Addressing migrants' well-being during COVID-19: An analysis of Chinese communities' heritage language schools in Germany

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdown affected social life in every regard. In critical times, the well-being of vulnerable groups is often at stake. Migrants represent a case in point because language barriers and the lack of social networks impede their seeking help from public institutions and information access. In migration policy and research, current attention overwhelmingly focusses on COVID-19's impact on travel restrictions and healthcare. This article contributes a new perspective by demonstrating how migrants' well-being needs (understood as emotions and sense of achievement) in education during the COVID-19-induced school closure were addressed by community educational organisations. Focussing on the Chinese community in Germany, data were collected in Chinese heritage language (CHL) schools from three urban areas. This article argues that CHL schools' reaction to public schools' closure had a positive impact on their members' well-being. Such organisations achieved this by expanding their educational programmes during and after the lockdown. These measures ensured continuity in migrant children's education beyond the realm of heritage language instruction, while enabling migrant parents to seek employment as the economy reopened. Overall, the results of this study underscore the potential of community organisations' educational programmes in maintaining migrants' well-being, especially in trying times.

Keywords: Chinese heritage language schools, Chinese in Germany, COVID-19 school closure, migrant organisations, well-being

1. Introduction

By July 2020, the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (hereinafter COVID-19) has infected more than 197,000 people and caused 9,000 deaths in Germany. Such numbers do not paint the full picture of disruptions. Germany, like many others, adopted strict lockdown
measures to avoid overwhelming the healthcare system. Compared with neighbouring states, Germany had proportionately fewer infections and a lower death rate. However, with activities in public institutions (schools and government centres) and the private sector brought down to a minimum, the lockdown severely affected public and social life in every regard.

In trying times like the current pandemic, the needs and well-being of migrants are particularly at stake of being neglected (European Commission 2020; OECD 2020). Not only does potential language barrier hinder access to health information, but migrant communities are also more vulnerable than the mainstream due to more precarious labour and living conditions, unstable residence status, lower educational achievements, as well as the relative lack of social networks (European Commission 2020). Germany hosts the largest number of international migrants (13 million) in the European Union (EU) (Federal Institute for Population Research 2017; United Nations 2019). Hence, how the pandemic and lockdown affect migrants, as well as the latter’s response to implement new forms of solidarity, and challenges they face, provide a valuable case study and reference in future research and policymaking.

As a response to the unprecedented social changes and calls for scholars and policymakers to address COVID-19’s impact (Hanafi 2020; Pleyers 2020), a plethora of key concerns and major issues in areas such as migrants’ residency status, mobility, access to information and healthcare have been highlighted (OECD 2020). Few, if any, article-length studies have yet to put the focus on (especially young) migrants’ well-being in education during COVID-19. This study contributes a novel perspective on migrants’ well-being needs in education during COVID-19 by answering the question:

How have migrant community initiatives in the domain of education reacted to Germany’s lockdown and school closure due to COVID-19 in an attempt to address migrant children and parents’ well-being needs?

The issue of migrants’ well-being during trying times such as the current pandemic is topical. It has already been flagged both in scholarship and in policy that migrants face particular difficulties. As mentioned earlier, they represent a group that is most vulnerable to the drastic changes. This article focusses on the domain of education because it strains both the young (migrant children) and the old (migrant parents). With schools in Germany closed by 16 March, young migrant children’s educational continuity was at risk. Parents, too, felt the pressure to juggle work, childcare, and home-schooling. Moreover, such disruptions expose existing structural inequality migrants face. Extant literature shows that (especially first-generation) migrants tend not to have a high proficiency in German, the host country language, coupled with the higher likelihood that migrants’ households lack resources such as computer, stable Internet, and working space (Heckmann 2008; Geis-Thöne 2020). These factors negatively impact migrant offspring’s learning, positive emotions, and sense of achievement—aspects of well-being examined in this article (see section below). In fact, reports have already warned about the risk of migrant children in Germany losing out in their learning and achievement during and after the COVID-19 lockdown (Geis-Thöne 2020).

This article brings attention to how migrant organisations addressed their members’ well-being needs during the pandemic. At times also known as immigrant organisations in migration scholarship, migrant organisations are established and led by migrants to
serve their communities, both in the country of origin and the country of destination (Chaudhary 2020). Extant literature examined the role migrant organisations (in a variety of forms) play in integration, civic and political engagement and mobilisation, as well as forging transnational ties between the heritage and host countries (Ramakrishnan and Bloemraad 2008; De Graauw 2016; Chaudhary 2020). However, scant attention has been paid to how migrant educational organisations serve their communities beyond the scope of teaching.

Set against the COVID-19 backdrop, this study charts a new analytical roadmap by examining migrant educational organisations’ role in well-being provision for their members in trying times. Based on current findings, this article argues that a specific type of migrant educational organisation (hitherto understudied in migration contexts in Germany) can provide for their members’ well-being needs during difficult times such as the current pandemic. This is achieved by the organisations’ stepping in to fill the vacuum caused by local school closure. As later parts of this article show, such measures addressed the emotional and achievement aspects of migrants’ well-being.

This article’s unique contribution lies in utilising the combination of perspectives from migrant organisation, education, and well-being to analyse the topical issue of migrant well-being during COVID-19. The resulting analyses inform scholarship and policy debates on how host society institutions and migrant organisations could collaborate to ensure migrants’ well-being, especially in difficult times.

The next section presents the migrant community in focus, followed by two sections that review the state of the art in migration and language, as well as well-being. Then, the method and data will be presented, with subsequent sections devoted to analysis and discussion on limits of this study and implications of findings for future research.

1.1 Chinese migration to Germany

This study focuses on Chinese migrant communities (predominantly from mainland China) in Germany, which has been the fastest-growing non-European migrant group (excluding refugees) in the country since the 2000s (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1 illustrates that, although the total number of Chinese migrants in Germany are still outnumbered by those from the USA, their increase between the two time periods has been exponential. Yet, research on Chinese migration to and community-building in Germany is few and far between (Giese 2003; He 2007). Scholarship in the past two decades covers areas such as the early history of Chinese settlements in Hamburg, Bremen, and Berlin (Gütinger 2004), the polycentric nature of Chinese communities with groups from China and Taiwan in the 1970s to 1990s (Giese 2003), ethnic businesses in urban areas (Leung 2003), student migration in the domain of higher education (Li 2017), as well as the increasing volume of Chinese investments and business-led settlement (Holtbrügge 2018).

The question of how Chinese migrant organisations provide for the well-being of their members—in normal or critical times like a pandemic—is left unaddressed. Yet, dynamic community initiatives, especially in the realm of education, are even more present. Therefore, the current context of unprecedented social disruptions due to COVID-19 presents an opportunity in migration research to analyse how community initiatives and
organisations in the fastest-growing migrant group in Germany step in to substitute host society social institutions (such as schools that were closed) and provide for its members’ well-being.

1.2 Migration and language: The case of Chinese heritage language schools

This article examines a specific type of migrant educational organisation: Chinese heritage language (CHL) schools organised by the communities themselves. Language is a crucial element in the lives of international migrants. When people move, they bring their languages with them, while often being confronted with a foreign tongue—the host society’s dominant language. Language, therefore, directly impacts migrants’ experiences and choices. This could be in terms of accessing services and gaining (residential, socioeconomic) status in host societies as regards host country language acquisition. In addition, and coming to our focus, transmitting heritage language enables migrants and offspring to ‘build social fields that link together their country of origin and country of settlement’ (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992: 1). Heritage language is, therefore, crucial in maintaining transnational ties, for migrants use it to communicate in the transnational space (Carling 2008), be it in transnational family or institutional networks. In the age of increasing linguistic diversity and connectedness as a result of international migration (Kagan, Carreira and Chik 2017), a new sub-field in migration research focussing on heritage language in transnational migration contexts began to thrive in the past decade (Kagan, Carreira and Chik 2017). Notably, it examines efforts and challenges related to migrant communities’ attempts to preserve and transmit their heritage languages (and

Figure 1. Top non-EU migrant sending countries to Germany from 1980 to 1990 and from 2005 to 2015 (Federal Institute for Population Research 2017).
by extension, their networks in both host and sending countries) in family and formal educational contexts.²

With an approximate size of 50 million Chinese-speaking diasporic populations worldwide, the issue of CHL education has drawn interest in this field (Mu and Pang 2019). Extant scholarship on CHL schools (in mostly Anglophone contexts) covers: textbooks replete with patriotic ideologies towards a particular heritage country (China or Taiwan) (Curdt-Christiansen 2008); identity negotiations in classroom interactions arising from teachers’ (usually first generation migrants from the heritage country of origin) excessive efforts to foreground the ‘Chinese-ness’ of local-born second generation students (Duff, Liu and Li 2017; He 2004); as well as communication challenges when heritage speakers of various Chinese languages gather in one classroom and learning difficulties of non-Mandarin speakers (Li and Zhu 2014). These are common issues faced by CHL schools in Germany too. As one of the few detailed studies that examined this topic, Leung (2006) documents that most CHL schools in Germany publicly acknowledge and promote their transnational ties and networks between Germany and either mainland China or Taiwan. With each side subscribing to teaching practices of China or Taiwan, ‘[t]he different curricula reflect the geopolitical and cultural differences between the PR Chinese and Taiwanese states’ in CHL classrooms (Leung 2006: 246). Furthermore, CHL schools from various camps publicly vie for authenticity of their version of Mandarin Chinese (Leung 2006).

Albeit its comprehensive focus, current scholarship on Chinese migration and heritage language education does not explore potential functions of CHL schools beyond language and identity maintenance. As migrant organisations, can CHL schools do more than just providing a milieu for language and cultural maintenance? Scant scholarly attention has been paid to the functions of CHL schools in supporting community members’ well-being needs in the host society, especially in difficult times such as the current COVID-19 experience. This article shows that such schools have the ability to promptly respond to changing societal situations. For instance, many of them were quick to utilise digital resources and expanded their course offering beyond the scope of heritage language education, which satisfied migrants’ demands and various aspects of well-being needs. As analyses in Section 3 show, transnational interactions in CHL schools also played a role in their innovative educational response to the COVID-19-induced closure of schools in Germany.

1.3 Research approach to well-being

Current well-being scholarship has examined a plethora of factors affecting human well-being. This includes income, health, education, housing, job satisfaction, community relations, leisure time, and crime rate (OECD 2013); marital status (Coombs 1991); religion (Snoep 2008); political participation (Lange and Pacheco 2010); democratic governance (Frey and Stutzer 2002); and environmental sustainability (Corral-Verdugo et al. 2011).

The broad consensus reached by various studies and approaches is that well-being is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing emotions, moods, and judgements people form about achievement and life satisfaction, depending on material and immaterial factors (Diener 1984; Diener, Oishi and Lucas 2003; Michaelson 2009; Stiglitz, Sen and
Adler and Seligman (2016) summarised the approach to well-being in current literature:

“Wellbeing is now understood not simply as positive emotions, but, rather, as thriving across multiple domains of life [...] Wellbeing integrates hedonic wellbeing (feeling good) and eudaimonic wellbeing (functioning well)” (Adler and Seligman 2016: 5).

For the purpose of this study, well-being comprises both eudaimonic and affective dimensions. While this article agrees with Adler and Seligman (2016) on what the broad category of eudaimonic well-being should encompass (and its suitability for this research), it argues that their hedonic understanding of well-being is too limited. The complementary category of well-being used in this study is, therefore, affective, which encompasses moods, feelings, and attitudes (Happiness Research Institute 2020). As I show further, analyses that incorporate both dimensions result in a more thorough understanding of well-being of the researched (Kainulainen, Saari and Veenhoven 2018; Veenhoven 2017).

Migration has direct impact on various dimensions of well-being of migrants. For one, most migrants move to countries with better and more stable socio-economic conditions (Hendriks 2015). Yet, migration incurs high ‘psycho-social costs’ such as the absence of companionship and linguistic familiarity (Hendriks 2015). In various ways, these relate to positive/negative affect and eudaimonic achievements/fulfilment. These are salient issues in normal times (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs 2018), not to mention the urgency for migration scholars and policymakers to address migrants’ well-being amidst social disruptions due to COVID-19.

2. Method

Data on which analyses are based were collected from three CHL schools in three cities, from April to June 2020. Although heritage language in Chinese migration contexts is often used in extant literature as an umbrella term for Chinese languages/dialects (Mu and Pang 2019), this article limits its scope to CHL schools offering Mandarin as a heritage language. This is due to Mandarin’s growing political and economic value but also the fact that most, if not all CHL schools in Germany teach Mandarin as the sole heritage language. In what follows, I introduce the CHL schools and present the two main data sources. All names are pseudonyms.

The three CHL schools hail from three major cities in two federal states: Bonn, Düsseldorf (North Rhine-Westphalia, NRW), and Munich (Bavaria). The reason to focus on schools from these locations is that NRW and Bavaria are the two states that host the highest numbers of Chinese-speaking residents in Germany (Destatis 2020). Being state capitals (Düsseldorf and Munich) and former federal capital (Bonn), these cities are attractive to (Chinese) migrants due to their dynamic socio-economic opportunities. Importantly, they also boast sufficient migrant infrastructure, the likes of which—CHL schools with high enrolment numbers in this case—proved to be conducive data collection sites. Table 1 provides an overview of these schools:

Findings of this study are informed by two main sources of data: (1) interviews with principals/teaching staff and parent representatives from the CHL schools and (2) a
review of curriculum and teaching materials developed by the schools in response to the public-school closure.

Interviews were conducted with the principals, selected teachers, as well as representatives from parents’ associations. Hence, all interviewees were personally involved in and familiar with administrative and pedagogic aspects of their school, as well as their impacts on migrant members during this critical juncture. The interviews paid particular attention to the rationale for a full transition from in-class to online learning, the schools’ extended curriculum, migrant parents’ need for and reception to such changes, as well as how they contributed to community members’ general state of well-being during the pandemic. Severe travel restrictions at the height of the lockdown from April to June and the fact that the three schools are geographically widespread from each other meant that all interviews were conducted via electronic correspondence. A standard open approach was adopted, in that each interviewee received a list of standard questions concerning the afore-mentioned themes, while the open-ended nature of the questions allowed respondents to freely report the situation of their respective CHL schools. Follow-up clarifications with CHL schools Bonn and Munich occurred via email, whereas for CHL Düsseldorf, it took place on WeChat (upon their invitation to the channel). Interviewees were not remunerated.

My second data source comprises curriculum/programme descriptions that were promptly designed by CHL schools to cater to the needs of their students and parents. Such documents reveal how schools designed heritage language and a range of other courses in response to migrants’ demands during COVID-19, so as to fill in the void left behind by the school closure. This study’s analytical approach follows the principles of deductive content analysis (Elo et al. 2014). Data in the form of texts obtained from CHL schools (interviews and curriculum descriptions/materials on curriculum) were coded according to the following major analytical categories: ‘COVID-19 and migrants’ well-being’ (entails sub-categories with combinations of positive/negative effects on affective/eudaimonic well-being), as well as ‘Digitalisation of CHL education and alleviating inequality faced by migrants’. In the following sections, results are described based on contents of the said categorisations.
3. Analysis

As evidenced in Table 1, all three CHL schools adopted prompt decisions in response to the global and local developments of COVID-19. Their early and quick transition from in-class to full online teaching occurred as the transnational and mobile nature of such migrant families enhanced their risk perception. They were quicker to realise the potential health hazard than members of the mainstream society, especially since many had just completed/planned visits to China or invited relatives during the Chinese New Year season in January and February. Just like in the case of public-school closure, CHL schools’ ‘physical closure’ was justified on the basis of the health aspect of well-being:

You have to understand why we were more concerned than Germans. As community leaders, we knew that some of our students and parents returned to China for the Lunar New Year. At that moment, we were also planning some informal gatherings for family members who planned to come visit us in Germany (from different parts of China). We saw how the situation evolved in China by late January, and how little preventive measures the German authorities adopted. As parents, we naturally voiced concern about possible infections and demanded prompt decision from the school (Parent representative, Bonn).

Our school started full online learning on 8 February and the current plan is to stick to it until the summer break. Whether or not our students could come back to class physically depends on our evaluation of the situation in summer. Back in February, we switched to full online teaching because the coronavirus was already spreading in China and many of our parents worried about potential dangers of too much physical contact. To us, this was a real problem and we took parents’ concerns seriously, hence the very early school closure on our part (Principal, Bonn).

The early school closure illustrates the concern for the health aspect of well-being of its members, as mentioned by the principal in Bonn. This was the same rationale under which mainstream schools closed much later, on 16 March. In addition, more than health concerns, the CHL schools’ subsequent creative and flexible practices addressed affective and eudaimonic aspects of migrants’ wellbeing. In the sections that follow, I show how this is achieved with the schools’ going beyond offering simply language classes. As a teacher in the CHL school Düsseldorf pointed out, ‘when public schools in our state [North Rhine-Westphalia] closed in mid-March, our school decided to significantly broaden our curriculum, so as to better take care of the increasing needs of our students and their families’ (Teacher, Düsseldorf).

Indeed, parent representatives from all three schools pointed out that their demands to stop all in-class activities in CHL schools did not mean putting a stop to their children’s learning. On the contrary, they have been requesting their respective CHL schools to offer even more opportunities than in ‘pre-Corona’ times. The parent representatives in Düsseldorf and Munich put forward their demand succinctly in the form of the motto 停课不停学 [classes stopped but learning does not stop], which was subsequently taken up by the CHL schools and communities under study. Under this motto, and responding to migrants’ demands, certain newly created courses and programmes were so comprehensive that such ‘corona curricula’ almost resembled that of a normal school programme.
3.1 ‘Corona curricula’ and migrants’ well-being

Once CHL schools decided to move all their teaching activities online, they began anticipating the situation and planning for solutions. This took two forms. First, as regards the focus on heritage language education, the schools increased timeslots for existing classes and added new ones. The principal of CHL Bonn revealed:

As the coronavirus ravaged the whole country and it became clear that local schools would close, I gathered my teachers to brainstorm. That was in March. We understood that our students, who normally attend local public schools and come to us only on weekends, would suddenly have a lot of free time. For younger students, it might be especially challenging for them to keep some sort of daily rhythm. Two of our teachers were quick to transform an existing semester-long course into an online-based Chinese Pinyin class, aimed at children between the ages of five and eight. We called that course the ‘Chinese Pinyin Online Training Camp’. To make sure that our youngsters remain attentive throughout, we kept each class at 45 min, like what they are used to in German public schools, but it would go on every day so that they maintain a good rhythm. This went from 9 March to 20 March and was one of our fastest and earliest responses to the school closure. We wanted this to coincide with the public-school closure so that our kids can still try to achieve something (Principal, Bonn).

The above extract showed that the school in Bonn reacted by re-adjusting their teaching plan for an existing course on Chinese Pinyin so that, right from the beginning of public-school closure on 16 March, young pupils would not feel the abrupt disruption to their daily learning routine. In an effort to continue their original mission of transmitting the heritage language, many schools also created new language-related courses. For instance, teachers in Düsseldorf designed a special course on ‘learning Chinese characters via storytelling’, as Fig. 2 illustrates:

The course description in Fig. 2 reveals that it is suitable for children between the ages of five and eight years, and that the course incorporates storytelling, games, drawing, and singing—all online—to enhance pupils’ vocabulary and oral expression skills. The specific teacher explained that:

[O]ur parents complained that their kids were mentally stressed in dealing with this COVID-19 situation, and that many children missed having fun in school with their friends. As a response, I thought we could have some fun while learning online, something that we normally don’t do in weekend classes. I came up with this course hoping that we could have some enjoyable time despite the depressing situation outside. This kind of language course is new, so I was worried at first. But it seems like most of my kids liked it. After an initial trial in March, many parents wrote to ask if we would offer it again. So our school decided to offer this course once more in April and May. Due to exceptional demand, we even started offering this course five days a week from Mondays to Fridays, and in three time slots from 08:45–09:25, 09:40–10:20, and 10:30–11:10. I personally find it encouraging that our kids can continue their learning despite being stuck at home. It’s important that they feel that they are achieving something academically, even and especially during difficult times (Teacher, Düsseldorf).
This case illustrates that CHL schools attempted to alleviate the emotional and mental stress experienced by their pupils due to school closure and social distancing measures. As a response, they initiated fun courses while staying true to their mission: teaching the heritage language. In a way, by introducing such fun and innovative heritage language courses during this trying period, the schools attempted to directly address issues of well-being among its members. This is notably so as the schools made use of such fun courses to cheer up the mood of their students and enrich their daily lives under lockdown and amid restrictive social distancing measures. Moreover, such initiatives have the explicit aim of giving the students a sense of fulfilment that they could achieve some academic progress even when their normal schools were shut. Therefore, the migrant organisation of CHL schools stepped in to provide for the emotional (affective) and eudaimonic aspects of their pupils’ well-being: (virtual) companionship, maintenance of learning rhythm, and sense of functioning well academically. The fact that teachers had to increase the timeslots for such course offerings after a trial period suggests that it was generally well-received within the migrant communities.

In addition, when it became clear that the nation-wide school closure was to last longer than expected, and that travel restrictions disrupted Easter holiday travel plans, CHL schools responded again. They expanded their programmes to include non-heritage language-related subjects and virtual Easter holiday camps for both students and their parents. The CHL school in Munich, for example, organised a twice-weekly (180 min/week), month-long course on ‘introduction to python programming’ for its older students. Explaining this unusual addition to the heritage language curriculum, the principal claimed that they ‘wanted to prevent fatigue due to prolonged home learning. Hence a good way is to stimulate older students’ intellectual aptitude and keep their interests in online learning by adding new, non-Mandarin classes’ (Principal, Munich). Elsewhere, the principal in Düsseldorf revealed how far they have gone:

In early April, I had a meeting with my teachers and some parents. We realised that the long Easter holiday was approaching, but that everyone’s travel plans were disrupted, that
they had to stay home with children out of school and many parents either out of work or stressed about juggling work and childcare. We thought, why not create something fun and meaningful for everyone? That’s how we came up with a virtual Easter learning camp. First, there was the usual language class focussing on Chinese Pinyin, writing characters, and poetry for ages of four to seven years. They ran daily for 50 min/day for 60€ per two-week session. Secondly, there was a new math class for those above 10 years of age. We had always wanted to add a math class because some parents expressed concerns that their children either could not understand math classes in their local schools, or that the teaching quality was too low. During this pandemic, we finally found time to do it online, with the strong support of parent representatives and even volunteers. This math course ran for 90 min/day for 80€ per two-week session. Then, we also introduced a Scratch programming course for those aged eight years and up because we saw this phenomenon of programming courses for kids in China, and we thought some of our kids here might want to try too. Like the math course, this scratch course ran for 90 minutes per day for 80€ per two-week session. Finally, and importantly, we decided to do something for the parents. They, too, are stressed and feeling uneasy. That is why we arranged a five-day adult yoga course, also as part of this Easter programme. It ran daily for 50 min for 30€ total. (Principal, Düsseldorf)

Taken together, this special Easter programme proved to be comprehensive in terms of subjects covered and the quantity of time required of participants. With a variety of language, math, and programming courses on offer all day long for two intensive weeks, children who signed up would find their days occupied. The extension of courses to include non-heritage language subjects like math showed how the school attempted to address preoccupations raised by migrant parents: that their children could not follow math classes in their local schools due to the language barrier, or that the level of math instruction in certain public schools was (perceived to be) low. In fact, this study’s data and observations corroborate assertions by extant scholarship as regards migrants’ disadvantages in education (especially math but also language), due to lower levels of host country language ability, differences in classroom culture (host vs. country of origin), and limited parental support (Wang and Goldschmidt 1999; Civil, Planas and Quintos 2005; Heckmann 2008). Moreover, the transnational ties (interactions with relatives and friends in China) of CHL schools’ teaching staff not only helped them keep abreast of pedagogical developments in China (Scratch/Python programming) but also inspired them to introduce these to migrants’ offspring in German CHL schools during a trying time. Throughout this pandemic, migrant-organised Chinese language schools showed how far they could go to address issues of educational inequality in the mainstream society and enhance migrant children’s sense of confidence and achievement. These constitute, as this article contends, the eudaimonic aspect of well-being. In addition, affordable yoga classes for adults also took care of parents’ physical and emotional state.

In the course of this study, it also transpired that not only were CHL schools quick to respond to educational and emotional needs of students during lockdown, but they were equally prompt in adapting to migrant parents’ demands following the gradual resumption of public-school activities and the approaching summer vacation. By mid-June, local primary and secondary school pupils have resumed in-class learning. However, the Education Ministry of NRW announced that summer vacations in the state would not be
shortened or postponed due to the school closure and would begin as scheduled, viz. from 29 June to 11 August.\(^5\) This caused significant stress among parents, as a parent representative in Düsseldorf put it: ‘[M]any of us have either been overwhelmed with work and childcare since March or are desperate to seek employment. We cannot afford to do childcare at home again just because public schools would close for summer as planned!’ The situation among migrant parents in the Chinese communities is especially precarious, as a senior teacher explained:

Many of our families are working class. Back home [in China] most of them might be considered *xiaokang* (moderately well-off/middle class), but here compared to the mainstream society they fair worse. I am not sure if you are aware of it, but many of our parents work informally in service and entertainment whose shops operate semi-illegally anyway. This coronavirus totally wiped out their income, and of course they don’t receive any benefits from employers or from the state. With the economy restarting, I assume a lot of our parents would be eager to work again, no matter how tough working conditions are (Teacher, Bonn).

Similarly, the principal in Düsseldorf revealed that: ‘just because many of our parents work for this big Chinese telecommunications company based in the city, it doesn’t mean that they are better off. Because they are Chinese, they don’t enjoy the kind of German employment rights that people here take for granted. Of course, they want to go back to work immediately, if possible’. Such circumstances are, in fact, not uncommon among migrants. Even in European countries with sound labour protection, migrants are more likely to engage in informal economies, notably in the form of unregistered employment (Harney 2006; Bosh and Farré 2013). This accords many migrants little labour protection, hence more prone to economic uncertainty, which the COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated (European Commission 2020). This posed problems for parents. For many age-cohorts, public-school closure lasted almost three months. In the case of NRW, children from many grades returned to school as late as 15 June only to find themselves going into the six-week summer vacation on 29 June. This distressed many migrant parents. This is because public schools’ mere two-week reopening would not satisfy children’s learning needs or provide parents with enough time to concentrate on seeking re-employment. In the case of CHL Düsseldorf, such concerns were voiced by parents in the school’s WeChat group (to which I was also invited to join and contribute). A group of five parents (all active members of the parents’ association) called for the school to do more to provide institutional childcare support and enrichment activities during the summer vacation, so as to free parents up for employment. Within three days, this call was endorsed by over 120 parents who are active in the chatroom (out of a total of 207 parent members). Recognising this, CHL schools devised, once again, special full-time non-heritage language-related enrichment programmes, at times with even meals included:

**Figure 3** describes a math and table tennis training camp organised in Düsseldorf. The ink in red assures parents that all activities are conducted in-person and in a full Chinese language environment, with the math curriculum following international standards. The training camp is divided into three sessions. The first session, suitable for children in grades five and six, runs from 6 to 10 July, and again from 13 to 17 July. The second session, suitable for children of grades seven and eight, runs from 20 to 25 July and again from 27 to 31 July. The final session, designed for children from grades three and four,
runs from 3 to 8 August. Table 2 below presents what a typical day in the training camp looks like:

In its communiqué to parents in the WeChat group, the school director reassured parents that they can now register their children for the summer camp and reported that it would cost 160€ per session for math and table tennis without lunch and 200€ with lunch. These programmes at relatively reasonable costs are not only aimed at students but also help free up parents’ time so that the latter could resume work/prepare to find new employment. Once again, CHL schools attempted to address and enhance the eudaimonic dimension of well-being—enabling a person to achieve something—of both migrant parents and their children in the post-lockdown life. That CHL schools went the extra mile to cater to parents’ demands was noteworthy. This shows that they are aware of the socio-economic situation in which many of their members find themselves despite the fact that their mission (during ‘normal’ times) was simply to transmit the heritage language.

3.2 Unintended consequences of CHL schools’ COVID-19 measures

Thus far, this article revealed how CHL schools’ rapid transition to online teaching and the expansion of their curriculum during COVID-19 positively addressed their migrant members’ well-being needs. These supported the central argument of this article: migrant educational organisations could contribute to their members’ well-being needs during COVID-19. However, CHL schools’ strenuous effort to address their members’ needs during this difficult time meant that the well-being of a particular group of people was negatively affected, albeit unintended. The group of people concerned were children who hail from non-Mandarin-speaking families (either German or other Chinese languages), whose Mandarin was not competent enough to follow online courses. All three schools reported such instances:

![Math and table tennis training camp](image-url)
When we just switched to online teaching, our teachers came across a problem. We realised that some students had trouble concentrating in class, mainly because their Mandarin was weak. You know, we have many mixed families here, so our school is rather unique [among CHL schools]. Of course, we want to keep them, so in the end our teachers conducted online classes in both German and Mandarin. It was not ideal because we compromised the quality and our students would not learn as much, but at least they could keep learning (Principal, Munich).

While my team and I think that the measures we have taken [moving all instructions online] are most appropriate for this critical juncture, I personally think that it does no good to some people, especially since our school has some kids from non-Mandarin-speaking families. Normally, this was not a problem as our teachers could pay special attention to them in a physical classroom. For example, our teachers would regularly approach them to check on their progress, while the rest of the class did other assignments. In an online classroom, it was not possible. We lost all these students for now, because their parents told us that their children just could not follow (Principal, Bonn).

If I have to compare online classes with what we normally do, I admit that interactions between us and our students in online settings are restricted to simply communicating knowledge. I have a professional background in pedagogy in China before coming here, and to me, 情感教学 (emotional pedagogy) has always been central in my teaching practice. This is all the more important for weaker students, such as those from non-100 per cent Mandarin-speaking families. They really need to feel your love, support and patience in class. They want to learn and this emotional connection with them, through body language for instance, is crucial. I miss this aspect of in-class teaching and I feel sorry for them [non-Mandarin-speaking students] (Teacher, Düsseldorf).

The above extracts illustrate that the well-being experience (in eudaimonic terms) of a small sub-group of people—predominantly non-Mandarin-speaking students—has been negative. Their family languages are either a mixture of Mandarin and other Chinese languages/dialects or German and Mandarin. In either case, the more dominant language of these children is German or the dialect concerned. It proved difficult for these students to get hold of their teachers and for teachers to pay close attention to them in a virtual setting. In comparison, this problem would not have occurred under normal circumstances in ‘pre-Corona’ times. As a result, students from these families had trouble keeping up

### Table 2. Detailed timetable for math and table tennis training camp

| Time          | Activities                                      |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 09:15         | Report to school                                |
| 09:30–10:30   | Math lecture                                    |
| 10:50–11:50   | Math exercise                                   |
| 11:50–13:00   | Lunch break (paid-lunch optional)               |
| 13:00–14:00   | Table tennis (optional, maximum six people)     |
| By 14:45      | Pickup                                          |
with the learning progress. The CHL school in Bonn has even momentarily lost such students.

4. Discussion

This article examined migrant well-being during the COVID-19-induced school closure by asking: How have migrant educational organisations reacted to lockdown measures to maintain migrants’ state of well-being? The specific focus is the fast-growing Chinese communities in Germany. It is worth reiterating that both CHL schools as migrant organisations and the well-being of Chinese migrants are hitherto understudied in the German migration research landscape (Giese 2003; He 2007).

The data analysed thus far provide preliminary evidence to suggest that CHL schools positively addressed various well-being needs of the majority of their members during the school closure in Germany. Specifically, they expanded existing heritage-language courses and designed new, non-language-related programmes to satisfy increasing demands for continued learning and supervision from migrant parents. Such organisations went so far as to cater to parents’ demand for the provision of holiday supervision for their children, so that they could venture out to seek employment with the gradual reopening of the economy. Therefore, we observe the introduction of various summer programmes on-site, when it was announced that public schools would not extend their classes into the originally scheduled summer vacation period.

These findings highlight the potential of migrant organisations such as CHL schools to fill in the void left behind by state institutions during the lockdown. Notably, results reveal how these organisations went the extra mile to take care of those who were left in a more precarious situation (in terms of employment and offspring’s education) than members of the mainstream society (those without migration backgrounds). The initiatives of these CHL schools provided an enabling experience to many migrant children by maintaining their learning rhythm. As the lockdown persisted and parents’ demands increased, the schools boosted migrant children’s confidence and enhanced their sense of achievement by providing math, science, and sports-related subjects in their heritage language.

As students across the board grapple with negative impacts of three months of school closure (and limited instruction) in the following school year, the potential contribution of CHL schools’ aforementioned efforts in minimising the damage felt by migrant children cannot be ignored. Future studies should aim to understand the longer-term effects of CHL schools’ COVID-19 responses on various aspects of migrants’ well-being, especially as regards addressing structural inequalities in educational achievements (eudaimonic well-being).

In addition, CHL schools’ response to COVID-19 not only enriched the lives of children but also maintained migrant parents’ eudaimonic well-being. The comprehensive supplementary programmes (introduced promptly and in response to parents’ requests) freed them up and provided them with time to seek employment. It proved useful as the economy reopened. This would not have been possible, however, if these families were to
rely solely on public schools since there were merely two weeks between the latter’s reopening and their closure again due to the scheduled summer vacation.

The flip side of CHL schools’ COVID-19 responses is that the well-being of a small group of non-Mandarin-speaking students was negatively affected, as mentioned earlier. This is, of course, an important issue, since ensuring the learning progress of German/dialect-speaking students (even in difficult times) contributes to building a more inclusive community. Nevertheless, insofar as the aim of this article is concerned, they do not hinder the acknowledgement of CHL schools’ overall positive role and potential in addressing and maintaining the well-being needs of a majority of their members.

5. Limitations

Limitations of this study are present in two main areas: (1) lack of prior research and (2) sample size. As mentioned earlier, there is a dearth of scholarship on Chinese communities in Germany in migration research in general, not to mention specificities such as how migrant organisations contribute to members’ lives and well-being in Germany in one way or another. This warrants attention because Chinese migrants represent the fastest-growing non-EU migrant group in Germany, which itself is Europe’s largest migrant-receiving country. To be sure, the lack of prior research on the specific topic addressed by this article is also attributed to the fact that social disruptions such as the COVID-19-induced school closure are unprecedented (but whose recurrence cannot be ruled out). Hence, this article also highlights the need for further research on migrants’ well-being and the role of community initiatives in a timely manner (see section below).

The second limitation pertains to sample size. In an attempt to strike a balance between conducting reliable fieldwork and data collection and ensuring timely dissemination of results in the midst of the pandemic, certain trade-offs had to be made. For this article, data collection was limited to the CHL schools in the three cities from the two states (NRW and Bavaria) with large Chinese populations. Bearing this in mind from the onset, the goal of this article is not to generalise any findings. Instead, this work aims to understand a critical situation—how CHL schools as migrant organisations responded to the COVID-19 school closure to address Chinese migrants’ well-being—via a case study (consisting of several sites), which is itself understudied. Insofar as this present research is concerned, the main question has been addressed. Further studies could build on this basis and expand the scale, so as to contribute to the generalisability of findings.

In addition, the issue of researcher positionality was present, as with any empirical research. This issue in and of itself is not so much a limitation of this study, since it is impossible to do away with it. It is nonetheless instructive to recognise it and reflect on its implications. Typical researcher positionalities in migration research manifest themselves most noticeably in an insider–outsider divide: ‘an insider researcher is a member of the migrant group under study, whereas an outsider researcher is a member of the majority population in the country of settlement’ (Carling et al. 2014: 36). As a German-Singaporean researcher, my position vis-à-vis the informants did not fit the archetypal insider–outsider divide as I was not considered a ‘full’ member of the migrant group (mainland Chinese) and the majority population in Germany (white Europeans). In hindsight,
I gained trust, build rapport, and transcended (to a certain degree) national boundaries with the migrant group under study, in part due to language skills and cultural competence. This ‘honorary insider’ status (Carling et al. 2014: 50) accorded benefits such as access to information on CHL schools’ private social media chat groups, the right to contribute to these chat groups and use their materials anonymously, as well as parents’ and teachers’ willingness to share their materials and open up to me regarding their difficulties and stress (topics of well-being) despite our having only recently and ‘virtually’ met. However, in the diverse landscape of ethnic Chinese settlements (mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, Hong Kongers, and Southeast Asians) and community-based CHL schools serving them, it remains to be seen in future research how researchers with a myriad of backgrounds could have their various third positions accepted by these migrant communities who, although all ethnic Chinese, are defined by national, political, ideological, and cultural boundaries (Leung 2006).

5.1 Perspectives for future research

The general picture emerging from the present analysis is that the public-school closure during COVID-19 could be highly disruptive to migrant children’s well-being (academic progress, achievement, and mood) but that migrant organisations could be responsive to social changes and prompt in taking up (at least a part of) responsibilities in maintaining migrants’ well-being. This is especially so when the corresponding host society institution—schools—partly or wholly stopped their normal scope of activities. Regarding the Chinese communities and the expansive network of CHL schools in Germany, could the same be said across the country? Further research could go beyond the scope of this article by examining how CHL schools throughout Germany responded. With at least two CHL associations and 40 officially registered member schools, larger-scale studies could seek to examine and explain similarities and differences of CHL schools’ COVID-19 response based on geography (urban, metropolitan or smaller towns), resources (well-financed CHL schools vs. those who are not), and socio-political boundaries (mainland Chinese vs. Taiwanese CHL schools).

Secondly, it would also be of interest to explore if other migrant communities have similar organisations that provided their own response in the wake of COVID-19 to ensure learning and well-being of their members. Such migrant organisations could come in the form of heritage language schools like the CHL, for instance, the network of Japanese supplementary schools, or in other domains such as cultural-religious groups within the Turkish communities. A better grasp of how migrant organisations in various communities responded (or not) to the lockdown in an attempt to address the well-being of their members would be beneficial to both scholars and policymakers in migration and integration. Such an understanding allows us to ask: Can a more inclusive and sustainable future in migrants’ educational landscape be achieved if partnerships between host society organisations (schools, local educational boards, and immigration bureaus) and migrant initiatives are enhanced? Future research could address this topic by exploring how and in what aspects this could take shape.

In the longer term, future migration research could reflect on how a crisis of this sort and the way social actors (such as CHL schools) dealt with it may bring about long-term
implications for multicultural attitudes and integration policies of European host societies. This study revealed that migrant organisations such as CHL schools are adaptable and in fact did respond fast to changing needs of migrants during the COVID-19. Also, as they are situated on the grassroots level and are run by members of the same community who speak and think like their migrant members, they may be better poised than most mainstream organisations to understand migrants’ precarious situation and immediate needs in trying times. Indeed, in this study, we have seen how migrant parents preferred to turn to such organisations for help at each stage. This occurred in early February (before COVID-19 took hold in Germany), in March (when it became clear that public institutions would temporarily stop their normal service for a longer period of time), and in June (immediately before public schools’ summer closure). On the part of CHL schools, the extra classes and programmes (language, math, programming, and sports) were offered at a very affordable rate in comparison to what one would normally pay outside. Could their non-heritage language curriculum be maintained and extended, so that migrant children who may face learning difficulty in public schools, such as in math (due to language barrier), have a chance in these migrant organisations to learn it in their heritage language? Could this in turn contribute to levelling the playing field and enhancing migrants’ well-being (especially in the sense of achievement)? This comes at a time when increasing public attention in major Western (and migrant-receiving) countries is paid to detrimental effects of public-school closure on general student populations’ learning and achievement, especially in language and math (Fickermann and Edelstein 2020; Kuhfeld and Tarasawa 2020). Further studies should, therefore, be conducted with a focus on how migrant initiatives and organisations—such as CHL schools or their functional equivalents in the domain of non-formal education—could supplement host society policies and efforts in addressing education inequality and enhancing migrant children’s confidence and achievements.

6. Summary and outlook

This study examined how a specific type of migrant organisation in the domain of education—CHL schools—reacted to the COVID-19 lockdown to address migrants’ well-being needs. It showed how such organisations’ response to the COVID-19-induced school closure positively influenced the state of well-being of most of their members. Specifically, this was achieved when CHL schools broadened their course offering and supervision availability during and after the COVID-19 lockdown. This had a largely positive effect on the affective and eudaimonic well-being among their members. Not only did CHL schools fill the void left by public schools’ closure, they provided an enriching and enabling experience for children to achieve something and accorded migrant parents time and energy to seek (re)employment.

Findings of this study contribute to the recognition that migrant organisations could be an important player in addressing migrants’ well-being and needs, in ways that host society institutions might not be able to achieve. Building on this foundation, future scholarship should address the broad implications of this research for policy innovations in the domain of integration and multiculturalism. With a better understanding of how various
community actors could contribute to migrants’ well-being, the synergy between such organisations and social institutions of host countries could be further strengthened. This will be a key to enhancing migrants’ well-being and their more active participation in the social life of their host societies in both normal and trying times.

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Endnotes

1. Compiled by Robert Koch Institute, as of 8 July 2020 (https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/InfAZ/N/Neuartiges_Coronavirus/Fallzahlen.html).
2. Recent compendia providing a comprehensive overview in the state-of-the-art on heritage language education are: Canagarajah 2017 (on migration and language); Creese and Blackledge 2018 (on language and superdiversity); and Kagan, Carreira and Chik 2017 (on heritage language education practices and innovation).
3. From the NRW Education Ministry Website (https://www.schulministerium.nrw.de/docs/Recht/Schulgesundheitsrecht/Infektionsschutz/300-Coronavirus/index.html), last updated on 20 April 2020. Different states operate according to different school calendars.

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