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# Back to the chalkface: an autoethnographic reawakening through the lens of self-determination

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## ABSTRACT

After many years working in Initial Teacher Education, I had the opportunity to take Academic Leave to return to an English primary school classroom. Over a 16-week period, I taught 9–10-year-olds for 4 days each week whilst conducting an autoethnographic self-study. By completing a weekly diary, key reflections were identified each week as I moved from what felt a beginner practitioner to the confident and competent teacher I had identified as when I initially left the classroom. Analysis revealed recurring themes linked to my motivation over this period, and these were aligned with self-determination theory's core components: perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness. As such, a more nuanced and personalised model of self-determination is proposed which maps on the professional rediscovery process I experienced. Analysis also identifies key considerations about how Initial Teacher Education might better prepare student teachers for the classroom.

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Teacher Education; primary; autoethnography; self-determination

## Introduction

Vosburgh (2022) begins his paper on the 'academic-practitioner gap' with a joke:

An academic and a practitioner walk into a bar. This is a very short joke since it turns out they sit at different ends of the bar and never speak. (2022, 1)

I would guess that most teacher educators working in academia would not find this particularly funny. Practice forms the basis of teacher education because it allows student teachers to apply theoretical understandings to real classroom contexts, developing the skills that cannot be acquired through academic study alone. Any Higher Education (HE) Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme is focused on preparing student teachers *for* practice, so practice and theory are intertwined throughout. In England, the role of ITE teacher educator includes working with teachers, visiting schools and being familiar with the current educational climate (Ping, Schellings and Beijaard 2018). By ITE teacher educator, I refer to an education professional (often working in a university) who designs and delivers teacher preparation programmes, educating pre-service teachers to gain a relevant teaching qualification.

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Indeed, teacher educators will undoubtedly have a background in practice working first as a school teacher before moving onto academia (Guberman et al. 2021). However, theoretical knowledge of teaching practice differs fundamentally from the ongoing lived experience of the classroom. And even though most HE ITE teacher educators will have lived the practice in the past, this memory will inevitably fade as a new teacher educator identity moves to the fore. As Murray and Male (2005) state, this movement is ‘from being first-order practitioners ... school teachers ... to being second-order practitioners’, i.e. ‘where they once worked in the first-order setting of the school, they now work in the second-order setting of HE’ (Murray and Male 2005, 126). The practice is similar but ultimately distinct.

There are many reasons why teachers decide to make the move from the classroom to teacher education, although these are generally under researched (Holme, Robb and Berry 2016). Richter, Lazarides and Richter (2021) apply the push/pull analogy, i.e. reasons to push the move and reasons that pull somebody towards teacher education. These could include a pull towards a perceived increased autonomy, career prospects (Holme, Robb and Berry 2016) or ability to make a different kind of impact (Guberman et al. 2021). There is also the push away from the routines of the classroom and emotional exhaustion (Richter, Lazarides and Richter 2021; Shapiro 2010). Regardless of motivation, transitioning to teacher education inevitably creates distance from daily classroom practice.

Whilst limited research examines teachers transitioning into teacher education, even less explores the reverse journey back to the classroom. Existing research on why teacher educators return to the classroom is almost non-existent. In England, the Department of Education does not gather data on this demographic, so there is no evidence that teacher educators do return. This paper, however, outlines an autoethnographic study where I, as a teacher educator, researched the experience of returning to professional practice after a period of absence from the classroom. It is this unique focus that offers a contribution to existing very limited understanding of the phenomenon.

Given that I am simultaneously the researcher, participant and author, the first person is very much front and centre of what follows. As an autoethnographic piece, this paper modifies traditional academic conventions (Wall 2006), but by balancing narrative accessibility with rigorous analysis, I aim to avoid criticisms of self-indulgent storytelling (Tarisayi 2023).

My own path from ‘first order teacher’ to ‘second order teacher’ (White 2014, 437) was fairly typical. I trained as a teacher at a UK University, qualified in the early 1990s as a primary school teacher and then began teaching Key Stage One (KS1 – 5–7-year-olds) children in an urban UK primary school. I moved onto other UK schools in subsequent years gaining experience of working across KS1 and KS2 (7–11-year-olds) as well as taking on leadership positions including two deputy headships. A secondment opportunity led to a full-time post in Higher Education ITE. I accepted this position intending to eventually return to primary teaching. Seventeen years later, I was still there but along with some other teacher educators (McDonough 2017; Scherff and Kaplan 2006; Spiteri 2010), was still keen to re-engage with school practice. Doctoral study and successive management roles (Head of Programme, Head of School) meant that the ‘push and pull’ (McDonough 2017, 241) were ignored for several years until an opportunity for Academic Leave arose. This paper examines my experience of returning to the classroom through the lens of self-

determination theory, analysing themes from reflective journals written during this period.

## **Literature review**

Before I articulate the existing literature around the movement of practitioners from Higher Education Initial Teacher Education to school, it is first relevant to outline the context of English teacher education more generally.

### ***Higher Education Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England***

Higher Education<sup>1</sup> Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in England combines both academic study and practical experience. Highly regulated, specific criteria detail what should be taught, how it should be taught and what the expectations are for the teaching profession. The Department for Education (DfE) accredits English ITE courses, whilst the inspectorate (Ofsted<sup>2</sup>) rigorously monitors performance, imposing significant penalties on providers that fail to meet the required standards. The Initial Teacher Training and Early Career framework (Department for Education 2024) outlines the essential knowledge and skills that students must acquire through two prescribed types of content: 'learn that ...' and 'learn how to' (2024, 5). English ITE has also undergone further scrutiny through the ITT Market Review (Department for Education 2021) which further emphasised the integration of theory with practice. This, and the related ITT criteria (Department for Education 2025), mean it is now more important than ever that any Initial Teacher Education programme closely links between theory and practice. Tutors, lecturers and mentors involved in these programmes are typically required to hold Qualified Teacher Status (QTS),<sup>3</sup> often with additional experience in school leadership. The route to teacher educator, therefore, begins with school classroom experience.

English schools are also highly regulated. A National Curriculum (Department for Education 2013) is in place and, although some schools do not have to follow it, the accompanying high-stakes assessment regime means the reality is schools have little flexibility in the content delivered. The perceived focus of the English inspectorate (Ofsted) on fidelity to sequences of learning alongside particular criteria related to staff wellbeing has resulted in many schools purchasing schemes of work to support coverage. Unsurprisingly perhaps, UK teachers now report that they have less autonomy when it comes to curriculum, assessment and that overall they have less autonomy in comparison to other professions (National Foundation for Educational Research 2020).

### ***Moving between Higher Education and the school classroom***

Whilst there are some studies that examine the transition from teacher to teacher educator (White 2014), very few explore the reverse process from teacher educator back to teacher, particularly in the last 5 years. Indeed, no published data confirm whether teacher educators in England return to classroom teaching. It is, therefore, worth considering some of the reasons teacher educators may not return to the classroom and why ex-teachers do not return to the classroom generally. The changing regime is often

mentioned with reference to accountability and performativity (Buchanan 2012). Confidence and identity are also an issue. Just as teachers often face an identity crisis moving from school to initial teacher education, the same can be true on reverse with teachers feeling out of touch at the prospect of returning to the classroom (Buchanan 2012)

The transition from teacher to teacher educator is not easily reversed. The development of a hybrid identity and the ongoing need to critique both theory and practice means that returning to teaching is rarely straight forward; as McDonough (2017) suggests, the teacher educator may never truly be able to 'go back'. Although rare, when teacher educators do return to school, it is for different reasons. First-hand classroom experience provides material that teacher educators regard as a professional 'duty' to share with student teachers to prepare them for the current job (Scherff and Kaplan 2006, 158), whilst remaining in school is understood as actively resisting the perception that 'teacher education is restricted to theory and detached from practice' (Spiteri 2010, 132). The literature suggests a preoccupation with relevance, specifically 'maintaining relevance' (Jordan, Hawley and Washell 2016, 238) and resisting 'becoming one of them' (i.e. a teacher educator) (236). The same tension operates in reverse; Dinkelman, Margolis and Sikkenga (2006) found that teachers moving into teacher education initially resisted letting go of their practitioner identities, yet ultimately came to value 'the complementary nature of the twinned identities' (2006, 120).

Returning to a previous teaching role is often a challenging process, especially at first. Romanticised expectations of 'returning home' cause educators to overlook inevitable challenges (Scherff and Kaplan 2006, 157). For example, McDonough (2017) found the pace, timetable and curriculum she experienced on return a challenge that highlighted the tension between technician and professional teacher; others found changes to the profession during time away totally overwhelming (Scherff and Kaplan 2006). Furthermore Buchanan (2012) noted that perceived accountability and lack of confidence were significant factors for returning teachers in general, not just those from teacher education. There are similar experiences in other sectors. Justham (2001) describes the initial shock to the system followed by steady growth in confidence and even surprise at the lack of lost skills as their previous identity returned. Despite the limited evidence, it appears that, in the UK at least, there is little interest in returning to practice.

### ***A model of motivation: perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness***

This project sought to use the lens of self-determination to explore the experience of returning to practice and how my motivation was impacted over this period. First established in the 1980s (Jansen in de Wal et al. 2020), self-determination theory is seen as having direct relevance to educational settings (Ryan and Deci 2020); it has been well used to analyse learner motivation (Hubbard et al. 2026; Husni 2026; Ryan et al. 2023) and teacher motivation (Hanfstingl et al. 2010; Müller, Alliata and Benninghoff 2009; Uysal 2023) where links have been made to job satisfaction, retention and teacher identity. Indeed, there is evidence that self-determination theory can be mapped onto the development of desirable teacher competencies such as use of instructional practices, improved classroom management and use of scaffolding strategies (Brenner 2022).

However, literature does not suggest that self-determination has been used to explore motivation for those who have returned to the classroom.

Described as an umbrella term by Jones (2006), self-determination theory encompasses 'intrinsic motivation, autonomous extrinsic motivation, and psychological well-being' (Ryan and Deci 2020, 1). Ryan and Deci (2000a, 55) define intrinsic motivation as 'doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable' and extrinsic motivation as 'doing something that leads to a separable outcome'. The framework is based upon what is seen as three basic and necessary (Koludrović and Reić Ercegovac 2015) psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness or as Chiu et al. (2024) puts it, the feeling of having choices, feeling achievable and capable and feeling connected. Competence is not understood as actual ability but rather one's *perception* of competence (Deci, Olafsen and Ryan 2017; Guay 2022; Ryan and Deci 2000b). Autonomy refers to 'the perception that one is the origin of one's own behaviour' (Jansen in de Wal et al. 2020, 20) in other words, one experiences 'a sense of choice, willingness, and volition' (Guay 2022, 80). Relatedness is the need for secure bonds with others, feeling connected/cared for and a sense of belonging (Granziera, Collie and Slempp 2026; Jansen in de Wal et al. 2020). Self-determination theory asserts that it is the satisfaction of these needs that maintain 'autonomous motivation, high-quality performance, and well-being' (Kovalcikiene et al. 2019, 307).

The theory is often presented as a progressive taxonomy (Ryan et al. 2021) which identifies the features of amotivation, extrinsic motivation (and its constituent parts) and intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000a) subdivide extrinsic motivation into external regulation (acting for rewards or to avoid punishment), introjected regulation (acting to maintain self-worth) and integrated regulation (acting for external outcomes that align with personal values). As such, the model of self-determination is often understood as a continuum of motivation (Gagné and Deci 2005). However, the ordering of motivation can be viewed as 'predictable' in that it suggests that individuals can be located in a 'distinct' and singularly dimensional motivational score (Howard et al. 2021, 1301). It does not necessarily account for multiple motivations working at the same time. As a result, self-determination theory has been criticised for not fully accounting for the multi-dimensional nature of motivation (Chemoll and Gagné 2014). It is more frequently used for single-occasion analysis, and many researchers argue that its application to longitudinal studies is needed (Li, Wang and King 2024; McAnally and Hagger 2024; Wu 2024). In addition, the separation of three needs (perceived competence, relatedness and autonomy) related to motivation may oversimplify complex interrelationships. For example, does the satisfaction of the three identified needs always result in intrinsic motivation or indeed do other factors also result in motivation? Hobson (2002) argues that the three conditions are not necessarily sufficient, and Nalipay, King and Cai (2020) also point out that these three needs may be much culture-specific and, therefore, not generalisable. Nevertheless, significant quantitative research seems to indicate that, with learners at least, the presence of perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness can impact on performance (Guay 2022; Nalipay, King and Cai 2020; Orsini et al. 2016).

Qualitative research on self-determination is somewhat limited, but more recently, it has been applied to teacher identity. Wong and Liu (2024) point out that 'although self-determination was not originally designed to explore identity formation, its core philosophy offers valuable insights into this developmental process' (2024, 2). However, and

unsurprising given the dearth of research on returning to school practice overall, it is unknown how self-determination can be translated to teachers returned back in the classroom, hence the research question underpinning what follows: How does self-determination support the experience of returning to the classroom?

## Research design

The project outlined in this paper was an autoethnographic study. Although definitions vary (Keles 2022), autoethnography combines autobiography (self-reflection) with ethnography (studying social systems) (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Through the analysis and interpretation of deep personal insight of the lived experience, broader cultural or educational issues are explored. Thus, autoethnography is not simply about recalling personal experiences but interrogating those experiences to reveal how individual lived realities reflect and challenge socio-cultural norms and understanding. Balancing the 'auto' and 'ethno' is crucial to avoid criticisms of 'self-indulgent displays of lyrical narration that obscure substantive research insights' (Tarisyi 2023, 60; see also Sparkes 2000).

Legitimation and generalisability concerns are frequently cited as autoethnographic limitations (Wall 2006). Some would argue that autoethnography should bracket out any particularly emotional experiences, cautioning against the risk of narcissism (Sahling and De Carvalho 2021) or positioning the researcher as the 'lone hero' (Luitel and Dahal 2021, 5) heroically overcoming difficulties and potentially exploiting or at least diminishing the experience of others. However, it is precisely these honest, emotional experiences and the researcher's subjectivity that add rigour and insight to the lived experience (Yung 2020) by allowing participants a structured reflective space to work through difficult feelings (Sahling and De Carvalho 2021); such experiences and feelings are reflected in this study. Anderson (2006) identifies further limitations arguing that the intertwining of personal lives and research interests in autoethnography means that some areas of research would be more or less impossible through the eyes of an individual who carries their own values and experiences. However, ultimately, all research includes the 'person', but the standard writing style encourages a more silent authorship (Sparkes 2000), or presents 'an illusion that the knowledge produced is more legitimate' Wall (2006, 149). Certainly, this particular piece of research could be extended by involving multiple researchers and/or tracking experiences over a longer period of time.

For this self-study, I was both the sole participant and the researcher; I assumed the 'dual role of the researcher(s) and the researched (Keles 2022) within the school community. Anderson (2006) refers to this as analytic autoethnography as I (the researcher) was an extension of the school community (Chang 2016) rather than an independent observer. Although I was the single 'active' participant, I remained conscious of autoethnography's power dynamics, i.e. whose story gets told and from whose perspective (Poerwandari 2021). Indeed, members of the school community I interacted with in this period in school also held a position and were 'passive' participants. Chang (2016) notes this position is characteristic of autoethnography as 'I am the main character and the others are supporting actors in my life story' (Chang 2016, 65).

The study took place in a large school in the north of England. The school offers a unique approach to the curriculum, one where both students and staff are afforded a relatively high level of autonomy and choice. The research was conducted over

16 weeks during which I inhabited the role of Year 5 class teacher working with 30 students aged 9 to 10. I embraced this role assuming all the responsibilities typically expected of a class teacher in an English primary school.

Each week I completed a reflective diary created specifically for the project. Twenty-two weekly diary entries were completed before, during and just after the 16-week period when I was in school and each was divided into sections asking for a description of what had happened, what the associated feelings were, an evaluation of the experience, the questions raised, key learning and connections to previous learning and reading. The structure thereby supported a focus on both the 'auto' and the 'ethno' by including both the personal narrative and the socio, cultural or theoretical context the experience sat within (Winkler 2018).

Reliability in autoethnographic study is perhaps best understood as trustworthiness, given its interpretivist basis (Creswell 2012; Guba 1981), i.e. it seeks to recognise whether conclusions are a reasonable interpretation, not the only valid interpretation. Trustworthiness was addressed in several ways. The 22 weekly diary entries formed a robust dataset spanning the entire period. Data quality was ensured through the structured format of each diary entry which provided consistency across all entries and reduced the risk of superficial or incomplete reflections. I also maintained proximity between lived experience and reflection, completing each diary entry at the end of the respective week before memories became lost or distorted, thus minimising recall bias and allowing for 'temporal congruence' (Edwards 2021, 1). All diary entries were date-stamped to maintain chronological integrity and allow me to track how themes evolved over time.

As the study progressed, I periodically analysed these reflections every few weeks identifying emerging themes including community, confidence and creativity whilst at the same time engaging with the literature. Self-determination theory began to emerge as a focal framework, and as such, and to further support trustworthiness, I systematically re-coded the entire dataset against the three psychological needs (autonomy, perceived competence and relatedness). Each time this occurred, the entire content of the diary entries was reviewed. I also looked for relationships between the three codes to arrive at broader themes about their interdependence. This iterative approach ensured that earlier entries, completed before this theoretical focus was identified, were analysed with the same rigour as later ones alongside the opportunity to further check that sections were complete, anonymised and that reflections had sufficient depth. Subsequently, analysis occurred throughout the project with reanalysis taking place in the months after the project ended.

Informed consent was granted by the headteacher, who acted as the gatekeeper for the research. I also planned to seek ongoing consent from any 'passive participants' whose actions or interactions informed my reflections. I was particularly mindful of the relational ethical considerations raised by auto ethnographers (Winkler 2018), who need to 'consider how their work implicates other people, ... what the consequences may be for individuals who, although not directly involved in a study, may be identifiable ... ; consent may need to be sought from these individuals in some cases' (British Educational Research Association 2018, 14). In the event, no additional consent was required, but I remained committed to ensuring both anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study as ongoing ethical principles.

## Results

Weekly reflective diary entries were returned to periodically within the period of the study to code according to themes. The themes grew from the reflections and were influenced by ongoing reading over this period including reference to self-determination theory. Once these codes were established, quotes related to each of the three areas were coded, cut and organised chronologically within a new document. The iterative process meant diary entries were frequently returned to and sections reconsidered. Once the period of study finished, key quotes were then selected based on opportunities for analysis and further discussion.

Using the entries, I will now document the experience and, to aid the subsequent analysis, I have organised these results into perceived competence, relatedness and autonomy.

### *Perceived competence: incompetence to invincible*

The first few weeks of teaching proved profoundly difficult; perpetually exhausted, I felt out of practice and out of touch. Despite years of prior experience, I felt as though I was starting anew, confronting the realities of the classroom with fresh eyes whilst experiencing a deep sense of identity dissonance.

'The first week has been exhausting. I had forgotten the energy levels required in the classroom. The dynamic of the day, the number of interactions, the clockwatching and continual reading of the room requires huge mental and physical reserves'. Week 1

... I felt like I was almost on placement again although I had awareness of what wasn't right rather than an unconscious incompetence'. Week 1

'I find myself consumed with thinking about what I can change and adapt in future lessons' Week 2

My perceived competence gradually grew, though initially this growth stemmed from compliance. Success felt like adhering to policy, understanding processes and not making 'mistakes' (as prescribed by policy). I craved the reassurance of doing the 'right' thing, and my sense of 'right' often depended on external validation; I felt validated when colleagues told me I was doing something well or I saw tangible evidence of my effectiveness in pupil outcomes.

'The children's writing has been brilliant this week and I really feel that every one of them made progress ... I felt emotional when I read the work of one child – maybe it was a mixture of relief and pride ... [A school] leader ... was very complimentary about the lesson and ... resources I had prepared; it's interesting how I really need this validation!' Week 3

By Week 3, I could feel a physical transformation beginning. It started during one particular lesson where I was teaching independently. I found myself responding to emerging needs throughout the session, and for the first time, I felt like a competent teacher again.

'I have loved this week. It feels like something has changed ... I [can] ... feel it coming back. It's like something had taken hold of me. ... I am ... becoming more confident about reflecting in action and I feel my teaching is becoming more responsive and therefore successful'. Week 3

As my confidence and perceived competence grew, so did my identity as a teacher. However, my identity as a teacher educator did not disappear. This duality of identity felt in conflict at times.

'It is a strange feeling ... almost like an out of body experience. I find myself listening to myself and noting areas to improve in the moment. It is as if I am both student and mentor'.  
Week 4

'I am neither a teacher of an ITE professional at the moment. I'm not sure what my identity is but I feel whatever it is, it is on the move!' Week 7

Seven weeks in, and I was flying; lessons were successful, and I felt confident in my role as teacher. Then I lost my voice. The impact was devastating. I lost all sense of perceived competence.

'I was unable to ... communicate effectively or feel in anyway autonomous or competent. I had no option but to relinquish control which I hated! There is something about acting as bystander that make me feel impotent and incompetent. I want and need to practise. It is the practise of teaching that make me feel like a teacher'. Week 8

Once recovered, my perceived competence continued to grow, and by the end of the experience, I felt totally invincible; I had a strong sense of inherent satisfaction and high intrinsic motivation.

'I feel my identity as a teacher stronger than ever. I can teach and I want to teach ...' Week 14

In summary, the entries reveal that my perceived competence followed a non-linear trajectory, moving from acute feelings of inadequacy towards a growing sense of internal confidence by the end of the experience.

### ***Autonomy: compliance to active decision maker***

In the initial stages of the experience, my reflections were consumed with comments relating to my sense of competence, but as time progressed, reflections increasingly explored my seeking of greater ownership and decision-making in my practice:

'... The lack of autonomy is frustrating – I like being control and making my own decisions'.  
Week 8

The school I was working in encouraged a child-led curriculum with teachers acting as active decision makers in terms of their curriculum plans. This meant I was encouraged to plan creatively. I found this fed my motivation to plan more.

'I am beginning to understand teaching as an enquiry which is equally motivating and exhausting. Each day I embark on an adventure of problems to solve, questions to ask, evidence to spot and react to. It is active and ongoing. I feel at my most productive when engaged in this process ... the activeness is intrinsically motivating and addictive ... I have hit my stride in planning and am really enjoying the creative thinking involved'. Week 5

'Once again, planning has been a process of huge motivation ... As each piece falls into place that sense of satisfaction is motivating. I have the innate desire to come up with innovate solutions. ... I need to feel my stamp on [curriculum planning]; to see how my ideas land in

the classroom ... and when they work well the sense of pride is immeasurable ... I need to own the classroom and what is happening in it'. Week 7

As my experience progressed, so did my confidence to plan for learning in advance whilst also making spontaneous decisions within lessons. By Week 11, my reflections captured observations about my growing ability to reflect in action and make independent judgements within the lesson.

'It seems to me that reflection in action is ... most necessary for effective teaching and also a sign of an effective teacher. Having confidence in own actions and judgements increases the sense of autonomy and thereby competency. Only a flexible, creative approach to the curriculum allows for this'. Week 11

'I feel fully ... in my role now. I know what I am doing and am able to make on the spot changes about behaviour, teaching, organisation. Having confidence to remain fluid and enquire is a positive thing for my identity ... As a teacher you are able to identify ... possible improvements but not to action these seems shackling'. Week 11

My reflections suggest that my autonomy was initially constrained by my initial lack of confidence but over time my confidence to make independent decisions directly influenced my intrinsic motivation.

### ***Relatedness: spectator to community***

Although I had connections to the setting, moving from a workplace where I was well known felt bewildering. I was conscious from the start for the need to build relationships with both the children and colleagues wanting to 'establish strong relationships and communication' if I was to be a 'trusted member of the team' (Week 2). Perhaps as expected, my early interactions tended to be mainly transactional as I got to grips with policy and practice. Any positive comments I received from pupils or colleagues felt significant and had an identifiable impact of my sense of relatedness and perceived competence.

'I am really enjoying getting to know the class – I hadn't really anticipated this. The thrill of a child getting something, staying focused, responding to a joke or bringing in something from home is really motivating (Week 2). My relationships with the school staff are evolving in the same way as the children ... (Week 3)

My growing sense of relatedness with colleagues and children motivated me to act more autonomously and take risks; my positive relationships with the pupils validated my role and allowed me to ensure learning was bespoke to their needs.

'My relationships with the class are an important part of why I am enjoying this experience. I find myself delighted when ... they wave to me across the playground. The little things confirm the connection between us. I increasingly have their personalities in mind when I plan activities ... I feed off their motivation and enthusiasm'. Week 9

My relationships with parents also had an impact acting as another form of validation.

So many parents made positive comments ... these meant a lot. The need for positive affirmation is real when you are starting again.

My reflections indicated the profound influence of these relational aspects any, by the end of the experience, my reticence at leaving these new relationships behind to return to my previous role in Initial Teacher Education.

'I feel like a different person – brighter, positive, complete'. Week 11

'I really do feel part of the team now and do not want to leave them. . . . I feel my identity as a teacher stronger than ever. I can teach and I want to teach . . . I love being treated as a teacher by the school community . . . I feel wanted, liked and respected'. Weeks 13/14

For me, relatedness was a powerful driver of motivation with my connections to the school community satisfying a need for belonging and also impacting on my perceived competence and autonomy.

The journal entries, therefore, indicated that by the end of time as a class teacher, not only was I increasingly internally motivated but I also felt more competent, autonomous and connected. The data also suggest that perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness were not experienced as discrete needs but were interconnected with one informing another.

My time back on school was both a professional and personal experience; by the time, it came to an end, I felt differently about the profession, my teacher identity and who I was a person.

'I feel in control and confident in my abilities . . . [with] the levels of confidence I had when I left the classroom. . . . I honestly feel like my previous identity has been reawakened . . . . Teaching in a primary school is a habit I am not sure I will be able to give up'. Week 17

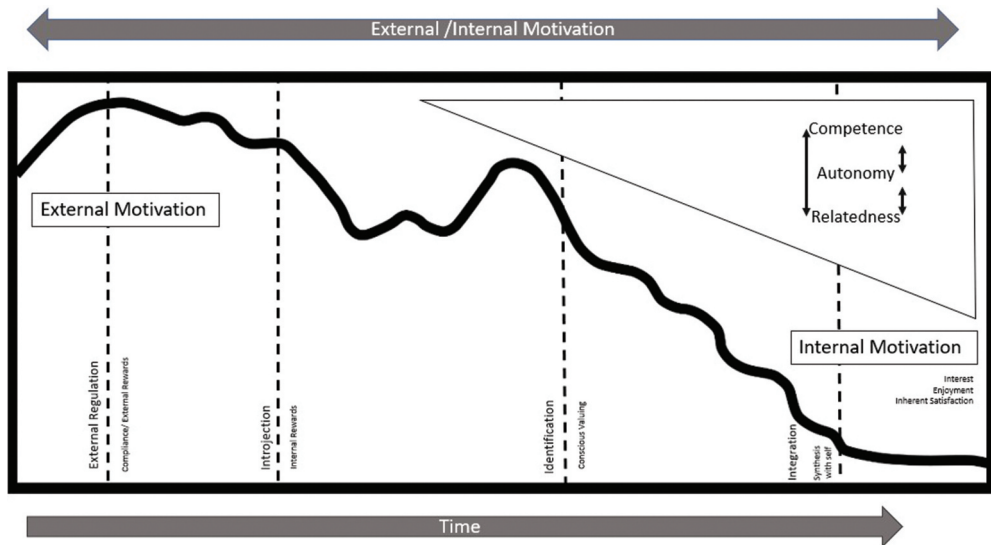
## Analysis

By exploring three psychological needs (perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness), self-determination provides a useful and unique lens to track the experience of returning to the classroom, a journey that was neither linear nor discrete. Deci and Ryan's original model of self-determination (Gagné and Deci 2005; Koludrović and Reić Ercegovic 2015; Ryan and Deci 2020) progresses from amotivation through extrinsic motivation and finally intrinsic motivation, suggesting a linearity dependent on how the three psychological needs have been satisfied. However, rather than progressing neatly through these forms of motivation, I experienced concurrent and fluctuating needs. I, therefore, present a longitudinal and multidimensional adapted model specific to this experience (see [Figure 1](#) Adapted Model of Self-Determination: Returning to Practice).

As such, the following analysis goes on to explore my findings further in relation to self-determination theory as well as considering broader implications for teacher motivation.

### *Perceived competence*

Definitions of competence are slippery (Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iatrellis 2022). Brenner describes it as 'people's perceived experiences of being able to influence and master tasks within their environments' (Dervenis, Fitsilis and Iatrellis 2022, 4). However, competency or competencies are increasingly something to be measured against and judged externally (Chiang and Trezise 2021). There is a strong



**Figure 1.** Adapted model of self-determination: returning to practice.

correlation between intrinsic motivation and measurable teaching competence (Uysal 2023) and also a teacher's sense of their competence (Wang and Chia Liu 2008) or feeling capable (Chiu et al. 2024). Furthermore, school level influences appear to have the greatest impact upon teachers' perceived sense of competence (Brenner 2022, 8).

On my own return to practice, my perceived competence was challenged. As one might expect, my sense of (in)competence featured heavily within my early reflective journals. I had expected my sense of competence to be buoyed by years of experience, but in reality, memories of past successes only exacerbated my sense of current inadequacy. I felt as though I was starting anew, confronting the realities of the classroom with fresh eyes whilst experiencing a deep sense of identity dissonance (Warin et al. 2006).

It appears my perceived competence as a teacher was tied to my current state of being, not what I had achieved in the past. This proved particularly challenging given that my previous prowess in schools had underpinned my confidence to work in Initial Teacher Education. Although there were some successes, my identity generally felt under assault at the start of the experience. Furthermore, not only was I struggling but I was acutely aware of that struggle. Memories of past competence highlighted my current difficulties and intensified feelings of inadequacy. I remembered what it felt like to be successful in the classroom, and I knew this was not it.

My perceived competence was tied to my need to be validated by others (whether it be colleagues or the pupils) as a form of external regulation and motivation. However, this was not discrete, from my internal motivation. If anything, the external motivation fed the internal. Furthermore, I found the two separate needs of perceived competence and autonomy intimately connected. My sense of autonomy fed my sense of competence and when I felt competent, I was more likely to act autonomously.

## Autonomy

Teacher autonomy involves independent decision-making about curriculum content and pedagogy (Great Schools Partnership 2014), which self-determination theory positions as central to engagement and motivation (Alharfi and Alamer 2026). When teacher autonomy is constrained, it diminishes professional enthusiasm, intrinsic motivation and pedagogical creativity. Research suggests that constrained teacher autonomy diminishes professional enthusiasm and motivation (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2017; Pearson and Moomaw 2005). My own experience confirmed this relationship; when I felt unable to make autonomous decisions, my motivation and creativity suffered accordingly.

The relationship between professional autonomy and perceived competence was noteworthy. As evident in earlier reflections, these needs operated in tandem rather than as discrete entities. My sense of competence directly influenced my decision-making capacity; when I experienced feelings of professional inadequacy, my confidence to make autonomous decisions was significantly compromised. This challenge was amplified in this new environment, where both explicit policies and implicit professional norms were still being internalised. Using Ryan and Deci's (2020) work, this would be equated to a combination of amotivation (perceived lack of competence) and external regulation motivation (compliance and sense of reactance) thus highlighting the complexity underpinning the interrelationship between teacher autonomy and perceived competence.

Starko (2021) extends Ryan and Deci's theoretical framework on intrinsic motivation and autonomy by drawing connections to creativity, arguing that a sense of autonomy 'increased ... interest in the task and desire to continue the task' (Starko 2021, 143). Moreover, Starko argues that creative potential is fundamentally dependent on individual agency, asserting that 'if students are to be creative, they must begin to develop their own ideas, judgments, and interests instead of always pursuing paths forged by their teachers' (2021, 134). Although Starko is largely discussing pupil creativity, this principle of autonomy driven creativity is equally applicable to educators. Teachers, too, require meaningful professional autonomy to cultivate creative potential. If teachers are to be creative (and therefore intrinsically motivated), they need to make their own judgements and decisions rather than following rigid or prescriptive curricula. I was becoming increasingly aware of how my own sense of creative autonomy was feeding my sense of perceived competence and motivation. Indeed, for Schön, it is precisely this activation of autonomous thinking and decision-making that makes teachers professional (Bustingorry 2008). Teaching involves 'making effective decisions about complex human situations' (Rushton, Dunlop and Atkinson 2025, 39); professional agency is vital.

Unfortunately, a 'flexible, creative approach' appears less common in the English neoliberal education context which has eroded teacher professional autonomy (Frostenson 2015). Increased regulation and scrutiny have often resulted in the excessive use of prescribed curriculum materials which not only result in 'professional frustration' but also diminish motivation for both teachers and pupils (Bustingorry 2008, 411). It was the child-led curriculum I was working within, where responsiveness and reflexivity were actively encouraged that had a significant impact on satisfying my needs of autonomy and, therefore, perceived competence.

## Relatedness

Buber (2013) wrote extensively on the nature of educational relationships and how they could be defined into I and It (the relationship between an object and person) and I and Thou (the relationship between person and person) (Beck 1992). The first (I and It) refers to treating people as objects instead of full and equitable others (Guilherme and Morgan 2009). The second (I and Thou) indicates a fuller, more mutual and reciprocal relationship where one knows thou as a 'whole being' (Buber 2013). Buber cites the I-Thou relationship as a characteristic of the genuine educator in recognising and realising the potential of the learner as a whole (Buber 2013, 92).

[in reference to Buber] 'The educator can only educate if he or she is able to build a relation based on true mutuality, on true dialogue with students, and this mutuality, this dialogue can only come to the fore if the student trusts the educator, if the student feels accepted ...' (Guilherme and Morgan 2009, 567)

Using Buber's work, I can reflect on my own experience as a need to move from I-it to I-thou and, as such, have my need for relatedness met. MacMurray states that 'the self is constituted by its relation to the other' (1961, cited in Jarvis 1995, p.29) and my sense of relatedness certainly informed my sense of self as a teacher. As I moved from a spectator to a member of the community, not only did my intrinsic motivation increase, so did my sense of who I was as a competent and autonomous teacher.

Arguably any autoethnographic inquiry is the search for connectivity between self and community (Chang 2016) as is a process through which one identifies the essence of who one is; my own search for connection was part of my own discovery about who I now was as a teacher. This can be understood through the self-determination lens in that the search for positive relationships not only secures the need for relatedness but also one's sense of competence and autonomy (Jansen in de Wal et al. 2020). Wubbels' (den Brok et al. 2009; Wubbels and Brekelmans 2005) work on teacher pupil relationships also makes use of a model of interpersonal teacher behaviour which, with clear links to self-determination theory, focuses on agency (influence) and communion (perception of a teacher as friendly or compatible) (Claessens et al. 2017) in exploring the quality of teacher/pupil relationships. I found similar links in my own experience although crucially, from the perspective of a teacher who craved relatedness with pupils, rather than vice versa; these positive relationships were not just to support the learners, they increased my internal motivation and fundamentally transformed and reinforced my new teacher identity. Even small interactions between teacher and student encourage the building of long-term positive relationships (Wubbels et al. 2014) and in my case the waves, jokes, 'hellos' all contributed to the sense of connection I felt as the experience progressed. In essence, both colleagues and pupils nourished my teacher identity and improved my perceived performance as a teacher.

## Conclusion

This autoethnographic project sought to analyse what this experience felt like using the theoretical lens of self-determination. It makes three contributions. First, empirical examination of a teacher educator returning to practice in England, second, the application of

self-determination theory to a short/mid-range longitudinal study and lastly, suggestion that school environments that prize autonomy may better support teacher motivation than compliance-driven contexts.

There are a number of potential limitations that could be explored in the future work. The project could be repeated using multiple participants to aid generalisability. This would also support autoethnographic limitations of power, privilege and potential bias. The school that the experience took place also had a unique character and curriculum approach. Return to practice could look very different in a highly regulated context. The project was also limited to 16 weeks. Arguably this could have felt like a novelty given the fixed time frame so tracking motivation over a longer or more permanent period may reveal different findings. Finally, use of mixed methods could increase external validation, for example, classroom observations and/or interviews with colleagues would support identifying any potential blind spots in self-observation.

Teacher educators in England face a persistent credibility challenge, preparing student teachers for the classroom whilst becoming distanced from those realities themselves. Yet research documenting this return journey remains absent from English literature. This autoethnographic study addresses this gap by examining my own 16-week return to teaching Year 5 students after many years in Initial Teacher Education. I propose an adapted model mapping this experience onto Ryan and Deci's framework, tracking how perceived competence, autonomy, relatedness and motivation types evolved over time. Here, external and internal motivation co-exist with the balance between the two varying over time, both occurring concurrently. The movement between these two forms of motivation fluctuated over time; it was not simple or rigid, and it was not necessarily a constant progression. Although overall there was a general sense of competence, autonomy and relatedness increasing over time (and as such my intrinsic motivation), there were dips and peaks, back and forth; it was not necessarily a neat progression. To this end, the proposed model ([Figure 1](#)) translates this varied mid-term journey onto the existing self-determination continuum where the movement from external to internal motivation oscillates and is multidimensional. Although this paper has explored perceived competence, autonomy and relatedness as three separate needs, the reality is that they were closely related with one feeding others and vice versa. The more competent I felt, the more likely I was to make autonomous choices. The more connected I felt, the more my sense of competence grew. As such, the three basic needs became increasingly intertwined over time.

Part of the increased success I felt over the placement was due to the specific environment I was in. A climate that prized professional autonomy, rather than fidelity to curricular schemes, meant that that I was able to have my self-determination psychological needs met. There are implications here for how we prepare student teachers for the classroom if they are to maintain internal motivation for the profession. Increasingly, there is seen to be a reduction in teacher autonomy in the English school system (Hashim, Torres and Kumar 2023), and this is impacting on teacher motivation (Granziera, Collie and Slep 2026). Top-down models often mean adherence to policies around 'curriculum, instruction, assessments, hiring, teacher evaluation ... budgeting, discipline, and even school culture' effectively 'trump' teacher autonomy (Hashim, Torres and Kumar 2023, 195). In self-determination terms, this will impact on intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction and desire to stay in the profession (Granziera, Collie and Slep 2026; National

Foundation for Educational Research 2020) as well as a general de-professionalisation (Frostenson 2015). Carpendale et al. (2024) argues

If you take a predetermined way of defining and thus measuring outcomes of a professional learning programme, then you filter out exploring what a teacher actually does with it. It ... becomes possible to overlook important aspects of teacher learning as the focus becomes adherence to predetermined outcomes. (2024, 920)

Could it be that adherence to prescribed criteria is merely an illusion of effectiveness? Inhabiting the role of a successful and motivated teacher requires autonomy, agency and active decision-making, the consequence of which breeds an internally motivated workforce. My return to practice revealed that autonomy, agency and active decision-making were essential to my sense of being a successful and motivated teacher. Whilst this single case cannot make generalisations, it raises important questions about whether externally regulated teaching environments can sustain teacher motivation long term. If so, how can teacher educators satisfy student teachers' needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence whilst meeting England's regulatory ITE demands? We need to be encouraging student teachers to have choices, feel capable and feel connected (Chiu et al. 2024). One way may be for teacher educators themselves to return to the classroom more regularly to re-engage with not only the lived experience of teaching but also remember once again what it feels like to be a 'novice' (Furlong and Maynard 1995) on the tricky journey to success although, of course, if this was an external requirement it could become self-defeating and just another neoliberal directive. However, in my self-study, returning to the classroom provided an experience that informed who I am as a person, a teacher and a teacher educator.

## Notes

1. Higher Education is post-school learning at universities/colleges.
2. Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, a UK government agency that inspects all educational settings and children's services.
3. Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) is considered desirable for teachers in the majority of schools in England. It is awarded through QTS Initial Teacher Training programmes.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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