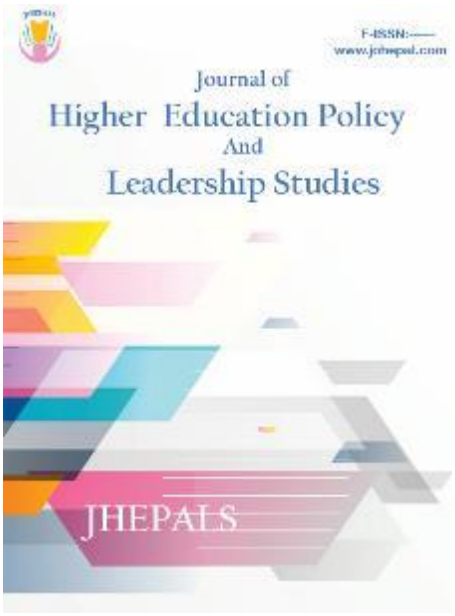
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Merging Identities: Role Conflict and Role Enrichment for Educator-Parents during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This practitioner-based article examines the ways in which educator-parent identity has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking the findings from Shifting Identities: A Mixed Methods Study of the Experiences of Teachers Who Are Also Parents (2016), and viewing them from the perspective of 'lockdown', the article aims to provide responses to the following questions: 1) What are the features of role enrichment and role conflict experienced by UK educators and parents between March and May 2020? 2) What opportunities and fresh perspectives arise from these experiences which could inform future practice and developments for educators and researchers?
The article lays out the unique nature of the current context before going on to outline the research methodology and philosophical assumptions underlying the work. It then goes on to establish some key principles before examining the elements of role conflict and role enrichment experienced by educator parents. The article concludes that may of the core values and principles, as well as the practical ways forward, are more vital than ever and provides some practical suggestions for how educator-parents might feel better equipped to manage their merging roles.

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Keywords: Work-family balance; Educator-parents; Covid-19; Well-being; Role management

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Introduction

This article seeks to identify some of the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by UK educators who are also parents of both genders during the Covid-19 Pandemic. For the purposes of this piece, 'educators' should be taken to refer to teachers from early years settings through to those educating students at university. Educator-parents is the term coined for those who also have dependent children up to the age of sixteen. Using research findings from *Shifting Identities* (Kell, 2016) and combining these with ongoing writing, research and education practice, I seek to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the features of role enrichment and role conflict experienced by UK educators and parents between March and May 2020?
2) What opportunities and fresh perspectives arise from these experiences which could inform future practice and developments for educators and researchers?

My doctoral thesis (2016) focused on teachers in maintained schools in the UK. As a writer and researcher, there are many findings and reflections which will be of significance to educators in higher and further education settings and to other writers and researchers.

Personal and professional contexts

I am an educator of twenty-two years and, as of September 2019, embarked on a 'portfolio career'. I now combine working in an Alternative Provision (AP) setting (for young people who do not attend mainstream school for reasons such as exclusion due to behaviour, illness or school refusal) with writing, research training and facilitation for educators with a focus on teacher well-being, recruitment and retention. I have a virtual personal learning network of more than 24,000 educators, whose wisdom and expertise (whilst inevitably limited and skewed) I draw upon in this and my other writing and research and experience of working with dozens of UK schools. I am currently combining this work with home educating two children of ten and twelve years old and sharing the house with a fellow full-time professional and three cats. My original doctoral research focus on teaching and parenting and how the two roles can enhance and conflict with one another therefore feels particularly pertinent.

Historical and sociological contexts

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, schools in the UK closed to the vast majority of students on 20 March, 2020, remaining open only to the children of essential key workers such a medics. The announcement, made by the UK Prime Minister on 18 March (gov.uk, 2020) left schools with just two days to reconfigure their provision and set up a home learning profession with little practical guidance. Meanwhile, most universities had ceased face-to-face contact the week previously. Education providers were forced to quickly master a series of online communication methods to continue with 'business as usual' as far as possible, with meeting, teaching and marking now taking place remotely. At the time of writing, universities anticipate no face-to-face contact for the foreseeable future, whilst schools are grappling to gradually welcome students back with social distancing measures, as far as possible, in place, and it would appear to be months before 'normal' service can resume (Gibbons, 2020; Ferguson, 2020). According to a survey of one local authority,

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on average 7 students (of key workers or those identified as particularly vulnerable) were attending school between 20 March and 1 June 2020.

Educational contexts

During ordinary times teaching is a noisy job, which offers little chance for respite (Kell, 2016, p. 133). On 20 March, 2020, the noise of the classroom and lecture theatre was cut off and the thousands of daily interactions which make up the fabric of an educator's working day were ceased. In the hiatus that followed, the profession had to negotiate new ways of being, new ways of functioning and new ways of educating. The whiteboards and projectors were replaced with home-working. This of course has been unique to each individual, and includes those completely alone, single parents, those with vulnerable relatives and those with new babies, each of which has brought its own challenges. By focusing on those who are parents, this by no means diminishes the challenges of those in other categories.

For those of us with children of school age, we have found ourselves in the tenth week of 'lockdown' in a unique position of supervising our own children's education whilst remotely educating our own students. Cries for help or food or entertainment as we try to work punctuate our days and we find our efficiency levels substantially depleted. More profoundly, there is something else going on – a wider feeling of unease and fear and sheer exhaustion which Berinato (2020) describes as 'grief'.

Our very raison-d'être as educators has been brought into question (see axiological assumptions below). The reality is that our most vulnerable students may not have the economic and technological means to engage with remote learning – those who struggle with mental health problems, poverty and abuse are out of our reach (The Children's Society, 2020).

Meanwhile, where perceptions of teachers in the media were already identified as an issue, at macro level, which negatively affected teachers' sense of professional efficacy and well-being (Kell, 2016, p.170), a series of controversial headlines served to further undermine the confidence of the teaching profession (e.g. Groves & White, 2020) and there was debate over the safety implications of the wider reopening of schools (Kell, 2020).

Within this extraordinary and unprecedented context, I will seek to explore the unique challenges faced by educator-parents in terms of roles conflict and to tease out some of the possible benefits (role enrichment) which might arise before going on to propose a series of recommendations in the light of our new outlook. For this, I draw upon Calvino's (1988) concept of 'fresh perspectives':

> Whenever humanity seems condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification (p. 7).

When examining my thesis findings on challenges and benefits of being an educator and parent through the lens of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been striking to observe which of these are completely new and which endure and to move from this position to exploring pertinent revelations from which we, as a community of educators, might learn.

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Research Methodology

I bring my professional experience as Teaching School Lead, senior teaching fellow at UCL and author to this piece. For example, the headteacher survey (Appendix 1) was a piece of work completed for a local authority in preparation for the wider re-opening of schools on 1 June and feeds into a bigger piece of work to ensure schools are supported during this period. I am a pragmatic researcher with an interest in 'demystifying the research process [to make] it more accessible and potentially more accountable to the public' (Atweh, Kemmis, & Weeks, 1998, p. 120).

Philosophical assumptions

My rhetorical assumptions see me identifying first and foremost as 'teacher' and secondly as 'researcher'. Like my first doctoral supervisor, Paul Miller, I wear many 'hats' and shift constantly between 'insider' and 'outsider' in the research process (Miller, 2012, p. 129). In terms of ontological assumptions I share Taylor and Bogdan's belief that reality is reflective, fluid and constructed by social actors (1998, p.9). I believe validity and truth to be multiple and subjective and take an interpretivist approach to the research, which sees human interaction as a basis for knowledge (O'Donoghue, 2007). My axiological assumptions are simple and fierce and shared by the majority of those in my profession (Kell, 2018, p. 44): to make a positive difference to the lives of young people.

Key Principles

Through more than a decade as a researcher, a number of key principles have evolved which underpin my thinking. I outline these below.

Turbulence and shifting identities

It is a truism that educator identity is constantly evolving:

> The architecture of teachers' professional identities is not always stable, but at certain times or during certain life, career and organisational phases may be discontinuous, fragmented, and subject to turbulence and change in the continuing struggle to construct and sustain a stable identity. (Day & DfES, 2006, p. 613).

Nias (2005) highlights the observation that when conflict and change occur, educators' need to adapt their 'situational selves', self-doubt and anxiety are frequently experienced (p. 224). Given that the situation in which we find ourselves could not have been predicted and is set to change the way that we live forever (Philip, 2020), it is little surprise that educators currently find themselves in a state of acute discombobulation.

Teacher wellbeing and teacher effectiveness

A focus on well-being must never be to the detriment of our central responsibility to give our students our very best, for they have 'one bite of the cherry', as a senior leader said in my thesis (2016). My research stands on the shoulders of a significant and growing body of literature demonstrating the link between teacher well-being and effectiveness (Nias, 1996; Day, 1999). A

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sense of genuine well-being is closely tied to a belief that educators are doing their jobs as well as they can, otherwise known as 'self-efficacy'.

> When teachers feel they are effective, assisting the learning of all pupils, keeping pace with their needs, handling the complex demands of teaching with insight and fluid flexibility, they experience joy, excitement, exhilaration and deep satisfaction... By the same token, teachers feel afraid, frustrated, guilty, anxious and angry when they know that they are not teaching well or when they encounter pupils whom they cannot help (Nias, 1996, p. 297).

Given that there are numerous students educators quite literally 'cannot help' in the present circumstances, aside from the inevitable personal challenges faced, it is, again, little wonder that the Covid-19 pandemic has taken a toll on well-being.

Control

In my research and training on teacher well-being, I find myself regularly drawn to Covey's circles of influence and control. The inner circle of influence represents the elements of our lives we can control such as what we wear, what we eat, the language we use. The outer circle represents concerns which are significant, but over which we have no control, such as what the future might hold, how others might regard us, and the consequences of global pandemics.

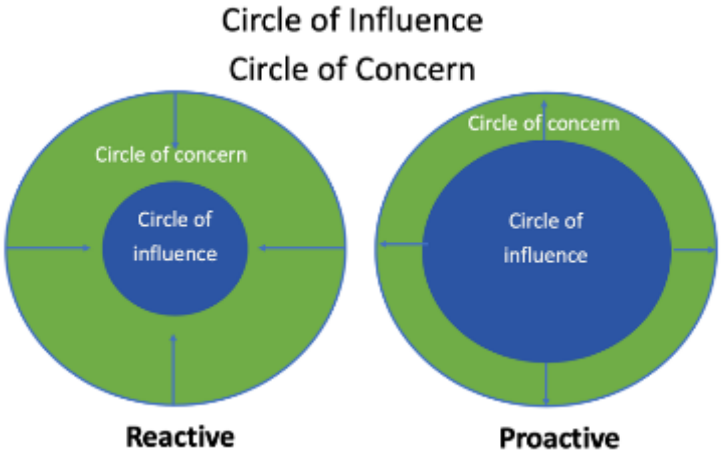


Figure 1, Circle of influence, circle of concern, adapted from Covey (2004).

When the circle of influence is diminished in size, as it inevitably is during the current period, feelings of anxiety and inadequacy abound. Our challenge is to identify and isolate the elements we *can* control.

Role Conflict

In this context, 'role conflict' is the term adopted to describe

> the challenges faced by [educator]-parents when attempting to balance their professional duties with their family lives; the relationships, policies and demands which

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> prevent them from feeling that they are successful in either one of – or both – roles. (Kell, 2016)

My research approach is based upon a premise that it is important to shine a light into the darker corners of our experiences before turning to the positive opportunities that may arise. In this section, I will explore some key elements of role conflict, reflecting upon how these may or may not have been affected by the current pandemic. It is worth noting at this stage that there are some manifestations of role conflict which also appear in the following section, role enrichment, depending upon how they are viewed.

Guilt and regret

For parent-educators, feelings of guilt and regret feature regularly when they discuss their struggles to balance the two roles. They regularly feel 'afraid, frustrated, guilty, anxious and angry' (Nias, 1996, p. 297) as they struggle to reconcile the conflicting demands of the two roles. Feelings of guilt and regret at neglecting duties both at home and at work featured regularly amongst the teacher-parents in my doctoral study (Kell, 2016, p. 97). Of 1,604 survey respondents, 63% agreed with the statement, 'I regularly feel stressed, depressed or overwhelmed when balancing work and family' (Kell, 2016, p. 130). Given the fact that, where 'work' and 'home' in most cases could be confined to two (or more) different spaces, it can be concluded that in many cases such feelings of guilt and frustration may currently be exacerbated.

Time, space and noise

The scarcity of time is a regular challenge for educator-parents. For one father, cited by Chhatwal, "It's a question of balancing guilt (letting family down versus letting children at school down) as I allocate my time" (2015). My thesis proposed a number of practical ways forward to deal with the 'hungry' nature of teaching and its ability to seep into every element of life. During Covid-19 and 'lockdown', many of these are no longer viable.

The emotional demands of both roles, combined with the perpetual noise, can mean that the individual can feel their own needs are being neglected. As one middle leader put it, when discussing a period when his children were younger: 'I'd feel squeezed into the corner of my own life, as if I didn't really exist as a human', says Keith of the period when his children were younger.

Where the noise level may have changed in its nature, for educator-parents from home, the chatter of a classroom or lecture theatre has been replaced by the noises of our own children's needs, desires and electronic devices. Where in ordinary times, the journey to and from work may have provided some precious time and space for reflection, this has now gone, and the lack of physical and mental space between bed, sleep, domestic chores and distractions has meant that, rather than shifting, our various identities have effectively merged.

Spillover and emotional dissonance

During the most ordinary of times, education is a career in which the 'to-do' list is never 'done' and the concerns and reflections can easily invade our private spaces. Now, with these all happening simultaneously and in the same spaces, the notion of 'spillover' is more of a challenge than ever for educator-parents. This term 'work-family spillover' comes from Mennino, Rubin and Brayfield (2005)

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and occurs when behaviours, moods, stress, and emotions from work are transferred to the family domain. The boundaries between work and family life are blurred or effectively eliminated. Again, this phenomenon is intensified whilst working from home.

When surrounded by family who are dependent on you for their every need, there is a risk of what Crawford called 'emotional dissonance' - the frequent need to display positive emotions that are not the same as the neutral or negative emotions that you are actually feeling.' (2009, p.22).

Continuous partial attention

The need to be able to regularly multi-task is a feature of the life of every educator, but more of an issue than ever for the parent-educator, who may be shifting in between meal preparations, supervision of home-learning and monitoring of a child's safety. The notion of 'continuous partial attention', a modern adaptive behaviour of continually dividing one's attention between one thing and another, was coined by technology writer and consultant Stone in 1998 is described as an automatic process motivated by a desire to be a live node on the network'. Rather than being a preference or a temptation, in the circumstances in which we find ourselves during Covid-19, I would argue continual partial attention is in fact an abiding necessity and results in high levels of exhaustion and frustration and lower levels of productivity and efficiency that we experience in more ordinary times.

When the old rules don't apply

Each of these factors mean that many of the previous ways forward are simply impracticable. In *Shifting Identities,* I advocated 'ruthless compartmentalisation' (Kell, 2016, p. 148), as a way of keeping work-family balance in check. This is the idea that we must work hard to keep work and family separate and be militant in our mastery of our time. This was an approach advocated by several teacher-parents and summarised by one middle-leader as follows:

> The big thing that's changed for me since I've been a parent is, I just – I very, very rarely take work home. I think, the important thing for me now, especially with them as very young children, is having a real, sort of distinguishing line between work and home (Kell, 2016, p. 120)

In a similar vein Edge, in the context of UCL's Global City Leaders research, talked in an interview about the importance of carrying one bag in an attempt to make the job of a school leader appear 'doable' and therefore appealing to others. Edge says, 'leave things that you don't need to take to school at home [and] leave things that you don't need to take home at school.' (Kell, 2019). Only now there are no bags and, with all of our duties in the same spaces, and compartmentalisation is more challenging than ever.

Role enrichment

In this context, the term 'role enrichment' is used to describe:

> the enablers – the positive factors which enhance [educator]-parents' sense of effectiveness and success in their daily professional lives and allow them, for example, to pursue their careers in a healthy balance with their family lives. (Kell, 2016.)

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Merging Identities

Whilst it may seem counter-intuitive to identify the benefits to educator-parents of a global pandemic, an increasing number of educators, writer and thinkers are considering ways in which this catastrophic period might give way to new ways of thinking (see, for example, Jones, 2020; Ovenden-Hope, 2020) and a more enlightened and just society.

Before we move to looking at fresh perspectives, it is worth dwelling on the fact that the key features of role enrichment and the clear values with which they are inextricably intertwined, seem in fact to be more valid than ever.

Moral purpose

Shifting Identities (2016) concluded that the benefits of being a teacher-parent far outweighed the challenges and that balancing the two is eminently possible in a supportive environment. Being a parent gave the participants 'an enhanced sense of moral purpose in their role as teacher or leader' (Kell, 2016, p. 166). This goes some way to explaining the emotional dissonance experienced by many educators during the current pandemic: the mere knowledge that, with our relative levels of security and privilege, we as educators may be comfortable and secure at home whilst the students we are used to seeing daily might be vulnerable or in danger leads to both negative feelings of helplessness and anxiety but also to a drive to do what we can to make a difference. A case study in point comes from the Pupil Referral Unit where I am based which moved quickly in March to secure three-times-weekly mealtime deliveries, funded and prepared by a local hotel, to the young people most at risk, thus enabling educators to check on their well-being as well as providing some nutrition. Whilst debates around the value or otherwise of online learning technology continue to rumble, it would be hard to argue against the unique value of face-to-face educator-to-learner contact. In the words of a trainee teacher I work with: 'I now understand better than ever why I want to teach.'

Empathy with parents and children

Participants in *Shifting Identities* also reported increased levels of empathy and understanding with students and their parents resulting from becoming parents themselves. Catherine, a teacher of English, evoked a powerful image to capture this empathy:

> I'm so much more empathetic to parents as well, and where they're coming from, and just wanting the best from their children. So I always try to imagine my classroom by having – imagining their parents up on the wall, and they're actually watching, and – what would they be thinking about their student's performance right now, about how their child is being taught. (Kell, 2016, p. 127)

Whilst all parents struggle with the transition to home-schooling and the varying demands of different educational institutions, those who are educators perhaps have a more enhanced appreciation of what we can realistically expect from young people during this period and of a healthy balance of work and play. In her reflections on being a mother-teacher, Findlater (2015) reflects on her increased motivation to offer her students the best possible education. 'Now that I have a child myself, I feel like what I am doing as a job is even more important to get right… What I do know for sure is that all those things I want for my daughter I also want for my students.'

Whilst educators and parents grapple with the debates around the safety implications (Richardson, 2020) and the growing divide between the most and least privileged members of

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society (Rickett, 2020), this profound sense of empathy points to a commitment to fulfill our moral purpose as educators that is more fierce than ever.

Time is precious

It is notable that the tricky question of time features in both role conflict and role enrichment sections of this piece. Whilst the frustrations have been explored above, there is another angle that can be taken on this issue which sees genuine and precious opportunities.

When working with the charity, *Education Support Partnership* to offer training to schools on staff well-being, I encourage delegates to consider the unique nature of working in schools. One of the key points that always arises is the need to exist in 'micro-team'. School staff's days are measured in minutes – even seconds. The three minutes between the end of break and the beginning of the next lesson frequently means a choice between using the toilet or drinking a cup of tea.

During this period, many educators do not have such constraints. This is disorientating, but also offers opportunities to be more flexible with time and to take better care of our daily needs – an area to which teachers frequently pay less than adequate attention, as Edge highlights (Kell, 2019). In addition, there are potentially greater opportunities to be in the open air, to exercise with our children, to cook and to eat with our children.

Whilst the guilt described above is very real for many educator-parents, one of the conclusions of *Shifting Identities* was that 'sometimes being in the [same] room [as your children]' is enough.' (Kell, 2016, p. 154). The physical proximity to our children which may at times feel constrictive has the potential to strengthen our relationships. Whilst so often repeated it verges on cliché, it is notable how many teacher-parents in *Shifting Identities* referred to the rapid passing of time with our growing children. Lines such as, 'enjoy every moment,' 'you can't get it back' and 'everyone tells you it – and you don't listen-but it's true. Time goes so quickly,' permeate the research. (Kell, 2016, p. 130).

Edge (Kell, 2019) talks of how fast many school leaders tend to move around building. We have, quite literally, been compelled to slow down. Perhaps we can make the most of this.

Challenging the notion of presenteeism

There is a unique opportunity to challenge the phenomenon known as presenteeism – the draw to be seen to be working excessively long hours by colleagues and line-managers. Chhatwal (2015) describes it as follows:

> In too many schools SLT are expected to be the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave in the (late or very late) evening. And this is the case regardless of what they actually achieve. Yet surely staff should be judged on outcomes, not the hours they put in?

It is one of the key factors cited by teachers as having a detrimental effect on well-being (Kell, 2018, p. 24). Now that educators working remotely, from home, have had a genuine opportunity to organise their own time and their own priorities without these contagious external pressures, there is the opportunity to refuse to go back to such pernicious practices.

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Challenging existing cultures and practices

At macro level, this period of upheaval offers opportunities to re-think approaches we have taken for granted over many years. School culture, including day-to-day routines, habits and expectations, can easily become entrenched if left unchallenged. We now face the biggest challenge of all, and within it a serious opportunity to call into question some of the practices and procedures which had the potential to undermine the well-being of educators. These might include procedures around performance appraisal, assessment and definitions of success, all of which are explored in depth in *How to Survive in Teaching* (Kell, 2018). This may also include the nature and perception of our schools' inspectorate, Ofsted, hitherto frequently seen as causing excessive stress (Kell, 2016, p. 144). *Shifting Identities* concluded that 'a supportive working culture which reflects an understanding of the day-to-day practicalities of teacher-parents' lives' (Kell, 2016) is key to ensuring teacher-educators thrive both professionally and personally. Here, with many members of society at their most frightened and most vulnerable, those who lead schools have an opportunity to demonstrate to their colleagues that they truly see them, in the words of Myatt (2015), as 'humans first' and educators second.

Conclusion: What mattered before now matters more than ever

'Everything has changed!' has been a cry that has run out regularly from all corners through this pandemic. Having reflected upon being a parent and educator through the lens of this pandemic and in the light of a decade's research, what actually strikes me is how much of what really matters is not only still valid, but more important than ever. When I look back at the final conclusions of my doctoral thesis, the recommendations strike me as a powerful reminder to us all that self-care and work-family balance should still be underpinned by Winnicott's 'good enough' principle of 1953. This is an opportunity to remind ourselves and one another of the following:

- Guilt and perfectionism, despite years of research, seem to service no practical or positive purpose. We need to find ways of letting them go.
- We each need to do what is right for us and our children – there is no one-size fits all approach.
- The practicalities and minutiae are more important than ever – finding time for silence, decent nutrition, exercise and to switch off from work are essential.

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Dr Emma Kell has over 20 years' experience as a teacher. Emma's energies are channelled into keeping great teachers happily in the profession. Emma's current ventures include keynote speaking, working as senior teaching fellow at UCL, a Teaching School Lead role at a PRU in Bucks, and research, presentations and training for Education Support Partnership, NFER and The Anna Freud Centre. Emma writes for a variety of publications including TES and BBC Teach on school leadership and the pressures and joys of teaching and has recently completed a doctorate on teacher well-being and work-life balance at Middlesex University. Emma is author of *How To Survive in Teaching* (Bloomsbury, 2018) and *A Little Guide For Teachers: Well-being and Self-Care* (Sage, 2020). She is co-host of the Clem and Em podcast. Emma is a TEDx speaker, delivering at TEDx Norwich in October 2020 on the theme of teacher well-being and detoxifying schools.

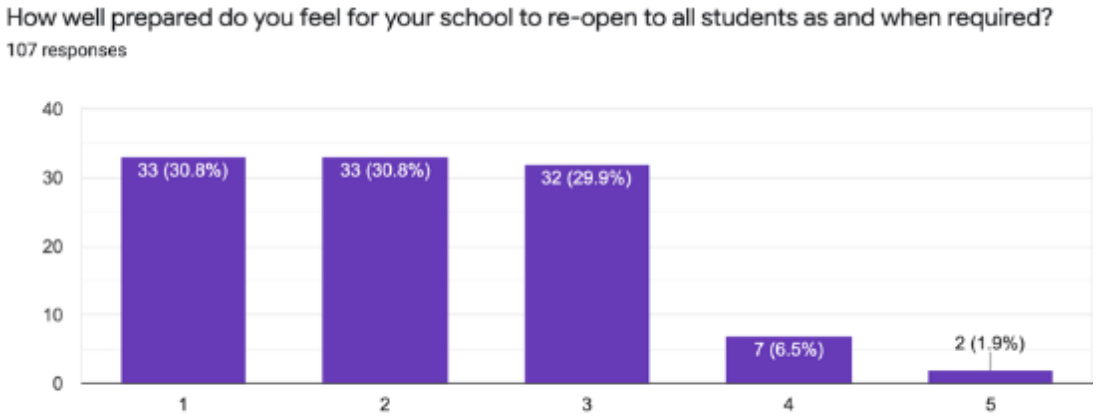
Appendix 1

Extract from a survey of headteachers in an English local authority.
Conducted by E. Kell with school and council representatives.

Bucks Headteachers: The re-opening of schools
Survey findings: 18 May, 2020

Dates of completion: 7-14 May

Total no of respondents: 107
No. of students currently attending school (prior to June 1st): range from 0 to 45. Average of around 7.
No of staff currently attending: range from 0 to 10. Average: 4.
Level of preparation (1= not at all well-prepared; 5=very well-prepared)



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