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The Tree(s) of Hope and Ambition: An arts-based social science informed, participatory research method to explore children's future hopes, ambitions and support in relation to COVID-19

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Abstract

This paper offers a new child-centred methodology that explores children's visions of their futures, encourages self-reflection and depth and shares children's voices with peers and researchers, as unbrokered as possible. This final stage of a longitudinal, arts-based, social science-informed project was delivered by partnering with schools in socially disadvantaged areas of Bristol, a UK city. Our two-phase activity used a Tree metaphor to explore children's hopes, ambitions and support, looking forward to recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis combined multi-disciplinary thematic and visual-narrative analysis, and revealed diversity, intersection and individuality in themes that scaled out from the child and their family over different timescales. Themes included emotion (concerns; empathy), experiences (happenings, resources skills; aspirations) and relationships, linked to their recent experiences of COVID-19 mitigation. The paper reflects

critically on children's and researchers' positionality, and the complexities involved in developing research methods that encourage children's autonomy, agency and authenticity.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and government response phases had major impacts on children's lives (Mondragon et al., 2021). While there tends to be a strong focus on looking back during disasters to capture perceptions and experiences of impacts and living with uncertainties (Children's Commissioner, 2021), there is much less emphasis on how such stresses influence children's abilities to look forward in recovery and the implications for their resilience. Despite increasing calls for genuine inclusion of children in policies that affect them and a growing appreciation that what is good for children is good for society, their voices remain largely absent from recovery and well-being discourses (Dvorsky et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). There is an acceptance that longer-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its mitigation on children's psychosocial and emotional health and well-being are likely (Fegert et al., 2020; Knowland et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2020). A recent UK government study capturing children's views on well-being and happiness concluded that 'the main areas raised included living in a country at peace and where children's needs are considered by those in positions of power; [...]—'They should listen to children because sometimes the children are right' (Jordan & Rees, 2020, p. 2).

How children view their futures in the emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this may be reflected in their hopes and ambitions, is not known. In the face of a lack of agency that included social isolation, education stagnation, missed milestones, lost independence and heightened anxiety, children were also isolated from people who may be important in their processes of becoming, for example friends, peer groups, teachers, grandparents and other extended family etc (Brennon, 2004). Previous work exploring children's aspirations in 'working class communities' reveal diversity and some disconnect between aspirations that children express, and the interventions designed to 'raise them', which tend to prioritise progression to higher education and ignore emotional progression (Brown, 2011). This paper begins to address this research gap through the findings of an arts-based process in Bristol, United Kingdom, that explored children's hope and ambition in recovery, from the Voices In a Pandemic—Children's Lockdown Experiences Applied to Recovery (VIP-CLEAR) research project (see vip-clear.org).

PREVIOUS WORK

Interest in children's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of mitigation strategies largely focused on their well-being, education and development (e.g. www.childrenssociety.org.uk; Cortés-Morales et al., 2021). Although most children did not experience the same health risks as other groups, they were significantly impacted by strategies to

control the virus, including school closures, lockdowns and social distancing. Socially disadvantaged children were further challenged as the pandemic amplified existing inequalities (Children's Commissioner, 2021; Holt & Murray, 2022). Despite this, children's voices during the COVID-19 pandemic were rarely heard (Cortés-Morales et al., 2021) and, when their experiences were considered, parents/carers were often the research participants, rather than children themselves (Holt & Murray, 2022). Exceptions include The Big Ask, the largest online survey of children, organised by the Children's Commissioner for England (Children's Commissioner Report, 2021) and the COVID 4P Log project where substantial efforts were made to include children, albeit using more traditional social science methodologies (Brown et al., 2022). Attention is now focused on children's recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 mitigation as a 'generational catastrophe' (Secretary General of the United Nations; Côté et al., 2022).

Recovery and resilience

Developing a working definition of 'recovery' is a key starting point as it is linked to, yet distinct from, other concepts such as 'resilience' (Kuntz, 2021). Although for both 'recovery' and 'resilience', the common trigger is a negative adverse event (e.g., flooding, pandemic etc.), recovery is a phased return to a previous state, where what was lost is being regained (Sonnentag & Neff, 2011). Socio-ecological resilience, on the other hand, involves coping and adaptation, with experiential learning and building up of capabilities that prepare the individual to respond to similar challenges in the future (Adger, 2000; Sutfliffe & Vogus, 2003).

In disaster studies literature, the 'process of recovery is one that carries with it the challenge of adjusting to displacement' (Medd et al., 2015 p. 315). This can involve sudden lifestyle changes that affect and change valued routines. Often the 'disaster' event itself is not the lowest point, and the complexities involved in the longer process of recovery are as, if not more, challenging (Medd et al., 2015). Recovery in children is recognised as a complex process, influenced by the child's life (st)age at the onset of the stress and its aftermath, demographic variables and ecologies of support (Gibbs et al., 2014). There are also calls for children's voices to input to recovery processes and for encouraging children to talk about their experiences (Freeman et al., 2015; Ronan et al., 2016). Previous research concerning children's learning for resilience in the context of flooding showed that they 'have valuable capital (knowledge, skills, attitudes/ dispositions), and potential to act as significantly more than a vulnerable group of citizens for which our policies and practices plan for and about for socio-ecological resilience' (Williams & McEwen, 2021, p. 1656). COVID-19 and its mitigation measures demanded children to undertake personal adaptations and recovery (learning and education, health and well-being) that requires their resilience.

More recently discussions have centred around the need to develop a 'whole-of-society' resilience approach, going beyond notions of 'resilience' as resistance or 'bouncing back'. Here, 'recovery' is viewed as a critical part of the approach, referring to both 'short-term' activities that will build post-crisis 'preparedness' but also a 'longer-term perspective of recovery' that aims to build future resilience (McClelland et al., 2022). This supports the desire to build forward in recovery and involves an aspiration for 'thriving' (or 'post-traumatic growth') and 'positive adaptation' (Kuntz, 2021, p. 189). However, including all voices and understanding the hopes and support of all is an inevitable challenge for more marginalised groups like children who can be easily overlooked. Raising children's voices and listening to them through supporting their hopes and (aspired) agency is a key aspect of children's mental health and well-being in disaster recovery.

Hope

There is no single definition of hope, although it is widely considered an integral part of being human. Indeed Webb (2007) identifies 26 theories of hope, and 54 definitions across a range of disciplines including psychology, anthropology, philosophy, theology and politics. Webb identified two main challenges of discussions about hope: that they tend to be focused within disciplines and that they fail to recognise hope as differentiated. Webb's work provides a more nuanced framework, enabling hope to be viewed as interdisciplinary and experienced in five different modes: patient, critical, estimative, resolute and utopian. Webb concludes 'We may each of us at different times and in different circumstances experience hope…[,] Our hopes may be active or passive, patient or critical, private or collective, grounded in the evidence or resolute in spite of it, socially conservative or socially transformative.' (p. 80).

Hope can be expressed cognitively or emotionally (Gallagher et al., 2019); it acts as a protective coping strategy and is an important psychological strength (Marques et al., 2011). More objective quantitative approaches to studying hope in children have predominated within psychology and children's development (e.g. the Children's Hope Scale; Snyder, 2002) with some of its validation with more marginalised groups (Metzler et al., 2022; Shadlow et al., 2015). Cognitive hope has been given more attention in past research than emotional hope, probably because it is easier to measure and research.

Hope predicts outcomes, such as physical and mental health and academic and athletic success (Snyder, 2002). Children's expressions of hope have been related to their autonomy and their resilience (Mullin, 2019), suggesting that hope plays a role in increasing children's agency, for example, their ability to perceive and change their environment (Aydin & Odaci, 2021). As David Orr reflects, 'Hope is a verb, with its sleeves rolled up' (Orr, 2011, p. 324). Educationalists such as Freire (2004) and Hicks (2014) also advocate for a pedagogy of hope and consider the importance of this in teaching practice.

Snyder et al.'s (1997) hope theory suggests three dimensions of hope: goals, pathways and motivations. His development of the Children's Hope Scale (CHS) for children aged 8–16 years (Snyder, 2002) has been applied to show whether children are engaged in goal-directed thinking. Hope is often confused with optimism and or wishful/creative thinking, where autonomy and self-regulation may not be present and the sense of agency is not necessarily expressed.

Hope fluctuates over time and according to circumstances, both internal and external. As Mullin (2019, p. 237) suggests, 'Children who hope are responsive to features of context, like presence or absence of supportive others, and presence or absence of resources necessary to move towards one's goals.' Hope is influenced by personal and environmental factors and is contextualised by previous experiences children may have lived through, or their perceived status in society, for example low or high socioeconomic status (Guinote et al., 2015; Jay & Muldoon, 2018). Our framing of the term hope remains open, but the focus of our research and methods employed encourages the expression of individual and concrete hopes. Very few examples exist of research where children have been asked about their hopes and ambitions following COVID-19, although one could theorise that children's hopes may have been altered as a result of restrictions and experiences at this time.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Participants

Bristol UK, a city with a population of over 400 000, is diverse and multicultural. The VIP-CLEAR research team partnered with four primary schools with a higher proportion of children receiving

free school meals (34%–45% compared to 19% average across the United Kingdom), in areas identified by the Multiple Index of Deprivation (Noble et al., 2019) as being socioeconomically disadvantaged. Mindful of our research partners' (schools') logistics we worked inclusively (with full classes of children) with over 150 children (ages 7–11 years). In line with ethical consent requirements, 111 data sets were analysed. We did not gather information about children beyond their ages. This was the last of three creative activities that children completed during the VIP-CLEAR research project and took place between October and December 2021 shortly after schools had fully re-opened following COVID-19 lockdown restrictions (in September 2021) in England. The context of each school partner was considered in both the selection and analysis of results; for example, one school was a Sanctuary School, 'committed to creating a culture of welcome and inclusion for refugees and people seeking asylum.' (https://schools.cityofsanctuary.org/).

Arts-based research

Researching with children can be challenging and methodological design requires careful and complex attention, not only to processes but also to aspects of trust, power, accessibility and cognitive development. Creative participatory methods and particularly arts-based methods, offer windows into a child's world and 'level the ground', facilitating collection of child-centred, in-depth data. Tumanyan and Huuki (2020) conclude that arts-based methods: '(1) recognise and make visible previously invisible experiences, acts, voices and histories; (2) nurture change and transformation in the lives of the youth; and (3) allow exploring the more-than-human, more-than-present and less-than-conscious aspects in the lives of youth and children' (pp. 381). They make the important point that arts-based methods are something that 'traditional study methods might not readily access' (pp. 381). Children can be empowered through these methods and encouraged to recognise their own thought processes and document their reflections.

Arts-based methods have been used effectively in different contexts that encourage and allow hopefulness in their response; for example, the Hope Project that worked with child refugees using photographs and 'the hope quilt' (Yohani, 2013). Abdulah et al. (2021) also favoured arts-based methods, exploring the implications of COVID-19 isolation with children in Iraqi Kurdistan. Terton et al. (2022, p. 69) concluded that 'visual methods helped to provide a better understanding of the students' emotions, their views of present world and their dreams for the future, more effectively than relying on verbal and text-based information.'

Developing the Tree of Hope and Ambition

With attention to ambition for 'wider intellectual contexts' (Holloway et al., 2011) and respect for and value of interdisciplinary research the team, from across a spectrum of demographics, included a locally embedded arts practitioner and researchers from risk geography, anthropology, environmental (child) psychology, education, health and well-being, risk communication and planning and co-produced the research with stakeholder partners (including school staff). The socially engaged artist was locally known and although not previously known to these children, had worked in other schools and Early Years settings for many years. In each research session, she worked with another (not always the same) team member (also experienced in researching with children) who acted as research assistant and observer and took detailed observational notes (on a developed pro-forma) including discussions and quotations from children.

Our methods interwove socially engaged arts practice with social science to co-create the Tree of hope and ambition (hereafter 'the Tree'). Previously, the research team had used deep mapping and arts-based photo-elicitation to gather children's changing experiences over time (Williams et al., 2022; https://www.vip-clear.org/). The Tree was an open, inclusive two-stage method that could capture individuality of experience, perspective and aspiration. Enabling creative expression of children's ideas, concerns and desires can foster personal and group agency and support them to develop ownership of a project. Influenced by non-representational theory and particularly Anderson's (2006) work, the activity was designed to acknowledge that hope is not simply about clear images/representations of the future and that it is not the quality of the art, but the process involving the narrative and discussion while the art is produced that is a 'powerful combination' (Einarsdottir et al., 2009, p. 229). Thus, capturing children's voices requires careful thought and attention, with deep appreciation and understanding that children see and experience the world in a non-adult, unique way, which may no longer be fully accessible to the adults who seek to understand it.

The research received ethics approval from the University Research Ethics Committee. We considered the boundaries of our research and avoided overstepping our focus on therapeutic content. Consequently, our clear focus was on hopes and ambitions for the future. Safeguarding procedures were followed closely so that when there was an observed or disclosed issue, it was raised with school staff research partners.

Stage 1

Working with the whole class (usually about 30 children for approximately 40 min), a series of slides introducing VIP-CLEAR and the research task were presented. Using the VIP acronym, to remind the children that they were the 'Very Important People' (VIP) in the project, simultaneously reminded them of the project and emphasised their valued importance; children responded very well to this. The artist explained the focus on looking forward and asked for children's interpretations of the words 'hope' and 'ambition'. She then showed them a Tree template. The task was inclusive, allowing children to work at different speeds and scales, and it was accessible across a range of individual learning and behavioural needs. The children drew one hope or ambition onto a cardboard disc and placed it in the branches of their Tree. Intentionally, after the initial introduction where the meanings of both words had been established, there was no emphasis placed on differentiating between hope and ambition (hereafter referred to as 'hope') and from this point, these concepts were considered as one. Children were encouraged to add more discs to their Tree and to include hopes at different scales (personal, family, school and wider communities). The task was not about reaching consensus; children's self-reflection and individual expression was encouraged.

Stage 2

The artist and an observer worked with children in smaller groups (five-eight children up to 1 week later). The artist refreshed the children's understanding of stage 1 and discussed why people might need support to achieve their hopes, providing definitions and examples where necessary. Thinking about their futures and identifying support needs is cognitively and emotionally challenging for children. The process and Tree symbolism provided a way to scaffold their thinking, as children traced their finger along the branches, down the trunk to the roots, encouraging them to think about the connections between specific hopes and support. The children drew

the support they felt they needed onto new discs and placed them in the roots of their Trees. In this smaller group, discussions and comments were frequent and recorded in the researcher's observations.

Analytical approach

Navigating the complexity of child-centred research (Jones, 2008; Uprichard, 2008), with the aim of representing children's voices as authentically as possible, we were influenced by non-representational theory as 'a machine for multiplying questions and thereby inventing new relations between thought and life' (Thrift, 2004, p. 71). A 'more-than-representational' (Jones, 2008) approach was applied to ensure that the nuances of inter-connections were captured; this consisted of a combination of thematic and narrative analysis informed by Textual-Visual Thematic Analysis (Trombeta & Cox, 2022). Considering the art (drawing and text on discs) and the observers' notes, the discs of hope and support were coded. Through paired interdisciplinary group discussion, a series of themes were identified. These were further discussed during recorded research team meetings, with iterative reflection of researcher interpretation. Adult positionality was a core guiding principle in our analysis. We were mindful to constantly challenge our interpretations of children's artwork and narratives recognising that there are differences in cognitive and socio-emotional development that may affect the interpretation of the data. We then returned to the original artworks, together with the observers' notes, to extract examples, both narrative and visual, of the children's hopes and support discs and present below a multi-disciplinary narrative.

FINDINGS

We begin this section by considering the 'Tree' method itself and in particular with children's understandings about hope and support. Moving on to the section Thematic and Narrative Analysis and Discussion, the overall themes resulting from the thematic analysis are presented with a focused discussion on Emotion, Relationships and Experiences.

Understanding of hope and support in the Tree of Hope and Ambition

Hope

Older children offered more independent thoughts and distinguished between hope as being more aspirational, maybe even passive, whilst ambition was explained with implied agency. This is illustrated through this exchange between the artist (A) and a child (9–10 years) (C):

A 'What do you understand by hope?'
C 'If you are hoping something will happen'.
A 'And what about ambition?'
C 'I think it means goals and dreams'.
A 'And what [do you think the difference] is between hopes and ambitions?'
C 'Hoping for something but ambition means goals.'

Younger children revealed a developing understanding of the two terms, particularly 'ambition' and needed more support through explanations of them. This is illustrated through this exchange between the artist and three children (7–8 years):

Artist asked what hope meant.

C1 'you really want something'.
C2 'can mean something different like hope you have a good birthday'.
C3 'you have courage'.

Artist asked what ambition meant.

C1 'Something you are worried about'.
C2 'Protective'.
C3 'Angry'.

Artist 'not quite [and explained using frame of 'my ambition is …']'

C3 'My ambition is to be the best skateboarder in the world'.

During the task, the word 'hope' was used more often in instruction and by children but distinguishing between the discs in the Trees to establish whether they were representations of children's hopes or ambitions (or even wishes) was not possible. In line with the project's child-led values, this distinction was not crucial and so these are combined in the analysis.

Support

Although support was understood well as a concept by most children, it seemed a more difficult task to reflect on, and specifically identify, the support required to achieve their hopes, especially for the younger children. For example, some younger children interpreted the task very literally, drawing grass and soils around the Tree (to support it). It was also evident that asking children to identify the support they needed encouraged them to consider the importance of their own voices being heard as this exchange between the artist and two children (8–9 years) reveals:

A 'Why do you think it's useful if we know who and what helps you?'
C 'So you can tell the school and things will change.'

This child placed value on support as well as recognising their own abilities:

A 'If you don't have support, will you be able to do it?'
C 'Yes, but it's easier with help.'

Thinking about support explicitly may not be something children are used to doing. It encourages a level of depth and of reflective thinking.

Non-Representational theory is relevant here because we were asking the children to share their hopes and ambitions, and this takes them (and, therefore, us) into the realms of the not

known, as well as considering the many ways we might understand the different meanings being made. We suggest that what is most important in this creative intervention is whether the children have a sense of hope and ambition, rather than necessarily what the specific elements of it are. Anderson writes (2006, p. 733) 'There is, therefore, an intuitive understanding that hope matters because it discloses the creation of potentiality or possibility'.

Thematic and narrative analysis and discussion

The Child's voice

An aspiration of the VIP-CLEAR project was to provide children with a platform and opportunity to express themselves. Engagement with the Tree was high, and all children participated. Children drew and talked about their futures both creatively with great imagination, and with realism demonstrating a range of cognitive process. A good imagination is natural for children and healthy; its importance is emphasised by many scholars, including Dewey (1980/1934) and Vygotsky (1978) who claimed that imagination is 'a function essential to life' (p. 13). Imagination helps young children make sense of the world, problem solve, create, make and play and express and cope with emotions (Chambliss, 1991). In doing so, children may become more personally resilient, suggesting that there is a role for imagination and creativity in developing personal resilience and, therefore, possibly in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children revealed a sense of aspiration for, and development of, agency. Evidence of their increased responsibility and desire to be considered as active citizens is summarised in one child's drawing, 'I may look small but my brain is huge!' (9–10 years). As calls for authentic and genuine inclusion of all children's experiences increase as countries recover from the COVID-19 pandemic (Jordan & Rees, 2020), our results reveal children's diverse hopes and ambitions with a focus on recovery and their futures.

Some hopes were more clearly related to COVID-19 risk and recovery, revealing an assimilation of children's recent experiences and views of the future into their wider and multi-layered lives. This fluidity was something we embraced in the analysis; it is how the children chose to express themselves and revealed diversity in their understandings and interpretations, authenticating their voices and quietening ours. The Tree drawing and the instruction to trace lines from the branches to the roots of the Tree to identify support provided a useful visual aid and enabled children to contribute.

Broad categories of hopes (in the branches) and support (in the roots) are represented in the Tree illustration in Figure 1. To prevent dilution of the children's voice and to amplify the diversity and individuality children expressed when asked about hopes and support, further categorisation was avoided. Themes were combined in the synthesis below, with discussions between team members to identify and discuss those that were most related to the children's diverse experiences of, and recovery from, COVID-19 and its mitigation. These included Emotion (to include Concerns and Empathy); Experiences (to include Happenings, Resources and Skills and Aspirations) and Relationships, and are discussed in the next sections, thematically in more detail (see Figure 2 for examples of competed discs).
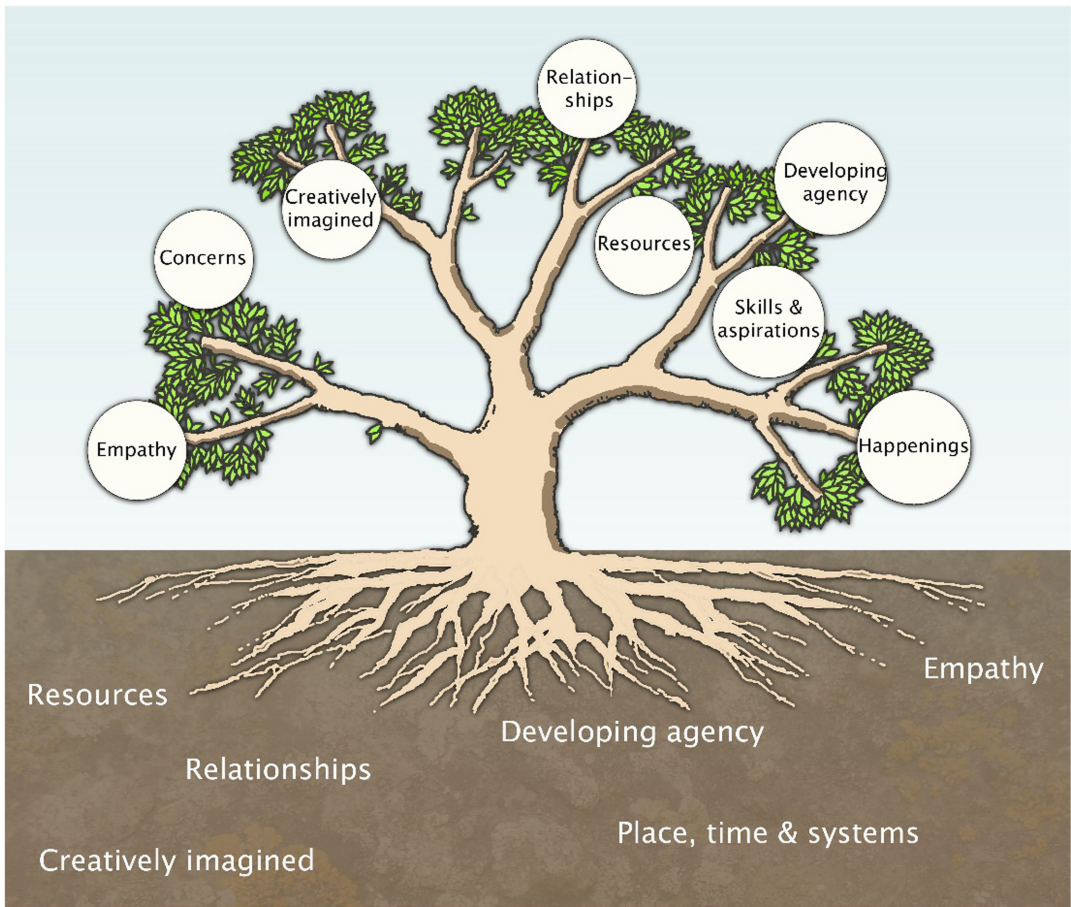
FIGURE 1 Themes of hopes and support (Digitally manipulated ink drawing). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Emotion

Children expressed empathy and concerns in their hopes for their families, school and the wider world in COVID-19 recovery, relating to both people and the environment. Children shared hopes to help their families and wider community with support or aspired provision, for example, 'I want to bye [sic: buy] my mum a bigger house and feed the homeless' (10–11 years). We cannot compare these hopes to pre-COVID-19 times but do suggest that awareness of family pressures (including financial) may have grown as a result of extended time at home due to COVID-19 restrictions. Other children expressed altruistic hopes for the school and other children who may need additional support, for example, 'To make school better you could get kids 1-2-1 help' (10–11 years). During COVID-19, additional support was delayed or withdrawn from families reliant on it and there is concern in recovery about potential developmental issues associated with this, such as speech therapy and learning support (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021).

Empathy was also expressed for peers, with knowledge (and sometimes responsibilities), that other children's future lives were being affected by other shocks. This revealed an assimilation, rather than a dominance of, COVID-19 into their thinking about other socio-environmental global issues. These were mostly related to health, environmental issues linked to climate change

FIGURE 2 Examples of children's hopes, ambitions and support. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

or wider socio-political issues such as homelessness and refugees, for example, 'I love my world. Stop climate change. So kids can have a better life' (10–11 years); and, 'Homeless, wars, poverty, disabled, more carers, more COVID vaccines, more jobs, more elections' (10–11 years). Sometimes, these fears seemed to be related to children's increased awareness of the associated risks and differential vulnerabilities of COVID-19, for example, 'Hoping my family won't die earlier. Because they are old age' (10–11 years); and, 'No bad sicknesses that kill people so everyone has their family and friends' (10–11 years).

Emotional empathy develops early in children and by the time children are school-age, their cognitive empathy skills are also developing rapidly (for a review, see McDonald & Messinger, 2011). Expressing hopes for others' futures is also altruistic, connected to higher levels of self-esteem and can make people feel actively engaged and useful (for a review see Post, 2005), something that children may need in their recovery from COVID-19. It can also be(come) a way

of coping, re-directing or softening focus, particularly when the topic, task or thought process may be overwhelming (Hu et al., 2016).

It may be that the children had raised awareness of these issues through what they had learnt at school (noting the earlier comment about Sanctuary Schools) or through other routes (e.g. news media). Either way, these topics of risks and negative impact require a level of sensitivity and follow-up support to ensure that concern does not become overwhelming (Ojala, 2012). In a world that is predicted to experience more of these interconnected global socio-environmental events, children's questions need to be addressed. Leaving questions unanswered can be damaging to future mental health and well-being even if, at the time, children seem resilient and so can easily be overlooked (Sak, 2015). Concern about social shocks (e.g., pandemics, climate change and other socio-political issues) can be related to increased levels of anxiety in children and affect their mental health and well-being (Nearchou et al., 2020). Exploring these topics with a methodology focused on hope may be an effective way to disrupt focus on feared futures to that of desired futures.

Relationships

There were many examples of children expressing hopes and support as relationships and connections with both humans and non-humans. We know that children had diverse experiences of relationships during the pandemic—some in stressful family settings, others enjoying increased time with family while many missed extended family (https://www.vip-clear.org/). Concerning humans, this included hoping for new siblings, friends and family. For this child, it was expressed as a positive desire to influence human characteristics, 'I want everyone bad to turn good' (7–8 years).

Relationships with animals have been shown to be consistently important to children throughout the different methodological phases of the VIP-CLEAR project (https://www.vip-clear.org/). There were instances where desire for connections with animals was expressed in relation to home, 'I would like a dog' (age 9–10 years) and schools 'The school to have a class pet. That is a cat' (7–8 years). It is clear from this child that relationships with animals were emotionally significant, 'Get a new puppy so I won't be sad' (7–8 years). At a young age, it appears that this child connected reducing feelings of sadness through their relationship with an animal, something also common in adults (Janssens et al., 2020). Children were also able to identify emotions and feelings through their 'need' for animals. 'I need animals to make me happy and not lonely, pets make me feel happy' (8–9 years). There is a level of self-connection, reflection, awareness and emotional openness in the recognition of sadness. Relationships with animals can allow children to explore relational and social aspects of their connections with animals (involving love, loss, understanding, connection and care [Tipper, 2011]) as this child's hope illustrated: 'I want a rabbit because before I had 2 rabbits and they died but I loved them so much, so I would want another' (7–8 years). Some personal agency and resilience strategies were expressed here too with knowing how to manage and influence feelings, being solution-focused with the knowledge that sadness (emotional well-being) can be changed and could be linked and developed to strategies to increase personal resilience and recovery from COVID-19. Children can talk to animals without being interrupted or feeling judged, which could be helpful, therapeutic and cathartic (Arkow, 2020).

Children often mentioned relationships with others when they talked about support needs and these mostly included families (parents and siblings but also wider and extended family), 'I need my parents to take me to lessons and my swimming teacher to help me with swimming'

(7–8 years) and teachers, 'I need help from the teacher. great!' (7–8 years). It was also clear that some children recognised support as being logistical, in terms of being taken to lessons or classes as well as other forms, such as knowledge, skills and support for learning. It was evident that support from others was recognised by children as a desire for affirmation and encouragement from their peers and from adults, which could boost self-confidence and emphasise positivity. Pictures were drawn with characters depicted with encouraging words like, 'yeah. Go [child's name]' and, 'well done' and, 'you can do it' and, in another case, a direct desire for encouragement: 'I want a coach to cheer me' (all 7–8 years). Support from both internal and external sources was recognised as important and could help to build personal capacity. The expression of the need for these types of support suggest that children recognise and value peers, teachers and coaches in their futures—something that they had less access to during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that should be considered in recovery planning.

Experiences (facing forwards)

During COVID-19 restrictions, children had been concerned about missing experiences and achievement of key milestones (https://www.vip-clear.org/). Here, children wanted to improve formally and informally recognised skills, 'I want to improve my handwriting' (7–8 years) and (frequently) swimming, 'Get on stage 5 in swimming' (7–8 years) for example, aligning with age-appropriate content within UK educational curriculums and their perceived importance by children. These were sometimes expressed as aspired achievements, for example, physical skill levels, 'Better at Teakwon Do. To get a black belt' (10–11 years), cognitive skills, 'Become even smarter so I can get a job' (10–11 years), musical skills, 'My favourite club is drumming' (7–8 years) and artistic skills, 'I want to get better at dancing' (7–8 years). Children show desire for recovery to include opportunities to develop their skills. It is encouraging to observe these hopes within children's visions of their futures, as sports, music, singing and playing, are associated with increased physical, emotional and psychological health (Catterall et al., 2000), and the feelings of self-confidence and achievement should increase self-esteem, suggesting an important role for them in recovery planning. These skills reflect diversity in interests and aspirations and are what the child feels are important allowing their individual expressions. This supports work showing disconnect between young people's aspirations and policies designed to raise aspirations through for example, promoting university education (Holloway et al., 2011; Grant, 2017). The arts-based process captures variety not widely reflected in the various measurements of children's development that inform curriculums and direct investment into catch-up recovery plans (www.gov.uk).

Children's hopes included travel, mostly linked to visiting and reuniting with extended families, 'I want to go to South Africa and learn some Africa. Cause I got family there' (7–8 years). At that time, physically seeing family had been difficult because of restriction on travel within and to many countries. There was also evidence of some children wanting more friends, 'I wish I can have more friends' (7–8 years) indicating a hope for more social and personal contact and possibly heightened awareness of the value of friendships within COVID-19 recovery. In some cases, hopes that included friendships were positioned outdoors in the children's artwork, maybe indicating a desire to, or recent experience of, playing and connecting with friends outside. Wanting 'more' friends could also indicate a perception that personal friendship numbers had fallen along with opportunities to play. For some children, this could be linked to raised levels of social anxiety resulting from extended isolation periods during pandemic restrictions (Teo et al., 2013) and

suggests that in recovery planning, support for social skills development to encourage friendships are important.

Although expressing desire for new items may be common in children across socioeconomic situations, the types of resources mentioned at this time and in these more socially disadvantaged settings may be important. Most often these hopes concerned having or getting money, improving or getting new houses, or buying new items (including food). In relation to money, there were examples of children wanting their families to have more money, 'I want my mum to be rich' (7–8 years). Houses were mentioned particularly often which is perhaps not surprising given the likely increased time spent in houses during COVID-19 mitigation. When houses were mentioned, there was evidence of a desire for new or bigger houses and more space physically (because currently, it was small or crowded) and personally (a desire for privacy, quiet and individuality). Hoping for new technology (games consoles, mobile phones) was mentioned but not dominant and often when referring to connections—playing with others online provided important interaction with peers during COVID-19 restrictions. Children again showed understanding of (adult) family pressures and desire to help the family for example, 'Buy a house for my family' (9–10 years), maybe indicating that buying a new house (as well as having more space) for the family would improve a situation. This was also evident in some examples that included buying items, 'I would wish for a new bunk bed' (7–8 years) and, 'I wish for more froot [sic: fruit] to get stronger' (7–8 years), which may not be the types of things that this age group would typically hope for (Children's Society, 2021). When thinking about resources as support, children mentioned money and this was connected to other themes of emotion and relationships: 'I need money's support to take my mum on holiday' (10–11 years); equipment and space, 'I need more learning stuff so I can learn better and we have more time to think. And pens' (7–8 years); and technology, 'I have a laptop' (7–8 years). During COVID-19, when many children's learning experiences were moved online, access to digitised learning (both financially and skill-based) was an issue. It is clearly a hope from children in VIP-CLEAR to be able to access digital technologies in their futures, and this has been highlighted by others (issues of digital poverty; Barnardos.org).

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of support

Drawing attention to and providing a practical method that encourages children to think about and identify support structures could be useful in encouraging self-reflection that promotes depth and self-awareness. It might mean that they feel more able to make things happen, for example, through advocating or petitioning others with their awareness of what they need. It could also encourage children to make connections and think more systematically. Implicit recognition of support could deepen their connections to their hopes and ambitions as they are encouraged to think about how to realise them (linking to the goals, pathways and motivations of Hope Theory) (Snyder, 2002). The methodological challenge to create an authentic way to research children's hopes, with minimal influence of the adult's voice, could be one reason that there is a lack of research in this area. The Tree methodology could be used to investigate other research areas such as, identifying (and visualising) different possible futures (e.g., in a climate change context) and in different settings to explore its promising potential.

Hope and recovery

This creative method allowed children to express their concerns, with some topical distance enabled through art and expert facilitation, in a gentle and supportive way. As researchers, we were aware of our responsibility to represent children's hopes as accurately and authentically as we could, avoiding too much adult processing and interpretation. Reciprocity in knowledge sharing as a key value in the team's co-productive research ensured that we shared results rapidly with school partners who were able to pass messages onto the school and class leaders. This also provided immediate feedback for children to witness leaders listening to their voices. In the United Kingdom, schools are implementing recovery plans and catch-up schemes, which focus mostly on academic learning (Maths and English), and there has been criticism that this is at the expense of play-based learning, and arts-based subjects; it potentially overlooks a need for reflection and processing in emotional recovery beyond a superficial approach (Bps.org.uk, 2022). Creative processes can allow the space/s in which participants reveal things that are hidden, even to themselves. Our results add evidence and support for this additional need, for example, one headteacher commented that, 'he [was] blown away with how articulate the children were at communicating their experiences and had little idea that they felt as they did' (observer's notes).

We suggest that spending time creating a research environment where children feel they have more individual autonomy and opportunity for expression, results in deeper insights into their perceptions. Our intention was to create a research method and space that allowed children to explore and express things that they themselves may not fully understand and where they did not feel that they had to produce 'the right answer'. The 'Tree' research tool can be conceived, not only as facilitating a snapshot of children's post-pandemic future but as an innovative method that provides opportunities for children to develop collective (re-)imagined hope. It also allows linked exploration of support and charting of pathways that can complement Hope Theory. We cannot know whether these children's hopes, ambitions and support differed to pre-COVID-19 times; or how contracted or expanded their visions of the future have become because of the restrictions. Anderson asks '...what can a body do when it becomes hopeful? What capacities, and capabilities, are enabled?' (2006, pp. 734), this process itself is relevant in our consideration of children's voice and agency in looking forward with hope.

Our research supports findings of the Children's Commissioners' research with older children (2021) in concluding that this generation are a 'sleeves-up generation, who are ambitious and perceptive' and hopeful for, 'a better world overall', particularly in relation to employment 'young people have told us that they are emerging from the pandemic looking to the future and with a drive to do well and succeed' (pp. 45), The younger age group of children in the VIP-CLEAR project thought about others when they thought about the future, hoping for themselves and others to get good jobs, and revealed that they are increasingly civically minded. Our findings add depth, providing more individual and detailed examples of children's hopes and ambitions for the future in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and revealing the support children said that they needed (which may differ to what adults think they need) to achieve these things. These are relevant both to inform our understanding of children's experiences of this global pandemic, and for future planning (across policies) for other social shocks at different scales.

Some children are resilient, and our results revealed diversity in their hopes and ambitions, assimilation of COVID-19 into their wider thinking and individualised thinking about support. Different hopes need different levels and types of support; children's identification of the support they personally need for particular types of hopes can be facilitated by this method and could allow adults to hear about and implement novel ideas for children. Of

significance is the finding that children found it difficult to express understanding of, and to identify where, their support might come from to fulfil their hopes and ambitions. Working closely with our research partner schools revealed a lack of capacity and space in curricula to offer children time and ways to express their own hopes and ambitions in their recovery from COVID-19. With regards to recovery and future preparations for social shocks, we suggest it is essential to provide safe spaces and opportunities for children to express their hopes and ambitions and identify the support they need, and their (aspired) agency within this. Indeed, this process itself is part of their becoming.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

A subset of consented children's artwork and associated documentation will be available from Bristol Archives at the project end (Summer 2022).

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