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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The ups and downs in perceived societal appreciation of the teaching profession during COVID-19: A longitudinal trajectory analysis

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Abstract

Given the disruptions the COVID-19 pandemic has engendered in people's professional lives, the importance and contribution of certain workforces has been under particular scrutiny. In England, the teaching profession has been under particularly close public scrutiny, with concerns that teachers' perceived social appreciation may have decreased throughout the pandemic. Thus, the current study examined the trajectory of teachers' perceptions of how much society, policymakers and the media had valued the teaching profession throughout this time. With an initial sample of 24 primary and secondary teachers in mainstream state schools in England, 54 online interviews took place at three time points: when school buildings were partially reopened for the first time (June 2020), when they were partially closed for the second time (February 2021) and when they were fully reopened for 16 months (July 2022). Three themes were identified in the data using a longitudinal trajectory analysis based on reflexive thematic analysis: 'initial admiration from local communities progressively waned', 'continuous government disrespect towards teachers' and 'initial media vitriol towards teachers was sustained'. Implications for how teachers and other stakeholders in education can most effectively work together for the benefit of the health and effectiveness of the teaching profession and the educational system are considered in the context of the associated risks when teachers have low levels of perceived social appreciation.

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The current study examined the trajectory of teachers' perceptions of how much society, policymakers, and the media had valued the teaching profession in England during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Three themes were identified in the data: 'initial admiration from local communities progressively waned', 'continuous government disrespect towards teachers' and 'initial media vitriol towards teachers was sustained'. There are associated risks when teachers have low levels of PSA of the profession, including on the quality of the educational system, and action should be taken to improve this.

INTRODUCTION

By May 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic had affected 93% of the world's workers (ILO, 2020) and presented major challenges to employers and employees, including those in the education sector. Specifically, school closures had affected approximately 63 million primary and secondary school teachers (International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2020) and 1.5 billion students (UNESCO, 2020). In England, various policies were introduced regarding schools, beginning with the closure of school buildings to all but key workers' children and some vulnerable pupils from 20 March 2020, followed by oscillations between partial school closures, partial school reopenings and full school reopenings. In response, teachers quickly developed new skills and implemented a variety of instructional strategies to continue providing education to their pupils (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). Moreover, they responded to pastoral challenges sometimes in light of new or increased social, economic, and welfare problems at home (Kim et al., 2023; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim, Dundas, & Asbury, 2021; Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, 2021).

Despite an increased awareness of teachers' contributions as parents and carers found themselves providing education at home, teachers were subjected to significant criticism during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, teachers were criticised for their response to national decisions around school reopenings. On 24 May 2020, the UK Prime Minister announced that primary schools were to fully reopen to students in the Early Years Foundation Stage (ages 4–5), Year 1 (ages 5–6) and Year 6 (ages 10–11) from 1 June, and that secondary schools were to reopen to up to one-quarter of students in Year 10 (ages 14–15) and Year 12 (ages 16–17) from 15 June. In response, the National Education Union (2020) initiated an appeal to the government to delay school reopenings – an appeal which led to the profession being denigrated as 'lazy' and 'scaremongers' (Whittaker, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, many teachers in England already believed that society did not value their

profession (OECD, 2020). The pandemic, and the way in which teachers were portrayed during it, may have exacerbated these pre-existing negative beliefs, in spite of the enhanced contributions teachers made during this time.

Perceived societal appreciation

The teaching profession, according to Maguire and Dillon (2007), has been subjected to on-going criticism and reform since the nineteenth century when the state first became responsible for the supply of teachers in the UK. In England, the 2010 UK Coalition Government's White Paper, *Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education, 2010), recognised a lack of esteem for the profession and this was included as part of the rhetoric for a system-wide reform of education (Braun, 2015).

Similarly, teachers have long believed that their profession is not valued by society (Cohen, 1967). That is, they have had low levels of perceived societal appreciation (PSA; Spruyt et al., 2021). In evidence of teachers' low levels of PSA, the latest Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) found that, on average, only 25.8% of teachers believed that their profession was valued by society. There were between-country differences though (OECD, 2020): the highest perceived values were found among teachers in Vietnam (92.8%), Singapore (72%) and the United Arab Emirates (71.6%); and the lowest among those in the Slovak Republic (4.5%), Belgium (French community; 5.3%), and Slovenia (5.6%). England, although slightly above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, showed a decline from 35.4% in 2013 to 28.8% in 2018.

Various factors can contribute to the PSA of an occupation. In the case of the teaching profession, individual, contextual and structural factors can negatively contribute to low levels of PSA, including continual growth in workload; ongoing pressure from above; unrealistic expectations from parents and pupils; and role ambiguity, which contributes to teachers persistently feeling that they have not done enough (Rice, 2005). National policy initiatives that influence teachers' working conditions and the boundaries of their professional roles can also drive contextual and structural factors that then can contribute to low levels of PSA (Hargreaves et al., 2007). Moreover, the media can play a significant role as its portrayal of teachers, for example, as lazy and lacking in commitment, and its relishing of scandalising cases of professional misconduct can cause reputational damage to the profession (Carlo et al., 2013), which can negatively affect teachers' PSA. In effect, the conglomeration of these factors may explain the declining levels of PSA among teachers in England. However, it is unclear whether the pandemic has affected teachers' PSA, and whether it has changed over the course of the pandemic.

Do teachers' perceptions of their professional value matter?

Teachers' PSA is of concern particularly to school leaders and policymakers as it can affect the health and effectiveness of the teacher workforce and educational system. For example, novice teachers who reported a sense of lack of recognition and appreciation from students and from the general public (i.e. low levels of PSA) reported higher levels of burnout (Gavish & Friedman, 2010). The significance of this finding can be viewed in light of a meta-analytic finding indicating that teacher burnout is associated with intention to quit the profession (Madigan & Kim, 2021), which has consequential implications for the teacher shortage crisis. Moreover, a 1% increase in teachers' PSA was found to be associated with a 1% increase in the likelihood of students wishing to work as

teachers (Han, 2018), potentially indicating that pupils can be affected by how teachers hold and communicate the value of the profession, which can thereby affect the future of the teacher workforce.

Low levels of PSA, therefore, are problematic especially given the teacher shortage crisis faced by many countries, which is largely fuelled by high attrition rates (Dupriez et al., 2016). This problem is evident in England, with reports that 12.5% of individuals had left the profession within 1 year of qualifying to be a teacher, 17.3% after 2 years and 31.2% after 5 years (Long & Danechi, 2022). Moreover, a forecast increase in the number of experienced teachers leaving the profession before retirement (Education Policy Institute, 2022) provides a bleak picture of the teacher workforce landscape.

Therefore, teachers' PSA should be of national concern, especially if this was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as it can have implications for education moving forward. Given the seismic changes the education sector has been forced to make as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the current study examined: How much did teachers in England believe that their profession was valued by society, policymakers and the media during COVID-19, and how did this change over the course of the pandemic?

METHODS

Participants and procedure

Data from three time points (T2, T5 and T7) in a seven-time point study of teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic were used in the current study (see Figure 1 for a

Timeline of 2020-2022 school events and research data collection points

2020
20 March: Last day of school for most pupils
26 March: First national lockdown
1 June: Reception, Year 1s and Year 6s return to school

    T2: 8-12, 18 June

15 June: Year 10s and Year 12s return to school

7 September: Schools open to all years for new academic year

5 November: Second national lockdown

2021
5 January: Last day of school for most pupils (except for Reception)/ national lockdown

    T5: 8-12 February

8 March: Schools open to all years

2022

    T7: 11-15 July

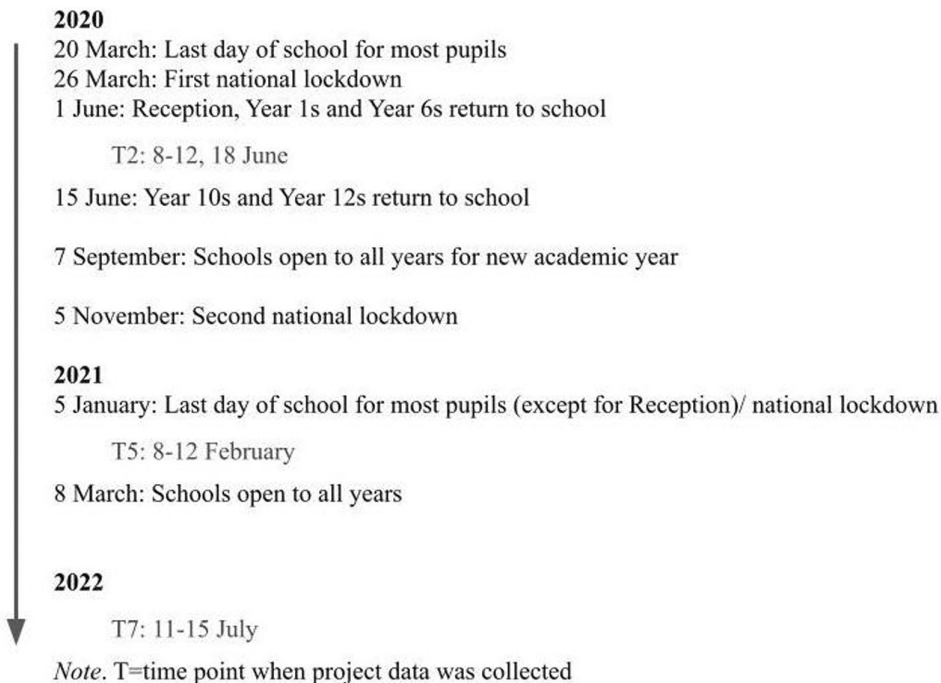*Note.* T=time point when project data was collected

FIGURE 1 Timeline of 2020–2022 school events and research data collection points.

timeline of events and data collection). The three time points corresponded to when school buildings were partially reopened for the first time (June 2020; T2), partially closed for the second time (February 2021; T5) and opened fully for 16 months (July 2022; T7). The larger project examined various aspects of the teachers' professional lives, including their high, low and turning-points (Kim et al., 2023; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim, Dundas, & Asbury, 2021) and wellbeing (Kim, Oxley, & Asbury, 2021). The three time points were chosen as they contained repeated questions on participants' beliefs on how their profession was valued by society, policymakers and the media. Ethical approval was received from the first and last authors' university department. Participants were financially compensated for their time. Semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted, data for which were audio-recorded, transcribed and anonymised prior to coding and analysis.

The sample at T2 consisted of 24 participants with representation from members of Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) and classroom teachers (CTs) in primary schools (Participants 1–5 and 10–15, respectively) and secondary schools (Participants 6–9 and 16–24, respectively), who worked in schools with the full range of Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles in England (a relative measure of deprivation in England; Ministry of Housing et al., 2019). The current study examines participants' responses at T2, T5 and T7, which consisted of 54 interviews (see Table 1). When presenting quotations, we provide the participant number and time point as context (e.g. 'P1, T5').

Measures

Based on the OECD's (2016) TALIS questions on teachers' professional value, three semi-structured items were developed to ask participants how valued and appreciated they felt by society, policymakers and the media, and whether that had changed since late March 2020 or the previous time the question was asked in the interview. For example: Do you think the extent to which society values the teaching profession has changed since the start of the pandemic? Please can you say a little about how and why? Participants were asked to elaborate on their responses where necessary, using prompts.

Coding and analysis

Using a critical realist framework, we aimed to identify patterns of stability and change in teachers' perceptions of how their profession was valued over approximately a two-year period during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e. June 2020 to July 2022). Our critical realist perspective acknowledged that there may be a mismatch between how teachers were valued during the pandemic and how they *perceived* they were valued, and we operated on the basis that their reality was a function of their subjective experience and observations with implications for their wellbeing and effectiveness. We, therefore, conducted and analysed interview data rather than conducting a document or media analysis (e.g. Oxley & Kim, 2023)

TABLE 1 Participants at three points.

Time point (T)	Participants (Ps) considered within analysis
T2	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24
T5	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19, P21, P22, P23, P24
T7	P2, P3, P4, P13, P16, P17, P19, P22, P24

with a view to understanding how our participants felt and examine whether, and if so how, they perceived societal valuing and appreciation had changed over time. Both latent and manifest coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022) were used to describe and interpret teachers' accounts of how they felt their profession was valued during this period and how that developed over time. This was important as we were primarily interested in teachers' expressed observations and beliefs but also in how they interacted with unfolding events.

The participants' responses were analysed independently at each of the three time points (T2, T5, and T7) using inductive and deductive coding based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, T7 transcripts were analysed and coded inductively. Once codes had been applied to all T7 transcripts, clusters of potentially related codes were colour coded. Each code cluster provided support in generating preliminary T7 themes. The most recent dataset (T7) was coded first as participants provided retrospective views on events from the COVID-19 pandemic's offset, including instances mentioned in T2 and T5. Codes and preliminary themes applied to the T7 data were thus relevant to T2 and T5 data. T2 and T5 transcripts were then coded primarily deductively, using the codes developed in the T7 data. However, inductive coding also took place at T2 and T5; the few new codes identified at T2 and T5 were incorporated into revised versions (for T2 and T5, respectively) of code clusters identified at T7.

Code clusters and preliminary themes were then recorded in three documents to be reviewed, one for each time point. These documents were organised in a hierarchical tree structure, namely by Theme name (e.g. Voiceless and Misrepresented) → Codes (e.g. exclusion from policymaking processes) → Participant(s) whose transcript(s) corresponded to the said code (e.g. P[articipant]18; P24). This structure allowed us to more clearly see the relationships between the codes and the themes.

Preliminary themes and most codes were the same or very similar across the three time points, indicating stability at the higher level. Longitudinal changes within themes were identified using a recurrent cross-sectional approach (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016; Saldaña, 2003) and the final themes were given labels which matched their longitudinal nature, focusing on participants' observations of and beliefs about their working lives and the profession as the pandemic developed. Throughout the analytic process analyses were commented on and amended (for clarity and to engage with the longitudinal story more lucidly) multiple times by all authors.

RESULTS

Three longitudinal themes were developed to represent the interview data: 'initial admiration from local communities progressively waned', 'continuous government disrespect towards teachers' and 'initial media vitriol towards teachers was sustained'. The 'initial admiration from local communities progressively waned' theme captures teachers' reports of initial positive recognition of their profession by pupils' parents, evident through acts such as gift-giving and verbal affirmation, which had waned by T7. The 'continuous government disrespect towards teachers' theme captures teachers' perceptions of consistent government displays of disrespect, especially through the exclusion of teachers from contributing policymaking processes and decisions over time. The 'initial media vitriol towards teachers was sustained' theme captures participants' perceptions of their representation within UK media sources. Traditional press media, more so than social media, was deemed to be increasingly negative towards the teaching profession between T2 and T5 – a pattern which was sustained through to T7.

Overall, participants perceived that those in more frequent contact and closer proximity to teachers, such as pupils' parents, valued teachers more highly than others, including government and media.

Theme 1: Initial admiration from local communities progressively waned

This theme concerns the ways in which participants believed they were perceived by those within their local communities, with most identifying an initial positive appreciation of the teaching profession that waned as the pandemic progressed.

Although some participants at T2 were unconvinced that many parents valued teachers because they felt that negative media 'kind of […] devalued teaching' (P15), most noted positive recognition from their pupil's parents, with some anticipating 'that parents will appreciate school and education a lot more' (P12, T2) owing to gaining a greater understanding of what the teaching role entails. The majority of the participants at T5 and T7 retrospectively noted peak times of parent appreciation, firstly, around the easing of the first UK lockdown in June 2020 when T2 interviews had been conducted, and secondly in late 2020, during the (second) UK lockdown: 'We were getting gifts delivered to school and thank you cards and parents would drop parcels at the door; amazing' (P13, T7).

This perceived increase in parents' respect for teachers in late 2020 was attributed to parents viewing their children being taught via online classes in their homes and often overwhelmed while more actively supporting their children's learning at home: 'I think the parents responding and actually taking part in the online learning and remote learning with their children actually appreciate just how much we are doing. So I think there's been an improvement in appreciation' (P14, T5).

Positive parent–teacher relationships seemed to have been sustained over the three time points for most participants, with teachers, and by extension schools themselves being perceived as 'a central point […] this kind of lynchpin of [the] community' (P4, T7). However, although most participants expressed that parents valued teachers more, some participants noted that high levels of respect and acknowledgement of the skill required to deliver a formal education was short lived, deteriorating even as early as T2, with parental attitudes 'changing and going back again' (P13, T2). At this stage, any perceived decline in parental appreciation for teachers was attributed to parents' increased exhaustion as a result of the demands of home-based learning, which meant they 'switched to thinking teachers should be doing more to support their children learning from home' (P19, T2). At subsequent time points, some participants noted that permanent changes in parents' positive valuing of teachers had not and was unlikely to occur:

> You'd think you might be more valued because parents have seen what happens with the schooling, but I don't think that's the case… I think everyone has just gone back to their own bubble, their own stress of how hard their own jobs have been.
>
> (P19, T7)

Negative experiences with, and feedback from, parents were more frequently shared at T5 and T7 than they had been at T2. Negative experiences with parents, especially parents complaining about perceived faults in participants' teaching, were more frequently shared at T5 than at T2, with additional participants expressing such sentiments at T7. Increasing parental discontent with, and declining valuing of teachers, manifested most clearly through parents 'lack[ing an] understanding of [teachers'] personal boundaries' (P2) by T7. This overstepping of boundaries was often done by requesting that teachers create and assign more work and dedicate more time towards their child. At T5, participants expressed concern over a lack of respect for teachers' time: 'the online stuff is, it's "24-hour access" for parents now' (P2, T5). Participant 13 (T7) shared:

'Can we have more books, can we have more work?' I think the other thing is that parents are therefore more aware of what their children should be doing[…] they're much more anxious that their children might be falling below. […] So then there's more pressure: 'What are you doing? My child can't do this, so how are you going to help, how are you going to support, what are you going to do about it?'

Regarding those residing locally to participants but not directly involved in school affairs, participants at T2 and T5 felt unrecognised as key workers and perhaps undervalued by them compared with other occupations and professions:

I think in some ways because everyone has some interaction with grocery shopping or [the] NHS also, whereas perhaps teachers, unless you've got kids of your own or, you know, I think it's a bit … not under the radar obviously but, like, unless you've got direct experience of that, you perhaps wouldn't realise what it's been like being a teacher.

(P19, T5)

One example of a lack of recognition mentioned was some retailers excluding teachers from the benefits granted to other key workers. Some participants expressed feeling less valued by society compared to other key workers such as those within the National Health Service (NHS):

We just want to be acknowledged that actually, it's not just the NHS and I'm not in their position, but actually they could only do some of what they're doing, because we are here all day every day. And I think that's where it's been hurtful. (P1, T2).

Overall, although some local appreciation, especially from parents, was maintained over the three time points, participants expressed mixed perceptions of local appreciation for the teaching profession at all time points. Teachers reported both positive and negative interactions with pupils' parents and these negative interactions became more prevalent over time. Some participants additionally perceived that no discernible acknowledgement or valuing of those working in education existed in their local community by people not connected to education. This implies that proximity to teachers, especially seeing teachers carrying out their work, was (at least initially) linked to a perceived increase in the valuing of the profession, indicated by peak perceived appreciation from parents around the UK lockdowns.

Theme 2: Continuous government disrespect towards teachers

This theme concerns the relationship between the teaching profession and the UK government. During T2 interviews, participants described how an already unsatisfactory relationship between policymakers and the teaching profession was exacerbated by COVID-19's onset. Participants described instances of government disrespect for the profession in the form of announcements about education that were not rooted in consultation with the profession, were not communicated in a timely fashion and did not consider how teachers would make them work. They also talked about cronyism; that is, policymakers interacting with a very narrow group of education stakeholders that did not represent the UK's teachers or schools. They pointed to the rapid turnover of four Education Secretaries between

COVID-19's onset and July 2022, and their individual lack of respect for the profession, as evidence that they were not valued by the government.

Regarding government announcements related to teachers, participants reported that their time and health had been undervalued. Of particularly great concern to participants across the three time points were the various instances of delayed and unconsulted government announcements detailing the reopening of schools that left little time for lesson planning and implementation and were sometimes contradictory to the guidance of Public Health England.

> The government never said, we are thinking of opening. What do you think the barriers are going to be or what do you think the challenges are going to be? And there was never that dialogue or that trust there really and that kind of … I just do not think they trusted the teachers with opening, they said we are opening on this day. (P11, T2).

Other swift government U-turns were also mentioned. For example, participants were shocked by the unexpected Prime Minister's announcement on 30 December 2020 (preceding T5 interviews, thus, discussed most at this time point) that most schools would reopen in January 2021, despite a surge of COVID-19 cases in England at the time, and then backtracking on 4 January 2021: 'Why did you put that out there […] on a Sunday, they're saying, "Schools will be opening," and then they'll change it on a Monday' (P1, T5). The U-turns that happened between T2 and T5 appeared to make participants feel increasingly that, relative to other professions and the public at large, their concerns over contracting COVID-19 were dismissed.

Concerned with teachers' safety being compromised as a result of the Prime Minister's initial announcement of schools reopenings, Participant 15 (T5) said: 'It's not safe, schools are not safe, you know, teachers are contracting it, […] and yet they still were going, "No, it's safe," and it just… they just don't listen at all.' Participant 11 (T5) shared their anger regarding successive government announcements seen to be made in haste, including decisions around Ofsted (a government body responsible for assessing the quality of educational services through inspections) beginning inspections of remote learning:

> But then they do things that I just think, 'could you not have thought about that a little bit more?' For instance, when we got told that schools were closing, we were given two days' notice and then we were told that we would be Ofsteded on our remote learning and it was like, come on. I know the Ofsted thing was like a week, a week and a bit later, but it was like, give us time to get into this.

At all three time points, the UK government's Department for Education (DfE), which is responsible for education in England, was accused by the majority of participants of undermining teachers' ability to determine how they carry out their own work. From T2 onwards, suspected government cronyism was considered a primary cause of severe disconnect with many schools' teaching staff:

> When the government was saying who they were getting […] their information from, […] they were three or four CEOs of Academy chains, but then that doesn't necessarily mean that they were teachers. That doesn't necessarily mean that they have a really good understanding of what teachers need right now, or what […] each individual school setup is like.
>
> (P2, T2)

The sentiment remained in T5: 'What I'm also really cross about is that lots of those people are not representative of the sector' (P4, T5).

Various discontented participants across the three time points expressed a desire for people with knowledge or experience of teaching to be in governmental roles and government bodies affecting education. For example, Participant 6 (T2) described the UK government's approach to education without sufficiently consulting teachers as: 'Just lots of going off in one direction and then having to really backpedal because they realise it doesn't work'. This sentiment continued in T5, exemplified by Participant 21: 'I've felt more than ever that the DfE and Ofqual [a body responsible for regulating examinations and assessments in England] really, really could do with some frontline teachers within their organisations to have within conversations'.

By T7, participants expressed disillusionment with teachers' inability to influence policymaking processes relative to their hopes at previous time points that perhaps they may be able to be heard and be involved. Discussing the few teachers invited to share their insights to inform policymaker decisions, participants reiterated that the views of only 'certain echelons of teachers who say the right things in the right place' (P4, T7) were acknowledged by the DfE and Ofsted. Even a participant who was actually involved in policymaking processes acknowledged the opportunity's rarity for most: 'it's nice to be sort of listened to in that respect but that's definitely not a universal experience, is it?' (P24, T7). Overall, teachers feeling undervalued owing to their perceived exclusion from policymaking processes was evident at all three time points, with hope surrounding the topic steadily decreasing over time.

In the most recent interviews (T7), participants additionally highlighted the quick turnover of Education Secretaries since COVID-19's onset as a sign that the teaching profession – and indeed education – is not a government priority. Participants relayed that politicians appeared increasingly disinterested in appropriately representing education within parliament, with Participant 4 (T7) discussing the 'Ongoing succession of education ministers none of whom seemed particularly interested in the job and/or knowledgeable about it and were just using it for career enhancement'. Participant accounts of being undervalued by those in government were evident at all three time points and increased as participants became more ground down and disillusioned, with Participant 13 (T7) discussing government actions stating: 'I'm thinking, have we really not learnt anything?'

For participants, the quality of government programmes created to alleviate the negative impact of the pandemic on pupils' education, including the National Tutoring Programme and Catch-up Programmes, also indicated policymakers' valuing of teachers. Interestingly, these were perceived negatively by the participants who mentioned them. Such education initiatives, which aimed to provide additional targeted academic support to pupils often in the form of tutoring, were described as being ill-thought-out, giving teachers more work to do, and 'imposed from on high' (P4, T5) by policymakers:

> And, I think even now there has been stuff about the lengthening of the school day and this catch-up programme and even that hasn't been received very well because if we open our mouths and say, 'well, no', we are not paid for that, it is, 'oh lazy teacher, lazy teacher, doctors don't do that'.
>
> (P17, T7)

Besides government actions that were reported to have negatively represented the teaching profession, participants perceived that individual politicians actively vilified teachers during and prior to the pandemic. At T2, teachers stated that a similar villainising of those involved in teaching was occurring, especially those critical of the government's handling of the profession since COVID-19's onset:

> And so I think, we're an easy target, we're a political football, we're, you know, and every different political party that comes in and wants to score goals will easily target education, and the way they do that is to denigrate and downplay the quality of the education that was in there before.
>
> (P4, T2)

Expressing a similar concern, Participant 17 (T2) stated: 'And it was almost like we've gone back to Gove's blob, like teachers are just, you know, these evil people with their unions'. Within commentary at T2 on policymakers were reflections of past instances of government vitriol towards the profession, sentiments that participants anticipated would increase over time.

At T5, participants heavily criticised the January 2021 comments from the Education Secretary encouraging parents to contact Ofsted if dissatisfied with the teaching provided to their children. One participant shared 'You'll remember him [Education Secretary] saying, "now don't forget if you're not happy with what your schools are doing, you know, do write to Ofsted"' (P23, T5). Participants viewed the Education Secretary's comments as a way of shifting the blame of the COVID-19 induced education-related issues solely onto teachers, undervaluing the increased difficulty of their work while potentially damaging relationships between teachers and pupils' parents.

At T7, participants discussed the Education Secretary's June 2022 comments on union-backed proposed teachers' strikes over a pay rise to match inflation rates as being 'unforgivable'. Participant 22 (T7) viewed this comment as 'almost emotional and moral blackmail', undervaluing the teaching profession by disparaging many teachers arguing to be compensated appropriately for their work.

For participants, government's disrespect for teachers discussed at T2 was repeatedly exemplified through a perceived disregard for teachers' working conditions and representation in government at T5 and T7. Discussion of how the behaviour of individual government officials affected the teaching profession, as opposed to the negligence of broader government bodies like Ofsted and the DfE, increased between T2 and T5 and were sustained to T7 by the remaining participants. This indicates teachers' growing frustration with policymakers and government bodies whom they perceived as inciting increased disdain for teachers.

Theme 3: Initial media vitriol towards teachers was sustained

This theme describes how participants perceived the media's representation of the teaching profession throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants at the three time points found coverage of the teaching profession within prominent UK media sources to be inaccurate, often omitting and undervaluing the genuine perspectives of teachers. However, a distinction was often made between the mainstream media and social media vs. parent and public opinion, which were sometimes evident on social media, believed to be influenced by the mainstream media. Perceived appreciation for teachers on social media was mixed at all three time points. However, short bouts of teacher appreciation from pupils' parents occurred online, often in retaliation to government and press media scrutiny of the profession, especially at T5 after the Education Secretary's suggestion that parents should report schools to Ofsted if unsatisfied with the quality of remote learning.

A perceived increase in mainstream media vitriol was evident between T2 and T5 which remained at T7, with Participant 22 (T5) summarising: 'The press don't … for me, [show] a realistic view of what life is like teaching the students in the pandemic'. Specifically, there was an increased concern among participants at T5 over news outlets, which were unfamiliar

with the classroom environment, reporting about teachers. Participants, such as Participant 14 (T5) perceived that such reporting resulted in a de-emphasis of the difficulty of teachers' work: 'So a person on the news making that claim that teachers are doing a huge disservice, or not doing enough, I think … how can somebody who doesn't actually have any experience in a classroom make such a claim?'

The media was perceived by participants as presenting a more polarised portrayal of teachers (presenting them as either heroes or villains) at T2 than at T5 or T7, with Participant 2 (T2) stating: 'I think that you're either vilified or you're held up as heroes, and we're not either'. Yet, according to some participants, the supposed tendency to heroise the teaching profession in some quarters raised many people's expectations of teachers. As a result, accusations from media sources that teachers were working less and complaining about the prospect of working more were consistently discussed by participants, especially during the easing of the first UK lockdown in June 2020:

> I think the teachers are, the teaching profession's been looked at kind of, a bit askance at the moment, they're saying, 'oh, you're all lazy sods and need to go back to work.' And yeah, which makes me a bit cross, if I'm honest. And yeah, I just, I have this kind of sense that we're going to become scapegoats again for, for everything.
>
> (P4, T2)

For some participants, avoiding media commentary on the teaching profession proved necessary to maintain their mental health: 'COVID went on and on the slamming and the narrative was so grim that I just didn't read it because it was just too depressing' (P17, T7).

Participants across the three time points consistently expressed concerns over the vilification of teacher unions in the press negatively impacting how the wider teaching profession was valued. Participant 20 (T2) stated: 'I think the unions have faced a huge amount of negative backlash and when they've tried to stand up for teachers safety issues in school […] it's been warped and twisted into we don't want to go back [to work]'. Concern over 'teachers get[ting] a bad press' (P3, T2) as a result of union representation in the press was sustained to T7. Participant 16 (T7) stated: 'the unions have to kind of come out almost more militant [due to teachers being disregarded] than they would be, which makes everyone hate us more'.

Accounts detailing a perceived underappreciation of teachers by the media mentioned tabloid sources most frequently, with a 'tabloid press turn on teachers' (P8, T2) discussed most within T5 interviews: 'I think some of the tabloid headlines should be ashamed of how they've reported' (P17, T5). Participant 13 (T7) in a discussion of how such media disparages the teaching profession noted: 'tabloid kind of stuff … the more sensationalist, tends to jump more on [negative] parents' view and then inflate it around that'.

In summary, teachers perceived a sustained level of media misrepresentation and disregard towards the teaching profession, primarily through press media, from T2 onwards. Regarding participant views on the teaching profession's framing in the press, a predominant response emerged: a fear of the misrepresentation of teachers' workload within media leading to undervaluing of the teaching profession over time.

Across the three themes, and increasingly as time progressed, teachers perceived an overall lack of appreciation for the teaching profession from their local communities, policymakers and media outlets. Initially, participants expressed relative hope for a more appreciated teaching profession, substantiated by positive interactions with their pupils' parents. Yet, initial positive parent–teacher interactions appeared to have been short-lived – believed by participants to be influenced by factors such increased exhaustion of parents over the prolonged remote learning situation, and press media's perceivably

inaccurate portrayal of teachers and their workload, leading to society's perceptions that teachers could have provided more support for pupils. Perceived government's low levels of valuing of the teaching profession, often seen through press media, seemed to have disheartened participants and contributed to some avoiding media commentary concerning the profession.

DISCUSSION

Work, including the perception of how one's work is valued, has changed as a result of COVID-19. The teaching profession was no exception, with teachers around the world reporting how they were negatively portrayed and perceived as a profession (e.g. Nerlino, 2023; Ryan et al., 2023). The importance of valuing the teaching profession has been recognised at the international level, including by the OECD (Schleicher, 2018) and Education International (Stromquist, 2018), as it is associated with the teacher recruitment and retention crisis. This topic of the perceived societal appreciation of teachers is particularly important in England, where in 2018, only 28.8% of teachers reported that they believed that their profession is valued by society, which was lower than in 2013 (OECD, 2020). The current study found pandemic-linked changes in how the participating teachers believed society, policymakers and the media value them. Specifically, the three themes identified in the interviews indicate changes in teachers' PSA from local communities ('initial admiration from local communities progressively waned') and low levels of PSA from the UK government ('continuous government disrespect towards teachers') and media ('initial media vitriol towards teachers was sustained').

There was evidence of mixed levels of local communities' appreciation of teachers' work at each time point and throughout the three time points. However, a trend of declining appreciation could also be identified. Initially, the appreciation was high, particularly from parents, who experienced the difficulties of supporting their children's education at home in the first UK lockdown. Turning to why the appreciation may have been high, it may be that the closer one is to a teacher (e.g. pupils and parents vs. general public), the greater the appreciation of their work (Carlo et al., 2013), as they are closer in observing the realities of teachers' work.

However, teachers' PSA seemed to wane as parents' expectations of what teachers should do to help them and their children changed over time. This change may be the result of comparing what the school delivered in earlier periods of the pandemic, greater awareness of what was being delivered by other schools through the media, and as many experienced mental health difficulties owing to their own personal and professional circumstances during COVID-19 (O'Connor et al., 2021). As such, there seemed to be some weakening of the stronger home–school relationships that were forged in some areas in the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strong home–school relationships are critical to pupils' educational experiences and outcomes (see Smith et al., 2022 for a review) and are necessary to involve each other in solving challenges such as increasing school attendance problems in the context of COVID-19 (McDonald et al., 2023). Thus, the potential volatility of this relationship should be of concern to both teachers and parents/guardians and efforts must be made to strengthen this to become enduring over time.

Moreover, participants reported that there was a general lack of public awareness and acknowledgement that teachers were included in the official list of key workers (Department for Education, 2020), and that they were included in a list of occupations known to be significantly at risk of exposure to infection and disease (Baker et al., 2020). As such, teachers questioned whether they or their work was appreciated or valued, which may have been coloured by their perception of the contrasting treatment for other key workers. For example, the NHS received weekly claps of appreciation from the public, children painted

and displayed rainbows to support NHS workers, and critical care workers were awarded blue badges by the government to mark the nation's appreciation of their work during the pandemic (Wood & Skeggs, 2020). To date, teachers have not received any equivalent or tangible level of recognition or thanks from the government or the general public at the national level. The nature of the PSA construct inherently involves recognition from others. Thus, without changes in the way that the teaching profession is recognised in society, PSA levels may continue to decline over time.

Teachers' perceptions of how highly the government values their profession were similarly bleak. Teaching has been considered a 'directed profession' that responds to the mandates of the government's changing priorities rather than having the inherent power to contribute to a self-improving educational system (Daly et al., 2020), resulting in a 'dispirited and demoralised profession' (Bottery & Wright, 2000, p. 475). The experiences of teachers during COVID-19 can be considered as another manifestation of this phenomena, although the argument can be made that quick national direction was necessary for such an emergency situation though perhaps not consecutively and one that U-turned repeatedly. Indeed, participants voiced an ongoing experience of this throughout COVID-19 that they had interpreted as continued disrespect from the government for the teaching profession. Similar to our study findings, these negative sentiments were evident in teachers in other countries during COVID-19, including teachers in Australia who reported that sudden shifts in school opening decisions signified the government's disrespect for the profession and analogised themselves as being treated like guinea pigs, scapegoats and babysitters (Ryan et al., 2023).

Our data shows a growing divide between 'us' and 'them' in the context of educational decisions and change, with teachers feeling the government does not value their expertise enough to consult with them in any meaningful way. Maintaining this hostile emotional distance will not be fruitful for anyone. Open and collaborative conversations are fundamental to closing this distance between the profession and the government. For example, more consultations like the one that the government launched regarding the impact of the pandemic on assessments during 2020 and 2021 (e.g. Ofqual, 2020a, 2020b) as well as regarding the education sector more generally (UK Parliament, 2020) are needed. There will inevitably be more complex decisions to be made as we emerge from the pandemic. As such, all parties should seize this opportunity to work together to ensure decisions are grounded in understanding of how schools work in practice.

The media has an inherent power to portray and shape society's perceptions of various issues (Lee, 2022), including those related to the teaching profession (Barnes, 2022). Teachers' frustrations were directed towards inaccurate portrayals of teachers as being lazy and not working during the first UK lockdown. Indeed, newspapers in England were found to have reported the profession in a negative light to some extent, regardless of the newspapers' political ideologies (Oxley & Kim, 2023). Moreover, the media's portrayal of teachers has swung between extremely positive and negative (Hansen, 2009), and teachers reported their observation of a similar phenomenon in the earlier period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our participants reported that the media's portrayal of teachers changed from heroes to villains over time, similar to the decline in local communities' perceptions of teachers. Similarly, teachers in the US reported that between March 2020 and April 2021, the media initially portrayed them as heroes then lazy and whiny as the pandemic progressed (Nerlino, 2023), which inevitably contributed to low levels of PSA and was a source of stress in these participants as well.

The media's often negative portrayal of teacher unions and their campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic was a particular source of stress, first, as some participants did not always fully agree with the union's approach and second, as some participants were aware that the media's portrayal can negatively affect public perceptions. Despite

teachers' clearly expressed understanding that drama 'sells', and their awareness that they can curate their own news consumption, they recognised that negative press for the profession can have a negative effect on them as individuals and the teaching profession (Hargreaves et al., 2007; Stromquist, 2018). Although the media is an important channel for voicing the concerns of the public and raising awareness, our data suggest that the portrayals may have had a more negative impact on teachers' personal and professional lives than was necessarily intended.

Implications

Recognition of teachers' efforts and performance can bolster their morale (White, 2014) and their desire to stay in the job (Ashiedu & Scott-Ladd, 2012). Recognition of the need to acknowledge the value of the teaching profession is not new (Carlo et al., 2013; IBF International Consulting, 2013) and is particularly relevant in the context of teachers in England with a reported decrease in PSA (OECD, 2014, 2020). In fact, prolonged public disregard for teachers' work may lead to low motivation and commitment and, ultimately, to individuals leaving the profession (OECD, 2020). Given that high teacher attrition has significant financial, educational and societal consequences (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Hanushek et al., 2016; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), engaging in steps to recognise teachers as essential workers, and proactively demonstrating appreciation for their work, would be beneficial.

The OECD (2020) recommended that in order to strengthen the teacher workforce, constructive dialogues between policymakers and the teaching profession must take place, especially on the issue of working conditions. Furthermore, as educational policy enactment inevitably involves teachers as implementers and/or recipients of the change, providing ways for teachers to participate in shaping national education decisions will be helpful for all parties. Specifically, it will assist teachers to feel that they are enactors rather than victims of bureaucracy (Gratch, 2000), and it will assist policymakers to ensure that national decisions are feasible, appropriate and effective in diverse contexts (Bangs & Frost, 2012). Therefore, a greater openness to discussion and collaboration between the two parties is recommended for effective planning and implementation of national educational strategies and decisions, and thereby a higher quality educational system.

Moreover, local communities and schools can consider ways to forge stronger relationships with each other that can help individuals obtain a realistic understanding of what teachers do. According to Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory, children have potential to grow within multiple nested and interacting systems, including the home and the school. Positive relationships between homes and schools can therefore have a positive influence on students' academic achievement, as they offer parents the opportunity to participate in school decisionmaking (Hampden-Thompson & Galindo, 2017). Thus, school, parents and pupils may all benefit from building systematic strategies to maintain the positive relationships, and in turn increase teaching profession's social esteem and thereby teachers' PSA.

Limitations and future directions

We had a sample of 24 teachers at T7, 21 at T5 but only nine at T7 and this is likely to have affected the findings, although we should note that the same cross-sectional themes were noted at all three time points. Nonetheless, at T7 we had four primary school teachers (three SLTs and one CT) and five secondary school teachers (five CTs). It is possible that at T7,

SLT members were overrepresented in the primary school sample and underrepresented in the secondary school sample. Thus, care must be taken in interpreting the findings.

The current study used the TALIS framework to understand teachers' PSA, which focused on teachers' self-reports of their perceptions of the appreciation shown by three groups: policymakers, the media and society. However, it did not consider teachers' perceptions of students' appreciation of their work, who may also contribute to teachers' PSA. Additionally, as teachers often have more negative perceptions of how their profession is valued by society than may necessarily be the case (e.g. Rice, 2005; Verhoeven et al., 2006), our findings may have captured perceptions that are overly negative compared with what may be the case. Thus, future studies are encouraged to triangulate the data presented here by gathering the views of multiple groups, including pupils, parents and policymakers as well as teachers. Moreover, a mixed methods approach may be beneficial, wherein individuals' qualitative responses can be validated against their quantitative responses.

Conclusion

Teachers, who already felt unappreciated, seem to have felt even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. As key workers, teachers have worked in an environment with an enhanced risk of infection, and are now working to meet the enhanced needs of the pupils and schools. This, in itself, is sufficient reason to acknowledge and appreciate the inherent value of the teaching profession. However, beyond this, increasing teachers' PSA is likely to be critical in addressing the teacher shortage crisis, fuelled by low recruitment and retention rates, that many countries are currently facing, including England. At a period in which both teacher recruitment and retention are low, thus fuelling the teacher shortage crisis, it is more critical than ever that action should be taken to increase teachers' PSA should we wish to provide a healthy and effective education to pupils.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There are no conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The anonymised data that support the findings of this study are available to researchers from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT
The study was carried out under British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines and ethical approval was received from the first and last authors' university department's ethics committee.

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