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Exploring Teachers' Experience of Occupational Value and Global Accountability Reforms: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: Teachers' feelings of occupational or professional value (that is, the subjective experience of feeling a sense of competence or enjoyment derived from undertaking occupational activities or tasks) can significantly influence the retention of the workforce. The United Kingdom (UK) is currently undergoing a teacher shortage, which, despite efforts to strengthen recruitment, has failed to reduce attrition rates to an acceptable level. Through the lived experience of UK primary school teachers, this study aims to deepen our understanding of occupational value. It explores the various factors that shape this value while also examining the ways in which accountability measures influence these dynamics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 UK primary school teachers. A thematic analysis revealed three main influential themes: Holistic Wellbeing; Professional Wellbeing; and Educational Dynamics. These results emphasise the importance of occupational value for the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers. They also indicate that supportive collaboration and constructive accountability can positively influence perceptions of occupational value as well as personal resilience. Further research is needed in this area to substantiate these preliminary findings.



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1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher Retention and Wellbeing in the United Kingdom (UK)

Teacher retention and attrition is an ongoing global concern, with the UK losing more teachers year on year; and despite recent encouraging data of recruitment numbers taken from the DfE's School Workforce Census ([Department for Education, 2023](#)), a significant percentage of recently qualified teachers leave the profession within the first 5 years ([McCallum, 2021](#)). Given the difficulties some schools face with filling teaching vacancies, some face the extreme decision to employ unqualified teachers, a measure that likely affects the quality of education ([Akiba et al., 2023](#); [Peirson-Hagger, 2024](#)). A large body of research surrounding this topic exists investigating the complex elements associated with the teacher shortage issue.

Research often focuses on solutions concerning attracting suitable candidates and retaining/maintaining a highly skilled workforce in order to deliver quality education. There are several problems related to this, not least the relatively low salary in comparison to other professions in the UK, lack of investment in resources, stress, and workload. Since teachers have arguably the largest influence on student outcomes, their importance in

supporting, not only the academic success of their pupils, but also positive social and emotional outcomes should not be overlooked (Katrodia & Kambonde, 2023; Rocque et al., 2024). Keçeci and Kara (2023) explored the complex and diverse reasons for which teachers leave the profession, identifying three main themes: economic reasons (such as low salary), personal and environmental reasons (such as expectation of respect, job satisfaction, intense stress, desire for personal/family time, lack of motivation, and health issues), and organisational reasons (such as long working hours, excessive workload, and the negative attitude of students towards teachers).

The current climate of teaching in primary schools and academies in the UK can be considered challenging. For instance, the latest UK government figures (Department for Education, 2024c) revealed the highest ever number of pupil suspensions and exclusions in the 2022/2023 academic year, an upwards trend that has accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic. Also of note are the results of an NHS survey (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023), detailing the mental health crisis amongst children in the UK. This is relevant in the context of research that found that pressure to perform well in academic tests is adversely affecting the social, emotional, and behavioural development of pupils, and by association, the wellbeing of teachers (Kaynak, 2020; McCallum, 2021). While the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum prioritises and explicitly teaches school readiness skills (the Prime areas), the focus shifts to core subjects (English, Maths, and Science) in subsequent years. Research has shown that these interconnected skills are essential for learning and have far reaching implications for predicting future success (Ofsted, 2023).

Given these occupational challenges, it is clear that teachers feel an intrinsic value in what they do, in terms of how their work can impact society. The term 'occupational value' has been used to describe the sense of competence or enjoyment derived from undertaking occupational activities or tasks (Persson et al., 2001). Understanding how this occupational value is formed regarding internal (e.g., perceived efficacy, autonomy, motivation, job satisfaction) as well as external forces (e.g., through the media, political, social, global influences) may positively influence teacher recruitment and retention. For example, Price and Weatherby (2018) found a strong association between occupational value and job satisfaction, which is also known as a predictor of teacher retention (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2020). Moreover, the decline in perceived occupational value, linked to low wages and unsatisfactory working conditions, has been shown to be associated with reduced job satisfaction and has been identified as a major reason for teacher attrition (Assaf & Antoun, 2024).

1.2. Importance of Feeling Valued

Dulfer et al. (2023) attribute teacher retention rates being low to a lack of professional trust to perform their role effectively, evidenced by accountability policies that pressurise them to keep up with their colleagues, exceed expectations, undermine job security, reduce autonomy, and increase commitment/workload (Department for Education, 2024d). Evidently, teachers have been under increased scrutiny and pressure in the form of global accountability reforms (Levatino et al., 2024), such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and the Schools White Paper—Opportunity for all (Department for Education, 2022). Many of these policies are concerned with increasing academic progress and results, publicly ranking schools (and education systems globally) with the unintended consequence of encouraging competition rather than collaboration between schools. Whilst accountability is fundamentally required for educational improvement, the current measures do not universally consider individual differences within populations affecting pupil performance, such as socio-economic status, cultural differences, special educational needs, and disabilities (some of which may be

undiagnosed). For example, the schools achieving lower performance scores are associated with low socio-economic areas and have the highest staff turnover and the least experienced teaching staff (Pulido-Montes & Martínez-Usarralde, 2022).

The perceived undermining of professionalism felt by teachers has been explored (Flores, 2023; Milner, 2013), highlighting an incongruity between teachers' traditional commitment towards flexibility/inclusion and pupil engagement in contrast with a loss of professional control due to standardisation and 'teaching to test.' The latter promotes an imbalance between the subjects and neglects the development of the 'whole child' (Brill et al., 2018). This pedagogical shift away from competency-based towards content-based methodology, mainly to high stakes tests and examinations, has adversely affected curriculum depth and narrowed teachers' professional role (OECD, 2024). Whilst the UK government stated the aim of providing more autonomy, this was directed more towards stakeholders (parents, academy leaders, and management) rather than teachers (Gupta & Zhao, 2024; Sahlberg, 2016), who were now provided the tools to hold schools to account, a shift away from political accountability (Ozga, 2020). The introduction of the academisation reforms in the UK not only reduced the responsibilities and accountability of local authorities, but it also signalled a paradigm shift towards imposing measures borrowed from business models (Keddie, 2019; Skinner et al., 2021). The practice of published test results to hold schools responsible represents accountability, which is high stakes for teachers, whose career could be directly affected and pressurising for pupils (Kaynak, 2020). Teachers have disproportionately more at stake from test outcomes than the pupils themselves, which diminishes student ownership and responsibility for their own learning (Sahlberg, 2016). Data taken from results are often used as efficacy and quality measures for performance management and pay reviews, a purpose for which they were never intended or designed (Smith & Holloway, 2020).

Finland, whose student performance results pre-COVID-19 consistently out-perform other countries in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) report (OECD, 2023), have recently declined, but remain above the OECD average, despite shunning the global educational accountability movement (GERM) (Akiba et al., 2023; Sahlberg, 2016). Support from stakeholders in Finland for the professional role of teachers is significant as it enables a greater autonomy and a higher perception of trust and occupational value. Longitudinal data from PISA results indicate that countries invested in these global reforms have experienced a decline in overall educational performance in the last decade, despite the aim of educational excellence through utilising GERM (Sahlberg, 2023).

The cultural perceptions of teachers' role in society and their occupational value differs depending on whether a country is traditionally collectivist or individualist, manifesting as respect or underappreciation, respectively (McCallum, 2021; Rocque et al., 2024). Teacher value is affected by the societal level of support that teachers receive, significantly impacting on their motivation, job satisfaction, and wellbeing (Seligman, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Spruyt et al., 2021). Goetz et al. (2024) noted that shared responsibility and positive teacher relationships are beneficial towards increasing the teacher perception of efficacy and lowering stress. However, Webster (2011) recognises an apparent incongruity between teachers' desire to be overtly collaborative, whilst simultaneously engaging in covertly competitive behaviour. Rather than condemning these instincts, the paper asserts the positive interaction of these seemingly opposing elements, with competition as the driver for innovation/change and collaboration the tool to share/deepen existing knowledge. There is clearly a healthy balance to be maintained, however, in order to build motivated, effective, and supportive teams. Stearns et al. (2015) presented the theory of collective pedagogical teacher culture—hypothesises that posit that cooperation and collaboration can mediate the negative impact of accountability pressures. Positive relationships with

colleagues can have a significant impact on attitudes and behaviours in educational settings, with supportive social environments associated with a greater sense of responsibility and stronger organisational commitment (Bashir & Gani, 2020). Erichsen and Reynolds (2020) recognise an overlap between collective pedagogical culture and the theory of relational trust (Schneider & Bryk, 2002). According to this theory, the influence of social relationships surrounding the school community can determine the success of an educational environment. This highlights the inclusion of collaboration with the wider community, rather than just within the institution.

Hall and McGinity (2015) associate teacher professionalism before academisation reforms as involving a greater autonomy, discretion, and trust; following its apparent weakening, teachers became associated with delivering content determined by national policy involving the uptake of highly structured programmes, which do not consider individual teacher strengths or personalities. Teachers' perception of disrespect from the government was highlighted by Kim et al. (2024), which was particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, when announcements about alterations to practice were made without consultation with the profession, with inadequate notice and without guidance on how they could be implemented. High stakes accountability policies applied to an already strained teaching profession can damage trust towards the government and further complicate teaching roles (Rushton et al., 2023).

In tackling the issue of teacher shortages through social research, there is a profound difficulty in determining cause and effect due to how the complex factors identified are inextricably linked. It is unlikely that any single factor is responsible; though, through the subjective perceptions of teachers' self-reports, some seem to be more influential than others. Occupational value has a significant influence on how teachers feel about their job and their motivation to carry it out, as well as shaping teacher identity (Gee, 2000; Rushton et al., 2023). Also problematic is the real-world nature of such research, which means that controlling for variables becomes almost impossible. Educational institutions and environments differ to such a large degree that results cannot be generalised, even within the same age range or country. There is a disproportionate amount of research for Western developed countries with primary/early years education not adequately represented; therefore, different global and cultural contexts require further exploration (Rushton et al., 2023). Through the lived experiences of teachers, a deeper understanding of the influential elements involved in teacher recruitment and retention can be gained, but such data are subjective and, therefore, influenced by confounding variables, affecting reliability.

The UK is currently undergoing educational reforms, following a change in government and following the Ofsted (2024a) Big Listen consultation, which invited the views of all those invested in the future of the education system (40% respondents were teachers). This is being utilised to reform Ofsted inspections, following controversy around their negative impact on mental health (Ofsted, 2024b). The Labour party has also launched a curriculum and assessment review, as well as outlining further policies aimed at reforming education, ostensibly in collaboration with teaching professionals (Department for Education, 2024a). The impact of these changes towards teachers' occupational value and whether this has already been influential, through the government's engagement with a wide range of educational stakeholders, may prove significant in terms of recruitment and retention.

1.3. Summary, Rationale, and Research Questions

In summary, there has been limited research into how teachers experience occupational value in relation to global accountability reforms. The present study aims to address this by applying a qualitative approach to the work of Akiba et al. (2023), which employed a quantitative, correlational design, in order to gain a deeper understanding of teachers'

experiences of occupational value and global accountability reforms. Ten UK primary school teachers were interviewed (in a semi-structured form), the recorded audio data of which were transcribed, and a thematic analysis was used to analyse their responses in greater depth. The principal research questions were:

How do teachers describe their occupational value within a primary school context? What are the most important factors that influence occupational value in a primary school context, from a teacher perspective? And what are teachers' personal experiences of occupational value in relation to global accountability reforms in a primary school context?

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

A qualitative design was chosen for its suitability for exploring in more depth the richness of teachers' experience as well as its potential to unpack their understanding of professional values and accountability through their lived experience in a way that cannot easily be quantified (Willig, 2013). Moreover, the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach in order to best "understand several individual's common or shared experiences of a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 60).

2.2. Sample and Procedures

A self-selective sample of UK mainstream primary school teachers was recruited via gatekeepers (explained below). It was a requirement that participants were adults with qualified teaching status and currently employed as a class teacher in a mainstream UK primary school. A total of 10 UK mainstream primary school teachers participated in the study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' biographical information.

Participant	Gender	Age	Experience (Years)	Teaching Qualification	Current Year Group
P01	Female	38	16	PGCE	3
P02	Female	43	21	PGCE	1/2
P03	Female	34	12	BA (Hons)	1/2
P04	Male	26	4	PGCE	2
P05	Female	43	22	BSc (Hons)	F1
P06	Female	48	24	BEd (Hons)	1
P07	Female	42	18	PGCE	1
P08	Female	42	20	PGCE	F2
P09	Female	46	23	BSc (Hons)	F2
P10	Female	32	6	BA (Hons)	1

This sample size was consistent with those of other qualitative research studies exploring related topics (e.g., Kaynak, 2020; Keddie, 2019) and was considered suitable for thematic analysis (described later; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The participants were recruited from four schools across England, all of which are part of different Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Most participants (90%) were Female, aged in their 40s, had 12 (plus) years of teaching experience, and held postgraduate qualifications, such as PGCE (50%) or Bachelor's degrees (50%). Participating teachers taught from F1 to Year 2.

Ethical approval was granted by the Arden University internal ethics committee after ensuring adherence to the BPS codes and guidelines (project ID: P10187; date of approval 9 July 2024). After this, a self-selective sample was recruited through headteacher gatekeepers, who contacted the target population by circulating the study advert via email. The participants could then contact the researcher directly. Volunteer participants were provided with an

information sheet containing details about the study and, after providing informed consent, interview dates/times were arranged, specifically when participants would have access to a quiet and uninterrupted space. After a brief introduction to clarify details about the study and ethical considerations, participants were asked a few demographic details, before answering questions about their lived experience on the research topics. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, allowing greater flexibility to explore interesting points or ask for clarification. All interviews were carried out by one interviewer, the first named researcher on this paper, whose background and experience will be expanded upon in the Reflexivity Section. Interviewer bias was partially controlled through questions designed as neither positively or negatively worded, asked in a neutral tone and without visual cues (the camera was disabled). On completion of the interview, each participant received a debrief via email with details of how to withdraw from the study if desired.

2.3. Materials/Measures

An interview schedule (see Appendix A) was designed by the researcher, the questions for which were based on relevant topics from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) teacher questionnaire (OECD, 2018). The topics of feedback, school climate, and job satisfaction were particularly relevant to this study, with questions such as 'How strongly do you agree or disagree that you have control over... your planning and teaching?' and 'For how many years do you want to continue to work as a teacher?'. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for the answers to be further explored, if necessary, with the researcher able to prompt for more detail or context, without influencing the participant's answer and keeping some consistency between interviews.

The participants were required to have access to the internet and a device that enables the Zoom application (i.e., a pc, laptop, or mobile phone). Zoom was chosen because it is widely used by educators, making it a familiar platform for the participants. It also offers artificial intelligence facilities to write captions in real time and record data (audio and captions). Features such as disabling the researcher's video output and scheduling capabilities were utilised to maintain consistency. Both the audio and captions were recorded before the pseudonymised data were transferred and thoroughly checked against the audio multiple times to ensure accuracy. In consideration of the online method of data collection, the British Psychological Society's Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research Procedure was followed by using a secure, encrypted method of communication and data collection; the participants were fully informed, no deception was used, valid consent was obtained prior to the interview, and the participant knew they could withdraw at any time. An Intelligent verbatim method was applied to the data, which involved removing repeated words, filler words or phrases, and false starts to ensure smooth articulation throughout.

2.4. Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen as researcher subjectivity is acknowledged; the nuanced data captured were representative of the complex nature of the issues explored and offers greater depth of insight. They were also selected over other approaches (e.g., interpretative phenomenological analysis) for not being wedded to any particular epistemological approach, thus affording the researchers greater flexibility in selecting the appropriate analysis structure to reflect the reality of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six phase method for Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the data: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This process was not linear but cyclical, involving the repetition of stages to gain clarity and deeper understanding of the data. To elaborate, initial codes

were applied to these transcripts, after which all the codes were collated and grouped by meaning. Data clustered by identified patterns were then grouped into each initial code, and the codes were then further refined, combining some and/or renaming them until they accurately described the data. Patterns were identified and the main themes and sub-themes were developed, with data checked against these to ensure best fit. A thematic map was developed to describe the influencing factors on teachers' perception of occupational value and accountability. Notes on each of the themes and sub-themes were taken to answer the research questions and recall previous research. These notes were then used as a starting point for developing a coherent narrative to accurately represent, explain, and interpret the data to maximise the potential for insightful, applicable results. Specifically, the first step of the analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim.

2.5. Reflexivity

As a reflexive thematic analysis, the interpretation of the data is subjective, involving the researcher's own experiences and assumptions. For context, the researcher has over 15 years of experience working within primary education as a teacher and has lived experience of mental health problems specifically relating to this role. Approaching this topic with heightened empathy towards the participants, the responsibility of representing their views accurately and fairly was at the forefront of the researcher's mind. During the interviews, for example, it was difficult, but important, not to assume or insert personal opinions. The semi-structured interview questions were helpful in that regard, seeking clarity when answers were ambiguous. The intention of the researcher was to maintain a neutral position, both through the questioning and verbal tone. During the coding process, all data were paid equal attention, and the excerpts double-checked contextually to avoid misunderstandings. The researcher aimed to ensure that all research data were ascribed equal significance in the analysis and reporting process. To achieve this, they maintained a record that identified individual participant data related to each theme and sub-theme, helping to minimise the risk of themes being inaccurately overstated or understated.

3. Results

The thematic analysis yielded three main themes: Holistic Wellbeing, Professional Wellbeing, and Educational Dynamics, with sub-themes as shown in Figure 1.

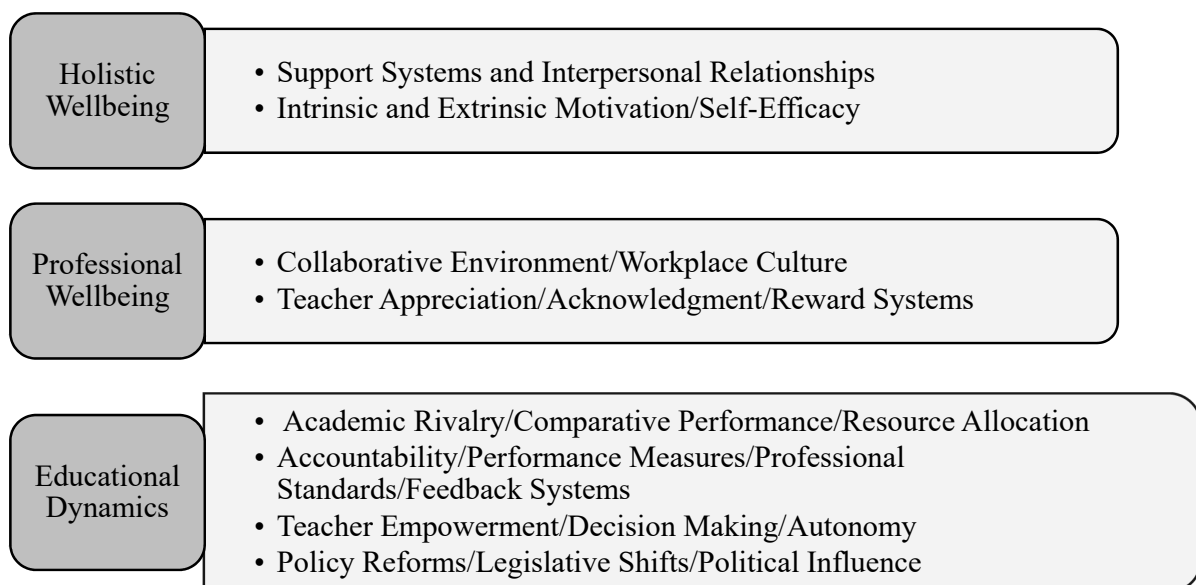


Figure 1. Thematic map of the influencing factors on teachers' perception of occupational value and accountability (themes, left; sub-themes, right).

Significant altruistic characteristics were common amongst participants, who stated their main motivation was to help pupils, their comparatively low salary was an accepted part of the role, and limited control over its influence was expressed. Additional sub-themes of social context, health, and resilience were identified, but removed in order to focus on the most prevalent ones.

3.1. Holistic Wellbeing

This theme indicates the lived experience of teaching encroaches on many different aspects of employees' lives. Teachers' homelives are often impacted by workload and wellbeing issues, influenced mainly by a desire to be effective in their role and make a difference to society. Within this theme, the sub-themes of support systems/interpersonal relationships and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation/self-efficacy were identified.

3.1.1. Support Systems and Interpersonal Relationships

The opinions of family and friends significantly influenced the occupational value of teachers, with many teachers asserting these opinions matter the most to them as their awareness of the time and effort teachers put into their job outside school hours enhances empathy and provides vital support.

(P07) . . . my close family and friends, really. I can sort of forget about the wider society, and even if they think that we have loads of holidays and finish at three, they don't really know so I can forget about that. It's more people that are important to me.

Clearly family and friends offer a great deal of support to teachers, especially when they experience professional challenges, but teachers are also aware that the profession can sometimes have a negative impact on homelife.

(P01) I was just so stressed all the time, and I just felt like I wasn't really a nice person to my family. And my husband (was) saying there must be a better way to live your life. . . I'm going to see how it goes. My husband's still a bit sceptical.

Overall, these close supportive relationships positively impact teacher wellbeing and help to mitigate negative societal opinions. Teachers rely on these supportive networks to build greater resilience, enabling them to withstand the physical and emotional challenges often experienced in the profession.

3.1.2. Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation/Self-Efficacy

A core motivation for teaching was expressed as a desire to improve the outcomes of all children and make a positive difference to society. Efficacy has a vast role in terms of motivation, enhancing or diminishing their perception of professional value.

(P06) I feel that we are a strong team, and the core reason that everybody is here is to develop, because we value the children, and we want them to have a better life.

Pupil attitudes often impact feelings of efficacy and, where attitudes to learning are negative, it makes it very difficult for teachers to stay motivated.

(P01) Last year was the toughest year I've had just the apathy of the children and the parents really, just they didn't really see education as important. . . I've never had that before. . . they were just not bothered with me, and it was that, I guess, not feeling valued by anyone. . . I was trying really hard to teach them, and nobody was really bothered whether I was there or not.

Alternatively, teachers who overtly experience representing positive role models to their pupils gain value and respect through that experience.

(P04) I like the effect it has on the children, particularly it being a very low social economic area with not a lot of funding. A lot of children who lack an Asian male role model, I like to give that perspective as well. And in terms of being broader even, a male

role model, just for all the children because in primary schools it's usually quite female heavy, and for them to see a male, it kind of opens up ideas and aspirations.

Feeling valued was highlighted as important towards job satisfaction, motivation, energy, and effectiveness. Pupils were seen as particularly pivotal towards teacher value, as they are the main motivation for entering the profession.

3.2. Professional Wellbeing

Evidently, teachers' sense of value is determined mainly from people that understand their position and challenges as well as those who benefit from their efforts. Therefore, colleagues, pupils, and their families represent a highly influential community with the capacity to affect individual and collective professional value, as well as attitudes towards accountability measures. Within this theme, the sub-themes of collaborative environment/workplace culture and teacher appreciation/acknowledgment/reward systems will be discussed.

3.2.1. Collaborative Environment/Workplace Culture

Colleague support is viewed as essential towards creating a positive teaching environment. Identification with a specific social group (within year groups, schools, and professionally), sharing similar attributes, motivations, and experiences, enables effective empathy and support.

(P04) I am very valued but, I'm quite nice to everyone. . . and try to be a team player. And I feel like that obviously resonates with everyone, and they will obviously value me because I value them, and it's a mutual valuation.

Flexibility and acceptance that occasional extra work will be required relates to equity between colleagues. Individuals can feel undervalued when this becomes expected rather than acknowledged. Collective responsibility and fair delegation were seen as significant towards positive relationships.

(P05) (Responsibility) That's peoples' professionalism, their flexibility without being taken advantage of. In schools there's a lot of give and take that is very much balanced out.

However, regarding accountability, the weight of responsibility is not always equally shared between year groups.

(P02) What goes on in terms of year 6 key stage 2 accountability has no bearing on me as a professional because that's the other end of the school.

Given that educational progression is a cumulative process, this is problematic and highlights a need for school communities to adopt a shared accountability approach towards summative assessments, recognising that pupil achievement is the result of a collective effort.

In summary, mutual respect, collaboration, and supportive relationships between colleagues support occupational value.

3.2.2. Teacher Appreciation/Acknowledgment/Reward Systems

All agreed that recognition had a positive impact, but opinions on the importance of this were mixed. Those who considered recognition highly important found it to be motivating and energising.

(P10) Really important. You put your heart and soul into it, so you want to be recognised and when you are, that makes you feel like you're doing a good job, then that encourages me to keep going.

Others also acknowledged that it made them feel understood and was beneficial towards their wellbeing and resilience.

(P08) . . .it boosts your self-esteem and motivates you a bit more. . . It doesn't hurt to have somebody else say, ah. . . that's been a really difficult day, you've done really well

with that today. Obviously that makes you feel a bit better, especially if you are having a bit of a down time when you've got a tough class.

Regular, sincere, verbal acknowledgement was appreciated more than other forms. Some recognition was deemed inappropriate because it was not regarded as genuine but rather mollification.

(P02) ...when you felt everything's just a bit rotten and management is getting at everybody and asking for changes and then you've got celebrations in the staffroom on Friday, that's not going to fix it. . . that's not what we need. That doesn't make it okay to treat people badly.

It appears to be the regularity, authenticity, circumstance, and receiving recognition from a range of people (management, colleagues, pupils, parents) that impact teacher value the most.

3.3. Educational Dynamics

The government influences teachers' professional value in various ways, some of which are apparent while others are more subtle. The major elements of government influence upon education are the statutory laws, policies, curriculums, tests, and standards imposed on schools. More subtle influences include the level of respect that is implied by government rhetoric regarding educational professions. Within the theme of educational dynamics, the sub-themes of academic rivalry/comparative performance/resource allocation, accountability/performance measures/professional standards/feedback systems, teacher empowerment/decision making/autonomy, and policy reforms/legislative shifts/political influence were identified.

3.3.1. Academic Rivalry/Comparative Performance/Resource Allocation

When the government introduced MATs, it was claimed that collaborative pedagogical cultures would be enhanced as a result, sharing good practice and initiating innovative ideas. The lived experience of teachers working within these trusts challenges that idea, however. Teachers felt competition was imposed through comparison with schools in their trust and the education system as a whole.

(P07) Teacher-wise within school, I don't think so. I think there's more within the Trust because we have a data league table. . . Looking at how we've done in comparison to other schools. I think externally there is competition, but I wouldn't say internally there is.

Interestingly it was noted by a few participants that competition can have a positive effect, helping professional development and motivating individuals towards career progression.

(P01) . . .there was an amount of competitiveness between the teachers. . . It was quite a stressful environment, but I do think it did help me learn a lot. . . Sometimes it can get in the way. Just on a social level when people are trying to outdo each other, but I think that probably happens everywhere.

The majority associated negatively with competition and stated an intention to avoid it, and most denied engaging in competitive behaviours.

Accountability measures such as Ofsted were highlighted as promoting competition between schools.

(P06) Sometimes external factors try and put competitiveness in-between schools, for example. . . Ofsted. . . all that kind of thing doesn't help, because it promotes schools to be competitive with each other.

Teachers' experience of competition through accountability is mixed, often dependent upon the social context of the schools' geographical location and cohort characteristics.

(P07) If you're at a school and you're seen to be a school that has 90% at age related, I think you are valued more in society than if you're at a school that struggles to get that

many percent. Even if you've got them to make massive amounts of progress. . . then you're not as good.

The implication is that the publishing of results as a comparison tool is unfair, as it does not represent a true measure of the competence and effort of teachers working in more challenging schools. Reporting progress could be a much more equitable measure, though still remains flawed as a comparative tool.

Primary schools have been undersubscribed in recent years, leading to reduced resources, with the consequence of promoting competition between schools and reducing the incentive to collaborate with other settings.

3.3.2. Accountability/Performance Measures/Professional Standards/Feedback Systems

Teachers recognise that accountability is a necessary and important aspect of their role, though it is also understood to be a significant source of stress and often involves large amounts of time-consuming bureaucracy.

When conducted sensitively, there is a confirmatory aspect of scrutiny, which can support teacher confidence and reaffirm shared goals. Through regular supportive dialogue, teachers feel their professionalism is valued and appreciated.

(P04) Experience wise I think things like Ofsted or observations. . . it shows I'm on the right track and even though it's stressful, I think it is good to have because then at least you know you're doing a good job.

A certain amount of monitoring is expected and accepted, but teachers often feel devalued when they feel excessively scrutinised, equating this with a lack of confidence from management in their professional ability.

(P10) . . .there's been times when it just felt nonstop, every week an observation or walk throughs or book scrutiny's. Every week and I just think it puts a bit too much pressure on you and you just like there must be something wrong, that's why they're constantly looking.

Constructive feedback is welcomed by teachers but is often difficult to receive consistently due, in part, to time pressures impacted by bureaucratic commitments.

(P01) We don't have many observations at our school. . .when we have had them we don't really get any feedback, because the head teacher's really busy. So, she sat in a lesson for 45 min, and then you have no idea how it went. . . The accountability is difficult, isn't it, when you don't know how you're doing?

Constructive feedback that genuinely supports teachers' improvement and self-reflection was integral towards supporting value. Accountability measures that make this distinction were appreciated, rather than unconstructive scrutiny.

The perception of professional value has an impact on attitudes towards accountability.

(P04) I think it's only human isn't it? If you weren't feeling valued you'd probably take it the wrong way. If you're already not feeling valued, you're not in the right mental state, so you might challenge everything.

In general, teachers communicated a greater willingness to engage with accountability where the need is clearly defined, alongside feedback that is timely, supportive, and beneficial to their professional development. Experience of feeling valued influenced responses to stress and accountability.

3.3.3. Teacher Empowerment/Decision Making/Autonomy

MATs have instigated a movement towards consistency, by implementing prescriptive, highly structured lessons often dictated by fidelity to a bought-in scheme of work. This reduces teacher autonomy and professionalism because it does not account for individual

characteristics/strengths and pupil knowledge, in favour of uniformity across schools within the trust.

(P08) I think it's difficult, especially now we've become an academy, everything is very top down, so you can have an opinion, but if it comes from above, there isn't anything that you're going to be able to say or do that can change their mind because that's a decision that they've already made as a blanket decision for everybody.

Decisions imposed without staff consultation were not always communicated effectively, and therefore, negatively affect teacher value.

(P03) I don't always feel supported. . . Sometimes decisions are made that I don't understand, and the repercussions of those decisions filter down to me, and I don't feel as valued in those moments.

The participants also expressed frustration that they did not have the power to choose methods that could maximise impact, engagement, and personalise learning for their class.

(P08) I think sometimes. . . staff do feel that you're not doing what you would wish you could with the children all the time, because you're ticking certain boxes off that you have to do.

A sense of depersonalisation and an undermining of professionalism was expressed by the teachers, who feel that the increasing focus on standardised testing is overshadowing the importance of personal connections and individualised learning experiences.

(P10) I feel like it's being run more like a business now and there's lots of targets, and are we really meeting the needs of the children?

The loss of professional autonomy and concerns about universally imposed teaching paradigms are negatively impacting teacher efficacy and enjoyment of their role, thereby reducing their sense of value.

3.3.4. Policy Reforms/Legislative Shifts/Political Influence

Historically, teachers have felt frustrated and disrespected by the UK government, with disagreements around policy, pay, and working conditions. With the recent change in government, however, the participants expressed hope for the future based on an apparent commitment towards collaboration and responsiveness towards teacher concerns.

(P04) I feel like with this new Ofsted framework, and how they're going about things. It feels like they are listening to us and taking into consideration what teaching is actually like. Now they're actually listening to teachers and recognising the workload that we have, trialling 4 day working weeks and things like that, new things, which is quite exciting. I feel like it's going in a good direction.

The participants alluded to the government's impact on workforce resilience, with disillusionment cited as a potential significant factor for influencing resignations.

(P06) Over the past few years with the government that we've had, I feel that it's completely had a negative impact—lots of professionals have left teaching. . . things are slowly starting to turn around, so I'm focusing on that positive and hoping that that continues.

Of the ten teachers interviewed, only two had never considered leaving the profession. Given the fragility of resilience in some sectors of the workforce, the participants highlighted the need for government respect and a greater empathy if they want to implement effective change.

(P02) Further change, how they feel about the profession and depending on what the changes were, I'd sort of look again at whether I wanted to put up with that and stay in my role.

Through consultation with stakeholders, the new government has made a positive start towards making teachers feel more valued. Teachers appear optimistic but cautious in their attitude towards reforms.

4. Discussion

In the current study, teachers described their experience of occupational value as mixed and prone to fluctuation dependent on a range of factors. Several participants referred to their career decisions being influenced by the perception of their professional value in a particular school setting. The most prevalent data focused on the themes of holistic wellbeing, professional wellbeing, and educational dynamics, suggesting that these were the most important factors that influence occupational value in a primary school context, from a teacher perspective. Experience of accountability reforms was also reported as either supportive or damaging towards occupational value, dependent upon whether individuals regarded them as positive, helpful experiences.

In agreement with previous research (Akiba et al., 2023), occupational value was described as highly important. Indeed, the participants acknowledged that teaching is a challenging profession, and if they felt consistent and sustained undervaluation, then this became a concern where most would consider resignation. The general findings from this study support previous research suggesting that the largest influences on occupational value are positive relationships, as well as how understood and supported teachers feel (Seligman, 2011), especially by those closest to them. We know from these previous studies that the influence of these supportive relationships could mitigate negative public opinion (Goetz et al., 2024) and increase the perception of teacher value.

In accordance with the theory of teacher pedagogical culture (Stearns et al., 2015), teacher recognition from colleagues was highly influential towards motivation and teacher value. Appreciation through regular, authentic, simple acknowledgement promoted teacher wellbeing (Kaynak, 2020), with other forms of appreciation (e.g., biscuits in the staffroom or gift incentives) sometimes regarded with suspicion or seen as inappropriate.

The results are consistent with those of Hall and McGinity (2015), maintaining that the loss of professional autonomy is still of concern amongst teachers and negatively impacts professional value. The pressure to conform with policies and methodologies determined by MATs, ensuring standardisation amongst their schools, can sometimes mean that teachers feel they are not meeting the specific needs of their children (Skinner et al., 2021). This creates an incongruity between teachers' compliance for the sake of cohesion and maintaining their ideology within an increasingly business-led model (Gee, 2000; Keddie, 2019; Rushton et al., 2023). The greater flexibility is perhaps needed to ensure that schools' unique needs and identity are not lost by association with MATs (Flores, 2023). There is also increased pressure through trust-compiled league tables to achieve impressive targets and data (Milner, 2013). The current study adds to this research by paying attention to the issue of diversity of schools within MATs, where teachers did not always feel that specific challenges were fully understood and attended to. A need for equity rather than equality were alluded to in connection with accountability (Levatino et al., 2024). Trust built through a sensitive analysis of accountability measures could be used to support professional autonomy, ensuring that it is respected and preserved (Dulfer et al., 2023).

In contrast to the findings of Kegeci and Kara (2023), this study found that salary itself was not viewed as directly influential towards occupational value; however, an excessive workload in relation to paid working hours was highlighted. A substantial portion of teachers' work is unpaid and unrecorded, making it difficult to control or compensate. The pressure and workload significantly impact wellbeing, with many teachers referencing these factors in connection with attrition.

Attitudes towards accountability reforms were dependent on the impact (beneficial or ineffective) on the pupil progress and teachers' professional skills, as well as whether relevance is apparent and feedback constructive (Katrodia & Kambonde, 2023). Where accountability reforms were regarded as useful, there was a tendency for occupational value

to be positively affected through the affirmation of efficacy, which agrees with the findings of Akiba et al. (2023). Accountability measures that were viewed as overly bureaucratic, time consuming, invasive, and ineffective were perceived as indicative of professional distrust, therefore devaluing (Erichsen & Reynolds, 2020; Gupta & Zhao, 2024). In the current study, the increased stress of pressure to perform well in comparison with national standards was more apparent within schools in low socio-economic areas, as pupil starting points tended to be lower on entry (Pulido-Montes & Martínez-Usarralde, 2022). Similar to the findings of Keçeci and Kara (2023), the teachers felt their extra effort to support the pupils' accelerated progress was undervalued by comparison because end results were still below age-related expectations. Competition was reported as mainly experienced externally through comparative test scores and was referenced in a negative way. This is perhaps explained by the collectivist outlook of this particular professional group (Stearns et al., 2015), which seems to regard collaboration and competition as uncomplimentary elements. Webster (2011) asserts that competition is not intrinsically negative, however, and can be utilised to motivate and inspire collaboration. Perhaps, the stigma of competition could be reduced by methods that constructively operationalise it alongside collaboration to benefit the education sector as a whole.

Teachers have not previously felt supported by the government in regard to addressing public misconceptions and raising the social status of the profession (Kim et al., 2024), but this study highlights a strong sense of optimism surrounding the change in government. This is largely because the profession is being consulted on the development of changes, a point highlighted by Rocque et al. (2024). By collaborating with stakeholders in this way, the government communicates respect for the education system and teachers' experience value through alliance rather than autocracy.

Overall, teachers accept the requirement for an enhanced level of accountability because they value the importance of their job and recognise the impact that they have. The data indicate that the pressure of accountability becomes overpowering when the quality of feedback is poor, scrutiny feels excessive, and responsibilities are not distributed fairly amongst colleagues/year groups. This imbalance of accountability, in the context of what Stearns et al. (2015) described as the collective pedagogical teacher culture, has implications for teacher morale and job satisfaction. Shared responsibility can create positive working relationships, which lowers stress and results in increased efficacy (Goetz et al., 2024).

4.1. Limitations and Future Directions

In order for the analysis of the data to be thorough, time constraints dictated that a small sample size was used; therefore, the results cannot be generalised, but they do offer naturalistic and rich insights into the research topic. The majority of the participants were female with only one male, but this is representative of the percentage of male primary school teachers in the UK (14%; Department for Education, 2024b). Thematic analyses have been criticised as lacking methodical rigor; to address this, advice for applying Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase method was consulted (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; McMullin, 2023; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). As a reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher is not subjective, decisions made can affect the analysis, but were carried out with consistency (in this case, an essentialist/realist approach). It was beyond the scope of this study to report on all the identified themes; therefore, only the most prevalent were reported. Some of the data were very vivid but unique; therefore, although tempting, it was disregarded to avoid overstating individual cases. As some of the participants were more vocal than others, the flexibility of the interviews was helpful towards eliciting more detail, but this was difficult to negotiate at times. Timing may have affected the responses of the participants, as some

were conducted during a working day, some just after, and others at the weekend or during the holidays.

4.2. Practical Implications

Given the importance of colleague relationships, collaboration should be encouraged and incentivised. The stigma of competition might be diminished by tackling the issue of fair accountability in terms of diverse settings, for example, publishing data comparing progress rather than attainment, which would offer a more accurate insight into teacher competence. Focusing on enhancing teachers' professional skills, rather than solely on their students' attainment, could make competition more acceptable, as it aligns better with their ethical standards. Potentially, this could also increase teachers' supportive network and create professional communities outside affiliation with one institution. Flexibility to address some of the unintended consequences of accountability policies (including pupil engagement, narrowing of the curriculum, etc.) and a demonstration of trust through teacher autonomy would raise occupational value. This research contributes to existing knowledge by contextualising and deepening our understanding of the lived experiences of primary teachers in the UK with regard to occupational value as well as the influence of global accountability reforms.

4.3. Future Directions

Future studies might explore teacher value and accountability in different social contexts to gain insight towards supporting schools in challenging areas, which have higher staff turnover and struggle to recruit experienced staff ([Pulido-Montes & Martínez-Usarralde, 2022](#)). It would also be beneficial to conduct a large-scale study analysing the workload associated with accountability practices comparing different year groups, to gain an insight into how accountability is shared out amongst colleagues. A longitudinal phenomenological study exploring the impact of the new UK governments' influence through impending policy changes on teacher value would provide valuable insights into teachers' professional identity, motivation, and overall wellbeing.

5. Conclusions

The data revealed the importance of the teachers' perception of occupational value towards significantly influencing efficacy and organisational commitment, as well as career decisions ([Bashir & Gani, 2020](#); [Nguyen et al., 2020](#)). The data highlighted an existential conflict that could threaten teacher identity due to a loss of autonomy and undermining fundamental convictions, ultimately affecting their motivation. Given teachers' critical role in society and their major impact on positive pupil outcomes, it is crucial to prioritise strategies that improve their perceived value. Raising the positive social profile of the teaching profession through the media and familiarising the public with an updated realistic understanding of what modern teaching entails would be a beneficial step. This would ideally include respectful and sympathetic dialogue regarding the profession when discussed politically and the creation of a truly collaborative relationship to the benefit of both educational and political stakeholders. This would seem essential for sustaining the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

As you will know from the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, this research focuses on understanding teacher perspectives on occupational value and the implementation of global accountability reforms.

Within the interview I will refer to global accountability reforms; in the UK these include, inclusion, published data and floor standards, progress scores, statutory assessments such as the phonics screening check, Ofsted inspections, performance management, book scrutiny and lesson observations.

The interview conversation will be recorded and transcribed for later analysis. However, the responses/data you provide will remain confidential and kept on a device requiring password protection in line with current GDPR laws. I would like to emphasize that this is about your personal perception of the topic. There are no right or wrong answers; you do not need to answer all the questions, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, during or after the interview process (until 2 weeks after the interview has taken place).

Please be aware that under safeguarding legislation if a disclosure of risk of harm to yourself or others is made, psychologists must consider their ethical responsibility, which may result in the need to breach confidentiality to prevent harm.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Are you happy for me to continue?

Over-arching themes for discussion:

RQ1: *How do teachers describe their occupational value within a primary school context? (Main questions 1–6)*

RQ2: *What are the most important factors that influence occupational value in a primary school context, from a teacher perspective? (Main questions 7–11)*

RQ3: *What are teachers’ personal experiences of occupational value in relation to global accountability reforms in a primary school context? (Main questions 12–16)*

Initial Questions:

- I. Confirm gender and age of participant.
- II. How long have you been teaching?
- III. What is your qualification?
- IV. What year group do you currently teach?

Main Questions

1. What do you personally value in regard to the teaching profession?
2. What has been your experience of how others perceive the occupational value of teachers?

3. What has been your experience of being valued within the school environment? (possible prompt: from colleagues, pupils, management).
4. Whose opinions are influential towards your own feeling of professional value and why?
5. Do you feel that your experience, ideas, and opinions are valued by colleagues and the leadership team?
6. Does your salary influence your experience of occupational value?
7. Which factors in your opinion are the most influential in terms of occupational value?
8. Have you or would you ever consider leaving teaching and why?
9. How important is personal recognition/appreciation to you as a teacher?
10. Do you experience competitive elements in your role and does this effect your occupational value? (possible prompts: if things are/aren't going well?).
11. What matters the most to you in terms of feeling valued?
12. What is your experience of accountability measures, such as observations or performance management?
13. Are you involved in decisions that affect you, for example, do you feel able to contribute, feedback, challenge judgements or decisions?
14. Do you feel that professional value has an impact on your energy and motivation to engage with accountability measures?
15. What impact do you feel global accountability reforms in primary schools has had on teachers occupational value?
16. How do you think occupational value might potentially effect teachers' reaction towards accountability measures?

As indicated, responses may be further probed as necessary to maximise response data using phrases such as, "could you tell me more about that?" "What was your opinion of that?" "How do you feel that impacts X?"

Thank you for your contributions and valuable time.

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