown
01 June	Phased re-opening of schools in England
29 June	Local Lockdowns implemented, beginning with Leicester
14 September	Rule of six, indoor and outdoor social gatherings above six banned in England
22 September	New restrictions announce, including return to working from home and a 10 pm curfew for hospitality
14 October	Three tier system of Covid19 restrictions in England
31 October	PM announces second national lockdown
5 November	Second Lockdown begins – England
02 December	Second lockdown ends with return to three tier system of lockdown
19 December	Tougher restrictions for London and SE England announced by PM
2021	
04 January	Pm announces children to return to school following Xmas break.
06 January	England enters third national lockdown
08 March	Return to school for children in England (primary and secondary)

Appendix 2 Questions for Interviews

During Covid

1. How did the first lockdown affect teaching and learning in your school /MAT?
2. Who was responsible for putting learning online during lockdown and now?
3. What role do head of departments play in providing learning for learners during lockdown?
4. What support did you find most valuable during lockdown, for example: Oak Academy?
5. Did you request and receive any laptop provision from Government?
6. What changes or amendments to online learning strategy have you implemented due to Covid19?
7. Why did you implement the online strategies that you did?
8. What guidance did you have in developing online learning during covid? And from who?
9. Did your strategic planning procedures change due to covid? If so, what were the changes?
10. What were the key challenges in terms of provision, that you encountered during covid? Opportunities?
11. How did you deal with them?
12. How did you engage hard to reach learners, SEND pupils during covid?
13. What strategies are in place for pupils who lack IT kit or have no internet access or limited study space?

After Covid

1. What did you learn re online learning during Covid?
2. Has the pandemic changed the way you plan learning, if so, how?
3. What role do you think online will now play in your school, and the future of secondary ed.
4. What strategies are you putting in place for online learning in the future, both as a response to ongoing pandemic situations and as part of business as usual.

Appendix 3 Types of school

Types of state schools in England, taken from Department of Education (<https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school>)

All children in England between the ages of 5 and 16 are entitled to a free place at a state school.

State schools receive funding through their local authority or directly from government. The most common types of schools are:

- Community schools, which are sometimes called local authority-maintained schools. They are not influenced by business or religious groups and follow the National Curriculum.
- Foundation schools and voluntary schools. Funded by the Local Authority but have more freedom to change the way they offer education. They may be supported by representatives from religious groups.
- Academies and Free Schools. These are run by not-for-profit academy trusts. They are independent from the Local Authority and have more freedom over curriculum.
- Grammar schools. These may be run by the Local Authority, a foundation body, or an Academy Trust. They are selective and there is a test to get in.

Appendix 4 Sample of schools

Transcript number code	School Type	Location (N, S, Midlands, London)	Ofsted rating
1	LA	S	1
2	LA	S	1
3	SAT	M	2
4	MAT	S	2
5	MAT	S	N/A
6	MAT	S	N/A
7	LA	M	1
8	SAT	M	NO INSPECTION TO DATE
9	LA	N	2
10	LA	N	2
11	LA	S	3
12	SAT	S	2
13	SAT	S	3
14	CS	S	2
15	MAT	S	N/A