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# Teachers' narratives during COVID-19 partial school reopenings: An exploratory study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Many countries around the world imposed nationwide school closures to manage the spread of COVID-19. England closed its schools for most pupils in March 2020 and prepared to reopen schools to certain year groups in June 2020. Understanding teachers' lived experiences at this time of educational disruption is important, shedding light on challenges faced and support needed by schools and teachers in the event of further disruption.

**Purpose:** The research reported here represents the second timepoint in a longitudinal study investigating what it was like being a teacher in England during the pandemic. Our aim was to better understand teachers' experiences at a time of partial reopening of schools in mid-June 2020.

**Method:** We used the framework of Self-Determination Theory to explore challenges to teachers' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness. A total of 24 primary and secondary state school teachers from 20 schools across England were interviewed and asked to tell stories of a low point, a high point and a turning point. A reflexive thematic analysis, using a mix of inductive and deductive coding, was conducted.

**Findings:** Six themes were identified in the data: *uncertainty, practical concerns, worry for pupils, importance of relationships, teacher identity, and reflections*. Challenging their basic need for autonomy and competence, teachers were anxious about current and future uncertainties while navigating school reopenings. Challenging their basic need for relatedness, teachers described the importance of connecting with pupils and their families, and with colleagues. Lastly, teachers searched for holistic meaning, evaluating what it means to be a teacher and reflecting on how these circumstances have affected their personal and professional lives.

**Conclusions:** Our analysis of teachers' experiences provides insight into how teachers' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness have been challenged. It highlights the importance of supporting teachers to feel autonomous, competent and connected with colleagues, pupils and their families. Such support is likely to be beneficial to teachers' wellbeing and their commitment to the profession, now and in the future.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; teacher identity; Self-Determination Theory; teachers; wellbeing; leadership

## Introduction

Many countries around the world imposed nationwide school closures to manage the spread of COVID-19 (Viner et al. 2020). In England, school closures, for all but children of key workers and some vulnerable pupils, came into effect on 20 March 2020 (Department for Education 2020a). On 24 May 2020, the government announced gradual school reopenings in England, with pupils in Reception (ages 4-5), Year 1 (ages 5-6) and Year 6 (ages 10-11) able to return to primary school from 1 June 2020 and pupils in Year 10 (ages 14-15) and Year 12 (ages 16-17) to secondary schools from 15 June (Prime Minister's Office et al. 2020). Given the dramatic changes in education during the course of the pandemic (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020) understanding teachers' lived experiences at this time is important, shedding light on what teachers needed, and may need in the event of further disruption.

## Background

Theoretical frameworks can be helpful in understanding one's experiences at work, and Self-Determination Theory has proven to be valuable in the past in this regard (see Van den Broeck and Ferris 2016 for a review). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000, 2002) there are three basic psychological needs for optimal functioning and wellbeing: autonomy (a sense of willingness and ownership of one's actions and behaviours), competence (a sense of effectiveness and mastery), and relatedness (a sense of caring, being cared for and belongingness). Contextualised within the workplace (see Van den Broeck and Ferris 2016 for a review), those who report their needs being satisfied at work tend to be more effective workers (Gagné and Deci 2005). In relation to teachers, satisfaction of these three needs is associated with teacher-related and student-related outcomes, including teaching motivation (Abós et al. 2019), teachers' perceptions of job

pressure and burnout (Bartholomew et al. 2014), students' motivation to work and student wellbeing (Poulou 2020). As COVID-19 has caused major disruption to education, questions arise around the implications of these for teachers and the profession.

Uncertainty, by nature, endemic to the teaching profession (Lortie 1975), encompassing didactic (being able to meet all pupils' academic needs), practical (using appropriate teaching and intervention methods) and relational (certainty about building relationships with pupils and parents; Munthe 2001) uncertainties. The COVID-19-related educational disruption has, however, brought new situational uncertainties that may have frustrated teachers' needs for autonomy and competence. In England, when lockdown was new and school was closed for most pupils, teachers needed to navigate quickly a situation that they had never encountered before (Kim and Asbury 2020). They needed to consider the practicalities of delivering remote education, including how to adapt their lesson material, providing task differentiation and feedback, and conducting formative assessments (König et al. 2020). Moreover, they needed to ensure that schools were COVID-19-secure for pupils who were physically attending (Department for Education 2020b). From May to June 2020, with the prospect of considerably greater numbers of pupils physically attending school, the practicalities of how partial school reopenings should work was likely to be a prominent concern. For example, these new circumstances required teachers to determine how to deliver a blend of physical and remote teaching, while ensuring that they followed government guidelines (Department for Education 2020b). This study explores whether confronting these new hurdles challenged teachers' sense of autonomy and competence, including those of school leaders.

Turning to the third basic psychological need, relatedness, a further question is whether teachers will experience a need for relatedness during COVID-19. Relationships are central to the teaching profession, with implications not only for teachers (e.g. Veldman et al.

2013) but also students (e.g. Hughes and Kwok 2007; Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim 2020). At the start of lockdown, research suggests that the physical remoteness led to teachers feeling disconnected from colleagues and pupils (Kim and Asbury 2020). Given that nearly three months of remote teaching took place before partial reopenings began, it is possible that teachers' need for relatedness may have been particularly affected.

Concerns that lockdown would exacerbate the 'gap' between pupils from more versus less affluent backgrounds have been echoed around the world (The DELVE Initiative 2020); in England, there were reports that eligible children were not receiving their Free School Meals during lockdown (Parnham et al. 2020). Indeed, teachers were particularly concerned about at-risk and vulnerable pupils at the beginning of lockdown (Asbury et al. 2020). As the pandemic progressed, it became increasingly clear that pupils who were not previously identified as vulnerable or at-risk were also affected. By this stage of COVID-19, the UK had entered recession (Stephens et al. 2020), with serious financial and welfare implications for many pupils' families (Nicola et al. 2020). Moreover, schools had become increasingly aware of the challenging circumstances that some pupils were living in (Power et al. 2020), and the socio-emotional, behavioural and academic difficulties that some had experienced during lockdown (Pearcey et al. 2020). It seems likely that teachers will have remained concerned for their pupils and that their concern may have expanded to a wider group than at the start of lockdown.

According to the Theory of Affordances (Gibson 1977), external circumstances can instigate changes in values, and COVID-19 has provoked people to rethink the roles of schools and teachers (Colao et al. 2020; Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). Teachers may therefore be reconsidering their teacher identity narratives: that is, what it means to them to be a teacher during this time and beyond (Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Beauchamp and

Thomas 2009). As schools gradually reopen, it is expected that they may have had opportunities to reflect on lessons from lockdown that they can apply in their new practices.

According to Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams 2001; McAdams and McLean 2013), individuals proactively create, develop, revise and internalise their experiences into self-stories, which give them a sense of meaning and purpose. Life stories have been instrumental in understanding experiences, including work role transitions (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010) and difficult experiences in adulthood (Pals 2006). At a time when the world is ever-changing, this framework of asking teachers to recount low, high and turning points in their professional lives may be helpful to elicit rich insight into teachers' experiences and needs.

### ***Purpose***

The study aimed to understand teachers' experiences, and the meanings they drew from their self-stories, at a time when many countries were reopening schools (Bonell et al. 2020). Using a narrative identity framework, and a mixed inductive and deductive approach to analysis, based on an initial study about the first six weeks of partial school closures in England (Kim and Asbury 2020), we asked: *What were teachers' experiences between late April 2020 and early June 2020 as schools in England prepared to partially reopen?*

## **Methods**

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the ethics committee of the researchers' university department. Participants provided consent to the study by return of a consent form prior to the interviews, and also provided oral consent at the start of the interviews, following confirmation by the interviewing researcher that identifiable data would be anonymised, and of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.



### ***Participants***

All 24 teachers (11 primary and 13 secondary school; 6 male and 18 female), who originally participated in the initial (Time 1) interviews between 24 April and 1 May 2020 volunteered to participate in the current (Time 2) interviews. Participants represented 20 schools from across England. Teachers were recruited via convenience sampling. A selection of 24 teachers was made from those who had expressed interest, with selection guided by the aim to achieve representation of a wide variety of teaching experiences and locations. Of the 24 participants, 9 identified as having a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) role in their school (5 primary, 4 secondary); while the other 15 identified themselves as class teachers (CTs: 6 primary, 9 secondary). Participants were compensated with a £15 retail voucher.

### ***Data collection***

We adapted Section B of the Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams 2008) to ask participants to share their experiences of COVID-19 as a teacher in England since their previous (Time 1) interview. Participants were asked to describe three key scenes (i.e. low point, high point and turning point) in as much detail as possible.

Participants were invited to be interviewed, over Zoom, by the same researchers at Time 2 (June 2020). The interview consisted of three sections, the first and longest section of which represents the content of the current study. The full interview lasted 60 minutes, on average ( $SD=16$  minutes). Interviews were auto-transcribed by Zoom; these automatically-generated transcriptions were then checked and corrected against the audio recordings and anonymised by two members of the research team. Following transcription of the interviews, all identifiable data (including participant details and any names or people referred to) were redacted and replaced with a general description, for example, 'place' or 'name'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The transcribed, anonymised interview data can be made available to researchers by contacting the corresponding author.

### ***Data analysis***

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013) was used to analyse the interview transcripts. A research team member read and re-read the data, generating initial codes and themes from their observations. Initial codes were assigned to participants' responses to questions in light of the research question; on a re-reading, these were consolidated and discussed with the other members of the research team, resulting in an initial set of codes. Initially, the transcripts were coded inductively and these codes were used as the basis for theme generation. This was followed by a deductive comparison with coding and themes from the participants' initial experiences (Kim and Asbury 2020). That is, the preliminary codes and themes were methodically reviewed alongside codes from initial interviews, and amended where appropriate, to ensure consistency between coding labels across the two time points. The transcripts were then reviewed again and themes were finalised. As at Time 1, our analysis was semantic and essentialist, describing teachers' expressed experiences rather than interpreting hidden meanings.

## **Findings**

Six themes were identified: (1) *uncertainty*, (2) *practical concerns*, (3) *worry for pupils*, (4) *importance of relationships*, (5) *teacher identity*, and (6) *reflections*. These themes reflected the experiences of the interviewed teachers at a point in time when they were around 11 weeks into the partial school closures in England during the COVID-19 pandemic, and shed light on how their experiences had changed during the period of time since they were interviewed at Time 1 (i.e. around 6 weeks after the start of the national lockdown). Four of the themes from Time 1 remained the same, while two had changed somewhat: namely, *finding a way* became *practical concerns*, and *worry for the vulnerable* had broadened into a more general *worry for pupils*.

Given the nature of the study, generalising from these findings is not intended. The focus of the findings is, rather, on the detailed, exploratory analysis of the themes identified in the rich narrative data. Although the emphasis is not, therefore, on quantification, it should be noted that broad quantitative terms such as ‘some’ or ‘several’ are used to assist in describing the extent to which a theme/code was shared across the study’s participants.

The content of teachers’ stories changed a little from Time 1 to Time 2. The low point scenes at Time 1 centred around *uncertainty* but had shifted to *worry for pupils* at Time 2. It was also notable that many high point scenes at Time 1 and Time 2 focused on the importance of relationships, indicating that teachers’ values consistently centred around their interactions with pupils and colleagues. The majority of turning point scenes in Time 1 were about *finding a way*, whereas those at Time 2 focused on *practical concerns*. These shifts seemed to relate directly to the development of these themes over time: teachers were emerging from finding their way in adjusting to the new ways of working in Time 1, to ensuring that they were being effective as teachers by first tackling the practical barriers in the new circumstances in Time 2. In the subsections below, the six themes are presented and discussed in more detail. Where relevant, transcribed and anonymised quotations from the data are included to illuminate key points.

### ***Theme 1: Uncertainty***

This theme captures the uncertainty that teachers reported feeling when looking towards schools reopening: feeling unsure of how they would function, and what would be expected of them. Teachers’ frustrations, especially regarding barriers to planning, were linked to their perception that the government had not been listening to them and that confusing governmental communications were worsening the uncertainty that schools were already experiencing. As Participant 23 (Secondary CT) put it, ‘every day, the information comes out, which is contradictory to the week before, or the day before, even, and it's very

difficult to plan...’. Many teachers felt this adversely affected their wellbeing, particularly, as they mentioned, when guidance was released last minute with little or no teacher consultation: ‘the stress levels ratcheted when all this guidance came out ... right on the eve of half term’ (Participant 3; Primary SLT). Teachers considered this placed an unfair burden on them; as Participant 1 (Primary SLT) commented, ‘the government haven't thought about the wellbeing of teachers throughout this time’. Teachers repeatedly expressed a desire to be able to plan ahead, something their Time 1 interviews suggested as a core element of teacher identity (Kim and Asbury 2020).

It was evident from the analysis that teachers also worried about uncertainty resulting from not knowing how pupils have coped in lockdown. As Participant 12 (Primary CT) explained, ‘it's not knowing where to start and not knowing what it is they need.’ Nonetheless, gradual glimmers of certainty boosted teachers’ sense of control, and with it, their confidence and motivation. For example, Participant 13 (Primary CT) described the relief of returning to school and being provided with clarity on the ‘new normal’:

*Because I'd been in the previous day and had a really positive experience... I got clarity about what I was doing and where I was doing it... I felt like I could picture what's going to happen. I can picture what the new normal is going to look like.*

Teachers’ stories indicated that the uncertainty they experienced in lockdown in relation to meeting pupils’ needs might ease as they return to school. However, overall, it was clear that the theme of *uncertainty* related predominantly to teachers’ observations of confusing government guidance and their perception of need for clearer guidance and improved communication.

### ***Theme 2: Practical concerns***

Once teachers had settled into remote working, their concerns became increasingly practical. They expressed worries about what full school reopening might look like, and how schools and the teaching profession would need to adapt to the ‘new normal’. Some teachers

were concerned about how they would cope with social distancing requirements at school, exacerbated by uncertainty around what their ‘new’ classrooms would be like. This was particularly apparent in the stories of those teaching in old buildings and small classrooms. Participant 9 (Secondary SLT) described the process as ‘like doing a giant Sudoku going, yeah, we can't do that ... and we can't do that... [with the] whole school it's even worse, because you've got isolated toilets and isolated handwashing facilities... in an [old] building, it's just unworkable...’.

Others worried about lack of resources, and how teachers should approach lessons when schools reopened. Their comments reflected teachers’ anxieties about how their role in keeping children safe when schools fully reopen might affect their ability to teach effectively. For example, one reception teacher (Participant 11; Primary CT) questioned:

*when these children come back, what is it going to be like? Because they're learning through play and you still need to have that engagement, but we don't have the resources there now to engage them. So how are we going to do that?*

Some teachers felt confident that their schools were well-prepared for reopening, particularly those who had been involved with, or seen first-hand, how their schools planned to address the practical concerns. For example, Participant 22 (Secondary CT) explained that ‘I feel really like [SLT] are going above and beyond to keep us safe, and to keep students safe as well’. Teachers’ gratitude to all school staff for the way they pulled together to prepare classrooms for pupils’ return was evident. For example, Participant 7 (Secondary SLT) said:

*You see the members of the community there, the cleaners, the catering staff, who're... keeping free school meals going. The... site team. Oh my god, they've had no time off.*

This suggests that, as teachers return to school and are reassured that *practical concerns* are surmountable, this theme may dissipate or change over time. In addition, some teachers reported a real excitement about the prospect of returning to school, such as Participant 16

(Secondary CT): ‘it's not getting back to normal, and it's not going to be school in the way that we know it... I'm excited, in a way ...’

Evidently, the theme of *practical concerns* is closely linked to *uncertainty*. However, the theme is not clear-cut: teachers’ stories and attitudes varied according to the extent of their schools’ preparations, and the emotions expressed and described, which ranged from anxiety to excitement.

### ***Theme 3: Worry for pupils***

Many teachers expressed worry about all of their pupils – i.e. their concern was not limited exclusively to those who would normally be considered vulnerable. As teachers were aware that some children’s home circumstances may have changed or deteriorated in lockdown conditions, they were anxious to hear from all their pupils, regardless of their ‘normal’ home situations. Most of the teachers mentioned worry over pupils’ loss of learning. Factors perceived as relevant included pupils not receiving adequate support; for example, one participant commented that ‘some of those children won't read a book at home. No one will talk to them about anything other than what's for dinner.’ (Participant 7; Secondary SLT). Another teacher (Participant 18; Secondary CT) worried about the long-term effects of home learning: ‘because he’s at home so much, he doesn't have the confidence he had instilled through his studies’, indicating the belief that some pupils particularly benefit from daily face-to-face contact with teachers and peers. Teachers’ concern for learning loss was exemplified by a story from Participant 11 (Primary CT) about reading a book with a key worker’s child:

*It was a book that she would have read really easily early on in the year, and she really struggled with it ... even those children that have home lives that you would assume to be better, they're falling behind.*

This story illustrates evidence apparent in the data of the sadness and frustration felt by teachers, who described seeing some of their pupils’ knowledge slipping away, and their

increasing worry for all pupils' loss of learning as time without normal school routine continued.

Some teachers were concerned that pupils had become disengaged with home learning tasks, including Participant 19 (Secondary CT):

*...the work we're providing is very traditional. It's not engaging. It's not fun. So it just made me feel bad that the ones that are engaging are having a really boring experience of learning.*

In this case, the teacher felt constrained by a combination of the limited teaching methods available, and being unable to make direct contact with pupils to monitor their progress due to school policies. Concerns about general pupil wellbeing heightened teachers' anxieties for those pupils that were already vulnerable before lockdown. Teachers were concerned about the greater difficulties that pupils with limited or absent home support may be experiencing in lockdown, which was confirmed for some teachers who managed to make contact with their vulnerable pupils. The analysis identified teachers' frustrations at being unable to provide pupils with a safe, supportive learning environment during lockdown, as well as sadness felt for their pupils' inability to engage with learning and the resulting loss of academic progress.

Several participants commented directly on the 'learning gap' between pupils who have resources at home to learn, and those who do not. For example, Participant 23 (Secondary CT) pointed out that 'not everybody has internet; not everybody has a phone. You know, that they've, some, some of our society have been completely cut off...'. Teachers also commented on the 'gap' in academic engagement and learning between pupils who were well supported at home and those who were not, regardless of social and economic disadvantage. Participant 21 (Secondary CT) described this gap as 'getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and it's of kids and families that recognise the value of education, and kids and families that don't.'

According to our analysis, the teachers' *worry for pupils* was, thus, focused on concerns about pupils' wellbeing and academic progress, and the recognition that this was now related to a wider group of pupils. Their narratives highlighted their awareness that supporting pupils' wellbeing and academic progress was influenced by maintaining pupil–teacher contact and supporting child–parent interactions.

### ***Theme 4: Importance of relationships***

As time delivering remote education continued, our analysis indicated that teachers found relationships with colleagues, pupils and parents increasingly crucial to carrying out their role effectively. For instance, colleague relationships were described as an important source of support, in terms of steadying anxieties and boosting wellbeing. As Participant 22 (Secondary CT) explained, contact with colleagues 'makes you feel a little bit more connected and gives you a bit more direction'. This suggests that teachers were seeking support from each other through the kinds of conversations which might, in normal times, have taken place in the staffroom. Social media played a role in helping colleagues stay in touch with each other; reported experiences were mostly positive. For example, Participant 23 (Secondary CT) described their staff group on a social media messaging service as 'support / therapy'. However, social media caused stress and confusion for some, as Participant 17 (Secondary CT) explained:

*I ended up having to turn my phone off ... because I remember feeling, this is so much negativity and worry and prediction going on about the situation, it was just too much... sometimes social media is the worst place to be at the moment for teachers....*

In stories about teacher–pupil relationships, teachers expressed sadness and frustration about lack of contact with the pupils but seemed to feel a real sense of joy when they were in touch. Small gestures and interactions with pupils seemed particularly important to them: Participant 2 (Primary SLT) described a high point scene of dropping small gifts to pupils' homes. This began as a way of encouraging engagement and boosting the wellbeing of



vulnerable pupils, but was then extended to the wider school community because it was so successful:

*I'd go out and I'd stand at the gate and I'd see the kid and I'd give them a present, and we were getting lots of lovely feedback on Facebook saying how much the kids were appreciating just a face and a wave and stuff ... I was getting a lot out of it personally, I know the kids were getting a lot out of it.*

Recollections of pupil interactions were a common feature in teachers' high point scenes, indicating the importance teachers place on helping and motivating pupils which, in turn, resulted in a sense of purpose and achievement for the teachers. However, many teachers appeared frustrated by the scarcity of such interactions, due to a lack of engagement from pupils. For example, Participant 20 (Secondary CT) described the lack of response to a deadline set during lockdown for pupils to submit projects. For many, such frustrations, and the resultant sense of powerlessness due to the limited interaction with pupils, were described by participants as low points.

A noticeable shift from early on in the lockdown was teachers' enhanced understanding of the importance of parental engagement for pupil participation. As Participant 8 (Secondary SLT) explained, the relationship with parents should be 'a partnership where you're in communication with your parents on a regular basis... they can support you in trying to get the best for the children'. Improving parent communications relating to whether pupils were completing and coping with academic tasks had an impact on teachers' experiences of pupil relationships and, in turn, their own sense of purpose and fulfilment. Many teachers noted that they felt appreciated by pupils and parents, which provided them with a source of motivation and enthusiasm. It was evident that pupils who were attending school in small classes were extremely appreciative: Participant 20 (Secondary CT) reflected:

*maybe [our pupils] appreciate us more than we ever knew. Maybe we didn't get that before... maybe we had no idea. And that felt quite humbling, to know that so many of them wanted to come and be taught by us.*

Indeed, maintaining good communication with colleagues and pupils seemed to feature prominently in teachers' stories.

### ***Theme 5: Teacher Identity***

The theme of *teacher identity* involved participants reporting a change in their role and their role-identity, during partial school closures and as schools prepared to reopen.

Participant 4 (Primary SLT) observed:

*...working in a small school is really hard. You know, we all have to step up to the plate all of the time... I've hoovered the floor, cleaned the toilet, I've, you name it. I've done it. You know, I can't sit in my posh office.*

Senior teachers, in particular, reported experiencing an increased workload and greater ambiguity in their work roles, although there was a sense of acceptance that their roles had to adapt to enable their schools to move forwards towards reopening. As another SLT member (Participant 1; Primary SLT) explained:

*some days I've been more of a janitor than I have a senior leader in that sense, but it is about managing those day to days, and I think that that's what's needed, that the staff need people managing this...*

Participants spoke about the importance of routine and structure to their work and their professional identity, as they had at Time 1. As Participant 18 (Secondary CT) put it, 'initially it's quite nice to have a different routine but then, as time's gone on ... you just feel that you're not really contributing to your school environment'. This desire to return to normality was very strongly expressed by several teachers; the emotion in some of the participants' descriptions gave a sense of how much teachers value routine, structure and certainty.

Teachers' caring natures and pupil-oriented priorities also came across strongly in the stories, particularly in relation to keeping pupils safe when they return to school. For example, Participant 5 (Primary SLT) considered that

*it's putting the needs of the children first rather than, I was going to say the needs of the country, but the children are the country. So... it's keeping them safe,... that's inevitably what... we want to do.*

This sense of caring for pupils was also evident through teachers' pride in their achievements when pupils responded positively to their efforts. This is well illustrated by Participant 1's (Primary SLT's) recollection of primary school reopenings:

*One little boy... after that first day he went home and told his mum it's the best day he'd ever had in school. That's a credit to the school, but that's a credit to the teachers as well... you're very proud of what you've put in place, but also very proud of the ethos and nature of the school.*

This pride in working hard for pupil learning and wellbeing, which is clearly already part of teachers' identities, appears to be magnified in the difficult lockdown circumstances.

Ultimately, teachers seemed to feel that teaching in its true sense meant seeing the children and interacting with them in person, as Participant 15 (Primary CT) described:

*I mean, that's why I'm a teacher, you know, to be with people. And so the whole working remotely and emailing constantly and not having that contact with people... I found that really hard.*

The sense of authentic interaction with pupils being at the heart of the profession was notable. Although teachers accepted that their roles had to adapt during the pandemic, it was clear from the analysis that values, such as caring for pupils, a desire for routine and interacting with pupils, remained at the heart of *teacher identity*.

### ***Theme 6: Reflections***

This theme is about teachers' reflections on the impact of lockdown on their personal and professional lives, together with their associated emotions, plans and strategies. Several participants referred to the difficulties in maintaining boundaries between schoolwork and home life. Some participants, particularly those in SLT, felt that work had been a constant, non-stop activity since the start of lockdown. For example, Participant 4 (Primary SLT) commented: 'I have not had a day off work. I haven't stopped working. I've worked seven hours a day, 14 hours a day, seven days a week....'. For SLT members, this sense of exhaustion appeared to relate to managing school and staff under lockdown pressures. However, our analysis suggested that the inability to switch off from work was prevalent for all teachers, and affected their work-life balance. For example, Participant 1 (Primary SLT) explained that 'you want to get things right for the children. So we'll do whatever. But sometimes that's at personal cost'; as Participant 7 (Secondary SLT) put it, 'the fear of lockdown has meant that you stew over things a bit more'.

However, some teachers reported that they had begun to establish and assert clear boundaries for themselves, as, in the words of Participant 14 (Primary CT) they had 'learned to take a step back and differentiate between work and when work should stop'. Similarly, several teachers reflected positively on spending time on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) during lockdown. Generally, teachers appeared to feel less pressure to complete CPD than at the start of partial school closures, and better able to appreciate the benefits of engaging in CPD. For example, Participant 5 (Primary SLT) described pride in hearing enthusiastic, innovative ideas from a junior member of staff they had previously mentored. Participant 24 (Secondary CT) reflected how CPD could inform future teaching practice too:

*You know, normal day to day teaching and you know, perhaps makes you realize that actually this is something we need to do more of anyway, you know, let alone during remote learning, but actually in the classroom too.*

Similarly, teachers were keen to consider how they could learn from lockdown experiences and how the curriculum could become more rounded in the future, particularly for those pupils who had been enjoying creative activities such as art and baking during lockdown. This is illustrated by the following comment from Participant 20 (Secondary CT):

*It has really made me reflect on our curriculum for next year, about how to maybe incorporate some of these things ... rather than just rattling through the National Curriculum.*

This notion of a more holistic education also connected to positive stories relating to ‘surprise star’ pupils from Time 1: i.e. pupils who may have responded well to and/or experienced some kinds of benefits from remote learning. In essence, these reflections demonstrate that the partial school closure situation may have shed new light on teaching practices, in some cases allowing teachers to feel that they better understood the individual needs of pupils. As Participant 10 (Primary CT) put it,

*I think as teachers we're probably going to come out better because of it, because we're going to have a bit more of an understanding and different ways that we can support children.*

In summary, these interviews enabled teachers to reflect on how lockdown has affected them, both personally and professionally. It was apparent from their narratives that for some, the effect has been exhaustion, particularly in the case of those with senior leadership roles. However, the narratives also indicated that lockdown provided others with an opportunity to reflect on and improve their teaching practices, and their hopes for the future of teaching.

## Discussion

As schools around the world partially or fully reopen (Bonell et al. 2020), and potentially close again as cases rise (e.g., Stein-Zamir et al. 2020), better understanding teachers' experiences in the lead up to the partial school reopenings offers useful insight into teachers' needs in this situation, the implications of which could help inform how these needs might be addressed. According to our analysis, teachers' stories of their experiences between April and June 2020 were represented by six themes: *uncertainty*, *practical concerns*, *worry for pupils*, *importance of relationships*, *teacher identity*, and *reflections*. Framed within the SDT approach we adopted for our analysis, these themes can be seen to illustrate the frustrations of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 1985, 2000, 2002).

Uncertainties are commonplace at the current time (Chater 2020). As COVID-linked changes in education are largely beyond teachers' control, it is unsurprising that many described low levels of autonomy and competence in their stories. One prominent source of frustration in the teachers' narratives was their identification that that government guidelines had been neither clear nor prompt, which had also been identified as a frustration during the initial phase of lockdown in April (Kim and Asbury 2020). Findings from a national survey of senior leaders in England in May (Sharp et al. 2020) indicated that they wanted the government to provide clearer and more detailed guidance about opening more fully. An important implication from our study is, therefore, for government to work collaboratively with teachers, especially when teachers feel that they are not heard or valued (Kim and Asbury 2020), as there could be consequences in terms of teacher burnout and diminished job satisfaction, and thereby teacher attrition (Nguyen et al. 2020). It was clear from the data that uncertainty seemed to be a common experience of the participants and, for some, this

triggered feelings that they were not able to do a good job as a teacher. It is also noteworthy that Time 1's theme of *finding a way* (Kim and Asbury 2020) expanded in breadth here to cover *practical concerns*. This is illustrative of how teachers may have accepted the change in circumstances and were able to focus on how to implement necessary changes to teaching, learning and the school environment.

As the teaching profession is inherently social, it is understandable that relationships and teachers' concerns for pupils were strongly evident in their stories. Interacting with pupils featured strongly in high point scenes, attesting to how teachers draw meaning and satisfaction from these relationships (Veldman et al. 2013). In line with a national survey finding that colleagues/peers were identified as the single most helpful source of support accessed by teachers in England who were surveyed in May 2020 (Walker et al. 2020), our analysis demonstrated that the teachers in our study valued being connected with colleagues. However, our analysis also identified that some teachers noted that experiences of connecting with colleagues through social media could have a negative side, due, for example, to the constant notifications and the dispiriting content at times. This highlights that technology is something of a double-edged sword; it can connect people but can also blur work–life boundaries, which has implications for physical and mental wellbeing (see Adisa et al. 2017 for a review). Thus, it seems that balancing the ways and the extent to which teachers connect with others may need careful consideration for some.

Unlike the situation at the time of teachers' initial experiences of COVID-19, when they focused their worries on particularly vulnerable pupils (Kim and Asbury 2020), teachers at this time — three months into lockdown — discussed how all pupils were affected and described how they saw pupils, who had not been previously identified as vulnerable, now displaying signs of learning loss. Whilst there are many international estimations of the various effects and impacts of the educational disruption wrought by the pandemic, the

OECD has estimated that, for the UK, 1/3 year of learning loss is associated with an economic downturn of USD 2,154 billion and that 2/3 years of learning loss is associated with a downturn of USD 4,245 billion (Hanushek and Woessmann 2020). With the immediate and long-term educational effects of the pandemic in mind, it is critical that academic support should be given to all pupils, which is the aim of the introduction of a Catch-Up Premium programme (Department for Education, 2020c). Additionally, it is important to note that some pupils have had particular disadvantages with regards to accessing technology at home: according to one survey conducted in England in May 2020, senior leaders and teachers reported that about one quarter of their pupils had little or no access to IT at home (Lucas et al. 2020). Ensuring that home environments are conducive to learning, and pupils have the appropriate technology to engage in learning, may be necessary now and in the future, as the world becomes increasingly digitalised (Iivari et al. 2020).

Collaborating with families, ensuring a healthy relationship with them, is also likely to be important to pupils' success (Hampden-Thompson and Galindo, 2017; Hughes and Kwok 2007). Knowledge gained about their families during this time may provide teachers and schools with new insights into how to work best with families, which could help with efforts to ensure that the academic gap is closed and that pupils' welfare and wellbeing needs are met.

Exceptional circumstances can change what may be within one's expected work role and what may be core to one's professional identity. Given the reduced staff numbers on site, our analysis draws attention to how senior teachers, in particular, reported how they had to extend themselves beyond their traditional roles. As prolonged experience of role ambiguity has been identified as a predictor of teacher burnout (Papastyliaou et al. 2009), making sure that changed or expanded roles are only temporary may be important, especially for those in senior leadership roles. In addition, the analysis suggested that teachers seemed to wish for a



sense of ‘normality’, in terms of the clear routines and structures that had delineated their daily lives as teachers. Such feelings, also voiced in the initial phase of lockdown (Kim and Asbury, 2020), may imply that a strong preference for routine and structure could represent a core element of teacher identity (Korthagen 2004). Additionally, teachers’ reflections afforded insights about what teachers felt to be important in their personal and professional lives, including an enhanced understanding that work–life boundaries should be in place. Thus, it seems that teachers’ perceptions of the period of time focused on in this study, though reflective of a period of time fraught with challenges and difficulties, has also illuminated views on what being a teacher can and should encompass.

### ***Implications, Limitations and Future Directions***

The findings from our study highlight the need for policymakers to engage with teachers and school leaders, providing them with regular platforms so that they are actively involved in conversations about education, and ensuring that decisions are communicated in a prompt and clear way.

Given that others sometimes know us better than we do ourselves (Vazire 2010), future studies may wish to triangulate teachers’ experiences with evidence from other sources, such as teachers’ partners and colleagues, to supplement and provide additional nuance to teachers’ own narratives. In the explorative study reported here, we have gathered rich, qualitative narrative data from teachers in England at a unique time in history. Our study’s aim was to offer insight into the experiences of our participants and not to draw generalisable conclusions. Future research aiming to provide generalisable findings should involve a large, representative sample of teachers.

## Conclusion

The changes that were brought about due to COVID-19 have meant that teachers and school leaders have been challenged in ways that they most would never have imagined. Our small scale, exploratory study represents the second timepoint in a longitudinal study investigating what it was like being a teacher in England during the pandemic. Our analysis of teachers' experiences has provided valuable insight into how teachers' psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness have been challenged. We hope that our research can help inform thinking about how teachers can be supported now, and in the coming months and years, to feel autonomous, competent and connected with colleagues, pupils and their families, in ways that will be beneficial to their wellbeing and their commitment to the profession.

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