

What must it be like to teach? What young people believe about being a teacher.

‘Young People, Possible Teachers’

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Caroline Daly, Mark Hardman, Francesca McCarthy

Centre for Teachers and Teaching Research, IOE

Background

- Dominant discourses around a ‘crisis’ in teacher recruitment and retention.
- Solution-oriented focus on remedying teacher attrition and increasing the ‘attractiveness’ of teaching’.
- We know very little about young people’s constructions of teachers.
- Almost nothing is known about how young people’s constructions of teachers are influenced by ethnicities, gender and other differences such as class (Gorard et. al., 2021), as well as understandings of what teachers do and how they feel about their work.
- Leverhulme Trust support for theory-building projects, ‘innovative’, ‘original,’ seeking to understand/ illuminate topics that can advance social justice.

Developing theory to understand this

- The ideas young people have about teaching are likely to be complex.
- The research builds on the concept of ‘figured worlds’ - *simplified, often unconscious, taken-for-granted theories or stories about how the world works* (Gee, 2010; Urrieta, 2007), originating in Holland et. al.’s (1998) seminal work.
- ‘Figured worlds’ of teaching are the *implicit theories* that are held about teachers (MacLeod, 2023), informed by the artefacts, discourses and behaviours (Holland et. al., 1998) that are involved in teaching, which young people observe and make sense of over time, forming interpretations of what it is to ‘be a teacher’.
- We are exploring the social, cultural and contextual, as well as the individual, influences upon young people’s constructions of teachers and teaching and how these factors influence future career aspirations and trajectories (Archer et al., 2023).

Objectives

- **examine** how young people's experiences with, and observations of, teachers shape these figured worlds of teaching and their imagined (non)futures as teachers.
- **illustrate** the figured worlds of teachers that have emerged from young peoples' engagements with artefacts, discourses and behaviours that constitute 'teaching'.
- **investigate** how young people figure factors such as ethnicity, gender and class within the world of teaching.
- **develop theory** that advances the contribution of a 'figured worlds' conceptualisation of teaching, by explaining how young people conduct identity work in relation to teaching by the time they leave school.



We expect to be able to bring theoretical robustness to the importance of the 'image' of a teacher

Research questions

- What are the figured worlds of teachers and teaching according to young people in schools?
- How do young people's experiences with teachers in schools shape these figurings and how do young people perceive these figured worlds as commensurate with their adult futures?

Sample

- 41 students aged 17-18 + 2 pilot students
- Nine settings in sub-regions of England
- Representation of gender identities
- 50% overall students from minoritised ethnic groups
- Educational profiles consistent with gaining access to higher education on leaving school, in line with pathways to becoming a teacher
- Not selected due to an expressed interest or disinterest in teaching, nor according to planned progression to university or other career pathways
- Senior staff in settings support with recruiting sample

Sample 41 + 2 pilot participants

Region	Setting	Urban/ rural	Ofsted	SES/EAL/SEND	Wh British/ Total	M/F
East of England	Sixth form college	Mixed	Outstanding	N/A	1/5	3/2
East Midlands	School - Academy	Urban	Good	25.18% FSM; 35.6% EAL; 12.78% EHCP & SEND	4/5	4/1
London	School – Free / Academy	Urban	Outstanding Good (6 th form)	68.02 FSM; 51.9% EAL; 3.95% EHCP; 11.99% SEND	0/5	3/2
North East	School 13-18	Mixed/ Coastal	Outstanding	9.65% FSM; 4.4% EAL; 2.95% EHCP; 8.85 SEND	5/5	2/3
North West	Sixth form college	Urban	Outstanding	N/A	0/5	1/4
South East	Grammar school	Urban/ mixed	Outstanding	5.9% FSM; 48.6% EAL; 0.5% EHCP; 3.3% SEND	2/4	3/1
South West	FE	Rural/ Mixed/ Coastal	Good	N/A	3/4	2/2
West Midlands	FE	Urban	Good	N/A	1/3	0/3
Yorkshire & Humber	School - Academy	Urban	Outstanding	17.5% FSM; 4.9% EAL; 0.96% EHCP, 5.96 SEND	4/5	3/2
				TOTAL	19/41 (46%)	21/20

Methodology – two-part interviews (c.60 mins)

- Beginning with ‘moving’ interviews – student as knowledgeable guide.
- Semi-structured interviews follow - narrative production.
- The interview schedule includes broad themes - the nature of teachers’ working lives, agency, social and communicative dimensions of teaching and motivations to teach/not teach.
- Draws on visual stimulus and artefacts (e.g. school reporting documentation, behaviour policies), events and visual stimuli as psychological tools, that can evoke the developmental and situated histories that help to construct figured worlds (Urrieta, 2007).
- Sociological and psychological perspectives introduced – ‘mapping a teacher’.

Learning from the pilot

- London 11-18 school – 2 students – July 2026.
- Status of teachers v status of other professions.
- School culture and aspirational impacts.
- Methodology adapted – ‘mapping a teacher’ to support narration.

Mapping a teacher

What teachers do	How teachers feel
Race	Gender
Personality	Academic ability
Fulfilment	Status within school /within society
Career security	Future career

A taste of the data

‘Society is quite harsh on teachers. Realistically, it’s one of the most important jobs in society’.

A taste of the data

- I feel like I know more than a person who hasn't had a parent who is a teacher. I see her every single evening working, making resources. So, the practical side, teachers spend their whole lives preparing for the classroom and then teaching in the classroom. What they do is prepare the next generation for their life and support them.
- It's such a workload, and they do it, to be honest, for pay that should be more than it is. The teachers' strikes last year. And especially with how much they do and how much time they give that is unpaid, and I think it's just such a massive workload [laughter].
- They don't get paid enough, and there is not enough funding for schools and colleges. I think at a high level, they are not respected enough.
- In terms of career fulfilment, I do enjoy the idea of teaching a lot — maybe if I get a bit older and sick of medicine or whatever I end up being, then I definitely see myself becoming a lecturer or a teacher. I'd say I really enjoy that interaction with the pupils.

Analytical approach

- **RQ1. What are the figured worlds of teachers and teaching according to young people in schools?**
- Adapting Gee's (2010) 'figured worlds tool' (after MacLeod, 2023) to identify characterisations of 'being a teacher'. Looking for episodes in the data where participants discuss teachers' ways of acting, interacting, talking and communicating, as well as beliefs and values.
- Asking 'what must this speaker assume about the world ... to have said these things in the way they were said?' (Gee, 2010, p. 173).
- Identifying what appears at a manifest level in participants' accounts of teachers, but also the assumptions that appear at a latent level of the data.
- Iterative sense-making among the researchers.

RQ2. How do young people's experiences with teachers in schools shape these figurings and how do young people perceive these figured worlds as commensurate with their adult futures?

- Analysing transcripts guided by Holland et al.'s 'cultural models' (1998) to identify episodes that suggest the (non)continuities between participants' identity work and the figured worlds of teaching.
- Drawing on *troubled or untroubled* (e.g., Wetherell, 1998) positions for the participants to identify the features that contribute to such positions - social and cultural influences.
- Carlone et al. (2014) identify the value of being able to 'toggle', moving between the macro and micro when analysing identity work. 'Toggling' between the macro cultural norms that contribute to how young people figure teaching, and their situated experience of the 'reality' of teachers and teaching.

Analytical approach – identifying figured worlds

- As part of the guidance related to the figured worlds tool, Gee (2010) has recommended approaching narrative sections of data with the question: “What typical stories [are] the words and phrases of the communication assuming and inviting listeners to assume? What participants, activities, ways of interacting, forms of language [etc.] are in these figured worlds?” (p. 171).
- The analysis within the project aims to move beyond the surface level of the narratives and reflexively explore how aspects such as context, background knowledge (assumptions) and voice are shaping of and shaped by how a narrative is expressed and interpreted.

Participant 4 (East Midlands School)

To me, a really good teacher is one who notices. So, because I have dyslexia and autism myself, sometimes navigating lessons, topics, and the workload can be really overwhelming, but a teacher who's really good spends a lot of time making sure that each of their students has access to the things they need to.

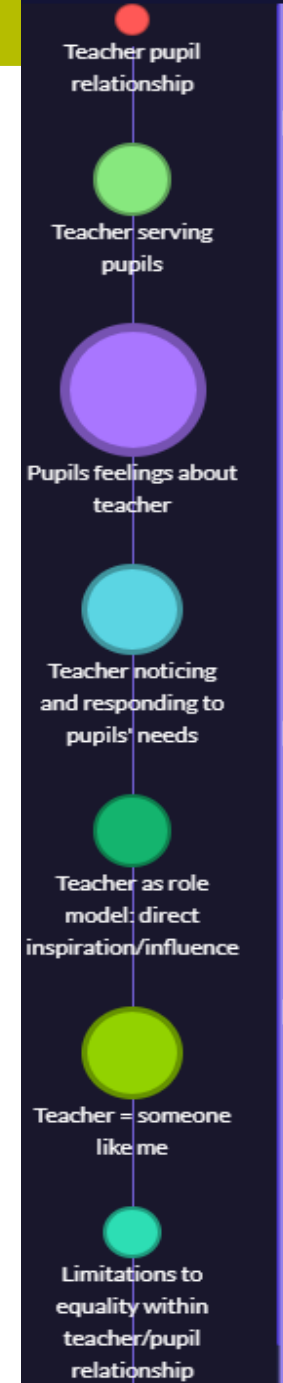
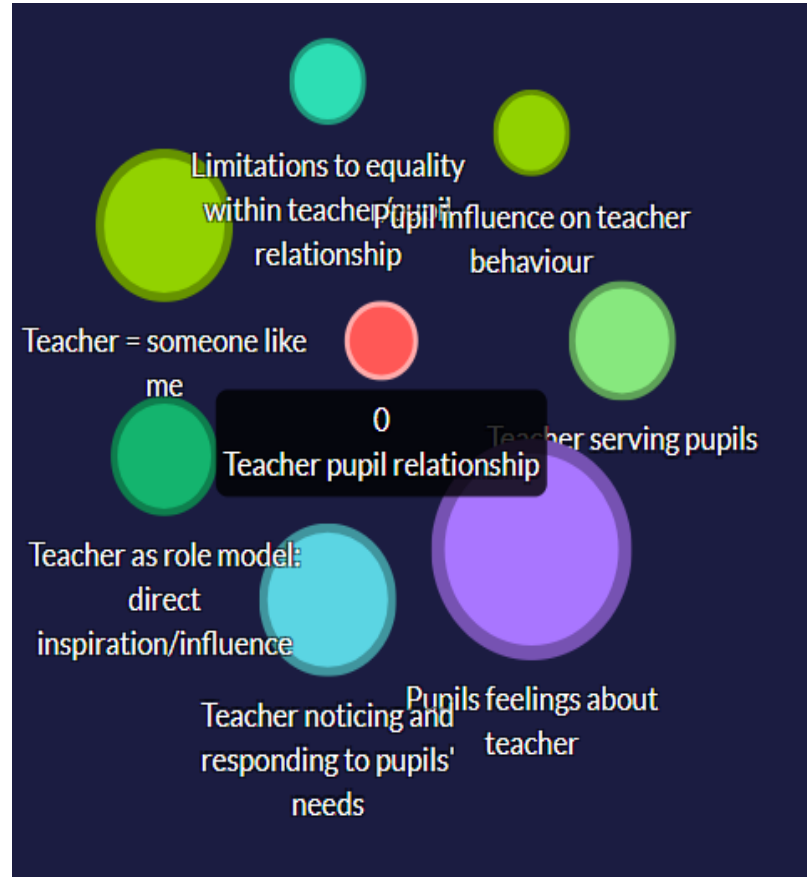
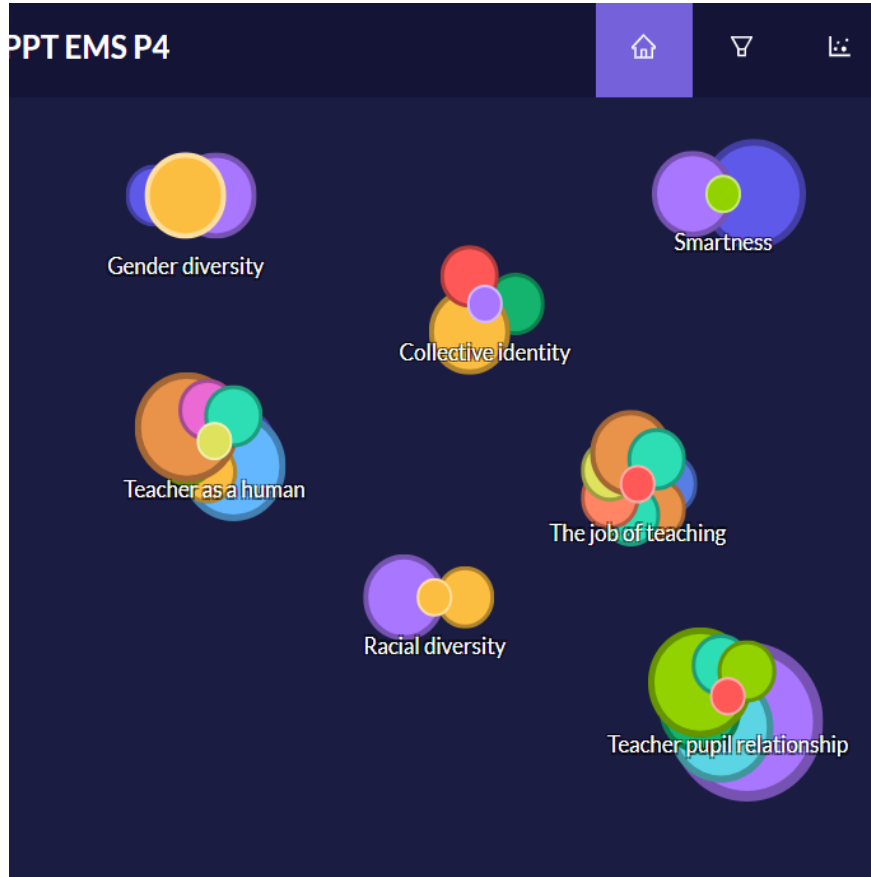
I think it's very rewarding, watching some of your students, like me. Personally, I started with 2s and 3s in GCSEs, and in the end I came out with 8s, 9s, and all of that. And I think it can be rewarding to watch these kids grow up into the people they're going to be.

I know personally, some of my English teachers don't even know who my drama teachers are because they've never crossed paths, because they're so on opposite sides of the school. They definitely all stay in their hubs.

I do believe it is incredibly draining. Sometimes, like obviously now that I'm older, I can physically see on their body language, on their face, like you can see when they're starting to be overwhelmed by whatever situation they're in or whether they're happy in the situation they're in, but you can sometimes pick up on teachers' exhaustion.

- It's a human response to be like, "I've had enough of today, I've had enough of this one student or this class. I'm just, I'm tired." Like it's a perfectly human thing to feel that way.
- With teenagers, growing up, trying to learn to understand your own feelings, to cope with your own feelings, to manage them effectively, especially in these age groups, can be really difficult. But even still, teachers also, for them, days can be really overwhelming, they can be really great, and sometimes lashing just happens. Sometimes you just lose control of everything, and you're spiralling, it just happens.
- The dynamic is very different when teachers are also honest, because they expect us to be honest all the time. You know, "I'm struggling with this, I'm not struggling with this, I need help with this, I don't need help with this." Sometimes teachers need help also

Quirkos examples: EMS Participant 4



All

T... You have the obvious giving information to children so that they can stay on their course, help them achieve the grades they want, to get to the places they need to be

EMS Participant 4.docx

Or smart in the fact that they're just confident in the fact that they know what they know. The teachers are confident in the fact that "I know what I'm teaching you, so you need to have faith in the fact that I can give it to you."

EMS Participant 4.docx

E... they're also figures of safety, I suppose, in a way, or even figures of pure hatred. Like, if you like or dislike a certain teacher or the way that they approach certain topics,

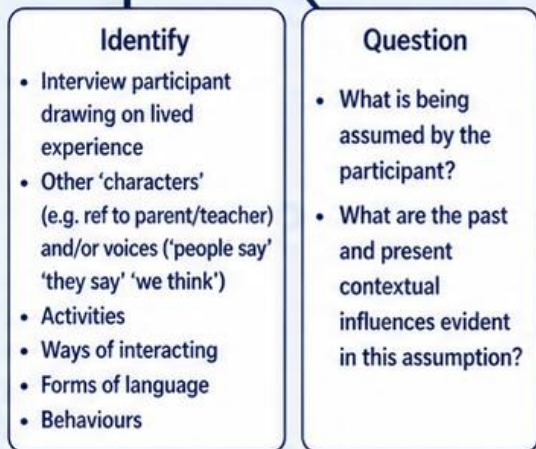
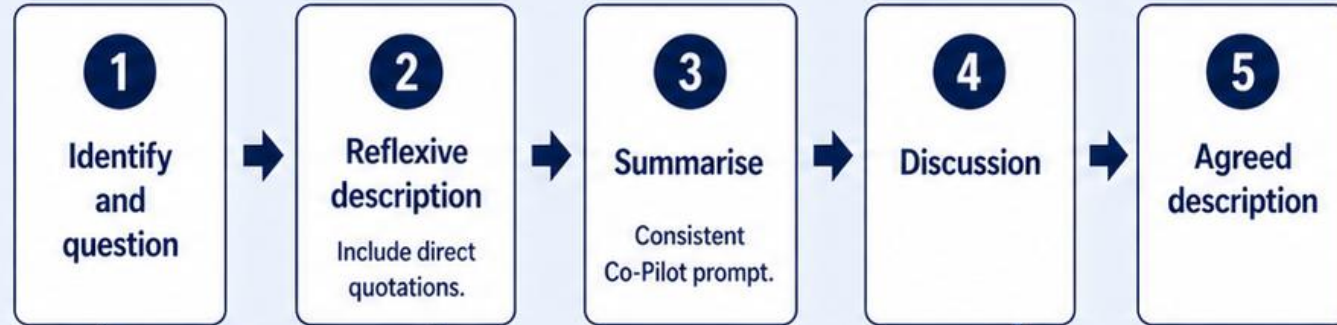
EMS Participant 4.docx

S... I can't really tell you what it is that perhaps you might not like about a teacher. I think a lot of teachers get hatred, but I don't often think it's the teaching or the person themselves. It's often the actual institution itself, the course, the... oh, hang on, I'm trying to find a word here. What's the word for it? [Pause]. Sorry, my brain has just blanked itself. But the policies, there we go. The policies that they put in place

TWO STAGE ANALYSIS PROCESS

STAGE 1

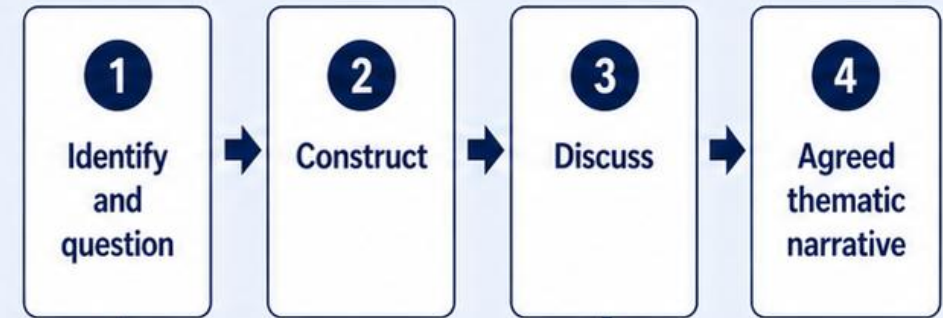
Identifying participants' figured worlds of teaching



Iterative process

STAGE 2

Constructing thematic narratives from the participants' figured worlds



Iterative process

Reflexive description – building with quotation

There is vivid recreating of exchanges with teachers who are tired or over-worked and how their honesty is a strong feature and is part of their relational work, referring to teachers who are ‘running late’, ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do this’. Honesty about their human vulnerability and admitting making mistakes is highly valued: ‘The dynamic is very different when teachers are also honest, because they expect us to be honest all the time. You know, “I’m struggling with this, I’m not struggling with this, I need help with this, I don’t need help with this.” Sometimes teachers need help also, and when they are confident enough in themselves to admit to us, “I’ve made a mistake,” it makes us feel more encouraged to also admit when making mistakes, or we’re overwhelmed, or we’re happy and things like that’. This reciprocity is key to being a teacher in her eyes. Honesty, being open about things that are overwhelming or have gone wrong is part of being a teacher.

(Extract from 1739 words!)

AI summaries

Her “figured world” centres on **altruism, relational work, vulnerability, work–life imbalance, and social status**, along with strong perceptions shaped by his own experience of school, family expectations, and wider societal narratives.

1. Teaching as Altruistic, Heart-Led Work
2. The Relational Core of Teaching
3. Teachers’ Vulnerability and Exposure
4. Workload: “Tip of the Iceberg”
5. The Pressures of Accountability
6. Status, Pay, and Social Perceptions
7. Diversity and Representation

AI summaries

Participant 4 (P4) constructs a vivid, emotionally rich figured world of teaching, in which teachers are fundamentally *human beings* whose work is shaped by emotion, vulnerability, structural constraint, and meaningful relational labour. Across the interview, P4 returns repeatedly to the belief that teachers' effectiveness and authenticity depend on acknowledging rather than concealing their humanness. This forms the core of her understanding of what it means to be a teacher.

1. Teachers as Human: Fallible, Emotional, and Affected by Their Environment
2. Openness, Mistakes, and Teacher Confidence
3. Teacher–Pupil Relationships: Connection, Care, and Influence
4. Shared Identity, Disclosure, and 'Someone Like Me'
5. Teaching as a Complex, Emotionally Rewarding but Challenging Job
6. Structural Constraints and Barriers: Policy, Funding, and Teacher Agency
7. Teacher Smartness and Professional Identity

RQ1. What are the figured worlds of teachers and teaching according to young people in schools?

We are exploring the social, cultural and contextual, as well as the individual, influences upon young people's constructions of teachers and teaching and how these factors influence future career aspirations and trajectories.

Constructions – tentative

- Relationality
- Human/humane
- Fallibility
- Vulnerability
- Emotionally draining
- Exhausting physically - workload
- Considerably rewarding
- Institutionally configured
- Underpaid
- Altruism
- Lack of gender/minorities/class lens?

How are these formed?

- Empathetic knowledge
- Identification – ‘like me’
- Family experience and expectations
- Increasingly interpretive observation
- Observing interactions with other students
- Reflexivity – own student-teacher interactions
- Critical incidents
- Political discourse - ‘strikes’, ‘pay’
- School discourses – accountability, behaviour policies, ‘safeguarding’, spatiality, leadership
- Teacher discourses – careers, expertise, pay

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