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An Appreciative Inquiry: exploring Teaching Assistants' experiences in a UK primary school during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Contents

Abstract

To describe the period between March 2020 and February 2022 as one of the most challenging of times in recent history, affecting millions across the globe, would be an understatement; not least for those working in education. It has been documented that education and those working within the education sector have been significantly affected by the pandemic and the disruption caused by school closures (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Munir, 2021). Existing literature has documented UK teaching staff experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly elicited through large-scale online surveys (e.g., Marchant et al., 2020; Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). The literature available documenting educator's first-hand experiences during the pandemic has predominantly focused on teachers' perspectives, within a problem-saturated context (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). This thesis seeks to capture the experiences and successes of teaching assistants (TAs) using Appreciative Inquiry (AI), a positive, social constructionist approach that aims to bring about transformation within an organisation (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2010). Four Teaching Assistants within the same English primary school took part in focus groups structured to follow the 4-D AI cycle. Five main themes were identified and discussed in relation to existing literature, research and theory. These were *relationships, community, personal growth and role, the children* and during an everchanging context the potential *impact on staff wellbeing*. Implications for the TAs, the setting and Educational Psychologists are also considered.

Chapter One
Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale for this research

1.1.1. Context

In March 2020 the Prime Minister announced the UK's first lockdown instructing people to stay at home, and refrain from non-essential contact and travel. This lockdown was further extended until early May of that year. During this time schools were only open to vulnerable pupils and those with key-worker parents/carers (e.g., individuals employed as nurses, police officers and supermarket employees etc.). At this time, I was completing my first year of my professional doctorate whilst working in placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). Like so many individuals across the UK, I began working from home on a full-time basis. The service I worked for, in conjunction with services across the UK, developed tools that allowed Educational Psychologists to continue to work with school staff, pupils and parents utilising a variety of online methods to both communicate with individuals and assess pupils. It was during this time that I had a conversation with a SENCo who told me that the TAs in her setting were extremely concerned for their own and their family members' safety while continuing to work with vulnerable children. They faced many challenges within their role exacerbated by the presence of COVID and their risk of catching it. Their tasks included the provision of personal care, working with pupils who struggled to socially distance and those who could be physically challenging. This was something that I began to hear quite often during my conversations with staff. In the meantime, newspapers began to report that teaching unions (GMB) had expressed serious concerns that "the majority of TAs (in London) were afraid to return to work" (Cowburn, 2020, para. 1) and "TAs were covering twice as many lessons as before the pandemic" (Unison, 2020, para. 1). I subsequently reflected on how fortunate I felt at that time to be able to work from home when so many had little choice.

However, despite the gloomy picture and headlines at that time, TAs (ex-colleagues and setting staff) were continuing to go to work and I began to hear more positive experiences that TAs were speaking about. These were namely working more closely with fewer pupils and the subsequent progress some pupils made. It was these experiences that I wanted to capture within my thesis to highlight the value of the TA, during this time and beyond, and how they had risen to the challenges they were facing (TES, 2020).

1.1.2. Professional background

Before becoming an Assistant Educational Psychologist (AEP) prior to my role as a TEP, I was a Teaching Assistant for six years in a primary school working with children with special educational needs (SEN). Whilst I enjoyed my job tremendously, I was very aware of the difficulties and challenges this role faced. For me, these included the lack of power and voice I had in relation to how those children could be best supported, despite often working with them for several years and communicating closely with their families. Furthermore, I was never asked to attend annual reviews or directly consulted by professionals such as the Speech and Language Service (SLT) or by the Educational Psychologist (EP). Further, the pay was dire (Roffey-Barentsen, 2014; Holt & Birchall, 2022; Topping, 2022) but like so many other TAS, I continued working in that role because of the enormous job satisfaction I gained and

the pride I felt when those children made small steps progress often only appreciated by myself, my colleagues and of course, the children's families.

Conversely as an AEP and TEP, I have often found it quite difficult to engage with staff other than teachers and SENCos, as access to TAs is not always straight forward. Further, in my experience, TAs do not always have the professional confidence in their opinions in relation to the children in their care when talking to outside agencies. This, of course, varies across settings, and therefore may be indicative of the ethos and power relations within particular schools. However, because of my previous background, I have always attempted to consult with TAs, as they can often provide a rich, detailed and holistic picture of 'their' children.

1.1.3. Qualitative data

Existing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic literature has documented UK teaching staff experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, which have mainly been elicited through large-scale online surveys (e.g., Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2021; Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020; Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). The literature available documenting educator's first-hand experiences during the pandemic has predominantly focused on teachers' perspectives, (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). As mentioned previously, in my experience, TAs are not always consulted about the children they work with nor are they often asked explicitly about their views as documented in the literature (e.g. Clarke, 2019; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014). This study sought to elicit TAs' voice in relation to their personal experiences during the pandemic utilising a qualitative methodology. Such an approach fitted with the researcher's relativist ontology from which reality is seen as being socially constructed with multiple truths and realities existing within a system of language, with no single truth (Mertens, 2010) (see chapter 3: methodology). In contrast to a quantitative approach often taken using surveys, a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to build a two-way working relationship with participants, to explore their interactions and attempt to understand "how they use[d] language to construct their reality" (Andrews, 2012, p44). Such an approach gave participants the opportunity to be heard and enabled the researcher to "build a complex, holistic picture" (Cresswell, 1998, p15). The researcher felt that a quantitative methodology would have restricted the nature of data collected (Mertens, 2010) and stifled the exploration of participants' experiences.

1.2. Conclusion

This thesis sought to capture TAs' positive experiences and success they experienced during the pandemic. Chapter 2 provides a literature review that gives a brief, historical overview of the TA role and its challenges. This is followed by a review of the literature in relation to education setting staff during the course of the pandemic and the research questions that have structured this research. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological parameters of this study in terms of qualitative research, the framework, the method of data analysis and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 discusses the setting context and practical procedure followed to collect data from participants. Chapter 5, 6 and 7 provide detailed description of the findings and themes identified across the data. Chapter 8 discusses, in more detail, an interpretation of the findings and implications for the future.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to introduce the Teaching Assistant's (TA's) role, considering a brief historical overview of its evolution. Staff experiences during the pandemic will then be considered in terms of common themes identified within the pandemic literature.

To describe the period between March 2020 and February 2022 as one of the most challenging of times in recent history, affecting millions across the globe, would be an understatement; not least for those working in education. It has been documented that education and those working within the education sector have been significantly affected by the pandemic and the disruption caused by school closures (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Munir, 2021). Further, children and young people and the wider community have also been detrimentally impacted, not only in terms of pupils' lost learning but also in terms of the significant social and emotional impact on society as a whole (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

This thesis seeks to capture the experiences of teaching assistants (TAs) during the pandemic and this review will briefly examine the literature in relation to the historical context of the teaching assistant (TA) role and the lack of TA voice within this. The literature reviewed in the context of the 'current' pandemic, spans from early research completed at the beginning (March 2020), when schools experienced their first 'lockdown'. This includes a range of literature and research that considers staff experience directly during the initial period through to studies that focussed on educators' experiences during numerous lockdowns and the reopening of schools in September 2020 through to February 2022. Due to the recent context, research within the UK is relatively scant, therefore, the review also considers research conducted both in the UK and beyond, in which common themes have been identified in relation to educators' experiences, feelings and challenges commonly experienced during the lock down period and beyond.

Terms: Educators and teaching staff have been used interchangeably to cover teachers, teaching assistants (TAs) and other support staff due to paucity of research that focuses specifically on Teaching Assistants.

Initial key search words: Teaching Assistants; TA; classroom support; role; SEMH; COVID-19; pandemic. *Expanded to include*: effective classroom support; impact; teachers.

2.2. Historical context and evolution of the role

Teaching assistants/classroom support assistant numbers have increased exponentially in recent years (Groom, 2006; Groom & Rose, 2005; Webster et al., 2011, 2013) comprising a quarter of the school workforce (DfE, 2022). In November 2021, there were 275,812 TAs in England, an increase of 4,400 since 2020 (DfE, 2022). The role has evolved quite substantially over the years (Clarke & Visser, 2016, 2019a, 2019b; Sharples et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2013) and the current study may also evidence how the COVID-19 pandemic has further contributed to this evolution.

The increase in TAs has been attributed, in part, to government reforms (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014) and the rising number of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) within mainstream schools (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014; Webster et al., 2010). As TA numbers have increased, the role has developed significantly from being historically viewed as "an extra pair of hands in the classroom" (Groom & Rose, 2005, p20) to more formal descriptions of "paraprofessionals and pedagogues" (Clarke & Visser, 2019b, p373) and the literature has documented the diverse and complex nature of the TA role (Lehane, 2016; Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2021; Mackenzie, 2011; Saddler, 2014; DfE, 2019). Previous research has focused on the effective deployment of TAs (Blatchford et al., 2009; Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2021; Sharples et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2010, 2011, 2013), their impact on supporting pupils' academic, social, emotional and personal development (Blatchford et al., 2009; Burton & Goodman, 2011; Minondo et al., 2001; Webster et al., 2011; Woolfson & Truswell, 2005), supporting non-academic skills and effectively managing pupil behaviour (Clarke & Visser, 2016, 2019a, 2019c; Losberg & Zwozdiak-Myers, 2021; Woolfson & Truswell, 2005), specialised training and development e.g., the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSAs) intervention (Krause et al., 2020), and the delivering of 1:1, small group and whole class teaching (Groom, 2006; Groom & Rose, 2005; Higgins & Gulliford, 2014; Sharples et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2013).

Research indicates that there has been no clearly defined role of the TA and their deployment and function has varied tremendously across settings (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014; DfE, 2019) with a variety of roles and titles such as Behavioural Support Assistant, Special Needs Assistant and Learning Support Assistants (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014). Historically, "in a bid to raise standards and tackle teacher workload" (DfES, 2003, p1), the National Agreement policy (2003) marked a shift in government strategy promoting the deployment of TAs to cover lessons, provided they worked under the supervision of teachers (Webster, 2020). It was at this time that the Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) role was also created to alleviate teacher workload. The HTLA was afforded a broad range of responsibilities including teaching, planning and working with pupils with special educational needs (SEN) (Bedford et al., 2006, p6).

Findings from a prominent large-scale research project, the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS; 2004-2009) suggested that SEN/low-attaining pupils who were supported by TAs, were less likely to make academic progress than pupils who were taught directly by teachers (Blatchford et al. 2009; Webster et al. 2013; Webster et al., 2017). The authors called for a "fundamental reassessment" in relation to the way "TAs were used" (Webster et al., 2013, p80). However, further analysis of the findings suggest that this measure of academic progress was not differentiated from pupils who did not have SEN and were grouped together with an expectation of making "progress by three National Curriculum sub-levels every two years" (Webster et al., 2011, p7). Pupils with SEN "who received the most TA support were behind their peers by up to two sub-levels, as a result of TA support" (*ibid,* p8). A comparison that may not be entirely appropriate given that the SEND Code of Practice (DfES, 2001b) identified children with SEN as having "a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age" (p6).

The Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project (2010-2011), in response to the damning conclusions of the DISS project, looked at three main aspects of the TA role (originally devised in the DISS project using the Wider Pedagogical Role model [WPR] (Webster et al., 2011) that potentially impacted on pupil progress. The WPR model was used as an 'organisational framework' (Cockcroft & Atkinson, 2015, p90) to identify elements of TA

support and potential barriers to effective practice. Three broad areas identified from the project included TA preparedness, deployment and practice (Webster et al, 2013). These focused on how TAs often spent more time with SEN pupils, who then missed out on quality time with teachers. The quality of TA-pupil interactions was deemed less effective than those between teachers and pupils and TAs were often given little or no time to prepare for lessons and lacked professional training and supervision. The authors called for significant changes in practice for TAs to support pupil learning more effectively (p78).

One criticism of both projects is the explicit assumption that TAs needed to be micro-managed, incapable of developing their own role with a complete disregard for potential TA autonomy within that. Whilst it can be argued that there was a need for more clarity in relation to how TAs could effectively support pupils and develop their role, the emphasis was more around dictating their practice rather than acknowledging their potential, encouraging autonomy and tapping into their enthusiasm and passion for the job.

> With money at a premium, you employ TAs for direct contact with children. But if that's not having an effect, maybe then taking quarter of an hour off that and giving them a quarter of an hour at the beginning of the day to talk to teachers about what they want them to do, might have a better impact. I think that's something we've learnt from doing it. (Webster et al., 2013, p86).

In response to the lack of clarity of the TA role, the Education Endowment Fund (EEF, 2018) produced guidance for how headteachers and Senior Leader Teams (SL) could make the best use of TAs. Recommendations highlighted that the TA role should: 'add value to what teachers do' rather than being seen as 'an informal teaching resource for low attaining pupils' (p3); 'deliver high quality one-to-one and small group support' (p3), utilise evidence-based interventions (p3); be able to effectively communicate with pupils to further develop their 'independent learning skills and manage their own learning' (p3). A final recommendation highlighted that pupils' learning delivered by teachers and TAs, should be integrated with explicit links made between classroom learning and interventions used to extend and consolidate that learning further.

It has been argued that research such as the DISS and EDTA projects evidencing TAs' negative impact on pupils' academic progress has largely ignored their role in social inclusion and pupils' social outcomes (Saddler, 2014). TAs often work very closely with pupils and may have closer relationships with children and young people than teachers (Roafe, 2003), enabling them to better support their mental health (Conboy, 2021). Further, the evolution of the role, particularly in relation to a more SEMH orientated curriculum (Groom, 2006) has been explored within the literature which documents how the TA role has been instrumental in promoting true inclusion within the classroom environment (Clarke et al., 1999 as cited in Groom, 2006) and further supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing e.g., within the ELSA role. The pastoral relationship that TAs often build with pupils is seen as a fundamental aspect of their role enabling pupils with SEN to further develop social skills crucial for building and maintaining friendships (Wearmouth, 2009 as cited in Saddler, 2014, p150). Moreover, Saddler (2014) argues that academic and social inclusion go hand in hand as 'in order to acquire knowledge and facilitate cognitive growth, social inclusion within the learning environment is deemed necessary for all learners' (p147), situating learning within a social cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978).

2.2.1. TA voice

Despite a large workforce within education and a move toward para-professional recognition, the literature suggests that TA voice has largely been ignored (Clarke, 2019; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014). O'Brien & Garner (2001) argued that TAs have historically been marginalised and poorly paid despite often working with the most vulnerable and complex pupils (Clarke, 2019; DfE, 2019). Research that sought the perspectives of TAs has suggested that they often feel undervalued (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014) and at worst, potentially regarded as 'pond life who know their place' (Watson et al., 2013, p115), a term used to describe TAs often perceived as being at the bottom of the teaching staff hierarchy. Further, Roffey-Barentsen & Watt (2014) found that a hierarchy of perceived status within the para profession itself also existed with HTLAs afforded the highest status and special needs assistants given the lowest status.

From a feminist perspective, gender may also be a contributing factor in relation to TAs' positioning in relation to status, value, and power (Clarke, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2012). The TA workforce is predominantly female (95%) (Clarke, 2019) and it has been argued that this has contributed to the undermining of this marginalised group (Clarke, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2011; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014).

2.3. Teaching staff experiences during the pandemic

2.3.1. The context

There were two periods during which in-person learning was restricted for the majority of pupils: first for 14 weeks in spring 2020; and then for eight weeks in winter 2021. During these periods of partial closure, many pupils experienced some form of remote learning. Even when schools re-opened fully, significant challenges remained due to high levels of staff and pupil absence. Research shows that COVID-19-related disruptions have worsened educational inequalities: the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has grown since the onset of the pandemic (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2022, p3).

Existing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic literature has documented UK teaching staff (including head teachers, senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants) experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly elicited through large-scale online surveys (e.g., Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2021; Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020; Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021). The literature available documenting educator's first-hand experiences during the pandemic has predominantly focused on teachers' perspectives, within a problem-saturated context (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). There appears to be no research that has sought to directly elicit TA voice in relation to their positive experiences of working face-to-face within a primary school during the pandemic.

A review of the current pandemic literature has highlighted common themes in relation to teaching staff experiences during the evolving crisis. Below is an overview of the literature and research that has sought to examine educators' experiences at different points in the pandemic.

2.3.2. Community

Witten et al., (2001) argued 'that beyond their educational function, schools can serve as catalysts for community participation, social cohesion and the vitality of neighbourhoods' (p307). Therefore 'school closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities' (UNESCO, 2020, Para.1).

It has been documented that many staff went 'above and beyond' their remit during the pandemic and that TAs 'were pivotal in allowing schools to keep functioning during the pandemic' (Moss et al., 2021, p3). Staff involvement within the wider community was wide-ranging from speaking with parents and doorstep visits, delivering resources, helping at food banks, meal voucher distribution and communication with Local Authorities and/or social services; these diverse roles often fell to staff working within more disadvantaged communities (e.g., Moss et al 2020; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022). Further, it was also highlighted that in more affluent areas pupils' learning was more of a priority in comparison to less advantaged areas in which staff became more aware of how poverty and overcrowding significantly impacted on pupil learning (Moss et al., 2020). Many teachers expressed how they had grown to understand their community better during this time (Dempsey & Burke, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020)

2.3.3. Role

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for teaching staff was adapting to new ways of working which included delivering learning remotely (DfE, 2020a as cited in Kim & Asbury, 2020). Whilst some staff reported that they embraced this, others struggled with unfamiliar learning platforms, which became an additional source of anxiety; staff had to also take into consideration the 'novel home-learning context' (Moss et al., 2020, p8). Learning not only had to be fun in order to motivate pupils to engage, but it also had to become a more family-orientated activity, especially for younger pupils (Moss et al., 2020). Moss et al., (2020) highlighted how in more disadvantaged areas, learning was more practical-based rather than IT-based. The disparity and inequality of the 'digital divide' (Dempsey & Burke, 2020) became more apparent during this time emphasising the social inequalities across the UK and beyond (Marchant et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Munir, 2021). Recent evidence from the Department for Education (DfE, 2022) suggests that the degree of learning loss remains significantly higher in pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (p8) with a further disparity between the north and south of England; the latter evidencing the least level of learning loss (p9).

Research also highlighted a wide variation in the delivery of teaching across countries. For example, a cross-cultural study comparing pre-school staff experiences between Sweden, Norway and the US, found that staff within the US were more likely to deliver teaching online during this time than staff within Sweden and Norway, who continued to teach in person for the majority of the time. This research highlighted the difficulties of delivering online learning which required significantly more planning than in person teaching and was exhausting to deliver (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

Schools faced enormous, continuing challenges to remain open despite high levels of ongoing teacher COVID-related absences prompting a rapid response by the government in relation to the deployment of TAs (DfE, 2020) to cover absent teachers. Despite historical evidence that TAs have the most positive impact on pupil learning and attainment when delivering

specific interventions, working 1:1 or with small groups and to support rather than replace teachers (Sharples et al., 2015; Webster, 2020), the government produced recommendations once again, to deploy TAs to 'lead groups and cover lessons' (Webster, 2020, para.8). In a review of these recommendations, Webster (2020) highlighted that whilst TAs should facilitate catch-up provision and targeted interventions, they should not be routinely utilised to replace teachers and cover lessons, arguing that this would be detrimental to pupils' learning (Webster, 2020).   Further, he argued that whilst TAs had a vital role in the recovery and catch-up required to address pupil lost learning, lessons from the past should be considered in order to avoid repeating history with the recognition that:

> It flies in the face of everything we know we need to do to avoid compounding the effect of missed learning time for the pupils most disadvantaged by time away from school if we routinely deploy unprepared and less-pedagogically skilled (compared with teachers) TAs to run the classes/groups in which they are taught. It denies these pupils much-needed teacher time, and it is also unfair on the TAs who are directed to lead those classes/groups without adequate preparation (Webster, 2020, para.17).

However, TA deployment altered quite dramatically (Moss et al., 2021) and by late October 2020, a large teaching union reported that "TAs were covering twice as many lessons" (Unison, 2020) with little sign of this abating. Evidence from an online survey, suggested that a large proportion of TAs (across primary, secondary and special schools) were continuing to deliver targeted interventions, 1:1 or small group teaching with over half of TAs delivering whole class activities and individually teaching 'bubble' groups (Moss et al., 2021). In the UK, between 2020 and 2021 pupils were put into groups known as "class or year-group bubbles" (Hazell, 2021, para. 2) in a bid to reduce the rate of infection across schools. If one pupil tested positive for COVID-19 then all pupils within their 'bubble' had to self-isolate for ten days (*ibid,* para 2).

2.3.4. Children

It has been documented that the impact of the pandemic and associated measures imposed to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus have had dire consequences for children and young people across the globe (e.g., Munir, 2021; Viner et al., 2021). These consequences have significantly impacted both children's physical and mental health and education. Further, these have resulted in vaccine disruptions, poor nutrition, violence against children at home, and exposure to harmful digital technologies (Munir, 2021, p4).

Much of the research within the UK and Europe has emphasised how educators were painfully aware of the implications for the more vulnerable pupils who were no longer able to attend school, consequently remaining out of sight with many staff reporting a duty of care to remain in touch with these pupils (Moss et al. 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Concerns were wide ranging and did not just relate to pupils' learning but also concerned their mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Moss et al., 2020; Munir 2021). Common worries about pupils (and often their families) included worry for the most vulnerable pupils (and their families) at risk of food poverty, unsafe home environments, SEN pupils (Burke & Dempsey, 2020) and difficulties accessing IT required for remote learning (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). Pre-school staff also expressed concerns about the social impact for their young children in relation to reduced contact with their

peers, consequently playing and socialising with small numbers of peers within 'bubbles' with the responsibility of making the right choice of cohort within those 'bubbles' falling on staff. (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

By the autumn of 2020, research suggests that both families and teaching staff highlighted that one of the most significant priorities for CYP returning back to school was addressing their social and emotional mental health (Moss et al., 2020) in order to achieve a smoother transition. It was documented that pupils appeared de-motivated and lacked energy upon returning back to school after a significant amount of time away, presenting with a clear deterioration of key skills, particularly for those pupils with SEN (Marchant et al., 2020; Munir, 2021)

Across the UK, in preparation for the reopening of schools in July 2020, many local authorities (LAs) adopted some form of 'recovery curriculum' (Carpenter, 2020) that focused on prioritising pupils' emotional needs, giving educators a framework through which to support pupils returning to formal education. Carpenter argued that during lockdown, many children and young people (CYP) would have experienced many different forms of loss including:

…routine, structure, friendship, opportunity and freedom, [which] can trigger the emergence emotionally of anxiety, trauma and bereavement in any child. The overall impact cannot be underestimated. It will cause a rapid erosion of the mental health state in our children. (Carpenter, 2020, para. 13).

The Recovery Curriculum represented a systematic, relationships-based approach designed to re-engage and motivate CYP back to formal education.

Table 1: Five Levers to support CYP (Carpenter, 2020, para.16)

Relationships	The importance of re-establishing and nurturing relationships
Community	The importance of listening to families who have been instrumental in the continuing education of their children during lockdown and to strive to engage them during their CYPs's transition back to school
Transparent curriculum	Emphasis is placed on educators' openness and honesty with CYP in relation to addressing educational gaps through consultation and co-construction with pupils to beginning to 'heal their sense of loss' (para.18)
Metacognition	The importance of re-skilling pupils and rebuilding CYPs' confidence as learners and being explicit about how this will be achieved.
Space	This emphasises the importance to let pupils return and engage at their own pace with the provision of 'space to be, to rediscover self, and to find their voice on learning in this issue' (Para.20)

2.3.5. Staff wellbeing

Educator's wellbeing has long been a concern prior to the pandemic (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022) and according to Pingitore et al., (2022), teachers are reported 'to be at higher risk for co-occurring mental disorders than other professional categories' (p2). Many factors have been attributed to this including stress from both excessive workload and student behaviour

as well as the school climate (Collie et al., 2012) as 'the culture, ethos and environment of the school can have a profound influence on both pupil and staff mental wellbeing' (DfE, 2018, p. 8).

It has been recognised that the long-term consequences of quarantine and social isolation could potentially lead to mental health difficulties in the future (Brooks et al., 2020). Within education, the current literature has highlighted the significant level of teaching staff stress and coping strategies during the pandemic (Maitland & Glazzard, 2021) and its impact on education professionals' mental health and wellbeing (Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020). A large-scale UK online survey (Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020) revealed that around 50% of staff felt 'their mental health and wellbeing had declined either considerably or a little' during this time (p18); "Individuals affected by an infectious disease outbreak, such as a pandemic, often experience increased anxiety, particularly around contracting the illness, a higher incidence of mental health difficulties, and heightened feelings of helplessness and stigma" (O'Reilly et al., 2021, p192; Douglas et al., 2009). Indeed, despite government reassurances that teaching staff were at little risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus from children, by late January 2021, the COVID infection rate amongst primary and secondary teachers was double the rate found amongst the general public (Gaunt, 2021, para. 2). Infection rates amongst primary school TAs were found to be three times higher than the general population with special school TA rates seven times higher (Gaunt, 2021, para.15).

These experiences are often further exacerbated by measures implemented intended to prevent the virus from spreading (Holmes et al., 2020), for example, social distancing, self-isolation, and quarantine. Much of the current pandemic literature identifies key factors that have impacted educator staff wellbeing throughout the pandemic (Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020; Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020; Moss et al., 2021). Concerns were expressed in relation to perceived unsafe working environments due to the inability to socially distance, the lack of efficient testing and their fear of transmitting the virus to vulnerable family members (Marchant et al., 2020; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Further, stress and anxiety related to the risks of travelling on public transport to and from work was also a significant concern for some staff (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

For many staff (58%), largely working from home became the norm during the first six months of the pandemic (Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020). Despite recent trends towards 'working from home' and the concept of greatly improving individuals' "work-life balance" (Crosby & Moore, 2004, p223), the pandemic 'lockdowns', which unexpectedly enforced this practice, had a significant impact on people's lives in a variety of ways. Recent research has identified five of the most challenging aspects that teaching staff found working from home. These included "pupils/students not completing their work, lack of social contact/isolation, lack of timely government guidance, maintaining a work/life balance and working whilst having children/dependents/family at home" (Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020. P11; Maitland & Glazzard, 2022). The level of isolation also appears to be linked to the type of role staff carried out. For example, Maitland & Glazzard (2022) reported that TAs experienced a more significant loss of face-to-face interaction with pupils, leaving them feeling more cut off than their teaching colleagues; however, teachers also expressed their feelings of loneliness, loss and helplessness at not being able to support their students when they needed them the most.

Moreover, an increase in working hours and teachers' poor mental health saw self-reported symptoms ranging from mood swings, difficulty concentrating, insomnia and tearfulness (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021) with more than half of the teaching staff reporting that the heavy workload and difficulties with personal health and well-being were significant factors in their consideration to leave the education sector (p9). Whilst issues around teacher wellbeing is nothing new, these unprecedented times saw the situation at crisis point further exacerbated by the pandemic. In recognition of this, the Anna Freud Centre, which has historically worked towards transforming the UK's mental health provision for children, young people and their families (annafreud.org) developed further resources during the pandemic, advocating a whole-school approach to supporting pupils' and education staff mental health and wellbeing. Further, the UK government launched it's 'Wellbeing for Education Return' in August 2020, costing £8 million to provide education settings resources to better support pupils, families and staff in recognition of the ongoing emotional impact of the pandemic (DfE, 2020). It was evident, therefore, that [both pupil] and staff emotional health and well-being should remain a significant priority moving forward (Scanlan & Savill-Smith, 2021).

2.3.6. Benefits and positives emerging from the lockdown period

Despite the gloomy picture discussed above, benefits and positive aspects that emerged from the partial school closures have also been documented. For example, research has highlighted the importance of professional relationships with colleagues which was highly valued and perceived as providing valuable emotional support (Kim & Asbury, 2020). The significant impact of socially distancing from colleagues upon returning to schools was identified by teaching staff to have contributed to feelings of isolation (Marchant et al., 2020). Many staff reported that they had made more effort to seek and develop these relationships further during the lockdown period and wanted to remain emotionally connected with colleagues, pupils and their families (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Colleague connection and the development of strong relationships has long been seen as a protective factor contributing to staff resilience whilst experiencing adversity and challenge (Beltman et al., 2011).

Evidence suggests that for some CYP who struggled in educational settings largely benefited from being educated at home, enabling them to become more confident learners within their home environment (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Soneson et al., 2022). Further, benefits of being at home for some pupils and staff included enjoying more time at home, more time spent with family, exploring new ways of remote learning/teaching and improving staff feelings of safety (Burke, Majella & Dempsey, 2020; Savill-Smith & Scanlan, 2020). For some pupils, being at home during the first lockdown, resulted in an increase in good mental health and wellbeing, as for some pupils, school prior to the pandemic, was a more problematic entity (Soneson et al., 2022).

For those children who were considered vulnerable and/or had key worker parents were able to attend school, the literature suggests that they also benefited from smaller classes with a small number of pupils to a high ratio of staff. As a result, stronger teacher-pupil relationships were forged enabling staff to better support pupils' academic and emotional wellbeing (Marchant et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Burke, Majella & Dempsey, 2020). During the phased return to school, educators reported the positive impact of smaller classes supported by more staff during both lockdowns and the impact on pupils' engagement with learning and well-being. Staff expressed that these positive aspects should form part of any future consideration moving forward (Marchant et al., 2020, Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Both

the need for more individualised social and emotional support for pupils as well as the requirements for maintaining hygiene standards throughout the day would require the need for more teaching staff (Marchant et al., 2020). Further, within a pre-school context, staff identified benefits of small groups in relation to extended play activities which were child-led and saw an improvement in the quality of children's general social interaction (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

2.4. Research questions

Previously, research has sought to elicit staff experiences during the pandemic, largely through online large-scale surveys. The literature available documenting educator's first-hand experiences has predominantly focused on teachers' perspectives and the challenges they have faced. There appears to be no research, at the present time, that has sought to directly elicit TA voice in relation to their positive experiences of working face-to-face within a primary school during the pandemic. This study aimed to explore the positive elements of the TA role during this time, thereby highlighting their skills and inherent value. Consideration will be given to how these skills could be capitalised upon and applied in practice to the benefit of children and young people (CYP) and those working within the education system.

The research questions were:

Research Question 1: *What were TAs' positive experiences working during the COVID-19 pandemic and what did they find supportive/worked well during this time?*

Research Question 2: *What can we learn from these experiences moving forward in a post-pandemic future?*

TAs were asked to reflect on ideal practice drawn from their experiences. They were encouraged to reflect on their moments of success and the aspects they felt supported them to achieve these. They were encouraged to think about what these would look like moving forward.

2.5. Conclusion

This literature review has briefly examined the historical context of the TA role in order to demonstrate how the TA role has evolved and grown over the years. For many TAs, who often work with the most challenging and complex children, their opinion has not always been directly elicited (e.g., Clarke, 2019; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011). This is despite their unique position of working closely with vulnerable pupils (e.g., O'Brien & Garner, 2001 as cited in MacKenzie, 2011), facilitating the development of trusting relationships and gaining a deeper knowledge of pupils' strengths and barriers to learning. Previous research that has sought TA voice, often does so within a problem-saturated context (e.g., Webster et al., 2011; MacKenzie, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic literature to date, has thus far elicited educators' opinions mainly through the use of large-scale surveys, of which, a disproportionate number of TAs have taken part despite occupying a quarter of the school workforce. Further, in studies that have explored personal experiences and perspectives of staff working during the pandemic, the focus has mainly been on teachers' lived experiences (e.g., Kim & Asbury, 2020). Common themes have been identified in the literature both across the UK and beyond, mainly in terms of the negative impact the pandemic has had on the education system and it's stakeholders. However, the examination of this literature also reveals positive aspects that have come to the fore. Despite the horrific experiences many have had to endure during

this time, the pandemic has also provided many educators the opportunity to pause and experience a less chaotic, more personal experience of working, teaching and supporting pupils. This research, therefore, aims to explore TAs' positive experiences and successes, highlighting their value and how this can be used to further support them in developing their role moving forwards in a post-pandemic future.

Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the researcher's positionality in terms of the ontological and epistemological stance of the research. Discussion subsequently focuses on the research undertaken using a qualitative approach utilising focus groups facilitated by an Appreciative Inquiry framework. Finally, ethical considerations as outlined within the researcher's ethical application and approval are also discussed.

3.2. Ontological and epistemological assumptions

Our core ontological assumptions shape our understanding of ourselves, others and the world around us (Corcoran, 2010, p27). Such assumptions guide our decisions and choices made throughout the research process. From a constructivist stance, "knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experiences from the point of view of those who live it" (Swandt, 2000 cited in Mertens, 2010, p 16).

The broad aims of this research were:

- To elicit TAs' personal narratives, giving space to reflect on their experiences and co-collaborate in this research

The researcher sought to elicit personal narratives in relation to participants' experiences of working during a complex and challenging time. This fits with a more relativist perspective which acknowledges the fluidity and shifting of reality, rather than one that is deemed to remain the same (Cohen et al., 2011). It was hoped that these narratives would provide a valuable insight into participants' subjective realities (Andrews, 2012).

The researcher, therefore, took a relativist ontology from which reality is seen as being socially constructed with multiple truths and realities existing within a system of language, with no single truth (Mertens, 2010). In contrast, realism views "the world as existing independently of human engagement" (Corcoran, 2010, p28) with the notion that the complexities of the social world can be observed and measured objectively and scientifically (Mertens, 2010).

Epistemology is concerned with an individual's view of how their knowledge and understanding of the world is constructed; one which is situated within both historical and cultural contexts (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001). Social constructionism underpins the current research which emphasises the importance of "everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality" (Andrews, 2012, p44) and acknowledges the interactive process of data collection between the researcher and her participants (Mertens, 2010).

3.3. Qualitative research

"Qualitative research is the interpretative study of a specified issue or problem in which the researcher is central to the sense that is made" (Bannister et al., 1994, p2) and is naturalistic in nature (Mertens 2010). In keeping with the epistemological assumptions underpinning this research, focus groups were utilised to explore first hand, participants' experiences of what

it was like working with vulnerable young people during the pandemic. These focus groups were facilitated by an AI framework which influenced the focus and structure of these sessions as it is considered "a tool of social constructionism and of cultural change" (Drew & Wallis, 2014, p6). Both focus groups and AI will be explored in the following sections.

3.3.1. Focus groups

Research that has documented staff opinion has largely been conducted using large scale questionnaires (e.g., . Such questionnaires enable the collection of mass data quicker and more effectively than traditional methods of collection (Fricker & Schonlau, 2002). However, access to online surveys may also present their challenges and potentially exclude a proportion of its intended audience e.g., XXXXX

However, the researcher felt that, given the historical lack of TA voice (e.g., Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014) and a seeming lack of direct TA voice within the pandemic literature, a focus group methodology was deemed most appropriate and effective in eliciting personal accounts through group discussion (Wilkinson, 1998). Further, in light of research that has explored TAs' positioning in relation to status, value, and power (Clarke, 2019; Gilbert et al., 2012) it was hoped that a focus group approach would provide a more supportive and safe platform for participants from marginalised groups to express their views (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The focus group approach typically sees the researcher present participants with open-ended or semi-structured questions to facilitate group discussion in relation to a specific topic (Wilkinson, 1998). Participants' interaction and group dynamics are key and place the researcher as a facilitator, "to listen and collect data" (Kruegar & Casey, 2000, as cited in Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014, p22). Further, semi-structured focus groups provide the opportunity to explore the subject matter in-depth and present a more complex picture of participants' experiences, providing the researcher with "an opportunity to observe the process of collective sense-making in action". The current study focused on participants within a pre-existing 'group' of TAs which Kitzinger (1994) argues supports the cohesiveness of dialogue as participants can "relate each other's comments to actual incidences in their shared daily lives" (p105). An important feature of the focus group is the generation of data gleaned directly through the interaction between participants (Kitzinger, 1994) with the underlying premise that language is a central aspect to the way we socially construct the world as we experience it (Burr, 2003)

3.3.1.1. The context

The current study utilised a blended model focus group format for the participants (e.g., a mixture of face to face and online) due to the pandemic with three focus group sessions (see chapter 4). This was deemed more appropriate at the time in relation to seeking ethical approval and ensured that they would take place despite the uncertainty of the ongoing situation of lockdowns, COVID-related self-isolation, and continuing restrictions around face-to-face meetings. At the time of planning for these (November 2021), restrictions across Europe were beginning to heighten as COVID-related case numbers began to escalate during the winter months (Ferguson, 2021). Although the researcher would have preferred face-to-face contact, the online nature provided some guarantee (at least to some extent) that focus groups could take place virtually. As it transpired, due to a number of factors including families spending time together over the Christmas period and restrictions easing, COVID-related

cases were particularly high at the beginning of 2022. All four participants had experienced a COVID-related absence a week prior to attending the second focus group session.

3.3.1.2. Advantages and disadvantages of focus groups, in-person and online

Consideration for the benefits and limitations of focus groups are considered below and how the latter were addressed in the current study. Whilst the nature of the focus groups conducted are separated into two distinct approaches e.g., in-person and online, (see below) it should be highlighted that the researcher was only present online (via Google Meet) during all of the sessions.

3.3.1.2.1. In-person focus groups

3.3.1.2.2 Advantages

In-person focus groups allow participants to share experiences and narratives within a safe, neutral environment (Krueger and Casey, 2000 as cited in Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 1998). The first focus group saw the participants come together in a familiar, quiet room within the school during which the researcher spoke with them via a laptop. The researcher noted that participants often made eye contact with each other, and their posture and non-verbal gestures appeared positive and affirmative. Research has suggested that this approach allows further reflection upon hearing other's perspectives and experiences when "sense making is produced collectively" (Wilkinson, 1998, p186). Moreover, as "research participants talk primarily to each other, rather than to the researcher, they may talk in a way that is more 'naturalistic' or 'ecologically valid'" (Liebes 1984; Albrecht et al., 1993 as cited in Wilkinson, 1998, p188). It has also been argued that "focus groups [can] generate more elaboration on ideas than individual interviews" (Heary & Hennessy, 2006 as cited in Guest et al., 2017, p694). A further advantage of this method is that the data generated from focus groups can be presented using participants' quotations to illustrate main points, providing a rich and detailed picture of their experiences and view of the world (Wilkinson, 1998).

3.3.1.2.3. Disadvantages

One criticism of focus groups (online or in-person) over individual interviews is the potential for dominant voices within the group (Smithson, 2000). This was difficult for the researcher to control remotely in the current study but was noted, particularly in the first focus group with two more experienced staff members dominating some of the dialogue. However, the term 'dominant' here is used to describe two participants speaking more than the others rather than providing an overriding opinion as described by Smithson (2000). It was hoped that the homogeneity of the group in terms of gender, education setting, and role ensured that participants shared similar experiences (Smithson, 2000) and in reality, no one had expressed controversial or differing opinions. However, it has also been argued that this homogeneity can generate more similar ideas in comparison to individual interviews (Heary & Hennessy, 2006 as cited in Guest et al., 2017).

Research has suggested that there is the potential for the researcher to construct a form of 'other' if they perceive themselves to be very different from the participants taking part (Smithson, 2000). However, on reflection it could be argued that the researcher, in the current

study, did not experience this, and in fact felt quite the opposite (see chapter 8 for personal reflections).

A final disadvantage of focus groups and the type of data collected is the time-consuming nature of transcribing. However, the time taken by the researcher in the current study to listen and emerge herself in the transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2016) enabled a rich and detailed picture of participants' experiences which, in the researcher's opinion, was worth the effort.

3.3.1.3.1. Online focus groups

The current study was affected by the pandemic throughout its lifespan. Ethics approval dictated the online nature of future focus groups so little consideration was given by the researcher to how this could potentially impact data collection. The online nature of the data collection presented several challenges including IT difficulties. The second focus group saw all participants self-isolating at home to COVID-19 and, unfortunately, one of the participants was unable to connect resulting in a mixed model focus group format comprising of a combination of face-to-face participation, individual attendance virtually and a mixed model of the two (i.e., two face to face, one virtual) with the researcher attending virtually throughout. These factors, due to extenuating circumstances beyond anyone's control, will have impacted the group interaction to some degree, a crucial element of the focus group (Kitzinger, 1994).

3.3.1.3.2. Advantages

There are several advantages of completing focus groups online. One significant advantage is their flexibility and time efficiency (Braun & Clarke, 2013); both the researcher and participants did not have to travel anywhere and it was easier to fit these around everyone's schedule. Further, sessions were videotaped unobtrusively allowing the researcher to remain present and, in the moment, free from making notes. This also gave the researcher more time to observe other aspects such as group dynamics and body language. Although, strictly related to focus groups completed during the pandemic, the remote the nature of these reduced the researcher's anxiety in relation to her own personal safety e.g., visiting a setting and the possibility of getting COVID. Finally, the online nature proved to be a robust method e.g., focus groups went ahead despite participants having to self-isolate.

3.3.1.3.3. Disadvantages

Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that the researcher using an online method has little control over how the session will go and how the room is set up, potentially affecting the group dynamics. This certainly was a factor in the current study as the SENCo had organised the room and seating arrangements for the first focus group and then self-isolation saw all TAs participating from their homes. One could argue that as participants were subsequently unable to be in the same room together, this may have diminished the advantages of focus group as outlined by Kitzinger (1994). Further, the researcher also felt that it was more difficult to build a rapport with participants using remote means and she may overcompensated by chatting more than was necessary. One significant disadvantage to using online technology, as highlighted in the current study, was the huge potential for IT difficulties e.g., difficulties with WiFi connections, laptop issues and potential difficulties for

some participants to access the internet or suitable equipment and/or individuals lacking online expertise (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Evans & Mathur, 2005).

3.3.2. Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

Whilst the method of data collection in the current study utilised focus groups, both the positive nature of these sessions and the semi-structured questions used to elicit participant voice were framed using an AI approach. This approach 'is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values and hopes, and dreams are themselves transformational' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p1).

3.3.2.1. Introduction

AI is an action research method (Grant & Humphries, 2006) with the underlying assumption that:

> Every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. AI begins by identifying what is positive and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, vision and action for change. (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008, pXV).

There are five principles of AI that underpin the approach (see table 3 below).

Table 2: The five principles of AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Seel, 2008)

Principle	Assumptions
The Constructionist Principle	Social constructionism – language and metaphors create realities. Positive language will create positive realities and futures.
The Positive Principle	A positive outlook can be most effective in creating positive change. It encourages individuals to express successful and positive experiences in order to build 'virtuous' circles instead of 'vicious' circles (Wender, 1968, p309).
The Simultaneity Principle	Inquiry and change happen simultaneously through asking questions. It doesn't focus on the past and what has gone wrong, instead change happens when individuals within groups begin to ask appreciative questions.
The Poetic Principle	Change occurs continually. AI encourages the way individuals think and behave to change and develop through the sharing of positive stories.
The Anticipatory Principle	This encourages individuals to change their behave in pursuit of a desired future

AI is an approach/process that facilitates individuals, within an organisation, to bring about change (Cooperrider et al., 2010) and is grounded in social constructionist theory (Gergen, 1978; 2009 as cited in Bushe, 2011, p87). The process follows a 4-D cycle which incorporates four sequential stages of *Discovery, Dream, Design* and *Destiny.*

Figure 1: AI 4D Cycle (adapted from Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p6)
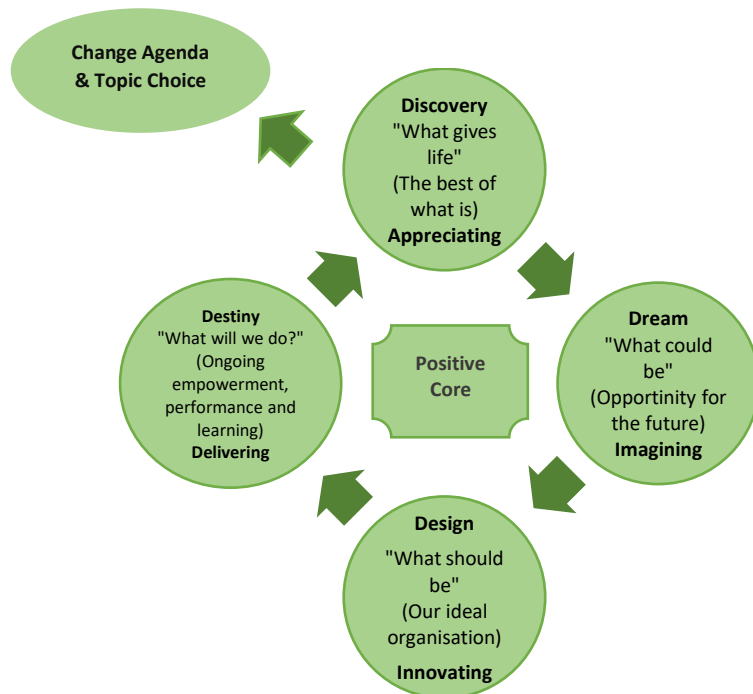
Below follows a brief description of each phase and what these looked like in relation to the current study.

Discovery Phase – the 'best of what is and what has been' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p7).

This phase is primarily a platform enabling an exploration of what worked well – 'life-giving' elements, in search of the organisation's 'positive core' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p8). In practice, this study sought to elicit TA voice in relation to successes, achievements and resources drawn upon to support these. Participants were encouraged to share examples of success and moments of pride and achievement.

Dream Phase – 'what might be' (*ibid*)

This phase focused on 'what could be'. In practice, TAs were asked to reflect on ideal practice drawn from their experiences. They were encouraged to reflect on their moments of success and the aspects they felt supported them to achieve these. They were encouraged to think about what these would look like moving forward.

Design Phase - 'what should be' (*ibid*)

This phase focuses on more practical ways to develop these aspects within the participants' role. In practice, TAs were asked to consider small steps and realistic changes that could be applied. However, as discussed (see chapter 8), this proved to be more difficult than expected due to the changing context and moved beyond the realm of the current study.

Deliver/Destiny Phase – 'what will be' (*ibid*)

This final stage aims to encourage participants to actively plan how any changes identified could be implemented. In practice, this felt a bit overwhelming due to the context of the final focus group together with the participants' recognition that they did not have the power to make any changes independent.

The semi-structured questions used for each focus group can be found in Appendix 9. These were positive in nature and aimed to elicit participants' experiences and identify aspects that supported/facilitated these using an AI approach.

3.3.2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of AI

The aims of the current study were to explore participants' positive experiences and successes and the research questions were worded to reflect this. Feedback from participants and the SENCo highlighted that the positive focus of an AI approach was really welcomed and provided TAs an opportunity to pause, share and reflect on their experiences. The initial stage of 'discovery' seemed to provide a platform for participants to make sense of their experiences during the past two years and discussion within a focus group structure appeared to provide a safe space in which to share their experiences and viewpoints (Wilkinson, 1998).

Consideration for the benefits and limitations of the AI approach are considered below, contained within the following table. How these limitations were addressed during the current study is discussed in the final discussion chapter (see chapter 8).

3.3.2.2.1. Advantages

AI is a flexible approach that can fit within many different methodologies; there is no set way (Bushe, 2011). It is an affirmative process and seeks to illuminate strengths and success; and highlights the best aspects (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). AI uses positive questioning and focuses on what works (e.g., Drew & Wallis, 2014). It encourages the sharing of experiences, build on strengths (Drew & Wallis, 2014, p6) and facilitate collaborative working. These positive elements really seemed to fit with participants' reflections of past experiences, during the 'lock down' period. Anecdotal evidence from participants suggested that having the time to reflect and participate in shared dialogue enabled them to appreciate and celebrate their achievements, outlining the 'positive change core' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) of the organisation. Participants had also spoken about feeling heard by the trust, who had initiated the gathering of staff views during the height of the pandemic with the potential to celebrate the setting's "organisational strengths and core capabilities" (Drew & Wallis, 2014, p5).

3.3.2.2.2. Disadvantages

One criticism of an AI approach is that it only focuses on positive experiences (Coghlan et al., 2003) and doesn't allow participants space to discuss problems and challenges being experienced (Bushe, 2011). However, participants in the current study, particularly during the 'dream' and 'design' stages did reflect on and discuss their more negative experiences. Drew and Wallis (2014) argued that an AI approach could potentially isolate individuals who are unable to participate in the process, suggesting that this needs to be carefully planned and fully collaborative (p19). This is something that the researcher had considered e.g., other

TAs within the setting who had not taken part, but felt that this was beyond her control (see recruitment process, chapter ??. A final disadvantage of this method is that it can be a difficult process to adhere to if the researcher/facilitator is inexperienced and the context is extremely challenging. This is something the researcher has subsequently reflected on (see personal reflections, chapter 8) in future AI sessions, for example, during staff supervision.

3.4. Rigour and quality of the research

Both the rigour and quality of the research were vital considerations to ensure that the findings were presented as accurately as possible throughout the research design and implementation of the methodology (Cresswell, 2009). Strategies employed within the current study are detailed in the table below.

Table 3: Strategies employed to check the accuracy of findings (Cresswell, 2009, p196).

Member-checking	This was done throughout the study through the presentation of themes identified by the researcher shared with participants to ensure transparency and accuracy of findings (see chapter 8 for more detail).
Rich, thick description	This was used to 'convey the findings' (Cresswell, 2009, p196) through the voices of participants and to 'give the discussion an element of shared experiences' (*ibid*, p196) (see Chapters 6,7 and 8 for findings).
Clarify the *bias* the researcher brings to the study	The researcher's positionality and experiences as a TA have been discussed within the introductory chapter of this thesis (Chapter 2). The researcher was also open and honest about this to participants at the beginning of the first focus group.
An external auditor	The research proposal, the study and complete thesis have all been subject to external auditing which have included the university ethics committee and the researcher's academic and research tutors.

A final evaluation of the rigour and trustworthiness of the completed study is discussed in chapter 8 in more detail in relation to four elements proposed by Curtin & Fossey (2007) which included member checking, collaboration, transferability and reflexivity.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were a significant priority and central component of the research design for this study, particularly given the COVID-19 context. These will be considered below; ethical approval was given in October 2021. The researcher acted in accordance with the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018), the HCPC Standards of Conduct, Performance

and Ethics (HCPC, 2016) and the Guidance on Conduct and Ethics for students during the research process (HCPC, 2016).

An integral part of the research process is gaining access to participants though the appropriate gate keepers (Cresswell, 2009). Ethical approval was sought via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Committee in June 2021; it was approved in October 2021 (see Appendix 1 for letter of approval). The application detailed the proposed study design and methodology, the method of analysis, data collection and storage and information pertaining to potential participants (see below).

At the beginning of the first focus group, the researcher gave a brief recap on these before commencing the main discussion. These are considered below.

Table 4: Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations	In practice
Informed consent	The information sheet (see Appendix 2) contained details about the study, provided a rationale and what participants could expect when taking part. Reassurance was given that the welfare of participants was a priority. Advantages and disadvantages of taking part were outlined. By providing consent, participants confirmed that they understood this information and agreed to participate and have their data used for the purpose of the research. This process aimed to "facilitate prospective participants' free and informed decisions as to whether or not participate in a study" (Bull & Lindegger, 2011, p27). However, as the SENCo had identified potential participants based on availability and enthusiasm, consent to participate was understood to be based on 'relational autonomy' (Bull & Lindegger, 2011, p28). Therefore, participants' decisions to take part were done in collaboration with both the SENCo and their colleagues.
Right to withdraw	Participants were explicitly told that they could withdraw at any point without giving a reason *prior* to data analysis. Once data had been anonymised and included as part of the larger dataset, it would not be possible to remove this from the study. However, they were able to withdraw from any on-going or future data collection.
Confidentiality & anonymity	The participants were told how their data was to be written up and distributed. Internal confidentiality to participants could not be guaranteed (Tolich, 2004) as they could potentially identify one another's contributions within the sessions but their identity and contributions would remain confidential outside of the group. To ensure confidentiality through encryption of the data, sessions were carried out via Google Meet, which were recorded. Audio data from the videos was anonymised in the form of a pseudonym file name, and stored in the researcher's university encrypted Google

	Drive cloud storage. The reporting of data through transcripts was also anonymised
Potential harm	No harm to participants was anticipated. However, it was acknowledged (in the information sheet) that discussions of professional experiences within such an unprecedented time could be sensitive and therefore potentially upsetting. Participants were not obliged to discuss anything they didn't wish to. Participants were discouraged to share anything about themselves or others that was of a sensitive or personal nature that they would not like to go beyond the group. Participants were encouraged to avoid the use of their own names and those of other participants within the sessions in order to further protect anonymity.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has briefly outlined the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research and explored the qualitative methods utilised, namely focus groups used to elicit participants' voice within a group context. The literature review in Chapter 3 highlights a gap within pandemic literature that this research has aimed to address, namely to seek direct TA voice using a positive-based approach e.g., AI. The procedure and context will now be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter Four

Context and Procedure

4.1. Introduction

The procedure followed to conduct the research will now be discussed in relation to the context e.g., the school; participant recruitment and their characteristics; the focus group process and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework; the data analysis process using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; Braun & Clark, 2019).

4.2. Context: the school

4.2.1. Geographical and statistical information

The setting was a city primary school within the researcher's placement local authority (LA). The school was built by the LA in response to the post-war baby boom in the late 1950's. Due to years of severe unemployment and subsequent social breakdown, the area has long been locally associated with crime, unemployment and anti-social behaviour (Anonymous, 2007). The school is within an area that continues to be deemed as socially and economically deprived (ONS, 2011) and is considered to be one of the more deprived areas within the city. Inhabitants (at the time of the report) were predominantly white with 89.7% classed as white [British] and 4.1.% white [other] with other nationalities, each making up less than 0.5% of the total population (ONS, 2011). According to the last full OFTSED report (2013), the school is larger than the average-sized primary school (315) and the proportion of pupils supported through School Action and School Action Plus or with a statement of educational needs was well above the [national] average. The term 'School Action' (S.A) referred to the identification of a pupil who was not making academic progress and support was put into place using existing school resources. 'School Action Plus' was used to identify where S.A had been unsuccessful and schools could seek support from external agencies such as the Speech and Language Therapy Service or an Educational Psychologist (Roberts, 2013).

4.2.2. Multi-Academy Trust

The local area is served by two primary schools including the one that took part in this research. It converted to an academy to be part of a large multi-academy trust (MAT) in 2015 and it's last OFSTED report (OFSTED, 2018) found the setting's overall effectiveness to be *Good*. The underlying function and premise of MATs is to raise education standards and for successful schools to lead and support failing schools (Parliament, 2017). MATs are autonomous systems in terms of curriculum, teacher qualification and pay and free from LA control (Baxter & Cornforth, 2019). However, MATs which can often govern schools over a large area 'many of which are culturally and economically diverse' (Baxter & Floyd, p1052) have been criticised for being too far removed from the local communities they serve and out of touch with pupil and family need (Parliament UK, 2017).

4.2.3. Staff wellbeing: why the setting participated in the current research

During the initial research meeting (see s. 4.2.4), the SENCO shared her reason for agreeing to participate.   She was the lead for staff mental health and wellbeing and the school had two Wellbeing Champions, one was part of the Senior Leader Team (SLT) and the other was a Teaching Assistant (TA) [they did not participate in this study]. The SENCo reported that these staff attended Trust meetings and supported staff.

During the pandemic, the MAT had directed staff to complete a staff wellbeing survey which was repeated after a period of reflection. The SENCo reported that this allowed the staff to be open in their reflections (as these could be anonymous) on the impact of COVID on their mental health and role in school. The school initially used the MAT survey and then adapted it to make it more personal to use for their staff. The survey had indicated that the TAs had felt more valued during the lockdown periods and as a team, they felt closer and more able to be open in expressing their thoughts and opinions. The SENCo was interested in exploring their experiences further during this time and to understand how the TAs were now feeling as she was keen to maintain those positive aspects in relation to staff mental health and wellbeing moving forward in a post-COVID future.

4.2.4. Contact, recruitment process and participants

After a long delay in receiving ethical approval (see Appendix 1), the researcher emailed all schools within her catchment area twice but received no response. Meanwhile, a colleague had also contacted her schools, and one had indicated their interest in taking part in the current research. The researcher emailed the SENCo and an initial meeting was arranged to discuss this further. During this meeting the SENCo told the researcher that she had four TAs in mind who she felt would be happy to participate. The researcher understood that the criteria the SENCo used to identify potential participants was based purely on their availability and enthusiasm to speak about their experiences. Subsequently, four participants had therefore agreed to take part in this research – their relevant characteristics (for this study) are detailed below.

Table 5: Participant characteristics

Pseudo Initials; Male or Female (**M** or **F**)	Role (title)	No. of years in TA role	Primary Special Educational Need of pupil/s they support
AN (F)	Year 2 TA/Cover Supervisor	8	SLCN
CN (F)	Year 2 TA/Year 5 PPA Cover Supervisor	4	Varied needs supported but mainly SLCN and SEMH
AS (F)	Year 5 TA/Wellbeing and Behaviour Team	4	SEMH
CB (F)	Year 5 TA/1:1 Support	2	PD

Speech, Language and Communication (SLCN); Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH); Physical Difficulties (PD)

4.3. Focus group procedure

Participants took part in three focus group sessions (see Chapter 3 for a detailed overview). In the first focus group session, the researcher introduced the research with a recap on the information provided to participants via email (see Appendix 2). This included a brief rationale for the study, a reminder of anonymity (internal and external) and participants' right to withdraw etc. Semi-structured questions were used in all the sessions (see Appendix 9) as well as brief prompts/extenders where deemed necessary (see Appendix 9). At the beginning of focus groups 2, 3 and the final meeting, the researcher and participants engaged in a brief

chat/catch-up to build rapport and to help everyone feel more comfortable. Then the researcher presented initial themes identified by her during the previous focus group (see Appendices 6,7 and 8). Each session concluded with the researcher thanking participants for their engagement and confirming their participation in the next focus group/meeting. The sessions were video recorded, which allowed the researcher to remain present and focused.

The format for each session is set out in the table below.

Table 6: Focus groups and AI design structure

Session	AI Stage	Format	Participants	Location
Initial meeting	N/A	Introductory meeting to discuss background and potential school /staff participation	SENCo & researcher	MS Teams
Focus Group 1	The 'Discovery' stage	Semi-structured interview	Four participants	MS Teams at the setting
Focus Group 2	The 'Dream' Stage	Presentation of themes from first session – member check (see Appendix 6). Semi-structured interview	Three participants (fourth participant unable to connect)	MS Teams at participants' homes.
Focus Group 3	The 'Design' Stage	Presentation of themes from the second session – member check (see Appendix 7). Semi-structured interview	Three participants – (rescheduled to the following day due to researcher's technical issues (fourth participant not present for either)	MS Teams with two participants together at the setting and one at home.
Final meeting	Member check and de-brief	Recap & presentation of themes from all sessions including those from the third session –	All participants attended	MS Teams with all participants at the setting.

| | | member check (see Appendix 8). | | |
| Dissemination meeting | N/A | Presentation of initial themes from all focus groups | SENCO & researcher | MS Teams |

4.4. Data analysis: reflexive thematic analysis

The analysis and findings presented in the following three chapters (5,6 & 7) was conducted using a predominantly inductive, data-driven approach to allow an unfettered exploration of the data, free from assumptions informed by theory and research (Byrne, 2021). However, it is acknowledged that the analysis within these chapters and the discussion of the themes in chapter 8, will be to some degree, informed through deductive evaluation to ensure that the themes identified were relevant to the research questions (Byrne, 2021). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) has been used to analyse the data gathered in the current study. Such an approach emphasises "the centrality of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity" (Braun & Clark, 2019, p590) and aligns with the researcher's social constructionist epistemology and acknowledges the interactive process of data collection between the researcher and her participants (Mertens, 2010). RTA is, therefore, a flexible approach during which codes "are actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process and subjectivity" (Braun & Clark, 2019, p594) and represent the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the data (Byrne, 2021).

The data was analysed using the six stages of Braun & Clarke's (2006; 2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) process (see Table 7 below).

Table 7: Braun & Clarke's (2006) phases of reflexive thematic analysis (p87)

Phase	Description of the process
Familiarisation with the data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract samples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis to the research questions and literature, producing a scholarly report of analysis.

Dialogue from each focus group was subsequently transcribed (see Appendices 10, 11 and 12) and the video recordings were deleted within a week of each session as detailed within the ethics application. Over the course of that week, the researcher aimed to fully immerse herself in the data and make notes. Each completed transcript was re-read alongside the video recording to ensure accuracy. Punctuation including breaks and pauses were added to transcriptions to make quotations easier to read and accurately represent how participants spoke (e.g., in terms of their local dialect) to maintain the integrity of the discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p220) (see Appendices 10, 11 and 12 for a transcript example). Initial codes were then identified across each data set. The transcript was entered into a table and initial codes manually generated by the researcher were added into a second column alongside the relevant text (see Appendices 10, 11 and 12). In the spirit of reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher acknowledged her assumptions and active role in creating these codes and recognised that "reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the data [and process]" was key (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p593). Initial themes were identified and then reviewed to ensure that they encapsulated the codes generated, representing the data accurately. In keeping with the epistemological stance of this research, codes and themes were identified based on both recurrence and meaningfulness (Byrne, 2021).

Themes were then presented as thematic maps within a MS PowerPoint presentation and included themes, sub themes and subordinate themes (see Appendices 6,7 and 8). Sub themes highlighted crucial aspects captured by the main themes, for example, *the importance of relationships* under the main theme of *Community.* Subordinate themes captured the researcher's interpretation of dialogue and aimed to situate the subthemes in context and provide more detail, for example, the subordinate theme *trust, connection and feeling appreciated* provided both context and detail in relation to the sub theme *Importance of relationships* under the main theme of *Community*. Initial thematic maps were created with the specific aim of presenting these to participants to check that these accurately represented what participants had shared (member checking, see chapter 8) and to form a coherent story. These themes underwent some transformation and refinement during the write up of the 'findings' chapters (see chapters 5,6 and 7) as the researcher became more familiar with the data (Byrne, 2021). The writing up of the final report was very much interconnected with the whole process of analysis (Byrne, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2019). The hardest part for the researcher was deciding on the most striking and relevant extract samples relating to both the research questions and literature review whilst choosing which ones to discard without losing meaning and relevance.

4.4.1. Themes identified

Main themes and subthemes are initially presented in chapters (5,6 & 7) in diagrammatical form as Figure 2 illustrates. Themes from each focus group are discussed in relation to the subthemes and subordinate themes identified within the thematic maps included at the beginning of each chapter for easy reference. The nouns 'pupils' and 'children' were used interchangeably and the phrase 'lockdown period' is used to cover the three lockdowns occurring in England from March 2020 through to March 2021. The terms 'TAs' and 'participants' have also been used interchangeably.

The subsequent analysis is presented and evidenced through accompanying data extracts as proposed by (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with a view to providing some context and meaning. Quotes have been annotated with the line number and the number of the participant for easy identification (see Appendices 10, 11 and 12).

Figure 2: Diagram format for presenting themes and subthemes
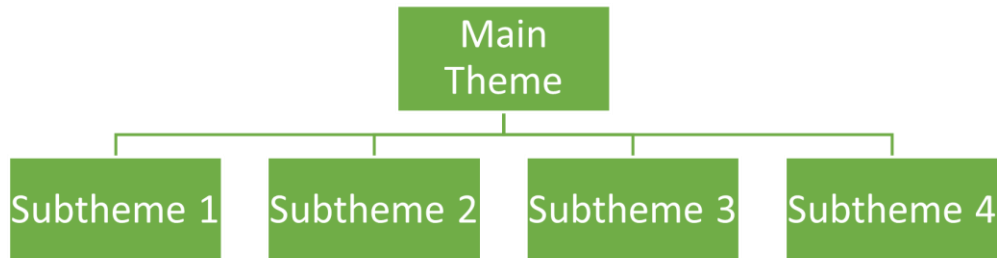
4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has briefly considered the context of the school that is set within a socially disadvantaged community and the SENCO's explicit interest in supporting her colleague's mental health and wellbeing as a drive for participating in this current research. The recruitment process has highlighted how things do not always go to plan and how important it is for the researcher to be flexible and open to change. The data analysis procedure using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) has been discussed in relation to the identification of main themes, sub themes and subordinate themes used to represent participants' voice.

Due to the unpresented and fluctuating nature of the context in which each focus group took place, themes and subthemes will be discussed in relation to those identified from individual focus groups illustrating TAs' reflections on their experiences at that particular point in time. At the time of the final focus group, the context had dramatically changed since the initial focus group, with subtle changes already beginning to emerge at the time of the second focus group. Findings have been presented for each focus group separately and will now be considered in the following chapters: 5, 6 and 7.

Chapter Five

Reflexive Thematic Analysis and findings – 'Discovery' (focus group one)

5.1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from the initial focus group. This session had aimed to explore the positive experiences and highlight successes during the pandemic following a series of lockdowns and was intended to represent the 'Discovery' stage of the 4-D stage of AI. However, in hindsight, one may argue that it actually represented the 'ideal' of what could be.

5.2. Focus group 1: *Discovery – 'the best of what is'.*

This focus group took place on the 16th of December 2021. Schools in England had recently re-opened (2nd of December) to all pupils again after a second lockdown lasting four weeks; England returned to a stricter three-tiered system of restrictions (IfG, 2021).

Four main themes were identified: ***Relationships, Community, Personal Growth* and *the Children*** (see Figure 3).

A summary of these themes, subthemes and subordinate themes are discussed below.

Figure 3: The Discovery Stage - thematic map: main themes, subthemes and subordinate themes
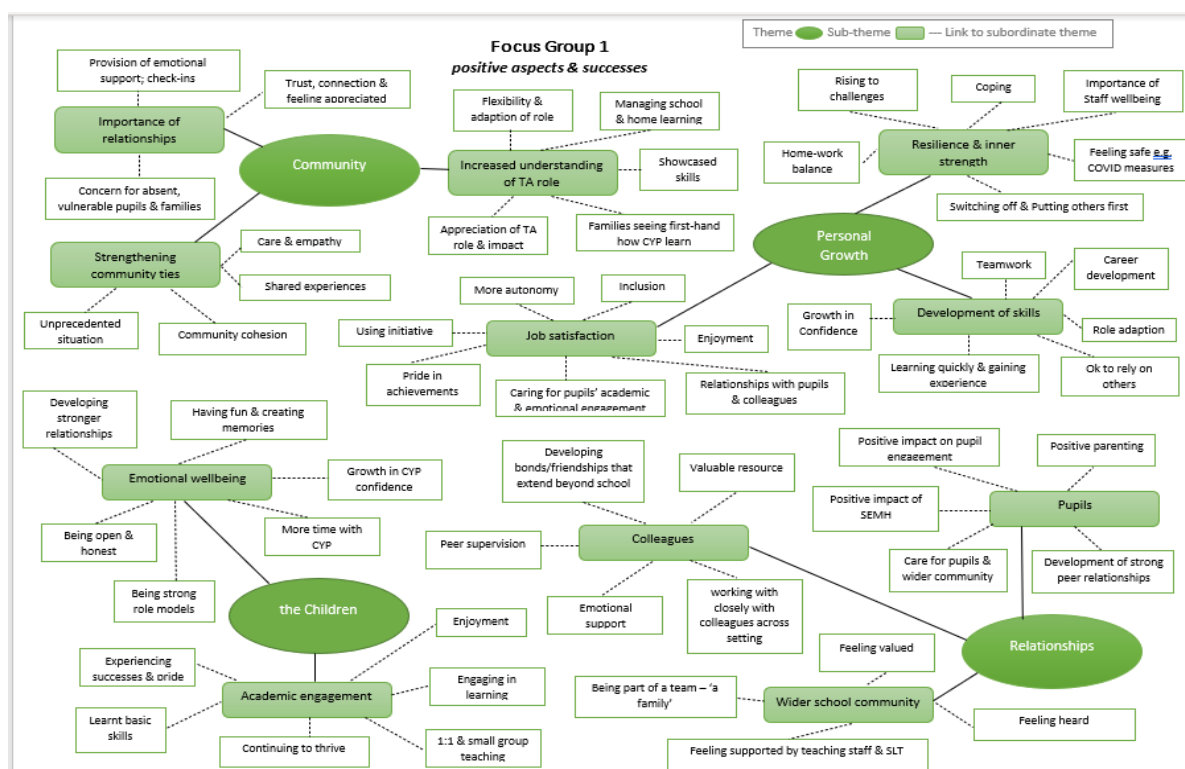
5.3. Main theme One: Relationships

Figure 4: Main theme: Relationships and associated subthemes of colleagues, pupils and the wider school community

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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │  Relationships  │
                    └─────────────────┘
          ┌──────────────┼──────────────┐
   ┌────────────┐  ┌────────────┐  ┌────────────────┐
   │ Colleagues │  │   Pupils   │  │  Wider school  │
   │            │  │            │  │   community    │
   └────────────┘  └────────────┘  └────────────────┘
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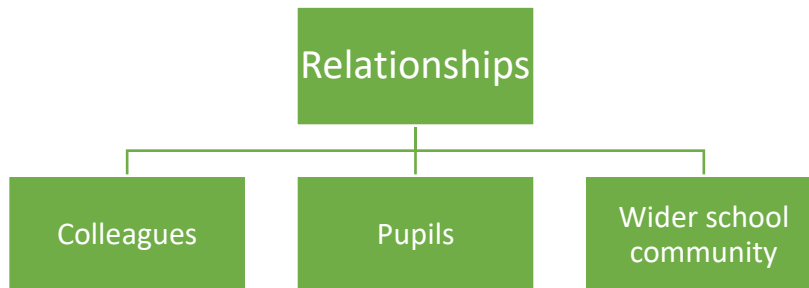
5.3.1. Relationships

This theme was a significant, common factor across the data set. Participants highlighted that they felt relationships were good prior to the pandemic, both within school and in the wider community. However, the unprecedented situation provided opportunities to develop these further.

5.3.1.1. Colleagues

From the very beginning of the pandemic lockdowns and school closures meant that TAs found themselves working in a variety of different ways, often working more closely with the class teacher.

> At the beginning we were with…there was us and a class teacher and we would be in maybe two or three days a week [is that right? yeah yeah] at the beginning. So, we'd be in in school and we'd be working maybe part time because we'd have the staff across the school who were allowed in, who weren't isolating. Or we'd rotate round and erm there'd be say it'd be maybe six or seven different bubbles which would have so many children in maybe up to 10 children in the in the bubbles and then two members of staff. So, a class teacher and the TA will be working in in those given times but then you'd be on a rota so you …you and the class teacher who you were working with would always work together …. (20,3)

TAs felt this gave them an opportunity to feel more involved in the children's learning whilst working closely with the teacher. Feeling included was an important factor that contributed to many aspects including job satisfaction and feeling heard. One participant expressed how she appreciated this way of working which enabled her to feel more included.

> Yeah, as a TA, I felt like as a TA, I was a lot more involved when it was just two members of staff then [yeah] obviously when there are loads of you, you've jobs to do haven't you but when it's just two of you, I felt more involved as an adult. (28,5)

However, due to staff absences because of self-isolating, shielding family members and illness, TAs also found themselves working across the setting with more unfamiliar staff. This allowed them to get to know a variety of staff which seemed to promote a feeling of staff unity and team cohesion.

But also, with staff because we worked with a variety of staff across the school who we wouldn't usually have worked with but so closely like just building relationships across the school with staff and children. (12,3)

TAs reflected on their flourishing relationships with colleagues due to working so closely with fewer staff. This aspect appears to have had a lasting effect throughout the pandemic and beyond.

I think maybe to be fair as well, where we were concerned [yeah] was the bond we had with our colleagues, the teachers we were working with we've built up a really strong bond… (38, 2) and a really good friendship on that… (39,3).

It was these relationships that TAs felt were a key resource that got them through difficult times. The reciprocal nature of these relationships also meant that they ensured they were also there for others.

Yeah, because we relied on each other so to have that trust that maybe wouldn't have happened in normal times and it, it helps. (40,2).

5.3.1.2. Pupils

The development of stronger relationships with pupils that TAs worked with due to small pupil to staff ratios, appeared to be equally important as those built with colleagues. The pandemic offered a unique opportunity for staff to get to know their pupils better through small group teaching.

Yeah, the relationships you was allowed to build with the children have been better, especially because erm…with only erm having smaller groups of children in originally as the pandemic started, you was allowed to build that relationship with a child better erm it was more like a one to one basis for the majority of the time. (11,2)

It also provided an opportunity for staff to get to know pupils they would not have ordinarily worked with, and who would not have perhaps received the same level of individual attention in larger classes.

And maybe sometimes in them bubbles, it might be kids that are in your…that was in your bubble that you didn't really… if you was in that classroom with them you wouldn't get to know kind of but because it was so small and you got to work more like… (25,4)

…and got to know them that little bit better, work a bit closer with them I think (27,4)

Working more closely with those pupils who may have struggled in mainstream classes prior to the pandemic, seemed to have a positive impact on pupil engagement which, for some, appeared to have a lasting impact when school finally opened to all pupils and things slowly returned to some form of 'normality'.

Yeah, that's great they carried that on and brought that back with them. So, it was more of an understanding and some of them are fine now in the classroom. It's it kinda taught 'em something really. (99,5)

5.3.1.3 Wider school community

Participants reflected on the importance of feeling heard by senior staff using wellbeing surveys which provided TAs the opportunity to voice their concerns. Participants shared that this had had a positive impact on staff wellbeing and feeling heard.

> …so we all got a whole staff wellbeing survey didn't we [yeah]? To be able to…to add any kind of worries about the pandemic or about how that's impacted us in our job erm and then we repeated that again a little bit later to see if anything's improved, which I think was a good thing…. (122,3)

Feeling heard by the school wider community, including senior leaders, gave TAs a sense of value and appreciation within their role. These aspects contributed to a sense of validation within their role.

> And just valued, I wrote I felt more valued. I felt that people believe in us like we get 'thank yous'. We get all of that from maybe higher up and from the children and from the parents. I think I feel a lot more valued in the job role now. (124,3)

5.4. Main theme Two: Community

Figure 5: Main theme: Community and associated subthemes of importance of relationships, strengthening community ties and increased understanding of the TA role

5.4.1. Community

The TA role during this time was inextricably linked with the local community; a sense of cohesion and closeness was experienced. During enforced school closures and a number of lockdowns, schools across England were closed to a large number of pupils. Eighty pupils attended the setting initially, a number that doubled in the second lockdown. Despite this number increasing with each lockdown, with more children able to attend, TAs reflected on the positive aspects that occurred during this time. This theme seemed to arise from a historical context in which TAs may not have felt as connected to the wider community. During the pandemic period, this relationship seemed to change as TAs had to rapidly adapt to new ways of working, which included providing social and emotional support for families through telephone calls, in-person check-ins with pupils and their families and delivering homework packs.

5.4.1.2. Importance of relationships

TAs became the main point of contact for many families, providing much needed emotional support with many parents feeling isolated. Relationships and trust rapidly grew due to the

time TAs regularly checked-in with both pupils and their families. Opportunities to connect with the wider community also led to feelings of being appreciated.

> Yeah, it was nice, and I found that because some days obviously the children that wasn't in the class, we made phone calls home obviously doing the checks and then sometimes like some of the parents, they won't have seen or spoke to anybody because they wasn't going anywhere. Some of them might not have that much family, so then when we was ringing to do our checks, some days they'd have a rant, a little wotnot, but that was fine because you felt you had that relationship them with ringing on a weekly basis with the parents. You felt like you were just communicating with them a bit more… (56,4)

TAs reflected on the opportunities the current situation which allowed them to connect more with both pupils and their families beyond the school gates.

> Yeah, more care and contact. Yeah, we would never have never got that [before]. (59,3)

TAs went over and above their usual remit and expressed concern for absent pupils including vulnerable pupils and their families. Their role changed drastically but they stepped up to the challenge.

> We used to do doorstep visits if we hadn't erm got in contact with certain children over maybe two or three days we'd go do erm…we'd take work packs home wouldn't we for them? We'd go knock on the door and we'd stand behind the fence and we'd just check in and we'd see if we could see the children, so we'd do our way around the estate. (65,3)

5.4.1.3. Strengthening of community ties

TAs found themselves at the forefront of community relations as they were often the ones who were the main point of contact for many families. Participants reflected on the importance of their role at that time and how this provided them the opportunity to do more for the community.

> I think the community really got together. Like the amount of messages like on when the parents picked the children up who were in school saying thank you, like what they wouldn't usually do. It wouldn't just be picking the child up and take them home, it was a thank you for what you're doing and like we appreciate everything like, and they genuinely understood. And I felt like they genuinely cared that what we were doing was a massive impact. (52,3)

There was a sense of community cohesion and a unification between school and community through shared experiences and a blurring of boundaries. Participants appreciated that parents would approach them first, which strengthened the connection further.

> Yeah, usually it's a pop on the playground at the end of the day if anything has happened it's one of them or at parents evening that's what the teacher usually deals with. So for us to be able to do that and actually speak to 'em… (60,4)

Participants indicated that they were happy to extend their role beyond caring for pupils and were empathetic to the plight that some families found themselves in. This provided an opportunity for TAs to showcase their skills and support their local community.

> It would be a quick phone call or whatever, but you did spend a good 10-15 minutes on the phone with some of these parents that wanted to get owt off their chest. If they wanted to moan about the work or whatever that was fine because we…we are there for the parents as well as the kids, so it was nice to show our support for them in that way as well. (58,4)

5.4.1.4. Increased understanding of the TA role

TAs found themselves having to adapt quickly and become more flexible in their role. This time provided the opportunity for TAs to showcase their skills and for families to see firsthand, how their children were effectively supported by TAs.

> Not only that, it also allowed parents to see how we learn with the children so especially going through phonics or sounding words out when they're reading a parent you could hear 'em in the background with 'oh I didn't know you did it like that' but it was an opportunity for them to see you know how the child has progressed and how they can help them at home so that was nice, yeah. (64,2)

This increased understanding of the TA role was linked to the community's increased appreciation of their skills and the impact they had on pupil engagement and learning.

> Especially when they was getting all the home learning packs and things like that and that's when they realised how… (53,4)

> How much effort was going in to it. (54,3)

5.5. Main theme Three: Personal Growth

Figure 6: Main theme: Personal Growth and associated subthemes of resilience and inner strength, development of skills and job satisfaction
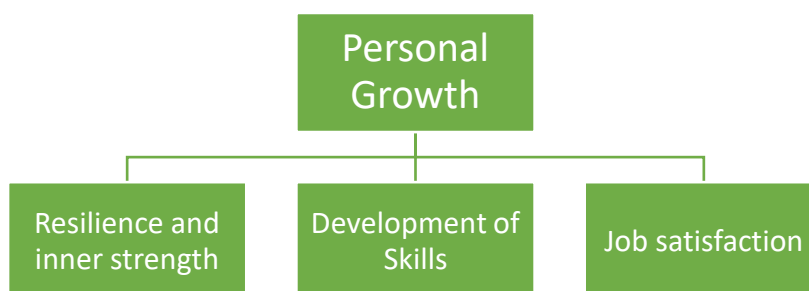
5.5.1. Personal Growth

Despite the challenges the pandemic brought, it also created opportunities for TAs to develop both personally and professionally. Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

TAs acknowledged that they experienced anxiety and concern for themselves and their families during this time and spoke of 'coping' with the situation. However, they also reflected on being able to 'deal' with their emotions and rising to challenges.

5.5.1.1. Resilience and inner strength

TAs reflected on the enormity of the situation and how they managed to cope with homelife and their job amidst a pandemic. Individuals were able to draw from their inner strength to help them manage everyday life.

> I think it's as well, it's…it's being put in a situation that is unprecedented and the fact that you're…we're at this point and you've coped with juggling your home life. Whereas before, if you thought you was having a bad day…bad days now are a little bit different, and I think it's that inner strength that you've been able to build because you've juggled your home life. You've dealt with your kids and their own emotions and then come to school and dealt with the situation there that I think it's…it's the inner strength that you have that you maybe didn't realise you have…. (81,2)

The situation enabled people to be more open with their feelings and feel more empathic towards themselves and others within a shared context. A reflection that these shared experiences of mutual support would not have happened prior to the pandemic.

> ….personally it's like a big accomplishment as well you know because we've all been thrown into this situation and we all deal with it differently but yet just the fact that you've…you've been…I mean personally myself, I'm a really private person so I think for me to talk to somebody who I don't really know about 'do you know what, I'm having a bad day today' and…and I think that that has seen those changes in people as well as myself that's been something that maybe wouldn't have happened. Do you know that if it hadn't have been be a pandemic you'd just plod on but yeah… (81,2)

Continuing to come to work was important and helped retain some normality. Participants reflected on coping mechanisms they had used including an acknowledgement of clear boundaries between home and work and ensuring they stayed strong for the children, putting others first.

> Yeah, we switch off from home to be able to be the positive role model for the children. (136,3)

> Yeah, I think like that we come to work…personally when I come to work its exciting because we're here for the children. So even though you might have your own problems at home, generally you come in, you walk through those doors don't ya? And you switch on to 'oh so and so's in the corridor' or you just seem to know everybody and just switch onto that…it's what you're here for. (137,5)

Participants spoke about feeling reassured by the COVID safety measures implemented, which appeared to allay some of their fears as well as ensuring these were embedded with pupils.

> Yeah, we did have that fear of what was the unknown of the virus [inaudible] 'cos there'd be say 10 children, 10 different families and you would be worried about where they'd go to work and what they're doing and things like that and what they're bringing to us or… but I think the testing regularly and…(138,3)

And the mask wearing and all the constant washing the hands and even the kids…it's like it's just registered. They'd come in and they're straight to washing their hands. (139,4)

5.5.1.2. Development of skills

TAs felt that the pandemic had created opportunities for them to showcase their skills which had led to further career/personal development. TAs expressed a sense of growing confidence and accomplishment, as a result of adapting their role and gaining experience in unfamiliar areas [such as teacher-cover, IT and delivering online learning].

> …being able to allow others to see your own skills and build on your own skills…so it's allowed me to improve as an individual really. (118,2)

And even if their role hadn't changed, one participant spoke of her increasing confidence that she felt enabled her to work more autonomously.

> I think its confidence is the biggest thing…, I do feel more confident in that I can maybe suggest something if somethings is not working for a child or…I just feel like I've got more like confidence to be like to join in without being asked… (113,5)

5.5.1.3. Job satisfaction

This subtheme seemed to weave throughout the entire narrative and crossed over into other areas; this appeared a critical factor in why the TAs continued in their roles despite the difficult circumstances.

Above all, it seemed clear that the TAs cared for the pupils in their care and who remained a main source of concern for them. They expressed their admiration for the children's ability to adapt and work hard despite everything

> And the children as well like, we worried…I worried about them. About what they were doing or their families like yeah… (51,3)

> How hard they worked like, they worked so hard even though it was out of their routine. Out of everything that was going on in the world they still worked so hard. (76,3)

Many positive aspects appear to have emerged within the pandemic context. One of the most prominent aspects that seems to have contributed to TAs' job satisfaction is the development of strong relationships with both pupils and colleagues across the setting. TAs were able to work closely with a variety of staff across the school which seemed to create a sense of community, united by a common struggle, thereby increasing feelings of being part a team. This seemed to increase their feelings of empathy and appreciation.

> Yeah, yeah, as a school I mean you have the…the staff that you worked closely with and those bonds and those relationships and things that you can rely on. But I think as a…as a full on Team [setting name], well I think we're…we're really like… (83,3)

> Like a family, aren't we? (84,5)

> I think also we can recognise in each other now. Yeah, even with people that you wouldn't have worked with before because we've been thrown into this situation.

Sometimes now you walk past somebody in the corridor and go 'oh are you okay?'. You know and you just know now that that look you maybe wouldn't have noticed before. (85,2)

Another aspect key to job satisfaction identified during this time was 'enjoyment' [within the role] and having fun with the children. Having the time to do so was crucial and this unprecedented situation enabled 'normal' life and academic learning to slow down somewhat. Participants reflected on an important part of their role to support the children's social and emotional learning. This also supported the development of stronger relationships between pupils and staff and provided an emotional balance whilst they were continuing to metaphorically 'juggle a number of plates'.

Yeah, actual basic skills. I think they quite enjoyed it because obviously with everything going on, we had the work going on for home for the kids and the laptops for the children that wasn't in school. And then we had the work set for the children that was able but yes it's like we got to do a lot more activities and fun stuff and things like that with them, so I think they really enjoyed it. (23,4)

Finally, TAs reflected on their newfound autonomy and being able to show their initiative which linked to their growing confidence, feeling heard and the development of stronger staff relationships (see above). Being more involved in the children's learning seem to enhance feelings of job satisfaction and feelings of pride.

Yes, for me it was more like a teacher said 'oh what do you think? 'Should we do this or should we do that?' [it] just made me feel more involved. Instead of just saying whatever, go get on with it, it was like 'what do you think we should do this?' 'Shall we do that with the children?' It just made me feel more like part of it, yeah. (34,5)

A participant reflected on successes that she was most proud of. These successes were linked to pupils' academic engagement and being able to make a visible difference. These opportunities also highlighted the importance of individual teaching and having the time to spend with less able students.

…he's done amazing and I do think that it's because he had more time one to one and he's in the classroom full time now as well. So, I think, yeah, I think it makes a massive difference. So, yeah for me that's erm like…like a proud thing…I'm really proud of that. (91,5)

5.6. Main theme Four: The Children

Figure 7: Main theme: The Children and associated subthemes of emotional wellbeing and academic engagement
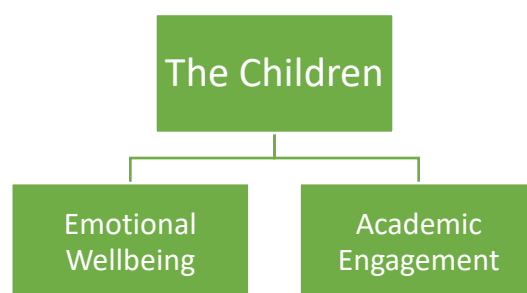
5.6.1 The Children

Enforced lockdowns, school closures and 'bubbles' comprising of small groups of pupils and teaching staff provided opportunities for TAs to work closely with pupils at either an individual or small group level. Subthemes identified were:

5.6.1.2. Emotional wellbeing

Opportunities to spend more time with pupils was a key subtheme that resonated throughout the 'discovery stage' and beyond. One participant emphasised how the children were their main priority.

> the children. We think about the children; we care for the children like a really a lot. So, I think that when we're here, they're almost our first thought. (134,3)

Initially, a small number of pupils attended school during the first lockdown and with many regarded as vulnerable. Participants recall that, as a result of this, less confident pupils began to grow in confidence and even thrive.

> It was nice. They like came out of their shells a bit more and just having that more time with them smaller groups (15,4)

Especially for the quieter children. (16,5)

It appeared important for the TAs to protect the children from external worries by having fun and creating memories, enabling children to be proud of their achievements and increase their confidence and self-esteem. This may also have enabled pupils to process their experiences in a more positive light.

> I think for those children who don't have the confidence to maybe talk to others or communicate the way they are, then they're a little bit more shy and things like that. I think there's still some children now that maybe walk by and go 'oh miss do you remember when we did this?' 'Do you remember when we did that in lockdown?' or 'we did that'. And I think for those children remembering those like memories almost, for them now like what happened and to be able to feel good about and feel chuffed that they've done that and excited to like share what they've done in such a crazy time. I think that's a massive confidence boost for them as well. (92,3)

Participants felt it was important to remain strong for pupils, being their role models during an extremely worrying time. Of equal importance, participants felt it was important to be open and honest with the pupils.

> If they wanted to know anything they'd ask, and we'd have our Newsround. Our Newsround what we used to play and things like that so we could keep them up to date every week on what was going on. And I just think that if they were coming in and we was panicking then…So it was a matter for us keeping calm and communicating so everybody knew what's what and reassuring. (144,4)

> Yeah, and not shy away from the fact that of what the world is at the moment. It's all about [inaudbible]. (145,3)

5.6.1.3. Academic engagement

From a very small number of pupils that initially attended school during the first and second lockdowns, to the creation of bubbles (in September 2020) that comprised of a reduced ratio of pupils to staff to prevent the spread of COVID. Both appeared to have a positive impact on relationships with pupils and their academic engagement. One participant reflected on a positive experience that she felt was a success.

> …one of the boys that was in our bubbles, generally in a big classroom with lots of other kids. He has always been up and down but then I found smaller group…more attention. He just seemed to calm; he seemed to settle. He actually even said 'Miss X I really like these smaller groups' and he did. He did seem to enjoy it when it was just four or five of them in the group and he seemed to settle more. You could engage with him more, he took more things on board he listened to yer. (97,4)

Participants articulated that the children who struggled within the mainstream classroom prior to the pandemic seemed to thrive, largely due to individual and small group teaching. This facilitated getting to know pupils better and being able to spend more time and give more attention to those in need. This impact also seemed to have a lasting effect beyond the lockdown period. For TAs, such successes gave them a sense of pride in their achievements.

> …during lockdown he was…he was coming in and we got some more time one to one and his confidence just grew massively. And because he was lower ability as well, he struggled with his writing and often he wouldn't really put much effort in. But after being that one to one a lot, now you should see him. He just…he tries at absolutely everything yeah and every time I see his work I'm shocked. I'm just like can't believe… (91,5)

Finally, when participants were asked if they had anything else to add.

> It was worrying weren't it but it's quite nice to discuss the positives cos we don't often get asked for them do ya? (132,5)

5.7. Conclusion

This focus group felt like a really positive experience for both the participants and researcher. These findings will be referred to and discussed in more detail in chapter 8: Interpretation and implications for the future. Findings from the second focus group will now be discussed in the following chapter (6).

Chapter Six

Thematic Analysis and findings – *'Dream' (focus group two)*

6.1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from the second focus group. This session aimed to explore what the participants felt their practice would look like in an ideal world – the 'Dream' Stage ('what could be') of the 4-D stage of AI (please refer to Chapter 3).

6.2. Focus group 2: Dream – what could be

This session took place on January 26th 2022, three weeks after the Christmas break. In early January, a record number of COVID-19 cases had been reported due to the Omicron variant (Finnis, 2022) and as a consequence the setting was experiencing a high number of staff and pupil absences. On the 27th January the government announced that they would be lifting all restrictions under Plan B (see Appendix 5) with England returning to Plan A measures (see Appendix 5) (DoHSC, 2022). The government attributed the lifting of Plan B restrictions to the vaccination booster programme, the falling numbers of omicron infections and the stabilisation of hospital admissions (DoHSC, 2022). Due to this fluctuating context at this time, participants seemed to reflect more on those positive aspects they had previously shared in the first focus group during the second session. The researcher subsequently reflected on this and considered that the participants perhaps viewed that time as the 'ideal' for them. This will be returned to in chapter 8: Interpretation and implications for the future.

Three main themes were identified which provided a snapshot of the context TAs were working in at that time. These were *Relationships, Role* and *Pupils* (see Figure 8). An overview of these themes, their corresponding subthemes and subordinate themes is below.

Figure 8: The Dream Stage – thematic map: main themes, subthemes and subordinate themes

Focus Group 2
positives "post" pandemic

Theme ⬤ Sub-theme ▢ — Link to subordinate theme

Greater communication

Closer teacher-TA relationships

Professional

Honesty & trust

Relaxed boundaries

Relationships

Supporting mental health & wellbeing

Support system

Personal

Increased empathy

Appreciation

Being more open with others

Increased participation in the children's' learning

Being part of a team

Inclusion

Increased sense of competence

TA voice/input in planning and implementation of teaching

Role

Feeling valued

More autonomy

Empowerment

Increased power/status 'respect'

TA voice/feeling heard

Quality time with pupils

Staff creativity

Job satisfaction

Care & compassion

Academic 'small group teaching'

Social & emotional 'fun activities' (basic skills)

Pupils

Increased contact with families

TIME 'in an ideal world'

Greater expectations of TA role

Less worried/complacency

Increased feelings of safety & security

Positive impact on pupil engagement

Positive parenting

Positive impact of SEMH

Learning

Moving forward

Respecting boundaries

Care for pupils & wider community

Development of strong peer relationships

Community

Role valued by wider community

Potential impact on wellbeing and role

Greater connection & provision of support

Workload has intensified

Impact on teaching and learning

Whole school staff-pupil relationships

the Children

Caring for others embedded across the setting

Relationships

Strengthening of peer relationships

6.3. Main theme One: Relationships

Figure 9: Main theme: Relationships and associated subthemes of professional and personal

Relationships

Professional
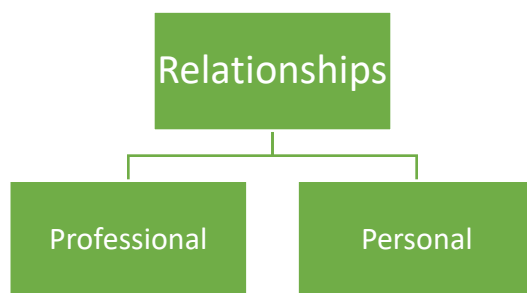
Personal

6.3.1. Relationships

In this session, relationships continued to be an important factor that participants were keen to maintain. These were a key resource that TAs drew upon, to support them both professionally and personally.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

6.3.1.1. Professional

Professional relationships were enhanced by improved communication with colleagues across the setting. Participants expressed that feeling heard was an important factor they particularly valued.

> I guess communication more in it across the board. Right? Yes, it all helps with it all. (36,3)

> And I suppose as well, I think the bottom of all that is the feeling that you've been heard, you know that you've said something, and it's of value. So, there's that as well. (37,2)

Honesty and trust were important elements that TAs also valued in their professional relationships. Boundaries between personal and professional relationships seemed to have become somewhat blurred as a result of stronger relationships. This was due to the extreme circumstances they had found themselves during the lockdown period,.

> Yeah, and the way…the way you trust people as it…it kinda threw you into a place where you have to rely on each other, and you need that honesty and you need…you needed it each other. (7,2)

Staff expressed they no longer worried about overstepping professional boundaries with less familiar colleagues, due to bonds created through a shared context.

> Yeah, you check in, don't you? You know sometimes before you…where somebody maybe just didn't look themselves, you'd think 'oh erm they're having a tough day' but now you're like 'are you okay?'. You know, you don't really feel they'd be offended if you…if you do say that now. So that's a nice thing that has come out of this you know… (11,2)

Continuing from this subtheme identified in the first focus group, participants emphasised that closer TA-teacher relationships were facilitated through regular communication, with teachers often seeking their input and ideas.

> It might be a plan of what they've already got in place, and they'll be like 'what can you add extra? or 'what do you think?' 'do you think this is okay?'. Or like, we had one from the class teacher the other day about XXX, and at, like, our XXX topic, and like, they was asking what kind of ideas. He'd had an idea like, what did we think about his idea and yeah, yeah, so that was a really… These emails, like, they send these out quite often, just to show us what their plan is, and whether we agree with it, or what else we can add to it. (34,3)

6.3.1.2. Personal

Strong relationships appeared to be a vital resource that staff drew upon to support good mental health and wellbeing and provide a much-needed support system

> I think like when we said about the relationships being quite a strong part in this school that I think that that's probably going to be there now. Yeah, that's there now. (6,3)

TAs expressed that they appreciated their colleagues more and felt that this had been embedded across the whole schools for both staff and pupils.

Yeah, we appreciate each other more now really don't we? (9,2)

Being more open and honest with each other whilst respecting personal boundaries also seemed to contribute to both staff and pupils' emotional support system. So too did an increased sense of empathy.

To be fair, like you said for the children and adults its ok to say you're not ok that's and that's said a lot more often. And the children are a lot more aware now that if you're having a tough day, its ok to talk about it but if you don't want to talk about it just yet then that's ok too. You know we say it quite often don't we? (13,2)

6.4. Main theme Two: Role

Figure 10: Main theme: Role and associated subthemes of inclusion, empowerment and job satisfaction
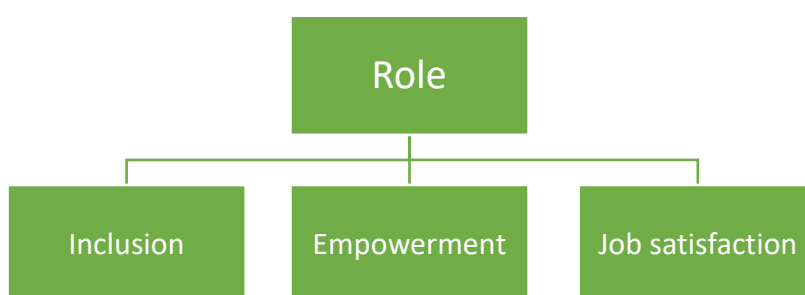
6.4.1.1. Role

Again, this was an overarching theme echoed throughout the sessions. Positive aspects that had been identified previously continued to echo throughout.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

6.4.1.2. Inclusion

Participants appeared to value the greater communication and improved working relationships with teachers which created a sense of continuing inclusion and feeling part of the children's learning, as well as an increasing sense of competence.

You know, we're part of the learning and we're part of…of what the children are learning and it's, it's nice to have that input and… I mean, it don't always go to plan…(30,2)

But even then, I suppose over the…the small groups as well, feeding back and adjusting and allowing your input to say, well, this didn't actually work with the group. But you know, how did your group go? You know, feeding back and, you know, adjusting as and when needed. So yeah. (35,2)

Participants echoed their sense of being valued members of the team, whilst continuing to contribute to the children's learning. This was often through emails which TAs appreciated

Like emails, like, we'll probably get emails more from the class teachers asking our input (27,3)

Yeah…it's a bit of inclusion as well really, that we maybe wouldn't have been included in before. (33,2)

6.4.1.3. Empowerment

Participants expressed the importance for them to feel heard and to know that their opinions and experiences were valued and recognised that these were often incorporated in both planning and teaching.

The staff, so like the teacher would be like, 'god, I didn't think of something like that' or 'thank you' and they'll be like, the next time, it'll be like what we've come up with, like, Whoa, yeah, it's nice. Hopefully, that will continue. (31,3)

Further, one participant reflected on how a growing sense of autonomy that had initially emerged during the lockdown period, continued to be evident in her current practice

> Yeah, thinking out the box, thinking on your feet… because there were…there were moments where I suppose as a TA, you wouldn't have had before. The teacher would have had it all prepared and they always had like a backup plan of oh, well, if this will do this, but then as a TA, you was allowed to be involved as to like, well, what if we do this? And it was like right, 'we'll go with that' and you was allowed that input that maybe you wouldn't have had to that extent before. Where now you find that the teachers are like, right, so we've got this come in what, you know, what do you think? You know Yeah, so I mean, that's been nice hasn't it? (26,2)

Participants touched on a sense of increased power and status as a result of the positive changes identified so far. This seemed to have been facilitated by a culture of respect embedded across the setting through greater communication and a clear ethos that all staff were to be treated equally by pupils. One participant reflected on how this had strengthened their role.

> I think it strengthens your role doesn't it [its easier as well init?]. Yeah, it's easier because when as a group of adults in a key stage or in a year group, yes, you know, that you can, you know, if one adult has said this, regardless of whether you're the TA or the teacher, it's no this…this is how things are, this is how this is how we're all respected in the same way. And I think that's been strengthened as well hasn't it throughout. That you know, when an adult speaks, that respect is needed, regardless of whether it's a teacher or a TA, or, or even the lunchtime staff even and that's been reinforced quite a lot really through all this. (41,2)

6.4.1.4. Job satisfaction

This was a significant theme that the researcher identified in both focus group 1 and 2. Important aspects that contributed to this included the relationships TAs had with staff and pupils, being an integral part of the children's learning and the freedom to be creative. Ultimately, the children were crucial in contributing to greater job satisfaction.

> …But you know, if you put something in place, especially if it's… because we quite enjoy creating things as does XXX and to do something, and the kids enjoy it, and just the looks on their faces, and we think I was part of that… (30,2)

That we did… You know making backpacks out of bottles of lemonade and [laughs]. (66,2)

Participants spoke of their care and compassion for pupils who were lacking in basic skills as a direct result of school closures and difficulties for parents at home. This had become particularly evident in the younger children, and they expressed their concern about the extent of missed learning opportunities – the foundation for life skills.

But that's something…your compassion and your heart goes out to them. So just, you know, if I can do this with them, it'll, you know, give them another experience, or give them a little bit of something else. You know to show that care and compassion, and they love the things around them even just, you know, making pictures out of clouds you know it that doesn't cost anything, but the children haven't done it. [Yeah], most of them haven't done it. You know…smelling, smelling flowers, or, you know, building a xxx in the grass, you know, those basic things like that… (64,2)

However, participants reflected on the importance of having quality time with pupils to be able to do the fun but vital things and give them opportunities to learn important life skills. However, academic learning was being prioritised and time appeared to be a scarce commodity. When asked if those opportunities existed currently, participants were clear that academic pressures were increasing.

Where before you had a lot more time to put the fun element in and you know the enjoyment element where that's not always there now because there's the… (70,2)

Bridging… trying to bridge that gap of learning. (71,3)

6.5. Main theme Three: The Children

Figure 11: Main theme: The Children and associated subthemes of moving forward, learning and relationships
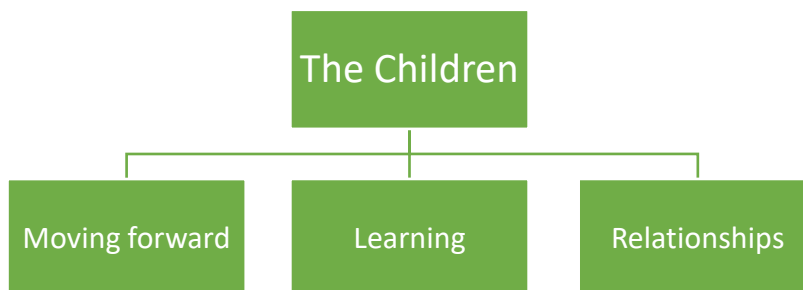
6.5.1. The Children

Participants highlighted many positive aspects that had emerged from pupil experiences during the lockdown period.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

6.5.1.1. Moving forward

Participants felt that things had moved on since the initial focus group and that pupils appeared less worried about the pandemic in general, as at this point, they had lived with it for almost two years. Participants' reflections about pupils' anxieties during the height of the

pandemic gave a valuable insight into the significant impact this had had on their social and emotional wellbeing.

> Because before you could see that worry in the children whereas now are a little more relaxed a little bit more. But I suppose that's complacency isn't it that? That it's been around for so long that its part of what the children are …so that fear factor isn't there so much now. So that's a good thing, isn't it? That…that fear isn't…because before for a child to say but what if…if I get covid…what…what if my mum…what…what if they get poorly and so now because it's been around for quite a while, you know there's a bit of complacency. So that it's not such that scary beast that it was you know before. (5,2)

6.5.1.2. Learning

Participants spoke of a less strict COVID related hygiene regime at school. They reflected that pupils had retained some positive aspects and were more aware of their own hygiene.

> It's not as…as stricter regime I suppose as where we were with the constant hand washing throughout the day. There's still the awareness of hand sanitiser…hand sanitiser you know wash your hands but before it was such a strict regime of you need to go wash your hands now…you need to go and…so I think the relaxation of that has been better but It's made children more aware of their own hygiene a little bit more hasn't it?

Whilst some pupils continued to grow in confidence academically due to the individual and small group learning they had received during the lockdown period, some struggled emotionally. However, at this point, participants seemed hopeful that these aspects were not completely lost.

> There's erm, there is a couple of children that I'd say, academically, are still more confident, but socially and emotionally I feel like they've blended back into…into the background, really. They're getting on with the work a bit better than what there would have been before but I have seen quite a few of them just struggling to be back in that large social situation of the of the classroom and we have had a few children go back up to the [nurture provision] erm because of that situation, really. So, it is a shame, but we can get 'em around again…definitely, with help from the xxx, I think. (104,4)

Again, at this point, participants were continuing to deliver teaching within small groups, which they felt was a crucial factor in being able to address gaps in pupils' learning.

> …And erm and another thing I thinks continuing is the smaller work groups and erm that more from…I don't know about you guys but for me I've been working in smaller groups within [subject lesson] and stuff and I feel like it works a lot better. So, it's not just your same day interventions, its literally taking a smaller group and helping them understand what it is they're learning, and I think that'll just continue as well 'cos it…it works. (14,4)

Lessons learned the hard way – a way of working that participants recognised was particularly effective in order to bridge the academic gaps created by so much time out of formal education.

We've had to do smaller groups in the last two years, so we've learnt that that works better overall. So, that's what's probably going to continue.

> I think…erm because they…they've been used to it as well. It really works. …And because it's such a catch up as well, I think it's such a catch up for the children that had all of that time off school. It's been essential to get them to where they… up to what they've lost previously in their learning. (20,3)

6.5.1.3. Relationships

Participants spoke of peer relationships becoming stronger as a direct result of a whole school approach emphasising consideration for others.

> I think we embed that in the children as well. Don't we like? For their peers… as well for them to check on their peers you know. Or if they see somebody on their own, you know during the day, you know just going to see if they're ok... (12,3)

Participants also reflected on an increased sense of respect for all adults in school with pupils respecting boundaries more. Staff with less perceived power, felt enabled to deal with incidences themselves, which positively impacted whole school staff-pupil relationships promoted through greater communication.

> I think erm…with the lunchtime staff, I feel like they're communicating more with us now as well. Often, they'll come in and say, right, this has happened, and this is how it was sorted erm or whatever, there's been an issue with this, this child or this child. Where before you didn't always get that so you'd get the children coming in, telling you there was a problem and you don't know if it had been solved or not so it used to take a lot of time up. But now that they're communicating, it feels like we're taking less time away from their learning to solve a problem that was at lunch time. (45,4)

A final question was given to participants: *In an ideal world, how would things be different?*

6.6. Main theme Four: Time

Figure 12: Time and associated subthemes of pupils, community and the potential impact on wellbeing and role
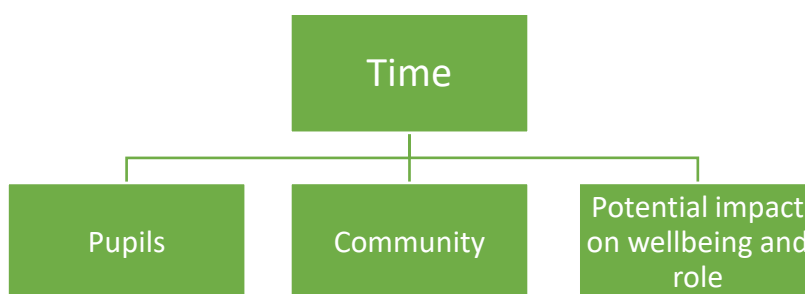
6.6.1. Time

In an ideal world, participants identified time as being the crucial factor that had been available to them during the lockdown period but was becoming increasingly scarce at that point. This lack of time impacted on three key areas.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

6.6.1.1. Pupils

Participants reflected on those children who, for a variety of reasons, missed out on their education and learning whilst being at home. There appeared to be a huge difference in parenting skills and abilities that had consequently impacted on some children's overall development. Participants were finding that they were having to support pupils in learning basic skills before moving on to age-appropriate teaching.

> I think for some of the parents where they were concerned where some of the parents was like, couldn't do the learning, didn't want to do the learning. Different reasons for not continuing learning at home erm I know like with my own children, it was no, it's still a school day. Yes, you're at home, but…and they did it and their schoolwork continued. But that was just the way I were. [Yeah]. But you know, for other parents that didn't maybe have access to the work and wanted to do it. So, the children have come back er whole different levels of… because of what they've missed, and what parents did or didn't do. And, you know, it's it, they just missed out on so much. So, like, we're seeing this in the children now that with, you know, we're having to put more in basic skills that are not there. Yeah. (58,2)

Participants touched upon the socio-economic impact on many pupils' experiences of being at home, suggesting that school did not just provide pupils with a formal education, but it was crucial for pupils' social and emotional development in a less affluent community. Participants spoke of having to address basic skills, particularly for younger pupils.

So, the year 2s that we have now they've missed half of year one, half of foundation, reception age so a lot of the key life skills really and you know, like behaviour, little niggly bits there, they're not there. Because they weren't in school….So, you know, and it's so the basic building blocks that they learn throughout school is what we're…we're picking up on now. (54,2)

> Because even to this day, like some of the parents don't, they don't have that at home. They don't have…they don't do anything outside of school. (61,3)

> No, because you know, I mean, some of the children don't leave the estate. So, we've, you know, to give them life experiences and their learning and everything else, you know, that they need. Its, it's hard when they've not getting the basics at home. (62,2)

Participants had reflected on the importance of spending time with pupils doing 'fun' activities, but they felt this was beginning to dwindle.

> Yeah. I don't know if we have that. That's what I'm saying….we don't have the time to give them that now. (68,3)

Participants were aware that things were beginning to change in relation to being able to effectively support pupils and the lack of time was beginning to impact on both academic and social and emotional aspects of pupils' learning.

However, they were hopeful that small group teaching would continue as they identified this as being particularly effective. Not only were small groups more effective academically, but participants reflected on how some pupils benefitted emotionally from small group learning.

> Yeah, I felt like they may be more focused when it was a smaller group when there was less children. And then obviously when you've got a full class, I find, I think, they maybe find it harder to contain themselves. (110,4)

For some pupils, a return to pre-pandemic large classes has had a detrimental effect on them both socially and emotionally. Participants reflected on those children who continued to struggle emotionally. Although they felt more able to identify those that needed more support, the impact of increased pressure on both staff and pupils, meant that this wasn't happening.

> I think we're very more mindful, like each of us. Like we have like the [nurture provision] where we…they use like ELSA sessions and things like that but erm I don't think I think we're mindful to maybe say, Oh, this child possibly needs a couple of hours every so often like, and we do, do that quite often now where we recommend or ask about if there's any intervention that can be put in place for these kids, but I don't think I think because of the way the day goes now…the intensity of the day now, I think they've just blended back into like what it used to be. (103,3)

Small group teaching also helped TAs teach and manage pupils more effectively.

> Yeah, like as a as a teacher or as a member of staff in the room teaching the class erm you've got eyes on, if you've got 16 children, you've got eyes on them all haven't you? Properly like you can see it all more and what's going on more whereas if you've got a class for 28 to 30 children. It's a lot more difficult to kind of… (111,3)

> It's harder to pick up on those…those little signals that they give off just before they explode [laughs]. (112,2)

6.6.1.2. Community

The lack of time (and an associated change in role responsibilities) was also impacting on community relations. In an ideal world participants identified aspects during the lockdown period that helped strengthen community ties and relationships. The increased contact with families during the lockdown period was a crucial element in building on those relationships.

> That's what I was gonna say. I think that's maybe what hasn't continued as much now in because we're not phoning erm every day or knocking on the doors to drop off a pack. Yeah, I think that that communication's probably broke down a bit now. And that's probably something that needs to continue int it, I think? (80,4)

However, despite the large number of pupils continuing to self-isolate, contacting pupils and families during this time was no longer part of their role.

> Yeah, I mean, it was more so now that in the fact that if a child tests positive, where before we would have still rung that parent….Whereas now you know, if there's a positive test come in, that they're just left for, you know, 5,6, 7 days, or however long until they come back. Where before we would have had that contact, you know, not necessarily given work or you know, asked to do work, but there had been that contact like 'hi, how are you doing?' 'how are you feeling today?'. You know, 'are you okay, have you been to see the sunshine today?'. Yeah. 'have you had some fresh air in the garden?'. And so that contact isn't there now. Which, which would have been nice. (81,2)

This was something that participants were particularly concerned about and expressed a sense of loss.

> But that contact that we had is less, and now they're off. So really, it's…it's gone in the opposite direction to what it should have been.

> Yeah. It doesn't happen that now. Where I think that's a sad thing. (85,2)

With the decline in communication, participants touched on other aspects that they perceived to be disappearing also, such as feeling valued. This narrative seemed to develop within the shared discourse of the focus group and was something that participants may not have reflected on before.

> Yeah. So, like, and then now looking back and looking at that now, do the parents have the same level of respect that they show to us, like, because of what we were doing? Or do they… thinking about it, do they have that any more for us? (82,3)

6.6.1.3. The potential impact on wellbeing and role

As education settings were beginning to move towards a pre-pandemic normality, participants reflected on the increase in their workload as a direct result of pupils' lost learning.

> I think like things like…erm interventions that we discussed before or like, I think we're getting a lot more put on us now because of what they've missed. (51,3)

> Like trying to get through what they're expecting now, in a day is a lot harder to what it's been…so that quite a bit of er…. (53,3)

> But on top of what's expected already, but, you know, further, so that just we're expected to just do more [Yeah] like in little time. [Yeah]. (55,3)

> To get them to where they need to be (56,2)

6.7. Conclusion

On reflection, the researcher felt that this focus group had not felt as positive as the initial focus group. However, with the increase in workload and greater expectations of their role, the researcher wanted to emphasise to participants that despite the AI focus, the more negative experiences they had voiced had been heard and noted. These findings will be referred to and discussed in more detail in chapter 8: Interpretation and implications for the future. Findings from the third focus group will now be discussed in the following chapter (7).

Chapter Seven

Thematic Analysis and findings – '*Design*' (focus group three)

7.1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings from the third focus group. This session aimed to follow the 'Design' stage ('next steps') of the 4-D stage of AI (please refer to Chapter 3).

7.2. Focus group 3: 'Design' – next steps.

As the fluctuating nature of the 'post' pandemic context continued, the final session took place on the last day of the February half-term 2022. Christmas had seen many of the COVID restrictions all but disappear which had meant that families had had the opportunity to spend the holiday season together along with England's population making the most of being able to socialise in larger groups. The consequences of this appeared to now become more evident and to further compound the difficulties previously expressed by TAs, COVID was 'now on their doorstep' as by early January, the UK recorded 218,724 daily COVID-19 cases (Finnis, 2022). Very similar to the changes being felt during the second focus group, the final focus group saw a dramatic change in context, reflecting the reality of the easing of restrictions whilst COVID was still prevalent. Things appeared to revert almost back to a pre-pandemic reality but with added pressures related to lockdowns, missed education and, of course, COVID. Similarly, to the second focus group, the COVID context appeared to precipitate an unplanned opportunity for participants to reflect on an 'ideal' of what could be experienced first-hand during the mist of the pandemic. The researcher felt that participants seemed to struggle with considering 'next steps' during this third focus group. This will be discussed further in chapter 8.

Three main themes were identified from the final discussion during the third focus group: the Children, Impact on staff wellbeing and Community (see Figure 13). The subsequent presentation of themes to participants in the final session, included the researcher's consideration of how these could potentially impact the participants within their role moving forward.

Figure 13: The Design Stage - thematic map: main themes, subthemes and subordinate themes
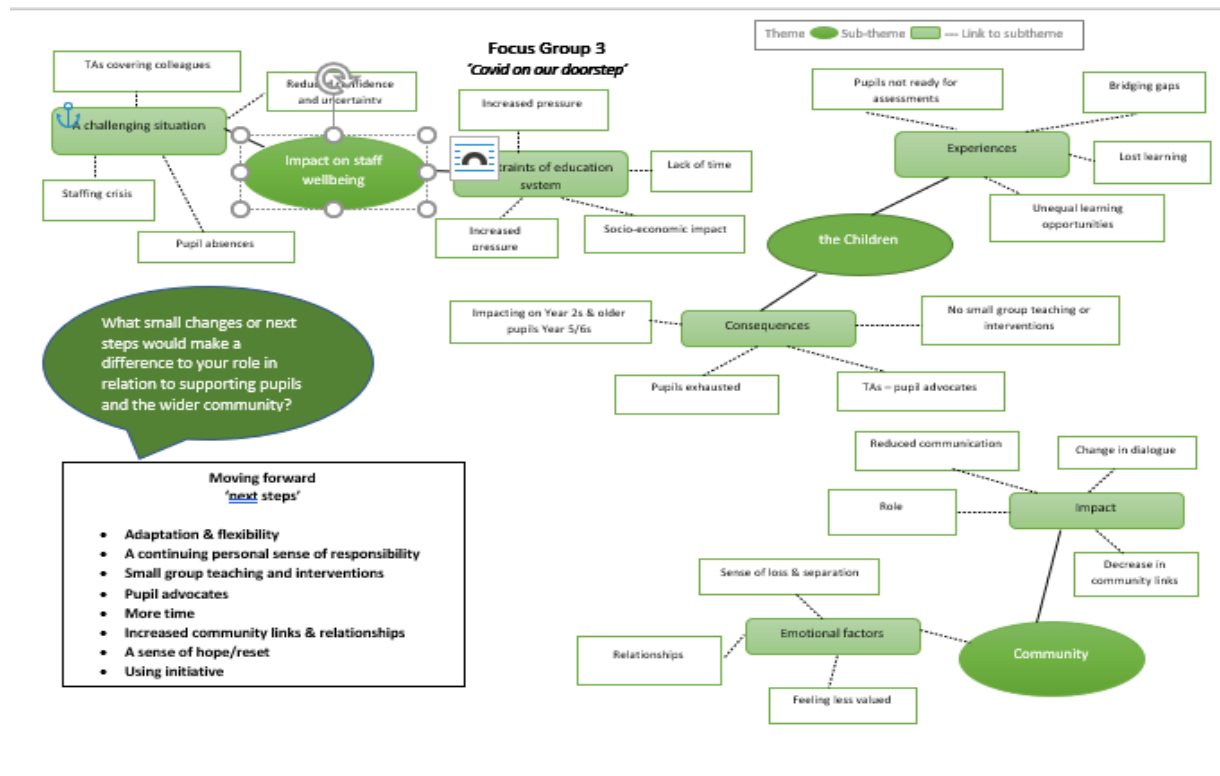
7.3. Main theme One: The Children

Figure 14: Main theme: the Children and associated subthemes of experiences and consequences
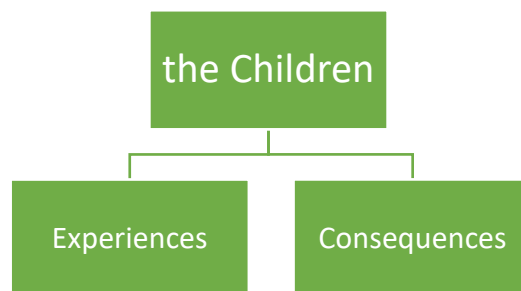
7.3.1. The Children

Participants expressed their concern in relation to things that had and still were impacting on pupils and their learning.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

7.3.1.1. Experiences

Participants expressed a sense of frustration that not all children had experienced the opportunity to access their learning whilst at home during the lockdown period. Participants reflected on the enormity of the situation in terms of how far pupils were behind academically and seemed to be facing an impossible task to support pupils who were just not ready due to the level of lost learning experienced during the lockdown period.

I think maybe in an ideal world if…because things have been so stressful just lately, I think in an ideal world if the children had been home learning all of them we, we wouldn't be kind of be in such as bigger mess as we are at the moment erm… Where the children we've got, some of them did absolutely nothing for months and months and I think these last couple of weeks especially, we've been struggling with…with those gaps. (2,2)

Participants expressed empathy for those pupils who were significantly behind as well a degree of frustration that the education system was not acknowledging this situation. Instead, it seemed to be adding further pressure to an already fragile system that was still being impacted by COVID.

So hard. Yeah, because the children are feeling it and they know there's pressure there. I mean, just like doing SATS over the last couple of weeks and they're just not ready for that kind of thing because they've missed out on so, so much, you know... But there's a vast majority of children that did nothing for months and months, and I think we're feeling the effects at the moment of gosh, what are we going to do to get these children to where they need to be? (6,2)

This inequality in learning opportunities continued to affect many pupils and bridging those gaps remained a priority for TAs who saw interventions as a crucial tool to support this. Due to the lack of staff, small group learning and interventions were unable to continue, which was also having a detrimental effect on pupils' learning and a source of frustration.

Just them little interventions that they're not getting at the minute [yeah] are the ones that they need to bridge the gaps [yeah]. (33,4)

7.3.1.2. Consequences

Further, the COVID situation was becoming worse than it had been for the last two years. COVID cases were on the rise, and large numbers of pupils and staff were absent due to having to self-isolate for at least six days. This meant that staff were having to cover colleagues, and often didn't know what they would be doing on a daily basis.

And that's the problem in it? Just staff covering staff and then those staff aren't getting replaced… (17,3)

You've still got, you know, possibly a third of your class missing due to, you know, positive cases. (18,2)

Participants seemed to bemoan the fact that they were unable to fulfil their TA role as they were expected to cover teaching staff. This seems to contradict previous discussions in which some participants had spoken positively about being able to cover and be more directly involved in teaching. However, this may reflect the level of uncertainty around expectations and their sense of ownership and control seemed to be ebbing away, at what seemed a somewhat reactive and stressful situation.

And instead of being the TA at the moment, you're…you're being the teacher or, you know, sent wherever to do whatever and you're not fully sure in what role they're asking you to do because you just need to be there... (25,2)

Participants shared that COVID had really hit their school leading to a high number of staff and pupil absences. Previously, participants had spoken of how important they felt small group teaching was and acknowledged that this would be crucial in supporting pupils who were really behind.

> And I think the other impact is because we've had COVID on our doorstep since we've come back from Christmas, that pressure's been intensified because the children aren't there or the staffs not there. So rather than doing the role that you should be doing, which is the interventions and pushing these children forward, you know and encouraging them we're just filling gaps for…for staffing really. (8,2)

> And I think in an ideal world, you'd have your TAs working with smaller groups more often, frequently throughout the day, to be able to work with individual groups of abilities to work on those gaps that they are missing. So, in an ideal world, you would have your teacher with maybe your more able children and then your TAs throughout the day taking different interventions. But that's not the ideal world at the moment. (7,3)

Participants voiced their concern in relation to how older pupils were not being supported as effectively due to the staffing crisis. Years 5 and 6 seemed to bear the brunt of the shortages in staffing.

> I think, uh I think [year] five, they're suffering quite a bit at the minute aren't they 'cause obviously a lot of the staff from the upper school are going down to the lower school to try and bridge them gaps or trying to help bridge the gaps aren't they? (11,4)'

Not only did participants reflect on the older children potentially missing out but also the more academically able pupils.

> I think it's not just bridging the gaps for the…the lower ability. I think it's like actually being able to like push the higher ability as well…because they're probably just getting by at the moment as well, they're not just being given more either. (49,3)

> Which I suppose in a sense though that's potentially failing the higher ability ones with the focus, being on bridging the gaps with others the higher abilities are not being pushed as they were, or they have been before. (52,1)

Ultimately, the lack of staff and time seemed to be a major theme running through the discussion. This was in contrast to the discussion in the first session, during which staff reflected on the value of having more time to spend quality time with pupils. This appeared mutually beneficial for both pupils and staff.

> So ideally either more staff or just more time to have them interventions that they need. (13,4)

7.4. Main theme: Impact on staff wellbeing

Figure 15: Main theme: Role and associated subthemes of a challenging situation and factors beyond their control

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        ┌─────────────────────┐
        │  Impact on staff    │
        │     wellbeing       │
        └─────────────────────┘
            │           │
  ┌──────────────┐  ┌──────────────┐
  │ A challenging │  │ Factors beyond│
  │  situation    │  │ their control │
  └──────────────┘  └──────────────┘
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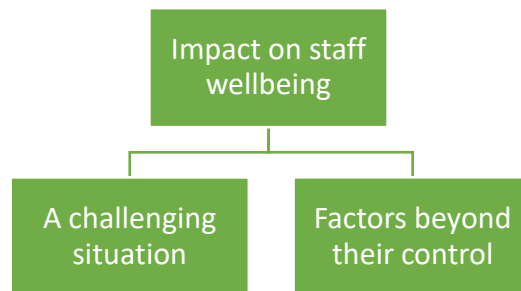
7.4.1. Impact on staff wellbeing

Participants spoke of being exhausted and how they felt ready for half-term. This was in contrast to the previous sessions in which all participants had seemed upbeat and positive.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

7.4.1.1. A challenging situation

The impact of easing restrictions and life beginning to return to some sort of normality, whilst COVID continued to spread, meant that the school appeared to be experiencing a staffing crisis. This research was also affected by this, in that all four participants had COVID after Christmas and were themselves having to self-isolate. This led to participants being separated during the sessions. On reflection, this may have led to more dominant voices with two participants together at work in the same room whilst the other remained at home. The fourth participant was unable to join online during the second session.

Participants expressed their exasperation at the staffing crisis, which seemed to be affecting the whole school. But participants rose to the challenge.

> We've all got, we've all got one place we're supposed to be, but every day we're just…we walk in we're given a different place. (37,3)

During the lockdown period, staff had been supporting children both at home and at school. Now that things were moving towards a pre-pandemic normality, a huge majority of pupils who were having to self-isolate at home, had little or no contact with staff. This obviously had implications for those more vulnerable pupils who would remain 'hidden' for over a week, with few checks. Further, these absences were also compounding the issue of educational gaps and lost learning.

> You're allowed back once you get it, as long as you test negative from day five, you could come back. But that's still a week and you know, in a school term and its… (23,2)

Participants expressed their uncertainty in relation to their role and daily routine. During the lockdown period, staff had spoken of an established routine, working closely with class teachers for an extended period time. However, in the current situation things appeared to change daily.

> Well, I think we're all just everywhere at the minute, aren't we? (36,4)

One participant shared that this uncertainty seemed to be a contributing factor to losing some confidence in her ability. The lack of experience, uncertainty of expectations and fleeting time spent with different year groups and pupils, seemed to highlight the difference between their experiences during the lockdown period and the current situation.

> I was gonna say I've, I've… I found it real difficult the last couple weeks. But then I'm not always 100 percent sure what I'm supposed to be doing over there? It's knocked…it's knocked my confidence a little bit, I think just in at least when I was in one place I sort of knew what I needed to do when what group would go out to do their reading, for instance or whatever. But I think it's so unpredictable at the moment. It's hard to always think right 'I'm gonna do this' or 'maybe we should do that?' because you are just literally walking in and seeing where you are…erm (31,4)

7.4.1.2. Factors beyond their control

Despite the evidence for pupils' lost learning (see chapter 8) and the battle staff were currently facing trying to bridge the gaps, the education system continued regardless with academic assessment and testing becoming a priority once again. These constraints appeared to add to participants' frustration that pupils' wellbeing was not being taken into account. Participants spoke of being advocates for the children.

> I think that has been apparent this week as well, especially like with the year 2 children because you know, they've been doing SATs Papers. Just, you know, just getting them ready you know that was the point of like both, myself and XXX we turned around and was like, look, these, these kids just they need some time out. You need to…and the teacher was like, oh, OK, we was like, no, genuinely they, they need…(96,2)

> …a break. (97,3)

Participants expressed how difficult they were finding the increased pressure and highlighted that this was felt across the whole school. This subtheme links to how TAs rose to the challenges they were facing at that time, with this and other aspects contributing to factors beyond their control. Whilst expressing that everyone was 'feeling it', there seemed to be a continued sense of empathy for their colleagues, highlighting the relationships staff had forged during the lockdown period. Through this, participants appeared to be drawing on these for support in yet another challenging situation.

> And it's hard. It's really hard at the minute (5,3)

> But that's that's…it's been really intense over the last few weeks; I think and that's affected us all hugely. (26,2)

Another factor beyond participants' control was the impact of the lower socio-economic background of their pupils and the associated attainment gap. Participants expressed their frustration at apparent differences between not only parental support, but also the type of learning pupils had had access to. Despite their best efforts in supporting pupils, participants were limited within their role in how much support they could offer and were now dealing with the consequences.

> You know the work sent home they did, the online work, they did the reading, they did the phonics but there was a massive majority of children that didn't do anything because they were [inaudible]..or the parents weren't sure what to do…(2,2)

The lack of time TAs had was a common subtheme throughout this final session and a significant factor beyond their control.

> It really does all go back to time dunnit? (88,3)

> Yeah, we need more hours [laughs]. (89,4)

7.5. Main theme Three: Community

Figure 16: Main theme: Community and associated subthemes of emotional factors and impact
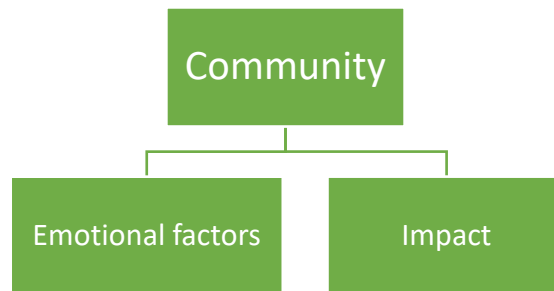
7.5.1. Community

Participants reflected on their experiences with the wider community during the lockdown period and compared these to what was happening at the current time.

Subthemes and subordinate themes identified are discussed below.

7.5.1.2. Emotional factors

Participants reflected on the quality of their relationships with community post-lockdown and at this point, they shared a sense that things had changed quite a lot already.

> Yeah, I think whether it's because of them working now and they're back at work and they've got things going on or whether it's just because they've just thought right we're back to normal, it's going away or whatever. I don't really know why it is. But yeah, I do think they're a bit more like cold with you. (70,3)

Following from this change, participants shared a sense of loss and separation between themselves and the wider community. They spoke of both a physical and emotional separation.

> Because you lose those links and because you know you're not phoning home and saying how are you? How's the little one, you know? And…and because you've lost that link, that's when you've gone back to being two separate like entities kind of thing whereas before you were one community you were in this together, you were pulling each other through it. Where once that link was broken because the kids came back into school, they were on the other side of the door again, they were on the playground, the other side of the fence you know and that was kind of the changing point. (84,2)

> Yeah, you know, it's a, it's a shame really because like you say that that that contact we had with parents and those conversations was you know like 'have a good day won't you?', 'oh, you know little one was feeling off this morning, just [inaudible]' and

you know, 'but make sure you have a good day too'. But we're like going back to pre-COVID like yeah, they've got a stuffy nose, there you go, see you later. Yeah. It's just I think it's starting to feel a little bit like that now, like we've come full circle. (64,2)

One participant reflected on their role during the lockdown period, and how they had supported families during this time. They spoke of families who were unsure or overwhelmed by their child's homework and had looked to the TA for support in this. However, as families no longer needed to worry about teaching their children, communication had appeared to have broken down somewhat as participants shared a sense of rejection and feeling less valued.

I think…I think during the lockdown and stuff though I think the parents might have felt a little bit more helpless because they didn't know the work, or they didn't understand themselves what to do. So, a phone call from one of us may have been a…a bit of a relief and they could be like, 'oh, I don't get what…what so and so's got to do' or where now they don't really have to worry about what work they're doing or and they're seeing adults on a daily basis and they're back to their normal lives aren't they? So, I think they don't need us, as much as well as we'd like to communicate with them, they don't need our help now. (78,4)

7.5.1.3. Impact

Previously, participants had spoken about how their sense of appreciation by the wider community had emerged during the lockdown period when parents and family members approached them directly to discuss any issues or simply just to connect. However, with the community returning to their 'normal' lives and no longer needing to isolate from others the impact of this appeared to be a reduced communication with the TAs.

Now we're having the conversations in the playground of well, you know, my little so and so has lost his cardigan and you're going to find it… where throughout when COVID started, those things weren't important you know…they were, so we are kind of creeping back into pre COVID kind of conversations that… (59,2)

This also led to a change in dialogue which one participant did not appreciate.

Yeah, some parents are just rude as well these days, I think [all laugh] (65,3)

A decrease in community links seemed to mark a return to pre-covid times. Participants had highlighted that whilst community relations had been good prior to the pandemic, they had come to appreciate the closer ties forged during this time. Participants seemed to feel some regret in this.

I think I think from my experience, especially on the last couple of months, it's it's…oh, well, maybe since Christmas it's feeling like we've gone back pre COVID. (56,2)

Participants, within their TA role, were keen to emphasise that their practice hadn't changed and that they were still continuing as they had always done. They seemed to attribute the decline in community interaction and communication to families within the community who had moved on (since COVID restrictions had been lifted) but the TAs had not.

I think we…I don't know. I think we like talk to them in a morning don't we I guess we go out in the morning and go out on an afternoon. (75,3)

Yep. We still have that positivity like and that encouragement and that support we…we still offer that same presence, I don't… I think it's maybe not accepted in the same way as before because day to day life is back to how it was before. (76,2)

7.5.1.4. Moving forward; 'a sense of hope' – next steps

During the final focus group, participants seemed 'stuck' (Partridge, 2019, p2) and overwhelmed by the changing context; this will be considered in more detail in chapter 8. The researcher, therefore, identified aspects of practice that participants had reflected on across the data set (during focus groups 1,2 and 3) in terms of positive qualities, experiences and successes. However, in the final focus group participants highlighted how these positive aspects were being impacted by the changing context. These were then presented to participants during a final debrief meeting (attended by all four participants), to seek a collective agreement for them to be disseminated to the SENCo and, eventually, the Senior Leader Team (SLT) (see Appendices 6, 7 and 8). It was the aim of the researcher that consideration of these aspects would form the basis for stakeholders to co-construct their 'next steps' with a view to further supporting TAs within their role. This be discussed further in more detail in chapter 8.

The table below summarises key qualities and practice participants had reflected on over the course of the data collection as important aspects of their role. These were identified by the researcher (and agreed by participants during the member-checking process) as areas potentially being impacted by the challenging context in which the final focus group took place. These aspects are supported by participant quotes.

Table 8: Professional qualities and practice identified

Professional qualities and practice/role		
Aspects identified	**Evidence**	**Implications**
A continuing personal sense of responsibility [towards the children]	I feel like the pressure is on everybody because we probably feel equally the same as the teachers to try and get it all right now for the children. (131,3)	If unmanaged - potential impact on staff wellbeing. If staff continue to work over and above remit; potential burn out and stress-related absence
The importance of small group intervention	And I think in an ideal world, you'd have your TAs working with smaller groups more often, frequently throughout the day, to be able to work with individual groups of abilities to work on those gaps that they are missing. So, in an ideal world, you would have your teacher with maybe your more able children and then your TAs throughout the day taking different interventions. But that's not the ideal world at the moment. (7,3)	The reduction of this type of learning has huge implications for pupils' academic catchup/progress in a post-pandemic future

Advocating for the children	Yeah. Yeah. And I think it was, it was this week that was like, no, come on now, the kids need a break. (100,2)	Related to a sense of responsibility and empowerment, this highlights an important aspect of the TA role in supporting pupils' emotional wellbeing and pupil voice.
More time	So ideally either more staff or just more time to have them interventions that they need. (13,4) I think that yeah, I think maybe that's like maybe to come that could be given in the timetable of the school days or the weeks they could be given time every class, every year group to enjoy maybe a few hours of doing their activities. (91,3)	Staff highlighted how their time was not protected, which was causing a high level of stress; potential impact on the holistic approach to pupil learning and emotional wellbeing as well as the potential impact on staff mental health and wellbeing.
The importance of community links and relationships	What the community, what we were to each other and how we supported each other [Yeah, yeah, yeah] you know even just a parent coming and going, you know, like, you know have a really good day and but the conversations seem to be going back to pre-COVID again. (62,2) Yeah, you know, it's a, it's a shame really because like you say that, that that contact we had with parents and those conversations was you know like …have a good day won't you? Oh, you know little one was feeling off this morning, just [inaudible] and you know, but make sure you have a good day too. (64,2)	A decline in links with the community and relationships between TAs and parents could have a detrimental impact on pupils' school experience and learning as well as impacting TAs' ability to effectively support pupils. These relationships, particularly in more disadvantaged communities, often provide a crucial link between families and school
Sense of hope/reset	Because surely because of the way we've had COVID in the school since January. Surely, we must be like ok for a while and we could be able to go back after half term and like reset just you know thinking right so everybody's had it now let's just, you know, fingers crossed it, it's…it's a	Positive aspects reflected in focus group 1 and 2 (see chapter 8 for discussion) continued to support staff resilience at this time. Moving forward, the consideration of these aspects, both internal and

	way forward once we go back after having that. (121,2)	external factors' (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022) should be a priority in relation to TA CPD and supporting staff moral
Using initiative, adaptation and flexibility	I guess it's maybe as a TA, knowing if you're in that class in that moment just using your initiative to just say oh maybe I could do this today or I can maybe do this small group or what do you want me to do? Maybe that's the small step we all just need to keep doing…just while it rides out the staffing issue or? (28,3) So rather than doing the role that you should be doing, which is the interventions and pushing these children forward, you know and encouraging them we're just filling gaps for…for staffing really. (8,2)	Earlier positive experiences appeared to increase staff confidence, using their own initiative more, adapting to difficult situations and supporting their ability to deal flexibly with new, unfamiliar situations. A decline in these qualities could potentially reduce staff motivation and effective engagement with their role.

These aspects, once endorsed by participants, were disseminated to the SENCo in a subsequent meeting. She told the researcher that she intended to further disseminate these to the Senior Leader Team (SLT) with a view to completing a further focus group with participants to collectively decide on which 'next steps' they wanted to focus on.

7.6. Conclusion

Whilst participants, during their final focus, group did not discuss on 'next steps' per se, their reflections provided a crucial insight into their experiences of working within a primary school at a difficult time of transition.

This chapter and the two preceding chapters 5 and 6, aimed to explore participants' perspectives of working through the pandemic using an AI framework. As each focus group took place at a different time, participants' reflections during the changing context and the themes identified provide a snapshot of TAs' personal and professional experiences. These will be discussed further in the following chapter 8: interpretation and implications for the future.

Chapter Eight

Interpretation and Implications for the future

8.1. Introduction

Existing Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic literature has documented UK teaching staff (including head teachers, senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants) experiences of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly elicited through large-scale online surveys. Despite making up a quarter of the education workforce (DfE, 2022), a relatively small percentage of Teaching Assistants (TAs) have contributed to these surveys (e.g., Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2021). Historically, TAs have remained silent and "unheard" (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014, p20). The lack of TA participation in such surveys perhaps echoes the continuing narrative of this marginalised group (Clarke, 2019; 2012; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014) who may feel they have little to contribute to national surveys seeking to elicit teaching staff opinion. This may be due to historical issues in relation to low status, poor pay and perceptions of being undervalued (O'Brien & Garner, 2001 as cited in MacKenzie, 2011). Further, the lack of participation by TAs in online surveys could also reflect their "lower level of formal education" in comparison to teachers (Clarke, 2019, p1) and corresponding socio-economic status, suggesting that some groups of individuals may not have access to the internet or struggle to access online surveys due to a lack of computer literacy (Fricker & Schonlau, 2002). Indeed, pandemic literature has highlighted that a significant number of teaching staff did struggle with learning online methods of delivering remote teaching to pupils (Moss et al., 2020).

Previous literature that has documented TA experiences, has done so within a problem-saturated context, highlighting the complexities and challenges that TAs have faced (e.g., (Clarke, 2019; Lehane, 2016; Mackenzie, 2011; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014; Sharples et al., 2015). At the time of completing this research, the literature available documenting educator's first-hand experiences during the pandemic has focussed entirely on teachers' perspectives, again within a problem-saturated context (e.g., Kim et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020). There appears to be no research, at the present time, that has sought to directly elicit TA voice in relation to their positive experiences of working face-to-face within a primary school during the pandemic. Further, the current study provides a critical snapshot delineating the changing context from mid pandemic through to the UK's education settings' transition to a post-COVID context. The focus groups captured TAs' first-hand experiences at different points whilst working during a challenging and fluid context.

Positive psychology, the embodiment of optimism and in antithesis to the deficit-model of psychology (Seligman, 2010), seeks to identify elements within life that enable people to thrive and lead fulfilling lives (Mather & Hulme, 2013). The themes identified within the current study: *Relationships, Community, Personal Growth, the Children, Role* and *Wellbeing* all contain some elements that align with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model which identifies five key factors that he argues contribute to an individual's overall well-being. These are *positive emotions* (feeling happy, optimistic), *engagement* (psychological connection), *positive relationships* (feeling supported and cared for), *meaning* (the belief that what we do is valuable) and *accomplishment* (feeling competent, a sense of pride and achievement).

For the current study, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) was adopted in order to explore positive experiences of TAs working in a primary school during the pandemic. AI is an approach for

organisational 'change that is based on the assumption that questions and dialogue about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams are themselves transformational' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p1). Both AI and positive psychology therefore "share the foundational principles of improving practice through focusing on potential and the affirmation of what is working over the condemnation of what is not" (Mather & Hulme, 2018, p1). The authors argue that AI can be seen as 'an important facet of positive practice' (p1).

As events began to unravel during the pandemic, life as we knew it paused and the closure of schools to the majority of pupils provided a unique opportunity to explore teaching and learning within a very different context. An early finding within the pandemic literature was that many teachers and teaching staff did not want to return to 'business as normal' in September 2020 (Moss et al., 2020, p17; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). The researcher in this current study, therefore, argues that lessons learned during this time should remain at the forefront of policymaker's decision-making within education in a post pandemic future. Research has suggested that TAs were "the unsung heroes" (Moss et al., 2021) during the pandemic and has highlighted, once again, historical issues in relation to these para-professionals' (Clarke & Visser, 2019b) low status, poor pay; remaining undervalued and unappreciated.

This study aimed to explore the positive elements of the TA role during an extremely challenging time, thereby highlighting their skills and inherent value. The research questions were:

Research Question 1: *What were TAs' positive experiences working during the COVID-19 pandemic and what did they find supportive/worked well during this time?*

Research Question 2: *What can we learn from these experiences moving forward in a post-pandemic future?*

Findings will firstly be discussed in relation to the research questions within the context of existing research. The researcher will then revisit the quality of the research, considering both strengths and limitations of methodology. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, future implications for the setting, lessons learned and implications for EP practice will be discussed.

8.2. Main themes identified

Main themes, subthemes and subordinate themes identified using thematic analysis were discussed in detail in chapters 5,6 and 7.

8.2.1. Summary of findings within the current research

Findings considered in Chapter 5, 6 and 7 as a synthesis will now be discussed further in relation to Research Questions 1 and 2 and existing research. The questions will be addressed together, as participants identified aspects such as relationships that were an important part of meaningful and positive experiences as well as a valuable resource. Each theme will firstly be summarised, followed by an interpretation in relation to existing literature.

8.2.1.1. Main theme: Relationships

8.2.1.1.1. Theme summary

The importance of relationships has been a central factor highlighted throughout the dataset. Participants spoke of the cruciality of relationships during the pandemic, seeming to view these both in terms of positive experiences and as a valuable resource to get them through difficult times.

Increased time working with a variety of staff during such a challenging time led to the development of close working relationships with colleagues, with the bonds created extending beyond the school gates. A differentiation between professional and personal relationships was also evident, and both appeared equally important, performing different functions. Early on during the lockdown period, strong relationships with colleagues and pupils were forged as a result of unprecedented ways of working, initially with a small ratio of adults to children for extended periods of time. Due to staff absences, TAs were provided the opportunity to work across the school in a similar vein and were able to forge relationships with less familiar staff. Participants' working relationships with colleagues, which continued as a result of earlier experiences, seemed to retain their importance and value throughout, providing much needed support when things became more challenging in 2022. Closer professional working relationships also appeared to contribute to job satisfaction and feelings of appreciation. Professional relationships with colleagues also developed at a more personal level, with TAs viewing these as a crucial resource, providing a much needed emotional support system. These relationships appear to have been facilitated through the development of unfettered communication across the setting, and an increasing sense of being part of a team/family.

Similarly, according to participants, increased time working with a small number of pupils saw pupil-staff relationships blossom and positively impact on both pupil emotional and academic engagement. These closer relationships appear to have had a huge impact, particularly for those pupils who had previously struggled in larger, mainstream classes. Participants valued these opportunities and acknowledged the importance of these for a variety of reasons. Smaller groups provided opportunities for getting to know pupils better and to be able to support them both academically and emotionally. Crucially, participants reflected on how they always put the children first, viewing their role as one of 'guardian'. They spoke of switching off from an incomprehensible world and focusing on the children in their care. Participants' reflections of their experiences with pupils during an unprecedented and scary time consisted of memories that both they and the children looked back on fondly. As the pandemic progressed, participants felt that the strong relationships with the children had continued and as the context became increasingly challenging, TAs spoke of themselves as advocates.

Interestingly, participants spoke of feeling heard and valued by the wider school community, including senior staff. This was a significant factor for TAs in feeling supported and being part of a team. This helped cement their feelings of validation within their role and positively impacted on their emotional wellbeing, providing a sense of competence.

8.2.1.1.2. Interpretation and links to research and theory

At the beginning of the pandemic, the long-term impact of quarantine and social isolation was uncertain, and research suggested that these could potentially cause mental health problems in the future (Brooks et al., 2020). Previous findings suggested that teaching staff had felt the significant impact of socially distancing from colleagues upon returning to schools, which had

contributed to continued feelings of isolation (Marchant et al., 2020). Of particular concern was around teaching staff stress and coping strategies. Parallels between this study and other research highlight the importance of professional relationships with colleagues which was highly valued, providing considerable emotional support (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022). Many staff reported that they had made more effort to seek and develop these further during the lockdown period and wanted to remain emotionally connected with colleagues, pupils and their families (Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Colleague connection and the development of strong relationships has long been seen as a protective factor contributing to staff resilience whilst experiencing adversity and challenge (Beltman et al., 2011). Psychological connection and positive relationships are two of five key factors that contribute to an individual's overall well-being (Seligman, 2010).

Results from the current study have echoed findings from previous research that has emphasised that the most effective use of TAs included the provision of pastoral and social and emotional mental health (SEMH) support to pupils (Groom, 2006; Groom & Rose, 2005) and delivering 1:1 and small group teaching and intervention (Groom & Rose, 2005; Blatchford et al., 2009). The current study highlighted how the high ratio of staff to small numbers of pupils attending during the first and second lockdown period facilitated stronger 1:1 TA-pupil relationships. These positively impacted both pupil SEMH and academic learning documented in pandemic literature (e.g., Dempsey & Burke, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marchant et al., 2020). Having fun with pupils, experiencing joy and creating memories – crucial elements for both staff and pupils who engaged more with their learning and felt supported socially and emotionally. Helping children to be proud of their own achievements and advocating for them were really important factors for participants. The importance of balancing academic learning with social and emotional learning was illustrated during the lockdown period and is something that has been widely recognised as critical in supporting pupils to move forward despite wider pressures to bridge the academic gap and lost learning (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020).

Further, in line with findings from Soneson et al. (2022), a general increase in pupil mental health and wellbeing for those who attended school during the lockdown period may have been attributable to greater attention from teaching staff, adapted teaching and increased attention to pupil wellbeing. All presumably facilitated through greater staff-pupil relationships. Research had also highlighted the significance of prioritising the health and wellbeing of pupils and staff back in 2020 with more emphasis 'on wellbeing activities and less focus on attainment/assessments and protecting staff breaks to promote workplace wellbeing' (Marchant et al., 2020, p1). The current study suggests that these should remain a priority moving forward. A finding that had been highlighted in 2017:

Government should recognise that good mental health and resilience in schools is critical to academic learning and give it the same status as academic learning (AEP, 2017, p1)

Historically, despite working with the most challenging pupils, TAs often felt unappreciated, unsupported and even, at worst, ignored (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014; Mackenzie, 2011). However, this current study suggests that this is not necessarily a given and that many factors can contribute to TAs' feeling appreciated, giving them a sense of value and feeling that their opinions matter (Beltman et al., 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Again, communication seems vital and can contribute to a 'sense of agency' (p415) and inclusion, whether from teaching staff or senior leaders (Howard & Johnson, 2004).

8.2.1.2. Main theme: Community

8.2.1.2.1. Theme summary

Findings across the data set (focus groups 1,2 and 3) suggested that TAs had to adapt their role, providing support beyond the pupils in their care; the development of trusting relationships with families were key to this. Increased contact and a blurring of the school-community context led to a strengthening of community ties, a sense of community cohesion through shared experiences. TAs reflected on increased mutual feelings of care and empathy; their role was seen as pivotal. TAs rose to the challenges of the situation and felt appreciated by the wider community as a result.

They spoke of a sense of transparency and connection that they hadn't experienced to such a degree before. However, due to the fluctuating nature of the context 'post pandemic', during the third focus group, participants' began to reflect on the changing relationship within the wider community as life returned to normal and communication with families had decreased.

8.2.1.2.2. Interpretation and links to research and theory

Whilst this study did not focus on the direct impact of the pandemic on pupils and community, findings in relation to participants' experiences working with pupils within a socio-economic disadvantaged community were in line with research that has highlighted the greater impact on disadvantaged pupils (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022). Research suggests that a clear economic divide across the UK was further highlighted during the course of the pandemic and TAs' role and experiences of working with pupils and the wider community varied accordingly (Moss et al., 2021). This often meant prioritising practical support less associated with traditional teaching to support communities more affected by 'poverty and hardship' (Moss et al., 2020, p6). For example, the SENCo at the setting in the current study, spent several days delivering Easter eggs across the community which had been donated by local companies. She noted that most of that week had been spent completing non-academic tasks. For many teaching staff, working closely with the community also provided a greater insight and understanding of the challenges families faced within the wider community (Dempsey & Burke, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020).

In the current study, anecdotal evidence provided by the SENCo during a feedback meeting with the researcher echoes findings within the literature highlighting the important role school played within the community, often providing a lifeline to isolated families within poorer socio-economic communities (Moss et al.,2020; 2021). Such communities often rely on schools as a source of support and feel lost and anxious as a result of school closures (Deeds & Pattillo, 2015; Witten et al., 2001). Further, shock events such as epidemics often exacerbate the economic situation and "further deepen existing learning inequalities in vulnerable households" (Conto et al., 2020, p7).

In the current study, staff were aware that rates of domestic violence and general levels of conflict throughout the community which increased exponentially during the lock down period, a finding also acknowledged in the literature (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020) . Research suggests that staff working within more disadvantaged communities were far more likely to be concerned about vulnerable pupils' safety who were not attending school (Dempsey & Burke, 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Flack et al., 2020). In the current

study, TAs were an important source of support for isolated families, and participants viewed this as an extension of their role for effectively supporting pupils, a finding echoed in current literature (Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020, 2021). The current study has highlighted the broad nature of the TA role in facilitating community links. TAs exercised a degree of autonomy whilst supporting families which provided them with a sense of achievement and value. This aligns with Seligman's PERMA model (2011) in which key elements such as *meaning* and the belief that what we do is appreciated and holds value contributes to our overall sense of wellbeing.

8.2.1.3. Main theme: Personal Growth and Role

8.2.1.3.1 Theme summary

In the first focus group, participants spoke of drawing upon their resilience and inner strength that they perhaps hadn't realised they had as well as being able to contain their own emotions during this time. With fewer pupils, TAs were afforded more time and adapting to a changing context allowed them the freedom to develop their skills further. It was evident in focus groups 1 and 2, that participants really enjoyed their jobs and cared for the pupils they looked after; giving them a sense of pride and job satisfaction, crucial elements that staff gained through many different aspects of their role. An increased participation in pupils' learning facilitated by TAs' inclusion in planning and input increased their sense of professional competence. This competence, together with a sense of inclusion, contributed to participants' feeling valued, feeling heard and an increased sense of autonomy.

8.2.1.3.2 Interpretation and links to research and theory

Research has identified that the resilience participants reflected on in the current study could be due to "a complex interaction of internal and external factors" (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022, p1). Indeed, the authors argue that both contextual factors such as personal and professional relationships and individual factors such as self-efficacy and a sense of professional purpose all contribute to an individual's resilience (p2). Further an individual's sense of *accomplishment*, feeling competent, a sense of pride and achievement contributes to overall emotional wellbeing as described in Seligman's PERMA model (2011).

Concern for participants' own safety and that of their families and loved ones were briefly discussed but participants appeared not to want to dwell on this (perhaps due to the 'positive' stance the researcher had wanted to focus on). However, participants spoke of coping with the challenging situation by switching off and putting others first, most specifically pupils and colleagues. This was a common altruistic characteristic for many teaching staff, as highlighted in the pandemic literature (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

Participants also spoke positively of a rapid development in their skills and attributed this to the opportunities provided by the enforced school closures. Opportunities such as having time to prepare for interventions resulting in being able to deliver high quality individual and small group learning as well as being able to communicate with pupils more effectively echoing the EEF's (2018) recommendations (see s.2.1, Literature Review). These findings are also in line with research that highlights how teaching staff across the UK rose to the challenges they faced (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Moss et al., 2020, 2021).

Importantly, a sense of overall job satisfaction was identified within the narratives of focus groups 1 and 2. Similarly to current literature, participants spoke of being proud of their achievements, being able to use their own initiative, having the autonomy in relation to the children's learning whilst being creative (Moss et al., 2021). Further, this engagement appeared to be a crucial element to keeping staff motivated, engaged with their role and further develop their self-efficacy (Higgins & Gulliford, 2014b) . Factors that have previously been documented as often being constraining factors for the TA role (Clarke & Visser, 2019b) were identified within the current study as aspects that contributed to participants' job satisfaction:

➤ Developing stronger relationships with staff and pupils; more one to one time with students (Burton & Goodman, 2011)
➤ feeling appreciated and supported
➤ feeling included in the children's' learning; planning and teaching and "positive collaboration" with teachers (Groom, 2006)
➤ having more autonomy to be creative and use their own initiative

8.2.1.4. Main theme: the Children

8.2.1.4.1 Theme summary

Findings from across the dataset (focus groups 1,2 and 3) suggested that TAs were mindful of the importance of supporting pupils' emotional wellbeing during this time and saw this as equally important as supporting their academic learning. A significantly reduced number of pupils during the lockdown period (1&2) provided the opportunity for TAs to really focus on individual pupils' learning, whilst getting to know them better and develop trusting relationships. Participants reflected on the successes experienced during the height of the pandemic and the legacy that these left. These included an increase in academic engagement for vulnerable, and somewhat disengaged, pupils stronger staff-pupil relationships and peer-to-peer relationships. Participants also spoke of a whole-school ethos of caring for others that had been embedded across the school during this time.

Participants reflected on the variable experiences of pupils during the lockdown period as many did not attend school. Gaps in pupil learning were becoming more evident by the final focus group which continued to impact pupil progression. Participants voiced their concern in relation to many pupils across the school, and how they had been impacted in different ways. For example, some younger pupils had missed out on early developmental experiences that, given the more disadvantaged community setting, school would have usually provided when parents/family were unable. These included the emersion in a language rich environment and a play-based curriculum to build on "foundational skills" (Conto et al., 2020, p5).

8.2.1.4.2. Interpretation and links to research and theory

Participants' earlier reflections during the pandemic had touched upon the importance of a whole-school approach which saw improved communication with staff, pupils and families positively impacting social and emotional wellbeing across the setting. The current study has highlighted the importance of "social connectedness" vital to supporting pupils' social and emotional wellbeing within the pandemic context and the importance of "trusted adults" (NICE, 2022, p24). The building of stronger staff-pupil relationships has been cited as a key

benefit of smaller group and individual teaching (Webster et al., 2013) and recommendations within recent pandemic literature, suggests there should be an equal focus on academic learning and pastoral support (Marchant et al., 2020; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021).

These opportunities particularly benefited vulnerable children who were able to attend school during the lockdown period who thrived during this time (Moss et al., 2020; Marchant et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Burke, Majella & Dempsey, 2020).

However, there is also evidence to suggest that for some pupils, being at home during the first lockdown, resulted in an increase in good mental health and wellbeing, as for some pupils, school prior to the pandemic, was a more problematic entity (Soneson et al., 2022). The current study also highlighted a less than positive picture for some of the more vulnerable pupils who were no longer in sight and were a great source of concern for staff. Similar concerns were echoed by teaching staff across the UK and beyond and included worries around child safety, food poverty and emotional wellbeing (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Pramling Sameulsson et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Further, research suggests that educators working in more disadvantaged communities were far more likely to have concerns that some children would lack parental support in relation to their learning and were "more than five times as likely to fear students [lacked] access to basic needs" (Flack et al., 2020, p4). Research had already emphasised a significant decline in vital skills, particularly for pupils with special educational needs early on in the pandemic (Conto et al., 2020; Marchant et al., 2020), and those pupils from economically deprived communities (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Moss et al., 2020). However, the current study also highlighted that this was just the tip of the iceberg and staff were continuing to see the effects of this in early 2022. A fact largely ignored by policy makers at this point, with pupils set to sit formal assessments despite disruptions in their education and the implications of this both in terms of pupils' loss of learning and emotional mental health and wellbeing (Conto et al., 2020).

An IT/online divide across the UK also became apparent, with children from poorer socio-economic communities being less likely to have access to the technology required to access online learning, which is something that participants touched upon, a finding also highlighted by research from within the UK and across the globe (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Flack et al., 2020). Further, evidence suggests that educators from such communities themselves were also more likely to need support in delivering online teaching (Burke & Dempsey, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Participants also spoke of the impact that such a loss of learning had on pupils. This was something they were trying to deal with at the time of the final focus group in February 2022 as things were slowly returning to 'normal'. A paucity in research at the current time suggests that the long-term impact and effect of this on pupils will not be known for quite some time. However, previous research on the effects of school closures suggests that these "can result in significant learning loss" (Conto et al., 2020, p7).

Participants in the current study voiced their concerns in relation to things returning to normal and spoke of advocating for pupils who were in the midst of testing, something the TAs felt was not appropriate at that time and was simply far too soon. These findings suggest that the positive experiences TAs spoke of about working during the lockdown period, had empowered them to voice their concerns at a time when, for example, Year 2 pupils were

sitting SATs. Further, with a move towards a post-pandemic normality, the current study highlights that with a return to 'business as usual' and a focus on academic achievement once again, both staff and pupil wellbeing appeared to become a secondary consideration. This was further emphasised by participants who reflected on their lack of quality, non-academic time spent with pupils.

8.2.1.5. Main theme: Impact on staff wellbeing

8.2.1.5.1. Theme summary

During the final focus group, it became evident that participants were grappling with an ever changing and challenging situation which was dominating their thoughts and experiences at that time. Staff and pupils were feeling the effects of the ongoing situation, which at that point, did not seem to be improving. Participants reflected on aspects that were largely beyond their control, which seemed in direct contrast to their experiences voiced during the previous focus groups. Discussion did not move onto the design aspect of the AI cycle. Given the challenging context, this was understandable and provided much to reflect on.

8.2.1.5.2. Interpretation and links to research and theory

Although not explicit, the participants in the current study, particularly in the final focus group voiced a sense of hopelessness due to the enormity of the situation. A study that examined the impact of the pandemic on staff mental health and wellbeing (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022) highlighted that senior leaders had been significantly concerned that once things returned to 'normal' and testing and inspections were reintroduced, positive aspects including a focus on a more "holistic approach" (p14) seen during the lockdown period, would be lost.

In the current study, a feedback meeting with the SENCo was held after the data collection was completed. She acknowledged that SLT were probably not aware of the level of pressure that TAs were under at that point which echoes the historical issue that TAs have often remained unheard (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014). Participants in the current study spoke of getting on with the job despite the difficulties and stress they were experiencing. An attestation perhaps to their resilience developed as a result of protective factors discussed previously as highlighted in Beltman et al.'s (2011) study of teacher resilience. Such protective factors strengthened during the lockdown period included the strong relationships they had developed with colleagues. These appeared to have empowered participants to speak up and advocate for the children. Moreover, the participants in the current study echoed sentiments expressed by staff in Maitland & Glazzard's (2022) study who "remained hopeful that given space and time, schools could harness learning from a time of crisis, leading to meaningful change" (p14). This aligns with the aims from the current study. The themes identified to form the basis for potential 'next steps' developed in collaboration with participants sought to ensure that lessons learned could be used to facilitate positive change in relation to the TA role moving forward within this setting.

8.3. 'Next steps'

As part of the member checking process, at the beginning of focus groups 2, 3 and a final meeting (held to check themes identified in focus group 3), participants were presented with draft thematic maps that captured main themes and sub-themes identified by the researcher from the previous focus group. This collaboration was an important part of the data collecting process, to ensure participants had been heard and their views accurately represented. The

final focus group, as part of the design and planning stage of the AI cycle, was intended to focus on co-producing next steps. The question participants were asked was:

'What small changes would make a difference to your role in relation to supporting pupils and the wider community?

However, as discussed previously (see chapter 8), the discussion did not move on in this direction with participants appearing to be "stuck" (Partridge, 2019, p2) within a context that felt overwhelming. Aspects of professional qualities and practice that participants had reflected on across the data set (during focus groups 1,2 and 3) in terms of positive qualities, experiences and successes were identified as areas that could potentially be impacted by the changing context. The researcher hoped that consideration of these aspects that had been endorsed by participants would form the basis for all stakeholders to co-construct 'next steps'.

To recap, aspects of positive qualities and practice endorsed by participants and presented to the SENCo to inform the 'next steps' were:

- ➢ **A continuing personal sense of responsibility**
- ➢ **Small group teaching and interventions**
- ➢ **Pupil advocates**
- ➢ **More time**
- ➢ **The importance of community links & relationships**
- ➢ **A sense of hope/reset**
- ➢ **Using initiative, adaptation & flexibility**

8.4. The SENCO's reflections on TAs' successes during the 'lockdown period'

Themes from all focus groups (see Appendices 6,7 and 8) were presented to the SENCo at the feedback meeting which culminated in the presentation of aspects to be considered for 'next steps'. This dissemination transformed into a collaborative dialogue during which the SENCo shared her thoughts and experiences in relation to the overall context. She expressed how the findings in this study had deepened her understanding of participants' experiences and the potential impact of the 'current' context. An overview of findings in relation to the SENCo's reflections is discussed below.

8.4.1. Relationships – staff and community

The SENCO highlighted that the pandemic had provided staff with opportunities to experience a diverse range of roles and work with unfamiliar staff across the setting that they wouldn't have ordinarily had. She felt that this had enabled staff to gain confidence and forge strong relationships with colleagues, creating a more united and cohesive team.

Relationships with parents and families in the community were extremely important to participants and the setting. The SENCo reflected on how families had grown in confidence through the support given by the TAs, both academically and emotionally. This increase in communication was seen as a positive element to have come out of the pandemic experience, a finding echoed in the pandemic literature (Marchant et al., 2020).

8.4.2. Emotional wellbeing

The ethos and support provided by the setting, colleagues and SLT had a significant impact on staff wellbeing. Not only was this support evident from participants' dialogue but it was also explicitly recognised by the SENCo who referred to the staff as "a brilliant, hardworking team". She acknowledged that it wasn't always easy to work at the setting but stated that their work ethic was "just amazing". The SENCo acknowledged that feeling appreciated and putting staff mental health and wellbeing first increased staff morale and gave them a sense of professional purpose.

According to participants, respect for all staff had been embedded across the school prior to the pandemic. However, they shared that this had increased greatly during the pandemic and had become more established as part of a whole-school ethos. This had given participants an increased sense of status and power. The SENCo had highlighted how the setting, as a whole, had invested in *all* their staff including non-teaching staff such as dinner ladies [lunchtime supervisors] providing an opportunity for all to feel part of the system. Creating and maintaining a nurturing school culture is considered essential in promoting 'the emotional well-being of the school community.' (Coleman, 2020, p69).

8.4.3. The context – January 2022

The SENCo, echoing the participants' discussion, also reflected on how things had changed since Christmas 2021 with the gradual relaxing of COVID-safety measures as prescribed by the government (DfE, 2020 updated February 2022). Further, the return of primary assessments e.g., SATS were due to commence in May of this year with year 2s already taking practice tests before the February half-term. The return of SATS testing in 2022 has been a contentious issue with many educators voicing their concerns (Martin, 2022). This was echoed by the staff in the current study, and it was highlighted that some of their children had lost almost two years of their learning, especially in relation to speech and language with staff attempting to bridge the gap in language acquisition. Further, many year 2s, were found to have very limited core skills. Both of these factors have been corroborated by current research that also highlights that this loss of learning was significantly higher in children from more disadvantaged communities (EEF, 2022). In the current study, the SENCo talked about how trying to do SATs with them didn't make sense, especially in relation to more formal teaching when what they really needed was a play-based curriculum to match their current levels.

The SENCo told me that it felt that things had slipped back to a pre-pandemic normality in relation to academic expectations. However, the situation felt more stressful than before the pandemic, particularly as there was so much to catch up on. She also acknowledged how the TAs were feeling incredible pressure and this was something she wanted to pass on to the SLT. Further, in response to feedback from the current study in relation to a significant reduction in small group teaching and interventions, she acknowledged that this was something that they should also change.

8.4.4. Summary

The SENCo welcomed the findings endorsed by the participants and disseminated by the researcher as it had been noticed by staff that TAs' morale had dropped in the previous term with an acknowledgment that everybody was feeling overwhelmed. She wanted to keep hold

of the positivity participants had expressed during focus groups 1 and 2 and spoke of completing another focus group with the participants to brainstorm ways forward and to "see what they could do to help". She wanted to initially focus on two specific aspects outlined in the findings including *flexibility* (e.g., to build on the confidence and sense of accomplishment participants experienced as a result of adapting their role – see chapter 6) and the *reintroduction of small group intervention*.

8.5. Personal reflections

As highlighted in chapter 1, the researcher reflected on her previous experience as a TA as an important element in her philosophical positioning within this research. Towards the end of the study, participants began reflecting on factors largely beyond their control, mainly at a more systemic and national level, which were contributing to a sense of hopelessness and feeling overwhelmed. The researcher also felt uncomfortable in trying to rigidly adhere to an AI cycle and perhaps, momentarily, shared their sense of hopelessness. The researcher had not only been a TA for many years but was also living through the pandemic herself and could identify with participants' experiences, sharing their sense of hopelessness and feelings of overwhelm. This presented some tension for the researcher who was able to both empathise and share these feelings to some degree whilst trying to remain objective and enable space for the TAs to have their own voice, free from her pre-conceptions and assumptions. Reflexivity (see below s. 8.7.1.4) is a crucial element of any research as it disregards "the idea that social research is separate from wider society and the individual researcher's biography" (Holmes, 2020, p3) and that "researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their work, aiming to understand their influence on and in the research process." (*ibid*, p3). Therefore, the tension between the researcher's positionality and how this could "affect the totality of the research process" (Holmes, 2020, p3) whilst trying to remain absent was a difficult element to grapple with. However, by being open and transparent about these experiences and positionality, the researcher attempted to demonstrate "empathetic neutrality" (Ormston et al., 2014 as cited in Holmes, 2020). It can be argued that these experiential experiences and social constructionist epistemology enabled the researcher to be more empathetic, listen more carefully and attempt to sensitively understand participants' experiences whilst sharing the journey with them as both an "insider and outsider" (Gair, 2012, p137). Further, one could argue that these elements and the collaborative, interactive process of data collection between the researcher and her participants (Mertens, 2010) contributed toward more ethical and valid conclusions.

8.6. Evaluation of rigour

Curtin & Fossey (2007) present important elements that ideally should be present in qualitative research to ensure it's trustworthiness. For the purposes of this study, four elements were considered. These included member checking, collaboration, transferability and reflexivity.

8.6.1.1. Member checking

The researcher incorporated member-checking or "participant validation" (Birt et al., 2016, p1802), a tool that seeks to validate the accuracy of the data with participants and seeks to find out 'whether the data is congruent with the participants' experiences' (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p92). Member checking by way of presenting participants with the researcher's thematically analysed themes and asking for feedback, was completed at each point of data

collection e.g., at the beginning of focus group 2 and 3 and at the beginning of the debriefing session to ensure the trustworthiness of the research (Creswell, 2009). Further, themes identified in the current study have also been found in extant literature suggesting a degree of validity and trustworthiness.

8.6.1.2 Collaboration

Initial themes identified by the researcher were captured and presented using thematic maps (see Appendices 6, 7 and 8). Participants appeared happy with these themes, and mainly feedback was given through affirmative speech and body language. The researcher felt that with each session, the participants grew in confidence and the research became more collaborative in nature as participants saw how their views and experiences had been heard and subsequently presented. However, the degree to which participants could be seen as equal collaborators was affected by the physical distancing between participants and researcher due to the online aspect of research, the time available and the challenging context which may have affected participants' interest in the research, particularly when experiencing a stressful time at work.

8.6.1.3. Transferability

Whilst the small-scale nature of the research can make no claims to be generalisable to other settings, an examination of the perspectives shared may provide an insight into the positive aspects of working in a challenging context and effective practice. Further, by presenting a detailed overview of the methodology and participants involved, there will be an element of transferability to other contexts that others may be able to replicate. The findings do correlate with staff experiences shared across the UK as reported in the literature, particularly within more disadvantaged communities. However, the school and its community may be more unique in terms of their high retention of staff and the team spirit and ethos staff were keen to highlight.

8.6.1.4. Reflexivity

As discussed in 8.6., it is crucial for anyone conducting research to try to be as reflexive as possible and acknowledge their influence on all aspects of the process (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The researcher was open and explicit about her previous experiences as a TA and acknowledged that she was "an active participant throughout the research process" (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p92). Further, the pandemic was an anxiety provoking time for all which the researcher felt provided a sense of commonality between participants and researcher. In hindsight, the researcher was inexperienced in conducting focus groups and the online nature of these made it very hard to build a rapport with the participants. The researcher may have tried too hard to compensate for this, talking more than was necessary, something mostly discouraged when facilitating the AI process (Drew & Wallis, 2014).

8.7. Evaluation of research aims and unique contribution to existing literature and practice

The current study endeavoured to highlight the positive aspects TAs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of AI, giving voice to a largely marginalised group (Mackenzie, 2011). Participants engaged with the questions and provided a rich and detailed picture of their experiences during the pandemic. Appreciative inquiry (AI) was chosen to reflect on positive aspects and successes that TAs experienced during the pandemic, aiming to celebrate strengths and achievements. As things began to move toward a pre-pandemic

normality, historical issues in relation to low status and being over worked (and perhaps underpaid) were beginning to emerge (Mackenzie, 2011; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to explore elements of successful practice and highlight the value of the TA role from the perspective of participants who supported vulnerable children and families within the wider community during one of the most challenging times in modern history. A unique opportunity that hopefully will never occur again. It has presented a snapshot of staff experiences situated within the context of a primary educational setting within a disadvantaged community and the extra challenges that this brought. Although, the 'aftermath' of the pandemic presented further challenges for staff in the current study, the data gleaned in relation to earlier affirmative experiences suggests that these helped better support TAs' resilience and ability to cope with new challenges. Themes identified from the data have highlighted fundamental aspects that contributed to and supported participants, both personally and professionally (relationships; community; role and wellbeing, the children).

The use of an AI approach contrasts with the existing pandemic literature which has largely focused on negative aspects of TA experience, largely through the use of large-scale questionnaires. The use of AI within the current study has also provided an example of how such a collaborative and supportive tool can be used to positively engage with TAs, both for educational psychologists working at a systemic level (Fox, 2009) and within the context of both peer and managerial supervision. Such an approach can provide "a safe and containing context in supervision. In addition to focusing on strengths and on what is going well for children and families, appreciative questions bring out the best in people, enabling them to be their best selves" (Partridge, 2019, p2).

Due to the small-scale nature of this study and the contextual background of the setting, the researcher can make little claim to the generalisability and applicability of the findings to other schools within the UK, and particularly beyond the context of a world-wide pandemic. However, it provided a small group of TAs, within a primary education setting, a platform to discuss their first-hand experiences of working during the pandemic. TAs had expressed that their participation gave them time and space to reflect on the positive elements experienced within their role.

Below follows potential implications for stakeholders in relation to what worked well during the pandemic and how these should continue to be an integral part of their role moving forward.

8.7.1. Implications for stakeholders

8.7.1.1. TAs

Participants demonstrated their passion and enjoyment for working with children and for them, job satisfaction and feeling appreciated was key. Elements of successful practice that TAs identified included:

➢ The opportunity to develop closer relationships with colleagues through working more collaboratively with teachers, promoting more autonomy and confidence.

- The opportunity to experience working within a variety of roles across the setting had given them a sense of empathy and appreciation for teaching colleagues. This further highlighted their flexibility and confidence in using their initiative.
- The importance and value of being consulted and included in planning and delivering pupil learning.
- Experiences of working more closely with individuals and smaller groups of pupils was seen as a crucial aspect of their role. Participants saw these as opportunities to support more vulnerable pupils both emotionally and academically, allowing TAs a more holistic view of pupil need.
  - Small group learning will continue to be crucial for many pupils following on from the pandemic in order to bridge the academic loss of learning. TAs should be an integral part of this learning model.
  - Having more time to spend with pupils in a non-academic context will also be crucial in supporting their social, emotional and mental health.
- The opportunity to promote and further develop close links with the wider community which are beneficial for both pupils and the setting.

In summary, the researcher argues that the current study has:
- highlighted the importance of inclusion of TAs in pupils' learning and feeling heard – important aspects that contribute to staff emotional wellbeing
- provided an opportunity to further understand and value TAs' contribution and help the education setting to realise this
- the potential to further develop the TA role given the appropriate support (as documented above)
- the importance of ownership of their role; promoting self-efficacy and staff resilience (Maitland & Glazzard, 2022; Higgins & Guildford, 2014a).

8.7.1.2. Managers/SLT

Findings presented in the current study may provide valuable insight into how managers and SLT can effectively support TAs, both emotionally and professionally; these were:

- Supervision using a strengths-based approach enables staff to reflect on what they do well and what they could do more of. The importance of ongoing and regular supervision, especially in relation to the current context.
- Feeling heard and being explicitly appreciated, contributes to staff emotional wellbeing, empowering them to voice concerns and advocate for pupils.
- Having the time to work closely with pupils is a key part of the TA role. Opportunities to share fun activities with a focus on life-skills was deemed as equally important as supporting academic learning.
- The importance of collaborative working relationships and their inclusion in planning and delivering teaching.
- To capitalise and support further TAs' links and relationships with the community.
- Due to close relationships with both pupils and their families, TAs are able to offer valuable insight into pupil strengths and vulnerabilities and should, therefore, be an integral part of the planning and decision making in relation to pupil support.
- Working more closely with individual pupils with SEND allows TAs to appreciate the small steps of progress that they often express their pride in when supporting pupils'

development. Opportunities to celebrate these would contribute to an increased sense of self-efficacy.

8.7.2. Implications for Educational Psychologists' (EP) practice

One key aspect of Educational Psychologists' practice is their knowledge of psychological theory and utilising "evidence-based strategies for change" (Cameron, 2006, p289). "Positive psychology addresses the study of positive aspects of experience with a view to improving the quality of individual and community life" (Cameron, 2006, p299). EPs' distinctive skill set, knowledge and application of psychology, the relationships they can build with staff, the community and wider agencies (Farrell et al., 2006) places them in a unique position to work at many different levels to affect change and support CYP's mental health and wellbeing through working closely with staff and families (Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2016).

The current study provides an example of how EPs can utilise AI, a positive strength-based approach (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011) to affect change at a more systemic level (Higgins & Gulliford, 2014b). The effects of the pandemic will have long lasting implications for both CYP and the adults that support them, both psychologically and socially (Shah et al., 2020; Flores & Swennen, 2020). The long-term psychological impact of loss of learning, isolation, illness and bereavement on children's' social and emotional mental health will potentially impact on EP work for a long time to come.

This research may provide a greater insight into the life of a TA as well as their capacities, which might otherwise have been overlooked or at least not fully appreciated, thereby informing EP practice when working with TAs to both support the CYP they work with and to further develop staff resilience and support emotional wellbeing (AEP, 2017) at both an individual and systemic level.

In summary, implications for EP practice include:
- An in-depth understanding of the TA role, awareness of the importance of that role and how EPs can work with TAs more effectively; a recognition of TA competence, their ability to work independently with pupils given their knowledge and skills and their passion and work ethic – what they bring to the role.
- Further understanding of how EPs can broker TAs involvement in conversations with SENCos and SLT.
- Thinking more systemically around how TAs are being deployed and supported. To promote their role and importance in the community.
- The important role that AI can play in staff supervision.

8.8. The role of power within the current research

Participants, when asked to consider potential next steps, seemed reticent which perhaps reflected the lack of power that TAs hold; a historical factor documented in the literature (e.g., Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014). This research took a bottom-up approach in the recognition that change can occur at different levels (Drew & Wallis, 2014). However, despite the current study's original aims to empower TAs in relation to directing their own role, the importance of the SENCo and the SLT in facilitating any change within the system cannot be underestimated. Moreover, the potential constraints placed on the system by the wider educational organisation e.g., the academy trust and the political context must also be

acknowledged as beyond the participants' control (McNiff, 2013). The SENCo spoke of a historical disunity between the staff who worked with and understood the community and the academy trust who ultimately dictated practice; an issue recognised nationally (Parliament UK, 2017). Further, the researcher's power to contribute and facilitate change was also constrained by the same factors affecting TAs e.g., systemic and political issues. However, McNiff (2013) argues that by documenting TAs' experiences and focusing on change from within the organisation, the researcher (an outsider) can "contribute to changing wider systems by focusing on a smaller piece within the system, as a participant" (p131).

In the current study, in order to minimise potential power inequalities between the researcher and participants, a collaborative approach was taken in which participants were involved throughout the study (Cresswell, 2014 as cited in Clarke, 2019, p9). A focus group format deemed "a valuable methodological tool in feminist research" (Clarke, 2019, p8), lends itself to this end by creating "a shift in the traditional hierarchical power relation between the researcher and the subject" (Kitzinger, 1994 and Wilkinson, 1998 cited in Clarke, 2019, p9) prioritising discussion between participants, with the researcher remaining on the periphery. Further, an AI methodology with its focus on collaborative change is a process that provides the space to complete the research with 'destiny' and 'delivering' (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom 2010), emphasising the importance of forward planning and implementing identified steps. Although, due to time constraints within the current study, the researcher was unable to complete the final step of the AI cycle, this will be something that will continue beyond the confines of this research.

8.9. Conclusion

Current COVID-19 pandemic research documenting UK teaching staff experiences has mainly used nationwide surveys, with a small proportion of TAs contributing to these. Further, research documenting first-hand experiences has focused on the lived experiences of teachers. The lack of TAs' direct voice within the literature has been addressed in the current study using a positive framework.

It seems clear that TAs in this setting performed many vital functions during the pandemic and were a key component in keeping their school open whilst supporting their colleagues, pupils and the wider community. Whilst the value of the TA role has been somewhat contentious in the past (Higgins & Gulliford, 2014a; Sharples et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2013), other research has recognised the positive impact on both pupils' social and emotional well-being and academic progression facilitated though individual and small group teaching (e.g., Goom, 2006; Groom & Rose, 2005). The pandemic provided a unique opportunity to further explore TAs' contribution and value within the educational system. Reflecting on their positive experiences and successes, participants spoke of the importance of relationships, community connections, feeling appreciated and supported within their role, the importance of inclusion and developing teaching partnerships in the children's learning, having more autonomy to be creative and developing their confidence in their skills to use their own initiative.

Further, it provided the opportunity for participants to reflect on their ideal role facilitated through different opportunities, expectations and demands that this unique time provided. Crucially, participants shared their journey of discovery and explicitly expressed what their role could look like in an 'ideal world', knowledge in relation to what they wanted to change

was gained via first-hand experience rather than imagining 'what could be'. These experiences appear to have given them a greater sense of agency and empowerment.

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Appendix One: Ethical Approval letter

The University Of Sheffield.

Approved: 11/10/2021

Katie Elizabeth Richardson Frankton
Registration number: XXXXXXXX
School of Education Programme: DEdCPsy

Dear Katie Elizabeth

PROJECT TITLE: Teaching Assistants' perspectives on supporting children in UK primary schools during worldwide pandemic - COVID-19

APPLICATION: Reference Number XXXXX

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 11/10/2021 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form XXXXX 4 (form submission date: 17/09/2021); (expected project end date: 20/07/2022).

Participant information sheet 1091835 version 5 (17/09/2021).
Participant information sheet 1092385 version 4 (17/09/2021).
Participant consent form 1091837 version 5 (17/09/2021).
If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely
XXXXXXX
Ethics Administrator School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:
- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:
  https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:
  https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements

Appendix Two: Participant Information Sheet

Teaching Assistants' perspectives on supporting children in a UK primary school during worldwide pandemic - COVID-19

Hello, my name is Kate Richardson-Frankton, I am Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Sheffield and currently on placement at the Psychological Service at xxxxxx Council. You are being invited to take part in a research project exploring the experiences of primary school Teaching Assistants (TAs) who have closely supported children both before and during the pandemic (from *March 2020 to the present).*

Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please feel free to ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Thank you for taking the time reading this.

What is the research about?

The aim of this research is to find out what it has been like for TAs whose role is to support children during such a challenging and unprecedented time. Historically, TAs have not always been consulted about their role or included in conversations in relation to the children and young people they work with, despite their expertise (McKenzie, 2011). Previously, issues relating to the role have included power inequality, unequal pay, gender issues and a lack of supervision and/or appropriate support despite working with the most challenging and vulnerable CYP (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Blatchford et al., 2009). Previous literature has mainly been set within a problem-saturated context in relation to the TA role (Groom and Rose, 2005; Burton and Goodman, 2011; Blatchford, et al., 2009) and these issues appear to have been further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marchant et al., 2020). Current research has indicated that teaching staff have shared similar experiences throughout the pandemic, many of which have been positive (Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020) and these will be further explored in this research.

This research will be adopting a positive, strengths-based approach known as Appreciative Inquiry (a participatory action approach) to explore TAs' positive experiences and reflections on successes and skill development during the pandemic. A further aspect of this approach will be to think about and plan collaboratively how to further develop the TA role and capitalise on their strengths and skills. Implications for Educational Psychologists (EP) and their practice moving forward will be considered with a view to promoting positive change and harnessing the value of TAs within a complex system.

Why have I been asked?

I have chosen to focus my research on primary TAs (NVQ levels 1-3 qualifications or similar) because of the amount of direct work they undertake with children and the lack of current research exploring the experiences of TAs during this time. Further, TAs may have more involvement in supporting children's academic and social and emotional mental health in the future as a result of children's experiences during the pandemic. I think this research will provide the opportunity for TAs to share their experiences which may be helpful in developing others' understanding and knowledge of how to further support them in their role e.g., teachers, SENCos and Educational Psychologists.

What will I have to do?

To gather the information about the experiences of TAs in their role of supporting children, I wish to carry out three semi-structured video interviews. Volunteers will participate in three video interviews following a sequential model of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) incorporating 4 stages (4-D cycle): Discover, Dream, Design and Delivery (Cooperrider, Barrett and Srivastva, 1995; Cooperrrider and Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008). An AI approach has the underlying premise that within every organisation something works and change can be facilitated through the identification of what works (Hammond, 1996, p3). It is hoped that through collaborative exploration of participants' high points, more general recommendations can be drawn together around how they can do more of what works moving forward.

The first focus group will incorporate the 'discover' stage. I would like to explore TAs' positive experiences during which they felt successful and had made a difference; the skills they used that helped; the successful strategies they used and to explore what they felt happened to make these memorable moments. This interview will then be transcribed, and the data interpreted using thematic analysis. Key themes and concepts will be presented to participants via email to ensure their experiences have been accurately captured. Individuals will then be invited to feedback their thoughts via telephone or email. A summary of these themes will be used to stimulate discussion during the second focus group which will incorporate the 'dream', 'design' and 'deliver' stages. During the 'dream' stage, participants will be encouraged to develop a vision of their ideal future by dreaming, visualising and imagining what this would look like. The 'design' stage will encourage participants to create ways of using what they have learnt from the previous stages within their role both in terms of working with children and in their interactions with colleagues. Participants will be encouraged to discuss short- and long-term goals as determined by them, whether these be for the TA role or for themselves. For the final 'deliver' stage, participants will be encouraged to form an action plan and agree a time frame in which these strategies will be implemented. A third and final focus group will involve a semi-structured discussion encouraging participants to share their experiences during the final 'deliver' stage. This session will subsequently be transcribed, and the data analysed using Thematic Analysis (see below). Again, these will be presented to participants who will be invited to feedback their thoughts in relation to the accuracy and validity of this.

Findings will then be disseminated via an online presentation (followed by a summarised report) to members of the senior management team within the setting. The researcher will also share findings with the Educational Psychologists at their host Educational Psychology service (EPS). Each focus group session is expected to take no more than two hours. The interviews will take place via Google Meet and will be recorded. This is to ensure that I can accurately capture what is being said. The video files will then be transcribed and analysed. All data will remain anonymous.

What will happen to the information I share?

Your consent form and the video recordings of these sessions will be saved onto the University File Store (X Drive). Transcription will take place within one week after each session and video recordings will be destroyed immediately upon completion of this. Data stored on the X Drive is encrypted and password protected. All information that is taken from you will be anonymised to maintain confidentiality. You will not be identifiable within the research. From the research findings, I will be creating a set of recommendations for Educational Psychologists to develop their understanding and knowledge working alongside SENCos and teachers in supporting TAs within their role moving forward. These recommendations will be shared in writing with yourselves and the Educational Psychologists at the Psychological Service in xxxxxx. The analyses from the interviews will be used as part of my doctoral thesis which will be published online at: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/. The contents of the Google Drive file will be deleted once my thesis has been approved and published.

What are the potential benefits and risks of taking part?

The benefits of taking part in this research include having the opportunity to share your experiences of what worked well during the pandemic to help others understand what you do and how you and other TAs in your role can be further supported. The risks of taking part are sharing experiences that may have been stressful or upsetting and could cause you to feel upset when talking about them.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and will be asked to sign a consent form) and you can withdraw at any point without giving a reason *prior* to data analysis. However, once the data has been anonymised and included within a larger dataset your data cannot be removed from the study beyond this point (November 2021). However, you can withdraw from any on-going or future data collection.

Please note that that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between participants and the University of Sheffield.'

What happens next?

If you would like to take part in this research, please contact me using the details listed below and I will email you a consent form to read. We can then arrange dates and times suitable for all participants for all sessions. I would like to complete the sessions sometime in November. Consent forms will be completed and signed prior to participation. Once we have completed the sessions, there will be no other expectations placed upon you.

Contact Information:	**My Research Supervisor:**
Kate Richardson-Frankton	XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Trainee Education Psychologist	School of Education
Telephone: xxxxxxxx	The University of Sheffield
Email: xxxxx@xxxxxxxxxxx	Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxxxxx

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

According to data protection legislation (applicable in the UK and EU from 25 May 2018) we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.' This means that we need to provide you with some further information relating to how your personal information will be used and managed within this research project. This is in addition to the details provided within the information sheet that has already been given to you.

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

In order to collect and use your personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is 'a task in the public interest'. Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

The University has developed a policy for safeguarding to aim to prevent harm in research and innovation and there is recognition that research activities can have an impact in the wider community and/or external individuals. The policy is designed not only to consider wider impacts of research, but also to ensure that there are clear procedures in place for reporting and escalation, placing those who have been potentially affected in a key role in guiding how incidents or concerns are resolved.

This policy is available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/safeguarding
Designated Safeguarding Contact is: xxxxxx@xxxxxxx

If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of the School of Education: xxxxxxxx, xxxx@xxxxxxxx and/or the University's Research Ethics & Integrity Manager (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx).

If you are dissatisfied with any other aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact xxxxxxx, xxxxxx@xxxxxx, in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Department of xxxxxx [Course Director], xxxxxx@xxxxxx. If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Teaching Assistants' perspectives on supporting children in a UK primary school during worldwide pandemic - COVID-19

Name of Researcher: Kate Richardson-Frankton

Participant Identification Number for this Project:

Please initial box:

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences up until the completion of data analysis (February 2022).
   In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular questions, I am free to decline. The person I can contact is Kate Richardson-Frankton on xxxxxxx or xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.

3. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.

4. I agree for the anonymised data collected from me to be used in future research.

5. I agree to be video recorded during the sessions. I understand these recordings will be anonymised, stored securely and destroyed once the research is completed.

6. I agree to take part in the research project.

_____   _____   _____
   Name of Participant   Date   Signature

 _____   _____   _____
   Lead Researcher   Date   Signature

Once this has been signed by all parties, the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form will be scanned and stored electronically in an encrypted and password protected file. The video/audio recordings of the interviews will also be stored in this file until the researcher has fully transcribed each session (within one week). The videos will then be destroyed.

Teaching Assistants' perspectives on supporting children in a UK primary school during worldwide pandemic - COVID-19

Hello, my name is Kate Richardson-Frankton, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the University of Sheffield and currently on placement at Psychological Service at xxxxxx Council. I am looking to recruit Teaching Assistants within a setting to take part in a research project exploring their experiences working closely with children both before and during the pandemic (from *March 2020 to the present).*

What is the research about?

The aim of this research is to find out what it has been like for TAs whose role is to support children during such a challenging and unprecedented time. Historically, TAs have not always been consulted about their role or included in conversations in relation to the children and young people they work with, despite their expertise (McKenzie, 2011). Previously, issues relating to the role have included power inequality, unequal pay, gender issues and a lack of supervision and/or appropriate support despite working with the most challenging and vulnerable CYP (Sharples, Webster and Blatchford, 2015; Blatchford et al., 2009). Previous literature has mainly been set within a problem-saturated context in relation to the TA role (Groom and Rose, 2005; Burton and Goodman, 2011; Blatchford, et al., 2009) and these issues appear to have been further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marchant et al., 2020). However, current research has indicated that teaching staff have shared similar experiences throughout the pandemic, many of which have been positive (Marchant et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020).

This research will be adopting a positive, strengths-based approach known as Appreciative Inquiry, a participatory action approach, to explore TAs' positive experiences and to encourage them to reflect on their successes and skill development during the pandemic. This aspect of the research aims to promote positive change. A further aspect of this approach will be to plan and implement steps to further develop their role, capitalising on their strengths and skills. Implications for Educational Psychologists (EP) and their practice moving forward will be considered with a view to promoting positive change and harnessing the value of TAs within a complex system.

Why have I been asked?

I have chosen to focus my research on primary TAs (NVQ levels 1-3 qualifications or similar) because of the amount of direct work they undertake with children and the lack of current research exploring the experiences of TAs during this time. Further, TAs may have more involvement in supporting children's academic and social and emotional mental health in the future as a result of children's experiences during the pandemic. I think this research will provide the opportunity for TAs to share their experiences which may be helpful in supporting other's understanding and knowledge of how to support them in their role e.g., teachers, SENCos and Educational Psychologists.

What will I have to do?

To gather the information about the experiences of TAs in their role of supporting children, I wish to carry out three semi-structured video interviews. Volunteers will participate in three video interviews following a sequential model of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) incorporating 4 stages (4-D cycle): Discover, Dream, Design and Delivery (Cooperrider, Barrett and Srivastva, 1995; Cooperrrider and Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008). An AI approach has the underlying premise that within every organisation something works and change can be facilitated through the

identification of what works (Hammond, 1996, p3). It is hoped that through collaborative exploration of participants' high points, more general recommendations can be drawn together around how they can do more of what works moving forward.

The first focus group will incorporate the 'discover' stage. I would like to explore TAs' positive experiences during which they felt successful and had made a difference; the skills they used that helped; the successful strategies they used and to explore what they felt happened to make these memorable moments. This interview will then be transcribed, and the data interpreted using thematic analysis. Key themes and concepts will be presented to participants via email to ensure their experiences have been accurately captured. Individuals will then be invited to feedback their thoughts via telephone or email. A summary of these themes will be used to stimulate discussion during the second focus group which will incorporate the 'dream' stage. During the 'dream' stage, participants will be encouraged to develop a vision of their ideal future by dreaming, visualising and imagining what this would look like. The third focus group will incorporate the 'design' stage during which participants will be encouraged to identify ways of using what they have learnt from the previous stages within their role both in terms of working with children and in their interactions with colleagues. Participants will be encouraged to discuss short- and long-term goals as determined by them, whether these be for the TA role or for themselves. These sessions will subsequently be transcribed, and the data analysed using Thematic Analysis (see below). Again, these will be presented to participants who will be invited to feedback their thoughts in relation to the accuracy and validity of this.

Findings will subsequently be discussed with the SENCo who may choose to disseminate these to the Senior Leader Team (SLT). The researcher will also share findings with the Educational Psychologists at their host Educational Psychology service (EPS). Each focus group session is expected to take no more than one hour. The interviews will take place via Google Meet and will be recorded. This is to ensure that I can accurately capture what is being said. The video files will then be transcribed and analysed. All data will remain anonymous.

What will happen to the information that is shared?

TA consent forms and the video recordings of these sessions will be saved onto the University File Store (X Drive). Transcription will take place within one week after each session and video recordings will be destroyed immediately upon completion of this. Data stored on the X Drive is encrypted and password protected.

All information that is taken will be anonymised to maintain confidentiality. Participants will not be identifiable within the research. From the research findings, I will be creating a set of recommendations for Educational Psychologists to develop their understanding and knowledge working alongside SENCos and teachers in supporting TAs within their role moving forward. These recommendations will be shared in writing with the school, participants and Educational Psychologists at the Psychological Service in xxxxxx. The analyses from the interviews will be used as part of my doctoral thesis which will be published online at: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/. The contents of the Google Drive file will be deleted once my thesis has been approved and published.

What are the potential benefits and risks of taking part?

The benefits of taking part in this research include providing the opportunity for TAs to share their experiences of what worked well during the pandemic; for them to reflect on these successes and develop an action plan to further develop their skill set and implement these moving forward. The setting will further benefit from providing staff time to share good practice and reflect on their skills

and qualities they have utilised to support children effectively; increase staff confidence in carrying out their support roles; improve staff communication; identify individual and team strengths and helping staff to value the strengths of others.

The risks of taking part for participants, are sharing experiences that may have been stressful or upsetting and could cause them to feel upset when talking about them. For the school, there may be financial implications due to the number of TAs required to take part simultaneously each session as cover may be required.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and will be asked to sign a consent form) and you can withdraw at any point without giving a reason *prior* to data analysis. However, once the data has been anonymised and included within a larger dataset your data cannot be removed from the study beyond this point (February 2022). However, you can withdraw from any on-going or future data collection.

Please note that that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between participants and the University of Sheffield.'

What happens next?

If you would like to take part in this research, please contact me using the details listed below and I will email you a consent form to read. We can then arrange dates and times suitable for all participants for all sessions. I would like to complete the first and second sessions sometime between December and January, and the final session sometime in January/February. Consent forms will be completed and signed prior to participation. Once we have completed the sessions, there will be no other expectations placed upon participants.

Contact Information:	**My Research Supervisor:**
Kate Richardson-Frankton	xxxxxxxxxxxx
Trainee Education Psychologist	School of Education
Telephone: xxxxxxxxxx	The University of Sheffield
Email: xxxxxx@xxxxxxxxxx	Email: xxxxx@xxxxxxxxxxx

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education. The University's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

Will the setting taking part in this project be kept confidential?

According to data protection legislation (applicable in the UK and EU from 25 May 2018) we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.' This means that we need to provide you with some further information relating to how your personal information will be used and managed within this research project. This is in addition to the details provided within the information sheet that has already been given to you.

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

In order to collect and use personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is 'a task in the public interest'. Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

The University has developed a policy for safeguarding to aim to prevent harm in research and innovation and there is recognition that research activities can have an impact in the wider community and/or external individuals. The policy is designed not only to consider wider impacts of research, but also to ensure that there are clear procedures in place for reporting and escalation, placing those who have been potentially affected in a key role in guiding how incidents or concerns are resolved.

This policy is available at: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/safeguarding
Designated Safeguarding Contact is: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of the School of Education: xxxxxxxxxx, xxxxx@xxxxxxxx and/or the University's Research Ethics & Integrity Manager (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx).

If you are dissatisfied with any other aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact xxxxxxxx xxxxxx@xxxxxxxxx, in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Department of xxxxxxxxx [Course Director], xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

Appendix Five: COVID-19 Pandemic Timeline:

A Chronology of the Pandemic March 2020 – January 2022 (BBC News, 2020; IfG, 2022; Finnis, 2022) & the Government's Plan A and B (Cabinet Office, 2021).

2020

March

16th: PM – 'now is the time for everyone to stop non-essential contact and travel'

19th: PM – the UK can 'turn tide of coronavirus' in 12 weeks

23rd: PM announces the **first lockdown** in the UK, ordering people to 'stay at home'.

25th: Coronavirus Act 2020 gets Royal Assent [legislation/emergency powers]

26th: Lockdown measures legally come into force

April

16th: **Lockdown extended** for 'at least' three weeks. Government sets out five tests that must be met before restrictions are eased.

30th: PM says 'we are past the peak' of the pandemic

May

10th: PM announces a conditional plan for lifting lockdown, and says that people who cannot work from home should return to the workplace but avoid public transport

June

1st: Phased re-opening of schools in the England

15th: Non-essential shops reopen in England.

23rd: PM says UK's 'national hibernation£ coming to an end – announces relating of restrictions and 2m social distancing rule.

29th: Matt Hancock (XXXX) announces that the UK's first local lockdown would be applied to Leicester and parts of Leicestershire.

July

4th: UK's first local lockdown comes into force in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire; more restrictions are eased in England, including reopening of pubs, restaurants, hairdressers.

18th: Local authorities in England gain additional powers to enforce social distancing [legislation/emergency powers]

August

3rd: Eat Out to Help Out scheme, offering a 50% discount on meals up to £10 per person, begins in the UK

14th: Lockdown restrictions eased further, including reopening indoor theatres, bowling alleys and soft play.

September:

14th: 'Rule of Six' – indoor and outdoor social gatherings above six banned in England.

22nd: PM announces new restrictions in England including a return to working from home and 10pm curfew for hospitality sector.

30th: PM says UK at a 'critical moment' in the crisis and would 'not hesitate' to impose further restrictions if needed.

October

14th: A new three-tier system of COVID-19 restrictions starts in England.

31st: PM announces a second lockdown in England to prevent a 'medical and moral disaster' for the NHS.

November

5th: **Second national lockdown** comes into force in England.

December

2nd: Second lockdown ends after four weeks and England returns to a stricter three-tier system of restrictions.

8th: Margaret Keenan, 90, first person in the world to receive the COVID-19 vaccine as part of a mass-vaccination programme after being given the Pfizer jab in Coventry

15th: PM says Christmas rules will still be relaxed but urges the public to keep celebrations 'short' and 'small'.

23rd: In England's tier four areas, people will only be allowed to celebrate Christmas with members of their own household and support bubbles. They will not be allowed to travel to other tiers to see family and friends.

2021

January

4th: PM says children should return to school after the Christmas break, but warns restrictions in England will get tougher.

5th: England enters a **third national lockdown**.

February

15th: Hotel quarantine for travellers arriving in England from 33 high-risk countries begins.

22nd: PM expected to publish a roadmap for lifting the lockdown.

March

8th: Planned return to school for primary and secondary school students in England.

29th: Outdoor gatherings of six people or two households allowed again.

April

12th: Non-essential retail and outdoor hospitality reopen under step two of roadmap.

May

17th: Step three of roadmap ups outdoor limits to 30 and brings back rule of six indoors. Pubs and restaurants reopen indoors and sports stadiums allowed 10,000 capacity. International travel reopens under traffic light system.

June

14th: Step four of the roadmap, planned for 21st of June, is delayed four weeks to allow more people to receive the vaccine, as Delta variant causes new spike in cases and becomes dominant strain.

July

19th: Most remaining restrictions lifted, including the reopening of nightclubs, as cases decline to a relatively flat level with vaccines taking affect.

September

14th: UK Government unveils its COVID winter plan.

16th: NHS starts administering booster vaccinations.

December

8th: PM announces move to Plan B measures as the Omicron variant begins to spread rapidly.

15th: Covid pass introduced in England, following Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland already adopting plan.

2022

January

4th: UK records 218,724 daily Covid-19 cases, the current record, though deaths and hospitalisations remain significantly lower than previous spikes, with scientists determining that the Omicron variant typically causes less serious illness than previous strains.

20th: In the UK there have been just over 15.5. million confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 152,000 deaths. Almost 91 per cent of the eligible population (people 12 and over have received their first dose of the vaccine, 83.5 per cent have had two jabs and just under two-thirds have received their booster.

27th: PM announces England will return to Plan A with Omicron cases falling. Plans unveiled to remove self-isolation requirement by the 22nd March at the latest.

Plan A: The Government's Autumn and Winter Plan 2021

- To help people stay safe by offering them vaccines and other treatments
- Asking people with COVID-19 to stay indoors, away from other people for 10 days
- To help the NHS and care services to manage the extra work
- Giving people advice on how to keep themselves safe
- To continue to encourage people to have the vaccine and boosters available throughout the winter
- Availability of COVID pass for those wishing to travel

- Encourage people to continue to take PCR and lateral flow tests
- Working to stop people from carrying COVID-19 in from other countries by:
  - Helping other countries to vaccinate their people
  - Having rules for people who are coming into the UK from other countries

Plan B: The Government's Autumn and Winter Plan 2021 (Gov.uk, December 2021).

- Face masks are compulsory in most public indoor venues other than hospitality
- NHS COVID pass to be mandatory in specific settings, using a negative test or full vaccination via the NHS COVID Pass
- Vaccines and testing promoted as best lines of defence
- People asked to work from home if they can

Appendix Six: Initial thematic maps presented to participants and SENCo – Focus group 1

Positive aspects & successes During the Pandemic

Community

Check -ins telephone & home

Providing time to listen

Provision of emotional Support

Trust

Importance of relationships

Concern for absent, vulnerable pupils & families

Connection

Feeling appreciated

Putting others first

Unprecedented situation

Community Cohesion

Care and Empathy

Strengthening community ties

Role elevation

Increased contact

Shared experiences

Showcased skills

Appreciation of TA role and impact

Flexibility & adaptation of role

Community's Increased understanding of TA role

Managing & organisation school and homework

Delivering homework packs

Families seeing first hand how their CYP learn

Personal Growth

Concern for others

Continuing to come to work

Self-belief

Resilience & Inner Strength

Switching off & putting others first

Rising to challenges

Juggling home life with work

Dealing with emotions

Learning curve

Feeling safe e.g., covid measures

Importance of staff wellbeing

Managing anxiety & coping

Grasping opportunities

IT and remote skills

Career Development

Development of Skills

Role Adaptation

Developing Confidence

Developing an understanding of others' roles

Appreciation of skills

Knowing it OK to rely on others for support

Learning quickly & gaining experience

Teamwork

Caring about pupils' emotional and academic engagement

Developing stronger relationships with wider school community

More autonomy

Feeling more involved

Developing stronger relationships with pupils and colleagues

Job Satisfaction

Demonstrating Initiative

Feeling part of the team

Pride in achievements

Love of learning

Privilege

Enjoyment – staff & pupil

Feeling appreciated

Opinions respected

The Children

Emotional Wellbeing

Growth in confidence

Having more time with them

Developing Stronger Relationships

Change in pupil perspective

Having fun

Being open and honest

Creating Memories

Helping the children to feel good about themselves

Staff as Role Models

Being strong for them

CYP proud of their achievements

Academic Engagement

Bubbles

1:1 & small group teaching

Experiencing successes [& pride]

Continuing to thrive [long term benefits]

Enjoyment

Learning Basic [life] Skills

Engaging in learning

Trust

The Relationships

Colleagues

Developing bonds/friendships that extend into personal life

Valuable resource

Emotional Support

Opportunities to work closely with colleagues across the setting

Peer supervision

Importance of staff wellbeing

Pupils

Positive impact on pupil learning

Development of strong relationships with pupils

Positive 'Parenting'

Caring for the children and wider community

Positive impact on pupils' social and emotional mental health

Wider School Community

Feeling valued

Being part of a team - 'a family'

Feeling heard

Feeling supported by teaching staff & SMT

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Reflections & change "post" pandemic

Relationships

Greater communication

Honesty

Closer teacher-TA relationships

Professional

Trust

Relaxed boundaries

Aid mental health and well being

Support system

Increased empathy

Personal

Being more open with others

Appreciation
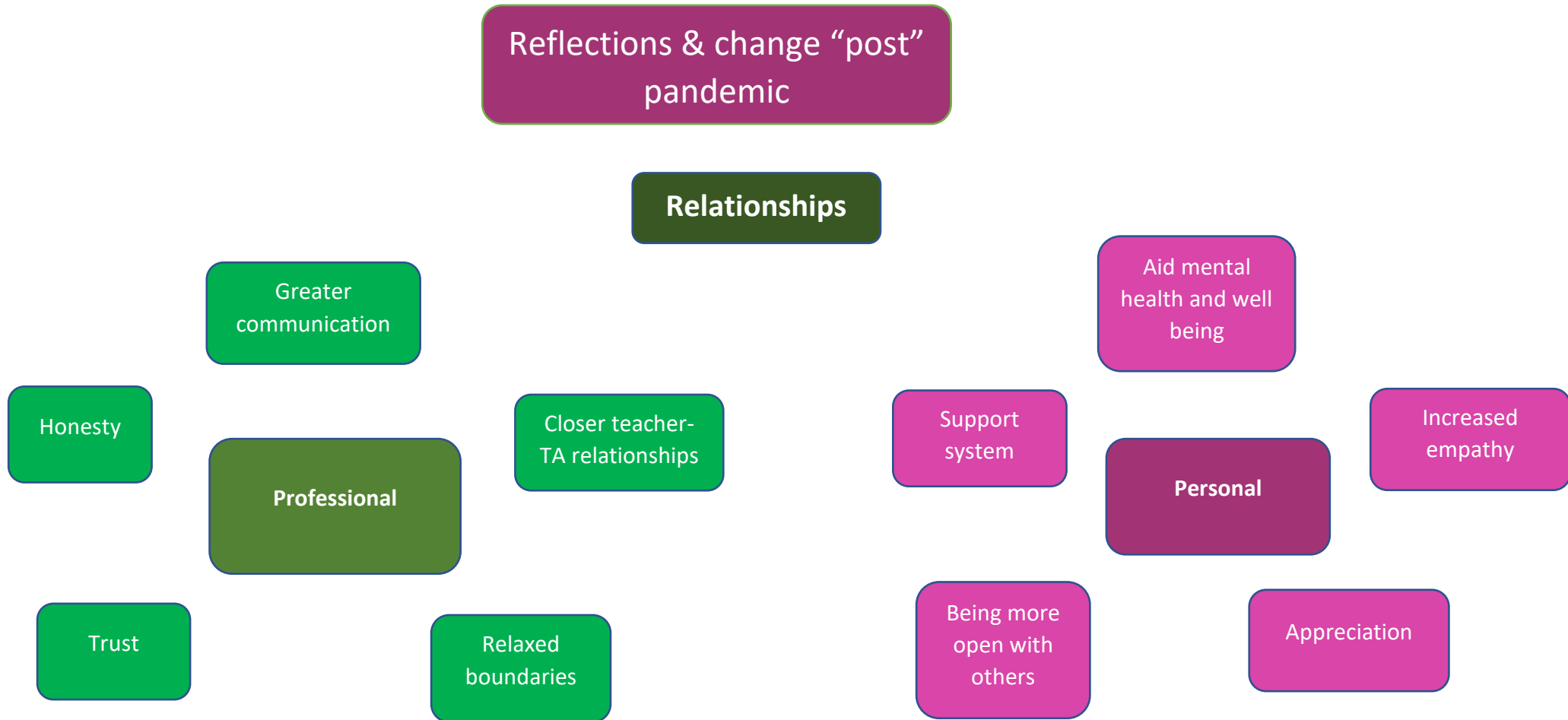
Reflections & change "post" pandemic

Inclusion

Role

Empowerment

Increased participation & being part of children's learning

TA voice/input in planning & implementing pupil learning

TA Voice: Feeling heard

Increased power/status 'respect'

Feeling Valued

Being part of team

Increased sense of competence

More autonomy

Job satisfaction

Staff creativity

Quality time

Care and compassion

Reflections & change "post" pandemic

The children

Learning

Moving forward

Less worried/complacency

Increased feelings of safety and security

Respecting boundaries

Increased awareness of personal hygiene

Growth in confidence

Importance of small group learning

Relationships

Strengthening of peer relationships

Caring for others embedded across setting

Whole school staff-pupil relationships

In an ideal world what would be different from the way things are now?

TIME

Pupils

Academic 'small group' teaching

Social and emotional 'Fun activities' (basic skills)

Potential impact on Wellbeing & role

Greater expectations for TA role

Workload has intensified

Impact on teaching and learning

Community

Increased contact with families

Greater connection & provision of support

Role valued by wider community

Appendix Eight: Initial thematic maps presented to participants and SENCo – Focus group 3

Current context

'COVID on our doorstep'

Lost learning

Unequal learning opportunities

No small group teaching or interventions

Staff & pupils COVID-related absences

Experiences

Pupils

Higher ability pupils missing out

Consequences

TAs -pupil advocates

Bridging Gaps

Pupils not ready for assessments

Impacting on Year 2s & older pupils 5/6

Pupils exhausted
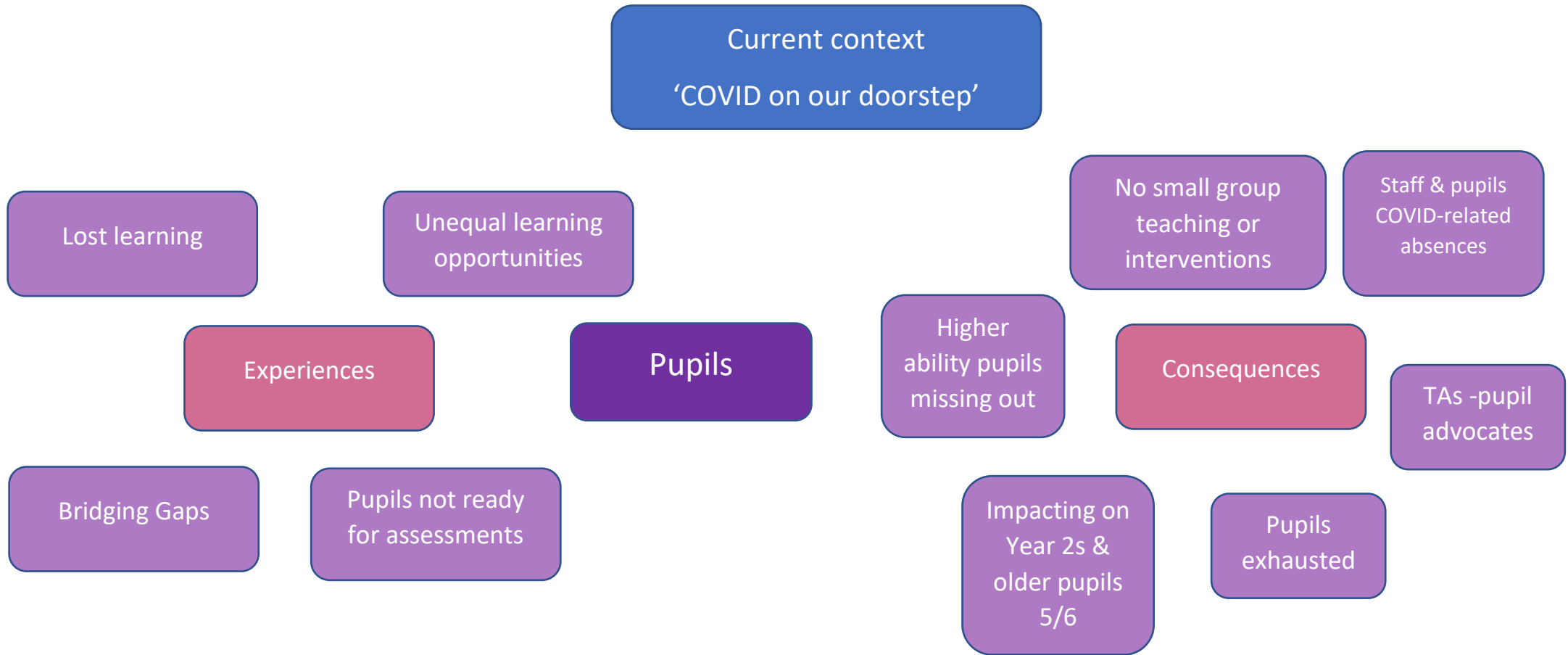
Current context

'COVID on our doorstep'

Impact on Staff Wellbeing

Staffing crisis

TAs covering colleagues

Constraints of education system

Rising to challenges

A challenging situation

Reduced confidence

Increased pressure

Factors beyond their control

Lack of time

Pupil absences

Uncertainty

Socio-economic impact

Current context

'COVID on our doorstep'

Community

Sense of loss

Reduced communication

Emotional factors

Relationships

Decrease in community links

Impact

Changing dialogue

Sense of separation

Feeling less valued

Role

What small changes would make a difference to your role in relation to supporting pupils and the wider community?

Current context

'COVID on our doorstep'

Continuing P/sense of responsibility

Adaptation & flexibility

Using initiative

Small group intervention

Moving forward 'next steps'

Sense of hope/reset

Pupil advocates

More time

Increased community links & relationships

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Teaching Assistant focus group interview schedule

Introductions and background: How long have you been a Teaching Assistant?

How long have you worked in your current setting?

Focus Group One:

Discover – the best of what is

Working during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Q1: What do you think have been the most positive and effective things you feel have made a difference whilst supporting pupils in your role during the ongoing pandemic?

What were the circumstances? What was your role in that? How did you feel?

Q2: What do you consider has been your biggest accomplishment/positive experience during this time?

What did you value about yourself; about the work that you do and about the team you work in.

Q3: What resources do you feel you drew upon that have supported you and your role?

So thinking about that what did you value about yourself, colleagues, community?

Prompts

➢ Can you say a little more about that?
➢ In what way?
➢ Can you give an example?

Session Two:

Discover

Recap from previous sessions and look at themes researcher has identified from this (member check) – are these accurate; is anything missing? [could use post it notes to add further themes].

Dream

In an ideal world, what aspects of these successful outcomes and experiences would you like to see continue moving forward?

What, if anything, would you do different?

Prompt: *If you could wave a magic wand and everything could be perfect/the ideal at work, within your role – what would it look like?*

Session 3:

Design

Recap on discussions and questions from previous sessions.

Depending on previous sessions and what has been identified in relation to how they have supported children during this time – a question should be posed to narrow down what they did and said to support them.

What small changes could be made to implement or further develop successful practice you experienced during COVID?

Appendix Ten: Exert - Transcript and coding: Focus group 1

	Focus Group 1: Transcript	Coding
	speaker 1:	
9	So, what do you think has been like the most or have been those positive and effective things you feel have made a difference erm…while supporting pupils in your role during the pandemic? It's quite a long question but you know what do you feel?	
	speaker 3:	
10	The relationships	Most positive/aspects that have made a difference are the relationships
	speaker 2:	
11	**Yeah, the relationships you was allowed to build with the children have been better, especially because erm…with only erm having smaller groups of children in originally as the pandemic started, you was allowed to build that relationship with a child better erm it was more like a one to one basis for the majority of the time.** And maybe…yeah more time	Opportunity to build better relationships with the children Opportunity to work with smaller groups as the pandemic started [which has led to better relationships] Opportunity to work 1:1 for majority of time
	speaker 3:	
12	**But also, with staff because we worked with a variety of staff across the school who we wouldn't usually have worked with but so closely like just building relationships across the school with staff and children.**	Opportunity to work closely with children and staff across the school Opportunity to build relationships with a variety of staff Different way of working
	speaker 1:	
13	Yeah, I think within the initial lockdown it was smaller wasn't it? smaller number of pupils	
	speaker 3:	
14	Yeah we had like we only had 17 like in the most…the most vulnerable children in the school…	Working with a small number of vulnerable children during lockdown
	speaker 4:	
15	**It was nice. They like came out of their shells a bit more and just having that more time with them smaller groups**	Opportunity for some children to grow in confidence due to more time in smaller groups
	speaker 5:	
16	**Especially for the quieter children**	Opportunity for some children e.g., the quieter ones to grow in confidence
	speaker 4:	

17	yeah for the quieter children yeah definitely it brought them out a little bit	Quieter children grew in confidence
	speaker 4:	
18	I 'spose I quite enjoyed doing those smaller groups to be honest	Enjoyed teaching smaller groups
	speaker 1:	
19	Tell me more about the relationships?	
	speaker 3:	
20	**At the beginning we were with…there was us and a class teacher and we would be in maybe two or three days a week [is that right? yeah yeah] at the beginning. So we'd be in in school and we'd be working maybe part time because we'd have the staff across the school who were allowed in, who weren't isolating. Or we'd rotate round and erm there'd be say it'd be maybe six or seven different bubbles which would have so many children in maybe up to 10 children in the in the bubbles and then two members of staff. So a class teacher and the TA will be working in in those given times but then you'd be on a rota so you …you and the class teacher who you were working with would always work together ….**so you'd be in but then maybe the next half term you'd swap around because you've had time to isolate away from everybody and then you'd swap around and work with somebody different that's right int it? That's what happened?	Reduced ratio of two staff to a maximum of ten children – Bubbles Working with class teacher for several days Work pattern changed due to staff absence due to self-isolating TAs working on a rota system 6/7 Bubbles (max of children) Working closely with teacher for periods of time TAs self isolation Rotate and work with a different teachers
	speaker 4:	
21	**Yeah, just the things we got to do as well because there was smaller groups. We was doing lots of baking and things like that.**	Opportunities created by working with smaller groups to do a variety of activities e.g., baking
	speaker 3:	
22	actual basic skills	Learning basic skills
	speaker 4:	
23	**Yeah, actual basic skills. I think they quite enjoyed it because obviously with everything going on, we had the work going on for home for the kids and the laptops for the children that wasn't in school. And then we had the work set for the children that was able but yes it's like we got to do a lot more activities and**	Learning basic skills Pupil's enjoyment Juggling tasks between work preparation for children at home and at school

		Opportunities created by working with smaller groups do a variety of activities
		TA enjoyment
		Pupil enjoyment
		Fun activities
	speaker 3:	
24	So yeah we did work…we worked two to a bubble really so two members of staff to one bubble	Reduced ratio of two staff to a maximum of ten children – Bubbles
	speaker 4:	
25	**And maybe sometimes in them bubbles, it might be kids that are in your…that was in your bubble that you didn't really… if you was in that classroom with them you wouldn't get to know kind of but because it was so small and you got to work more like…**	Bubbles Getting to know children that you wouldn't get the opportunity to work with/know before
	speaker 3:	
26	Go round each child and like got to know	
	speaker 4	
27	**…And got to know them that little bit better, work a bit closer with them I think.**	Working more with individual children and got to know better
	speaker 5:	
28	**Yeah, as a TA I felt like as a TA, I was a lot more involved when it was just two members of staff then [yeah] obviously when there are loads of you, you've jobs to do haven't you but when it's just two of you, I felt more involved as an adult.** [definitely yeah – all nod in agreement]	Within the TA role – became more involved Working closely with teacher for periods of time Felt more involved Job satisfaction
	Speaker 3:	
29	And certainly for you guys I think for like me who's worked here a long time I'm quite an experienced ta here who maybe on the outside over members of staff would ask us to do things and to support and things but for you guys who are new to like the school and you come in during COVID they've got to know what you can do as well in that sense I think so you've been able to prove that you can do everything we can do even though you haven't got the experience	More experienced TA [assertion of authority/time in role] Opportunity for less experienced TAs to demonstrate abilities Less experienced TAs able to prove their ability Have shown they can do anything more experienced TAs can do

	speaker 1	
30	Yeah, yeah what do you…how do you…how did you feel about that?	
	speaker 5	
31	Yeah, I think it was great to be honest I love learning anyway so it was a struggle because when I started it was like a month or two later that it shut down so it was really weird for me and I didn't really get a chance to experience being a ta before we hit a lockdown so for me just being involved and getting to do things that more experienced people were doing was a privilege really yeah definitely helped me a little bit further on [laughs]	Enjoyment Love of learning Less experienced/new TAs struggled initially Missed opportunities to learn role before Pandemic and subsequent lockdowns A privilege to be doing what more experienced TAs did due to new situation Benefited from the situation in relation to role development
	speaker 1:	
32	Yeah do you? what? So, do you feel your role was slightly different? You know, did you…did you do more things?	
	speaker 3	
33	I think at the beginning of when it first started it was it like end of 2019 or was it 2020 [it was 2020) so March so around the beginning that's when the bubbles were just two staff in. But as it progressed like, as the pandemic went on we got more children in and we had more time in school and things and erm. So like as a year group, so by the September we were in our year group bubbles weren't we? And I think that was when I hadn't ever covered before, so I hadn't covered classes on my own as the class teacher when absence like the staff were absent. But I think it was when the September came and we were in our year group bubbles and we had to step up almost. So I had to step up and cover that class if say erm the year two class teacher had to isolate I then took the class. So I got more experience in the cover role which then allowed me to become more confident and feel a little bit more understanding of	Reduced ratio of two staff to a maximum of ten children – Bubbles As pandemic progressed number of children increased Staff spending more time in school Staff absence/self-isolation changed role TAs stepping up to challenge and covering classes with little experience of doing this Gaining more experience and thereby increasing confidence Developing a clearer understanding of the teacher role and learning how to teach at the front of class - empathy

	everything like what a class teacher does. Like the data side, what's needed what's needed in books, what the children need to learn erm and just knowing how to teach them like at the front of the class. Like having that relationship as that class teacher role I've developed that just through having to go back and then that's led me to progress as a cover supervisor this year	Understanding the importance of having a relationship with the children within the class teacher role Progression of role
	Speaker 5:	
34	**Yes, for me it was more like a teacher said 'oh what do you think? Should we do this or should we do that?' [it] just made me feel more involved. Instead of just saying whatever go get on with it, it was like 'what do you think we should do this?' 'Shall we do that with the children?' It just made me feel more like part of it, yeah.**	Feeling more professionally involved Feeling listened to More autonomy Feeling part of the team
	Speaker 3:	
35	And your ideas as well putting your ideas down	Feeling listened to Appreciation of skills
	speaker 1	
36	Can you tell me more?	
	speaker 5:	
37	I'd like to say yeah - maybe a little bit more relaxed for them maybe?	Teaching staff becoming more relaxed with TAs?
	Speaker 2:	
38	**I think maybe to be fair as well, where we were concerned [yeah] was the bond we had with our colleagues, the teachers we were working with we've built up a really strong bond…**	Development of a strong bond between colleagues (teachers and TAs)
	Speaker 3:	
39	**and a really good friendship on that..**	Development of good friendships between colleagues (teachers and TAs)
	Speaker 2:	
40	**Yeah, because we relied on each other so to have that trust that maybe wouldn't have happened in normal times and it, it helps.**	Relying on colleagues Opportunities to build trust between colleagues
	Speaker 3:	
41	yeah in and outside of school so we've got that relationship now	Development of relationships in and out of school
	Speaker 4	

42	Usually, you have your go to people yeah you know you can go to so and so and so and so but then obviously because it got mixed up that you did get …	Opportunities to develop the relationships with different staff
	Speaker 2:	
43	But it was but …**if you were having a tough day so were the other people that you were with so you could each look at each other and know that yeah okay you're here so it's fine.**	Recognition of challenging situation Empathy for others – 'in same boat' Supporting each other
	Speaker 3:	
44	But then equally as TAs knowing we're all in the same boat we can all just discuss this with each other or we can get in touch and stuff even if we're not in that bubble together we could just contact each other if we needed a little bit of guidance or a bit of support in in any kind of area of the pandemic and in school	Recognition of challenging situation Empathy for others – 'in same boat' Importance of contact with each other Importance of communication Advice and guidance Supporting one another
	speaker 1	
45	Yeah, and was that different? Do you feel that's developed because of the circumstances?	
	speaker 3	
46	Yeah definitely	
	Speaker 5	
47	Yeah, I think especially a bit later on when we went to year groups erm I feel like as a year group we'd sort of really bonded as well and we knew, you know we're all there for each other. But like I said you could, you could if you were ever struggling or something you could just ask anybody. Yeah, I definitely think that come from…	Bonding with children and staff Supporting one another Struggling with situation Relationships expanding to wider circle of staff across the setting
	Speaker 2	
48	Maybe in normal times that wouldn't have happened, you'd have just done it yourself and think I'm having a rubbish day.	Recognition that support and quality of relationships may not have occurred prior Dealt with difficult days in isolation prior to pandemic
	Speaker 5:	
49	I think because we worked so closely with people at the time dint we? It was literally	Working so closely with people

	maybe you or two other people. You sort of relied on them to know how you were sort of feeling as well and you'd pick up how they were feeling.	Small ratio of staff TA/teacher Relying on each other Development of mutual relationship which provided emotional support
	Speaker 3:	
50	And especially if they were off for anything, you were genuinely worried and cared for them yeah	Concern for colleagues
	Speaker 3:	
51	**And the children as well like, we worried…I worried about them. About what they were doing or their families like yeah**	Concern for pupils absent from school Concern for pupils' families
	speaker 1	
	Could you tell me more about that?	
	Speaker 3:	
52	Yeah…**I think the community really got together. Like the amount of messages like on when the parents picked the children up who were in school saying thank you, like what they wouldn't usually do. It wouldn't just be picking the child up and take them home, it was a thank you for what you're doing and like we appreciate everything like, and they genuinely understood. And I felt like they genuinely cared that what we were doing was a massive impact.**	Brought the community together Feeling appreciated Feeling others understood what their role entailed Feeling that families understood what they were doing during the pandemic and the impact of this Feeling that parents/families cared and appreciated them
	speaker 4	
53	**Especially when they was getting all the home learning packs and things like that and that's when they realised how**	Feeling that families developed a better understanding of what TAs were doing
	Speaker 3	
54	**How much effort was going in to it.**	Feeling that families understood and appreciated their work during this time
	Speaker 5	
55	I think they were definitely a bit shocked at times weren't they [all laugh]	Families underestimated amount of work/effort TA role
	Speaker 4:	
56	**Yeah, it was nice, and I found that because some days obviously the children that wasn't in the class, we made phone calls**	Concern for absent pupils Connecting with the community

	home obviously doing the checks and then sometimes like some of the parents, they won't have seen or spoke to anybody because they wasn't going anywhere. Some of them might not have that much family, so then when we was ringing to do our checks. Some days they'd have a rant, a little wotnot, but that was fine because you felt you had that relationship them with ringing on a weekly basis with the parents. You felt like you were just communicating with them a bit more. I'd say they trust you a bit more [yeah]	Importance of communication Important aspect of role during pandemic Providing support to isolated parents/families Listening and being there for others Developing relationships within the community A sense of community cohesion and supporting one another
	Speaker 5	Developing trust with families and wider community
57	I really enjoyed that yeah	
	speaker 4	Enjoyment [in role]
58	**It would be a quick phone call or whatever, but you did spend a good 10-15 minutes on the phone with some of these parents that wanted to get owt off their chest. If they wanted to moan about the work or whatever that was fine because we…we are there for the parents as well as the kids, so it was nice to show our support for them in that way as well.**	
	speaker 3	Connecting and communication with families Providing support Listening and being there for both parents and pupils Showcasing their skills and empathy
59	**Yeah, more care and contact. Yeah, we would never have never got that [before].**	
	speaker 4	Developing relationships within the community
60	**Yeah, usually it's a pop on the playground at the end of the day if anything has happened it's one of them or at parents evening that's what the teacher usually deals with. So for us to be able to do that and actually speak to 'em**	Extension/adaptation of role Increase in contact with parents/families Communication and connection
	speaker 5	

61	Yeah, it was really good weren't it? Yeah.	Enjoyment Job satisfaction
	Speaker 4	
62	And then you sometimes get the children coming on the phone and they'd have a little chat as well	Communication and connection with absent pupils
	Speaker 3	
63	we used to listen to ours read over the phone yeah because we'd have you'd work with your class and I'd be and the class teachers would do it opposite times as well so we'd all listen to the full class read every…every week at least once or twice a week	Adaptation of role Utilising remote measures Communication and connection with absent pupils
	Speaker 2:	
64	**Not only that, it also allowed parents to see how we learn with the children so especially going through phonics or sounding words out when they're reading a parent you could hear 'em in the background with 'oh I didn't know you did it like that' but it was an opportunity for them to see you know how the child has progressed and how they can help them at home so that was nice, yeah.**	Opportunity to showcase skills Role transparency Opportunity for parents to see first-hand how their children are taught Enjoyment
	Speaker 3:	
65	**We used to do doorstep visits if we hadn't erm got in contact with certain children over maybe two or three days we'd go do erm…we'd take work packs home wouldn't we for them? We'd go knock on the door and we'd stand behind the fence and we'd just check in and we'd see if we could see the children, so we'd do our way around the estate**	Concern for absent pupils Communication and connection with absent pupils Communication and connection with the community Over and above job description
	speaker 1:	
	And was that for who you considered maybe more vulnerable or just in general?	
	speaker 3:	
66	Just in general. So it was later on weren't it? When the children who weren't in school and just in general if we had like… obviously part of our responsibilities was making sure that children were ok and throughout the	Concern for absent pupils Communication and connection with absent pupils

	pandemic as well and erm we just make sure we had or we'd listened to them on the phone our we'd seen them or…	
	speaker 4	
67	[inaudible] in class meetings and things they used be quite good they liked that yeah	Enjoyment Peer connection
	Speaker3:	
68	It was for every child like every child across the school	Concern/care for all pupils
	Speaker 4:	
69	And then they got to see each other as well on the screens cos they missed each other as well so it was hard for them	Peer connection Relationships Recognition of challenges faced by pupils Empathy
	speaker 1	
70	What do you consider has been your biggest accomplishment or positive experience during that time? And I know that's quite a long time isn't it? But anything that's stands out to you as your biggest accomplishment ?	
	speaker 2	
71	Oh man, that's a bit of a tricky one isn't it?	
	Speaker 5:	
72	Does it matter in what context sort of thing?	
	speaker 1:	
73	No, not at all. It could be for yourself and what you valued about yourself about your work about your team and your colleagues. Like an accomplishment that you feel really proud of?	
	speaker 3:	
74	I think the team like I think the staff and the way we all got on with it we've we all come together as staff	Coming together as a team
	speaker 4	
75	**Just to see the kids…just to see the kids. They're quite resilient kids, they just seem to get on with it don't they? But just to still some of them was still coming in school** and…	Empathy Resilience Enjoyment Care
	speaker 3	

76	**How hard they worked like, they worked so hard even though it was out of their routine. Out of everything that was going on in the world they still worked so hard.**	Empathy Focusing on others Admiration
	speaker 4	
77	We found it scary. We didn't know what to expect but just to see all the staff coming together and yeah, and the children and to just see them actually just getting on with it and I think that really	Scary The unknown Staff and pupil cohesion
	speaker 3:	
78	Because sometimes, day by day you don't actually think about the little things you know what actually make what are big things. All these little things added to this big thing and without each and every one of those erm all working together and enjoying each other's company and…and having a relationship with the children and the staff and knowing all of this…it wouldn't run would it? It wouldn't be what is it today would it and …	Importance of relationships with staff and pupils Part of a team Staff all playing their role Small things make a big difference Staff cohesion Reflection
	Speaker 5:	
79	They wouldn't enjoy coming in would they?	Enjoyment
	Speaker 3:	
80	So, knowing that we've all got that at the end of, well we're still going through it but towards the end of it, is a massive thing, I think. Yeah, and that's what I think. I'm proud of like everybody altogether.	Pride in role Proud of others Being part of something worthy Part of a team Staff cohesion Relationships
	Speaker 2:	
81	**I think it's as well, it's…it's being put in a situation that is unprecedented and the fact that you're…we're at this point and you've coped with juggling your home life. Whereas before, if you thought you was having a bad day…bad days now are a little bit different, and I think it's that inner strength that you've been able to build because you've juggled your home life. You've dealt with your kids and their own emotions and then come to school and dealt with the situation there that I think it's…it's the inner strength that you have that you maybe didn't realise you**	Unprecedented situation Coping Juggling roles Inner strength Perspective Dealing with emotions Putting others first Getting on with job Inner strength Challenging situation has brought out the best in people Relationships Communication Supporting one another

	have………personally it's like a big accomplishment as well you know because we've all been thrown into this situation and we all deal with it differently but yet just the fact that you've…you've been…I mean personally myself, I'm a really private person so I think for me to talk to somebody who I don't really know about 'do you know what, I'm having a bad day today' and…and I think that that has seen those changes in people as well as myself that's been something that maybe wouldn't have happened. Do you know that if it hadn't have been be a pandemic you'd just plod on but yeah…	
	speaker 1	
82	Yeah, when you say about the staff, is that whole staff as a team, as a school?	
	Speaker3:	
83	**Yeah, yeah, as a school. I mean you have the…the staff that you worked closely with and those bonds and those relationships and things that you can rely on. But I think as a…as a full on Team [setting name], well I think we're..we're really like…**	Team (school) identity/cohesion Pride Staff cohesion Bonds Relationships
	Speaker 5	
84	**Like a family aren't we [yeah yeah]**	Being part of a team 'Family'
	Speaker 2:	
85	**I think also we can recognise in each other now. Yeah, even with people that you wouldn't have worked with before because we've been thrown into this situation. Sometimes now you walk past somebody in the corridor and go 'oh are you okay?'. You know and you just know now that that look you maybe wouldn't have noticed before.**	thrown into this situation Opportunity to work closely with children and staff across the school Opportunity to build relationships with a variety of staff Empathy and care for others
	Speaker 3:	
86	and like people I feel like I work key stage one but people over in key stage two would maybe pop by and they'd check in even if its just outside the door you are you ok erm how's your day going on? Or are the children ok and I think that would never have happened before [no no] that does now.	Empathy and care for each other Deeper relationships with a variety of staff
	speaker 1	

87	Have there been any experiences that sort of stand out to you like you know any any particular incidences or things with individual pupils and that you think you know that what you're doing has really made that you know that difference?	
	speaker 5	
88	I've got one in particular. Erm I had a little boy who used to go to the ~~xxxx~~ all the time erm	
	Speaker 3:	
89	The ~~xxxx~~ is a …	
	Speaker 2:	
90	A nurture room	
	Speaker 5:	
91	Yeah yeah and **…during lockdown he was…he was coming in and we got some more time one to one and his confidence just grew massively. And because he was lower ability as well, he struggled with his writing and often he wouldn't really put much effort in. But after being that one to one a lot, now you should see him. He just…he tries at absolutely everything yeah and every time I see his work I'm shocked. I'm just like can't believe … he's done amazing and I do think that it's because he had more time one to one and he's in the classroom full time now as well. So, I think, yeah, I think it makes a massive difference. So, yeah for me that's erm like…like a proud thing…I'm really proud of that.**	Working more with individual children and got to know better Pupil growth in confidence 1:1 work Made a massive difference in pupil confidence and engagement with learning both short term (at the time) and long term (ongoing) Enjoyment (TA) Pride
	Speaker 3:	
92	**I think for those children who don't have the confidence to maybe talk to others or communicate the way they are, then they're a little bit more shy and things like that. I think there's still some children now that maybe walk by and go 'oh miss do you remember when we did this?' 'Do you remember when we did that in lockdown?' or 'we did that'. And I think for those children remembering those like memories almost, for them now like what happened and to be able to feel good about and feel chuffed that they've done that and excited to like share what they've done in such a**	Opportunity for some children to grow in confidence due to more time in smaller groups e.g., the quieter ones to grow in confidence due to more time in smaller groups Positive aspects Creating memories Reflection Pupils feeling good about themselves

		crazy time. **I think that's a massive confidence boost for them as well.**	Feeling of pride and excitement Sense of achievement despite challenging times Confidence boost
	Speaker 5:		
93		It's been like a positive experience for them instead of oh we had to go to school when everybody else didn't or something, they've got positive experience from that haven't they?	Positive experience for pupils TA sense of pride and achievement that for those children who had to attend school (vulnerable and those of key worker parents) didn't feel they missed out
	Speaker 3:		
94		I think there are lots of children across the school that are like that now	
	Speaker 2:		
95		I think to be fair I think when all the children came back their faces said it all on the playground {yeah] when they all came back and they saw their friends and it was such a lovely, lovely moment you know that like gosh everybody's still here they're all still there	Sense of pride and enjoyment in role Child-focussed Sense of community Emotions Peer relationships
	Speaker 3:		
	yeah		
	speaker 1		
96		Anybody else? Anything that stands out for you?	
	speaker 4:		
97		Well probably about the same **…one of the boys that was in our bubbles, generally in a big classroom with lots of other kids. He has always been up and down but then I found smaller group…more attention. He just seemed to calm; he seemed to settle. He actually even said 'Miss X I really like these smaller groups' and he did. He did seem to enjoy it when it was just four or five of them in the group and he seemed to settle more. You could engage with him more, he took more things on board he listened to yer.**	Smaller groups Increased attention More settled and calmer Pupil enjoyment Pupil engagement Strengthening pupil-staff relationships
	speaker 3:		
98		And even now they do that now	Difference in pupil confidence and engagement with learning both short term (at the time) and long term (ongoing)

	speaker 5	
99	**Yeah, that's great they carried that on and brought that back with them. So, it was more of an understanding and some of them are fine now in the classroom. It's it kinda taught 'em something really.**	Difference in pupil confidence and engagement with learning both short term (at the time) and long term (ongoing) A change in pupil perspective
	speaker 3:	
100	It's like a wow like learning moment for us really isn't it?	Pride in job Job satisfaction Enjoyment Team cohesion
	speaker 4:	
101	Yeah, like we were praising 'em, weren't we? You know, you can do this and so it's…it's nice to see that they've settled	Enjoyment Child focused Praise Job satisfaction Pupil resilience
	speaker 1	
102	And were they pupils that were getting one to one attention before?	
	speaker 4:	
103	They'd be challenging children, let's say. That maybe in the classroom, things could be too much, they was easily…easily wound up by certain things. And before and because obviously you've got lots more children in the classroom, you could sit and talk with them. But you wouldn't have that one-to-one time to spend with them like you did when we was…when we was in our bubbles so…	Challenging/disengaged children benefited from small groups and more 1:1 time Communication Bubbles
	speaker 5:	
104	I think from…from the one that I was saying as well, if he was working in a lower ability group with me say there might have been six or seven of them where during the lockdown there was maybe only two or three or maybe just himself at points. So I think more concentrated attention was better for him yeah does that make sense	Concentrated attention Beneficial for many pupils

	speaker 1	
105	Yeah, definitely and so what I think you've touched upon it really…but like what sort of resources did you feel you drew upon that supported you in your role? I guess you've said relationships are really important is that right?	
	All:	
106	Yeah, yeah massively	
	speaker 5	
107	Knowing you could rely on that person when you walked in was…	Relying on others for support
	Speaker 4:	
108	Of course, you need that support yourself sometimes, don't you? It's no good coming into work thinking you've got nobody there if you need. If you're having a down day yourself. So it's nice to be able to come in and know that there is gonna be people there for you and…	Knowing people are there for you Importance of emotional support Colleague relationships
	speaker 3	
109	And that people have different strengths haven't they? Like I think to know that you can go and say 'I'm struggling with this' erm 'you might know better or what…what do you think?' I think that's…that's like a resource wise as well like just in the day to day teaching as well that there's somebody there if you're struggling to go get advice from or they'd be quite happy to come and support that.	Different people have different strengths (skills) Feeling listened to Able to seek advice from a variety of people Being there for one another
	speaker 1	
110	You've mentioned that your roles changed…is that like, directly because of those skills that you were able to develop or showcase?	
	speaker 3	
111	Yeah, I think they contributed to it. **And then like, obviously some of these jobs came up so I applied for them. I was actually isolating myself, I had to interview [on zoom and things]. Yeah, I think it was all because of those skills, I don't think I would have maybe had the confidence to go for the job before the year that I covered for people, and I didn't have the confidence before but because of that I did and I went for the job**	Opportunity for showcasing skills Learning curve Growth in confidence Self-isolating Online methods Role progression

	and it was it was nice to…to know that I could do it.	
	Speaker 1:	
112	And is that the same for everyone?	
	Speaker 5:	
113	**I think its confidence is the biggest thing….., I do feel more confident in that I can maybe suggest something if somethings is not working for a child or…I just feel like I've got more like confidence to be like to join in without being asked…**	Growth in confidence Feeling listened to Feeling opinions matter Increase in self-belief in professional knowledge and skills Increase in autonomy
	Speaker 3:	
114	Yeah, your initiative almost	Using your initiative more
	Speaker 5:	
115	Yeah, I'm not so worried about ooh should I do this or should I do that should I ask somebody I feel like I can just do it and know that I've done alright yeah. Definitely confidence.	Increase in self-belief in professional knowledge and skills Increase in autonomy
	Speaker 1:	
116	Yeah. Anybody else?	
	Speaker 3:	
117	You've got…you teach different now don't you?	Development of professional skills
	Speaker 2:	
118	Yeah, erm I think…it's given me…**being able to allow others to see your own skills and build on your own skills** obviously with like A was saying that shes [inaudible] being cover support now and me being allowed to do PPA cover which erm has allowed me to be part of planning of lessons and you know looking at resources and where we get them from **so it's allowed me to improve as an individual really.**	Development of professional skills Feeling more part of the team Development as an individual [personal skills]
	Speaker 3:	
119	Your knowledge int it and understanding?	Development of knowledge and understanding
	Speaker 2:	
120	Yeah. I mean I love learning new things anyway but it's just being able to pass it on	Love of learning

	you know when normally you'd have the teacher at the front and you would be able to add in little bits but where now I'm allowed to you know give a little bit of my own input [laughs]. Yeah	Increase in autonomy Role development
	Speaker 1:	
121	I believe some of you may have notes?	
	Speaker 3:	
122	We've got positive impact I wrote about whole staff wellbeing to be able to **so we all got a whole staff wellbeing survey didn't we [yeah]? To be able to…to add any kind of worries about the pandemic or about how that's impacted us in our job erm and then we repeated that again a little bit later to see if anything's improved, which I think was a good thing.** It could be anonymous or not if we wanted it to be. So, I think that what I wrote.	Positive impact on staff wellbeing Having a voice Feeling heard
	Speaker 5:	
123	Yeah, it was just nice erm to be able to fill that out and know that you could just write whatever you wanted and that it didn't have to go anywhere to just to get something off your chest	Eliciting voice Being part of the school community Feeling heard
	Speaker 3:	
124	**And just valued, I wrote I felt more valued. I felt that people believe in us like we get 'thank yous'. We get all of that from maybe higher up and from the children and from the parents. I think I feel a lot more valued in the job role now.**	Feeling more valued Feeling appreciated and valued by many from senior staff, pupils and the wider community
	Speaker 1:	
	Yeah. And obviously we are still going through the pandemic, but do you feel that things have moved forward positively? Have you reflected on things you'd like to continue that you don't want to lose that you have built on?	
	Speaker 5:	
125	I think things are probably more planned now aren't they? So if something does go wrong then we've got a plan to put in place and it's not gonna be so much lost. It was a nightmare to start with really wasn't it?	Experiences have shaped current practice More planned

		Acknowledge of difficulties/challenges faced at the beginning
	Speaker 2:	
126	Yeah. but if something does kick in then we know we know what action plans in place now because you know we've been through it and [inaudible] kinda thing so we know what the next step would be if lets say if a bubble goes down or	Experiences have shaped current practice Action plans Bubbles Ongoing situation
	Speaker 3:	
127	Yeah we've all got risk assessments haven't we yeah?	Risk assessments in place
	Speaker 1:	
128	Ok. Are there any questions or comments you'd like to add?	
	Speaker 5:	
129	Erm, I don't think so…the only I've got is about the children again really I've just put erm that children that were easily overwhelmed in the class like what you were saying seem more at ease erm that's the only thing I've got on there that we haven't actually spoken about so yeah it wasn't all negative. There was a lot of negative weren't there in the media and	Positive impact for children easily overwhelmed Positive experiences Negative media portrayal
	Speaker 3:	
130	Yeah it was very much like fear weren't it? Everyone got a bit worried too much.	Fear at the beginning
	Speaker 4:	
131	Yeah, it was the unknown as well weren't it obviously just knowing what we were getting ourselves into kind of thing weren't it [Yeah].	The unknown Uncertainty
	Speaker 5:	
132	It was worrying, weren't it? But it's quite nice to discuss the positives 'cos we don't get asked for then do ya?	Acknowledgement of concerns at the beginning Nice to discuss the positives
	Speaker 1	
133	Recap: Yeah and like it's been so difficult hasn't it? Like at the very beginning there was so much uncertainty with schools not knowing what to do. So, it's been nice to see that there has been some positive experiences, What resources did you draw upon at this time?	

	Speaker 3:	
134	Yeah - I think erm It was a worry coming in because I live with my sister and my parents so I very much worried about what I would be taking home with me and things like or that but i think also we are very…*'the children. We think about the children; we care for the children like a really a lot. So, I think that when we're here, they're almost our first thought'.*	Concerns for loved ones Main focus was on children Care for pupils – put them first
	Speaker 2:	
135	Yeah, we switch off	Coping strategy Switching off – putting pupils first
	Speaker 3:	
136	**Yeah, we switch off from home to be able to be the positive role model for the children.**	Switching off – putting pupils first Coping Being a role model for pupils
	Speaker 5:	
137	**Yeah, I think like that we come to work…personally when I come to work its exciting because we're here for the children. So even though you might have your own problems at home, generally you come in, you walk through those doors don't ya? And you switch on to 'oh so and so's in the corridor' or you just seem to know everybody and just switch onto that…it's what you're here for.**	Excitement of job Being there for the children Switching off Pride in role Job satisfaction
	Speaker 3:	
138	**Yeah, we did have that fear of what was the unknown of the virus [inaudible] 'cos there'd be say 10 children, 10 different families and you would be worried about where they'd go to work and what they're doing and things like that and what they're bringing to us or… but I think the testing regularly and…**	Fear The unknown Concern for themselves Reassured by COVID measures put in place by setting e.g., regular testing
	Speaker 4:	
139	**And the mask wearing and all the constant washing the hands and even the kids…it's like it's just registered. They'd come in and they're straight to washing their hands.**	Concern for themselves Reassured by COVID measures put in place by setting e.g., mask wearing, washing hands Pupils compliantly followed these routines
	Speaker 5:	

140	Hand sanitiser	COVID measures e.g., hand sanitiser
	Speaker 4:	
141	Yeah, the sanitiser they're sanitiser mad they bring their own they've got their key chains, so I think for that to carry on I think that's a good thing. I mean we were having to wash anyway before that but sanitising workstations. They can be obsessed with it sometimes anyway can't they?[yeah]	Pupils fully engaged with measures Pupils continue to follow these Pupils making these part of everyday life
	Speaker 3:	
142	And it's the children that has brought that out isn't it? [yeah]	Pupils making these part of everyday life
	Speaker 2:	
143	Yeah they're more aware aren't they?	Increase in pupil awareness
	Speaker 4:	
144	**If they wanted to know anything they'd ask, and we'd have our Newsround. Our Newsround what we used to play and things like that so we could keep them up to date every week on what was going on. And I just think that if they were coming in and we was panicking then…So it was a matter for us keeping calm and communicating so everybody knew what's what and reassuring.**	Regular communication with pupils Being transparent Being positive role models Keeping calm and providing reassurance
	Speaker 3:	
145	**Yeah, and not shy away from the fact that of what the world is at the moment. It's all about [inaudbible].**	Being transparent and keeping communication open
	Speaker 5:	
146	Yeah and we all had each other didn't we? To reassure each other as well as the children so.	Being there for each other Importance of staff relationships Importance of staff supporting each other so they could effectively support the pupils
	Speaker 4:	
147	And a lot of our staff obviously the ones that did have to self-isolate for whatever reasons some of them who were shielding we didn't see for like nearly a year so not seeing some of them that was hard.	Staff absence due to self-isolation Staff absence due to shielding Emotionally hard for staff
	Speaker 3:	
148	We all did a video didn't we for children didn't we for the staff too while we were at	Enjoyment Over and above – putting others first

	home [yeah yeah [laughs]] we all did something like erm something silly or and one of our teachers put it together with like with music and it was just saying look we miss you all we love hearing from you and things like that and it was erm to almost like bring the community together and to just let them know we were all thinking of them and that we were all still there.	Care for pupils Keeping communication open Remaining connected Being there for others Community cohesion
	Speaker 1:	
149	Thank you for all your time, it much appreciated. Hope you all have a lovely Christmas and I look forward to seeing you all in the new year.	

Appendix Eleven: Exert -Transcript and coding: Focus group 2

	Focus Group 2: Transcript	Coding
	Only 3 participants as 1 was unable to connect at home	
	Speaker 1:	
1	I don't know if things have gone back to normal for you, everyone's at different stages aren't they at the moment? But those things you experienced and enjoyed that you know what would you like to see continue if you know say you had a magic wand and everything could be perfect within your role at work what would it look like?	
	Speaker 3:	
2	erm I do feel like it's probably moved on a little bit more now [yeah] especially with the children…I think it's…	Things have moved on; Things have moved on with pupils
	Speaker 2:	
3	**It's not as…as stricter regime I suppose as where we were with the constant hand washing throughout the day. There's still the awareness of hand sanitiser…hand sanitiser you know wash your hands but before it was such a strict regime of you need to go wash your hands now…you need to go and…so I think the relaxation of that has been better but then It's made children more aware of their own hygiene a little bit more hasn't it? [yeah] you know that em…**	Less strict regime; Development of pupil independence in relation to personal hygiene; Pupil hygiene awareness still there; Relaxation of rules seen as a positive
	Speaker 3:	
4	I think its not as talked about daily now [yeah] with the children	Pandemic no longer the focus for the children
	Speaker 2:	
5	**Because before you could see that worry in the children whereas now are a little more relaxed a little bit more. But I suppose that's complacency isn't it that? That it's been around for so long that its part of what the children are …so that fear factor isn't there so much now. So that's a good thing, isn't it? That…that fear isn't…because before for a child to say but what if…if I get covid…what…what if my mum…what..what if they get poorly and so now because it's been around for quite a while, you know there's a bit of complacency. So that it's not such that scary beast that it was you know before.**	Children less worried; Children feel a bit more comfortable; Complacency due to length of time it has continued; Fear factor gone; Positive aspect; No longer a scary beast; Learning to live with it
	Speaker 3:	

6	I'd like it to continue though… **I think like when we said about the relationships being quite a strong part in this school that I think that that's probably going to be there now. Yeah, that's there now.**	Continuing strong relationships; Embedded in school
	Speaker 2:	
7	**Yeah, and the way…the way you trust people as it…it kinda threw you into a place where you have to rely on each other, and you need that honesty and you need…you needed it each other.**	Trusting others; Pandemic led to staff relying on each other; Honesty; Needing each other;
	Speaker 3:	
8	Yeah so id like that to continue	Positive aspect like to continue
	Speaker 2:	
9	**Yeah, we appreciate each other more now really don't we?**	Appreciate each other more
	Speaker 3:	
10	Yeah, and like everybody…people across… like I work in key stage XX but I feel like people across the other side appreciate each other.	Support and appreciation of each other embedded across setting
	Speaker 2:	
11	**Yeah, you check in, don't you? You know sometimes before you…where somebody maybe just didn't look themselves, you'd think 'oh erm they're having a tough day' but now you're like 'are you okay?'. You know, you don't really feel they'd be offended if you…if you do say that now. So that's a nice thing that has come out of this you know to…**	Looking after each other; Closer relationships; Less worried about overstepping professional boundaries due to trust
	Speaker 3:	
12	**I think we embed that in the children as well. Don't we like? For their peers… as well for them to check on their peers you know. Or if they see somebody on their own, you know during the day ,you know just going to see if they're ok...So I'd like that to continue amongst everybody, the children and the staff**	Pupils have also built stronger relationships; School/staff ethos – looking out for each other
	Speaker 2:	
13	**To be fair, like you said for the children and adults its ok to say you're not ok that's and that's said a lot more often. And the children are a lot more aware now that if you're having a tough day, its ok to talk about it but if you don't want to talk about it just yet**	Stronger social and emotional support; Being more open with others; Continuing mental health and well being support through caring for others and relationships for others; Increased empathy; Respecting boundaries

		then that's ok too. You know we say it quite often, don't we?	
	Speaker 4:		
14		Yeah, I agree with all that…the relationships, I think we're all like bonded now aren't we? And erm and another thing I thinks continuing is the smaller work groups and erm that more from…I don't know about you guys but for me I've been working in smaller groups within [subject lesson] and stuff and I feel like it works a lot better. So, it's not just your same day interventions, its literally taking a smaller group and helping them understand what it is they're learning, and I think that'll just continue as well 'cos it…it works.	Stronger relationships Staff bonded; The continuation of smaller groups as positive aspect
	Speaker 3:		
15		Yeah, somethings come from that hasn't it yeah	Positive aspects emerging from pandemic
	Speaker 4:		
16		Yeah definitely	
	Speaker 3:		
17		We've had to do smaller groups in the last two years, so we've learnt that that works better overall. So, that's what's probably going to continue.	Smaller group teaching to continue as shown to work
	Speaker 1		
		That's interesting then that you've been able to do that with all the children returning as well so	
	Speaker 3:		
18		Yeah, like staffing it like, I've been they've like quite conscious and like aware and about staffing groups to be able to, like implement that into back to school reality as well, like so we ensure it gets done and that the children are carrying on improving all the progress in that sense is like more daily in it now? [Yeah].	Staffing levels adapted to fit new ways of working; Back to school reality; Pupil progress
	Speaker 1:		
19		That's good. Can you tell me more?	
	Speaker 3:		
20		I think…erm because they…they've been used to it as well. It really works. [Yeah, yeah] and because it's such a catch up as well, I think it's such a catch up for the children that had all of that time off school. It's been essential to get them to where they… up to what they've lost previously in their learning.	Small group learning essential for addressing gaps in learning – lost learning; Catching up

	Speaker 1:	
21	So you'd like to see those that continue?	
	Speaker 3:	
22	Yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	
23	Is there anything else that you, you know, you obviously that, that you identified that within your role, or that you could see? Or maybe that hasn't happened?	
	Speaker 2:	
24	I don't know really	
	Speaker 3:	
25	[inaudible] I was so good at like, thinking out the box	
	Speaker 2:	
26	**Yeah, thinking out the box, thinking on your feet… because there were…there were moments where I suppose as a TA, you wouldn't have had before. The teacher would have had it all prepared and they always had like a backup plan of oh, well, if this will do this, but then as a TA, you was allowed to be involved as to like, well, what if we do this? And it was like right, 'we'll go with that' and you was allowed that input that maybe you wouldn't have had to that extent before. Where now you find that the teachers are like, right, so we've got this come in what, you know, what do you think? You know Yeah, so I mean, that's been nice hasn't it?**	Continuing to feel listened to and part of decision making in relation to pupil learning; Reflections…Thinking out of the box; TA-teacher improved working relationship Drawing on TA expertise/experience Job satisfaction Feeling appreciated
	Speaker 3:	
27	**Like emails, like, we'll probably get emails more from the class teachers asking our input**	Direct email contact TA voice/input in planning/implementing children's learning
	Speaker 4:	
28	Yeah, I've notice that…definitely get more emails now.	
	Speaker 3:	
29	Yeah. And like, just, yeah, it's nice,	Appreciate increased participation; Role has positively changed as a result of the pandemic;
	Speaker 2:	
30	**You know, we're part of the learning and we're part of…of what the children are learning and it's, it's nice to have that input and… I mean, it don't always go to plan. But you know, if you put something in place,**	Being part of the children's learning; Increased input Seeking TA voice; Being heard; Being part of a team;

	especially if it's… because we quite enjoy creating things as does Cl. and to do something, and the kids enjoy it, and just the looks on their faces, and we think I was part of that.	Job satisfaction; Inclusion; Allowing staff creativity
	Speaker 3:	
31	The staff, so like the teacher would be like, 'god, I didn't think of something like that' or 'thank you' and they'll be like, the next time, it'll be like what we've come up with, like, Whoa, yeah, it's nice. Hopefully, that will continue. [Yes]	Working partnership – teacher-TA; Inclusion; TA Voice; Being part of the planning and implementation of children's learning; Job satisfaction; Enjoyment and pleasure
	Speaker 1:	
32	So what are the emails about? Just for ideas or …?	
	Speaker 2:	
33	Yeah…it's a bit of inclusion as well really, that we maybe wouldn't have been included in before. Even if it's erm….	Inclusion
	Speaker 3:	
34	It might be a plan of what they've already got in place, and they'll be like 'what can you add extra? or 'what do you think?' 'do you think this is okay?'. Or like, we had one from the class teacher the other day about XXX, and at, like, our XXX topic, and like, they was asking what kind of ideas. He'd had an idea like, what did we think about his idea and yeah, yeah, so that was a really… These emails, like, they send these out quite often, just to show us what their plan is, and whether we agree with it, or what else we can add to it.	Inclusion in planning; feeling listened to; Drawing on TA experience and expertise; Feeling valued; Input sought more
	Speaker 2:	
35	But even then, I suppose over the…the small groups as well, feeding back and adjusting and allowing your input to say, well, this didn't actually work with the group. But you know, how did your group go? You know, feeding back and, you know, adjusting as and when needed. So yeah.	Inclusion; Shaping lessons; Reflecting on sessions & opinions sought; Supportive; Being listened to
	Speaker 3:	
36	I guess communication more in it across the board. Right? Yes, it all helps with it all.	Improved communication across the setting; Feeling supported
	Speaker 2:	

37	**And I suppose as well, I think the bottom of all that is the feeling that you've been heard, you know that you've said something, and it's of value. So, there's that as well.**	Feeling heard; Feeling valued; TA voice; TA opinion matters
	Speaker 1:	
38	And do you feel that you can see the difference in the way you're doing your job and the way the pupils may be respond now?	
	Speaker 3:	
39	I think we're all on the same page now aren't we? So we all equally know we're all [yeah], we're all like, who they can go to not just the class teacher or not. Yeah. Yeah, they can go to each one of us. and we're all like and [C: we're all on the same page, yeah].	All teaching staff are respected equally; Respect embedded across the setting; Unity; All adults afforded the same value and respect; Overt message to pupils
	Speaker 1:	
40	That's good. And that how does that make like your role? You know, how does that make you feel when that?	
	Speaker 2:	
41	**I think it strengthens your role doesn't it [A: its easier as well init?]. Yeah, it's easier because when as a group of adults in a key stage or in a year group, yes, you know, that you can, you know, if one adult has said this, regardless of whether you're the TA or the teacher, it's no this…this is how things are, this is how this is how we're all respected in the same way. And I think that's been strengthened as well hasn't it throughout. That you know, when an adult speaks, that respect is needed, regardless whether it's a teacher or a TA, or, or even the lunchtime staff even and that's been reinforced quite a lot really through all this.**	Respect and value for all staff has strengthened TA role; Increased sense of competence; Made role easier; Increase in 'power'/status; Supporting wellbeing of staff; Respect embedded in school ethos/culture; Reinforcement of boundaries; All adults viewed as equal;
	Speaker 1:	
42	Is that something that you notice has been done? Has it just happened organically? Or is it something that like, you know, the school as a whole?	
	Speaker 2:	
43	It was there anyway wasn't it? It's just reinforced the way it is now	
	Speaker 3:	
44	Its more heavily noticed now, I think [C:] yeah. And like people are very much like they're quicker to like speak to the children, like, if some like say	Increased emphasis on respect for all adults in school as a direct result of pandemic experiences;

	their behaviour or lunch time staff would probably not approach a situation as much as what we would as teaching staff but now they do so now they're like, oh, no, I, I'm on the same page as that teacher and that teacher and like, they know how to approach certain children in certain ways, because of it being heavily implemented a bit more now, because of what's happened.		This respect has empowered some staff with less perceived power; All adults on the same page; Working together; Embedding respect; Inclusion; School culture and ethos;
	Speaker 4:		
45	**I think erm…with the lunchtime staff, I feel like they're communicating more with us now as well. Often, they'll come in and say, right, this has happened, and this is how it was sorted erm or whatever, there's been an issue with this, this child or this child. Where before you didn't always get that so you'd get the children coming in, telling you there was a problem and you don't know if had been solved or not so it used to take a lot of time up. But now that they're communicating, it feels like we're taking less time away from their learning to solve a problem that was at lunch time.**		Increased communication across setting; Supportive environment; Empowerment; Children's behaviour modified through sense of staff equality; Possible increase in children's feelings of safety and security; Increased sense of value and power; Feeling appreciated whatever the staff role; Increase in role productivity; More time to focus on children's learning; Less involvement with behaviour during time outside of learning
	Speaker 3:		
46	Yeah, like they solved it already so you can tell that was a solved at lunchtime so now it's school like you're in class now…		Containment – pupil issues tackled immediately by appropriate staff; Increased productivity
	Speaker 1:		
	So, there's been quite a trust built across the staff as well? [yeah]. Is there anything that you feel you would like to do more of, or within your role? That doesn't have to be anything major, but just as a result of what you've experienced? That hasn't that isn't necessarily there? Or could be there potentially?		
	Speaker 4:		
47	It's quite hard to think on the spot in it?		
	Speaker 1:		
48	I mean, you can always have a think for you know, our final group. It's just really like a recap. It's interesting to see things are happening and changing isn't it? All the rules are relaxed now, aren't they? And things are going back to like normal? So yeah. And obviously, you've spoken about the last two years before Christmas, and then coming back again, things are a bit different aren't they?		
	Speaker 3:		

49	What was that one, and I'll write it down so that I can go and have a think?	
	Speaker 1:	
50	So in an ideal world, what aspects of those successful experiences you know, those things that we talked about in our first session, would you like to see continue moving forward? And you've said, actually, there are, there are quite a lot of things that are continuing, and you've identified those. So if there's anything else, however small, it doesn't have to be, you know, a large thing. So just if there's anything in an ideal world, if you could wave a wand….it's difficult to think on the spot, I know.	
	Speaker 3:	
51	**I think like things like…erm interventions that we discussed before or like, I think we're getting a lot more put on us now because of what they've missed.**	Increase in TA workload to address gaps; Return to normal ways of working; Increased workload [potential to impact on staff wellbeing]
	Speaker 2:	
52	Yeah. So I think that's intensified…especially with the little uns as such	Workload has intensified; Increased pressure especially with younger children
	Speaker 3:	
53	**Like trying to get through what they're expecting now, in a day is a lot harder to what it's been…so that quite a bit of er….**	Greater expectations; Increased pressure
	Speaker 2:	
54	**So, the year 2s that we have now they've missed half of year one, half of foundation, reception age so a lot of the key life skills really and you know, like behaviour, little niggly bits there, they're not there. Because they weren't in school. [speaker 1: Yeah]. So, you know, and it's so the basic building blocks that they learn throughout school is what we're…we're picking up on now.**	Younger children have missed opportunities to learn basic life skills; Impacted on children's behaviour; TA role playing catch up; Children have missed out on basic building blocks due to prolonged absence from school
	Speaker 3:	
55	**But on top of what's expected already, but, you know, further, so that just we're expected to just do more [Yeah] like in little time. [Yeah].**	Potential to impact on staff wellbeing; Increased pressure and expectations; Not enough time
	Speaker 2:	
56	**To get them to where they need to be**	Children are behind their chronological developmental stage; Impact on teaching and learning
	Speaker 1:	

57	So maybe having a think, for next time about what, what could help that…its difficult at the moment I guess!	
	Speaker 2:	
58	**I think for some of the parents where they were concerned where some of the parents was like, couldn't do the learning, didn't want to do the learning. Different reasons for not continuing learning at home erm I know like with my own children, it was no, it's still a school day. Yes, you're at home, but and they did it and their schoolwork continued. But that was just the way I were. [Yeah]. But you know, for other parents that didn't maybe have access to the work and wanted to do it. So, the children have come back er whole different levels of… because of what they've missed, and what parents did or didn't do. And, you know, it's it, they just missed out on so much. So, like, we're seeing this in the children now that with, you know, we're having to put more in basic skills that are not there. Yeah.**	Children missed out on education due to some parents unable or unwilling to teach; Some parents unable to access work due to lack of technology [reflection on socio-economic status]; Variation in parental ability; Lack of parental responsibility for children's learning; Lack of boundaries at home; Massive educational and emotional gaps; Impact on children's learning; ;Impact on society in general]; Impact on TA role; Role shaped by children's experiences of school absence; Younger children more impacted in terms of learning life skills; Extra dimension that impacts on TA role and children's learning; Lacking in basic skills
	Speaker 1:	
59	And is that both academically and emotionally?	
	Speaker 3:	
60	Yeah. Yeah.	
	Speaker 3:	
61	**Because even to this day, like some of the parents don't, they don't have that at home. They don't have…they don't do anything outside of school.**	Lack of parental boundaries and guidance; Lack of parental responsibility/apathy in relation to children's wider learning; [perhaps a reflection on socio-economic status of area]; Children not exposed to new experiences and experiential learning
	Speaker 2:	
62	**No, because you know, I mean, some of the children don't leave the estate. So, we've, you know, to give them life experiences and their learning and everything else, you know, that they need. Its, it's hard when they've not getting the basics at home.**	Socio-economic impact on children's experiential learning; Parental apathy; Low priority for children's wider life experiences; Impact on children's learning and development; Lack of parental guidance and responsibility for their children's learning and development

	Speaker 3:	
63	Yeah, I mean, it's not all of them is it but it's a lot.	Impacted large number of children in the setting
	Speaker 2:	
64	**But that's something…your compassion and your heart goes out to them. So just, you know, if I can do this with them, it'll, you know, give them another experience, or give them a little bit of something else. You know to show that care and compassion, and they love the things around them even just, you know, making pictures out of clouds you know it that doesn't cost anything, but the children haven't done it. [Yeah], most of them haven't done it. You know…smelling, smelling flowers, or, you know, building a xxx in the grass, you know, those basic things like that…**	TA skills - compassion and empathy; Going above and beyond role remit to support impacted children; Teaching life skills; Spending quality time with children to do the fun things they may have missed out on or never experienced; Parenting the children; Improving the quality of children's experiences; Developing basic skills; Reflection on socio-economic status of population – children never experiencing simple pleasures
	Speaker 3:	
65	We did.	
	Speaker 2:	
66	**That we did… You know making backpacks out of bottles of lemonade and [laughs].**	Having fun with the children; Being creative; Addressing social and emotional gaps; Quality time; Recognition of the importance of play for social and emotional development
	Speaker 1:	
67	Do you still have those opportunities?	
	Speaker 3:	
68	**Yeah. I don't know if we have that. That's what I'm saying….we don't have the time to give them that now.**	Lack of time; Academic catch-up potentially impacting on addressing social and emotional development; Pressure to address academic skills over social and emotional delays; [potential impact on education as a whole across society];
	Speaker 1:	
69	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
70	**Where before you had a lot more time to put the fun element in and you know the enjoyment element where that's not always there now because there's the…**	Lack of time impacting on fun elements of learning [not to be underestimated]; social and emotional impact;

		[Implications for EPs in supporting schools – to emphasise importance of fun and incidental learning for social and emotional wellbeing for both children and staff: For children – will directly impact on their ability to learn and access their education - for TAs who appreciate and value quality time with children – the fun element and supporting children to grow emotionally has many benefits such as bonding with the children which will strengthen children's learning experiences; TA - increased sense of value and pride [re: focus group 1 discussion]; increased feelings of inclusion; increased sense of wellbeing and feeling supported; contributes to job satisfaction
	Speaker 3:	
71	**Bridging… trying to bridge that gap of learning**	Bridging the gap in children's learning
	Speaker 2:	
72	Yeah, the gaps…	
	Speaker 1:	
73	Yeah. So that…that issue is compounded now whereas maybe like before, you had maybe like a smaller number of children before the pandemic?	
	Speaker 2:	
74	Yeah, there's always been that pressure there anyway weren't there for the learning? But now it's even more so because you're fully aware that you're plugging these gaps you know	Returning to pre-pandemic ways of working but with added pressure; Plugging those gaps academically and socially and emotionally
	Speaker 1:	
75	Yeah. So that could be something that you could maybe think about the, like you said, the fun element and the basics, something that you would in an ideal world like to see continue? Could you expand?	
	Speaker 3:	
76	Yeah, because we had to check daily didn't we with the children?	Lost community contact; No daily check-ins
	Speaker 2:	
77	Yeah…yeah daily checks in with the children yeah, we'd do the phonics over the phone [laughs]	Reflecting on adapted role during lockdowns; Remote teaching
	Speaker 3:	
78	[inaudible]	
	Speaker 2:	

79	Yeah, posting workpacks after school at the end of the day, yeah. But then that was a way of seeing the children as well, which was that that was a nice thing, really. But then you'd knock on the door, drop the pack and stand at the other end of the garden 'Hi' [laughs]	During height of pandemic - Working within the wider community; Reflecting on what was - maintaining connections with children and families; Wider TA role
	Speaker 1:	
78	So, what about that that contact with community has that continued?	
	Speaker 3:	
79	No, I don't think so	
	Speaker 4:	
80	**That's what I was gonna say. I think that's maybe what hasn't continued as much now in because we're not phoning erm every day or knocking on the doors to drop off a pack. Yeah, I think that that communication's probably broke down a bit now. And that's probably something that needs to continue int it, I think?**	TA role reverted to pre pandemic within community; Loss of contact and connection; Potential area to develop – beneficial for both TAs, pupils and community
	Speaker 2:	
81	**Yeah, I mean, it was more so now that in the fact that if a child tests positive, where before we would have still rung that parent. [Yeah]. Whereas now you know, if there's a positive test come in that they're just left for, you know, 5,6, 7 days, or however long until they comeback. Where before we would have had that contact, you know, not necessarily given work or you know, asked to do work, but that had been that contact like 'hi, how are you doing?' 'how are you feeling today?'. You know, 'are you okay, have you been to see the sunshine today?'. Yeah. 'have you had some fresh air in the garden?'. And so that contact isn't there now. Which, which would have been nice.**	Community care and links declining despite dichotomy of things returning back to 'normality' despite increasing numbers of pupils (and staff) getting COVID; No longer supporting pupils and families at home isolating; pupils continue to self-isolate at home but now are 'hidden'; No check-ins; Lost connections and safety support system; TAs would like to build these back
	Speaker 3:	
82	**Yeah. So, like, and then now looking back and looking at that now, do the parents have the same level of respect that they show to us, like, because of what we were doing? Or do they… thinking about it, do they have that any more for us?**	Perception of respect of TA role declining in community;
	Speaker 2:	
83	Yeah. Because I mean, there was many times parents said, like, oh, my gosh, how do you do this How do you actually get them to sit, you know,	Reflection on how families relied on TA support for both emotional

	what, what do I do? You know, and but now that's and really we've got more children off now	support and support them in how to home educate their children; More pupils absent but no support or contact both emotional or academic.
	Speaker 3:	
84	than we did before.	
	Speaker 2:	
85	Throughout the pandemic yeah. **But that contact that we had is less, and now they're off. So really, it's…it's gone in the opposite direction to what it should have been.**	More pupils absent but no support or contact both emotional or academic; Concern for absent [vulnerable] pupils
	Speaker 1:	
86	Yeah. Then I guess the numbers have increased, like you said [Yeah]. So, they're there at home, like for five days, or whatever it is?	Numbers of pupils self-isolating due to covid has increased
	Speaker 2:	
87	Yeah, and where as if this would have been before, we would have had that contact? Yeah, you know, would have even maybe dropped off a little colouring pack for the children. And, you know, there are some little colouring sheets there for you and…	No longer supporting pupils and families at home isolating; pupils continue to self-isolate at home but now are 'hidden'; No check-ins; Lost connections and safety support system; TAs would like to build these back
	Speaker 3:	
88	But that's not the case now.	Return to pre-pandemic 'normality'
	Speaker 2:	
89	**Yeah. It doesn't happen that now. Where I think that's a sad thing.**	Disappointed that community ties and connections have reverted back
	Speaker 3:	
90	Yeah, the community int it really…	
	Speaker 2:	
91	I mean, the parents used to say didn't they… I mean, not all the children would come on the phone. But even when they got to talk to you on the phone, and they was like, oh, it's teacher [laughs]. And it'd may be lift 'em for that day you know for the hour or that moment Where obviously now the children are off testing positive that that doesn't happen. That that's not there, which is quite sad really.	Loss of contact and providing support for parents; Aspect of role TAs enjoyed; Sense of community and connection; 'Sad' – aspect to potentially to change
	Speaker 1:	
92	Yeah, I suppose like you said making the connection between home and school…	
	Speaker 3:	
93	Yeah, and even the parents they'd just sit and chat to you for about 45 minutes…about their life not just their kids….	
	Speaker 2:	

94	Yeah. They'd be happy to chat to you wouldn't they?	Reflecting on positive aspects of community support and connections especially for parents needing someone to talk to; therapeutic aspect of role; 'making a difference'
	Speaker 4:	
95	Yeah, some of them. I had a couple of phone calls where somebody maybe be struggling or something and just may be like, Oh, no, thank God you've rang or… just because they haven't spoke to another adult in in a couple of days or and all they've got is the children at home and they just wanted to speak to another adult. So a lot of the time, we would spend 5-10 minutes just talking to a parent about what they've been doing or, and erm yeah so you just don't have that communication as much now, erm obviously, if there's a problem in the playground, a parent will come up. But you don't have that.	Feeling appreciated; diverse role; provision of emotional support; therapeutic role; incidental communication between parents and TAs now declined
	Speaker 2:	
96	I think that's reverted back then really hasn't it now then. [Yeah. Yeah]. It's reverted back to like…pre-COVID I suppose really? [Yeah, it's just that contact on the playground now and you know.	Community links/communication no longer there; Reverted back to pre-covid times
	Speaker 3:	
97	Yeah and that's it you know…the class teachers still use seesaw and that side of things. Erm and Tapestry in the early years but we don't, [we don't] we don't have any kind of communication with them now apart from on the playground.	Some online working still continuing (teachers); decline in parental contact/connection
	Speaker 1:	
98	And that's something that you'd like to see, you know, as I said, in an ideal world?	
	Speaker 2:	
99	Yeah it would have been nice to continue with that.	[Reflecting on how these connections could be strengthened]
	Speaker 3:	
100	Yeah,	
	Speaker 1:	
	Yeah. And what about the quieter children? Have you seen? Have they…are they carrying on thriving as it were, from those early experiences? Or…	
	Speaker 3:	
101	No…you see I don't think they are…	Quieter children are not continuing to thrive
	Speaker 2:	

102	No, they've kind of gone back and blended into the background. [Yeah] that sounds awful to say that, but…	Blended into the background
	Speaker 3:	
103	**I think we're very more mindful, like each of us. Like we have like the [nurture provision] where we…they use like Elsa sessions and things like that but erm I don't think I think we're mindful to maybe say, Oh, this child possibly needs a couple of hours every so often like, and we do do that quite often now where we recommend or ask about if there's any intervention that can be put in place for these kids, but I don't think I think because of the way the day goes now…the intensity of the day now, I think they've just blended back into like what it used to be.**	Signposting children to nurture provision or other intervention more than before; Some children have gone back to how they were pre-pandemic
	Speaker 4:	
104	**There's erm, there is a couple of children that I'd say, academically, are still more confident, but socially and emotionally I feel like they've blended back into…into the background, really, they're getting on with the work a bit better than what there would have been before but I have seen quite a few of them just struggling to be back in that large social situation of the of the classroom and we have had a few children go back up to the** [nurture provision] **erm because of that situation, really. So, it is a shame but we can get 'em around again…definitely, with help from the xxx, I think…**I think we can we can help them come back with their confidence and erm but I think, obviously, at the minute, a few of them are going to the ~~nest~~. So it's like sort of reintegrating them back into the classroom again. Yeah, it's…	Some children continue to grow in confidence academically but not socially and emotionally; Pupils struggling to return to large social situations e.g., classroom; Some pupils have returned to the nurture provision
	Speaker 3:	
105	I think we can we can help them come back with their confidence and erm but I think, obviously, at the minute, a few of them are going to the xxx. So it's like sort of reintegrating them back into the classroom again. Yeah, it's…I still think there's more children that possibly need that that aren't accessing it though.	TA role –supporting reintegrating pupils from nurture provision into classroom More pupils needing nurture support but not accessing it
	Speaker 4:	
106	Yeah, I agree with that.	
	Speaker 3:	
107	Yeah, it's quite, it's hard in it now it's back to kind of trying to bridge the gap.	Bridging the gap
	Speaker 1:	

108	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
109	Because I think even children with behaviour, that it wasn't… because of the smaller groups how it was before, the behaviour didn't escalate the way it kind of does in a big room, doesn't it?	
	Speaker 4:	
110	**Yeah, I felt like they may be more focused when it was a smaller group when there was less children. And then obviously when you've got a full class, I find, I think, they maybe find it harder to contain themselves.**	Pupils finding it difficult to cope [contain themselves] back in larger classes
	Speaker 3:	
111	**Yeah, like as a as a teacher or as a member of staff in the room teaching the class erm you've got eyes on, if you've got 16 children, you've got eyes on them all haven't you? Properly like you can see it all more and what's going on more whereas if you've got a class for 28 to 30 children. It's a lot more difficult to kind of…**	Reflecting on benefits of small class sizes in relation to behaviour
	Speaker 2:	
112	**It's harder to pick up on those…those little signals that they give off just before they explode [laughs].**	Larger classes make it harder to spot behaviour before it escalates
	Speaker 3:	
113	Yeah, those triggers that could be maybe spotted before, but isn't now.	Larger classes make it harder to spot behaviour/trigger before it escalates
	Speaker 1:	
114	Yeah, well thank you for your time. The next session will focus on thinking about what small changes would make a difference to your role in relation to supporting pupils and the wider community.	

Appendix Twelve: Exert - Transcript and coding: Focus group 3

	Focus Group 3: Transcript	Coding
	Only 3 participants – one didn't participate	
	Speaker 1	
1	It's a lot to take in, but yeah, that that's what I've sort of taken from what you said, that things so other things have stayed the same, you know, the relationships. But these things obviously now that things are moving on. Yeah. So, the question is if these are the things that you feel that you would like in an ideal world to be different, what small changes and you don't necessarily have to implement those, but what small changes would make a difference to your role in relation to supporting pupils and the wider community. So, it could be something really, really small, but…	
	Speaker 2:	
2	**I think maybe in an ideal world if…because things have been so stressful just lately, I think in an ideal world if the children had been home learning all of them we, we wouldn't be kind of be in such as bigger mess as we are at the moment erm… Because there's the older children when they, you know, they were sitting GCSE's or…their home learning was more structured and they were more independent they, they went on and did their learning. Where the children we've got, some of them did absolutely nothing for months and months and I think these last couple of weeks especially, we've been struggling with…with those gaps. So in an ideal world, I think if our children had been doing home learning we'd be in a better place… not all of them cos obviously some of them did…You know the work sent home they did, the online work, they did the reading, they did the phonics but there was a massive majority of children that didn't do anything because they were [inaudible]..or the parents weren't sure what to do…**	Frustration; Reflection; Impact on wellbeing; Stressful situation; Impact of pandemic; Mess; Older pupils had more structured home learning; Pupils, TAs working with didn't do anything; Recently struggling with these gaps as a result; Ideal world – all pupils would have done home learning; Parents unsure of what to do; Socio-economic impact
	Speaker 1:	
3	And how that's really hard, isn't it? That's a massive thing, isn't it? To think about how that….	
	Speaker 2:	
4	And another thing because now there's the pressure to bridge those gaps and to get children where they need to be, where they should be and…	Pressure; Bridging gaps; Pupil focussed;

			Pupil Advocate; Getting children to where they should be
	Speaker 3:		
5	**And it's hard. It's really hard at the minute.**		Current situation very hard
	Speaker 2:		
6	**So hard. Yeah, because the children are feeling it and they know there's pressure there. I mean, just like doing SATS over the last couple of weeks and they're just not ready for that kind of thing because they've missed out on so, so much, you know, and some of them are you know age-related and where they should be. But there's a vast majority of children that did nothing for months and months, and I think we're feeling the effects at the moment of gosh, what are we going to do to get these children to where they need to be?**		Advocate for pupils; Empathy; Increased academic pressure on pupils; Pupils not ready; Missed education; Constrains of education system; Sense of hopelessness
	Speaker 3:		
7	**And I think in an ideal world, you'd have your TAs working with smaller groups more often, frequently throughout the day, to be able to work with individual groups of abilities to work on those gaps that they are missing. So in an ideal world, you would have your teacher with maybe your more able children and then your TAs throughout the day taking different interventions. But that's not the ideal world at the moment.**		TA construction of role [ideal world]; Importance of small group teaching to build on gaps; Delivering interventions throughout the day; Teacher – more able; TA – interventions with less able [DISS/previous research see lit review]; Current situation – not idea
	Speaker 2:		
8	**And I think the other impact is because we've had COVID on our doorstep since we've come back from Christmas, that pressure's been intensified because the children aren't there or the staffs not there. So rather than doing the role that you should be doing, which is the interventions and pushing these children forward, you know and encouraging them we're just filling gaps for…for staffing really.**		COVID on doorstep now; Exacerbated the situation; Staff and pupil absences; Staffing issues; Impacting on everyone; TAs being used to cover & fill gaps; Interventions and small group teaching not happening;
	Speaker 3:		
9	Yeah.		
	Speaker 2:		
10	It's…it's been a….		
	Speaker 4:		
11	**I think, uh I think 5, their suffering quite a bit at the minute aren't they 'cause obviously a lot of the staff from the upper school are going down to the lower school to try and bridge**		Year 5s impacted due to staffing crisis; Not receiving interventions;

	them gaps or trying to help bridge the gaps aren't they?	Staff redirected to lower school to bridge gaps; Concern for pupils;
	Speaker 3:	
12	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
13	**So ideally either more staff or just more time to have them interventions that they need.**	Need more staff; more time for interventions; Constrains/Impact of COVID;
	Speaker 1:	
14	Sounds like a massive thing, isn't it though? Because like you said, people are still off, aren't they? And.	
	Speaker 2:	
15	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
16	Yeah, yeah.	
	Speaker 3:	
17	**And that's the problem in it just staff covering staff and then those staff aren't getting replaced…**	Staffing crisis due to pandemic
	Speaker 2:	
18	**You've still got, you know, possibly a third of your class missing due to, you know, positive cases.**	Huge number of pupil COVID-related absence; Further impacting on learning; Lost learning
	Speaker 1:	
19	And what, what are the rules now? Are pupils still expected to stay off?	
	Speaker 3:	
20	Yeah, it's just six days int it?	
	Speaker 4:	
21	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
22	Yes.	
	Speaker 2:	
23	**You're allowed back once you get it, as long as you test negative from day five, you could come back. But that's still a week and you know, in a school term and its…**	Pupils missing a week due to COVID
	Speaker 1:	
24	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
25	**And instead of being the TA at the moment, you're…you're being the teacher or, you know, sent wherever to do whatever and you're not fully sure in what role they're asking you to do because you just need to be there...**	TAs covering teachers; uncertainty in role;

	Speaker 1:	
	Yeah, yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
26	**But that's that's…it's been really intense over the last few weeks; I think and that's affected us all hugely.**	Intense; Impact on wellbeing
	Speaker 1:	
27	OK. So yeah, I don't really know where…where you go from that. I guess that's that, that massive overall picture isn't there, but that sort of anything little that or small changes or small things that you could maybe…	
	Speaker 3:	
28	**I guess it's maybe as a TA, knowing if you're in that class in that moment just using your initiative to just say oh maybe I could do this today or I can maybe do this small group or what do you want me to do? Maybe that's the small step we all just need to keep doing…just while it rides out the staffing issue or?**	*Change – using initiative small steps during staffing crisis*
	Speaker 1:	
29	Can you tell me more?	
	Speaker 2:	
30	Yeah, I suppose knowing your role as well. And you know, having the confidence to go OK, right so if I go do this today and you know, fingers crossed we don't get sent anywhere [laughs]	Knowing your role; Confidence; Taking some control amidst uncertainty
	Speaker 4:	
31	**I was gonna say I've, I've… I found it real difficult the last couple weeks. But then I'm not always 100 percent sure what I'm supposed to be doing over there? It's knocked…it's knocked my confidence a little bit, I think just in at least when I was in one place I sort of knew what I needed to do when what group would go out to do their reading, for instance or whatever. But I think it's so unpredictable at the moment. It's hard to always think right 'I'm gonna do this' or 'maybe we should do that?' because you are just literally walking in and seeing where you are…erm** but I think when things settle back down hopefully that'll be definitely erm on the books to go back to doing right, I'll take this group out or I'll take that group out and that will help or at least I hope it well.	Difficult situation; Uncertainty about role; Continually changing due to ongoing situation; Knocked confidence; Unsure of what to do; Challenging situation;
	Speaker 1:	
32	Well, do you think that will be something that you could do is that, you know, an opportunity that you'd be able to do when things are….?	
	Speaker 4:	
33	Yeah, definitely. Especially with like during reading lessons or maths. **Just them little interventions**	Concern for pupils; Lost learning;

	that they're not getting at the minute [yeah] are the ones that they need to bridge the gaps [yeah].	Struggling to support most in need; Bridging the gaps
	Speaker 1:	
34	So that's not something that you'll…you'll have to sort of negotiate. That is something that will happen when things do settle down and you go back to what you know, the way that you felt worked well.	
	Speaker 4:	
35	Yeah, I think so, yeah. I think it's pretty much what we would have done I think erm, especially with your lower abilities, you always know which ones need more help, but if you're not there, you can't help them 'cause you're not there.	Lack of control over role; Helplessness;
	Speaker 1:	
35	No…and are you working across the whole school?	
	Speaker 4:	
36	**Well, I think we're all just everywhere at the minute, aren't we? [laughs]**	Lack of stability in role; Uncertainty
	Speaker 3:	
37	**We've all got, we've all got one place we're supposed to be, but every day we're just…we walk in we're given a different place.**	Uncertainty; Not knowing
	Speaker 4:	
38	Yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	
39	I guess it's not, It's not boring.	
	Speaker 4:	
40	Oh no, it keeps you on your toes [laughs]	
	Speaker 1:	
41	But yeah, you say about knocking your confidence. Is that because you're not used to being in like a certain year or way of working and things like that?	
	Speaker 4:	
42	Yeah, I think so. I'm used to being in the key stage two now. So, to go down to year one was a bit of a shock to the system [laughs]. They are absolutely lovely but they're a lot more fussy obviously than the older ones aren't they?	Having to adapt and be flexible; The unknown;
	Speaker 1:	
43	Ah right [laughs].	
	Speaker 4:	
44	No, you see I love the older, I love year six, year fives are great as well just erm **obviously, you go wherever you needed don't you but If you don't know what you're doing it's a little bit harder.**	Being flexible; Uncertainty; Unsure of role;
	Speaker 2:	
45	Yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	

46	Yeah, I guess so. But again, with these saying like you know, you got to know the staff better, I guess the teachers, they're feeling it as well, I would imagine?	
	Speaker 2:	
47	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
48	**Yeah, I think everyone's feeling it aren't they?**	Impact on wellbeing
	Speaker 1:	
	Yeah, yeah. So…	
	Speaker 3:	
49	**I think it's not just bridging the gaps for the…the lower ability. I think it's like actually being able to like push the higher ability as well…because they're probably just getting by at the moment as well, they're not just being given more either.**	Concern for higher ability pupils; Lack of control over pupil learning; Constraints of education system; Bridging the gap;
51	Speaker 1: Can you tell me more?	
	Speaker 2:	
52	**Which I suppose in a sense though that's potentially failing the higher ability ones with the focus, being on bridging the gaps with others the higher abilities are not being pushed as they were, or they have been before.**	Potentially failing higher ability pupils; Bridging the gaps for lower ability; Focus on lower ability to expense of higher ability
	Speaker 4:	
53	So, they've been left to their own devices aren't they, really like, you know that they're able to do erm whatever the work is, but they need that extra push don't they to push themselves.	Higher ability pupils left to their own devices
	Speaker 3:	
54	Yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	
55	Yeah. So what about in terms of or you probably not even thinking now about the wider community like you said that loss of contact and stuff, but when you're hopefully…if we get back to normal, is that something that you would like to change or you know like you appreciated it during COVID and they appreciated you. Is that something that you'd like to continue?	
	Speaker 2:	
56	**I think I think from my experience, especially on the last couple of months, it's it's…oh, well, maybe since Christmas it's feeling like we've gone back pre COVID.**	Community links declining; Lost communication
	Speaker 3:	
57	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
57	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	

59	Now we're having the conversations in the playground of well, you know, my little so and so has lost his cardigan and you're going to find it… where throughout when COVID started, those things weren't important you know…they were, so we are kind of creeping back into pre COVID kind of conversations that..	Community links reverting back to pre-COVID; Reflection on experiences during COVID
	Speaker 1:	
60	And would you like? Is that something you'd like to change, though going forward for your role?	
	Speaker 3:	
61	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
62	Yeah, it's, it's…your taking that value away of what we had of what…what was it you know, I don't know the words erm the the value of of what they were getting at school. **What the community, what we were to each other and how we supported each other [Yeah, yeah, yeah] you know even just a parent coming and going, you know, like, you know have a really good day and but the conversations seem to be going back to pre-COVID again.**	Sense of loss; Taking value away from community relationships that were created during COVID; Reflections on changing dialogue with families; Reverting back to pre-COVID communication
	Speaker 1:	
63	Erm - people getting back, so yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
64	**Yeah, you know, it's a, it's a shame really because like you say that that that contact we had with parents and those conversations was you know like 'have a good day won't you?', 'oh, you know little one was feeling off this morning, just [inaudible]' and you know, 'but make sure you have a good day too'. But we're like going back to pre-COVID like yeah, they've got a stuffy nose, there you go, see you later. Yeah. It's just I think it's starting to feel a little bit like that now, like we've come full circle.**	Sense of loss and regret; Loss of connection; Feeling less valued Come full circle
	Speaker 3:	
65	**Yeah, some parents are just rude as well these days, I think [all laugh]**	Breakdown in communication
	Speaker 2:	
66	Yeah.	
	Speaker 3:	
67	I'll just say it as is. They're just rude to you	
	Speaker 2:	
68	Yeah, I was being polite.	
	Speaker 1:	
69	Is that it? Are they parents that perhaps wouldn't be rude before, or you know?	
	Speaker 3:	

70	Yeah, I think whether it's because of them working now and they're back at work and they've got things going on or whether it's just because they've just thought right, we're back to normal, it's going away or whatever. I don't really know why it is. But yeah, I do think they're a bit more like cold with you.	Parents no longer need the support of TAs; Things have reverted back to pre-COVID 'normal'; Lost community connection
	Speaker 2:	
71	Yes.	
	Speaker 1:	
72	Are they?	
	Speaker 3:	
73	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
74	Yeah, yeah.	
	Speaker 3:	
75	I think we, I don't know. I think we like talk to them in a morning don't we I guess we go out in the morning and go out on an afternoon.	TAs trying to maintain continuity of role; Being seen; Loss of community connection
	Speaker 2:	
76	Yep. We still have that positivity like and that encouragement and that support we…we still offer that same presence, I don't… I think it's maybe not accepted in the same way as before because day to day life is back to how it was before.	TAs trying to maintain continuity of role; Being seen; Loss of community connection; Sense of rejection by community
	Speaker 3:	
77	Umm.	
	Speaker 4:	
78	I think…I think during the lockdown and stuff though I think the parents might have felt a little bit more helpless because they didn't know the work, or they didn't understand themselves what to do. So a phone call from one of us may have been a…a bit of a relief and they could be like, 'oh, I don't get what…what so and so's got to do' or where now they don't really have to worry about what work they're doing or and they're seeing adults on a daily basis and they're back to their normal lives aren't they? So, I think they don't need us, as much as well as we'd like to communicate with them, they don't need our help now.	Reflecting on parent's sense of helplessness during COVID; TAs provided support to wider community; No longer feeling needed or appreciated; Reverting back to pre-COVID 'normal'
	Speaker 1:	
79	Yeah. So it's a very difficult time, not an ideal time then to be thinking about…	
	Speaker 3:	
80	Well, in an ideal world none of this would have happened….[laughs]…Yeah.	In an ideal world…
	Speaker 2:	
81	Yes.	

	Speaker 1:	
82	Yeah, I guess maybe then it's just taking away those things that there were positive and that have carried on. And then hopefully like you're saying, once things go back to normal, it's trying to maintain those, isn't it?	
	Speaker 2:	
83	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
84	**Because you lose those links and because you know you're not phoning home and saying how are you? How's the little one, you know? And…and because you've lost that link, that's when you've gone back to being two separate like entities kind of thing whereas before you were one community you were in this together, you were pulling each other through it. Where once that link was broken because the kids came back into school, they were on the other side of the door again, they were on the playground, the other side of the fence you know and that was kind of the changing point.**	Lost/broken community links; Lack of communication; Reflections on sense of unity; Very separate now; Roles and relationships now back to pre-COVID 'normal' Changing point
	Speaker 1:	
85	Previously you mentioned having more time to connect…it sounds as if you may not have that?	
	Speaker 2:	
86	Yeah.	
	Speaker 3:	
87	No.	
	Speaker 3:	
88	**It really does all go back to time dunnit?**	Lack of time; Dominant discourse
	Speaker 4:	
89	**Yeah, we need more hours [laughs].**	
	Speaker 1:	
90	Yeah, you'll have to start coming in earlier [laughs]. Yeah, like that's what I was thinking that you know, these things that you identified that you like doing, like spending more time with the children and like, doing those things that you enjoy during COVID, like the fun things and creating and that. That helped the relationships and, you know, some quieter children you said thrived. So yeah, it boils down to that time, doesn't it?	
	Speaker 3:	
91	**I think that yeah, I think maybe that's like maybe to come that could be given in the timetable of the school days or the weeks they could be given time every class, every year group to enjoy maybe a few hours of doing their activities.**	Moving forward; Next steps; Making changes;
	Speaker 2:	
92	Yeah.	

	Speaker 3:	
93	Yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	
94	So that's something that maybe you could think about when you when you know things settle down. That you'd be happy, you know, interested in doing or being part of?	
	Speaker 3:	
95	Yeah, yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
96	**I think that has been apparent this week as well, especially like with the year 2 children because you know, they've been doing SATs Papers. Just, you know, just getting them ready you know that was the point of like both, myself and XXX we turned around and was like, look, these, these kids just they need some time out. You need to…and the teacher was like, oh, OK, we was like, no, genuinely they, they need…**	Pupil advocate; Concern for pupils; Constraints of education system; Potential impact on wellbeing of pupils
	Speaker 3:	
97	**A break.**	Pupil advocate
	Speaker 2:	
98	Yeah they need a break…	Pupil advocate
	Speaker 1:	
99	Yeah, I guess it's gone full circle, hasn't it, I guess.	
	Speaker 2:	
100	**Yeah. Yeah. And I think it was, it was this week that was like, no, come on now, the kids need a break.**	
	Speaker 3:	
102	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
103	I forgot the year 2s do SATS? Year 2s do SATS don't they?	Education system
	Speaker 2:	
104	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
105	That's crazy.	
	Speaker 2:	
106	We've been testing for a couple of weeks but getting them ready but	
	Speaker 3:	
107	This week's been the hardest week.	Impact on wellbeing
	Speaker 2:	
108	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
109	That's absolutely mental.	
	Speaker 3:	
110	And it's not even the proper test yet, it's just practice [all laugh]	Frustration in relation to education system;

	Speaker 1:	
111	So everyone, everyone on Monday will just…just be in bed wiped out [laughs]	
	Speaker 3:	
112	Yeah.	
	Speaker 2:	
113	Yeah sleeping this morning til seven was amazing [laughs]	
	Speaker 1:	
114	Oh dear. Yeah, it sounds really tricky. I guess it'll be the same across other schools as well wont it?	
	Speaker 3:	
115	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
115	It'll be all over wont it?	
	Speaker 3:	
116	Yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	
117	Yeah, Ok well, I don't really know…so apart from like saying it's a…it's an unprecedented situation, isn't it? So, you've been saying it's your time. It's just because it, like everybody across the school, is because of staff absence and pupil absences and that some things are dominating everything at the moment for you?	
	Speaker 2:	
118	Yeah.	
	Speaker 4:	
119	Yeah, at the minute it's absolutely, I think.	
	Speaker 3:	
120	When people aren't isolating, we'll be able to like, put things in place, I guess as a school more.	Looking to future; moving forward
	Speaker 2:	
121	**Because surely because of the way we've had COVID in the school since January. Surely, we must be like ok for a while and we could be able to go back after half term and like reset just you know thinking right so everybody's had it now let's just, you know, fingers crossed it it's…it's a way forward once we go back after having that.**	COVID in school; Feeling hopeful; Resilience; Reset; A way forward
	Speaker 1:	
122	OK. Yeah. Is there's anything else you wanted to add that I maybe missed out or didn't seem to cover? What you talked about and reflected on 'cause, I really want to get it right and make sure that everything that you said…	
	Speaker 3:	
123	Yeah, I think that that's everything mainly in it really.	

	Speaker 1:	
124	Does it feel weird to go back to what you were talking about before Christmas?	
	Speaker 2:	
125	Yeah. 'cause we was in a moment of positivity then [all laughs]	Moment of positivity; Back to 'reality'
	Speaker 1:	
126	But I guess that was, yeah.	
	Speaker 3:	
127	And now it's just…now it's just gone down a bit, the positivity.	Not so positive; Reflection; Potential impact on wellbeing
	Speaker 2:	
128	Yeah, quite a lot. Quite a lot.	
	Speaker 4:	
129	Look at my jumper [POSITIVITY] [all laugh]	
	Speaker 1:	
130	So I hear that you're all feeling the increased pressure?	
	Speaker 3:	
131	**I feel like the pressure is on everybody, because we probably feel equally the same as the teachers to try and get it all right now for the children.**	Increased pressure; Pressure across the setting; Getting it right for the children; Pupil advocates;
	Speaker 1:	
132	So, more responsibility?	
	Speaker 3:	
133	Yeah. So, like, even though we're not the class teachers, I think we're…we're expected to know, yeah.	
	Speaker 1:	
134	OK, so that's another pressure, I guess.	
	Speaker 3:	
135	Well, whether we are or not, that's just the way I personally feel [laughs].	Personal sense of responsibility; Added pressure
	Speaker 3:	
136	They might not expect, but I think they…they do, I think. Well, I…I think so.	
	Speaker 1:	
137	Thank you so much for coming today – I really appreciate you al being here at short notice, so thanks again.	