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# Unlocking education through relationship building: Identity and agency in English educational institutions during Covid-19

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a longitudinal study in the North of England with 13 educators in schools, colleges and universities during two lockdowns. The project was designed to ‘unlock’ education by providing spaces to co-create new ways of thinking about education in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Focus groups were conducted with school and college teachers as well as university staff at the end of the first and second English lockdowns, in summer 2020 and spring 2021. An initial analysis identified issues with expectations and communication between educators and executive management as well as a lack of agency of educators, and how participants framed them as impacting on their identity as educators. Therefore, the framework of *tactics of intersubjectivity* was adopted to explore how educators discursively positioned themselves and others through constructions of similarity and difference, realness and power, and how their professional identities were affected by the experience of working through the pandemic and by those around them. Whilst educators took opportunities to *authenticate* their identity and reimagine education, their agency was undermined by top-down governing involving little successful communication, leading to *denaturalising* and *illegitimising* experiences for educators. Executive management were perceived as lacking engagement with staff and understanding of the implications of their decisions on them. The

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findings call for relationship building and recognition of educators' voice.

#### KEYWORDS

authentication, educator identity, pandemic, voice

### Key insights

#### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

We draw on the framework of tactics of intersubjectivity to explore English school, college and university educators' experiences of facilitating teaching and learning during two lockdowns (spring 2020 and 2021) in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Education under lockdown impacted similarly on educators' professional identities, despite their diverse contexts, as they experienced a lack of agency due to institutional power structures, top-down management and poor communication. This resulted in a disconnect between senior management and staff and calls for building new relationships in the neoliberal era.

## INTRODUCTION

By April 2020, Covid-19 had spread across the globe, impacting 210 countries, 188 of which had closed schools to some extent (The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2020). China, where the novel coronavirus was discovered, was the first country to close schools nationally to contain its spread (Ma et al., 2021), and other countries followed suit to varying degrees. Universities were also impacted: 91% of universities across the world moved their learning to online to all or some extent, with 7% cancelling teaching altogether. The 2% of unaffected universities included those which were already completely online as part of their educational model (Marinoni et al., 2020). The four home nations of the United Kingdom moved to remote learning for the majority of children and university students for between 10 and 19 weeks (including holidays) depending on nation, age and school year (Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2022, p. 386). Our project aimed to provide a space to discuss the experiences of professionals working in education settings in the North of England. We hoped this might afford participants to 'reimagine' the education system, practices and possibilities.

In England, the first so-called 'lockdown' started on 20 March 2020; all schools and colleges closed their premises to all but vulnerable children, including those who were Looked After children, those who were supported by social services or had an Educational Health Care Plan, and children of key workers (Department for Education, 2020a). These groups were still able to attend school premises, either part-time or full-time depending on their circumstances. Yet, far from being closed, schools were open to these pupils throughout the lockdown period including the Easter and half-term holidays (Breslin, 2021). Universities moved entirely to remote learning, but many kept some of their premises open for students who were care leavers or otherwise vulnerable (Office for Students, 2020). There was little warning and thus little preparedness for what remote learning might look like, nor were

there sufficient resources such as laptops for staff, or indeed children and students (Howard et al., 2021).

This paper is part of a project involving focus groups with university students, youth workers, university educational professionals (including lecturers, librarians, timetablers and administrators) and teachers in schools and colleges. It focuses on the groups of teachers and university staff (13 participants), retaining this distinction where necessary to provide context, but referring to them collectively as 'educators' for their common involvement in delivering or facilitating learning and teaching—note though that occasionally university staff refer to themselves as teachers in the data. Whilst we recognise that they work in very different contexts, our discussion encompasses both of these groups owing to interesting similarities in experiences and frustrations with the systems that participants were working in, including government edicts, the media and expectations of parents or executive management. Uncovering these commonalities in lived experiences and demonstrating the wide-ranging impact of lockdowns on educators across the sector is thus a contribution of this paper. The analysis takes a discourse analytic approach to explore how educator identity and agency were impacted and negotiated throughout the pandemic. Whilst we predominantly focus on educators' experiences of ensuring education under lockdown, participants also oriented to how this relates to wider issues such as inclusivity and accessibility of education and how education should respond to the reopening of society after lockdown. Such an exploration is worthwhile given the dynamic nature of identity and the way it can be affected by exceptional and new situations (Chaaban et al., 2021), which in turn may shape educators' response to new policies and requirements from above (Lasky, 2005).

Whilst there is research about educators' experiences under lockdown (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Breslin, 2021; Kim et al., 2021; Reimers, 2022; Sharp et al., 2020), this project is significant due to its longitudinal nature. Each group met three times, twice in the first English lockdown of 2020 and again in the spring of 2021 during the second lockdown. It should be noted that there was another form of lockdown in November 2020 (Stackpath, n.d.), but educational establishments were not closed during this time. We are focusing on the two lockdowns that impacted education. The analysis uncovers a shift from participants' initial optimism about reimagining education to a realisation of how existing structures were limiting their agency and impacting on their identity as educators. We argue that the two lockdowns have illuminated power relations and practices that had been hidden to some extent (cf. Roy, 2020). The focus groups highlighted how collegiality and notions of 'we are all in it together' were belied by remote management and little listening to staff. There was a strong sense that executive management, the highest tier of management in schools, colleges and universities, was hiding remotely whilst giving diktats, but did not listen or even ask how staff were. Covid-19 thus exacerbated and revealed the disjuncture between executive management and educators 'on the ground', increasing alienation and decreasing the agency of educators. Whilst there has been research on the changing nature of teachers' identities during the pandemic (Christensen et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Mellon, 2022), this paper specifically looks at how institutional power structures and top-down management impacted on educators and how they in turn constructed their identity when reflecting on their experience of enabling teaching and learning during the pandemic. This research hence shows the rupture of working practices, educator identities and professional relationships at the focal point of education under lockdown, but placed in the wider context of increasing pressures on educators and top-down management in a neoliberal context (Moore & Clarke, 2016; Morrish & Sauntson, 2020; Thomson et al., 2021), as discussed below.

We begin with an overview of English education during the pandemic, including some emerging difficulties. This is followed by a discussion of educator identity and agency, with a focus on Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) tactics of intersubjectivity. The methodology outlines the data collection through focus groups and how the data was analysed. The analysis is

divided into the first and second English lockdown, highlighting issues of educator identity, agency and voice, and how participants conveyed these through language. The analysis and discussion are thus situated at the intersection of education and linguistics, exploring how participants expressed their experiences of education under lockdown and thereby constructed their own identity as educators, adding to the field of study of teacher identity. At the same time, we consider the implications for educational institutions and the need for creating spaces for critical conversations between educators and executive management in a neoliberal era, such that all parties can 'dig deep with critical issues and disrupt the hegemonic order perceived' (Vetter et al., 2021, n.p.).

## COVID-19 AND EDUCATION UNDER LOCKDOWN

On 1 June 2020, English primary schools saw the return of Reception and Year 6 children to school, and on 15 June, Years 10 and 12 returned to schools and colleges, often on a part-time basis (Kim et al., 2021). The key exam years, Years 11 and 13, had already left school in May, their GCSE and A Level exams having been cancelled and centre-assessed grades being provided instead (Howard et al., 2021). From the beginning of July 2021, primary schools were able to invite other years to attend face-to-face sessions where there was 'Covid secure' capacity, which at that point involved classes of no more than 15 children, dependent on space (Department for Education, 2020b). Students at universities were still learning remotely, but were able to return to campus in September 2021, although there were varying university policies and practices regarding remote learning and some students had very little or no face-to-face learning that term (Hubble & Bolton, 2020). Face-to-face learning was also diminished due to rising Covid-19 case numbers and large numbers of students having to isolate soon after they arrived (Khan, 2021). There was further disruption later in the autumn term as the government tried to ensure students returned home safely for Christmas having isolated first, with universities being advised to teach online to facilitate this. However, the dates the government provided did not necessarily link with the reality of individual university term dates, teaching and placement plans (Universities UK, 2020).

All children not receiving 'education otherwise' (Education Act, 1944) were expected to attend school and college from September 2020, although education was still disrupted, with children being sent home to isolate (Howard et al., 2021). In 2021, some primary schools returned on 4 January, with an expected delay for secondary schools (Timmins, 2021). However, by the end of that day, the English government policy changed, and all schools closed premises to children except vulnerable children and those whose parents were key workers (Timmins, 2021). On 8 March all children except those educated 'otherwise' were expected to return to schools and colleges. Students were only able to attend university face-to-face sessions during this time if they were on a practice-based course such as medicine or teacher training (Kernohan, 2021). All students were allowed to return to university campus on 17 May 2021, which for many was at a point of cessation of academic activities for the academic year (Universities UK, 2021).

During this second lockdown, the number of children attending school premises, especially primary schools, increased dramatically compared to the previous lockdown (Blundell et al., 2021). This was firstly due to more occupations being added to the list of key workers, including but not limited to those who worked in the healthcare industry, the transport and border industry and the food industry. A second factor in this increase was that more children were considered vulnerable: the then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson decreed that any child without a laptop or functioning broadband should be considered vulnerable and attend school (Gov.uk, 2021). Consequently, overall, 21% of primary school pupils and 5%

of secondary school pupils were in school in the second lockdown compared to 4% and 1%, respectively, in the first lockdown (Barnes, 2021).

Education under lockdown led to increased digital learning. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) note that pre-pandemic, technology was seen by many as a 'good-to-have' and something that we might aspire to invest in when time, money and skills allowed. However, the emergency move to remote education converted a good-to-have into necessity overnight. Not only were there questions of technology being available, but also whether it was suitably up-to-date for the software required and whether there was internet access available for everyone requiring it (FE News, 2021). Moreover, even if this was the case, there was still a question of skills; despite many children, students and educators being digital natives, they lacked the required digital skills for remote learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021). Arguably, the correct term for this overnight conversion to remote learning is 'emergency remote learning'; it was not akin to the remote learning offered by leaders in the field, such as The Open University (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020, p. ii). This emergency nature caused much stress to educators (Müller et al., 2021). Furthermore, the sudden nature of the move to remote learning vastly increased educators' workload due to upskilling, the additional need for communication with colleagues and students, and dealing with extra pastoral issues (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021).

To summarise, the English lockdowns were a dynamic situation involving continued negotiation of who would receive education face-to-face or virtually, and government guidance was at times misaligned with the schedules and requirements of schools, colleges and universities. Not only did this have consequences for ways of working, such as having to adopt digital learning at short notice, but it also impacted on the identity of staff as educators, to which the discussion now turns.

## IDENTITY AND TACTICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Professional agency and educator identity are both complex phenomena, and as researchers have argued, interlinked (Bowen et al., 2021; Chaaban et al., 2021; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Identities are not static entities, but rather they are continually negotiated and impacted upon by the temporality and social situation of an individual (Chaaban et al., 2021). Professional agency includes 'the power to act, to affect matters, to make decisions and choices, and take stances' (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 2). As Lasky (2005, p. 900) argues, educators' agency and identity affect how they interact with policy and 'new mandates' from above; thus it is pertinent for educational institutions to understand more about the interaction of identity and agency if they wish educators to work effectively within a changing landscape of education. Indeed, the university sector in the United Kingdom has undergone drastic changes through the neoliberal shift in recent decades, with universities increasingly being run like businesses, in turn making their students into consumers and their staff into service providers placed under an ever-increasing audit culture (Morrish & Sauntson, 2020). We argue that such performance pressure has only increased further with education under lockdown. Indeed, Watermeyer et al. (2021, p. 655) coined the term 'Pandemia', in which academic institutions utilised the pandemic for 'surrendering the ethic of care'. Given the weight of expectations experienced by participants during the pandemic, it is essential that executive management understand the impact of mandates on their staff and how the endless need to adapt and perform impacts severely on professional identity and wellbeing (Ball, 2003). Yet there appears to be an intensification of the managerialism in education settings as charted by Connell (2013), in which managers are ever more remote, whilst granting decreasing agency to professional educators. Therefore, it is worthwhile exploring educators' identity with consideration of institutional power relations. As Clarke (2009, p. 196) argues, consid-



ering the 'ethico-politics of teacher identity is something that could be utilized to resist any attempt to impose a narrowing of focus on the meaning of teaching' and part of broadening our understandings of education in the long term.

Suitable for such an endeavour are Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) tactics of intersubjectivity (henceforth Tol). Tol is a discourse analytic framework to analyse identity construction. It is part of their 2005 conceptualisation of identity not as an inherent aspect of a person, but as discursively constructed, relational and emergent from interaction. Tol understands identity as '*the social positioning of self and other*' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586, original emphasis) through discursive and other semiotic means along three interrelated dimensions: 'sameness versus difference, genuineness versus artifice, and institutional recognition versus structural marginalization' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 494). Each dimension presents a continuum of possible positioning encapsulated by two tactics towards either end of the dimension. This means that the tactics are not mutually exclusive, but rather provide a means of exploring the varied ways in which identity can be constructed within and across these interrelated dimensions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 494).

The dimension of similarity and difference focuses on how subjects position themselves or are positioned as similar or different, regardless of any objective similarity or difference they may have. *Adequation* is the creation of 'sufficient' similarity—a blend of the terms 'adequacy' and 'equation' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 494). The opposite tactic, *distinction*, involves the highlighting of difference. Within the dimension concerned with realness, *authentication* is the creation of a genuine identity, whilst *denaturalisation* creates identity that is unreal, unnatural or experiencing some other form of 'rupture' (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004, p. 501). Finally, the dimension of power comprises *authorisation*, whereby some identity is portrayed as legitimate and allowed, and *illegitimation*, through which identity is denied and rejected. Despite emerging from Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) language and sexuality research, the framework lends itself to exploring other aspects of identity, such as in the present research.

## METHODOLOGY

Some saw the pandemic as a time of hope for renewal, an opportunity to examine education and rethink its purpose (Arnove, 2020; Cahapay, 2020; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Stern, 2020; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). In this spirit, this project was designed in the hope that students and educators, including school, college and university staff and youth workers, could reimagine education and 'unlock' it in light of the neoliberal restraints on education (Ball, 2003; Blacker, 2013). The aim was to 'generate rich, complex, nuanced, and even contradictory accounts of how people ascribe meaning to and interpret their lived experience with an eye toward how these accounts might be used to affect social policy and social change' (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011, p. 546).

The wider study included one group of youth workers, two groups of students, one group of school and college teachers (including one primary, one secondary and one college teacher) and two groups of university staff comprising lecturers, senior lecturers, timetablers, librarians and administrators. Participants were recruited via social media and wider email calls through a variety of school partnership, university and student networks, which asked for people who might want to reimagine education in the light of the pandemic. Whilst the youth workers came from across the United Kingdom and Malta, the rest of the participants came from schools, colleges and universities in the North of England. Due to the nature of the discussions that emerged and the surfacing of participants' critical stance towards leadership, it is crucial to protect anonymity. We therefore refrain from being more specific here in terms of what institutions are involved or what participants' exact job titles are, as

these may potentially be traceable through revealing institution-specific nuanced structures of leadership.

The wider study seeks to make a contribution to theory by engaging in discussions of neoliberalism and education, and we give voice to issues raised by university students (Haines Lyon et al., 2022). Yet for this paper, we are focusing on educators from the formal education institutions, which involves three separate groups: one group of school and college teachers, and two groups of university staff. Participants were invited to attend two one-hour focus group meetings via Microsoft Teams to question how education might be reshaped. During the first meeting with each group, three questions were discussed, as detailed in Table 1.

At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to choose a focus for more in-depth discussion during the next meeting, held between a week and a fortnight later. Both groups of university staff chose to explore future possibilities for university education, whereas the school and college teachers decided to unpick issues of expectations.

At the end of the second meeting, participants agreed that they had found the meetings useful and would be interested in meeting again. The second lockdown provided an opportune moment to extend the study and invite former participants to a third meeting. Whilst not all returned due to time constraints and not all remained in the same group depending on participant availability, the separate strands for school and college teachers and for university staff were maintained. In this third meeting, participants were asked to reflect on the previous year in light of the second lockdown and any implications for education. The number of participants constituting each group is shown in Table 2.

All meetings were recorded and a verbatim transcription was produced, assigning each participant a pseudonym. An initial analysis identified common themes of inequality and problems with digital access, as well as issues of agency, trust, voice and communication. Educators were under great pressure due to expectations placed on them by employers, parents, students and themselves. This was impacting their identity as educators, which emerged from the way participants discursively framed these matters. Given the importance of language in the construction of social reality (Burr, 2015), we drew on Tol (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004) to investigate these matters further and obtain insight into power dynamics and the impact of institutional behaviour on the agency and identity of educators.

Whilst *denaturalisation* and *illegitimation* stood out, we did not count individual occurrences of these tactics, nor did we constrain ourselves in how long an extract from the transcript was—this could vary from part of an utterance to an extended turn at talk. This is in line with Bucholtz and Hall's (2004) presentation of the framework, which does not raise

**TABLE 1** Questions used in the first meeting with each group.

	Focus group questions
1	What are your experiences of working under lockdown?
2	What are the positives?
3	What are the challenges?

**TABLE 2** Number of participants and code for each focus group.

	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3
Strand	Summer 2020	Summer 2020	Spring 2021
School/college teachers	3 (SC-1)	3 (SC-2)	3 (SC-3)
University staff group A	6 (UA-1)	6 (UA-2)	4 (UA-3)
University staff group B	4 (UB-1)	3 (UB-2)	5 (UB-3)



the question of how long an instance of a tactic may be or whether they should be countable, thus giving the freedom to make these decisions to the analyst. Rather than producing an overview of which tactics emerged how often then, we see the value of the framework in helping us explore the issues raised by participants with a close focus on the language used to convey them.

## ANALYSIS

### First UK lockdown

The practitioners in schools, colleges and universities expressed how their experiences during the first lockdown in spring 2020 were changing their job and their ways of living. Their lives were being disrupted, and such rupture of existing patterns impacted on their educator identity. Whilst their experiences were shaped by their specific teaching contexts in schools and colleges or universities, a lot of commonalities emerged, which form the focus of our analysis.

### Expectations

A key issue emerging from all three groups of school, college and university educators was the rise in expectations of work and stress resulting from this. Remote learning led to different ways of contacting educators, such as through Google Classrooms and Microsoft Teams. School and college teachers felt obliged to respond quickly to parents, regardless of the time of day, possibly to show that remote schooling was working. The same was the case for university staff responding to student queries and other emails, as Valerie (UA-1) pointed out, emphasising her lack of control of the situation: *'Being thrown into this has been very overwhelming and I've spent a lot of evenings on you know working late unable to switch off or you know the emails never stop as we all keep saying.'* Whilst some of this responsibility was self-imposed, it was exacerbated by the pressure from above that required employees to work beyond their contracted hours and blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, which some participants highlighted as problematic: *'I think they don't realise that you've got a life'* (Lydia, SC-1). For school and college teachers, such seemingly exponential expectations were exacerbated by national news stories about superhero teachers.

#### **Extract 1.** You're never going to be good enough (Clara, SC-1)

You're never going to be good enough when you have got a head teacher running around the village delivering packed lunch boxes and teachers waving at people jogging 10 miles a day, it's like we are not all the same we are not going to do that. [...] We're working to capacity and the message was they'd [the Academy Trust] like us to go above and beyond, and it's like we are working at capacity, there is no above and beyond in that.

Teachers felt the pressure of being held to a standard they could not live up to, giving them the *denaturalising* sense of falling short. Clara challenged the expectation of working *'above and beyond'* by executive management, who were demanding more and more whilst teachers had already reached their full capacity. Similarly, Maddy (SC-1) said *'I got a piece of coursework at 6 o'clock on Friday night but then I'm now expected to then mark it'* and explained if teachers did not live up to those expectations *'you get challenged on it'*. School

and college teachers expressed concern that the additional provisions put in place and the resultant additional work would be expected of them *ad infinitum* as the new standard, rather than as an emergency measure.

Similarly, university staff attributed the strain they were under not just to the pandemic *per se*, but also to a leadership issue by executive management, who were unaware of the working conditions of staff. According to Cecilia (UA-1), it was *'quite difficult to say no when there's all this pressure coming from above, even if your sort of immediate manager isn't doing that'*. This pressure was in itself a *denaturalising* experience, involving a conflict between the ethos of educators to go the extra mile for students and the fact that they were barely managing to keep going themselves. Another example was guidance issued to staff to have all their teaching materials prepared before September. Thomas (UB-2) reported on this pressure of preparation *'crammed into the summer'* to conform with the guidance by executive management. Staff were unable to take their leave despite also being *'constrained'* from taking it at other times because of their teaching commitments. Thomas' account drew heavily on language of obligation, with little room for educator voice, concluding with a reflection on the approach taken by executive management.

### **Extract 2.** An instinct to sort of micromanage (Thomas, UB-2)

Why is the reaction to a crisis an instinct to sort of micromanage I wonder? You know, we will ensure the job is done to a standard that we are proud of and that we are prepared to stand by, so I would ask the institution to have a bit of confidence in us to do that, you know.

Thomas criticised the reaction to *'micromanage'* staff and *illegitimise* them rather than affording them agency and authority as competent professionals who take pride in doing their job well and can be trusted to do so. This pattern appeared throughout the sector on all levels of leadership, as Greany et al. (2021, p. 38) note with regard to school leaders' experience: 'the centralised and overdirective nature of government decision-making during the pandemic reflected a wider trend of micro-management in education'.

Thus, expectations emerged as a matter of identity: they are the tension between who individuals are as educators and what they do on the one hand, and what others, such as parents, executive management and the media, think educators should be and do on the other hand. This misalignment between actions of the self and actions desired by the other was a *denaturalising* and *illegitimising* experience that impacted negatively on participants and their identity as educators. Moreover, this misalignment was evident in the way participants spoke about their work, as discussed below.

## Creating distinction

University, college and school executive management appeared not to understand the impact of actions on staff. Indeed, participants created *distinction* between high levels of management and the rest of the staff. When participants used the term 'university', they described the most senior managers at executive level. Participants did not refer to themselves or students as the university. The equivalent was the case with 'school' and 'college' being proxy for executive management. For instance, Clara (SC-2) was voicing her concern that *'you're going to get to that stage where actually it's working alright in management eyes so we'll do it for the next term'*, creating a *distinction* between what executive management deem fitting and what 'we', the teachers, would do if their professional judgement was taken into account. Research has found this phenomenon at other levels of the educational hier-

archy as well, with school leaders expressing a sense that government expectations were unreasonable, not based on consultation and lacking an understanding of their implications for schools (Fotheringham et al., 2021; Greany et al., 2022).

Managers were criticised for making decisions without considering the impact on staff or checking the feasibility of plans with relevant staff before announcing them. For example, Molly (UA-1) drew on language of *denaturalisation*, such as the time since the beginning of the pandemic having been '*the most stressful period*' in a long career, and presenting the lack of understanding from executive management—rather than the pandemic per se—as '*the biggest challenge*'. Other participants reported: '*We've been really disturbed by the things that are being promised from [the] powers that be and it's as if they're sort of writing cheques that the academics can't really cash*' (Alice, UA-1). This again expressed a disconnect between staff and executive management, as the former felt that they could not deliver on the promises made by the latter, because they had not been consulted on what was achievable. Despite their expertise they were not given the opportunity to shape decisions that directly impacted on them, resulting in a *denaturalising* and *illegitimising* lack of voice and agency.

There was further frustration at being told to ensure time off whilst simultaneously being given a rising workload, such as the expectation that staff would pre-record a large amount of their teaching content over the summer, disregarding the level of exhaustion already experienced by staff.

**Extract 3.** They are not teachers themselves (Alice, UA-2)

And for something like that to be sent out to staff which basically says, work through your summer to get this reasonable amount of stuff done beforehand, was that had the emotional intelligence of a jackhammer quite frankly and it's again it's things like this [...] they are not teachers themselves. [...] And this is my concern about the promises that are made it's up to us to try and deliver that but the promises are made by people who have never stepped foot inside a classroom and that troubles me.

The *distinction* between executive management and staff is evident: executive management who make '*promises*' are juxtaposed with staff who then have to '*try and deliver*' on it. Not only was there a problem of communication in that management were perceived as imprudently demonstrating '*the emotional intelligence of a jackhammer*', but staff were also acutely aware that decisions were made about teaching by those who had no experience of teaching themselves, suggesting that expertise was divorced from decision-making. This is a case not simply of *distinction*, but also of *denaturalisation*, as the expertise of staff as educators was not valued and they were not given a voice or agency, which was cause for '*concern*'.

To summarise, participants across all groups mentioned the stress resulting from increased workload and expectations of constant availability. This impacted on participants, *denaturalising* and *illegitimising* them as educators. This misalignment of what educators were able to provide and what was expected of them was not only conveyed by participants in what experiences they shared, but also in how they phrased those experiences: they created *distinction* between themselves as the educators who actually delivered the teaching in schools, colleges and universities, and executive management who were making decisions devoid of any solid experience base.

## Authenticating identity as a professional educator

Despite these struggles, some positive aspects emerged. School, college and university staff expressed pride in how they were rising to the challenge of education under lockdown. There was a sense of *authentication* of their identity as a professional educator, one who can think on their feet and learn new skills. Thomas (UB-1) framed the pandemic as a long-awaited opportunity *'to question longstanding norms'* and revisit and adapt teaching and assessment practices, which was a chance for positive innovation and for learning new digital skills. This resonates with our initial hope for this research to reimagine education. Similar sentiments were expressed in a different focus group, where Alice (UA-1) pointed out that she *'learnt a huge amount'* and that this had been *'great professional development'*, albeit not under ideal circumstances. There was a sense of *authentication*, of educators coming into their own, reflecting on their own practice and enhancing their professional skills. Such an initial coming together in a joint effort to provide education under lockdown has also been identified by Greany et al. (2022, p. 34) with regard to schools, where *'there was a strong sense of most staff pulling together in a crisis and of contributing to a national effort'*.

There was also a willingness to reconsider teaching practices on a more long-term basis and take agency in implementing changes. Participants expressed the sense that once the initially pressing adjustments had been made, educators should cease to be simply responsive, and instead should *'switch over to kind of the proactive experience'* (Julia, UA-1) and make the best of the new situation. University staff were ready to embrace blended delivery more long-term, not simply as a response to the pandemic, but for the benefit that it was bringing. For instance, Cynthia (UB-1) emphasised her focus on learning from the pandemic: *'I still I sort of can relate myself almost at the very early stages of an academic career, so it's constantly how can I adapt and how can I sort of relate to that moving forward and give, provide the best support to students.'* Cynthia thus made a link between changing her teaching practice and *authenticating* herself as a good teaching professional who seeks continuing professional development.

Teachers reported similar experiences, discovering that some of the new practices were working well. For example, Maddy (SC-1) reported that her department had *'come to realise that we do need to start marking online'* for the instant availability of feedback to pupils and the ease of filing it. The realisation that this practice was worth adopting permanently was another example of educators expanding their professional repertoire through the pandemic.

## Second UK lockdown and looking ahead

As the second full lockdown of winter and spring 2021 was drawing to a close, going back to participants helped us gain deeper insight into issues raised as well as into what had changed since the beginning of the pandemic. Our sense that the situation was evolving is supported by other research. Education in schools during the pandemic has been found by Greany et al. (2022) to consist of three distinct phases: March 2020 to August 2020, encompassing the initial urgent response and a coming together of educators as noted above; September 2020 to August 2021, with its logistical challenges and ever-changing requirements by the government; and September 2021 to spring 2022, with new challenges such as emerging long-term impacts and high rates of sickness-related absences. Whilst the first part of our analysis has explored the first phase in the classification by Greany et al. (2022), this section is concerned with the second phase, offering a discussion of how school, college and university educators looked back on their initial experiences of the pandemic, and what they were hoping to take forward into the next academic year.

## Naïve superheroes?

At several points there emerged a sense of participants (and researchers) having approached the pandemic akin to naïve superheroes—full of commitment and hope to make the best of it—which was contrasted in hindsight with their experiences as the pandemic continued.

**Extract 4.** I was reporting quite a positive experience (Thomas, UB-3)

When lockdown first came in, I think last time we met I was reporting quite a positive experience. [...] And we came together and people sort of really threw themselves into it. And there was a kind of like, yeah, just a real sort of positive mentality a year ago. From September onwards, that has, has changed and the students' engagement with online learning has, has gone through the floor [elaborating on the challenges of teaching online when all students had their camera switched off]. So I think I've probably become a fairly competent radio presenter for the last year. I think that's probably roughly what it seems like just speaking into it's a hugely unrewarding activity for me, certainly, I would not ever want to apply to the OU [Open University] now. That's one thing I've learned about myself.

Thomas' experience of education at the beginning of the first lockdown was one of optimism. He elaborated how staff and students adopted a can-do attitude in their desire to tackle the situation. The result was feeling like a community and jointly applying themselves to teaching and learning under lockdown, which was expressed through agentive formulations whereby people '*came together*' and '*threw themselves into it*', thus taking control of the situation in a positive way, an experience of *authorisation*. This aligns with Kim and Asbury's (2020, p. 1070) research into the first lockdown, which notes that teachers had found satisfaction in 'rising to the challenge' despite grappling with different roles.

However, this formulation was contrasted with Thomas' subsequent depiction of the 2020 autumn semester. By that point, the initial optimism and energy had given way to exhaustion, demotivation and a lack of engagement. Thomas not only showed himself aware of the struggle that continued online learning presented, but he also reflected on what this meant for his professional practice and himself. Rather than as an educator, he had come to see himself as '*a fairly competent radio presenter*', which he had found '*hugely unrewarding*'. Thomas framed this as something that he had learnt about himself and his teaching style, which reclaimed some of the agency that appeared lost in his description of the struggle. He *authenticated* his identity as an educator who wanted to foster '*the collaborative nature of learning*', to the point where, if this was lost, it had the *denaturalising* effect that he no longer perceived himself as an educator. Whilst staff first reacted with a '*positive mentality*' and embraced the new way of working, the reality of the ongoing pandemic unmasked this approach as somewhat naïve. This resonates with findings by Greany et al. (2022) on teachers' response of coming together during the initial phase of the pandemic (see also Kim & Asbury, 2020), which then succumbed to more negative feelings as 'the sense of a "blitz" spirit began to wear thin' (Greany et al., 2022, p. 34). Extract 4 thus illustrates how the initial reaction of optimism in the face of the first lockdown gave way to a rather uncomfortable re-evaluation as the pandemic continued. Yet we, as researchers, were also naïve superheroes in our initial belief that the pandemic would permanently transform education for the better and that this research could help steer it in such a direction.

Contributing to such a re-evaluation was the ongoing experience of an intense workload. Whilst this was to be expected with the changes that blended and online learning brought,



staff expressed the sense that this was compounded by unnecessary demands on them. For instance, Molly (UA-3) pointed out that *'things got a lot worse'* after the initial meetings and that *'towards the end of the summer vacation last year, things were just horrendous'*. This was at the point when staff were facing an unprecedented semester whilst already being tired from a summer of relentless preparation for constantly changing circumstances.

**Extract 5.** Understanding that they have given us too much to do (Molly, UA-3)

I do not think a [pastoral officer] is the answer, that's for sure. [...] So things like that when they said they stripped down the workload, did not happen. And that would have helped enormously, from my perspective. It's not about putting support in place to deal with what they have given us. It's understanding that they have given us too much to do.

The actor is not named here, but solely referred to as *'they'*. Yet this is hearable as referring to executive management, constituting another example of the *distinction* between 'us' and 'them' discussed above. Molly established a contrast between what was promised and what was implemented, formulating a critique of not delivering the reduction in non-essential workload that would have been such a relief. She attributed the problem to executive management delegating tasks without a thorough understanding of the workload they entailed. This is an instance of *illegitimation* and *denaturalisation*, where the voice of the professionals who accomplish these tasks and know what they involve has not been heard. Additionally, Molly challenged the university's use of pastoral officers to support staff to deal with their allocated workload, rather than listening to their staff and supporting them by postponing non-essential work for the duration of the pandemic.

## Not learning lessons

Whilst the disillusionment of university staff had become clear by the second lockdown, overall the school and college teachers retained their optimism for longer, continuing to frame teaching under lockdown as a learning opportunity.

**Extract 6.** We can do education differently (Lydia, SC-3)

I do think as well it's taught us that [...] we can do education differently. I would not want I do not think we can completely do it online. But I do think it has taught us that it's possible to meet the needs of some children more effectively, in different ways.

Due to the pandemic, educators had thus experienced a different way of doing education and were more aware of and inclusive with respect to learners' needs. However, arguably lessons learnt only carry full value if educators are enabled to implement them, which would require decision-makers (the government and executive management) to recognise these lessons as well. The following discussion shows that this was not the case.

University staff felt under pressure from executive management to go back to full on-campus delivery in autumn 2021, and they expressed concern that the benefits brought by blended or online learning were being ignored. For instance, Molly (UA-3) found it difficult to cope with *'the highest management's fixation on getting back on campus, when everybody knows, some sort of blended delivery is at best I think what we're going to be able to deliver'*. The determination to be back on campus was contrasted with what was apparently



common sense, what *'everybody knows'*, namely that delivery would at best take a blended form. Even though Molly did not specify whom she meant by *'everybody'*, this was hearable as including at least all staff involved in enabling or providing teaching. Through this juxtaposition, the decisions of management were *denaturalised* as unrealistic, whilst *authenticating* staff and their expertise as educators. However, there was also *illegitimation* in the fact that their voices were not heard.

University staff in both groups framed the move back to face-to-face teaching and the disregard of the benefits of blended delivery as a missed learning opportunity: *'My big concern is lessons aren't being learned, and messages aren't getting through'* (Julia, UA-3). The push back to face-to-face teaching was presented as a problem of communication, so staff and their expertise were being ignored when decisions about teaching delivery were made, a form of *illegitimation*. Similarly, Molly (UA-3) emphasised that *'there were so many valuable lessons to be learned from this'* and online learning had led to greater inclusive pedagogy for marginalised groups, such as disabled students and students with caring responsibilities. She contrasted this with her *'big, big worry'* that this valuable insight was *'just being disregarded in the rush to get back to face-to-face because that's their ideal'*—notably Molly did not say *'our'* ideal. The use of the passive voice and the lack of specification who *'they'* were expressed criticism without openly naming the actor and attributing blame, whilst opening up a divide between the people making the decisions and those implementing them, as discussed previously.

## Wish for greater agency

Related to the pressure for on-campus teaching and the concern that lessons were not being learnt about accessible and inclusive pedagogy, some participants in both the university staff and the school and college teacher groups expressed a wish for greater agency related to pedagogic matters. Clara (SC-3) explained how she was allocated additional tasks with the question whether she minded doing them, and pointed out *'well, you always have to say, yeah, it's fine'*. She had suggested a way of dividing pupils into bubbles based on the school they would go to next, but had found that *'they didn't listen to that'*, resulting in a mixed group that was difficult to teach meaningfully, creating *'a very stressful time'* for the teacher. Evidently teachers did not feel that they had the agency to say no or to have their professional judgement about what works best taken into account. Other teachers located the pressure as coming from the exam boards rather than the local school level. Maddy (SC-3) emphasised that *'as a school, I think we've done really well'*, but that *'our battle is the exam boards not taking into consideration the, the obviously the fact that they've done the learning in lockdown'*, and teachers *'kind of just got to go with that'*. There was a sense that the teachers and their professional expertise were not given sufficient agency and voice, either by school management or wider institutions such as exam boards. A similar phenomenon was identified by Greany et al. (2021, p. 24) with regard to school leaders, who were dissatisfied with government decisions during the pandemic and *'expressed anger at the refusal to listen to the profession'*. The lack of agency and feeling of having one's professional expertise disregarded thus filtered down through educational hierarchies.

University staff reported similar struggles with being allowed to make the right decisions for their learners. For instance, whilst emphasising that she was not going against the vice chancellor's decision of not offering any blended learning in autumn 2021, Maria (UB-3) *authenticated* and enforced her educator identity as somebody who has seen what works and has the experience to be *'adding in, as you say, lessons that we've learned'*. Indeed, she was explicit that making this judgement was part of being a good educator, *'in teaching, you'd like to take as much of a personalised approach as you can'*, and she asserted

this as the right professional practice, *'that's part of being a teacher. That's what we do'*, again *authenticating* herself as an educator. She also portrayed tutors as working from an *'evidence base'*, namely student feedback, which *authorised* her to make that judgement. Hence, this was an instance where a staff member claimed more agency than the official university line would account for, and justified this based on her professional expertise and the student voice.

A need for more staff agency and recognition of professional expertise was also raised by Rose (UB-3), who would have liked to see academics being given *'some autonomy'* over how they approach the next phase of teaching during the pandemic (autumn 2021) such that it would work for their programmes. Having this agency to make decisions on what works best for programmes or individual modules would *authorise* staff to exercise their professional judgement, and it would *authenticate* their identity as competent and experienced educators. However, the issue goes even further. Rose framed the restriction of staff autonomy as a lack of *'trust'* from executive management. Thus, not only could staff not make decisions about what worked for their programme, but there was a perceived disconnect from executive management and a sense that their expertise was not recognised. That such trust was not forthcoming was for Rose *'one of the biggest challenges'* and *'what concerns me most'*. Rose's description resonates with other focus groups, criticising the lack of staff voice and opportunities to contribute to leadership decisions in a meaningful way. Rose critiqued the approach taken by executive management throughout the previous year as *'this kind of centralised governing'*, which is unaware of and therefore does not take into account the various *'nuances'* of teaching delivery.

Nevertheless, there is also cause for careful optimism that fostering a better institutional culture of conversation and collaboration is possible.

#### **Extract 7.** We need more of these kind of discussions (Elise, UA-3)

But this, you know, bringing professional staff and academic staff together in this kind of forum is obviously really helpful, it's made me more aware of what you know, the library staff or our timetabling staff are going through and that's, you know, so it's really useful beyond just, you know, for the purposes of your research project, you know, it's useful. So maybe, you know, we need more of these kind of discussions, you know, so that we understand each other because we are so removed from each other at the moment.

That the university staff focus groups brought together professional and academic staff was appreciated by Elise for its potential to make staff *'more aware'* of each other's daily tasks and challenges. Beyond the scope of the present research, such a format has the potential to help staff *'understand each other'* and bring them together, promoting a sense of community and shared recognition within the institution. Implementing such forums for an exchange between staff operating in diverse roles in the university may be a way towards fostering a sense of cohesion and shared purpose, which may contribute to shifting the status quo from a top-down governing style to a more collaborative and empowering way of working.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The pandemic provided opportunities for educators to *authenticate* their identities and, to some extent, reimagine education. However, their agency was undermined by edicts from executive management, be it the 'top' of a university, a college or exam board or even the government, often with little insight into what their decisions entailed 'on the ground', which

was a *denaturalising* and *illegitimising* experience for educators. Although not identical, the situation was mirrored across both participant groups, with a disconnect in the relationship between university staff and executive management, and teachers and exam boards or the government, respectively, despite interactions with immediate superiors such as line managers and head teachers being generally positive. There was little evidence of conversations between educators and executive management or the government in which there could be some form of negotiated understanding of expectations and the future of teaching delivery during the pandemic, and room for an appreciation of the professional identity of educators. It cannot be right that when we asked participants at the end of the first lockdown about their experience, one (Clara, SC-2) replied that this was the '*first time I've been asked how do I feel, what do you think about this, and I think that's massive*'.

The findings resonate with previous research during the pandemic. As Watermeyer et al. (2021) detail, universities across the United Kingdom became ever more corporate in their response, thereby alienating staff as the pandemic proceeded. The growing freedom of staff to change practice in the first lockdown was met with and suppressed by a more corporate, authoritarian university system. As Flemming (2021) and Hall (2021) demonstrate, the corporatisation of universities was a journey English universities had already embarked upon (see also Morrish & Sauntson, 2020); schools similarly had encountered managerialism, with managers far removed from staff (Connell, 2013), but the pandemic seems to have exacerbated these authoritarian proclivities.

Yet whilst these findings may not give executive management much credit, we acknowledge that management teams were also under pressure, as they had to continually interpret and implement government policy (Fotheringham et al., 2021; Greany et al., 2022). However, arguably, if they had engaged in relating to their staff, staff may in turn have been able to understand the stress that their leaders were experiencing. Moreover, educators might have been able to help solve some problems. The result may have been more *adequation* than *distinction*.

Although the present study is small, due to its longitudinal approach and its detailed and principled linguistic analysis of educators' testimonies, it offers valuable insight into the changing experiences of English educators across the sector as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded and the role of language in negotiating their identity as educators. It reflects not only the situation under the first English lockdown, but also how matters had changed by the time the second lockdown came into force, tracing the dynamics of the constantly evolving expectations on educators and highlighting commonalities between the experiences of university staff and teachers, despite the different contexts they operate in. The contribution lies firstly in showing how the pandemic impacted not only on pupils and students, but also—fundamentally and in comparable ways—on educators across the sector, by giving a voice to people who were not sufficiently heard during the pandemic and longitudinally tracing their changing experiences of education under lockdown. Secondly, this study contributes to research on neoliberalism in education and educators' challenge of dealing with increasing top-down management and performance pressure, explored during the focal point of the pandemic, with lockdowns exacerbating such power dynamics further. Finally, this research shows that a close analysis of language use can reveal not only the issues participants raise, but also how the way they do so constructs and challenges educator identity.

Whilst this study focuses on England, issues of educator identity and agency during Covid-19 are of international relevance. Further work could explore and compare how different education systems have responded to the challenge of education under lockdown and what relational spaces were created in the process. This would contribute to a better understanding of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on educators, their practices and their identity.

Spaces to imagine education, or at least talk about experiences, are important. If we are to build our understanding of each other to develop *adequation* and *authentication*, it

is essential that executive management not only ask questions, but also listen and take on board their staff's answers. Despite the issues uncovered by this research, there is hope in terms of educators building new relationships with each other, creating *adequation* and developing 'under the radar' practices to find ways of reclaiming agency and *authenticating* their identity as skilled and professional educators. This could be understood as 'emergency team' work in which educators pulled together where previous hierarchies were 'disrupted' by the pandemic (Fisher et al., 2021, p. 532), despite the very distinct nature of executive management, who were so often seen as separate. This research thus calls for spaces for dialogue and relationship building during the pandemic, but also beyond.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

We confirm that the research presented in this paper was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethical issues and in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. This research has been granted ethical approval by the School Research Ethics Committee for the School of Education, Language and Psychology at York St John University (approval codes: RECEDU00042 and RECEDU00046).

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