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'Feeling Overwhelmed': Pedagogy and professionalism in a pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The normal lives of schools were significantly affected by the recent global pandemic. Some countries closed all schools nationally, others such as the USA closed at a local level according to state law. Much of the focus of research in this area is on the effect on children and learning loss, but this paper uses secondary analysis of data from a project on primary/secondary school transition in England to examine the experience of teaching in a pandemic, with a particular focus on pedagogy and professionalism. It presents our findings of a significant impact on teachers' professional lives in England; from the pedagogic difficulties of teaching online, dealing with the anxieties and fears of themselves and others, providing support in ways hitherto beyond their experience, increased and different workloads. Some embraced the positive challenge, but many found their mental health suffered.

The normal lives of schools were significantly affected by the recent global pandemic. According to the OECD (2020), in the first half of 2020 there were school closures in 188 countries affecting 1.7 billion children and their families, mostly lasting around 10 weeks, but ranging from 7 to 19. Some closed all schools nationally, others such as the USA closed at a local level according to state law. Much of the focus of research in this area is on the effect on children and learning loss, but this paper uses secondary analysis of data from a project on primary/secondary school transition in England to examine the experience of teaching in a pandemic, with a particular focus on pedagogy and professionalism. Detailing the challenges of the experience, we wondered if the fundamental changes to teachers' working lives, and the extent to which they were freed from the usual demands of accountability would have any lasting effects.

Of course the pandemic had significant effects on lives in general, and there seems little doubt that it will have exacerbated the teacher retention crisis. Zamarro et al. (2021) conducted a survey of 1045 teachers in the United States in March 2021 and found that 'teachers' reported probability of leaving their current state or the profession within the next 5 years . . . increased from 24% on average in March of 2020 to 30% in March 2021' (2). Similarly, a RAND survey (Steiner and Woo 2021) found that nearly one-quarter of teachers expressed a desire to leave their jobs at the end of the school year which compared to 16% in a previous, pre-pandemic survey. As Diliberti, Schwartz and Grant

(2021) explain, 'At least for some teachers, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated what were high stress levels pre-pandemic by forcing teachers to, among other things, work more hours and navigate an unfamiliar remote environment, often with frequent technical problems'.

Early in the pandemic, a survey of over 5,000 U.S. teachers revealed that the five most commonly experienced feelings among teachers were anxiety, fear, worry, sadness, and feeling overwhelmed (Cipriano and Brackett 2020). Baker et al. (2021) conducted a survey of 454 teachers in New Orleans and found that in answer to a question about the most difficult aspects of being a teacher during the pandemic, the most common theme, present in about 43% of responses, was 'lack of connection'. 31% said 'online teaching challenges' and the third and fourth most common themes were 'lack of student' and 'family resources' and 'negative impact of work on family/self'.

This paper will present our findings of a significant impact on teachers' professional lives in England; including the pedagogic difficulties of teaching online, dealing with the anxieties and fears of themselves and others, providing support in ways hitherto beyond their experience, and increased and different workload. Some embraced the positive challenge, but many found their mental health suffered. After presenting these findings we discuss whether the changes to pedagogic and professional practices experienced during the pandemic had any lasting effects or whether they were just a strange 'break' in what teachers had come to accept as 'normal'.

The pandemic in England

In England, the lead up to the first school closures in March 2020 was interesting. As the government moved from vague mentions of 'herd-immunity' and instructions about frequent handwashing to increasing restrictions placed on many aspects of everyday life, there was growing disquiet about schools as breeding grounds for infection, dangerous to teachers, pupils and their families. However, against this was a realisation that school closures would place an unmanageable burden of childcare on working parents, particularly those perceived as vital to National Health Service efforts to deal with the virus. Once the government had advised against mass gatherings, such as sporting events, the clamour to close schools grew louder. Eventually, on March 20th it was announced that schools would close, except to the children of key workers (those critical to the COVID19 response) and children deemed to be vulnerable (for reasons of health or social/family circumstance), all public examinations were cancelled, and there would be no school performance league tables produced.

Teachers were tasked with creating on-line lessons overnight, to occupy and educate (we wonder in which order?) the children now at home and being educated by their parents. Schools remained closed to most of their pupils until June. By the second week of June, primary schools opened to Year 6, the oldest cohort, who were taught in socially distanced bubbles of no more than 15. Some, not all, secondary schools did the same with Years 10 and 12 (the examination classes). Schools returned in September, with most children having missed around 4 months of schooling. Social distancing measures were in place, with students being taught in 'bubbles' – though anecdotally these bubbles often extended across a whole year group. The discovery of a new variant in November, and the much dreaded 'second wave' of infections led to a series of lockdowns of shopping,

leisure and social activities. Despite this, schools were expected to stay open. By mid-December, the week before the scheduled Christmas break, in some of the worst affected areas in London, councils advised schools to close, but Gavin Williamson, then Secretary of State for Education, threatened legal action if the schools did not stay open. In January, after some schools had returned for one day, schools were instructed to move to online learning until at least the end of February (after the half-term break), and eventually re-opened on 8 March. Schools remined open until the summer break (July 2021), though it was reported that by the end of the summer term many students were out, isolating or unwell with the disease. The national newspaper the Guardian reported that with the rise in cases of the new Delta variant, many schools were moving to online teaching and/or closing early for the summer as around 840,000 students were isolating, and there were also staff shortages.

> One headteacher at an infant school told the *Observer* that three-quarters of pupils and 12 staff members had been sent home over the last four weeks. Nearly a third of pupils who had only just returned to school last Monday after isolation were sent home again on Friday, with six staff members off (Hall 2021)

Schools remained open throughout the Autumn Term of 2021, despite rising cases of the new Omicron variant, they appear to have reopened for good, with Rishi Sunak, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, declaring his fury at school closures and saying it had been wrong to 'empower' scientists (Badshah 2022). It would seem that the government's 'post'-pandemic policy was 'business as usual'. Ofsted inspections resumed, public examinations took place, School Performance Tables were published. With life 'back to normal' what did we learn from teacher's experiences in the pandemic?

The pandemic and professionalism

Much has been written about the pandemic and its effects on teachers including health and safety (Sanguinetti et al. 2022), organisational aspects (Sahlberg 2020), and the role of teacher unions in school closures/reopenings (Marianno et al. 2022). There is much about online teaching; for example, Okmawati (2020) on google classrooms. Other areas of research are teachers' mental health and well-being (Kim, Oxley, and Asbury 2022; Lacomba-Trejo et al. 2022) identity (Mellon 2022), teacher burnout (Gómez-Domínguez et al. 2022), the specific experience of primary teachers in England (Moss et al. 2020). Reimers (2022) comparatively examined five OECD countries, focussing on differential responses to the pandemic, and the consequential differential learning loss and impact.

However, the impact of the pandemic on teacher professionalism is particularly pertinent given pre-pandemic and current concerns about the erosion of professionalism through various neo-liberal accountability policies (Suspitsyna 2010; Holloway, Sørensen, and Verger 2017; Ball 2018) and concerns about the impact of this on well-being and consequently on teacher recruitment and retention (Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond 2017; Foster 2019). The pandemic was a time during which there was a necessary and inevitable disruption to the general assumption of how schools should work and how teachers should act, and there was a potential for professionalism to be reframed.

According to Hargreaves (2000, 152–3) when teachers talk about being a professional they are referring to 'how teachers feel they are seen through other people's eyes in terms of their status, standing, regard and levels of professional reward'. He continues: 'They will talk about *being professional*, in terms of the quality of what they do; and of the conduct, demeanour and standards which guide it. The literature usually refers to this conception as *professionalism'*. In describing four distinct ages of professionalism – pre-professional, autonomous, collegial and post-professional or postmodern – Hargreaves describes the latter, the status quo pre-pandemic, as a time of

> centralised curricula and testing regimes that have trimmed back the range and autonomy of teachers' classroom judgement, and a market-inspired application from the corporate sector, of systems of administration by performance management (through targets, standards, and paper trails of monitoring and accountability) (Hargreaves 2000, 168)

This is echoed by Furlong's (2005) conception of managerial professionalism where decisions about teaching are removed from the classroom teacher and placed entirely in the hands of school management informed by government edicts. One of us (Perryman 2022) has written previously of the increasing performative accountability culture – box ticking exercises, preparations for observations and inspections, teaching to the exam – in schools. This accountability is seen as 'a good thing' irrespective of the cost to people – intensification, loss of autonomy, monitoring and appraisal, lack of decision-making and lack of personal development are not considered. Hence, as Barnett (2012, 202) notes 'amid these processes the language of professionalism changes. From a language of "+trust" "+integrity" 'community and 'loyalty' currents run that would funnel in a new language of 'efficiency' 'performance indicators' 'standards' being 'adaptable' and managing in a 'smart' fashion'. He concluded that 'professionalism is witnessing a lurch from an ethic of service to an ethic of performance'. This leads to what Wilkins (2011) calls 'post-performative professionalism' – those educated, trained and now acting within a system to which, in their experience, there is no alternative.

Could the pandemic show an alternative way of being and herald the move towards what Whitty (2012, 44) called 'democratic professionalism' which 'seeks to demystify professional work and forge alliances between teachers and excluded constituencies of students, parents and members of the wider community'?

Hargreaves and Blaise (2021) returns to his own concept of 'professional capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) and examines how the pandemic has affected it. In the original paper, Hargreaves and Fullan defined professional capital as a group's professional worth that enables it to achieve its goal, and say it is made up of three components: human capital, decision-making (or decisional) capital, and social capital. Human capital which Hargreaves says is individual teachers' knowledge, talents, and abilities, can become depleted 'when low status and diminished rewards fail to attract the best talent, when resources that are essential to high-quality work are withheld, and when self-determined professional learning and development is replaced by mandated compliance with government directives' (1850). Decision-making capital involves teachers' professional judgement and expertise which is developed over time, something that is depleted when 'teachers' judgements are not trusted, when they are excluded from important decision-making processes, and when their expertise is not valued'. What was the effect of the pandemic on these important aspects of professionalism? New skills and capabilities,

together with the suspension in normal regulated examination processes and a reliance on teacher judgement may have given a sense of expansion. However, Hargreaves argues that 'the sheer novelty, difficulty, and complexity of working in online learning environments where students' digital resources were scarce, home circumstances were unconducive to student engagement and self-determination, and virtual communication robbed teachers of their capacity to connect fully with all their students depleted, suspended, or wasted the stockpiles of human and decisional capital within the teacher workforce' (1851).

The third component is social capital, the professional capital that is circulated among teachers and shared by them, the relationships of trust that speed up and strengthen decision-making, about the effectiveness of judgements that are made collectively rather than individually, and about knowledge and ideas in teaching that are disseminated throughout the profession via collaborative cultures and professional networks.' Clearly teaching at home, online, alone all day is not at all conducive to the impromptu initiation of yet more interaction to try and develop ideas and strategies once the instructional day is over (Hargreaves and Blaise 2021).

However, as well as these more negative aspects, it was hoped that the social status of the teacher may have increased as they were lauded in some quarters as key-workers essential to the nation's recovery, and that their perception of their own worth may have changed:

> It seems that when teachers look in the mirror supplied by Covid-19, they see a set of systemic problems, certainly, but they also catch a glimpse of who they are and what they might become, outside the tight restrictions of policy. Their evocations of education's character and purposes are as much products of the pandemic as are the growth of online provision, and the consolidation of for-profit tutoring
>
> (Harris and Jones 2020, 241)

In academic circles this was portrayed as an opportunity to change teachers' professional lives. However in a BERA blog, Courtney et al. (2020) argued that 'with formal examinations cancelled and the metrics of expected levels, tracking, targets and flight paths rendered meaningless, teachers' professional judgements must again be valued and necessary post-Covid-19, returning power to school-based professionals'. On twitter, comments such as these were common:

> Remember when they said we need state tests & report cards because otherwise teachers & principals would slack off? Well, testing & state report cards are cancelled and all I see are teachers & principals working harder than ever before. Let's trust our professionals
>
> (Clark 2020)

There seemed to be a brief moment when teachers could redefine themselves as professionals: more skilled, more trusted, more valued.

Methodology

The project from which the data for this paper was generated was funded as a rapid response project by the UCL Office of the Vice-Provost (Advancement) and the Wellcome Trust, with the aim of exploring the impact of the school closures and restrictions caused

by the pandemic on primary/secondary transition. We employed a mixed methods design, initially surveying over four hundred Year 6 and 7 (aged 10 to 11) students and their teachers in England during three phases, Summer and Autumn 2020 and Summer 2021. Given the move to remote learning, the team faced recruitment challenges as schools were overwhelmed with the burden of providing for learning in very new circumstances. To circumnavigate this a broader strategy was employed by the wider team: surveys were promoted using departmental colleagues' social media (Twitter/ Facebook) and parental WhatsApp groups. Organisations such as the College for Teaching also promoted the survey directly to teachers and, once schools reopened, more traditional recruitment through email invitations in initial teacher education partner schools became possible again. However, working completely remotely also presented new opportunities to interview both students and teachers in a setting outside of school and we found that many interviews lasted longer than anticipated. Online consent and information sheets also expedited this process somewhat. Rural, urban and suburban schools from all regions were represented. In total, we had survey responses from 109 teachers and interviewed 12, and had 321 survey responses from pupils/students and interviewed 17.

Surveys were designed and hosted through UCL-hosted Redcap. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted remotely, almost all using UCL-hosted Microsoft Teams software.

With each additional round of data collection, new data was supplemented. We have written elsewhere about the findings from this project (Leaton Gray et al. 2021) but this paper is based on a secondary analysis of the teacher data with the broad focus of the impact of the pandemic on teachers.

Procter (1993, 256) remarks that 'it is a truism of social research that almost all data is seriously underanalysed: unless the data collection is tightly designed to test a specific hypothesis, the original researcher will explore only a fraction of its potential'. For the purposes of this paper, we have subjected these data to secondary analysis, which usually involves using data previously collected for an earlier study. Secondary analysis can involve 'the study of specific problems through analysis of existing data which were originally collected for another purpose' (Glaser 1963, 11), 'the further analysis of an existing data set with the aim of addressing a research question distinct from that for which the data set was originally collected and generating novel interpretations and conclusions' (Hewson 2006, 264) or 'the re analysis of data for the purpose of answering the original research questions with better statistical techniques or answering new research questions with old data (Glass 1976, 3). Heaton (1998, 3) suggests three forms of secondary analysis, the first is "+additional in-depth analysis" which involves a more intensive focus on a particular finding or aspect of the original primary work. The second is "+additional subset analysis" which involves a selective focus on a subset of the sample from the original study or studies which warrant further analysis'. And finally, there can be a new perspective conceptual focus, 'the retrospective analysis of the whole or part of a data set from a different perspective to examine concepts which were not central to the original research'. The secondary analysis undertaken in the writing of this paper encompasses all three.

Secondary analysis may distance the researcher from the original research. But as Heaton (1998, 5) argues, even when primary data have been collected the researcher may not have been working alone, nor transcribed the data and a more radical response is to argue that the design, conduct and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative research are always contingent upon the contextualisation and interpretation of subjects' situation and responses. Thus, secondary analysis is no more problematic than other forms of empirical inquiry, all of which, at some stage, depend on the researcher's ability to form critical insights based on subjective understanding. We subjected each data set to further analysis using NVIVO to help identify initial themes, then analysed using a system of open-coding based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and involved refamiliarising ourselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing for themes and finally categorising and naming them. These themes are discussed in the next section. We firstly discuss the positive reactions to the challenge of teaching in the pandemic, followed by the difficulties, and then discuss the impact of changing and more demanding roles and additional workload on the teachers' sense of themselves as professionals.

Findings

Positive reactions

There were some positives noted by our teachers. Maddie remarked that she 'quite enjoyed working out a different way of teaching' and some of the survey responses listed particular improvements in skills

> The teachers are far better at technology and more creative in their teaching practice as they had to adapt. This will have benefits going forward with new research being released about different pedagogical methods (Survey S21 4)

> We will continue to use new technologies to teach our pupils. We currently have a science teacher signed off with a knee replacement but she continues to teach all her lessons online via zoom . . . . Moodle helps our pupils transition into college as it is the platform that they use there (Survey S21 5).

> Staff have become more vigilant with health and safety and more confident using computers (Survey S21 6).

In our survey almost all the teachers reported an increase in their ability to use online learning pedagogies and techniques. Where 0 indicated novice, 100 expert and 50 satisfactory, the overall mean changed from 42.5 to 69.5. It also appeared that this increase in ability was greater for those participating in the last round of data collection, with mean scores of 38 increasing to 74 over the course of the 16 months of the pandemic.

One highlighted that it was a relief to be freed of the pressure of preparation for public examinations

> I mean it helps you know, not having to do SATS this year. And so being able to kind of take a slightly different pace and prioritise slightly different things enabled us to go a bit slower, but a bit more in depth into things like text analysis or writing. (Becky)

And another enjoyed online meetings, rather than travelling to physical meetings

> I'm hoping that there's a lot of good change come out of it. I had to travel for about 15/20 min to go to my local my network meetings and now we've started doing them all virtually. Saves a lot of time 'cos you just click in . . . A lot of people, a lot of us have said can we just carry on like this? It's easier, yeah (Sophie)

One member of SLT remarked 'It has been very positive for our parents to see first-hand the professionalism of our staff' (Survey S21 5). This presumably referred to parents being able to view online teaching and also witness increased home-school communication. This phase perhaps saw an increase in teachers' 'decision making capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012) when teachers were using their own judgements to prioritise their work, develop new skills and decide what, when and how to teach their students (or indeed to prioritise their social welfare).

The difficulties of teaching online

There were many comments about the difficulties of teaching online. Predictably there was a focus on the logistical and practical difficulties faced by our teachers, struggling with their own connection issues and initial inexperience in online teaching. The main challenge, however, came from the students not having the resources to take advantage of online learning.

> Lots of children don't have access to devices on their own, or have to share devices with their parents and their siblings etc; so I think a big challenge for us was making sure that number one the most vulnerable children had a device that they could access at all . . . we did a big fundraising drive to buy more (Becky)

> We had to provide an awful lot of technology for students . . . I think the live lessons was a much bigger strain on students and on families than they perhaps anticipated in terms of actually just like the bandwidth they needed to stream them (Linsey)

Not all schools did 'live lessons', particularly at the beginning when 52% of our summer 2021 survey recalled that lessons had been mostly delivered by printed worksheets in hard copy, 20.8% mentioning textbooks, and 39.6% stationery packs. This was partially as a response to the difficulties in accessing the technology as Becky reported above, but also due to what was perceived as a lack of information about issues such as safeguarding.

> I just think that no school was informed about it and so most schools, including my own, just went, do you know what? No, let's not add more stress to the current climate by getting ourselves into a safeguarding issue. Or, are we breaking the rules of zoom? . . . Let's not, let's keep our students safe and let's just do it all, just uploading PowerPoints and recorded messages, and I think what that led to is some of the girls thinking this is boring (Joyce)

Even once technology was more widely used at the beginning this tended to be asynchronous activities to be completed in the pupils' own time, either emailed home or posted up onto a learning platform. For those schools that did 'live lessons', and this increased over time as tech capability and teacher expertise built up, there were also scheduling challenges

> One of the big challenges was to ensure that the schedule, none of the live lessons clashed with other year groups, so that someone who had a sibling in year four didn't have a live

lesson at the same time as someone who was in year six and so that was like a huge, huge logistical challenge for teachers and for parents (Becky)

There was also the issue, as our next interviewee remarks, of the fact that online lessons, without the need for handling interruptions, behaviour management issues, and practical time-consumers such as distributing books and waiting for quiet, lessons that were planned for an hour, took no time at all.

> I found that the parents were complaining and saying that the children were finishing their day far too early; that we would be loading everything up by 7 am. Then, the children would rush through the work and by 9 everything had been done . . . I knew that I was setting them a full day of work . . . I couldn't understand why they were finishing it by 9:30. And then I realised that they were just running through the activities. So part of my learning was to . . . . I made them log on at the beginning of every single lesson, so I gave them a timetable and I said, 'right, I expect you all to log on at 9 o'clock – we will start our English lesson'. I created a lot more activities because I found the input would be very short, brief, and they had a longer period in which to do their activity. So I had to create more activities. (Susan)

There were also some interesting comments about teaching into a void, for example:

> What I thought was really hard with the thing with the lessons . . . that teachers put heart and soul into lessons and actually really stepped out of their comfort zones so they would record themselves creatively. Writing on the board, which you know, that's a big thing to be able to come up with a story. You know, just on the top of your head. Usually you are doing that with the children and you've got a relationship in this kind of a little bit of banter between you
>
> *(Louisa)*

Anyone who has adopted online teaching (and as educators ourselves, we can relate) can echo the sentiment of the dispiriting nature of teaching into the void with little response from the 'audience'. Sometimes due to connection issues (or in some schools due to concerns around privacy as Joyce discusses above) student cameras and microphones were switched off. Teachers found it hard to engage with no student feedback or reaction. As Hargreaves and Blaise (2021) notes, remote learning also presents teachers with challenges of how to maintain relationships and establish emotional connections with students, and how to sustain student engagement with learning, especially among those who are most vulnerable. For many teachers, it wasn't just a question of upskilling in order to teach remotely. According to Hargreaves and Blaise (2021,1838) it meant

> having to acquire or increase their own digital proficiency which ranged from mastering technical tools to developing new pedagogies such as managing group work and assessments online. It also meant developing digital proficiency with learning among their students and trying to cultivate capacities for self-direction and self-determination among these learners so they could work independently, at home, while their teachers were working with other students or while students themselves were working on asynchronous tasks.

By our summer 2021 survey, 93.8% of teachers reported that they were engaged in synchronous online teaching in real time (via platforms such as Zoom, Teams or Moodle). It is also important to note the extra impact of this sudden challenge to established pedagogic practice on new teachers – those training to be teachers, or in the first-year post-qualification.

> You know there were some real lows where I was just like 'Oh my God, I can't do this. I just cannot keep going because this is so challenging in a really difficult way for me' in the sense

> that I was learning how to teach. Like I said, I'm an NQT, so I was learning kind what I needed to give the children to learn and also how to present it to them. But then also how to do that online . . . (Maddie)

Maddie also missed the camaraderie of school life

> I worked from home two days a week, which I actually hated. After about two weeks, 'I can't do this'. So I went in. And actually, the camaraderie between us as a Maths department was incredible. I think we really kept each other going. Most people came into school to teach from their classrooms. And it was like waving at each other and you know we would sit at opposite ends of the staff room to eat lunch (Maddie)

Hargreaves and Blaise (2021, 1838) agrees this is a problem saying

> Teaching today is a collaborative and social profession. The work of teaching draws on the social and moral support of colleagues in the school building. It also depends increasingly on moving ideas, knowledge, and teaching practices around in professional communities and networks of shared professional learning. Remote learning has typically translated into remote teaching too. It has cut teachers off from the routine conversations and interactions, and not just meetings, that make up regular school life

We can also see here the diminishing of 'social capital' (Hargreaves and Fullan 2012), a time of collective judgements and collaborative networks disrupted by the isolation of working from home

Teachers providing support – a different role

One of the main differences for our teachers was stepping out of the traditional home/school divide and negotiating what were often blurred boundaries. Teaching children sitting at home in their pyjamas is still teaching, but many other activities were completely new. Responses to our survey found 29% of our teachers engaging in home visits, 77% in pastoral telephone calls, 45.8% had helped arrange home broadband. 45.8% of their schools had been involved in the delivery of food packages.

> So in the first lockdown we provided vouchers, and then food parcels as well went home to disadvantaged children (Becky)

> We are exhausted with the additional needs that students are now presenting with, every member of the Inclusion and pastoral teams are working flat-out. SEN have huge amounts more, not least because parents noticed their children had perceived needs and want them all exploring, we are inundated (Survey S21 52)

> Disadvantaged children had two phone calls a week: one from a member of SLT, and one from the class teacher, just to kind of keep track of what was going on, and then, if there was no response for a week, then we would go around and knock on doors (Becky)

> The other overriding thing I would say is that we were relentless . . . . We didn't give up on any of them and as soon as a parent said, you know, we're struggling with something, we offered them something else straight away and we didn't give up . . . we asked them to come in, we will show you, we will provide you your home learning pack, have some stationery. Even with the phone calls. If they didn't answer in the morning, we would try again to the point where . . . the parents were just picking up the phone saying, 'Crikey, you've taken your time. I've been waiting for your phone call today' . . . . we didn't take no for an answer. We were just trying to do everything possible (Sophie)

These finding are very much in line with the research by Moss et al. (2020), who found, from a survey of 1653 Primary Teachers in England in May 2020, that the primary concern of teachers during this first lockdown was for pupil welfare. The stated priorities in terms of communication with families were 'Checking how families are coping in terms of mental health, welfare, food' (72%), 'Providing information about how parents can support their children's learning at home' (63%) 'Reassuring families that learning will be maintained' (17%) 'Providing information on where families experiencing hardship can find additional support' (35%) 'Providing information on how free school meal vouchers are being distributed' (35%) 'Checking how families are managing with the schoolwork' (46%) 'Ensuring parents know if their child can still attend school' (16%). In answer to the question 'Which of the following have you personally been involved with during lockdown?', other roles included meal voucher distribution, liaison with social services, visiting family doorsteps, distributing food parcels and delivering hard copy resources. This focus on welfare was very much outside most of these teacher's professional experiences, and at a time when they were being applauded as key workers may have led to a sense of optimism about a renewal of status. There was also more of a sense of professional autonomy as schools worked with their own local communities, prioritising according to need, and release from the external pressures of inspections and preparing for examinations.

Increased workload

Unsurprisingly, the demands of a new teaching pedagogy and extra support roles had an impact on workload

> I'm the Year Seven transition teacher, we are quite a big school and we have a Year Seven curriculum, so a third of their curriculum's based with me. So what would happen is, it didn't matter what lesson they were teaching, I was online 24/7 (Holly)

> I think that ultimately we got to the point where I was teaching four days a week in school and then on the Friday we shut for deep cleaning and stuff. And on that Friday we had to catch up on everything. If there were phone calls to be made, they had to be made. Then, you had to do all the marking from those 50% of children that didn't come back and you had to prepare for the next week as well. And I was working, you know, into the night (Anne)

> I think every teacher will tell you this. The marking became a nightmare – having to mark digital work was extremely difficult. The school were good, they said, oh just give very general feedback. Don't worry too much. But there was an expectation that we would mark every piece of work somehow and get it back to the children (Susan)

> More workload has resulted from marking and checking homework using computer programs like Teams, making contact to families due to students needs and issues (Survey S21 55)

The consequences of this were exhaustion

> The higher expectation of work and no more time being allocated has made teaching more unmanageable. This is now becoming the new norm and is making me burn out and making me feel overwhelmed (Survey S21 9)

> I think teacher professionalism is as good as it's ever been. I think it's utterly incredible. The lengths they're going to, which will inevitably come with some sort of burnout ... It's

exhausting – you don't understand how tired teachers are. I mean, personally I'm surprised they're upright (Linda)

Linda's comment about 'professionalism' above is interesting – a return to Barnett's 'ethics of service' rather than 'ethics of performance'?

Teachers as people going through the pandemic too

One of the factors to remember is that teachers as people, with families and friends, were also going through the pandemic. Much as with argument-binaries such as driver versus cyclist, dual and multiple roles meant boundaries were blurred. Teachers had to deal with the anxieties of their students, and their students' parents, whilst also suffering their own anxieties – for example, as home-schooling parents themselves – as well as illness and bereavement. Jones and Kessler (2020, 2) point out 'While teaching was already a difficult, complex profession, COVID-19 has pushed aside some of the heart-warming, relational positives for teaching and replaced them with stress, increased demands, and worry about student safety'.

There was much in the data of teachers 'holding' others' anxieties:

> We were very kind of conscious as a school that there were very high levels of anxiety amongst the children and also the parent community on how they were going to manage home-schooling
> *(Becky)*

> People have more money worries at home, mum and dad maybe didn't ever used to spend that much time together before. And now that it's quite stressful home educating four kids at home or two kids at home. And so I think . . . the children have got a bit low and anxiety levels have gone up
> *(Joyce)*

As Becky pointed out, this was particularly tough on 'teachers who are kind of juggling home lives and home-schooling their own children'. Steph argued that these pressures were often not recognised:

> At school we're not appreciative of everybody's home life that if they had young children who couldn't go to nursery therefore they couldn't go into school to look after vulnerable children. And even though they wanted to, some people were kind of forced to go in
> *(Steph)*.

Steph also pointed out that teachers were not immune to the issues with technology that affected their students:

> Staff have problems with technology as well so you know. Some people, their laptops don't work, or they only got a phone at home. They've got a tablet because they do their work at school.

Others found that the added aspect of parental surveillance increased their own anxiety

> It gave the parents an opportunity to, if they wanted to, be overly critical. So there were, you know, maybe the occasional human spelling mistake error. Everyone was feeling a bit tetchy . . . The whole situation was quite stressful, so parents you know there was a few kind of complaints. It gave the parents an opportunity to look in, to criticise the teachers. That was hard . . . and the children see that you're human and that that kind of mistake is fine but being under the microscope almost removed the human element and that wasn't a pleasant experience. I'm sorry, I just can't think of anything positive really to say (Louisa)

Hargreaves also found evidence of the impact of surveillance

> Teachers' work was becoming visible to parents in the worst possible way. Teachers had to teach in ways they did not especially value, that they felt were far less than optimal, and in which it was hard to be successful or to experience the basic psychic rewards that normally defined the job. Yet, they were also under everyone else's microscope, all the time.

This was exacerbated by a sense that the teacher experience was not being accurately reported in the media

> I never worked harder than during lockdown but the message that was being given across the nation was schools are shut and we were never shut in primary schools . . . Everybody was under the impression that school the teachers were sitting at home drinking gin and tonic and actually we were . . . it was hard. I felt that we were juggling an awful lot of plates and at no point did I feel that that was really acknowledged. Government seemed to then be blaming teachers for all sorts of things that were going on (Anne)

> There's always a bit of a bad press with teachers anyway. Like, I had somebody come round . . . and he said to me as he was measuring up for a quote for windows, 'oh you've been sat on your *** on full pay while I've been going to work', and I was like 'how very dare you. I'm also teaching online over the summer, which I am to A level' (Steph)

Hargreaves agrees: Even as teachers despaired over their own capacity to fulfil the basic moral and emotional purposes of their work due to the pandemic and to the ways in which it was being managed, they also often felt that parents and the public just did not understand what they were going through. An example of the 'bad press' teachers were encountering is as follows: in the TES (2020), Conservative MP Christopher Wakeford, speaking on behalf of the Commons Education Committee, called for a probe into 'lack of school work' during lockdown. He said:

> Clearly something has gone wrong and we must examine why. Whilst many schools have done remarkable work, others have not been able to provide the same offer for one reason or another, and this, too, needs to be investigated why.

However, far from providing 'a lack of school work' researchers found schools engaged in a flurry of activity, in confusing circumstances. Hulme et al. (2020, 4) interviewed 12 school leaders over the pandemic and found

> leadership teams engaged in iterative cycles of scenario planning for re-opening, grappling with the logistics of a revised curriculum offer, reduced instruction time, the operational challenges of physical distancing and reduced interaction in protective bubbles, enhanced hygiene practices, workforce planning, staggered starts to the school day, managing parent congregations at drop-off/collection and organising school transport.

It is not surprising then that for school leaders, as Harris and Jones (2020) described

> the pressure is relentless, the options are limited, the sleepless night are frequent. The staff meetings, coffee catch ups and corridor chats with colleagues, that made up a school day, have gone. All those informal, important, moments where social relationships are built, and leadership is enacted simply vanished overnight. Parents, students, and teachers now exist in a twilight education world either awaiting the return of normal service or hoping for some new normal that might offer stability, continuity, and reassurance. The stark reality is that neither is likely to occur anytime soon.

Fotheringham et al. (2021) surveyed and interviewed school leaders during the first months of the pandemic and found that one of the issues for schools during this time

was the plethora, described by many of their respondents as 'an avalanche', of information going into schools from the Department for Education:

> The DfE published 50 guidance documents specifically targeted at schools from 18 March to 18 June 2020, with 11 of those guidance notes pertaining to the day-to-day running of a school. In sum, for the 90 days from the announcement of school closure, 201 policy updates were issued by the DfE.
>
> (Fotheringham 2021, 14)

Unfortunately, this plethora of advice was not always useful as Moss (2020) reported

> Schools were not waiting to be told what to do because there was no advice addressing the problems they faced. Moreover, when government advice came it was often impossible to act on in practice . . . or addressed issues that for schools simply weren't a priority.

This policy hyperactivity led to confusion in school already dealing with the impact of the pandemic. Despite this, critics like Wakeford demanded an investigation, which he implied should have been ongoing by Ofsted – accusing them of 'hibernating through the crisis like badgers' (Reporter 2020). In January 2021, Ofsted restarted monitoring inspections of schools deemed 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement', albeit remotely given the full national Lockdown. Gavin Williamson encouraged parents who were unhappy with the online provision to complain to Ofsted, but in an estimated 5,000 emails, parents flooded Ofsted with praise rather than complaint (Weale 2021).

In a blog based on her research with Moss et al. (2020), Bradbury (2020) reported

> As plans for reopening intensify in England, the government appears to blame schools for not sharing its priorities. Schools being open is inextricably linked with parents' ability to work. But schools are workplaces for teachers too. As one respondent argued, 'I do not believe the current guidance has teacher safety first and foremost. I feel like I am dispensable'. Despite putting themselves at risk like other key workers, teachers feel 'ignored and unimportant – at times treated like I am required but my ideas and knowledge are not valid'

A picture would appear to be emerging that despite their status as key workers, teachers as professionals were unvalued.

Mental health and future doubts

Unsurprisingly then, some of our respondents raised concerns about their own mental health

> I think that this has also had a big impact on teachers' mental health (Survey S21 49).

> But yeah, personally, for me there were days when I didn't want to do anything . . . I didn't want to do anything but if I had a timetable class I would push myself through it. But then I had pressures from the head of Department to do XY and Z . . . So that was the hardest thing. I think they didn't really help or . . . ask about mental health. They just said get in touch if you have problems (Steph)

> It's the hardest I've ever had to work, not just physically but emotionally and mentally because . . . we were also going through a pandemic and we could just carry on teaching, you know, keep calm and carry on teaching because we were also part of that pandemic and I was scared every day I left the house. I was scared for my children. You know my kids were at home because they are at high school and I was texting them during the day saying please

don't leave the house . . . And then we had to carry on teaching and being that role model that we are expected to be. And I found that very, very difficult indeed (Anne)

The pandemic was ongoing at the time of writing (although schools were operating 'business as usual'), and it remained to be seen what the consequences for teachers, and for teacher retention would be in the long term. There were some suggestions that it may make more teachers leave

> I found it really difficult job, and it has now made me look at when I can retire and at what point can I, you know, think really of leaving teaching if it's possible for me to get a new job this year, I will definitely do that. Because it felt utterly soul destroying. It was horrible, it you just felt like you were everybody's whipping boy (Anne)

> I have been working closely with trainee teachers this year and they have found it very hard. We have had three trainees take LOA and another trainee has not looked for a job yet for next year as he has been really disillusioned by teaching through a pandemic. If I was early in my teaching career I may well have also felt like leaving (Survey S21 14)

> Felt like quitting at one point (Survey S21 15)

Whilst the pandemic apparently boosted applications for teacher training courses in England, presumably due to the illusion of stability, a career in teaching still brings concerns. A survey of two thousand teachers for the Education Policy Institute (Fullard 2021) indicated that 'teachers are now almost twice as likely to leave as they were before the pandemic' due to worsening workloads, anxiety and levels of well-being, as described in our data. Fullard noted a surge in applications to teacher training programmes during the pandemic, but predicted 'this boost will be short-lived; as the economy recovers, the interest in teaching and teacher training will return to pre-Covid-19 levels'. The report also found that . . .

> 'ordinarily we would expect a period of low economic activity to also reduce teacher attrition. People tend to be less likely to leave a job when there are fewer alternative employment opportunities. However, the current situation is unique because the labour market conditions are caused by a global pandemic, and our results suggest that other factors that are related to the pandemic have made teachers almost twice as likely to leave.'

It would seem therefore that whatever positives we and others found in teachers' professional lives in the pandemic initially; in terms of increased autonomy, a sense of collaboration, renewing connections with parents and communities, there was no permanent change.

Conclusion – reimagining professionalism?

Despite the sub-heading above, this paper is not about reimagining professionalism. That would have been nice. There was moment when it seemed as if teachers would be reassessed as professionals by government and society, that the general 'discourse of derision' (Ball 1990), the need for untrusted teachers to be held permanently accountable would have been challenged. In the early days of the pandemic teachers were lauded and valued as key workers, and helped the national effort in new ways, delivering food parcels and providing welfare support to families, as well as learning new skills such as online

learning. More pertinently they were suddenly trusted as professionals. Inspections ceased and examinations were cancelled as teachers' judgements were trusted.

Teachers kept schools open for the children of key workers and the vulnerable, and learnt new ways of teaching online. Some did this more successfully than others, and even as early as June 2020 we saw the first murmurings of critique from Members of Parliament and Ofsted about schools 'not doing enough'. Inspections restarted with interim visits, and Ofsted's findings complained of learning loss and reemphasised its pre-pandemic focus on the curriculum. The public examination system resumed in force, and School Performance Tables returned. In its report on 'Education Recovery in Schools' the inspectorate Ofsted (2022) stated

> It is clear that many leaders and staff have worked tirelessly and creatively across the year to settle pupils back into school routines and help them catch up academically. For some pupils, this has been successful. However, some pupils are still behind both academically and in terms of wider development, which will affect them in future.

There is no sense here that there will be anything other than a return to normal, the rhetoric from Ofsted is about catch up and the return of routine. The opportunity for change in how teachers as professionals are viewed (and how they view themselves) seems over.

Following an investigation on the effects of pandemic school closures in Chile, González et al. (2020, 270) urged

> after this complex and sometimes traumatic experience, all decisions regarding the future of the school will require that educators have sufficient professional and institutional autonomy to reframe their professional role and values in accordance with local community needs.

They also recommended sustaining 'the professionalism that arose out of urgency and necessity with a vision that emphasises professional responsibility and collaboration among educators and between their communities' and called for a reconceptualisation of 'the vision of teaching, learning and leadership that allow us to remain adaptive to the challenges of the post-pandemic era'.

In 2020, the OECD (2020) made the point that professionalism would be crucial in any reimagining of education after the pandemic:

> Preparing for the next months and years requires rethinking key elements of teacher professionalism: knowledge, collaboration, and autonomy, as well as the prestige of the profession. Reflecting on these issues is also critical for ensuring teachers' well-being in the long run. Professionalism is crucial

The report recommended that teachers be given time and resources to update their knowledge and skills around online learning, compensating for different levels of learning loss, assessment, dealing with the impact of the pandemic on their students' emotions. They also suggest that teachers should be empowered to lead, rather than be the subjects of, educational change. Is such trust in teachers possible? The rapid return to pre-pandemic normal suggests not.

Jones concurs:

> The impact of the pandemic on students' (and teachers') lives has tended to be discounted. No great rethinking of pedagogy, curriculum and ethos is thought necessary to educational recovery, and ministers have been unmoved by the arguments of Black Lives Matter, that

> 'knowledge' and 'culture' should be rethought, inclusively. Instead, the emphasis has fallen on a rapid return to normal.
>
> *(Jones 2020, 237)*

As Hargreaves and Blaise (2021) writes

> COVID-19 has underlined the inalienable importance of in-person schools and their teachers for student well-being, for students who have learning difficulties or emotional challenges, and as places of care and protection while parents and other caregivers are working or out of the home for other reasons. Teachers matter.

Undoubtedly, the findings of this paper are limited by the relatively small sample size, and the fact that the data about teacher professionalism is incidental and not the focus of the original research. However, it concurs with much of the concurrent research and paints a picture of a profession increasingly overwhelmed by the demands placed on it. In an earlier iteration of this paper we stated 'it remains to be seen if lessons will be learned'. It seems, with the rapid return to 'business as usual' that they have not, and the post-performative professional still has no alternative.

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