What can I do? Caring relationships among teachers, students and families during COVID-19 lockdown in Scotland

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Abstract

Engaging with the ethics of care as developed by Nel Noddings, this paper unpacks the perceptions of three primary teachers working in Scotland during COVID-19 lockdown. Noddings constructs her ethics of care as relational. This focus on the 'relation' is central to the paper and the three themes that emerged from analysing the in-depth interviews conducted with the teachers show different facets of the relations teachers were engaged in during the lockdown. The first theme looks at the teachers' work during COVID-19 lockdown as embedded within a larger Scottish discourse that has care as central to its formation. The second theme discussed the idea of reciprocity – care ethics focuses on acknowledgment of the relation between the carer and the cared for. The third theme focuses on parents as being intermediary between the teachers and students. The paper suggests that the experience of lockdown offered primary school teachers new possibilities of caring, thus giving teachers the possibility to go beyond the 'norm' of care established within their classrooms and schools.

Keywords: COVID-19 lockdown, Scottish primary teachers, ethics of care, Nell Noddings, students.

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Introduction

> Education may be thought of as a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation (Noddings, 2002, p. 283).

The above quote by Nel Noddings captures the essence of this paper. Children, their families and carers and teachers (we use the term teachers to imply all educators) as a 'constellation of encounters' in an unplanned circumstance: COVID-19 lockdown. This paper looks at encounters within teacher-student/family relationships developed during lockdown, which in Scotland commenced on 23rd of March 2020. This unexpected and unprecedented event brought about a quick and sudden change in the relationship (see Adams and McLennan, 2020, p. 7). In this paper, reflected through the voices of teachers, we seek to shed some light on the dynamics of this changed relationship.

The work of Nel Noddings (2012, 2005, 2002, 1986) forms the theoretical understanding of this paper. The focus is on how teachers made sense of the 'caring relation' (Noddings, 2005, p. 15) during COVID-19 lockdown, and how they seemed to have new possibilities for care which went beyond the 'norm' of care established in their respective schools. This theoretical framework will be developed later in the paper.

The paper draws upon a study which was carried out by a group of researchers in the School Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee in Scotland. Three of the researchers are the authors of this paper and are all involved in educating either teachers or educational psychologists. In-depth interviews were held with primary school teachers and Head Teachers from the first week of lockdown until the end of the scholastic year. The interviews aimed to gain an understanding of the impact of the experience of lockdown on their identity as teachers. We are 'curious' about what they make of their current experiences of work and the contribution of this to their thinking about what is valued in their work as a teacher or Head Teacher as they support children and families during the lockdown. An invitation for voluntary participation in the project was put on social media and teachers who responded were interviewed online. For the purpose of this paper we are focussing on three interviews with teachers. We do not make any claims

to generalisation but seek to form an understanding of the experiences of these teachers during COVID-19 lockdown from a dimension of care. We chose these three teachers because they have contrasting experiences of teaching and engagement with the experience, but all demonstrated the need to maintain a caring, reciprocal relationship with their students. A key aspect of Noddings' relational theory is that of reciprocity which will be expanded on later.

Theoretical framework: Relational Ethics

Noddings builds her ethics of care on Martin Heidegger's argument that care is the very Being of human life. If care is a fundamental "reality of life" (Noddings, 2005, p.15), then care has to be relational – given that human beings are constituted by their being in relation to others (while the emphasis is to others as human beings, relations go beyond the human aspect). Noddings (see 1986) focuses her ethics of caring within a relationship context. In its most basic form, it is a "connection or encounter" (Noddings, 2005, p.15) between two human beings: 'one caring' and the 'cared for' and the recognition of this care. We want to highlight the following three main ideas for the purpose of this paper:

First, in the encounter the carer is attentive to the cared for. This works at various levels, both at the level of emotions and reasoning. The carer listens, observes and reciprocates to the needs of the cared for. Listening does not only mean understanding or listening (see Mercieca and Mercieca, 2014a) for our own purpose but is listening that also feels with the other (Noddings, 2012, p. 55). The affective factor is important. But as Noddings (2005) states "this is not to say that caring is irrational or even nonrational" (p.21). Listening implies 'the particular' - this child, this situation, this parent, this teacher. It is listening that tries to resist universalisation of particular groups, even if these are constructed as minority or have a history of being silenced. Certainly, it is not listening that is utilitarian, that is, focusing on the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people. The focus, therefore, is not only on the outcome but also on the process and means to achieving that end (see Noddings, 2005, p.21), which for us refers to the relationship between people. The focus is on developing "the attitudes and skills required to sustain caring relations and the desire to do so, not nearly so much on the reasoning used to arrive at a decision" (Noddings, 2005, p.22).

Secondly, the cared for must reciprocate to the one who cares. Noddings emphasises that a relationship has to be two-sided. The contribution of the cared-for is essential even if it is basic. Noddings gives examples of a baby who stops crying or gives a smile when held by a parent. Even this basic form of reciprocity in enough to maintain a relation. For Noddings (2012), "without this response, there is no caring relation no matter how hard the carer has worked at it" (Emphasis in original, p. 53).

Third, it is important to differentiate the ethics of care from ethical discourse often defined in terms of virtues. Care as virtue is an individual attribute (see Noddings, 2005, p. 17) that focuses on virtuous acts of the carer. The focus is on the character of the person involved in the act of care. In Noddings' ethics of care the focus is not on the person caring per se, but on the relationship. In and through relationships the one caring and the cared for "foster mutual recognition and realization, growth, development, protection, empowerment, and human community, culture, and possibility" (Lynn and Catherine, 2005, p. 393) in the relationship. The focus in this relationship is on what 'I' can do, and not the more objective attitude that something (or someone) must be done. Noddings highlights that caring could be seen as natural – we attend attentively to the other. In fact she terms it as motherly. This is often the case in educational contexts and links us back to the opening statement of this section when Heidegger was quoted. We respond, "out of love or inclination" to others (Noddings, 2012, p.54). Even when encounters with others are often complex and risk being disrupted, ethical caring brings back that natural element of care. "We draw", in the complex situations, "on ethical caring – an ethical idea built of recollections of caring and being cared for. We ask what we would do if we were at our caring best or if this other were not so difficult. We respond 'as if,' and by doing so we hope to restore the preferred condition of natural caring" (Noddings, 2012, p. 54).

The Scottish Context: situating the study

The Scottish situation bears examining, not only as the context for this paper, but also because education traditionally has been distinct from the rest of the UK; as such, it is considered a fundamental influence on the distinctiveness of being Scottish. Humes and Bryce (2018, p.119) discuss how education has historically been seen as influential on Scottish culture and society with a perceived link between social mobility and education such that education has long been highly regarded as a means of promoting democracy both for the individual and society. With the introduction of the Scottish Parliament in

1999, the devolution of education enabled Scottish education to further develop its separate identify from the rest of the UK. This was namely a policy of social justice and egalitarianism (Kennedy et al., 2007) reflected in the engravings on the parliamentary mace of Wisdom, Justice, Compassion and Integrity: values that were later to underpin the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004).

The first Act of the Scottish Parliament was linked to education and set out five national priorities for education: achievement and attainment; framework for learning; inclusion and equality; values and citizenship; and learning for life (Standards in Scotland's Schools Act 2000). In 2004, an important step was taken to reframe the concept of all children being supported to reach their full potential with the introduction of an Act which redefined needs from a deficit model (Special Educational Needs) to the concept of all children potentially having Additional Support Needs at some stages in their lives (Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004). This different terminology reflects that needs can be long or short term and be varied in nature, extending from learning abilities to such factors as being bereaved, living in difficult home situations, being exceptionally able, being bullied and so on. This re-emphasis on the possibility of all children needing support was encapsulated in the policy Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, no date, a) which has been tested across Scotland since 2006 and became embedded in subsequent legislation. Within this framework there are eight indicators which are fundamental in relation to a child or young person's wellbeing. Importantly, these relate not just to time in school but also at home and in the wider community. These are that the child should be: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included. The OECD (2015) describes Scottish school education, comparatively, as very inclusive. However, while McAuliffe (2018, p.704) acknowledges a "genuine commitment in Scotland to promote inclusion for all", she comments that there is still room to enhance the system and explains that there can be considerable inclusion issues to surmount for both students and adults working in the education system that can be stressful for all concerned. One clear issue that evidences the challenge of implementing inclusion, which was also flagged by OECD (2015), is that of the gap in attainment between the most and least privileged children and young people in Scottish society.

The current party in government, the Scottish National Party, has made education its "number one priority" and has acknowledged poverty as being a key factor in the gap in attainment between students living in different home circumstances as defined by the Social Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (Scottish Government, no date, b). The SIMD measures 6,976 geographic data zones in relation to poverty, fewer resources or opportunities. The SIMDs range from one to five with one being the top 20% of deprivation. With the aim of closing the attainment gap, the Scottish Attainment Challenge was introduced by Scottish Government in 2015 along with the National Improvement Framework which followed in 2016. The particular foci of this initiative reflect that wellbeing is valued as well as academic achievement, as the three key areas of focus are literacy, numeracy, and health and wellbeing. These three areas are overarching themes embedded as the responsibility of all teachers within the Curriculum for Excellence. At the same time, however, the Scottish Government has responded to an overall decline in attainment, as evidenced in both international comparative surveys and national data (OECD, 2015), with an increased emphasis on national testing in the form of the Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA). Introduced in 2017, these tests in reading, writing and numeracy, conducted with students in Primary 1(aged 5), Primary 4 (aged 8), Primary 7 (aged 11) and Secondary 3 (aged 14), are intended, according to Scottish Government (2019), to be used diagnostically as one of several means of providing information to help educators target support where needed. However, the anonymised information can also be used at local authority level and there have been concerns among teachers, since the inception of the assessments, that the tests add pressure in relation to teachers' accountability and the improvement agenda, which they see as unnecessarily intrusive. According to the Scottish Government's 2019 user review of the SNSA, these concerns are diminishing as "the majority understand that the primary purpose of the SNSA is diagnostic and formative" (p.10).

Thus, the onset of lockdown on 23 March 2020 saw the teachers in Scotland faced with the issue of maintaining focus on the holistic attainment of the child both in a traditional academic sense and in support of their overall wellbeing. In his parliamentary speech on 19 March 2020 (Scottish Government, 2020a), the Deputy First Minister and Education Minister, John Swinney, highlighted that teaching, learning and support would continue but differently with teachers connecting with pupils through distance and online

learning. It was established from the outset that children of key workers would be able to go to a local hub centre while their parents were at work during the normal school hours. This would be unlikely to be their familiar school setting and they would be supported by teachers and other local authority educators who would not necessarily be known to them. The other pupils would be at home with their parent or carer and the rest of their family, with the teachers communicating with them from a distance. The Deputy First Minister highlighted that vulnerable children would "not be cut adrift" (2020a, no page) and that there would be as much educational continuity as possible. This would all be ensured by enabling local authorities to have flexibility in their strategies (Scottish Government, 2020a).

It was not until 20 April that subsequent guidance came from Scottish Government and Education Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020b) in relation to term 4 (April to June). At this point, it was acknowledged that the return to school was an unknown factor, and regular updates would be provided. The document reflects that support and guidance was under ongoing development in relation to: working in the digital domain; equity of support for home learning; support for children with Additional Support Needs; support for transitions; the nature of parental involvement and engagement, with parents not being expected to act as teachers nor engage in a formal way in educating at home; and support for teachers and school leaders. As ever in the Scottish context, this guidance would be interpreted and enacted at national, local and school level. This context sets the scene for the themes which follow.

Moments of Care – Thematic Analysis
Theme 1: The Scottish system and caring

The interviews with three teachers from a care ethics perspective needs to be situated within this larger discourse of care within the Scottish Education system. This theme shows an awareness in these teachers of their students' needs, and which said awareness contributed to their care of these students. Noddings explains that the one-caring teacher connects to the cared-for by acknowledging the relevance of student experiences and accepting their accompanying feelings. She refers to this as an attitude of engrossment (Noddings, 2005), and defines it as "an open, nonselective receptivity to the cared for" (Noddings, 2005, p.15). This attitude spurs an interest in the teacher to know more about the students that she cares for, and this caring continues to foster her interest.

The three primary school teachers talk knowledgably about their students in relation to the dynamic of the socio-economic status of the class and about the additional support that students need in order to access the curriculum. Becky states that 30% of her class are in SIMD1 or SIMD2, referring to the levels showing highest need according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Jeannie discusses not only that there is a considerable number of children who receive free school meals, which is used as an indicator of poverty in school settings, but also children who have "English as an additional language, … [and] a myriad of other additional needs with my class being a Six/Seven composite. I have children learning at early level right up to second level, and even pushing into third level I would say". Here Jeannie refers to the stages of the curriculum that children achieve from pre-school through to the final Primary 7 year when children are typically twelve years old. Her composite class consists of students aged 9-12 and their range of attainment on the curriculum varies widely.

Ailsa works in a different scenario, where every year some students from her school transition to a fee-paying secondary school: "probably about 10% of our children go onto private secondary school, 10 or 15% ... I think I've only got one SIMD child in my class this year who's on deciles 1 or 2"

However, despite the more affluent catchment areas, Ailsa's students still have additional support needs and she feels that more should be receiving additional support:

> "I've got two that go to nurture twice a week and I've got about four that go for additional support and literacy and numeracy. I've got more that should. I've got one wee child who is nonverbal, very visually impaired, uhm, in a wheelchair, can't move independently, doesn't walk or stand. Has 2 Pupil Support Assistants assigned to her at all times."

The information the teachers are privy to about their students is at the level of the individual, so they know of any particularly difficult contexts that their students have to deal with. Noddings (2005) says that the one-caring teacher views the world through the eyes of the student (Owens and Ennis p.394) with her "energy flowing towards others and their projects. I receive what the other conveys, and I want to respond in a way that furthers the other's

purpose or project", as opposed to pushing forward her own agenda (or project) (Noddings 2005, p.16). Jeannie describes a particular student who she is aware struggled without support under lockdown: "I have a child that's a young carer ... Mum is a single mum. Six siblings and she really looks after her siblings, so she's not getting the support that she needs and she is just a kid herself."

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, teachers were aware of regulatory processes around personal data, and child protection, among others. The teachers interviewed report being constrained by these restrictions which now had an increased impact on their practice and on their reaching out to students. The increased reliance on the digital domain in the context of COVID-19 meant that some means of reaching children were restricted. Jeannie reflects here on the UK's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and its impact on what is possible in terms of working with students as opposed to what teachers would do if they were permitted:

> "we've got to be really careful … with GDPR and all the rest of it. So yeah, there's a lot to think about, so initial ideas are like what can I do? What can I do? What can I do? But then it's whittling it down to what we are actually allowed to do."

This quote takes us to Noddings' outline of her care ethic, in which teachers approach students needs from the subjective perspective of 'I must do something', rather than 'something must be done'. Jeannie is caught in performative procedures and systems, where action is perceived through accountability. Yet she strives to think of her own agency through these systems, and indeed, reiterates "what can I do?" three times, almost trying to find a way to work around "GDPR and all the rest of it". This left an impression on us, and we picked this question to use in the title of this paper, thinking it encapsulates the efforts made by these teachers to care for their students.

Becky discusses the limitations of the Scottish schools' intranet, GLOW, which is a national digital network. This means that there are national restrictions on what can and cannot be done within GLOW in order to protect those involved in teaching and learning such as the ability (or not) to deliver teaching using webcams: "… they had to have 32 Local Authorities' agreement because we're all in the same tenancy, so there are a lot of issues in

deciding what is switched on and switched off. 'Cause if it's switched off for one it's switched off for everyone and likewise if it's switched on, it's switched on."

Likewise, Ailsa mentions guidance issued from unions and local authorities to teachers about their teaching, for example, whether to teach new concepts or to focus on consolidating existing learning. Ailsa highlighted to the interviewer that this was intended to protect teachers from stress emanating from additional workload, but at the same time it proved a systemic constraint to some teachers working with their pupils. She suggested that it should be down to teachers' professional judgement (see Mercieca and Mercieca, 2014b) whether or not teaching new concepts is appropriate, based upon pupil need: "I am getting to the stage with some of my maths groups where they need to learn new stuff, and the unions have been really quite adamant that we shouldn't be teaching new ideas and this time should be for consolidation. I just think teachers have to be allowed to be make a professional judgment on whether or not it's appropriate."

Jeannie also flags that this constraint makes her job more challenging: "What I find challenging is more the constraints that I've got placed on me and the problems that the families are then going to be experiencing."

Theme Two: Reciprocity

School and classroom spaces often nurture communication between the students and the adults. When the Scottish Government announced with three days warning that schools would not be open, a sense of urgency was felt to speedily establish some kind of communication between children and teachers during lockdown. In those three days, 'homework' packs were created and distributed to children. These packs consisted mostly of handouts and to-do activities. Some reading books and games were also distributed. There was a sense that these packs could somehow extend the relation of care between students and schools and in particular with learning that is often associated with the act of teaching. Jeannie reported "…before we actually went into lockdown we were quite fast in creating homework grids. The school anyway did this thing where we sent out homework on a Thursday, but we made this set up that would last them two weeks. So effectively right up until Easter Holidays with various sort of activities … right across the curriculum. I worked quite closely with my stage partner and we tailored it to what we were doing."

Similarly, Ailsa said "our school, 'cause obviously everyone only had two days to get things up and running for the first 2 weeks, so we just spent the last two days of term manically preparing booklets. So I sent the kids away on that Friday with two weeks' worth of work that they could just do without really any input at all. So loads of revision worksheets for literacy and for numeracy and some project sheets, a reading book… but just tons and tons of stuff."

While the learning aspect seemed to be catered for by distributing consolidating material to all the children, efforts were also spent to establish communication links with students and setting up online learning environments. This was a big change to some of the interviewed teachers. They went through a fast learning curve in managing how to navigate platforms. Jeannie highlighted that she "wasn't actually familiar with [SEESAW]" but she quickly understood that such platforms are "a means of communication. You can communicate and send announcements to parents and pupils". For Jeannie, these platforms are useful not only because she could upload work for students to engage with, but also, she could "respond directly to that". We think that Jeannie's word 'respond' captures a crucial aspect of the ethics of care as highlighted earlier. She can reciprocate to her students and parents, therefore, allowing for communication not to stop but to continue taking place.

Ailsa reported that "for the first 2 weeks I just emailed them every day through our kind of school email system and just checked in with them every day and sent them a little daily plan…set out like the visual timetable in our classroom, so the ones that wanted structure had a lot of structure but with huge emphasis on the fact that they could pick and choose if it's too much…and I gave them time limits for every activity 'cause I've got some children who are very diligent but very slow and would spend four hours completing one sheet of sums. So I'd tell them, if you spend half an hour on this then stop."

The commitment shown by these teachers is reflected in Noddings' writing about the attitude that "there is nothing that can take precedence over the one-caring teacher's responsibility to care for students [and that she] will work persistently to seek involvement in the cared for, going beyond superficial responses" (Owens and Ennis p.394). This was apparent in the

teachers' interviews, but the following anecdote by Ailsa shows this commitment to reaching out to students very clearly:

> "So I got lots of broad bean seeds and a bag of soil and left them in my front garden and just told kids: You know where I live. If you want to grow a seed, come by with a yogurt pot and fill it and put a seed in. So loads of kids are when I put that up on teams ... for the next two or three days I basically had my whole class visit my garden. So, I saw loads of them, you know, at a very safe distance. They'd be at the top of my path, that's about 10 metres long, and we'd have a nice wee chat. And since then, actually, I've probably got about six or seven visitors a week just to my garden. I feel like I still connected and kept in touch with most of them. One wee boy I hadn't heard from at all, but I mean he lives maybe about ten miles away. But I drove out and posted his pack of work through his door and just clapped eyes on him. There's another one who's not engaging at all, but I got in touch with the mum and went round and so I have done a couple of home visits".

Clearly, in this encounter, the cared for receives the caring and shows that it has been received. The teacher has acknowledged the need in the students for connection. She responds to the need and shows care to students, and they acknowledge that she has cared for them. The beans and soil are Ailsa's way of caring, her way of being in relation – nowhere in a textbook were beans set out to be the way of reaching towards students.

The three teachers reported that they were constantly wondering how they could reach their students and how they could provide for them further. When it comes to using technology, Jeannie quickly highlights the limitations. She was responding to her students collectively and the material that she was uploading and the feedback that she was giving to her students "doesn't really allow for an awful lot of differentiation and the interaction that a lot of my kids actually need."

All three teachers interviewed emphasised their constant awareness that they were not always reaching all children through technology. Reflecting through the interview process, Jeannie stated that "they [students] are completing things [that is task given on SEESAW], but the ones that you want to complete - as is always – is that you can't get them to engage. These are the

once that aren't actually engaging". This weighs heavily on Jeannie, and she uses phrases such as "a big scare" to express her concern. She is thinking that the students who do not engage with technology are those whose attainment is often not at par with the other students and there is a widening of their attainment gap. These interviews, once again, bring to the forefront the fact that primary school teachers are often very aware of the stories which constitute the daily lives of these students. The knowledge that they have about students seems to bring forth more the urgency to keep some form of communication. But even here, Jeannie is caught in a conflict. A father of student with additional support contacted her through SEESAW as he was "not coping very well". She was advised by the leadership team not to engage in a conversation with the father over SEESAW but was allowed to phone him at home. This "really boosted him [the student]" and Jeannie kept this up once a week. Such evidence of reciprocity contributed to the relation of care which was established between Jeannie and this student.

The issue of the 'powerful' carer over the 'cared for' becomes evident. Jeannie uses the first person singular to highlight this imbalance of power: "you know you put that thing in the phone. It doesn't send your number, so I have contacted him"; "I could speak to him [father not coping]"; "I did ask my head teacher"; "I was allowed to do [the phone call]"; "I'm keeping up with him". While it could be argued that the student-teacher relation in the classroom is also hierarchical, yet there are moments when this is challenged, questioned and transgressed by students. Yet it seems that during the COVID-19 lockdown, power seems to rest more with the teachers. The students and their parents are at the receiving end on this relationship.

There is another aspect to the issue of power, that of the Local Authority decisions often negotiated through the Head of Schools to teachers. There are moments when the interviewed teachers felt that "what I want to do and what I've been told to do are two separate things" (Jeannie). One of the teachers seemed to speak with relief when she assured the interviewer that she "didn't go rogue" because she was allowed to make contact through an acceptable medium, yet the engrossment and commitment shown by these teachers was such that left us questioning what she would have done had she not been given alternative possibilities to do so. In fact she admits that "it is a little bit rogue" of her to allocate completely separate tasks to four children who would not be able to engage with the standard set tasks, as she was adamant that she would not set up a child for failure.

Theme 3: Parents 'in-between'

This theme concerns parenting in the various ways that it was mentioned in the interviews. The teachers interviewed were keenly aware of the increased presence of parents in the teaching and learning process that would have normally taken place within the school premises. They also emphasised their caution against burdening parents with teaching material, knowing that many parents had pressures of their own although willing to support their children's development. The teachers offered support to parents too, both with academic material as well as by lending an ear to listen to their struggles. Two of the three teachers whose interviews were analysed for this paper happened to be parents and also mentioned their own challenges and how they tried to go about dealing with them.

Parental presence in teaching/learning process

The teachers interviewed mentioned being caught between trying to make their pedagogy available to parents, and keeping in mind that parents are not teachers. This was particularly the case for Becky whose rationale in sharing her play-based pedagogy was that she hoped it would prevent parents from putting pressure on their early years children: "I've pulled out all the research I did with play-based learning and I'm trying to adapt that so from my class I'm trying to pass that on to parents. I think some parents at home are still in that 'we're at school' mindset, and so I'm trying to make sure that that pedagogy that I've got in my brain that I was using in the classroom, I can pass on." Ailsa, on the other hand, spoke about the importance that "the kids do as much as they can independently."

Teachers also mentioned the new awareness that they were dependent on parents to interpret the teachers' instructions. Such awareness also brought with it some misgivings: "I'm very aware that things are being scrutinized by parents, because obviously in a normal day, I'd be happy with the parents seeing about, you know, half the day – that, I'd be alright with, but ¼ of it I really wouldn't want them to see… my activities and learning experience are all planned but you don't plan everything you say until it comes out your mouth whereas I'm very aware that they're just seeing, uh, everything that I'm doing and that what I'm putting out is being utterly scrutinized by some quite um, demanding parents. So I am very aware of what I'm sending out that it's got to be good."

Teachers even put thought into the timing of when their plan was posted, and the impact of such communication on families: "I think emailing the work at the weekend when parents have already got more time to maybe print things off or copy out sums into their jotters or organized, 'cause my kids and they all have math worksheets and literacy sheets and things so it makes a bit easier" (Ailsa)

Teachers aware of pressure on parents

Teachers changed the timing of communications to accommodate parents who found it easier to prepare for the week on Sunday, and then again when parents who worked in the weekends as keyworkers needed the plans to be sent to them prior to the weekend. Becky reported making an emphasis in her communications to homes that "all I want from parents is to make sure that the kids are happy. Happy, healthy, safe. That is it. And I'm really trying to reassure parents that that's enough if you're doing anything, it's enough. If you're doing one task, it's enough. If you're not doing any tasks and you are sitting spending time together, it's enough, and that's what I'm really keen to make sure – that parents don't feel the pressure of teaching their children." She also considers it her job to reassure parents that they are doing "a great job", realising that she cannot possibly know the difficulties in different homes.

Jeannie also emphasised that "happy parents is happy children", but expressed concern about some of her children, mentioning a child who is a fluent English speaker, but whose parents are not. Small details get in the way of a child's access to learning: "So they can't access … when you give remote access to the online book, it gets sent to the parents' email so they have to then login, [but they won't understand]." Jeannie also mentioned a student whose brother has additional support needs which are very severe, and Jeannie is aware of how challenging the single mother finds her situation. Jeannie worries that "he's not going to engage in that, and these are the children that we actually need to reach", as she worries about the attainment gap widening for this student.

Teachers available for parental support

Ailsa reassured parents who told her that they were struggling and asked for what they could do which was essential: "So I've just said, Learning your tables because you know that's just useful and doing a wee bit of the

consolidating maths so they don't forget it, and reading." Jeannie also dissuaded parents from pushing against the grain and urged them: "Then don't do it. Don't force it, you know, go out and do something else."

Jeannie distinguished her knowledge from that of parents and tried to prevent them from being stressed about activities: "I would really like to have a dedicated slot where I'm available and have those open conversations with parents" as she claimed that "It's not just the children will have to worry about - it's the families as well." Becky, in fact, did have a communication channel "just for adults, which is just all about inspiration and hopefully I am answering questions about teaching and how I do things in the class, but, well, in the hope that parents will absorb that and copy you." This was possible for Becky to do because it seems it was a practice which was established earlier in the year: "I've had them in throughout the year showing them everything that we're doing in class… Play based learning, digital technology and digital skills, so the parents that I've got at home supporting in the children at home have been great, you know, they've not been worried about taking on board that technology because the kids are quite confident with it."

Teachers as parents make their caring responsibilities more complex

Although teachers are very willing to put their students' needs before their own, it is important to recognise that their caring responsibilities are more complex than just caring for their pupils at a distance (Noddings 2012, p.54). The impact of lockdown and their changed working environment also has an impact on them, as revealed by Jeannie and Ailsa, who are also parents.
Jeannie reveals that she manages her children's schedules in a way that allows her to work efficiently, thus blurring the lines between herself as a parent and as a teacher: "It's hard to switch off. I mean, I keep my kids up later so that I can do work in the morning."

For Ailsa, the experience reveals itself to have benefits as, prior to lockdown, she had an extensive schedule of reaching out to groups of children for coaching or tutoring. She is clearly driven to engage with caring for children in a variety of contexts but is nevertheless appreciative of having more time at home: "I tutor four different kids a week and I coached gymnastics two nights a week, so normally I'm really busy and I'm never in my house. I mostly I leave for school at 7:00 in the morning and because of either tutoring

or gymnastics or children's activities, I'm generally not home for my tea till after 9, so it's actually been really nice to have more time in the house."

However, Ailsa also acknowledges the challenging of balancing work and parental duties: "Working-wise, it's challenging, 'cause it's a small house and my husband's also working from home and he's very noisy. Skype calls pretty much all the time and I've got two children who are also needing time and attention." Ailsa is also aware of the emails which parents of students send her: "I've constantly got an eye on TEAMS and email."

Ailsa's children are of secondary school age and is aware of the additional challenge of parenting young children as well as having teaching commitments, as revealed to her by her colleagues: "There are a lot of young colleagues who have got really young children who are just finding it so difficult the first couple of weeks. Having, you know, three under-fives at home and trying to teach."

Conclusion

This paper brought to light the complexity and uncertainty (see Mercieca, 2011; 2009) that teachers were experiencing during the COVID-19 lockdown. The sense of urgency and the fast-changing pace of change influenced the teacher's engagement with students. Yet, what is evident through the analysis of the interviews is the teachers' continual commitment to engage with a relationship with their students. Often this relation was maintained through unconventional methods and was somewhat different from what we are accustomed to in schools and classrooms. Yet the 'want' from the part of teachers to keep communicating with their students and their families is certainly an indication of the level of care these three teachers were showing to their students. We also want to argue that in trying to establish different and novel communication channels, a different care relation was established that goes beyond that which was occurring prior to COVID-19 lockdown. The lockdown gave these teachers new possibilities of caring, thus giving teachers the possibility to go beyond the 'norm' of care established within their classrooms and schools. While these experiences cannot be generalised, they have increased our understanding of the caring relation that some teachers and their students and parents/carers had and its manifestations.

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