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'Making sure that people are in a good place is draining, and nobody does that for me': the pandemic and its ongoing impact on teachers and headteachers

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Introduction: Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, education provision was significantly disrupted for two academic years. Schools saw an increase in their workload and scope of their responsibilities which impacted staff members physically, mentally and professionally. This study examines how the pandemic and school disruptions impacted teachers and other staff members, and their continued experience since all restrictions have been lifted.

Methods: Twenty-three staff members were interviewed in the 2021/2022 academic year and nine staff members in the 2023/2024 academic year using semi-structured online interviews.

Results: Results showed that the pandemic was challenging for staff members with their well-being and workload significantly affected. Even though restrictions in England were lifted in the summer of 2021, staff members are still struggling with the effects of the pandemic, as well as emerging post-pandemic challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis.

Discussion: Findings from these interviews suggest that the impact of the pandemic has been long-term and highlight the need to include staff members in any discussions regarding recovery plans. These findings also emphasise the importance of prioritising sustainable support systems and resources for staff members to ensure the resilience and effectiveness of the education sector.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, headteachers, mental health, schools, teachers

1 Introduction

From March 2020 to July 2021, three lockdowns and several periods of restrictions occurred in England. In March 2020, schools across the country moved to hybrid learning, with only children of key workers or vulnerable children attending school in person. A phased reopening of schools started in June 2020, with only selected groups being able to attend school (i.e. vulnerable children, nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6). However, two more lockdowns and several periods of disruptions and restrictions were further implemented from September 2020 until July 2021. This meant that for two academic years the way that education was provided significantly

changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the length and severity of pandemic related restrictions a significant amount of research has focused on how these disruptions have affected children's educational experience and development. However, less attention has been given to the impact of these disruptions on teachers and other staff members working in primary schools, particularly in terms of longer-term impacts. This paper aims to expand the literature by reporting both the short and longer-term impact of the pandemic and school disruptions on staff members working in primary schools across England. This paper makes an important contribution by reporting data that highlights the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically focusing on teacher mental health and well-being, the persistent recruitment and retention crisis in teaching, and the continued support schools offer to local communities.

Research conducted in the last few years has shown that, in England, the pandemic and school disruptions were challenging for staff members working in primary schools. During the first lockdown, teachers felt that there was no clear guidance on how to deal with the crisis (Kim and Asbury, 2020) as government regulations were often published at the last minute which contributed to an increased frustration from staff members about the uncertainties they experienced (Kim et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). While initially, some teachers were able to adapt, others struggled. Many teachers saw their workload increase and job demands change as they had a higher administrative load or had to take over other supporting roles, administrative or clerical tasks which, in some cases, took more of their time than educational activities. For example, teachers had to deliver food parcels, do home visits and support vulnerable families in addition to teaching online and/or in-person lessons (Kim and Asbury, 2020; Lacey et al., 2024). These changes substantially increased the demands placed on staff members, often without additional resources provided to support this increase in workload, therefore contributing to poorer well-being in this population (Nwoko et al., 2023). While trying to teach in new circumstances, teachers were also concerned about how these disruptions were affecting vulnerable children (Kim et al., 2023; Kim and Asbury 2020), how children's personal circumstances might have changed during the disruptions and how this could be affecting children physically, emotionally and academically (Kim et al., 2021). As such, the pandemic was incredibly stressful for anyone working in an educational setting.

During the pandemic, teachers' mental health and well-being was significantly impacted (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Education Support, 2020; Kim et al., 2022). For example, teachers' and headteachers' anxiety was reported to spike the week before the school closures in 2020 and in June of the same year when the government announced that schools were going to reopen to some children (Allen et al., 2020). The subsequent periods of disruption continued to change their responsibilities which in turn, impacted their well-being. During the lockdowns, staff members had to focus on delivering lessons while also juggling personal commitments or changes. However, teachers felt that they were not valued and that the general public had a negative perception of their profession (Kim et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023; See, 2024). The increase in workload and stress, as well as difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance also contributed to a decline in their mental health and well-being

(Education Support, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2023). Thus, the impact on staff members has gone beyond changes to their day-to-day teaching routines and activities. It is important to note that some of the challenges faced by staff members (e.g., high workloads and stress) had already been present prior to the pandemic (Ofsted, 2019). A recent systematic review of factors influencing teachers' occupational well-being found that studies conducted over the past two decades consistently identified teachers having high workload and job demands which impacted their mental health and well-being (Nwoko et al., 2023). Therefore, rather than creating entirely new challenges, the pandemic might have amplified them and might have intensified the imbalance between existing demands and resources available.

Similar negative impacts on early years and primary school professionals have been reported across the world (e.g., Chan et al., 2021; Eadie et al. 2022, ; Garvey et al., 2023; Jakubowski and Sitko-Dominik, 2021; Marshall et al. 2022, ; McDonough and Lemon, 2024; Selvik and Herrebrøden, 2024). A meta-analysis of studies conducted during the pandemic (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2023) showed that teachers around the world reported high levels of burnout. In a study conducted in the US, teachers reported that their morale and work-life balance was better at the start of the pandemic than at the end of the 2020/2021 academic year, and that their workload had significantly increased since the start of the pandemic (Marshall et al., 2022). Similarly, teachers in the US reported to have significantly higher levels of depressive and anxious symptoms 18 months after the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic (McLean et al., 2023). Interestingly, in this study, early career teachers were reported to show more depressive symptoms than pre-pandemic, but also more depressive and anxiety symptoms than mid and late career teachers post-pandemic (McLean et al., 2023). These studies would suggest that even though the type and duration of disruptions might have varied across the world, the teaching profession universally faced significant challenges, including increased workload, stress, and the need to rapidly adapt to new ways of working.

While restrictions have been lifted in England since the summer of 2021, schools had not fully returned to 'normal' at the time of writing, and concerns about the sustainability of the teaching profession have only deepened, with many educators reconsidering their future in this profession. Allen et al., 2020 reported that in June 2020, 21% of headteachers and 9% of middle leaders and class teachers in their sample reported that their experience of the pandemic so far made them more likely to leave the profession. Similarly, a report from Fullard, 2021 suggested that teachers' intention to leave the profession by the summer of 2022 increased from 16% to 29% since before the pandemic, and from 27% to 43% to leave by 2025. A report by NFER, 2024 also showed that in the 2022/2023 academic year 44 per cent more teachers intended to leave the profession than in the previous year. This data suggests that this trend of increasing teacher attrition may not be only a temporary effect.

Looking at initial teacher training applications also provides an insight into the difficulties the education system is facing. While in England there was an increase in the percentage of initial teacher training applications at the start of the pandemic (Worth and McLean, 2020), a report from Zuccollo, 2022

suggested that the number of applications in 2021/2022 was lower than pre-pandemic numbers and targets were still not been met in the 2024/25 academic year (Department for Education, 2024). The increase of teachers leaving the profession and the reduced number of initial teacher training applications suggest that the profession may not be viewed as an attractive career prospect anymore, particularly where high and persistent job demands have not been matched by resources and support. While the pandemic may not be the only cause for these trends, it may have exacerbated problems that the education system has been facing for a while, which has led to an increase in people leaving the profession and a decrease in initial applications. Therefore, exploring staff members' experience of working in a school setting may help to identify potential areas for support for this population.

Most research discussed so far has focused on educators' experience in the first few years since the start of the pandemic. However, limited interest has been given to the long-term impact and experience of this group. Considering the additional challenges that the pandemic brought to the teaching profession and the significant impact it had in the first few years, it is essential to understand how these experiences and changes have been impacting them a few years after the pandemic. This could provide more information regarding how teachers and other staff members can be best supported, which in turn will also benefit children's learning and development.

This paper reports the findings from a series of interviews carried out with teachers and members of the senior leadership team over the course of the academic year 2021/2022 and the 2023/2024 academic year. In both academic years, the interview was divided into two sections. Section one looked at the impact of the pandemic and school disruptions on children, while section two explored the impact on teachers and other staff members. This paper reports on the results of section two in both academic years and aims to explore staff members' experiences of working in primary schools during and after the pandemic.

Methods

Participants

All participants interviewed were staff members working at schools participating in the ICICLES project: a 3-year longitudinal study investigating the impact of pandemic related disruptions on children's socioemotional, language and educational skills in the first years of formal schooling. Two sets of interviews were conducted. The first ones in the 2021/2022 academic year and the second ones in the 2023/2024 academic year.

For the first set of interviews (2021/2022), twenty-three staff members from 21 schools in England were interviewed. The sample consisted of five teachers, two members of the senior leadership team, five head teachers or heads of school, 11 headteachers or heads of school that were also responsible for other roles such as Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), or lead of different curriculum areas. All staff members had been working in their schools for between 3 and 25 years at the time of being interviewed and schools were located in the following

geographical areas: East Midlands ($N=1$), East of England ($N=3$), London ($N=1$), North East ($N=1$), North West ($N=3$), South East ($N=5$), South West ($N=2$), West Midlands ($N=2$), and Yorkshire and the Humber ($N=3$). Schools had an average of 24.72% of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) ($SD=13.08$; range = 7% to 55.10%), an average of 12.52% of children who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL) ($SD=13.90$; range = 0% to 48.2%) and 13.45% of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) ($SD=5.51$; range = 5.82% to 24.42%).

For the second set of interviews (2023/2024), nine staff members from nine schools in England were interviewed. One participant was a teacher, three participants were headteachers, and five participants were headteachers or heads of school that were also responsible for other roles such as SENCO, DSL, or lead of different curriculum areas. All staff members had been working in their schools between 5 and 25 years at the time of the interview. Schools were located in the following geographical areas: East Midlands ($N=1$), East of England ($N=2$), London ($N=2$), North East ($N=2$), North West ($N=1$) and South East ($N=1$). Schools had an average of 22.6% of children eligible for FSM ($SD=9.7$; range = 6.5% to 37.3%), an average of 29.7% of children learning EAL ($SD=22.4$; range = 0% to 58.4%) and 16.98% of children with SEND ($SD=4.9$; range = 9.1% to 24.6%). Four of the staff members interviewed in the 2021/22 academic year were also interviewed in the 2023/24 academic year.

Ethical approval for the ICICLES project was received by the Research Ethics Committee of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. All participating schools provided written consent to take part in all components of the ICICLES project. In addition, staff members who participated in the interviews provided additional verbal informed consent at the start of each interview.

Measures and procedure

Participants were asked to opt-in for an optional online interview when joining the ICICLES project and once again in spring 2024. At both times participants that opted-in were sent an email invitation and the interviews took place between January and June 2022 and between March and July 2024.

All participants were interviewed with a semi-structured online interview that lasted between 40 and 60 min. At both times, the interview consisted of two sections: section one looked at the impact of the pandemic and school disruptions on children, while section two explored the impact on teachers and other staff members. In this paper we report only the results regarding the impact on teachers and other members of the senior leadership team.

In the first set of interviews, questions explored participants' work, health and well-being during the pandemic and in the first year post-pandemic. The interviews also examined any support they received and any concerns they had regarding their profession at the time of the interview. In the second round of interviews, questions focused on participants' experience working in an educational setting after the pandemic, as well as any differences across the post-pandemic years. Similar to the first set of interviews, questions also explored any support they

received and any concerns they had regarding their profession at the time of the interview. Considering that the second round of interviews took place almost three years after restrictions were lifted, the interview also explored whether participants considered that the pandemic and its associated disruptions were still impacting staff members, or not, and any other emerging challenges for the profession.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and their content analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, who had a background in developmental psychology and had no prior relationship with the participating schools or their staff before the study commenced. A preliminary analysis was carried out manually after each round of data collection by the same member of the research team. This began with a familiarisation process, which involved reading the transcripts and making initial notes. Initial coding was done manually and a spreadsheet was used to organise and track initial codes. As interviews were semi-structured, some initial codes closely reflected the interview questions, while others reflected ideas that emerged more spontaneously from interviewees' responses. Following this initial coding, related codes were grouped into broader themes that represented shared patterns in the data. The process of creating these themes was iterative, with some initial themes being combined, split and renamed as the analysis progressed. Because the two rounds of interviews were conducted at different time points, themes were initially developed separately

for each round of interviews. After analysing the data from the second round of interviews, it was merged with the first round's data, and further themes were developed and refined to produce the final themes. The analysis at both time points focused on experiences shared across staff roles. See Table 1 for an example of how codes were developed into the final themes.

Results

In both rounds of interviews nine recurring main themes were identified: 1) general experience of the pandemic, 2) differences between lockdowns, 3) post-pandemic experience, 4) health and well-being, 5) support and resources for staff, 6) view of the profession, 7) positive impacts and 8) main concerns going forward. An additional theme emerged only in the second round of interviews: 9) current impact of the pandemic and other emerging challenges. This section reports the findings of each theme, with data from both sets of interviews included for the first eight themes, as these were recurring across both sets of interviews.

General experience of the pandemic

Most participants described the pandemic and school disruptions as difficult and challenging times. Similar

TABLE 1 Examples of codes and themes.

Quote	Initial code	Final theme
"The workload is immense for our office staff. They still have their usual office work of setting children up in the school and doing all of the trips and doing all of the things they would have normally done, but they're now having to do daily tallies for the Government, daily tallies for the Local Authority, daily tallies for our Trust, of who's got COVID, who's not."	Increased workload since the pandemic	General experience of the pandemic
"The first one, it was a novelty. It was that middle one where the pressure to teach in school and online. That bit I found really difficult because you felt like you were torn between the computer and doing those ones that were at home and the ten that you had there, that was really hard"	Second lockdown harder than first lockdown	Differences between lockdowns
"It's getting progressively worse, local authority just continuing to cut and cut and cut and cut plus cuts to school budget staffing. So less resources and staff but more responsibilities."	Less resources post-pandemic	Post-pandemic experience
"I had one teacher, that following the pandemic, just could not cope with teaching, so left."	Impact on their mental health	Health and Well-being
"I know that in other erm in other stressful jobs, that are, are erm are services, for example, police and social care, there is an element of supervision there and supported supervision And I think that's built, I know that that's built into, into day-to-day working practices. And I think teachers should have that too and have that support. "	Need for supervision	Support and resources for staff
"it doesn't really feel like, erm, a lot of our families have a huge amount of respect for school staff anymore"	View of the profession	View of the profession
"This experience has helped the staff to become a better team and closer and more resilient, better able to survive these kinds of things. We know we can do it and we know we can support each other".	Closer relationships among staff members	Positive impacts
"I worry that we might lose the expertise going out the other side. So, those experienced teachers that actually don't find a great work/life balance and we might lose that expertise"	Concern about losing experienced staff	Main concerns going forward
"I don't know how much is..like the pandemic was obviously hugely stressful, erm, for schools but I think that now, kind of and dealing with the fallout and other issues that have arisen since, erm, it's probably even worse."	Additional challenges beyond the pandemic	Current impact of the pandemic and other emerging challenges

descriptions were provided by participants interviewed in the first- and third-year post-pandemic. Some had to oversee their own children's education while making sure that their pupils were receiving and accessing their lessons. Others had to teach each lesson both in person and online, which doubled their workload. Others that were, for example, shielding or isolating, felt they could not perform their roles properly. Difficulties were enhanced by the fact that changes in schools had to be implemented at very short notice and with limited resources and support. Additionally, they had to constantly make changes last minute as staff members would get sick and someone would have to cover for them unexpectedly. In some schools, this affected their relationship with parents/carers. One participant in the first round of interviews said:

It was so difficult for parents to understand that we didn't know these things were going to happen because a lot of them were like well you must've known that was coming but as teachers, even our headteacher, we didn't know anything was coming before it was announced on the news the same as everybody else.

Across both sets of interviews, participants reported that the pandemic and school disruptions significantly increased their workload and scope of their responsibilities. Participants had additional tasks they had to complete while still having to teach. These tasks were different for different schools. Some schools had to support families with meal vouchers, others had to deliver paper-based copies of the schoolwork, all of them had to complete daily tallies regarding the number of positive Covid-19 cases in their schools, as well as making regular phone calls or visits to the most vulnerable families to check on their pupils. The workload around pastoral care significantly increased and had to be completed with limited support, staff and resources. For some families, schools were the only source of support during the pandemic and as such withdrawing or reducing this support was not possible. As one participant in the first set of interviews said,

Everything seemed to fall on schools and we felt very responsible of that and keeping some of those families going with food as well as much as anything else, you know all the having to make up the food packs for families to come and collect. Some families we couldn't get hold of and then that was a worry. We ended up having to make home visits. Just seemed to broaden and broaden and broaden everything that schools were responsible for during a time that was particularly difficult.

Differences between lockdowns

There were some differences identified in the experience of participants during the different lockdowns and periods of restrictions, primarily in the first set of interviews. The first lockdown (March 2020) was described by some as a 'novelty' with some initial concerns about how to successfully set up online schooling. It was also incredibly lonely but the idea of

being able to work from home was welcomed. Schools' priority at that time was mainly their pupils' mental health and well-being. Therefore, for some schools, this was a less challenging period of lockdown as there was not much pressure regarding children's education. However, a couple of participants reported being scared as the virus was relatively new and they did not know much about it. These teachers were also worried about being under scrutiny as parents/carers were going to be able to see or hear their online lessons. During the first lockdown, in some schools, only the teachers or headteachers would work on-site, so they had to fill all roles typically carried out by other members of staff or that are a combined responsibility across several members of staff.

This meant that there was also some resentment among staff members because some teachers had to work in school full-time while others (e.g., support staff or teachers who were shielding) were able to stay at home. For staff members that were not able to be on site, there was a feeling of guilt because they were not 'supporting' their team at school. One participant reported that she started working longer hours than normal to try to prove she was still working and said:

I felt very guilty that I wasn't there, kind of with my team and I didn't you know [...], I felt I should have been there really physically, like literally supporting them. Rather than kind of you know, being away at a distance.

After the first lockdown, things became more difficult for some schools as now there was an intense pressure to focus on children's education, with almost all participants having to teach in school and online. As one participant said *'That bit I found really difficult because you felt like you were torn between the computer and doing those ones that were at home and the ten that you had there, that was really hard'*.

This was the time when the additional administrative work was added and activities that were paused in the first lockdown restarted, significantly increasing their workload. One participant also described this time as extremely difficult as they were now aware that children were perceived as being behind. It was also difficult to maintain continuity of learning, as well as catch up for children that had learning gaps, when they were constantly missing school. Thus, stress levels increased, due to the pressures of making sure children were learning.

The second and third lockdowns were a shock for some schools, with a mix of experiences reported. In general, participants felt that changes had to be implemented at the last minute, which made teachers and parents/carers very upset. During the second and third lockdowns, expectations regarding what teachers should do increased, but staff members had to balance those expectations and their own concerns of living through those unprecedented times. While external expectations at this time moved towards children's education, schools were also still quite concerned about how to ensure everyone's safety and how to make sure they had enough staff as teachers were regularly having to isolate. Others found these lockdowns particularly difficult as they could see that after each period of disruptions, the children's learning gaps were bigger, increasing their stress and worry. One participant in the first round of

interviews described the experience as *'the hardest time I have ever known in my career and I think it's only now that I'm starting to see the joy, again, in what I do'*.

Post-pandemic experience

The first academic year after restrictions were lifted in England (2021/2022) was described by one participant in the first set of interviews as the hardest one academically *'We thought it would get better this year, because actually, we're open, it's business as usual, except that it's not. Because if a child has got Covid like symptoms, they're being advised to isolate and then get tested'*. Participants in the first set of interviews described being tired and seeing their colleagues also quite tired. Additionally, schools were finding it difficult to find supply teachers, particularly in rural areas.

In this first year there was a general feeling that everything was back to normal, but for schools, this was not the case as they were still dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. For example, their increase in workload had not stopped. Schools were still providing additional pastoral care, with one participant mentioning *'we don't see it getting any easier over the next twelve to eighteen months'*. Schools were still expected to provide extra support for families but there is also an external sense of urgency and pressure to try and get children back up to speed. Another participant said

You've still got that external pressure. With the best will in the world, these children are not where they should be because they've missed a year of school along the way, probably more because of the Covid outbreaks. So, I think it's the external pressure that's more of a worry than what's going on in school.

Additionally, teachers were still falling ill, which meant others had to step in. This was very disruptive and added to an already quite intense workload. For example, in one school

We've all been ill, but not Covid related, we just seem to catch anything now, whereas before we wouldn't because we've not been exposed to it [...] And so, I think we're quite, our resistance is quite low, and I don't think it would take much to push certain staff over the edge sometimes, but we keep going. So, I think it's had quite an effect on the staff.

In the second round of interviews, participants continued to report many of the challenges described two years earlier. Staff workloads and responsibilities remained above pre-pandemic levels, with some schools still providing support beyond education, due to many services in their communities being reduced or removed since the pandemic. For example, schools reported supporting families with safeguarding and online safety or assisting with housing and benefit applications. Therefore, after more than two years of restrictions being lifted, schools became the place where parents and families look for help of any kind, but also the place they go to complain regarding, for

example, long waiting lists for referrals. One participant said that however

That's not our fault, we have no control over that but because we're the ones who are making the referral, you know people kind of come back and have a go at us, or shout at us about that. Because you know, we're seen to be the ones who are holding up the process, when in actual fact that's not the case.

Financial difficulties were discussed by all except one participant in the second round of interviews. For some schools, things are getting progressively worse, as their local authorities continue making cuts to services in the community. Nevertheless, school's budgets are also more limited, but they still have more responsibilities than before.

Overall, in the second round of interviews, participants described working in an education setting post-pandemic as tough, exhausting mentally and physically, worrying, tricky and draining. Others described it as constantly having to overcome barriers and being in a state of *'firefighting'*, with urgent needs or problems constantly arising, which prevented them from planning in advance or focusing on other important matters such as planning their lessons or activities at schools. As one participant said:

I think the best way to describe it is that I still, to this day, feel like I'm fire-fighting. I feel that there's just...as soon as you think that there's an opportunity to think strategically about how to move the school forward, how to improve outcomes for children, you get hit with more staff absence. Or you get hit with another challenge that each day it just feels like there's something else that we have to respond to. Erm, and again we try and look more longer term, but then something else gets thrown in to the mix, which then throws all those plans out of the window.

Participants also described these difficulties of planning being related to the fact that schools have not known the needs of their pupils and staff in advance. Prior to the pandemic, staff members would be able to know on average the level or needs of their pupils. Since the pandemic they now have to wait until pupils and staff members attend school to understand where they are and plan how to support them.

Overall, participants at both timepoints reported high workloads and pressures, although the context of these pressures and the needs they were responding were slightly different. While some immediate challenges of the pandemic had reduced over time, wider responsibilities and changing needs in schools and their communities continued to increase staff members' workload and scope of responsibilities. Interestingly a few participants said that after a few years of restrictions being lifted, they are seeing that challenges that are present for children, are also present for other staff members working in their schools. For example, some adults are also showing some language and communication difficulties and their resilience has decreased.

Health and well-being

During the first set of interviews, most participants reported that their mental health and well-being were negatively impacted. Besides the drastic change in the type of work and the increase in their workload, teachers also had limited social interaction with others. Most teachers found it difficult not to have the support that they would normally have from fellow staff members during the times when social restrictions applied. One participant said that being able to talk to other teachers before the restrictions meant they could *'get rid of the stresses of the day'*. Therefore, social restrictions meant they could not get *'off their chest'* any of their worries. Another participant said, *'it has just been lonely, lonely as a profession, but lonely as well, because we've been, even coming back into school, we've been, you're not allowed to mix'*.

Mental health and well-being issues were heightened by the fact that some staff members were also struggling in their personal lives, with some of them losing family members or getting ill but still being expected to continue teaching with no one checking up on them. For example, one participant mentioned that *making sure that people are in a good place is draining, and nobody does that for me'*.

According to participants in the second set of interviews, the staff members who struggled the most during the initial stages of the pandemic and the first years post-pandemic were those living alone, those with additional health conditions, and support staff. Staff members living alone faced significant challenges due to a lack of a support network and limited opportunities for socialisation, which exacerbated feelings of isolation. Support staff often felt undervalued, as their roles were perceived as not essential because they were not directly involved in teaching. Vulnerable staff members with underlying health conditions struggled with isolation, adding to their physical and emotional burdens. Post-pandemic, staff members that seemed to be struggling more were still staff members with underlying health conditions or already dealing with mental health and well-being issues, those required to cover for colleagues when they are ill and teachers with young children.

Unfortunately, two years later, the impact on their mental health and well-being can still be seen. Some staff members were still struggling and a third of participants from the second round of interviews explicitly said that this experience has impacted them negatively. For example, one participant said that

The pressure that it created on staff, we're still feeling the repercussions of it now. You've got some staff who've had long Covid, who've had long-term health issues, following, pandemic as well. So, there's a wider picture of staff that, from my personal view, is not always taken into account by government.

As a result, staff attendance patterns have shifted post-pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period. In some cases, this is due to staff taking longer to recover from illnesses, while others may be struggling mentally or emotionally and need to take time off. Additionally, staff members are now prioritising their own well-being, occasionally taking time off to focus on

themselves. While some participants celebrated this shift toward self-care, others noted that it has increased the workload of other staff members.

Overall, participants at both time points reported ongoing concerns about staff mental health and well-being. Many of these concerns were still reported two years later, suggesting that what had initially been experienced as immediate pressures of the pandemic had developed into longer-term concerns.

It is also important to note that in the second round of interviews, some participants noted that there is now an increasing number of newly qualified teachers, whose experience is different as they were still studying when the pandemic started or were not yet working. While they did not experience teaching during lockdowns and periods of disruption, their experience of having to be isolated from their families, on student halls, learning online, among other pandemic related disruptions needs to be considered as may be different to staff members that were working since the start of the pandemic.

Support and resources for staff members

Many participants said in the first round of interviews that schools provided resources to support their staff's mental health and well-being during and right after the pandemic. For example, one school had referred staff members to counselling services. Other schools shared resources and activities staff members can access if needed. While most participants reported that their schools accessed and provided support for them, there was a mixed experience regarding the amount of support provided. Some participants reported that their schools received support from their Local Authorities or their Trusts, while others did not receive any support and could only access limited opportunities due to lack of school resources. As one participant said

We're not part of an academy trust, so we don't have that wider network of schools and support, it's just us. No support from the local authority, really, other than to say, well done, you're doing really well, keep up the hard work. Well, that's great but where's the practical support?

Nonetheless, participants reported in the first set of interviews that the best thing to do to support staff in the first years after the pandemic would be to check on working practices to ensure a work-life balance, reduce their workload and increase resources.

Two years later, in the second round of interviews, most participants reported that schools were providing support for staff members implemented during or after the pandemic. Instead of focusing on access to specific services, participants described changes in policies and practices aimed at improving work-life balance and supporting staff members' mental health and well-being. Examples of these policies and practices included: constantly being in contact with staff, regularly reevaluating what works and what does not work in their practices, ensuring that all meetings have a defined purpose, among others.

One participant stated that their school currently offers no additional support but emphasised efforts to organise more social activities to improve staff morale and interaction. Another participant said that while their school no longer provides extra support, plans are underway to introduce supervision or targeted support for staff working with vulnerable children, which staff members in their school consider essential.

Six participants said that there are support initiatives they would like to implement but have not been able to due to a lack of funding or support from their local authorities. The desired support included:

1. Supervision for staff members similar to the supervision provided in other high-stress professions such as medicine.
2. Access to training for staff.
3. Counselling services or initiatives to improve staff members' mental and physical health.
4. Hiring additional staff to have a more equitable distribution of workloads.
5. Increases support and stronger connections with local authorities and external services, allowing schools to signpost families to appropriate services, reduce staff workload, and focus more on teaching responsibilities.

Therefore, support for staff was reported at both time points, although the type of support provided differed. While earlier support focused more on immediate access to specific resources and services, two years later participants described support as a more general approach, embedded within schools' working policies and practices. However, limited resources continued to restrict the additional support schools could provide, with participants at both time points identifying areas where further support was needed.

View of the profession

At both time points, participants reported that perceptions of the teaching profession had become more negative since the pandemic, and that teachers felt that more undervalued and underappreciated by parents and the general public.

In the first set of interviews, participants attributed this shift in perception to the fact that many people assumed that teachers, and other staff members were at home during lockdown and periods of disruption not working, while parents/carers oversaw their children's education, but this was not the case. Schools were working as much as possible to ensure children and their families were well and that children were receiving education. As one participant said:

I have a real bugbear about the vilification of us in the press and that got to a lot of us actually, and I just think that was very demoralizing, the way the public as a whole was talking about us as a profession.

In the second set of interviews, parental attitudes emerged as a significant theme discussed by participants. They described that there is now a perceived lack of respect from the general public,

along with unrealistic expectations regarding the role of educators. For instance, one participant noted a decline in respect from parents towards staff members, which led their school to implement policies aimed at protecting staff members. Similarly, another participant shared that families no longer seem to appreciate educators as they did pre-pandemic. Instead, there is now an expectation that schools will provide support for families regardless of the issue or timing and that *'It's a real struggle to maintain that level of support whilst also, you know, our main purpose is to be here for the children's education.'*

Due to the pressure and the negative perception of the teaching profession in recent years, some staff members in the first set of interviews indicated they were considering leaving the profession. This has made it challenging for schools to recruit for new positions. For example, one participant said that six members of their teaching staff had left, and the school was struggling to find people to cover these positions. Another participant said that she had been looking at other jobs, however now that all restrictions had been lifted, this participant was not thinking as much about leaving the profession as during periods of disruption.

Two years later, these issues persisted. Participants reported that staff members across all career stages in their schools were still considering leaving the profession. Some of the reasons reported why staff members were leaving or thinking of leaving the profession included: the high demands of the job, long working hours, low pay, difficulty coping with the profession's challenges, the negative perception of teaching, and the growing appeal of alternative career opportunities. In this second round of interviews, one participant reported that the majority of staff members in their school (approximately 70%) who worked there during the pandemic had moved to a different school or had left the profession entirely. Additionally, one participant said they were actively exploring opportunities outside the education sector, stating:

Teaching has always really been my life, but it is a job and it's becoming kind of an unbearable job, and an unmanageable job and the more that happens, the more you have to disassociate, it sounds really awful, from it, just to survive [...] I don't know what else I would do, but I know I'm moving on.

Only one participant said that in their school recruitment is getting better recently and it was until this academic year (2023/2024) that they were fully staffed since the pandemic. Consequently, staff recruitment and retention remain a significant challenge for most schools almost three years after restrictions were lifted in England.

Positive impacts

Not all impacts of the pandemic and school disruptions have been negative. In the first round of interviews, two participants expressed that they and their colleagues think that this experience has made them become closer and has made them a more resilient team. Two other participants said that being at

home during lockdowns allowed them to spend more time with their families. Schools think that a hybrid model has been beneficial for them as the technology now allows them to be more in touch with the families or other services, and meetings can be held online that before would have required parents or other service providers to commit a half-day or a full day just to one in-person meeting. Online platforms have also allowed them to keep in contact with harder-to-reach families and that has improved their relationships. Finally, some schools have decided to keep using online platforms for assigning homework and this has given some teachers some extra time to focus on other activities as they now do not have to spend time photocopying documents to send home and think that online platforms are more time efficient. In the second round of interviews, it was reported that expectations of what a teaching role is have changed. Some staff members have set more boundaries, choosing not to work beyond certain limits and prioritising their physical and mental well-being more than before. Therefore, positive changes were reported at both time points, although these differed in nature.

Main concerns going forward

In the first set of interviews participants said that they had two main concerns going forward: the physical and mental health of all staff members working in schools, and how to make sure that schools can recruit good quality staff members to substitute those that are leaving the profession. Schools were still under immense pressure and some participants were concerned that teachers were going to reach burnout because *'none of us have taken the time to recover, we all went straight back'*. While others thought that eventually they were all going to be all right as their *'staff seem to be amazingly resilient, they are absolutely wonderful'*. Back then, participants suggested that with the right support everyone was going to be okay.

Two years later, similar concerns persisted, though a few new issues emerged. Similarly to the first round of interviews, participants were mainly concerned about not being able to retain good staff and not being able to recruit qualified staff members. A second major concern was the limited financial resources faced by schools. This lack of funding means that schools struggle to recruit and hire the staff needed to support all students and meet their needs. The financial limitations have also limited the access to resources aimed at supporting staff members' well-being. Additionally, limited funding has prevented schools from addressing more basic issues, such as ensuring the health and safety of their buildings. A third concern was the continued increase in workload and responsibilities, which may prevent staff from performing their work to a high standard due to limited staffing and resources. Additionally, some participants reported that they were worried about the increase in the number of children with special needs and the increasing demand for support for other students and their families. These rising demands, along with limited resources, could push good staff to leave the profession. A final concern was the future quality of the profession.

While similar concerns about staff well-being, recruitment and retention were reported at both time points, in the second round

of interviews, financial pressures were more prominent and seemed to exacerbate existing concerns.

Current impact of the pandemic and other emerging challenges

In the second round of interviews, participants were asked whether pandemic-related disruptions and changes were still impacting them or if other factors had emerged as significant challenges nearly three years later. Only one participant stated that pandemic-related disruptions were no longer impacting them. However, the rest felt that while the pandemic's direct impact had reduced, it remained a contributing factor alongside other emerging challenges. For example, one participant said *I don't always want to kind of use that as an excuse, but when you take that moment to sit back and reflect, you know, it has to come under that umbrella. We are still struggling from that aspect.'*

Since the pandemic, staff attitudes have shifted, with many prioritising their mental health and well-being. As a result, staff members are more likely to take time off when needed. For members of the senior leadership team, this shift has added to their challenges, as they now must balance managing staff well-being alongside the well-being of parents and children. While some participants support the focus on prioritising well-being, others view it as staff members no longer *'going the extra mile as they used to before'*. They also noted that absences, regardless of the reason, have an effect on the remaining staff as someone needs to take over further increasing workloads. Interestingly, in some cases schools' day-to-day practices have not gone back to pre-pandemic with for example, staff members limiting their socialisation or sitting on every other seat and not next to each other even though this is not mandatory anymore.

Additionally, participants also highlighted the differences in the education system and needs of pupils and staff members post-pandemic. However, there was uncertainty about whether some of these changes were a consequence of the pandemic or would have occurred regardless. For example, one participant said that the view of the profession was already not very good since before the pandemic, so it might be that the view would have continued to be worse even without the pandemic. Similarly, the use of technology was already changing children's developmental experiences. These factors, whether pandemic-related or independent, appear to have exacerbated existing challenges in education, further impacting staff well-being and the broader education system.

Beyond the pandemic, participants highlighted additional national and international factors affecting staff. The cost-of-living crisis (which is also impacting families and pupils), salaries not keeping pace with inflation, and extended waiting times for healthcare services staff may need were identified as significant concerns. One participant questioned the connection between these issues and the pandemic, stating, *'But again, how much is that kind of linked to the pandemic, how much is that...is that a result of the pandemic?'* International political and humanitarian issues were also raised by a couple of participants who noted the challenges faced by children and staff members of affected nationalities.

Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted two academic years and had a wider impact on schools and staff members that can still be seen to date. In this paper, we reported how teachers and other members of the senior leadership team have been impacted since the start of the pandemic and school disruptions. We interviewed 23 staff members of schools participating in the ICICLES project in the 2021/2022 academic year, and 9 staff members in the 2023/2024 academic year. Nine main themes were identified: general experience of the pandemic, differences between lockdowns, post-pandemic experience, health and well-being, support and resources for staff, view of the profession, positive impacts, main concerns going forward and current impact of the pandemic.

Overall, results showed that staff members have had a challenging time. The pandemic and school disruptions not only affected how education was delivered but also significantly impacted their health and well-being. Additionally, there were some differences in how participants were affected during the different lockdowns and/or periods of disruption. While most impacts were negative, a few participants also identified positive impacts of this experience such as the benefits of online platforms and have decided to keep using them going forward as they improved their work-life balance or made it easier for them to be in touch with families or institutions. Similarly, some others are now prioritising their physical and mental well-being more than before. Even though restrictions have now been lifted, staff members are still seeing the impact of the pandemic and school disruptions and unless changes are implemented, the crisis in this profession may continue.

While many of the issues identified in this study are consistent with previous research, the present study provides a longer-term perspective, highlighting that many of these challenges continued to be experienced several years later with the pandemic adding further pressure to some pre-existing difficulties. One of the main findings was that the pandemic and school disruptions negatively affected schools making it difficult for all staff members to perform their roles. While challenges differed across participants and across periods of disruptions, it is clear that in general, this was a difficult time for everyone working in school settings. This result aligns with previous research (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Education Support, 2020; Fullard, 2021; Kim et al., 2021), reporting similar experiences across schools in England during different periods of disruptions. At the start of the pandemic, teachers were reporting that there was no clear guidance on how to deal with the pandemic at schools and that restrictions or regulations were often reported at the last minute (Kim et al., 2021; Kim and Asbury, 2020). Our results suggest that a few years later, schools still have the same view of pandemic-related disruptions and consider that this not only made their roles more difficult but, in some cases, also affected the relationship with parents/carers.

Our results also align with previous research from the early stages of the pandemic reporting that school's workload and job demands increased and that schools became the main source of support for families beyond their children's education. During the pandemic, schools were providing food parcels and

emotional support to children and families that were struggling (Kim and Asbury 2020; Lacey et al., 2024) without having the resources, support or training needed for this. This increase in workload and change in the scope of their responsibilities might have contributed to making their profession more demanding and stressful. Unfortunately, many schools are still having to provide this additional support and have now had to take on responsibilities that other professionals or services in their communities would normally be responsible for. This is because these services have been cut, reduced or have long waiting lists. Nevertheless, schools have also limited resources and funding but are still expected to provide that support. The continuation of increased responsibilities alongside limited resources suggests an ongoing imbalance between the demands placed on staff and the resources available to meet them, which can contribute to increased stress and impact negatively on their well-being (Nwoko et al., 2023). These pressures may also have implications beyond individual staff well-being and affect the wider functioning of schools. Participants' descriptions of constant firefighting suggest that responding to immediate staffing, pupil and family needs can reduce the time and capacity for longer term planning and strategic school improvement. For school leaders in particular, this may shift their focus from proactive leadership to managing immediate operational demands. Since restrictions were lifted, schools are also seeing intense external pressure to 'get back to normal'. However, they are still seeing and feeling the impact of the pandemic and school disruptions. Therefore, to be able to plan how to best support schools and staff members, their experience post-pandemic should be taken into account and not only the events that occurred during lockdowns and school disruptions.

Results of these interviews showed that the pandemic and school disruptions had an impact on the health and well-being of teachers and senior members of the leadership team. Similarly, to previous research, this impact is not just related to an increase in workload, changes in their personal lives, stress and scope of responsibilities. It is also related to them feeling undervalued and underappreciated by the general public (Kim et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2023; See, 2024). Teachers' mental health and well-being are still a concern after a few years since the start of the pandemic, with many schools concerned about their staff members reaching burnout due to the constant pressure. While most schools have made efforts to support their staff, the results of these interviews suggest that much remains to be done. Additional resources and funding would be beneficial, but access to training, supervision, and counselling, as well as stronger connections with other professionals, would also be valuable. Therefore, when developing plans to best support staff members, it is essential to include teachers and senior leadership team members in the discussions, as they are the ones who best understand their needs.

Due to the intense pressure and how the profession has been viewed in the last few years, some staff members have decided to leave the profession and their schools are finding it difficult to recruit for new posts. The increase of teachers intending to leave the profession (e.g., Allen et al., 2020; Fullard, 2021 NFER, 2024); and the reduced number of initial teacher training applications suggest that the profession may not be seen as

attractive as before. It is important to note that some of the challenges mentioned so far already existed prior to the pandemic. It is understood that teaching is a career known to be stressful (Ravalier and Walsh, 2018) and that recruitment and retention difficulties already existed in England (House of Commons Education Committee, 2017). As a result, the pandemic has not only highlighted pre-existing issues within the education system but has added pressure to an already fragile system. Therefore, more attention should be given to how teachers and other staff members working in schools experienced the post-pandemic education system. This is not only to make sure that teachers are satisfied with the work they do, but also to make sure children receive the best education possible since the environment in which children learn impacts how they learn. Therefore, the struggles teachers are facing now may impact children's education, making it more difficult for children to reduce any learning gaps.

The findings of these interviews have several implications for research, policy and practice. First, they show how further research needs to be done regarding the long-term impact of the pandemic on staff members since much of the existing evidence has focused on the pandemic and its immediate aftermath. Second, policymakers must prioritise the health and well-being of staff members, recognising the long-term impact of the pandemic on their professional and personal lives. This may include providing access to counselling, mental health resources, and training to help staff manage increased demand effectively. Third, systemic issues such as workload management, teacher retention, and recruitment must be addressed urgently. Additionally, given the expanded role schools have assumed in supporting families and communities during and after the pandemic, increased funding and resources are essential to enable them to meet these responsibilities. Finally, it is important to involve staff members in the development of recovery plans to ensure that their experiences and needs are taken into account, but also that any support provided is actually beneficial for them.

The findings of these interviews also have some limitations. Fewer staff members participated in the second round of interviews, with four of the nine participants having also participated in the first round. Although the remaining five participants occupied similar roles across schools, this difference in sample composition should be considered when interpreting changes and continuities across the two testing points. Nevertheless, the similarity in staff roles across the two samples still allowed experiences related to comparable aspects of school practice to be explored over time. In addition, the analysis focused on experiences shared across staff roles rather than comparisons between individual professional groups. While role-specific experiences were considered where relevant, the small number of participants within each role limited the extent to which differences between professional groups could be explored. Finally, it is important to note that all data was coded by a single researcher. Therefore, the involvement of only one researcher in the coding process should be considered when interpreting the themes identified.

In conclusion, the pandemic and school disruptions significantly impacted all staff members working in school settings. While there are no more restrictions related to the

Covid-19 pandemic, schools are still being impacted and are under a lot of pressure to get back to how things were before the pandemic. Staff members' health and well-being have been deteriorating due to all the changes in workload and scope of responsibilities with some of them deciding to leave the profession. Additionally, many believe that the pandemic is still having an indirect impact, with other challenges now adding to the pressure. Therefore, any plans looking at Covid-19 recovery should include support for all staff members and not only children's education. Findings from this study highlight the need to include teachers and senior members of the leadership team in any discussions regarding recovery plans and stresses the importance of teachers and senior members of the leadership team among communities, as they provide support beyond the children's education. There are still some concerns regarding how staff members will continue coping with the effects of the pandemic and school disruption, but as noted by some participants in this study, with the right support a positive outlook can be achieved.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Ethics Committee, National Institute of Social and Economic Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

CZ-M: Project administration, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. EL: Writing – review & editing. JH: Writing – review & editing. SF: Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. CB-C: Supervision, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing.

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