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**‘We need clear directions, if we're going to move forward. It's as simple as that':
Teachers' narratives during partial school reopenings in the COVID-19 pandemic**

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Abstract

After school closures for most pupils in March 2020, following national lockdown due to COVID-19, England prepared to reopen schools to certain year groups in June. These dramatic changes in education may have frustrated teachers' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness, as framed within Self-Determination Theory. The current study, which presents data from the second timepoint in a longitudinal study of teachers' experiences of COVID-19 in England, examines their experiences of partial reopenings of schools in mid-June. All twenty-four primary and secondary state school teachers were interviewed again and asked to tell stories of a low point, a high point and a turning point since their initial interviews in late April. A reflexive thematic analysis, using a mix of inductive and deductive coding was conducted, resulting in the identification of six themes: *uncertainty*, *practical concerns*, *worry for pupils*, *importance of relationships*, *teacher identity*, and *reflections*. Challenging their basic need for autonomy and competence, teachers were anxious about current and future uncertainties while navigating school reopenings. Challenging their basic need for relatedness, teachers described the importance of connecting with pupils and their families, and with colleagues. Lastly, teachers searched for holistic meaning, evaluating what it means to be a teacher and reflecting on how these circumstances have affected their personal and professional lives. Policy implications as to how teachers' psychological needs can be met during a pandemic are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19; narrative identity; Self-Determination Theory; teachers

‘We need clear directions, if we’re going to move forward. It’s as simple as that’:

Teachers’ narratives during partial school reopenings in the COVID-19 pandemic

Countries around the world imposed nationwide school closures to manage the spread of COVID-19 (Viner et al., 2020). In England, school closures, for all but children of key workers and some vulnerable pupils, came into effect on 20 March 2020 (Department for Education, 2020a). On 24 May, the government announced gradual school reopenings, with pupils in Reception (ages 4-5), Year 1 (ages 5-6) and Year 6 (ages 10-11) able to return to primary school from 1 June and pupils in Year 10 (ages 13-14) and Year 12 (ages 16-17) to secondary schools from 15 June 2020 (Prime Minister’s Office et al., 2020). Given the dramatic changes in education during the course of the pandemic (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020), understanding teachers’ lived experiences at this time is important, shedding light on what teachers needed, and may need in the event of further disruption.

Teachers’ Basic Psychological Needs: Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness

According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2002) there are three basic psychological needs for optimal functioning and wellbeing: autonomy (a sense of willingness and ownership of one’s actions and behaviours), competence (a sense of effectiveness and mastery), and relatedness (a sense of caring, being cared for and belongingness). Contextualised within the workplace (see Van den Broeck & Ferris, 2016 for a review), those who report their needs being satisfied at work tend to be more effective workers (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Applied to teachers, satisfaction of these three needs is associated with teacher-related and student-related outcomes, including teaching motivation (Catalán et al., 2019), teachers’ perceptions of job pressure and burnout (Bartholomew et al., 2014), students’ motivation to work and student wellbeing (Poulou, 2020). As COVID-19 has caused major changes it is reasonable to speculate that teachers’ needs may not be being met, and this may have implications for their wellbeing and the health of the profession.

Autonomy and Competence

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

Relatedness

Turning to the third basic psychological need, it seems likely that teachers will experience a need for relatedness during COVID-19. Relationships are central to the teaching profession, with implications not only for teachers (e.g., Veldman et al., 2013) but also students (e.g., Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). At the beginning of lockdown, the physical remoteness led to teachers feeling disconnected from colleagues and

pupils (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Given that nearly three months of remote teaching took place before partial reopenings began, it is possible that teachers' need for relatedness may have been particularly affected.

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

Being a Teacher

According to the Theory of Affordances (Gibson, 1977), external circumstances can instigate changes in values, and COVID-19 has provoked people to rethink the roles of schools and teachers (Colao et al., 2020; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Teachers may therefore be reconsidering their teacher identity narratives, that is, what it means to them to be a teacher during this time and beyond (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). As schools gradually reopen, it is expected that they may have had opportunities to reflect on lessons from lockdown that they can apply in their new practices.

Narrative Identity Theory

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

The Current Study

Understanding teachers' experiences, and the meanings they draw from their self-stories, at a time when many countries are reopening schools (Bonell et al., 2020), offers a unique insight into how teachers' needs are being met and the implications of the ongoing pandemic for the profession. In this light, using a narrative identity framework and a mixed inductive and deductive approach to analysis, based on an initial study about the first six weeks of partial school closures (Kim & Asbury, 2020), we asked: *What were teachers' experiences like between late April and early June as schools in England prepared to partially reopen?*

Methods

Participants

All 24 teachers (11 primary and 13 secondary school; 6 male and 18 female), who originally participated in the initial (Time One) interviews between 23 April and 1 May 2020 volunteered to participate in the current (Time Two) interviews. Table 1 outlines the characteristics of the 24 participants in regard to gender, school stage, and career stage/position. They were compensated with a £15 retail voucher. The project was approved by the ethics committee of the researchers' university department.

Measures

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

Procedure

Participants who participated in Time One of the longitudinal project were invited to be interviewed by the same researchers at Time Two (2020). Participants were interviewed over Zoom (2020) between 8 and 12 June 2020, and one participant was interviewed on 18 June due to personal circumstances. The interview consisted of three sections, the first and longest section of which represents the content of the current study. The full interview lasted 60 minutes, on average ($SD= 16$ minutes).

Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was used to analyse the interview transcriptions, whereby one member of the research team read and re-read the data and generated initial codes and themes from their observations. Initially the transcripts were coded inductively and these codes were used as the basis for theme generation. This was followed by a deductive comparison with coding and themes from the participants' initial experiences (Kim & Asbury, 2020). That is, the preliminary codes and themes were methodically reviewed alongside codes from initial interviews, and amended where appropriate, to ensure consistency between coding labels across the two time points. The transcripts were then reviewed again and themes were finalised. As at Time One, our analysis was semantic and essentialist, describing teachers' expressed experiences rather than interpreting hidden meanings.

Results

Our reflexive thematic analysis indicated six themes: (1) *uncertainty*, (2) *practical concerns*, (3) *worry for pupils*, (4) *importance of relationships*, (5) *teacher identity*, and (6) *reflections*. These themes reflect the experiences of teachers 11 weeks into partial school closures in England during the COVID-19 pandemic, and shed light on how their experiences had changed since they were interviewed at Time One (6 weeks after the start of national lockdown). Four of the themes from Time One remained the same, while two had changed somewhat; namely, *finding a way* became *practical concerns*, and *worry for the vulnerable* had broadened into a more general *worry for pupils*. A summary of teachers' low, high and turning point stories and their associated themes can be found in Table 1.

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The content of teachers' stories changed a little from Time One to Time Two. The low point scenes at Time One centred around uncertainty but had shifted to worry for pupils in Time Two. It was also notable that many high point scenes at Times One and Two focused on the importance of relationships, indicating that teachers' values consistently centre around their interactions with pupils and colleagues. The majority of turning point scenes in Time One were about finding a way, whereas those at Time Two focused on practical concerns. This shift relates directly to the development of these themes over time.

Theme 1: Uncertainty

This theme captures the uncertainty felt by teachers looking towards schools reopening and feeling unsure of how they would function, and what would be expected of them. This uncertainty was a result of confusing government communications, building on teachers' uncertainties about how pupils were faring at home. Teachers reported a continued

lack of clarity in government guidance, which impacted their ability to plan ahead. Several teachers appealed directly to the government to rectify this, including Participant 23: *'I'm trying my best, but we need clear directions if we're going to move forward. It's as simple as that.'* The desire to keep moving was palpable, which as Participant 6 put it, *'I actually want to just crack on'* (Participant 6).

Teachers' frustration, especially regarding barriers to planning, was linked to their perception that the government had not been listening to them and that confusing governmental communications were worsening the uncertainty schools were already experiencing. As Participant 23 put it, *'every day, the information comes out, which is contradictory to the week before, or the day before, even, and it's very difficult to plan...'* Teachers repeatedly expressed a desire to be able to plan ahead, something their Time One interviews suggested as a core element of teacher identity (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Consequently, many teachers felt the government's poor communications adversely affected their wellbeing, particularly when guidance was released last-minute with little or no teacher consultation: *'the stress levels ratcheted when all this guidance came out ... right on the eve of half term'* (Participant 3). Teachers felt this placed an unfair burden on them; as Participant 1 commented, *'the government haven't thought about the wellbeing of teachers throughout this time'*.

As well as the uncertainty created by last-minute government communications, teachers worried about uncertainty resulting from not knowing how pupils have coped in lockdown. As Participant 12 explained, *'it's not knowing where to start and not knowing what it is they need.'*

However, gradual glimmers of certainty boosted teachers' sense of control, and with it, their confidence and motivation. Participant 13 described the relief of returning to school and being provided with clarity on the 'new normal':

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

Teachers' stories indicate that the uncertainty they experienced in lockdown in relation to meeting pupils' needs may ease as they return to school. However, the theme of *uncertainty* relates predominantly to government guidance, and here the message is clear: teachers need clear guidance and improved communications in order to teach effectively and to support pupils to reach their potential.

Theme 2: Practical Concerns

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

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

Others worried about a lack of resources and how they would approach lessons when schools reopen. One reception teacher (Participant 11) was concerned about:

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

Questions such as these reflect teachers' anxieties about how their role in keeping children safe post-lockdown will affect their ability to teach effectively.

Some teachers felt confident that their schools were well-prepared for reopening, particularly those who had been involved with, or seen first-hand, how their schools planned to address the practical concerns. For example, Participant 22 explained that *'I feel really like [SLT] are going above and beyond to keep us safe, and to keep students safe as well.'*

Teachers were grateful to all school staff for the way they pulled together to prepare classrooms for pupils' return:

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

(Participant 7)

This suggests that, as teachers return to school and are reassured that *practical concerns* are surmountable, this theme may dissipate or change over time.

Some reported a real excitement about the prospect of returning to school, such as Participant 16: *'it's not getting back to normal, and it's not going to be school in the way that we know it... I'm excited, in a way ...'*

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

Theme 3: Worry for Pupils

Many teachers were worried about all of their pupils, not exclusively those who would normally be considered vulnerable. Concern for pupils who were not previously considered vulnerable was highlighted by Participant 7:

He wasn't on any lists, you know, he wasn't a vulnerable child. There was no abuse in the home. There's no prior issues that he might fall through the cracks; that the family might feel overwhelmed... the loneliness of that young person... you know that's that's not okay.

This story highlights how some children's home circumstances changed or deteriorated in lockdown conditions, and why teachers were anxious to hear from all their pupils, regardless of their 'normal' home situations.

Most of the teachers also mentioned worry over pupils' loss of learning. Factors perceived as relevant included pupils not receiving adequate support; for example, *'some of those children won't read a book at home. No one will talk to them about anything other than what's for dinner.'* (Participant 7). Participant 18 worried about the long-term effects of home learning: *'because he's at home so much, he doesn't have the confidence he had instilled through his studies'*, indicating that some pupils are believed to particularly benefit from daily face-to-face contact with teachers and peers. Teachers' concern for learning loss were exemplified by Participant 11's story about reading a book with a key worker's child:

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

Again, this story demonstrates the sadness and frustration felt by teachers seeing some of their pupils' knowledge slipping away, and their increasing worry for all pupils' loss of learning as time without normal school routine continued.

Some teachers worried that pupils had become disengaged with home learning tasks: *'the work we're providing is very traditional. It's not engaging. It's not fun. So it just made me feel bad that the ones that are engaging are having a really boring experience of learning.'* (Participant 19). In this case, the teacher felt constrained by a combination of the limited teaching methods available, and being unable to make direct contact with pupils to

monitor their progress due to school policies. This indicates that carefully considered guidance and open-minded communications are desperately needed from school leadership and government, given that this issue will continue to be important as schools navigate the remainder of the pandemic.

These concerns for general pupil wellbeing heightened teachers' anxieties for those pupils that were already vulnerable before lockdown: *'Knowing that really good, intelligent, accessible kids aren't taking part makes it even worse for the disadvantaged and vulnerable students, who we know are out there.'* (Participant 23). Teachers were concerned about the greater difficulties that pupils with limited or absent home support may be experiencing in lockdown, which was confirmed for some teachers who managed to make contact with their vulnerable pupils: *'we went to a set of flats and I think there may be four or five siblings in a flat where we know there's only two bedrooms... I had no idea this was what [they] go home to.'* (Participant 14). Participant 10 reported similar worries, and the reality that *'obviously, it's not a brilliant situation for a child to be doing home learning'*. These examples show teachers' frustration at being unable to provide pupils with a safe, supportive learning environment during lockdown, as well as sadness for their pupils' inability to engage with learning and the resulting loss of academic progress.

Several participants commented directly on the 'learning gap' between pupils who have resources at home to learn, and those who do not. Participant 23 pointed out that *'not everybody has internet; not everybody has a phone. You know, that they've, some, some of our society have been completely cut off.'* Stories such as these demonstrate teachers' frustration at the material reasons some pupils were struggling to progress academically.

Teachers also commented on the 'gap' in academic engagement and learning between pupils who were well supported at home and those who were not, regardless of social and economic disadvantage. Participant 21 described this gap as *'getting bigger and bigger and*

bigger, and it's of kids and families that recognise the value of education, and kids and families that don't. ' This highlights the importance of parents providing academic support, and that this may be another source of a learning gap.

Teachers' *worry for pupils* was thus focused on fears about pupils' wellbeing and academic progress, which now concerned a wider group of pupils. Their narratives highlighted that supporting pupils' wellbeing and academic progress relies upon maintaining pupil–teacher contact and supporting child–parent interactions.

Theme 4: Importance of Relationships

As time delivering remote education continued, teachers found relationships with colleagues, pupils and parents increasingly crucial to carrying out their role effectively.

Colleague relationships were described as an important source of support, steadying anxieties and boosting wellbeing. As Participant 22 explained, contact with colleagues *'makes you feel a little bit more connected and gives you a bit more direction'*. This shows that teachers needed support from each other through conversations which might normally have taken place in the staffroom. Social media played a role in helping colleagues stay in touch with each other, which were mostly positive. For example, Participant 23 described their staff group on a social media messaging service as *'support / therapy'*. However, social media caused stress and confusion for some, such as Participant 17:

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

In stories about teacher–pupil relationships, teachers expressed sadness and frustration about lack of contact with the pupils but seemed to feel a real sense of joy when they were in touch. Small gestures and interactions with pupils seemed particularly important to them. Participant 2 described a high point scene of dropping small gifts to pupils' homes; this began

as a way of encouraging engagement and boosting wellbeing of vulnerable pupils, but extended to the wider school community because it was so successful:

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

Stories of pupil interactions were a common feature in teachers' high point scenes, indicating the importance teachers place on helping and motivating pupils which, in turn, results in a sense of purpose and achievement for the teachers. However, many teachers were frustrated by the scarcity of such interactions due to a lack of engagement from pupils. Participant 20 described a deadline set during lockdown for pupils to submit projects:

When the deadline day came, the amount of students that actually sent something in was shocking. We had so many not send work in or even communicate... I've had a huge amount of students that have not replied to any emails or sent any work in... three quarters of children sent absolutely nothing in.

For many, these frustrations and the resultant sense of powerlessness were described as low points. This re-emphasises the importance of real interactions with pupils for teachers to feel a sense of purpose and achievement.

A noticeable shift from early on in the lockdown was teachers' enhanced understanding of the importance of parental engagement for pupil participation. As Participant 8 explained, the relationship with parents should be '*a partnership where you're in communication with your parents on a regular basis... they can support you in trying to get the best for the children.*' Improving parent communications relating to whether pupils were completing and coping with academic tasks had an impact on teachers' experiences of pupil relationships and, in turn, their own sense of purpose and fulfilment.

Many teachers noted that they felt appreciated by pupils and parents, which provided them with a source of motivation and enthusiasm. Pupils who were attending school in small classes were so appreciative that Participant 20 reflected, *'maybe [our pupils] appreciate us more than we ever knew. Maybe we didn't get that before... maybe we had no idea. And that felt quite humbling, to know that so many of them wanted to come and be taught by us.'* The prevalence of *importance of relationships* in teachers' stories indicates the necessity of good communication for teachers with colleagues and pupils.

Theme 5: Teacher Identity

The theme of *teacher identity* is about participants reporting a change in their role, and their role-identity, during partial school closures and as schools prepared to reopen. One SLT member shared: *'...working in a small school is really hard. You know, we all have to step up to the plate all of the time... I've hoovered the floor, cleaned the toilet, I've, you name it. I've done it. You know, I can't sit in my posh office.'* (Participant 4). Senior teachers in particular have experienced an increased workload and greater ambiguity in their work roles, although there was a sense of acceptance that their roles had to adapt to enable their schools to move forwards towards reopening. Another SLT member explained that *'some days I've been more of a janitor, than I have a senior leader in that sense, but it is about managing those day to days, and I think that that's what's needed, that the staff need people managing this...'* (Participant 1).

Participants spoke about the importance of routine and structure to their work and their professional identity, as they had at Time One. As Participant 18 put it, *'initially it's quite nice to have a different routine but then, as time's gone on ... you just feel that you're not really contributing to your school environment.'* This desire to return to normality was very strongly expressed by several teachers, including Participant 20, who said that *'this idea of normality, I was absolutely craving. I was craving a timetable or a structure and seeing all*

the staff, that [I] can have a laugh and bounce ideas around with'. Participant 2 also explained that *'we want school to go back to normal, we want the kids in, we want all that day to day hustle-and-bustle ...'*. The emotion in these participants' descriptions provides a sense of how much teachers value routine, structure and certainty.

Other stories described how their thorough planning enabled social distancing practices to run smoothly when schools reopened for some primary school groups:

...after all this hard work, ...seeing it work, seeing these children returning to school, seeing them smiling, happy... the structure of it, the routine, they all work... it was great just to see how efficient it was, and how successful it was. It all worked and it all came into place and no bubbles mixed. (Participant 1).

Teachers' caring natures and pupil-oriented priorities also came across strongly in the stories, particularly in relation to keeping pupils safe when they return to school. Participant 5 explained that *'it's putting the needs of the children first rather than, I was going to say the needs of the country, but the children are the country. So... it's keeping them safe,... that's inevitably what... we want to do.'*

This sense of caring for pupils was also evident through teachers' pride in their achievements when pupils responded positively to their efforts. Participant 1 exemplified this through their recollection of primary school reopenings:

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

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

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

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

The sense of authentic interaction with pupils being at the heart of the profession was explained further by Participant 23:

The teacher doesn't just stand there and teach; it's that whole interaction and building up, it's the social interactions; the teaching of life skills to these kids that maybe don't have that experience at home, or haven't really experienced it, teaching them to work as a team to collaborate.

Although teachers accepted that their roles had to adapt during the pandemic it was clear that values, such as caring for pupils, a desire for routine and interacting with pupils, remained at the heart of *teacher identity*

Theme 6: Reflections

This theme is about teachers' *reflections* on the impact of lockdown on their personal and professional lives, together with their associated emotions, plans and strategies.

Several participants reflected on difficulties in maintaining boundaries between schoolwork and home life. Some felt that the work had been constant since the start of lockdown, particularly for those in SLT: *'I have not had a day off work. I haven't stopped working. I've worked seven hours a day, 14 hours a day, seven days a week....'* (Participant 4).

For SLT members, this exhaustion appeared to relate to managing school and staff under lockdown pressures, but for all teachers, the inability to switch off from work was prevalent, and affected their work–life balance. For example, Participant 1 explained that

'you want to get things right for the children. So we'll do whatever. But sometimes that's at personal cost', and as Participant 7 put it, 'the fear of lockdown has meant that you stew over things a bit more.'

However, some teachers reported that they had begun to establish and assert clear boundaries for themselves, as they had *'learned to take a step back and differentiate between work and when work should stop.'* (Participant 14).

Similarly, several teachers reflected positively on spending time on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) during lockdown. Generally, teachers appeared to feel less pressure to complete CPD than at the start of partial school closures, and better able to appreciate the benefits of engaging in CPD. For example, Participant 5 described their pride in hearing enthusiastic, innovative ideas from a junior member of staff they had previously mentored in a journal club. Participant 24 reflected how it will inform future teaching practice too: *'You know, normal day to day teaching and you know, perhaps makes you realize that actually this is something we need to do more of anyway, you know, let alone during remote learning, but actually in the classroom too.'* Such examples indicate that lockdown may have afforded some teachers with time to think about how to improve their teaching practices.

Similarly, teachers were keen to consider how they could learn from lockdown experiences and how the curriculum could become more rounded in the future, particularly for those pupils who had been enjoying creative activities such as art and baking during lockdown. Participant 20 commented:

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

This idea of a more holistic education connected to positive stories relating to ‘surprise star’ pupils from Time One. For example, Participant 17 described the experience of a pupil with Autism Spectrum Disorder:

Remote learning has been, in some ways, quite a revelation... he's really engaged with it, and actually not being in a room full of other people has made him a bit more... comfortable and enthusiastic.

These reflections demonstrate that partial school closures may have shed new light on teaching practices, allowing teachers to better understand the individual needs of pupils and provide a fuller education than pre-COVID. As Participant 10 put it,

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

In summary, these interviews enabled teachers to reflect on how lockdown has affected them, both personally and professionally. For some, the effect has been exhaustion, particularly for members of SLTs. However, lockdown has also provided many teachers with an opportunity to reflect on and improve their teaching practices, and their hopes for the future of teaching.

Discussion

As schools around the world partially or fully reopen (Bonell et al., 2020), and potentially close again as cases rise (e.g., Stein-Zamir et al., 2020), understanding teachers’ experiences in the lead up to these partial school reopenings offers a useful insight into teachers’ needs in this situation, and how they can be addressed. Teachers’ stories of their experiences between April and June 2020 were represented by six themes: *uncertainty*, *practical concerns*, *worry for pupils*, *importance of relationships*, *teacher identity*, and

reflections. These themes illustrate frustrations of basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness within SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2002).

Basic Needs for Autonomy and Competence: Uncertainty and Practical Concerns

Uncertainties are commonplace at the current time (Chater, 2020). As COVID-linked changes in education are largely beyond teachers' control, it is unsurprising that many described low levels of autonomy and competence in their stories. One prominent source of frustration was that government guidelines have been neither clear nor prompt, also a frustration during the initial phase of lockdown in April (Kim & Asbury, 2020) and echoed by survey findings on senior leaders in England in May (Sharp et al., 2020). We urge the government to work collaboratively with teachers, especially as they feel that they are not heard or valued by the government (Asbury & Kim, 2020), and this could have consequences for teacher burnout and job satisfaction, and thereby teacher attrition (Nguyen et al., 2020). In sum, uncertainty seemed to be a common experience of teachers and, for some, triggered feelings that they were not able to do a good job as a teacher.

Moreover, Time One's theme of *finding a way* (Kim & Asbury, 2020) expanded in breadth here to *practical concerns*. This is illustrative of how teachers may have accepted the change in circumstances and were able to focus on how to implement necessary changes to teaching, learning and the school environment. Ensuring that schools are COVID-19-secure has, for example, immediate financial costs, with purchases such as PPE, hand sanitisers and thermometers putting a strain on schools' budgets (Sharp et al., 2020), bringing another threat to senior teachers' sense of autonomy and competence. In this light, financial and logistical support from the government to make such purchases would be helpful. Some of the uncertainties and practical concerns may dissipate through time as schools are given clearer government guidance and support, which will allow their basic needs for autonomy and competence to be fulfilled.

Basic Need of Relatedness: Importance of Relationships and Worry for Pupils

As the teaching profession is inherently social, it is understandable that relationships and teachers' concerns for pupils were strongly evident in their stories. Interacting with pupils featured strongly in high point scenes, attesting to how teachers draw meaning and satisfaction from these relationships (Veldman et al., 2013). Teachers valued being connected with colleagues, which echoes survey responses that colleagues/peers have been the most important source of support for teachers during lockdown in England (Walker et al., 2020). However, some teachers experienced the negative side of connecting with colleagues through social media due to the constant notifications and the dispiriting content at times. Technology is a double-edged sword; it can connect people but can also blur work–life boundaries, with implications for physical and mental wellbeing (see Adisa et al., 2017 for a review). Thus, it seems that balancing the ways and the extent to which teachers connect with others may need careful consideration for some.

Unlike teachers' initial experiences of COVID-19, when they focused their worries on particularly vulnerable pupils (Kim & Asbury, 2020), teachers at this time — three months into lockdown — discussed how all pupils were affected. Their concerns were substantiated when they saw pupils who were not previously identified as vulnerable, displaying signs of learning loss. Of various international estimations, the OECD estimated that for the UK, 1/3 year of learning loss is associated with an economic downturn of USD 2,154 billion and that 2/3 years of learning loss is associated with a downturn of USD 4,245 billion (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). To prevent both the immediate and long-term effects of learning loss, it is critical that academic support is given to all pupils, which is the aim of the introduction of a Catch-Up Premium programme (Department for Education, 2020c). Additionally, vulnerable pupils are continuing to suffer during this time, especially in regards to accessing technology and crowded home environments, with reports that 27% of pupils in England

have little or no access to IT at home (Lucas et al., 2020). Ensuring that home environments are conducive to learning, and pupils have the appropriate technology to engage in learning, may be necessary now and in the future, as the world becomes increasingly digitalised (Iivari et al., 2020).

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

Being a Teacher: Teacher Identity and Reflections

Exceptional circumstances can change what may be within one's expected work role and what may be core to professional identity. Given reduced staff numbers on site, senior teachers have extended themselves beyond their traditional roles, in some cases cleaning toilets and vacuuming the school, to ensure that schools are COVID-19-secure. As prolonged experience of role ambiguity is a predictor of teacher burnout (Papastyliaou et al., 2009), ensuring that changed or expanded roles are only temporary may be important, especially for those in SLTs. Moreover, teachers seemed to crave a sense of normality, with clear routines and structures for their daily teacher lives. Such cravings, also voiced in the initial phase of lockdown (Kim & Asbury, 2020), illustrate that a strong preference for routine and structure may represent a core element of teacher identity (Korthagen, 2004). Additionally, their reflections highlighted lessons learned about what is important in their personal and professional lives, including an enhanced understanding that work–life boundaries should be in place. Thus, it seems that COVID-19, though fraught with challenges and difficulties, has illuminated what being a teacher can and should encompass.

Implications for Practice

Policymakers are strongly encouraged to ensure that teachers and school leaders are provided with regular platforms and actively involved in conversations about education, and that decisions are communicated in a prompt and clear way. Doing so may be effective in reassuring them about what is expected of them, and help foster a sense of autonomy and competence.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future studies may wish to build on this study by implementing a mixed methods design, wherein both qualitative and quantitative data is collected and analysed to validate and enhance the current findings (McKim, 2017). Second, given that others sometimes know us better than we do ourselves (Vazire, 2010), future studies may wish to triangulate teachers' experiences with evidence from other sources, such teachers' partners and colleagues, to supplement and provide additional nuance to teachers' own narratives. Lastly, we have gathered rich, qualitative narratives from teachers in England at a unique time in history and our aim in doing so was not to draw conclusions that are generalisable. Research designed to be generalisable should involve a large, representative sample of teachers.

Conclusion

The changes that were brought about due to COVID-19 have meant that teachers and school leaders have been challenged in ways that they could never have imagined. At the time of writing, the pandemic is not over and may continue to take a toll on teachers' basic psychological needs, leading them to confront difficult questions about what it means to be a teacher. As such, teachers should be supported now and in the coming months and years to feel autonomous, competent and connected with colleagues, pupils and their families. We anticipate that this will be beneficial to their wellbeing and their commitment to the profession.

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Table 1

Teachers' Characteristics and their Low, High and Turning Point Scenes

Participant No.	Characteristics	Low	Theme	High	Theme	Turning Point	Theme
1	Female Primary SLT	Finding out about re-opening of schools and hard work/ long hours preparing. Wanting to get things right for children but cost to personal wellbeing.	Practical concerns	Seeing children returning to school and successful outcome of teachers' hard work preparing. Personal satisfaction and results of good organisation.	Importance of relationships	Change in role to manage staff and new required tasks, day to day; manage necessary resources.	Teacher identity
2	Female Primary SLT	Returning to school and discovering pupils' family troubles	Worry for pupils	Taking presents to children at home	Importance of relationships	Government guidance coming out and realising government is not behind teachers	Uncertainty
3	Female Primary SLT	Family member dying	Reflections	Seeing children happy in the corridor; being ready with social distancing requirements for school reopening	Practical concerns	Government announcing that schools will reopen and moving to prepare for this.	Practical concerns
4	Female Primary SLT	Government announcement re reopening of schools; paperwork requirements	Practical concerns	School acquiring a washing machine to allow cleaning and washing on-site	Practical concerns	Leading staff training session to break down hierarchy - inclusive staff approach to new ways of working in pandemic	Reflections
5	Male Primary SLT	Being asked to return to work by executive headteacher despite health conditions.	Importance of relationships	Journal club meeting with colleagues	Importance of relationships	Government announcing that schools will reopen and preparation required.	Practical concerns
6	Female Secondary SLT	Receiving an email of complaint from parent	Importance of relationships	Receiving an email of thanks from pupil	Importance of relationships	Government announcing that schools will reopen	Practical concerns
7	Female Secondary SLT	Attempting to arrange mediation between pupil who had left his family home and his parents	Worry for pupils	Feeling sense of school community in pupil and staff interactions in school, during keyworkers' children's lessons and preparations for reopening	Importance of relationships	Meeting with heads of school to share high and low points, and feelings of trust and openness that resulted.	Importance of relationships
8	Male Secondary SLT	Receiving email from superior while he (participant) had COVID-19, asking him to	Importance of relationships	Arranging whole faculty online meeting and sharing experiences with colleagues	Importance of relationships	Increasing contact with parents, resulting in better pupil engagement with work	Importance of relationships

		make fifty phone calls to pupils; feeling superiors did not understand or care about his situation.					
9	Male Secondary SLT	Having to ensure vulnerable pupil has food because he is being punished at home for eating	Worry for pupils	Creating blended learning platform	Reflections	Son returning to school allowing participant to focus on work and son to enjoy school	Reflections
10	Female Primary ECT	Concern for pupil's wellbeing due to lack of contact and knowing child's home life difficulties	Worry for pupils	Children returning to school and feeling some normality	Teacher identity	Shift in teaching approach to focus more on pupil wellbeing when they return to school and learning from this for future practice.	Reflections
11	Female Primary ECT	Reading with a high achiever and seeing her struggling more than before the pandemic.	Worry for pupils	Returning to school and seeing children happy	Teacher identity	Preparing classroom for children's return and realising learning will be different - e.g., removing resources for play due to concerns about germs, and feeling sad about this.	Practical concerns
12	Female Primary ECT	Anxiety after government announcing school reopening and preparing for children to return	Practical concerns	Meeting to prepare for next academic year and plan for redesigned classroom.	Practical concerns	Realisation about need to seek help for anxiety, triggered by SLT in classroom and unnecessary worry about it looking a mess.	Reflections
13	Female Primary MCT	Planning for school reopening and attending meeting, and being informed of further uncertainty and delay to teaching due to academy decision.	Uncertainty	First day back in school and feeling some sense of normality	Teacher identity	Being able to plan more effectively after going back into school and seeing what classroom would look like.	Teacher identity
14	Female Primary MCT	Delivering home learning packs to vulnerable children and feeling shocked at their deprived living situations and lack of concern from some parents.	Worry for pupils	Deciding to differentiate between work and life to be able to switch off.	Reflections	Online performance management meeting; feeling worried in advance but then feeling unappreciated and realising that work/ life boundaries are important.	Reflections

15	Female Primary LCT	Anxiety the day before school reopening about social distancing and keeping pupils safe	Practical concerns	Making shadow puppets with keyworkers' children and the satisfaction of seeing them having fun but keeping socially distanced	Importance of relationships	Face to face, socially distanced staff meeting; discussing plans and fears helped anxieties.	Importance of relationships
16	Female Secondary ECT	Being tested positive for COVID-19; facing isolation and uncertainty about health outcome; worry about lack of pupil contact during illness and missing school planning	Uncertainty	Having poem published in school Book of Hope and inspiring pupils	Teacher identity	Preparing for school reopening and social distancing practicalities; realisation that school will not be normal.	Practical concerns
17	Female Secondary ECT	Negative conversations of teachers on WhatsApp following government announcement about school reopening; anxieties from this and social media	Importance of relationships	Autistic Year 9 pupil nominating participant for weekly Hot Chocolate award certificate showing appreciation for teaching	Importance of relationships	Accepting technology and remote learning positively, and using it to help children learn; realising it could be beneficial beyond the pandemic, especially for some vulnerable children.	Reflections
18	Male Secondary ECT	Contacting pupils and finding them demotivated to learn due to lack of engagement in lockdown	Worry for pupils	Working on action research project; building relationships with colleagues and feeling motivated through Zoom discussions.	Importance of relationships	Becoming more involved pastorally; contact with pupils by phone and arranging fun tasks for them to encourage contact with school	Importance of relationships
19	Female Secondary MCT	Seeing summary of pupil engagement and realising how many are not engaging	Worry for pupils	Starting more pastoral contact with pupils	Importance of relationships	Meeting with department to plan for reopening and realising that new way of working and learning is for longer-term	Reflections
20	Female Secondary MCT	Deadline for pupils to send in work and three quarters of them sending in nothing.	Worry for pupils	Success of competitions set and seeing creativity of pupils; realising he needed to adapt his teaching approach;	Reflections	Government laptop scheme being rolled out; realisation that this meant that remote learning would be long-term and feeling able to plan for this.	Reflections
				Year 10s returning to school and sense of normality.	Teacher identity		
21	Male Secondary MCT	Lack of student engagement and feeling powerless to do anything about it.	Worry for pupils	Organising a virtual choir with pupils and the wider community.	Importance of relationships	Improving work/ life balance and allocating time to deal with emails in one block.	Reflections

22	Female Secondary MCT	Announcement that year tens would return and worry over what that meant for teaching, and risk of bringing something home to their own child who is shielding.	Practical concerns	Zoom meeting with colleagues, sharing concerns and giving her confidence about teaching.	Importance of relationships	Embracing online learning and setting creative tasks; increasing pupil engagement	Reflections
23	Female Secondary LCT	Setting work and students lacking engagement and not submitting work; concern for learning loss despite working long hours to prepare work for students.	Worry for pupils	Helping pupil and his mum get onto a music website over the phone, and feeling valued by them.	Importance of relationships	Finalising Year 11 results and sending them to exam board; feeling able to move on afterwards Frustration over realising lack of clarity from government.	Reflections Uncertainty
24	Male Secondary LCT	Managing multiple sources of input from students and learning to support them with multiple virtual learning platforms	Practical concerns	Delivering webinar on metacognition and finding high interest in it; realising it's possible to use adversity to find new and better ways of teaching (e.g., online platforms).	Reflections	Adapting own teaching based on ideas from webinar.	Reflections

Note. SLT= Senior Leadership Team. ECT = Early Career Teacher. MCT = Mid-Career Teacher. LCT = Late Career Teacher.
We have 25 high point and 25 turning point scenes as, in each case, one participant described two separate scenes.