

‘Becoming a teacher of my own design’: Exploring professional identity development in first-generation student- teachers from a working-class background

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Abstract

This research explores how professional identity development is experienced among ten working-class/first-generation student-teachers undertaking a primary teaching degree at a post-1992 Higher Education institution (HEI) in England. Using narrative methodology involving episodic narrative interviewing, participant journalling and pen portraits, the experiences of working-class/first-generation students were captured. Master and personal narratives emerged from data analysis, and the development of a professional identity developed alongside a student identity. The imagined *good* student and teacher models were internalised by participants and used as a benchmark to compare themselves against which can be seen as identity types within the figured world of university and primary education. These benchmarks influenced both academic and social belonging and teacher competency discourses were evident in the findings.

A student typology was created comprising three distinct types: Achievement-Focused, Validation-Seeking, and Grounded-Learner. Similarly, a teacher typology was also created comprising The Saviour, Career-Focused, and The Grounded-Educator types. The mismatch between the imagined ideal and the pre-existing sense of self was navigated by a reconstruction of the imagined ideal. Following data analysis, it is recommended that HEIs support academic belonging through regular formative feedback and scheduled guided reflection sessions to enable individuals to reflect on their progress and personal growth as a result. Increasing representation as part of the lecturing team could support this academic belonging further. Working-class students often need support to follow HEI processes around funding. Providing structured support in both a group environment and individually at 16-19 provision may support an increase in applications. In addition, time spent at university campuses may create a familiarity which will support belonging. Increasing the offer of part-time and flexible learning courses can support those students who need to work alongside their studies as well as those with parent and caring responsibilities, increasing the accessibility of HE.

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Glossary of Terms

Cultural capital a concept from Bourdieu's theory describing the social assets a person has such as education, intellect, style of speech and dress.

First-generation (FG) university students whose parents and grandparents have not attended HE.

Field a concept from Bourdieu's theory where a field is a system of social positions, shaped by institutions and actors who shape the social practices.

Indices of multiple deprivation (IMD) a statistical measure of how disadvantaged an area is based on its population. Considering education, income and health statistical markers.

Institutional habitus a concept from Bourdieu's theory describing the way an institution responds to the world through its' culture and social field.

Intersectionality the interconnected effect of social categorisations such as class, gender and race providing a unique experience through the overlapping of these categorisations.

Knowledge economy an economy in which growth is dependent on the quantity, quality, and accessibility of the information available, rather than the means of production.

Social class a division of a society based on social and economic status

Socio economic status (SES) defines current social and economic status whereas social class is often generational and more stable. Rubin *et al.* (2014) call for subjective, self-definitions of social class rather than the usually adopted objective methods of income, parental occupation etc.

Widening participation a government strategy aimed at increasing attendance at university from underrepresented groups including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, first in family and those from ethnic minorities.

List of Acronyms

DfE – Department for Education

HE – Higher Education

HEI – Higher Education Institution

IMD – Indices of Multiple Deprivation

ITE – Initial Teacher Education

L4 – Level 4 student, someone who is in their first year of a degree

L5 – Level 5 student, someone who is in their second year of a degree

L6 – Level 6 student, someone who is in their third and final year of a degree

OfS – Office for Students

OFSTED - Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PGCE – Post Graduate Certificate in Education

QTS – Qualified Teacher Status

SES – Socio-Economic Status

UG – Undergraduate

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Personal and Professional Context

This research explored the process of professional identity development as experienced by working-class/first-generation student-teachers undertaking a primary teacher training degree at a post-1992 higher education institution (HEI). This is relevant to my own journey as a researcher, student, teacher and teacher educator, coming from a working-class background. Attending university was always promoted as possible by my parents and teachers and I selected a HEI based on how friendly the environment felt during the open day. Attending university was a comfortable experience for me and I did not notice any of the research reported challenges of settling in (Reay *et al.*, 2010; Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016). This continued when I attended a different HEI to complete my primary PGCE and then my master's while working full-time. As a qualified primary school teacher, there were some minor adjustments I needed to make as I developed my professional teacher identity. However, working in a school that was situated in a disadvantaged area arguably made this process easier.

My current role as a primary teacher educator has challenged my self-efficacy as well as highlighting some of the personal challenges I have experienced whilst transitioning to academia. Working within a post-1992 HEI, I am currently leading the primary PGCE course, working with post graduate students. Prior to this I worked with the undergraduate primary teacher training course which was where I first noticed some of the identity struggles students experienced when settling in at university and transitioning to a teaching professional. Working at this HEI, which promotes its role as a civic university as well as supporting widening participation, aligns with my personal values as a working-class/first-generation teacher educator and as such the importance of exploring these students' experiences became apparent. I share the same background and journey into teaching as the participants within this study which would arguably make me an 'insider'. However, as an experienced teacher and now a teacher educator and researcher, it can also be seen that I am an outsider to the unique participant group as the historical and cultural context they are experiencing is 20 years different from my own. Mercer (2007) explores the complexity of researching within your own educational institution and referred to the insider/outsider position as a double-edged sword which will be discussed in 3.16.

1.2 Policy Context

The widening participation agenda featured heavily in English education policy from 1992 and again in 2001, when the government set ambitious targets to increase the number of 18-year-olds entering HE (Rainford, 2023). Despite this, the 2024 parliament review briefing stated disadvantaged students (a government measure including low-income families) are less likely to attend university and less likely to complete their degrees when they do (Lewis and Bolton, 2024). Professional courses often appeal to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Tuckett *et al.*, 2021). This is due to their perceived route into a specific career and the ability to see a way to better their income or circumstances. Disadvantaged students are 3% more likely to choose a course leading to a higher paid occupation such as business, computing or law and 1% more likely to choose a course in education (Britton *et al.*, 2021). This report notes that measures of mobility and success were based on graduate earnings, disadvantaging teaching due to the standardised salaries offered. Considering disadvantaged students are more likely to choose a course with a vocational focus, exploring the experiences of working-class/first-generation students as they develop a professional identity will highlight the challenges, tensions and successes. This research aims to identify practical improvements to support successful completion and begin the discussion around working-class strengths within professional environments, specifically teaching.

1.3 Definition of Key Terms and Concepts Used in the Thesis

Teacher professional identity Part of an individual's identity concerned with how they see themselves as educators.

Teacher professionalism the knowledge, skills, and practices teachers must have to be effective educator.

The following definitions are concepts used within the research as part of the theoretical framework:

Figured worlds A theory of social and cultural elements which define cultural arenas influencing identity development. A figured world is a combination of cultural norms, expectations and perceived rules governing how members should act.

Identity The self-perception of who a person is, influenced by social and cultural factors. Within the figured worlds theory, identity is constructed through interactions with other members of the figured world in question.

Artefact An object or signifier of figured world membership. Often used by individuals when measuring their own identity against perceived figured world membership.

The work of Bourdieu has been influential and below are key concepts referred to in the thesis:

Field is a social space with a set of rules and expectations, similar to the concept of a figured world but with a focus on the influence of institutions and actors to shape the social structure.

Habitus The dispositions, ways of thinking and habits dictating how an individual operates within a field. Habitus is influenced by social interactions and shapes how the individual operates in these fields.

Capital is a resource giving an individual power or influence in a certain field. For example, cultural or financial capital.

The work of Foucault has been influential and below are key concepts referred to in the thesis:

Discourse language practices and knowledge shaping how we understand the world. A combination of cultural, historical, political and social influences.

Power is the influence of individuals, institutions or certain discourses. Power is relational and can shape how we view and interact with the world. Certain discourses can legitimise the power influence of certain views or shape which view/voice is important.

1.4 Research Design and Methodology

This research adopts a narrative methodology aligned with the figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) concept of identity and a social constructionist view of the world. The narratives shared in participants' own words have a part to play in how identity is constructed (Clandinin, 2012). Narrative inquiry has been used in this research to better understand the processes of identity formation for HE students such as demonstrated by Ding and Curtis (2021) who used this approach to explore the experiences of first-year university students. Within my research, participants took part in two individual interviews and completed five personal journal prompts throughout the data collection phase. The use of narrative moments to capture memorable and significant elements of their experiences (McAdams, 2001) enhanced the understanding of identity formation through the identification of personal and master narratives. A master narrative is a cultural expectation or accepted belief while a personal narrative is specific to the individual and can be both personal and interpersonal (Breen and McLean, 2017). Following data collection, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), using the theoretical framework of figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) was undertaken to identify the narratives relating to the figured world of university and primary teaching. This analysis enabled identity development to be understood as it was experienced by the participants.

1.5 Contribution to Knowledge

This research provides a contribution to knowledge in three key areas, working-class/first-generation student experiences; methodological recommendations and creating a language to support student reflection. First, relating to how working-class/first-generation students experience the development of a professional identity whilst undertaking a three-year teacher training degree. This research recognises the importance of continuing to research social class inequality through exploring the experiences of students who are both working-class and first-generation. Methodologically, selecting participants that self-identify as working-class whilst also being first in their family to attend university enables me to understand how they navigate these experiences and how they talk about them through narrative retelling. Understanding these experiences has enabled practical recommendations to be made to support similar students in HEI. Second, this research provides a contribution to methodology through utilising pen portraits as part of the data analysis element, building on the work of Blundell and Oakley (2023) as well as

combining narrative methodology with a figured worlds lens. Finally, this research creates a student and teacher typology to provide a language of understanding and self-reflection.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 of the thesis provides a comprehensive literature review including an overview of the historical and political context underpinning this research. Following this, the literature relating to identity and specifically social-class identity, student identity and professional identity are examined. This research adopts figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) as a theoretical framework which is explained in 2.4.1. Chapter 3 introduces narrative inquiry (3.4) and details the methodological design adopted during the research including the research paradigm, data collection tools and ethics.

Chapter 4 of the thesis summarises the findings and this is organised in three distinct figured worlds namely university, working-class and primary teaching. Although identity development takes place as an intersecting process, the findings are separated out into student, teacher and social class to untangle the complexity. The findings explore the personal and master narratives that emerged and present a student and teacher typology to further explicate the data. Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and literature, determining the connection between the different identity elements and tensions. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and provides the contribution to knowledge and practical recommendations for HEIs and primary teacher educators to support student success.

1.7 Summary

This research explored the experiences of working-class/first-generation students enrolled on a primary teacher training degree. Using narrative methodology and the figured worlds theoretical framework, participant identity construction processes were explored including the perception of *good* models of being a student/teacher. These models serve as a benchmark for individuals striving to achieve membership to the figured worlds in question and act as a comparative standard for individual success. Both episodic narrative interviews and individual journal prompts were used to elicit participant experience stories (narratives) which were in turn analysed to

identity both student and teacher typologies. These typologies are discussed in relation to the benchmark (*good* teacher/student) individuals perceive. In addition, participant identity tensions are explored as both a mechanism for change and reconstruction and a barrier to internalising success.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a critical examination of the concepts, theories and research related to students' experiences within HE. First, the historical and political context provides an overview of social and cultural influences, before moving on to exploring identity within the theoretical framework of figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001).

2.2 The Historical and Political Context

According to Jenkins-Smith and Smith (2019) political policy and the history of education shape cultural perceptions of teaching and HE. Interestingly, the process influences individual perceptions of what a *good* student or teacher might look like, providing a benchmark for comparison. As a result, the historical and political context is crucial to understanding the figured world this research is situated within. Fully analysing all these elements is beyond the scope of this thesis but a short summary can be found within this section, and additional elements can be viewed in appendix A.

2.2.1 Teaching as Women's Work

Primary teaching is a job historically completed by women (timeline of primary teaching policy, appendix A) with 50% of qualified primary teachers being women in 1870, rising to 75% by 1985 (Oram, 1996). Historically, the social status of elementary/primary teachers was different from those in fee-paying schools, secondary schools, and HE. Secondary teachers were more likely to have a university education, while primary teachers were trained at a teacher training college, with Musgrove (1959) asserting that secondary and university teaching in the 1900s was a middle-class, male-dominated profession. This has not changed, in 2024/25, 86.1% of the primary teaching workforce are women but only 70% of leadership roles were filled by women (DfE, 2025). Primary teaching, being concerned with nurture, was promoted as a legitimate profession for women following the 1870 Elementary Education Act widening access to education for children from all backgrounds. Young (2019) highlights how middle-class women were initially selected to serve as cultural role models for working-class children. Women teachers were

required to navigate the tensions of professional womanhood alongside cultural expectations of femininity, and the traditional role within the family. The figured world of primary teaching in the 1900s was arguably one dominated by gender inequality. Understanding the feminist context for primary teaching provides awareness of the cultural context in which teachers operate. This is important in today's economic climate, and Block *et al.* (2025) note that in more economically developed countries, there is self-segregation in which women and men choose gendered careers despite gender equality.

2.2.2 Education Policy and Widening Participation

Social class has dominated educational policy for decades and provides a cultural backdrop for understanding individuals' experiences (appendix A). Ball (2021) explains how the 1988 Education Reform Act reinforced neoliberal ideals. This included the introduction of the national curriculum, a focus on teacher professionalism and a continued right for parents to choose. Using the language of reform, including urgency and necessity, these changes supported a globalised competition within education. In 1997, New Labour promoted social reform and a shift towards a knowledge economy, focussing on raising standards and education for all. The Coalition government from 2010, continued to focus on social class as a dominant education policy agenda, aiming to end class division and promote a more equal, meritocratic structure (Friedman and Laurison, 2020). Rainford (2023) argues that aspiration was framed mostly in economic terms, creating the narrative that individuals simply need to try harder. Despite criticism, the idea of raising aspirations persists and low attainment is still often perceived as a lack of aspiration.

The political response to social class inequality is social mobility (DfE, 2016; 2022; 2026). Policy suggests disadvantaged people lack academic aspiration and financial support (Hoskins and Barker, 2017) with the most recent white paper (DfE, 2026) stating that the previous underperformance of white working-class children will no longer be tolerated. Rainford (2023) counters the aspiration deficit hypothesis by stating that policy often focuses on helping individuals realise their existing aspirations, rather than remedying a deficit. Something that is supported in the 2026 white paper 'every child achieving and thriving' which suggests the education system has let down disadvantaged individuals. Farley *et al.* (2021) explain how education policy can perpetuate inequality by prioritising qualities like resilience. This can shift

responsibility from systemic inequality onto individuals (McCluskey, 2015). Reay (2020) explains that education often reproduces inequality, and people tend to remain in the social class they were born into, with a sense of determinism (Reay, 2025). Steadman and Ellis (2021) assert that within policy teaching quality has been constructed as an economic link to social mobility creating a limiting factor for teacher agency whilst failing to address structural inequality. Despite the ongoing policy focus, Stephens *et al.* (2019) agree that class inequality has not decreased highlighting the ineffectiveness of such discourses. Working-class students still demonstrate lower attainment and may experience greater cultural deprivation (Saeed, 2022).

2.2.3 Teacher Education Policy: The *Good* Teacher Benchmark

Shain and Ozga (2001) show that education policy significantly affects teacher pedagogy, making it difficult to distinguish what constitutes good teaching. Steadman and Ellis (2021) argue that teacher quality and effectiveness are central to policies aimed at social mobility, which shifts responsibility onto teachers to drive social change. Janzen *et al.* (2025) explain how policy blames teachers for failing to meet government-defined goals, with teacher competence discourses contributing to this trend and teachers blamed for failing schools (Maguire and Ball, 1994). More recently, Sant, Weinberg and Thiel, (2024) argue that blame is also placed on ITE for not adequately preparing teachers.

The Teacher Training Agency was introduced in 1994 to standardise teacher education and emphasise experiential learning (Grunodff *et al.*, 2017) and the introduction of a general set of standards in 1998 (DfE, 2011) was designed to ensure quality across providers. As part of the New Labour agenda to modernise teaching, Carswell and Conway (2023, 2025) argue that these standards promoted certain areas of teaching as valuable over others, influencing the discourse of *good* teaching. The political discourse of teacher competency has been suggested as removing democracy and professional judgement from the profession, a point supported by Biesta (2015), while also repositioning the teacher's role from an ethical one to that of 'global economic competitiveness' (Janzen *et al.*, 2025. Pg 4). Yet Mahony and Hextall (2013) acknowledge that standards can provide clarity and consistency to the profession. In contrast, Ball (2012) argues these same standards can be regulatory, removing individual agency and professional trust. Further to this, Hulme and Quirk Marku (2017) see the introduction of teachers' standards as a

form of central control by presenting systems of specification. Combined with performance indicators and a culture of self-evaluation, this trend has contributed to the continued professionalism of teaching however, this often comes at the cost of individual agency and professional judgment (Janzen *et al.*, 2025). Nevertheless, not all teachers see the standards negatively. For example, research by Frostenson and Englund (2020) found new teachers view policy and guidance as a framework to support their development, a view not incompatible with developing a personal ethos of teaching.

Despite these reforms, teaching remains stable but demanding, causing many professionals to struggle with stress and job satisfaction (McCallum, 2020; Green, 2021). The 2016 white paper (DfE, 2016) notes education inequality was still present, and the geographical difference of provision quality was at fault (for current data see: OfS, 2026). In 2021 a market review was conducted, examining the quality of teacher educators once again to explain the 'slow to no' progress schools were making to close the attainment gap for disadvantaged children and enable social mobility (DfE, 2021). Following this market review, the initial teacher training and early career framework (ITTECF, DfE, 2024) was produced and has become the statutory curriculum for all initial teacher training providers in England. Tillin (2023) argues that the initial release of this policy is controversial and fulfils political aspirations more than it focuses on the needs of the pupils it aims to support. Teachers' voices are traditionally marginalised in the creation of education policy (Hill, 2007; Reeves, 2018) resulting in a tension between policy and practice.

The introduction of the teachers' standards has arguably produced a generation of risk averse professionals (Sachs, 2016) and Ball (2003b) suggests has contributed to a culture of compliant professionalism where the skill of teachers is not valued as much as the output they produce. This can be seen through the OFSTED (2025) inspection handbook where the quality of lessons is judged on the pupil outcomes, not considering pupil motivation, aspiration or diversity. The reduction of teacher competence to pupil attainment, ignores factors outside of the school environment relating to pupil attainment and oversimplifies the teaching process, contributing to the inevitable deprofessionalisation of teaching (Janzen *et al.*, 2025). The idea that there is one way to be a *good* teacher is a form of ideological control where policy discourses relating to teacher competency become the model of good teaching, which in turn promotes a set of values

as important (Smyth *et al.*, 2001). Considering the impact this has on the profession, Steadman and Ellis (2021) suggest these regulatory frameworks construct what it is to be a teacher and position teacher quality as a marker for social mobility success.

2.3 Students in Higher Education

This section critically analyses the literature relating to HE students, including working-class/first-generation students and the motivations for attending HE.

2.3.1 Working-class/First-generation Students

Research into the experiences of working-class and first-generation students often draws upon the theoretical framework of Bourdieu and the concepts of *habitus* and *capital* (1.3 provides a definition of these concepts). First-generation students are often from disadvantaged families (Coombs, 2021) and did not grow up in households where the language of HE was present (Crew, 2020). Bettencourt (2020) explains how these challenges can include a cultural capital deficit or cultural mismatch (Hecht *et al.*, 2021) and first-generation students may find a lack of alignment between the values of the institution and their own independent values, creating a threat to their social identity (Bettencourt, 2020).

In an autobiographical account, Reay (2018) describes the ways in which her schooling reinforced her difference as a working-class girl and how habitus transformation, on a deeper level is challenging and uncomfortable. For working-class students the transition can be a threat to their class identity and threaten a coherent sense of self (Reay, 2018). Focusing on the experiences of students at elite universities, Reay (2021) suggests not all HE institutions (HEIs) are equal in resources and facilities. This can exacerbate any potential challenges as the mismatch between what the student is used to and what they may experience widens. As a result of the perceived status of elite universities, Reay (2018) concludes most working-class students attend low-status universities, which in comparison, are poorly funded. However, Read *et al.* (2003) argues that a university more appealing to working-class students will be able to present a better sense of belonging. Education for all, to quote government rhetoric, should not be gatekept by elite

institutions, and widening participation should not be a concern only for those HEIs of lower status.

Working-class students are arguably less familiar with the cultural norms of university (Devlin, 2013) and Friedman and Laurison (2020) explain that they often self-eliminate themselves from HE by opting out. Similarly, first-generation students are more likely to drop out of university (Adamecz-Völgyi *et al.*, 2020) especially during the first year (HESA, 2025) and these students are less likely to complete their degree qualification (Adamecz-Völgyi *et al.*, 2020; Toutkoushian *et al.*, 2021). Harackiewicz *et al.* (2014) explain that these students are more likely to find the HE environment stressful which can negatively affect academic success. Reay (2021) reported working-class students often spoke about feeling 'not good enough' and being intimidated by their middle-class counterparts, further compounded by the notion of student potential and the importance of working hard (Rainford, 2021a).

Reay explains how students are often able to meet the academic challenges of HE but struggle to meet the social challenges (Reay, 2021). Research carried out by Rubin and Wright (2015) demonstrates how working-class students tend to have fewer friends at university and are often older on entry than middle-class students. Social integration can provide crucial emotional support at university (Thomas, 2012), and this reduced friendship element may contribute to the challenges experienced. Coulson *et al.*, (2018) found experiences of working-class students during welcome week were often negative, with students feeling socially excluded, something also noted by Reay (2018) where she details how a student may struggle without a social support network, even in the simplest of ways such as finding the right department at university. Lee (2017) explains how identifying as working-class suggests the acknowledgement of associated discourses such as shame and imposter syndrome (Addison *et al.*, 2022), creating a potentially uncomfortable experience in HE. Loveday (2015) notes that shame structures the working-class experience of HE and the view of working-class as deficient, supported by Luczaj (2023) who found entering HE can bring up emotions of loss, guilt and fear alongside excitement and hopefulness.

HE, specifically pre-1992 institutions are middle-class environments (Boliver, 2013) with their own set of rules and expectations (Fernando and Kenny, 2021) and 'fitting in' can be a challenge if you are unfamiliar with these unspoken rules (Reay *et al.*, 2009). However, there are research examples demonstrating protective factors where students can succeed despite perceived disadvantage. As well as individual habitus, Bourdieu (1977) acknowledges institutional habitus which is a result of both the social class of the staff/students and the history of the institution (Çelik, 2020). Lee (2021) notes how institutional habitus can be a protective factor which may explain how some students are able to succeed. Abrahams and Ingram (2013) describe how students were able to develop a chameleon habitus which enabled them to fit in and retain their sense of family and community belonging outside of university. This chameleon habitus is the ability to switch behaviours between different fields, to mirror the expectations of those in the field to fit in providing a potential solution for working-class students who do not want to abandon their working-class identity.

Despite the negative outlook reported for working-class students, Luczaj (2023) reports that working-class privilege can provide advantages. Looking at individuals in Poland, she found working-class individuals can be more independent and resilient. In fact, such deficit approaches can mask working-class positives (Crumb *et al.*, 2020) and Jehangir *et al.* (2022) found a sense of working-class pride reported through a desire to remain authentic and give back to the working-class community. Read *et al.* (2003) conducted their research in post-1992 institutions and found working-class students select to attend a non-elite HEI due to a sense they would be more likely to belong, suggesting that there is a place for post-1992 institutions when encouraging widening participation. Although other authors do not make the same claim, there is evidence showing working-class students can adapt in a range of different university environments and support from the HEI can make all the difference (Reay *et al.*, 2011). Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) suggest that a new student identity can be constructed when non-traditional students enter post-1992 universities showing the importance of increasing the accessibility of a diverse range of students.

There is also the financial element to consider when discussing the experiences of working-class/first-generation students at university. Hecht *et al.* (2021) report that first-generation students experience structural challenges, including reduced financial support and Luczaj (2023)

adds that they may also experience other resource deficits. A study by McCabe *et al.* (2022), shows that financial risk was a significant factor in deciding whether to attend university or not. Financial anxiety is also explored in the work of Pilgrim-Brown (2023) who identify a narrative of shame in working-class students. There was a fear of debt present in her participants and debt aversion often shaped further study choices. Interestingly, Roksa and Kinsley (2019) found family financial support did not impact academic achievement, but family emotional support did. Wainwright and Watts (2021) detail how intergenerational learning can be a protective factor where the experiences of other family members in education can encourage others to see education as possible. Yosso (2005) suggests that the concept of community cultural wealth challenges the cultural capital deficit where alternative sources of value are present in communities. Promotive and protective factors are documented by Schoon *et al.* (2021) as individual agency and parental co-agency. To explain this further, individual agency is where an individual is resistant to outside influences and can act as an individual. Parental co-agency can be described as parents' aspirations for their child to attend university which in turn become the child's own aspirations. Understanding the impact a sibling's attendance at university may have on students is important as first-generation status often focuses on parents and grandparents. As well as parental support, having siblings who attended HE can support social adjustment even when parental support was low (Hagler, 2024).

Despite the potential for success and the range of possible protective factors, working-class students still perform less well than their middle-class counterparts (Friedman and Laurison, 2020). Rubin (2012) notes working-class students are less likely to obtain good grades or even complete their degree showing the experience of working-class students is more complex than an issue of effort or ability. This is supported by 2026 OfS data stating 83.8% of disadvantaged students complete their degree compared to 90.7% of advantaged students and disadvantaged students were less likely to achieve a good degree (2:1/1st). Considering all students are required to meet an entry qualification threshold, this gap can be attributed to factors other than academic ability. Friedman (2014) found those who succeed are at risk of negative effects such as a personal tension through the shifting identity required to fit in and the impact of such a cultural mismatch on belonging (Philips *et al.*, 2020; Born, 2023). However, one study by Chan (2018) notes 'being upwardly mobile is not really such a rare and isolating experience' (*ibid*, pg199) showing that there are instances where individuals have comfortably achieved social mobility and class identity change.

The concept of resilience is often researched in terms of the impact it has on student retention and success. Chung *et al.* (2017) report non-traditional students are more likely to display resilience which in turn is a predictor of academic success. Holdsworth *et al.*, (2018) add to this stating, resilience is part of participatory learning at university and students report that maintaining perspectives and building support networks are crucial to developing this. Boliver *et al.* (2015) suggested universities adopt middle-class ways of working and it could be argued that if resilience is a key driver for success (Chung *et al.*, 2017), then working-class individuals who already possess a good level of resilience (Reay *et al.*, 2011) would find HE easier. Although resilience has been shown to be important, the discourses around resilience can serve to distract from issues within HE practices by internalising the problem as one of personal determination or 'grit' (Webster and Rivers, 2019).

2.3.2 Motivations for Choosing Higher Education

Understanding the reasons why people choose to teach may uncover explanations as to why working-class students appear to be able to succeed (Case study HEI local data, 2025). Bergmark *et al.* (2018) researched motivations for choosing teaching courses in Sweden and found there were four main discourses: (re)creating the caring school, creating a desirable life, promoting life changes for young people, and gaining knowledge. The importance of an individual's own school experiences can motivate them to enter the teaching profession to either recreate a positive experience for others or create one which is seen as better than their own school experience. In contrast, Lauermann *et al.* (2017) found in the USA, motivations for teaching included a commitment to teaching as a career, teacher self-efficacy and a sense of personal responsibility. Cross-cultural studies have also found motivations linked to wanting to work with young people, intellectual challenge, and the wish to 'give back' to society (Richardson and Watt, 2014). These research examples do not account for social-class, gender or identity elements with a large body of teaching motivation research being focused on individuals from white middle-class backgrounds as the dominant group (Keane *et al.*, 2020) meaning results may not represent a diverse experience. This does not account for the intersection of identity factors present in working-class/first-generation students, and it would be short sighted to assume motivations for study are uniform. It is important to note that motivations for study varies between disciplines,

and the social sciences often attract students with less materialistic motivations (Taylor and House, 2010).

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to choose to study for social justice and altruistic motivations (Folkes, 2022) of which teaching would fall within this category. This is supported by the work of Nias (1989) who found working-class teachers often saw themselves as 'change agents', going into the world of teaching to make a difference. Folkes (2022) explored the motivations for teaching in rural areas and community centred values were a key driver with individuals attending HE to give back to their community. Similarly, Hecht *et al.* (2021) found first-generation students expressed more interdependent and fewer independent motives for attending further education. This was also supported by Stephens *et al.* (2012) who found that first-generation students also demonstrated a community centred motivation. However, these community centred motivations for HE are often incompatible with the cultural norms (Phillips *et al.*, 2020). These findings were contradicted by Thiele *et al.* (2017) who found the motivation of working-class students attending university included an enjoyment for subjects and wanting to be better, whilst Davies *et al.* (2016) found participants wanted to escape certain conditions or quality of life and the promise of job stability. The difference that ITE introduces here is that being community centred in your core values could be seen to align with the values of teaching.

Esteban-Bara and Mellén-Vinagre (2019) notes motivations for teacher training were often personal initially and moved to more altruistic motivations as the course progressed. For 70% of their participants the growth and development of their pupils was more important than their own personal growth (*ibid*). Thiele *et al.* (2017) looked at socio economic differences in elite universities in UK. Utilising a phenomenological approach, this research included semi-structured interviews to elicit participant experiences of HE. Conducted within a Russell Group HEI, this research explored the potential mismatch between environment and personal identity. Here motivations for study included proving others wrong and identified low expectations as a barrier. Identity was influenced by their own self-evaluations of how they were perceived, compared to others. Interestingly, continuing generation students tend to report personal reasons such as expressing themselves and Estefan *et al.* (2023) suggests, being an independent thinker may predispose them to select courses with a less philanthropic goal. For those individuals entering HE to train to teach, the paradox occurs where they are both escaping working-class culture and still

very responsible for maintaining the class divide through professionalism and teacher competency discourses. This links back to the reproductive nature of policy and how the decline of policies that aimed to re-distribute financial aid resulted in an increase in inequality (Passey, 2012). Crozier *et al.* (2016) summarise that there is continued difficulty where middle-class aspirations are assumed to be working-class aspirations. The problem this creates is that if all working-class students attend university, this arguably reduces student choice and participation to an aspiration deficit solution and does not consider the complex and diverse motivations individuals have for attending (Folkes, 2022).

2.3.3 The Importance of Belonging

The importance of belonging for both academic success (Lawrie *et al.*, 2024), psychological wellbeing (Kahu *et al.*, 2022) and identity development will be discussed here. Belonging is a key concept in identity development (Harris, *et al.*, 2021) and a sense of belonging comes from the recognition that an individual aligns with others within that social group (or figured world) and this alignment creates a sense of 'fitting in' (McDonald, 2024). As well as peer alignment, representation of lecturing staff can also foster a sense of belonging as explored in Keane *et al.* (2023b) who found that local representation from teaching staff can improve student-teacher retention. In addition, guided reflection can support students who experience imposter syndrome (Geringer *et al.*, 2025) showing that institutional support can be a protective factor. Being a mature student also challenges belonging and Steel *et al.* (2024) note that resilience is a key trait that enables mature students to adapt in HE, something that links to resilience within working-class students. Ahn and Davis (2020) defined four types of belonging impacting student outcomes. These types of belonging are social, academic, surroundings and personal space. The impact of both social and academic belonging has been seen as significant with academic belonging being a key predictor of student academic success (Lawrie *et al.*, 2024).

Exploring working-class students' experiences at elite universities, Jin and Ball (2021) show success is often the result of compartmentalising identity and focusing on academic belonging over socialising. Achieving academic belonging comes from individuals feeling they are on the right course, enjoying the learning experience and believing they can achieve. Academic performance can also become dependent on grade outcomes where Buckley (2025) suggests a

belonging-performance dependence occurs. For working-class students who may doubt their academic ability, this dependence becomes more significant. Maclean (2022) used autoethnography to explore her own experiences of working-class imposter syndrome at a Russell group university and identified cultural inadequacy as a defining factor whilst Rickett and Thompson (2024) write from the perspective of an academic, noting imposter syndrome is embedded in both class identity and gender. In addition, there is also the feeling of not belonging and that any academic success is inauthentic or somehow fraudulent (Breeze, 2018). In summary, belonging is a complex subject but one integral to understanding the experiences of working-class/first-generation students.

2.4 Understanding Identity

To explore professional identity development, it is important to consider the theory and research relating to identity. This will be considered as part of the figured worlds theoretical framework before considering literature relating to teacher professionalism and class identity.

2.4.1 The Theoretical Framework

This research is conducted within the theoretical framework of figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) which was influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1965), Vygotsky (1930) and Bakhtin (1981). This approach links anthropology and sociology to present a theory of identity within a social and cultural framework. Social constructionist in nature, figured words are cultural arenas subject to unique and distinct cultural rules, expectations, and language forms. The figured world creates and reinforces the individuals' behaviours and operates as a powerful force in social construction. Within this framework, identity is cultural as well as social and influenced by historically situated practices.

Although Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be called upon to explain the way students from a working-class background experience the middle-class world of HE, it can be argued the figured world concept incorporates Bourdieu's concept of habitus whilst also acknowledging the local field, something Bourdieu's concept does not consider (Choudry and Williams, 2017). As well as the cultural expectations and language forms present in each figured world, there is consideration

of power imbalances where characters are valued as more/less significant. For example, within the figured world of teaching, success is seen as academic achievement and a job well done, an idea influenced by the teacher competence discourses (2.2.3). The figured world theory has been utilised in educational research where Chao *et al.* (2019) used this concept to explore teachers' identity development when teaching abroad and Wiggins and Monobe (2017) adopted figured worlds and poetic enquiry to identify how the self was positioned within transnational spheres. The figured worlds concept aligns to a narrative methodology through the parallel between figured worlds and narrativised worlds. Figure 2.1 below shows a summary of the key concepts in the figured worlds theory adapted from the work of Holland *et al.* (2001).

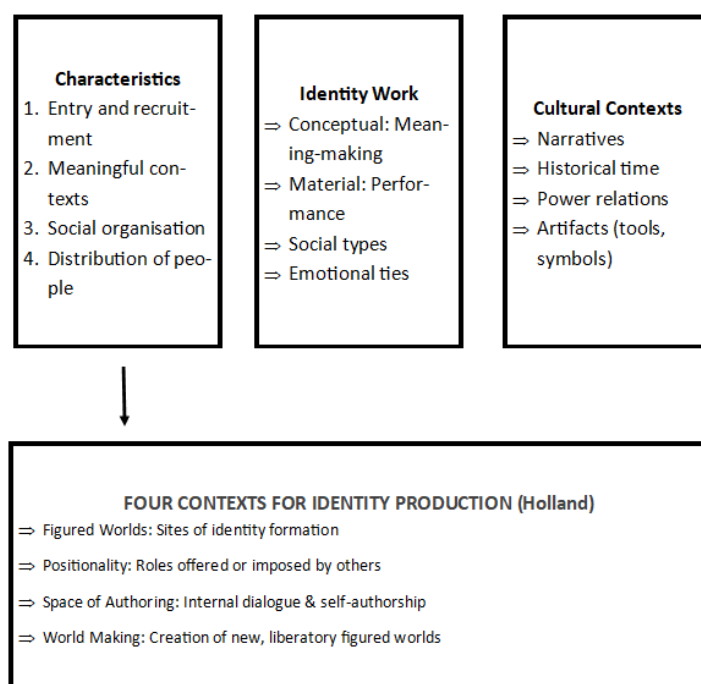


Figure 2.1: A diagram summarising the elements of a figured world and the effect on identity production. Drawing on the theory by Holland *et al.* (2001)

2.4.2 Identity and Figured Worlds

Holland *et al.* (2001) adopts a social view of self where identity is not fixed but improvised through social situations. In addition, individuals can hold many identity representations of themselves. These representations are dependent on negotiation and status. Linking back to narrative methodology, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) assert that stories are an individual's way of thinking about identity in a relational way. It is also the way in which professional identities are continuously developed in relation to cultural formation and personal experiences (Lyngstad,

2024). Within these experiences, critical events can be seen to shape professional identity through helping the individual recognise their place in the figured world under focus. Intersecting identities can also develop together, and Jones (2009) explored how the self-authoring process of intersecting identities is complex with individuals needing to navigate tensions between conflicting identities. Individual stories contribute to cultural production and reproduction in three ways: 1. They bring to light cultural beliefs relating to the topic; 2. They present a model to define the figured world in question and those who are members, and; 3. Act as a mediating device so the individual can understand their own identity in relation to this model (Holland *et al.*, 2001). Aligning this to professional identity research, point 2 can be viewed as teacher competency discourses with point 3 detailing identity development. Within the cultural context of identity development there is the opportunity to deviate from the master narratives and McLean *et al.* (2018) notes this was more often the case when individuals held marginalised positions in society.

The application of figured worlds theory by Cantillon *et al.* (2022) in the field of medicine, highlights the intricate social construction of teacher and student identities. Their research proposes everyday discourse holds the potential to empower individuals, offering a platform to counter the influential effects of policy discourse. This prompts inquiry into whether similar agency exists within everyday discourse to challenge cultural and social class norms, given its role in constructing and reconstructing cultural discourses. Within the context of ITE everyday discourse, integral to the HE experiences, functions as an influential force in shaping discourses including those pertaining to social class identity and professional identity. The process of identity formation relates to place, history in person, positionality, and the narrative and discursive contexts they inhabit. This positioning emerges because of access to cultural and social resources, shaping an individual's evolving identity. Thorius (2016) used the figured worlds theory to explore special education teachers' identity and notes how tensions between narratives encouraged participants to critically examine their own identity and challenge structural barriers. This demonstrates the role of identity tension in world-making, encouraging individuals to reframe their identity position. Considering identity theory sets the foundation for specific identities and professional teacher identity will be explored below.

2.4.3 Teachers' Professional Identity

Teacher professional identity formation includes a complex intersection of influences, including personal beliefs, societal norms, and the educational environment. Nias (1989) highlighted the pivotal role of primary teachers' identities in shaping their perception of teaching as a professional endeavour. Nias' research sets the scene for comprehending how teachers conceptualise their roles within the educational sphere and building on this understanding, Ball's (2003b) exploration of performativity and professionalism in education highlights the mounting pressure educators face to meet accountability and performance criteria. Ball's work (Ball, 1995, 2003a, 2003b, 2018, 2021; Reay and Ball, 1997) contributes to the evolving discourse surrounding professionalism in the context of contemporary education, shaped significantly by demanding standards. In agreement with this critical notion of teacher professionalism, is the acknowledgement of the marketisation of education where the neo-liberal control methods are visible through policy and centralised standards (Conroy *et al.*, 2013).

The introduction of the teacher performance management policy in 1998 highlighted performativity in practice and set out a 'new professionalism' for teachers to aim towards (Mahony and Hextall, 2013). The rise of a performance culture in teaching has potentially reduced the value of certain elements of the role related to caring (Forrester, 2005). Linking this to the historical context of primary teaching being considered 'women's' work' and concerned with nurture, this shift to performance-based pay has positioned several elements as more valuable. Apple (2021) adds that along with the professionalism of teaching came the intensification of the expected work outputs. In alignment with these discussions, Mayer and Mills (2021) stress the intrinsic link between professionalism and increased accountability, emphasising how performance standards shape the professional identities of teachers. This central control over teaching as 'work' has shifted the cultural perception of teaching and defined what *good* teaching is (Hulme and Quirk Marku, 2017). Goodson *et al.* (2016) detailed how teaching as a profession has moved from being seen as mechanistic to a process, with teachers being seen as both villains and victims. If we agree the work of teachers is politically and socially constructed, research into these experiences must also acknowledge the narratives present in the political and social sphere. Arguably an individuals' own history is also relevant here as personal narratives are a product of master narratives (political, cultural and social discourses) interpreted and experienced by the

individual. Teachers' voices continue to be marginalised in education policy and the tension of teaching within a neoliberal world continues to challenge teachers (Hill, 2007; Reeves, 2018).

Considering the further implication of policy in defining what it means to be a *good* teacher, Carswell and Conway (2025) identify four elements of professional teacher identity shaped by teacher competency frameworks. These areas are: The end goal of being a teacher; the ethical substance of teacher identity; discursive authority sources and self-practice (pp1216). By exploring the teacher competency framework in Ireland, the researchers identified the areas in which teachers engage with external influences and internal processes to develop their professional identity. Teacher professionalism is one factor here in terms of what is defined as legitimate 'work', but professional belonging can also contribute to the development of identity (Hulme and Wood, 2022).

The challenge for teachers and their developing professional identity is entering a profession where *good* teaching has already been politically defined (Calabrese Barton and Yang, 2000). This can result in identity tensions, and this complex process can be both personal and emotional (Steadman, 2024). Similarly, for Zembylas (2003), teacher identity development is an emotional process in which teachers strive to make sense of their own experiences while trying to achieve *good* teaching. Considering the *good* teacher discourse, the only way for teachers to redefine this is to challenge the policy-driven stereotype. Developing an identity that challenges contemporary teaching discourse is difficult and requires agency (Melville and Bartley, 2013). Providing early career teachers with this opportunity can support the development of an identity that challenges current norms and can potentially improve both practice and professionalism (*ibid*), enabling working-class professional teachers to redefine what success looks like. Significant to professional identity development is the role of the placement school and mentor support provided to students (Rushton *et al.*, 2025), considering the available support to act with agency. In addition, Steadman (2021) notes that the experiences of conflict and transition can be transformative when developing a professional identity, linking with identity theory and concepts of shame, showing that uncomfortable experiences can contribute to positive identity development.

This understanding expands when considering the influence of personal beliefs and familial dynamics on aspiring teachers. These factors connect individuals' emerging beliefs towards teaching and contribute significantly to the development of their professional identity. This process can be explained as one of transition, where individuals shift their personal identity (Steadman, 2021) but is also more complex than a process of assimilation. Holland *et al.*'s (2001) concept of a radical reinterpretation of self in new educational contexts generates reflection regarding whether working-class/first-generation student-teachers might not change themselves but rather construct a unique figured world of teaching, challenging the conventional idea of self-transformation and highlighting the potential for individualised constructions of professional teacher identities. One example of this is the work of Keane (2024) who observed working-class students able to acknowledge their middle-class professional identity, whilst maintaining their working-class identity. In addition, working-class teachers often display a desire to become relatable and inclusive teachers (Keane *et al.*, 2020) potentially highlighting altruistic motivations. The emergence of a new teacher identity recognises working-class identity as valuable (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003) challenging earlier discourses of deficit. Ultimately, the construction of a professional identity among teachers emerges as a dynamic, interconnected process shaped by personal, societal, and educational factors. An exploration incorporating diverse perspectives and contemporary research adds to the understanding of the complexities present in this critical aspect of teacher training.

Crozier and Reay (2011) found that many working-class students manage to adapt to the range of HE expectations and Schei and Schei (2017) show how personal narratives can empower or disrupt the identity development process. Steadman's (2021) work on agency, transition, and conflict shows how becoming a teacher is emotional and conflict laden. This is due to managing competing pedagogical ideologies, conflicting identities, and contradictory explanations during ITE. Importantly, this acknowledgement does not suggest that these elements need to be eliminated; rather it highlights that they should be an openly recognised part of the teacher's professional identity process. Identity movement across HE and school spaces which hold different models of *good* teaching can become a transitional process. In this process, student-teachers personally define who they are in different figured worlds. In summary, the conflict serves as a trigger for transition which in turn shapes emerging agency. This allows student-teachers to form meaningful interpretations of their experiences.

However not all teachers see themselves as ‘teachers’ (Nias, 1989) and often teachers demonstrate a strong concern for the welfare of others over the desire to impart knowledge (Lortie, 1975). This can be seen to conflict with the shift towards performance-based work value and those caring elements being seen as non-work (Forrester, 2005). Lortie (1967) details the norms present in teaching that constrain behaviour or choices. Linking with Goffman’s (1959) discussion of shame, Lortie identified teaching as a profession with a certain amount of pre-knowledge of what it is to be a teacher, which is often not the reality. This aligns with practice shock that is discussed by Orr and Simmons (2010) detailing how early career teachers experience a disruption when entering the profession as the expectations they formed during their training did not match the reality of teaching. Lortie discusses shame as way to uncover the elements of teachers’ practice, they felt were not aligned to the social norms of teaching and found elements related to pupil welfare and teacher conduct were often cited. Despite this, mentor support was seen to be significant in supporting teachers to develop a professional identity (within the context of early career support) and may also explain why positive placement mentoring during the training phase is supportive (Hulme and Wood, 2022). Now that professional identity has been discussed as important, the literature relating to a working-class identity is presented below.

2.4.4 Working-class Identity

The class system in England is historical and persists within both policy and discourse (Goldstone, 2020). In 2013, the BBC funded an exploration into social class in Britain (Savage *et al.*, 2013), identifying seven categories of class (table 2.1 in appendix B). This new measure considered a more complex set of markers including education, income, social and cultural activities, occupation, and home ownership. Friedman *et al.* (2021) highlighted that individuals meeting demographic markers for being middle-class, can prefer to self-identify as working-class. A survey in 2024 (YouGov, 2024) asked which jobs were seen as middle and working-class and 59% of people saw teaching as more of a middle-class job with Goldthorpe (2007) categorising it as a middle-class professional occupation. However, Apple (2021) counters this, suggesting teachers cross over both the working-class and middle-class spheres. McEwan (2021) researched identity perceptions in young people whose families have undertaken intergenerational social mobility and find themselves in between class identities in relation to their home environment, education

and ideology. This research highlights the complexity of statistical markers of class that may demonstrate social mobility while not changing the self-perception of class identity.

Political attempts to reduce the effect of class inequality and even remove it have failed (Whitty, 2001; Connelly *et al.*, 2021) and Reay (2013) suggests that they even go as far to reinforce the inequality through affirming the difference between classes. As explored in Jacquet's (2023) concept of transclass, the aim should not be to move up the class structure, but to abolish it altogether. In fact, the social mobility discourse can be viewed as one of determinism where working-class individuals accept their social position as fixed and pre-determined through family circumstances (Reay, 2025). Reay (2021) notes that young people are often tasked with managing the tensions between a working-class background and a middle-class university environment. The alternative here is arguably to create an environment where working-class individuals can maintain their class identity alongside academic and career success without sacrificing their authenticity.

Social class identity is complex and challenging to define and while statistical indicators, as exemplified by Goldthorpe (2007), may outline class categories, the identity tied to one's class affiliation goes beyond income levels or occupational choices. In fact, the statistical measures themselves may not be accurate (Boliver *et al.*, 2022) and many individuals in Britain identify as a certain class based on their upbringing rather than their current circumstances with 72% of people agreeing family background was more important than current circumstances when defining class (YouGov, 2024). Being working-class continues to be a significant part of an individual's social identity, connected with their sense of community, familial bonds, and sense of place. Rather than relying solely on quantitative markers to define this phenomenon, it is necessary to give significance to self-identification. Recognising the subjective agency in defining one's class identity becomes pivotal in understanding the depth and subtleties of working-class identity. In alignment with the constructionist perspective on identity formation, which highlights its social construction and reconstruction through interpersonal dynamics, statistical measures lose importance and appear inadequate in exploring the diversity of experiences.

Not all social class research focuses on the perceived negatives of working-class individuals, Bettencourt (2020) identifies many strengths associated with working-class backgrounds, including work ethic, sense of responsibility and value of money. Individuals can also provide a sense of empathy to understand and relate to others which would be a clear asset in a nurturing profession such as teaching. In addition, Hurst (2010) found four benefits demonstrated by working-class participants: awareness of multiple perspectives, sensitivity to issues of oppression, resourcefulness, amounts of discipline, tenacity and hard work. Despite this, middle-class institutions expect working-class students to conform to middle-class norms. This is further enforced by institutional norms which dictate what it means to be a student (Rainford, 2021a) and presents a *good* student benchmark as the standard.

Pearce *et al.* (2008) researched the concept of a *good* student and found working-class students had a loyalty to their class identity while reframing being working-class from a negative to a positive, through giving back to their local community. For these students, their class identity was not something to lose but instead they were able to combine their class and graduate identity. This was supported by Loveday (2016) whose participants were proud of their working-class identity. Class identity is often minimised as an important factor in belonging at HE and the concept of fair access can overshadow the importance of class as an element in collective belonging (Snee and Devine, 2018). Also important is the way that working-class students are conceptualised through widening participation policy, something affecting both the discourse of what it means to be a student and the way in which HE staff see these individuals (Rainford, 2021b). Bathmaker (2021) notes that identity features of social class, gender and ethnicity continue to affect the experience of moving from university into the world of work, and necessary personal attributes for success are adaptability, self-efficacy and resilience. It may be productive to consider how working-class attributes are aligned to those desirable attributes for the professional workplace, and a strength-based approach may be one solution. O'Shea and Delahunty (2019) propose a strengths-based approach as a counter narrative to the discourse of aspiration deficit and suggest when the focus is on existing capabilities, success is more likely.

Class identity is complex and intersects across many other identity elements (ethnicity, gender, age). Bonnett (1998) details how the working-class identity has become synonymous with being white in Britain and the role of class as a paradigm for racial inequality, something supported in

the DfE (2026) white paper. Edwards *et al.* (2012) also reported how, since the 21st century, politics has worked to reframe the working-class as homogeneous and white, something echoed in the 2026 white paper (DfE, 2026). Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2017) explores how class was removed as a category of importance from political policy in the 1980s but despite this, inequality persisted. Class was something, according to Thatcher, persistent only in the minds of the workers rather than being a cultural phenomenon. The denial of class did not serve to remove such inequality however and working-class discourses persist. In her research, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite interviewed 100 people in Manchester from 1997-1999 and found that working-class people have a stronger belief in education whilst seeing middle and upper-class people as 'snobby'. This research also notes how people correlate certain values with class and that working-class values were seen to be those of hard-work and self-reliance. Even though politically, Britain is not ruled by the class system, Evans and Mellon (2016), found the number of people identifying as working-class remains broadly stable with 60% of people surveyed identifying as working-class, which has not changed since 1983. In addition, 47% of people classed as managerial or professional would still consider themselves working-class. This was supported by Friedman *et al.* (2021) who reported that people from privileged upbringings tend to mis-identify themselves as working-class reflecting an intergenerational self that deflects and obscures social mobility. The reason for this may be that it is perceived as more admirable to be successful from effort rather than structural privilege, suggesting as well as the working-class identity being persistent and intergenerational, it also serves a function in positioning success because of personal effort. Challenging the notion of a homogenous working-class identity, Evans and Mellon (2016) found political attitudes were more in line with those in similar occupations than those in the same class which presents an interesting perspective for identity development within professional environments.

The literature relating to identity and class has been explored alongside a brief historical overview of teaching and education policy relating to social mobility. A more detailed review of the historical and political context was beyond the scope of this work. Following a consideration of the literature, several research gaps were identified which are detailed below.

2.5 Research gaps

Identity and social class have been heavily researched (e.g. Crozier *et al.* 2016, Loveday 2015, Wainwright and Watts 2021) however, this is often approached from a deficit model (Friedman, 2014; Kulz, 2017; Mura, 2015; Reay *et al.*, 2009; Stahl, 2018). Within a deficit approach the reasons why students may experience challenge are explored with little research to acknowledge the potential benefits of being working-class. A strength-based approach is limited within literature and greater attention is needed to address the limiting discourse of working-class deficit. UK specific research and primary education specific research is also limited with a large body of research being from overseas or focusing on secondary education. This fails to recognise the unique elements of primary teaching as a nurturing profession and different to secondary education. It also fails to acknowledge the experiences of primary student-teachers in England working within specific education policy.

Research is often focused on HE in general, rather than primary teaching or ITE which does not account for the addition of professional requirements alongside the standard degree requirements. Although like the medical field, the placement-based element of ITE courses present a different challenge for students compared with those on a non-placement-based degree. Research exploring professional identity either focuses on experienced teachers, early career teachers or those from different backgrounds. Meaning the intersection of working-class and first-generation as a unique marker of potential disadvantage combined with the focus on primary ITE creates new knowledge and understanding. As a result, this research aims to look at how to create a culture of success within working-class/first-generation students.

2.6 The Research Aims and Questions

Following the literature review and consideration of the research gaps, the following research aims and questions have been created to explore the way working-class/first-generation student-teachers experience the development of a professional identity during their time undertaking an undergraduate initial teacher training degree.

Research aim –

To explore the processes and influences impacting student-teachers' professional identity development.

Main research question –

RQ - How do working-class/first-generation student-teachers make sense of their developing professional identity and what are the factors contributing to this process?

Specific research objectives –

1. Explore the figured worlds experienced by working-class/first-generation student-teachers.
2. Investigate the master (cultural) narratives and personal narratives supporting the combination of class identity and the new professional teacher identity.
3. Investigate possible counter narratives these students use to manage identity tensions.

Subsidiary Research Questions -

1. What cultural and personal narratives are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences that influence an emerging professional identity? (SQ1)
2. What tensions emerge between a personal/class identity and a professional teacher identity? (SQ2)
3. How do student-teachers reframe existing narratives to combine their class identity and emerging professional teacher identity? (SQ3)

This research aims to explore the re-categorisation of what it means to be a teacher (Nias, 1989, Ball, 2003b) and find out if individuals can combine both their community/class identity with their

emerging professional identity.

2.7 Summary

From the critically appraised literature the research aims and questions have been authored to explore the professional identity development of working-class/first-generation student-teachers. This research builds on the theory of figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) and its associated work on identity construction to give voice to the experiences of student-teachers as they work to retain their class identity while developing a professional teacher identity. Teacher training has been chosen due to the professional placement element of the course which differs from a non-placement based undergraduate degree as the requirement to behave professionally is brought to the forefront for these students.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains and justifies the critical research paradigm in which the research is located and provides a detailed exploration of the data collection tools of narrative inquiry interviewing (3.9), journalling (3.8) and pen portraits (3.10). A narrative approach was selected to complement the figured worlds theoretical framework and acknowledge the significance of participants' own interpretations of events and experiences as a marker for identity development. The multi-methods approach has been designed to allow a shared meaning to be developed between the researcher and participant.

3.2 Research Paradigm and Context

One way of organising research paradigms is on the qualitative/quantitative distinction (Johnson and Christensen, 2024). Within this distinction the data collection tools link directly to the underlying philosophical beliefs relating to ontology and epistemology and is arguably a crude and outdated view. The suggestion of discrete categories does not highlight the complexity of data and ignores the opportunity for both quantitative and qualitative data to contribute to research insights. Another categorisation used is positivist/scientific; interpretative and critical (Scotland, 2012). This moves away from data type and focuses instead on the purpose of the research as well as ontology and epistemology. Although presented as discrete categories there is an acknowledgement that there is some blurring of these paradigms, especially the interpretivist and critical paradigms. Interpretivist research is an approach focusing on understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals within their social context and accepts there are multiple truths, open to interpretation. Rather than striving for an absolute truth, the interpretivist researcher aims to analyse the social phenomenon (Clarke, 2009). Research within this paradigm often adopts qualitative data collections tools such as journals (e.g. Van der Wal *et al.*, 2019), case study interviews (E.g. Frostenson and Englund, 2020), and qualitative questionnaires (E.g. Hoffman *et al.*, 2019). Although less common, interpretivist research can use quantitative methods such as in Richter *et al.* (2021) who used factor analysis to explore teachers' professional identity.

The critical research paradigm acknowledges the subjective experience but also seeks to disrupt the persisting inequalities and is concerned with social justice (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). Research conducted within the critical paradigm favours qualitative data collection tools such as interviews (e.g. Rood and Ashby, 2020), observations (e.g. Kolluri, 2019) and focus groups (e.g. Stahl, 2018). Linking to the research concepts explored here, identity research is often conducted from an interpretivist research paradigm. In contrast, social class research can be seen to operate within the critical research paradigm and the example studies all adopted interviews as either their main or only data collection tool (Phillips *et al.*, 2020; Bathmaker, 2021; Hecht *et al.*, 2020; Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021; Bettencourt, 2021). Reay (2021) utilised interviewing to generate qualitative data relating to participants' perceptions of being working-class at university. She used interviews alongside emails and informal chats, enabling the researchers to gain a shared understanding of individuals experiences showing qualitative data collection tools enable a richness of data to be generated. Both ontology and epistemology will be explored further in 3.3 below. This research sits within the interpretivist research paradigm with some elements of critical research, adopting a multiple truths view of the world whilst acknowledging persistent class inequalities. This research aims to analyse and challenge the cultural perception that working-class individuals are somehow lacking or 'less' when it comes to HE and professional careers.

3.3 Ontology, Epistemology and the Critical Paradigm

Although the concepts of ontology and epistemology will be discussed separately here in relation to this research, considerations of ontology are inextricably linked with epistemology at its core. As noted by Akkerman *et al.* (2021) these values relate to the social, economic and cultural position that considers the reason for this research as well as the power influences affecting it. To summarise these positions, the idealist ontology is founded in the philosophical works of Kant and Hegel (Krijnen, 2015) and proposes what is known about the world is subject to interpretation. It is concerned with the way in which reality is connected to the mind and the foundation of everything is linked to a mental process. This ontological position is crucial to this research as it acknowledges the importance of the mind and interpretation rather than alluding to a positivist existence of an external truth. Acknowledging the subjectivity of our mind's interpretation of the world enables this research to use individual stories to shape the nature of identity and develop our understanding of that process. Linking further to the concept of ontology in motion which recognises the influence of time and the changes occurring through participation in reality

(Akkerman *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly relevant to this research when looking to understand the process of identity development and how participants recall of experiences both reveal and construct a professional identity. This ontology in motion can be seen to take place in a defined space where there are accepted master narratives or norms governing expected behaviour as part of a group. As noted by Elfreich (2019) how we explain and make sense of the past forms part of the construction of new identities.

Epistemological considerations are fundamental to understanding how knowledge is constructed and validated. A social constructionist epistemology acknowledges our interpretation of the world, and the role of language in creating meaning. Research is conducted to understand an individual's perception of the world around them and focuses on how this world is interpreted by the individuals themselves. Phillips (2023) discusses how these interpretations include an individual's position including factors relating to gender, class, race and ethnicity. The complexity of intersecting identity elements means researching within a social constructionist epistemology means acknowledging the ever-changing nature of these individuals and how they interpret their identity in relation to others. For an epistemological underpinning to support such a research aim an exploration of the critical paradigm is needed. Within this critical paradigm, historical influences and meanings are acknowledged, and language is not purely a tool to describe reality but one that shapes it (Scotland, 2012). The critical paradigm works within power influences and cultural and historical elements to understand, challenge and reconstruct. Holland *et al.* (2001) explores constructionism, explaining how knowledge is shaped by societal interactions and perceptions. In this context, individuals often turn to personal narratives, as highlighted by Lewis (2025), to navigate and make sense of their experiences. Revisiting the figured worlds concept, individuals use these personal narratives to understand and align their thoughts and actions to master (group) narratives as part of identity change and construction. McAdams (2006) aligns narrative methodology with its philosophical underpinnings, stressing its suitability for exploring the subjective nature of reality. Narratives can manifest in various forms, including discourses, personal anecdotes, and dominant cultural narratives. McLean (2008) suggests a dichotomy between master narratives, which encompass overarching societal beliefs, and personal narratives, which represent individual or marginalised perspectives.

My position is a subjective epistemological position and as such recognises research is shaped by the researcher through the construction of meaning. Levers (2013) explains how observations are affected by the observer and knowledge of the social world will be 'filtered' through the lens of the researcher (McKechnie *et al.*, 2008). The positionality of the researcher as a working-class/first-generation teacher (3.16) is important here and honest reflexivity has been conducted as part of the post research quality process (3.17, appendix C). However, the current researcher position may also provide some unequal privilege which has been explored further in 3.16. Considering the critical paradigm further, it is important to explore how the figured world of primary teaching represents or reproduces inequality. What counts as worthwhile knowledge is determined by the social and positional power of the researcher and as a result certain voices can be marginalised and seen as less important. My position is both of an insider and outsider researcher and the conundrum this creates will be explored in 3.16. An 'insider' researcher is an integrated part of the topic being studied, whereas an outsider is not a part of the topic being studies (Yanto and Pandin, 2023).

Although the critical research paradigm can be seen to challenge social inequality, Dimock (2021) suggests this paradigm operates within current social, cultural and historical influences meaning it is also subject to political bias which, through policy, constructs a view of what is legitimate knowledge and what is even worth researching. Exploring professional teacher identity within a working-class field can be seen to both support the policy agenda that education is the solution to class inequality (DfE, 2016; 2022; 2026) and the problem (Reay, 2018) through the reproduction of inequality. The tension exists here that any findings supporting the struggles of working-class students only reinforces and legitimises the inequality between classes and supports the notion anyone can succeed if they only work hard enough. This also presents as tension within my researcher identity. As both an insider (teacher, working-class/first-generation) and outsider (having achieved social mobility through professional status) to the research field, my own narrative of professional identity will potentially become interwoven with participant narratives. This will be acknowledged but not seen as a limiting factor due to the very nature of narrative inquiry and the researcher-participant relationship (Clandinin, 2018) (appendix D).

3.4 Research Design: Figured Worlds and the Narrative Approach

This research draws from the theory of figured worlds (2.4.1) by Holland *et al.* (2001) as a framework to understand and interpret professional identity development. An important concept within this framework is the awareness of socially constructed *worlds* with cultural expectations and language forms. Also, significant is the social constructionist view of identity formation within figured worlds (2.4.2). The main research aims of exploring the processes and influences impacting working-class/first-generation student-teachers' professional identity development, drives the methodological approach with the theoretical framework highlighting the social construction of identity acknowledging both the historical and cultural influences described in figured worlds. Alongside this, the belief identity is both constructed and reconstructed through social spheres and the outward image of this is one of stories told and lived (Clandinin, 2012) aligns with a narrative methodology which aims to explore those stories as the expression of personal identity. Stories are accepted as both a retelling of identity and a reconstructor of identity (*ibid*). Supporting the concept further, Asplund and Perez Prieto (2020) suggest narratives serve as a means for individuals to construct and express their identities. McAdams and McLean (2013) agree, asserting narrative identities are comprised of internalised life stories. These can significantly influence self-development (McLean, 2008), a crucial consideration, given the focus of the research on personal and professional identity change, and development.

The narrative approach used was developed using a multi-methods approach including a demographic questionnaire, participant written journalling and individual interviews. Although a traditional narrative inquiry methodology often adopts a more longitudinal approach, a more compact approach was adopted to enable the participants to put forward stories they found significant (Butler-Kisber, 2010). This removes the research bias to an extent where decisions would need to be made about which elements of field data were significant. The narrative approach developed with the exploration of stories in the initial pilot study conducted in 2022 (3.12). This pilot explored the use of semi-structured interviewing to elicit personal stories. As a result of this work several methodological adaptations were made including the revision of the interview schedule and the addition of journal prompts (3.12). The initial demographic questionnaire (appendix E) enabled key information to be collected without interrupting the flow of the conversational interview which recognises relationship building as a key element of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). Journal prompts were scheduled around the

university and placement calendar to maximise the timely sharing of experiences (appendix F). Interview 1 was devised drawing upon the insights of Atkinson (1998), McAdams and McLean (2013), and Mueller (2019). In more detail, (Atkinson, 1998) developed the life story interview in detail and provided a framework for eliciting life stories through interviewing. Although elements of this were present in the final interview schedule (parental background and educational history), many elements were removed due to the time required to conduct a life story interview. McAdams and McLean (2013) explore narrative identity through storytelling and provide an explanation of how a narrative identity is formed through stories which informed the interview 1 questions (Appendix G), specifically the decision to ask for positive and negative experiences and how self-exploration is developed. Mueller, (2019) suggested a more succinct methodology in contrast to traditional life-story work through 'episodic narrative interviewing' which provides a more achievable data collection tool to encourage both participation and continuing research engagement from participants. Following further literature exploration of the narrative methodology, it was decided to capture the stories as they unfolded, journal prompts would be sent at key times in the student calendar. Finally, interview 2 was scheduled to clarify previous data points and add more detail to stories shared in interview 1 and participant journal entries. Each research objective was considered alongside data types to ensure the selected data collection tools could elicit relevant findings. A summary of this can be found in table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: How findings address each research objective

Research objective	Data function
Explore the figured worlds that are experienced by working-class/first-generation student- teachers.	Narrative interview data enables the researcher to identify and highlight structural cultural and narrative elements of the figured world of teacher training, HE and teacher professionalism.
Investigate the master (cultural) narratives and personal narratives supporting the combination of class identity and the new professional teacher identity.	Narrative interview data highlights personal stories and master narratives were analysed to identify how students develop their professional identity and how this process presents challenges. The narrative interview

	data identified ways in which participants overcame these challenges. Demographic data enabled the researcher to identify any patterns in narratives are affected by age, gender and route to HE.
Investigate possible counter narratives these students use to manage identity tensions.	Narrative interview data were analysed to identify the personal narratives participants used to situate themselves within the WC professional field.

A data collection timeline can be seen below in figure 3.1 which demonstrates how the different data collection tools were organised across the data collection phase.

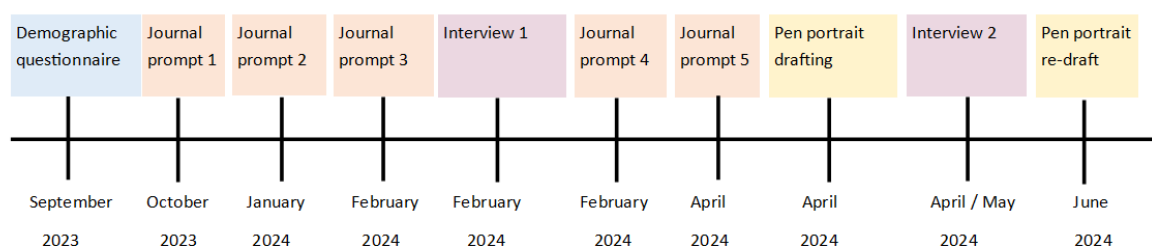


Figure 3.1: Data collection timeline

3.5 The Importance of Place

Drawing on the influence of place and the impact on belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023) (2.3.3), the research setting is one warranting further discussion. The case study HEI is situated in England, specifically the Midlands. The demographic data for the region at the time the research was conducted shows the region is in the top 20 of local authority districts with the highest proportion of neighbourhoods in the most deprived 10% (IMD, 2025). The region is also in the top 20 for children and elderly living in income deprived households (IMD, 2025). Furthermore, the case study HEI 2022-23 data (most recent) shows at the time of the study 36.27% of undergraduate student-teachers are from quintile 1-2 for the indices of multiple deprivation (IMD, 2025) and 34.95% are from quintile 1 of POLAR4 (a measure of participation in HE by area 1-5, 5 being the

lowest) meaning these students are from an area where participation in HE is least likely with 24% from a widening participation area based on home postcode. In addition, 91.26% of students commute from home to attend university rather than living on campus.

The research location is situated in an 'opportunity area' (DfE, 2017). This is an English policy initiative identifying the 12 most deprived areas of England with an aim to encourage social mobility through funding additional projects. The relevance of this location to the research is participants who identify as working-class will also be part of a cultural and social discourse where working-class individuals are considered the majority group. Such class-based assumptions can be seen to reproduce inequality in education (Ahn and Davis, 2020) and will need to be considered through data analysis to reduce the effect that this research does not reinforce the inequality that it aims to challenge.

3.6 Participant Sampling

Probability sampling was adopted (Daniel, 2012) where participants met the inclusion criteria. The invitation to participate was initially sent to all current students (210 students) on the target primary teacher training course at levels 4, 5 and 6. The inclusion criteria for participants were: individuals enrolled in an undergraduate teacher training programme at the designated HEI; first-generation students, (meaning neither their parents nor grandparents have attended university) and self-identifying as working-class. After the initial invite, 15 individuals expressed an interest in taking part in the research. Consent was provided from 14 individuals, and 10 participants completed all data collection elements with two participants in L4, two in L5 and the remaining six in L6. The remaining 4 participants were withdrawn (1 requested to withdraw) and 3 others were withdrawn from non-engagement over a period of 3 journal prompts (appendix H).

The distinction between being categorised as first-generation students and self-identifying as working-class acknowledges the complexity of identity formation. Adams (2009) argues while categorisation implies fixed boundaries, identity is a dynamic construct subject to change and influenced by various social and personal factors. To ensure objectivity and avoid imposing value judgments, the study refrained from providing statistical class markers, thus allowing participants

to define their own socioeconomic status based on their lived experiences and self-perception. Recognising the complexity of defining working-class self-identification can be a way to overcome this. Rickett and Morris (2021) also adopted self-identification to ensure participants had autonomy over their identity elements. Self-identification is used differently by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013), where instead of using statistical markers of class, the participants were asked instead to describe their class background in their own words during data collection. For this study, participants were asked to self-identify as working-class to decide if they met the inclusion criteria, but interview questions also asked them to describe their own social class. Using a combination of both above approaches.

3.7 Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire (appendix E) was developed to contribute to subsidiary research question 1: What cultural and personal narratives are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences that influence an emerging professional identity? By understanding key information about participants: age range, qualifications, confirmation of first-generation and commuting status, it enabled these factors to be explored in more detail during interview 1 and 2. An additional question around sibling attendance at HE was sent to all participants via email. Participants were invited to select their own pseudonym with one being selected for them if they did not wish to choose. The demographic data were used during the pen portrait and analysis phase to include contextual information for each participant, and a summary of participant demographic data can be found in table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2: Participant demographic data

Participant	University level	Demographic markers	Age band	Living Arrangements	Family links to university (HEI)
Louise	4	Care leaver	18-25	On campus	Older sister attended HEI
Rebecca	4	None	18-25	With parents	Twin sister attended HEI
Dave	5	Mature student	35+	With family	Wife previously attended HEI
Dorothy	5	None	18-25	With parents	None
Jane	6	Mature student	25-35	With family	None
Ava	6	Mature student	35+	With family	None
Ruby	6	EAL	18-25	With family	None
Melanie	6	Mature student	35+	With family	Auntie attended HEI
Sarah	6	Mature student	18-25	With family	None
Laura	6	None	18-25	With family	None

3.8 Journal Entries

The journal as a narrative tool, in literature terms, is regarded as a personal record and can include expression, reflection, memory and a tool for self-exploration (Brien and McAllister, 2016). Participants were invited to complete five separate journal prompts linked to the subsidiary research questions and the interview questions. The journal entries were designed to identify the cultural and personal assumptions, or narratives, participants held about teaching and university whilst also highlighting tensions within these identity elements. Individual journaling supported the retelling of events or 'personal stories' in the participants' own words (Holley and Colyar, 2009). A shared word document was set up, visible to the researcher and individual participant only. This provided the five journal prompts which were also sent via email at the specified times. The dates of the journal prompts were set around the participant university calendar and as such differed for first (L4), second (L5) and third year (L6) students (appendix F). The aim of this was to capture their thoughts and experiences at key points of the academic year including when they had just started placement, mid placement and at the end of the academic year. Participants had access to the shared file and were invited to include any additional journal entries through the duration of the data collection (October 2023 to April 2024) but only one participant made an additional entry. The decision to invite additional journal entries was to capture potentially significant moments arising outside of the journal prompt calendar. A summary of participant journal response times can be found in appendix H.

3.9 Interviews

Participants took part in two individual interviews. Interview 1 explored stories and experiences linked to university and placement (appendix G). Interview 2 was a reflective interview exploring elements of interview 1 and the journal entries in more detail. The interviews were originally designed to be conducted in person but due to participant work commitments, several took place over Microsoft Teams at the request of the participant (3.12). The interview 1 questions were designed to supplement the journal entries and enable participants to share experiences of both university and placement to answer SQ1 and 2 by identifying those narratives relating to university and teaching, whilst highlighting the tensions that emerged between a working-class/first-generation identity and a professional teacher identity. SQ3 was addressed in interview 1 through the way participants chose to talk about their positive and negative experiences.

Several authors were influential in the design of the interview schedule and a summary of these can be seen in appendix J.

The influence of episodic narrative interviewing (Mueller, 2019) was significant and warrants further exploration here. This approach took the narrative inquiry, life-story interview and adapted it to focus on a particular experience in a more time efficient way, aiming to uncover smaller, focussed narratives. Within this approach, Mueller suggested preparation stages for an episodic narrative interview. These begin with the definition of the topic under focus, and the initial question asking the participant to define the phenomenon of interest, in this case 'what does social class mean to you?' (Appendix G, Q1a and 1b). Following this initial question, further questions are designed to invite the participant to tell a story within a particular situation, 'tell me about the best memory at university?' (Q2.3). After this the participant is asked to tell a story related to the research topic (social class) which was included in question Q2.5 asking participants to think about others in their university cohort and if they noticed anyone they felt was more middle-class. Interview 2 enabled participants to give further details or clarify meanings offering the participant the option to change or add to any of the narratives.

The interview 1 questions aimed to elicit responses relating to the personal, family, factors and institutional factors (including placement experiences) impacting identity development. A semi-structured approach enabled the researcher to engage in conversation relating to the participants' stories and ask them to expand or explain further. Following the interview 1, the Microsoft Teams transcription was edited alongside the recording to ensure there were no transcription errors. Prior to interview 2, the journal prompts, and interview 1 transcription were considered and follow up questions were devised using themes (appendix G). The reflexive interview approach was inspired by Arksey and Knight (1999) whose work on oral history interviews provided an insight into the need for a flexible approach and influenced by the work of Pessoa *et al.* (2019) who suggested the key types of questions in a reflexive interview: in-depth questions; clarification questions; confirmatory questions; organising questions and reflections. The journal and interview 1 data were mapped against the master pen portrait headings (appendix K, 3.10) to ensure there were no gaps in information. Two participants spoke about a bereavement in their initial interview, and it was explicitly checked if they were comfortable to be included in the pen portrait and data analysis which they both were.

Interviews were both recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams functions. Both files were saved and additionally uploaded to NVivo for analysis. The use of NVivo was supported by the work of Jackson and Bazeley (2019), who provide both structural guidance and a deeper analysis of the approach in their book, 'qualitative data analysis with NVivo'. The initial interview transcripts removed the conversational start/end to some interviews between researcher and participant. After further reading on relational ethics (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Clandinin, 2012, 2018) and narrative relationships these were re-transcribed to include the conversational elements, showing the inclusion of relationship building and the co-construction of a shared identity.

3.10 Pen Portraits

Pen portraits have been used as both data organisation and data analysis. Individual pen portraits were created for each participant (appendix L). These were narrativised and were essentially an interpretative summary representing the qualitative data held for each participant (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). This enabled the data to be presented as a coherent story. The advantages of pen portrait data presentation are it provides the ability to present the data in a more accessible way (Campbell *et al.*, 2004). Blundell and Oakley, (2024) describe how pen portraits can have different uses in research and can be both a descriptive summary and a reflective tool. Pen portraits were used in research by Carpentieri *et al.* (2024) who researched British social history, as a solution to data fragmentation.

The process for creating the pen portraits can be seen in figure 3.2 below and followed the proposed steps by Sheard and Marsh (2019) which are: 1) define what to focus on, 2) design a basic structure, 3) populate the content and 4) interpretation. Stage 2, design a basic structure, was developed from the journal and interview 1 data and was informed by the pilot study 2 pen portrait (appendix P). Once the pen portraits were drafted, these were sent to participants for their agreement and invitation to make changes and co-author. This member checking processes (Seale, 2010) supported research trustworthiness. The process of authoring the pen portraits was also used as a form of analysis where findings were analysed to create the portraits through

selection of key elements relating to the research questions whilst also considering the themes emerging from initial data analysis.

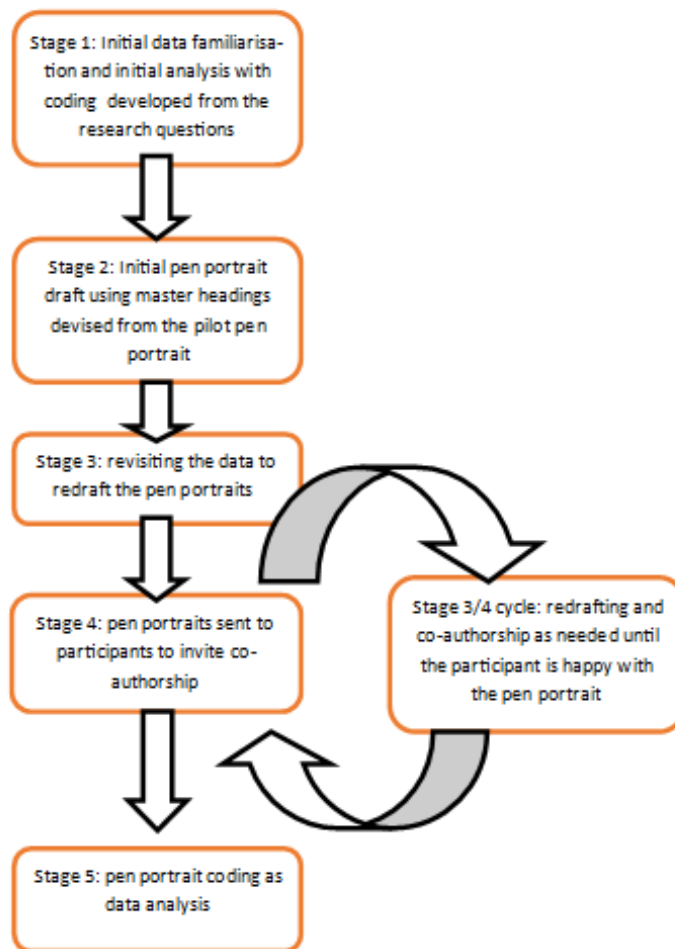


Figure 3.2: Pen portrait process (adapted from Sheard and Marsh, 2019)

In addition to data organisation, pen portraits can be an analytical tool for incorporating themes or patterns (Holloway and Jefferson, 2013). Pen portraits as a data analysis tool have been explored by Sheard and Marsh (2019) in the field of medical research. The process of using pen portraits as part of the data analysis process was also adopted by Blundell and Oakley (2023) where they suggested their use in analysis was an underused technique. Using the pen portraits as a data source for analysis acknowledges retold experiences in the form of stories inherently include an evaluation of the events (Golombek and Johnson, 2021). In this way the participant perception of the experience is shared as part of the story and using narrativised summaries in

the form of pen portraits presented a new set of data which displayed recurrent themes. Byrne (2017) suggests providing a narrative retelling can give voice to participants and support meaning making.

3.11 Limitations

Several methodological limitations were identified both during the data collection and analysis process. Journal consistency was considered in the planning stage, drawing on researcher experiences including the work of Cameron and Panović (2017), demonstrating the challenges of participants continuing to engage with personal journals. To mitigate this, only five journal prompts were sent to participants at key times in the academic calendar to minimise fatigue and encourage engagement (appendix F). Despite this mitigation there were several participants who needed a reminder to complete the journals, and one participant was withdrawn due to non-completion. A summary of the participant completion times can be found in appendix H. Out of the five journal prompts, eight participants completed all five, one participant completed four and a final participant completed three but requested to continue to participate in the research. From the original 15 volunteers, 10 participants completed the research tasks. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the findings here due to the small participant sample. Another emerging limitation was the timing of the journal prompts and interviews around the academic calendar which is discussed further in 3.12.

3.12 Research Development: Pilot Studies and Methodological Modifications

Throughout the data collection process several methodological modifications were made to address elements of participant engagement and research quality. Two pilot studies were conducted prior to the research taking place which will be discussed below. Pilot study one included an individual interview, and a group interview. The schedule for this can be seen in appendix M and amendments following pilot 1 can be seen in appendix N. Although the rationale for a group interview was founded in the aim to reduce negative power effects (Egid *et al.*, 2021) and introduce a participatory element (Gilflores and Alonso, 1995) there were concerns about participant anonymity as the group discussion meant participants would be able to identify each other. The ethical responsibility for taking care of stories told (Clandinin *et al.*, 2007) (3.15)

resulted in the decision to remove the group element from the research and introduce the participant re-drafting of pen portraits to retain some participatory element (3.10).

Pilot study two included an individual interview and a sample pen portrait which was sent to the participant for feedback. The second interview pilot was due to the changes made following pilot study 1 and the interview schedule can be seen in appendix O. The interview 1 schedule was unchanged from the pilot 2 interview, but the addition of an interview 2 structure was introduced to enable the researcher to check for meaning and ensure a more authentic voice (Pessoa *et al.*, 2019). Pilot 2 included five participants undertaking a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) course at the HEI. The decision to include participants from a different course was to allow for a full volunteer sample from the undergraduate (UG) programme in the main research. All five pilot 2 participants were interviewed individually in person and the interviews were recorded and transcribed to enable analysis. It was through this analysis process the decision to summarise the data as a pen portrait was introduced. A pen portrait sample was created using data from a pilot 1 participant with consent and sent to the participant for their feedback. This sample pilot study pen portrait (appendix P) informed the creation of the master pen portrait headings (appendix K) and the content for research interview 2.

Participant engagement modifications were made to enable participants ease of access. Although the research interviews were scheduled around the academic and placement calendar, there was flexibility offered to participants over a period of two weeks which enabled them to schedule the interview at a convenient time. Interviews took place in a meeting room on the HEI campus, neutral in location and accessible to all participants. Eight interview 1 meetings took place in this way and were recorded on Microsoft Teams to enable audio recording and transcription. Two were further conducted remotely over teams on request of the participants. Interview 2 meetings were offered as a face-to-face meeting on campus or a Teams meeting remotely. Two participants selected to meet on campus whilst the other eight selected teams. Although the effect of in person interviewing versus online/phone interviewing can be seen to limit interaction and engagement through the removal of body language and emotional cues (Gubrium *et al.*, 2012), the ability to use video calling as a method enabled this to take place with minimal disruption. Salmons (2014), concludes online interviewing can be a valuable and credible research method when carefully designed. Staddon (2023) also notes following the COVID pandemic, many

students were required to use online technology to study which resulted in increased confidence when using technologies to communicate.

This increase in video requests for interview 2 was due to the university term ending and participants negotiating family and work commitments. This manifested in challenges when setting up interview 2 as L6 participants had completed the course and many were working. This meant that the second interviews took place across May- July 2024. The impact of this may affect the positioning of professional identity as one participant (Melanie) was working as a teacher and spoke from a position of experience when talking about her teacher identity. The data from this participant was included as interview 1 and the journal entries were completed prior to the course being completed. This provides a unique insight into the process of a developing professional identity from student to qualified professional. To increase participant engagement during the interview process, the researcher shared personal stories with the participant to both model the storytelling process and provide a sense of belonging and reduce 'otherness' between the participant and researcher (Bondy, 2012). Although this research was not designed to be fully participatory, it was important to provide as many elements of participant participation as possible. This discussion enabled participants to comment and create shared meaning of concepts and experiences.

3.13 The Data Analysis Process

To analyse the data six stages of analysis took place which can be seen in table 3.3 below and these will be explored further in this section.

Table 3.3: Stages of data analysis

Stage	Aim	Process
1	Data familiarisation and reflexive engagement	Transcription of interviews and reading of journal prompts. Inductive orientation of findings (Braun and Clarke, 2022).
2	Data organisation	Adding each participant as a case in NVivo and labelling data type (interview 1, 2 and journal).
3	Initial coding and integration of journal data	Initial data coding across four key themes: identity, personal/family, institutional and placement. Identification of similarities to inform the pen portrait master headings.
4	Interview 2	Creation of interview 2 reflexive questions
5	Data summaries	Pen portrait creation.
6	Re-coding and theme development	Coding of data focusing on figured worlds of class, university and primary teaching creating analysis themes.
7	Theoretical mapping through Figured Worlds	Pen portrait redrafts following interview 2 and participant feedback. Examination of findings to refine themes across narratives and re-organise presentation of analysis in line with Figured Worlds theoretical framework (appendix I for a sample).
8	Iterative refinement	Ongoing analysis through the research process. Continuous engagement with findings, pen portraits and theory to ensure themes were grounded in participant narratives.

Polkinghorne (1995) describes a crucial distinction between the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. In this study, the focus will be on analysis of the participant narratives. Using a reflexive thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), enables the synthesis of shared experiences among participants by identifying common themes and patterns within the narratives. Although a thematic analysis alone might risk minimising the uniqueness of individual stories, it could be argued that such an approach enables the synthesis of shared experiences among participants. In addition, the reflexive thematic analysis was adapted from the 6-step approach by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022) to include additional steps as seen in table 3.3 above. Analysis was informed by both narrative inquiry and the Figured Worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) theoretical framework. Rather than following a linear sequence of coding and theme development, the process involved repeated movement between the interview transcripts, journal entries, pen portraits and emerging interpretations. This approach enabled the development of participant narratives whilst maintain sensitivity to the social and cultural contexts influencing identity development. Through the analysis of narratives, the study aims to uncover both the individual perspective and the collective constructs that contribute to the participants lived experiences within the teaching profession.

3.14 Analysing Narratives

Stage 1 involved data familiarisation and reflexive engagement. Building on the work of Braun and Clarke (2022), the interviews were transcribed and re-read over a period of 4 weeks. This process enabled a depth of engagement but was also characterised with periods of distance from the findings to enable researcher reflexivity. Following this period of data familiarisation, stage 2 involved the organisation of findings where individual interview transcripts were added to NVivo to support organisation. During stage 3, initial semantic coding took place where responses were coded as either identity, personal/family, institutional or placement related. These codes were selected to focus the analysis on the research question and enabled initial themes to be created. The journal entry data was also organised against each participant case in NVivo at this stage. This initial coding identified the dominant or 'master' narratives present in the data which informed the focus of the pen portrait and built on the process of semantic coding by Braun and Clarke (2022).

Following this initial coding stage, participants were invited to interview 2 (analysis stage 4) where the researcher prompted reflection on the shared experiences (participant journal and interview 1). These clarification questions ensured participant stories and interpretations were represented in the way the participants were happy with. A sample of follow up questions can be seen in appendix K. Following interview 2, pen portraits were created for each participant (analysis stage 5, section 3.10). Once pen portraits were created, all data sources were re-visited and re-coded adopting a latent coding approach (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The data were further coded (analysis stage 6) using seven codes which were identified as themes were created (table 3.4 below). This further coding enabled additional information from the pen portraits and interview 2 to be considered. Belonging was something the data showed to be more important than initially noted and the intersection of the emerging student and teacher identity was also more significant. Coding took place in NVivo initially which can support data coding through organisational support (Bazeley and Richards, 2000). Following the initial NVivo coding (appendix J for a sample), additional analysis took place using paper to group and map the different participant responses to the broad figured worlds and pen portrait sections (appendix I). This mapping against the theoretical framework (analysis stage 7) enabled relationships between participants' narratives, recurring patterns and contradictions to be identified. Emerging themes were examined through the lens of Figured Worlds theory (Holland *et al.*, 2001), facilitating analysis of how participants negotiated identity, agency and belonging within educational contexts.

Using NVivo to code the data enabled the researcher to see a summary of each code at the click of a button (appendix J). It also enabled the organisation of data to a participant case and data type enabling comparison to take place both within and between participants however the benefit of being able to see the comparison tables on paper, supported the process further. The ability to search for key terms also enabled the researcher to cross check the themes and number of mentions during the analysis process. The coded data were then organised into seven broad themes: Belonging; Personal assumptions; Cultural assumptions; Figured world evidence; Narratives around an emerging professional identity; Tensions between class and professional identity; Reshaping of narrative to include new identity. This further data categorisation was then used to author the pen portraits, forming the final presentation of findings in a chronological and succinct way. Aiming to embody the journey from starting teacher training to graduating as a qualified teacher.

Table 3.4: Coding categories

Coding categories	Description
Belonging	Relating to university and placement
Personal assumptions	Personal narratives linked to own values around being a student and teaching
Cultural assumptions	Master narratives relating to how a student or teacher should behave
Figured world evidence	Relating to the unspoken rules of university, teaching and being working-class
Narratives around an emerging professional identity	Relating to how they felt like a teacher
Tensions between class and professional identity	These tensions emerged when the personal narratives conflicted with master narratives
Reshaping of narrative to include new identity	The ways participants reframed any tensions

3.15 Ethics and ethical researching

Within research ethics, the guidelines established by BERA (2024) include principles such as confidentiality, anonymity, the right to withdraw, the importance of informed consent, and the imperative to prevent harm to participants. An information sheet was provided to participants who expressed an interest in volunteering (appendix S) and participants were informed of their right to withdraw without repercussion. When participants did not complete the journal entry, they were sent an email asking if they would like to withdraw to reaffirm this. A participant consent form can be seen in appendix U. These ethical considerations extend to both written and verbal consent processes, as emphasised by Sieber and Tolich (2013). A process of continuous consent was used, asking participants at each stage if they are happy to continue (Klykken, 2021).

Central to ethical research practice is the acknowledgment of power differentials between researchers and participants and the potential for imbalance in such relationships. Consideration to the power imbalance was given and the different elements of knowledge and experience was considered in relation to the researcher and participants at each different stage of the course (level 4, 5, and 6). Table 3.5 (appendix T) shows the individuals having more knowledge/experience in each considered area, those with more knowledge and experience arguably have more power in each situation. Each element will be discussed in turn.

Considering the influence of master narratives around working-class/first-generation students, the least experienced students can be seen to be the most heavily influenced here due to their limited experience and knowledge of HE which could challenge these cultural assumptions. The researcher in this situation has the least power as years of experience has enabled me to challenge these master narratives and consider them alongside my own personal narratives.

When considering the level of knowledge relating to social class and experiences of HE, the researcher is clearly holding the most powerful position, and this is something the participants will be aware of due to my role as a lecturer and their role as a student. Countering this are the participants recent experiences of being a teacher in a school and being a student. Here, the participants are the individuals in the position of power with the most recent experiences. Considering teacher professionalism, as a qualified and experienced teacher, the researcher holds the position of power, and this is further impacted by the researchers position as an initial teacher educator. Although it is important to consider how the power effects may affect the research, the interview style and pre-existing relationships can be seen to mitigate some of the undesired effects. Seale *et al.* (2015) researched student voice and found power effects were a result of ownership and expertise. Here, the participants perceived ownership of the project belonging to the researcher, meaning they were always the ones with less power which could be the case for participants in this research.

Within the framework of narrative inquiry, Caine *et al.* (2020) build upon the foundational work of Lindemann-Nelson (2001) to propose a framework for relational ethics. This framework prompts researchers to consider several key questions:

1. What is done with the story?
2. What type of narrative is being conveyed?
3. Who engages with the narrative, and for what purpose?

Such reflection is essential for ensuring narratives are treated respectfully and ethically within the research process. Considering ethics, several mitigations were used to reduce the effect of power imbalance. The narrative interviews were conducted from a constructionist and feminist paradigm which has been reported to have the most therapeutic effects (Wolgemuth *et al.*, 2015). Researcher positionality was also considered and is explored more in 3.16 below.

3.16 Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality is crucial in ethical research. For this reason, a detailed discussion of positionality is considered here. Massoud (2022) explores the challenges of researcher positionality and note that self-identification in research can create vulnerability but is also valuable to provide authenticity where researchers belong to groups that align with their participants (e.g. gender, class). Ultimately the benefits of self-identification, facilitating open conversations, outweigh the potential challenges. To support with the process of reflecting on researcher positionality, Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) devised a resource for mapping researcher positionality over the range of intersecting social identities. This prompts the researchers to consider their identity elements across a map of social relations. Within this template there are three tiers of social identity – level 1 includes broader facets such as class, citizenship, ability, age, race, sexual orientation, cis/trans, status and gender. The second tier is how these elements impact their lives with the third tier designed to enable further reflection and ask the researcher to explore the emotions tied to the details of their social identity. To support my reflection, the completed position map can be seen in appendix C.

The researcher positionality map exercise enabled me to consider my positions of power, privilege and influence. It also enabled me to honestly reflect on any negative emotions I held

relating to identity elements. I am aware of my white, British heritage and how it enables me to automatically belong to most groups. My current occupation enables me to pass for middle-class, as does my qualification level. There is a tension here however as my working-class upbringing feels more authentic and persistent than any new emerging middle-class identity despite demographic markers of class. There is also the embedded cultural discourse of aspiration and ability. The notion that my intelligence means I am duty bound to use this in academic fields and the persistently high expectation of me in childhood meant I would often hide my ability to fit in more.

One issue explored through researcher reflexivity is the position of being both an insider and outsider researcher. Mercer (2007) explored research conducted within educational institutions and suggested that positionality changes as the researcher-participant relationship shifts through the research process. Managing this dual role can be challenging and data interpretation can be biased as the researcher is embedded in the culture. Further to this, reciprocity in interviews may be affected through maintaining a professional distance. This was mitigated by ensuring that none of the participants were being taught by myself during the research process. The further challenge here is presented through the changing nature of identity as socially and culturally constructed but also the persistent nature of core identity elements such as social class or upbringing. Referring to the figured worlds theory (2.4.2), these embedded identity elements have been reinforced socially and historically through interactions and are not fixed but instead continuously reinforced and personally adopted. The researcher positionality map (appendix C) shows despite my working-class upbringing, it is impossible to deny my current position as university lecturer, which is suggestively middle-class. This class positioning causes discomfort and tension within my identity as I feel working-class at the core but acknowledge certain privileges my experience and career provide. I recognise my own journey as similar to the participants but am also aware that I am not currently integrated in their own experiences in the same way. I work at the HEI, but I am not their equal. The nature of my employed position is that my experience and knowledge is assumed by others. It is important to acknowledge my belonging to both categories with the insider position being held historically.

Another challenge with insider research is the desire to be both part of the topic but not let my own experiences dominate or guide the research. This is supported by the work of Mohler and

Rudman (2022) who explored this complex position of being familiar with the research area through the insider position whilst also being an outsider to address the potential subjectivity or desire to dominate or guide the research outcomes. Another potential downfall of the insider position is identity marker similarities, unwittingly suggest a heterogeneous group of people. Although the insider position can bring authenticity to my research, it could also undermine the process by assuming that similar experiences mean similar things to the researcher and participant (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). As well as the consideration of my position in relation to the participants, it is also important to reflect on my position of influence when it comes to eliciting organisational change. My position as a senior lecturer and course leader within the HEI provides me with some level of influence when suggesting change because of this research. Nigam *et al.* (2022) write about the duality of this experience and suggest both insider and outsider positioning is important to create change.

During the data analysis, the research aimed to identify and deconstruct master narratives (overarching societal narratives influencing individual and collective perceptions). This process aimed to identify the dominant discourses shaping participants' experiences and perspectives. As part of the ethical protocol, a post-participation sheet (appendix V), providing participants with the opportunity to reflect on their involvement in the study and express any concerns or feedback they may have, designed to mitigate some of this unanticipated harm. This mechanism fostered transparency and was devised to empower participants to engage in ongoing dialogue about the research process.

During the interview process the familiarity of the researcher/participant relationship was considered. I had previously taught the L6 students, though there was no teaching involvement during the year of data collection or analysis. This meant that participants in L6 were more familiar with me and had an existing student-teacher relationship. In addition, one participant in L4 and one in L5 was known to me due to a previous academic mentoring role. A summary of these pre-existing relationships can be seen in appendix D. The pre-existing relationships enabled me to create an environment where participants were open and willing to share personal stories as part of the interview process, often sharing conversational elements to their current progress over the last year and enquiring after the researcher. This process of building trust in narrative inquiry was documented by Kim (2016), who writes about the importance of trust to enable

participants to be open, honest and generous with their answers. The participant relationships had a positive influence on this, but it is important to note that over familiarity may result in bias in data collection. To mitigate this, I included conversational elements of the interview in the transcripts to show transparency and enable reflection during data analysis. This conversational element included a sharing of my own stories during the interview which was noted by Bondy (2012) to foster an open connection.

3.17 Post-Research Quality

Qualitative research and narrative methodology can be criticised for its lack of validity, reliability and generalisability when compared to positivist research. It is important to refer to the research objectives here which do not aspire to create a generalisable hypothesis to can be tested and validated but instead aims to recognise the complexity of human experience. Creswell and Miller (2000) assert within the realm of research methodology, numerous scholars have crafted their own conceptual frameworks and terminology to encapsulate essential principles such as quality, rigor, and trustworthiness. This diversity reflects the ongoing evolution of research practices and the recognition that different contexts may need personalised approaches to ensuring the credibility and reliability of findings. Rainer and Jarvis (2021) explored secondary physical education teachers' perceptions of pupil readiness using focus groups and interviews within an educational setting. Working with qualitative data, they suggested alternative quality measures such as trustworthiness as a fundamental metric of research quality. Rainer and Jarvis also emphasise the need for researchers to establish credibility and integrity in their work. In the context of my research, gathering authentic voices was important to me and this was achieved through several steps. Asking similar questions in both the journal prompts and interview 1, enabled a shared understanding to be developed. Any uncertainties were then included in the interview 2 questions which were developed for each participant based on the data collected so far. Further to this the member checking of the pen portraits confirmed the trustworthiness of the participant voice. Ensuring the participants voices were authentic and reflected the shared meaning between researcher and participant was held at the forefront of every stage of the process. Continuous reflection took place during the authoring of the findings and discussion chapter as well as reflective conversations with my supervising team as a mechanism of ensuring credibility and authenticity. Building upon this perspective, Rallis and Lawrence (2017) also propose integrity as a cornerstone of research, highlighting the ethical imperative for researchers

to uphold honesty and transparency throughout the research process. The ethical requirement for transparency was important in this research to mitigate the power imbalance present between researcher-participant and lecturer-student. To foster this openness, the researcher also shared stories and experiences during the interviews.

Fusch *et al.* (2018) advocate for the notion of credibility as a crucial element of research quality. Credibility can give voice to participants, and it was important in this research to provide such credibility through the narrativisation of data in the pen portraits (3.10). Together, these perspectives underpin the complex nature of assessing research quality, acknowledging the significance of trustworthiness, integrity, and credibility as essential components of rigorous and impactful research. The quality of this research was evaluated at various steps in the process, through initial data coding, discussions with supervising staff and re-coding, the researcher was able to reflect on the trustworthiness, credibility and transparency of providing an authentic voice. This was confirmed through participant involvement in the analysis.

3.18 Summary

This chapter has summarised the research paradigm, participant sampling and the importance of place. The data collection tools (3.7-3.10) have been justified and the link to the research questions is clearly explained (3.4). The important consideration of ethics and researcher positionality have been shared and the steps taken to mitigate power imbalances detailed (3.15, 3.16). Finally, this chapter has summarised the data analysis of narratives (see 3.14) and considered alternative measures of research quality (3.17). Chapter 4 presents the findings relating to university student narratives, working-class narratives and primary teaching narratives.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings and has been organised to provide an insight into the experience of identity development through the narratives of university, the working-class family and primary teaching. These narratives are inextricably linked but have been separated out to report the findings in a clearer way. The intersection of these elements is discussed in more detail in chapter 5. There is also a consideration of the identity tensions present in the findings and the responses to these.

Data analysis highlighted elements of several cultural assumptions which are referred to as master narratives. These are present within the figured world and are the shared beliefs which are recognised as key elements. Personal narratives were also identified. These are communicated beliefs about themselves as individuals and provide an insight into how participants own identity impacts their self-belief and ability to construct a successful student and professional teacher identity. These master narratives are key factors in influencing the personal identity development process when entering a new social environment and provide a benchmark for individuals to compare themselves to. They highlight the 'rules of engagement' within the figured world and have an impact on belonging. Participant experience highlights these narratives through spoken and unspoken assumptions and co-construct the figured worlds of teaching, university and the working-class family which are summarised in Tables 4.4-4.8 (appendix W). The influence of the master and personal narratives was evident through the comparisons participants made against how they thought they should be behaving and this is explored further in chapter 5.

A participant pen portrait summary can be seen in the table 4.1 below and summarises key information from each pen portrait. To capture the intersection of each narrative and the influence on identity, figure 4.1 in appendix W shows a diagram of the different narrative elements and how they interact.

Table 4.1: Pen Portrait Summary

Participant	University level	Family Background	Deciding to go to university	University Experience	Placement Experience	Identity Elements
Louise	4	Louise lived with a foster family from aged 9. Her older sister attended university 2 years before she did. Louise was unsure about her class identity but self-identified as working-class.	She had a difficult time at school, but she had supportive teachers and she enjoyed being around other children. She wanted to be a teacher.	Louise has dyslexia and is being assessed for ADHD. She often found the work overwhelming and stressful.	Louise enjoyed placement but found the expectations difficult. She loved seeing the children make progress but has experienced challenges with managing behaviour.	Louise finds making friends difficult and moving into campus accommodation was hard. She often felt lonely. Louise does not feel as though she belongs at university and prefers to view it as a job. Louise feels her identity is more shaped by being a foster child than anything else.
Rebecca	4	Rebecca's dad passed away in her first term which resulted in re-taking L4. She had very little help in applying for university. She self identifies as working-class.	Rebecca wanted to be a teacher since she was 8 years old and had always wanted to go to university to get a better job. She attended college during COVID which was hard.	Starting L4 again, Rebecca was determined to make friends. She has made good friends which was a relief. She wants to do well but doubts herself when writing assignments.	She was nervous but her placement mentor helped to put her at ease. Teaching good lessons and seeing children make progress was rewarding.	Rebecca feels as though she is working-class and is trying hard to better her situation. She worries no matter where she is in the future, she will always feel different to people that had a middle-class upbringing.
Dave	5	Dave's parents were working-class and always worked hard. Dave has children of his own and self identifies as working-class.	Dave felt his years working taught him many skills that would help him. Supporting his family was the motivation to attend university but he was concerned about the finances.	Dave has found the financial struggle difficult. He is balancing being a parent and a student which sometimes makes him feel disconnected from his peers. Getting good grades helped him feel more settled.	Dave has good relationships with staff at placement and is happy to be flexible and support other classes. He loves teaching science and enjoys helping the children develop a love of science.	Dave strives to be professional, and this is helped by the experience of working prior to university. He feels looking like a teacher is important and doing his best for the children in his class. Dave's working-class identity is strong, and he does not want to ever say he is better than anyone else. Being anything other than working-class feels inauthentic.

Participant	University level	Family Background	Deciding to go to university	University Experience	Placement Experience	Identity Elements
Dorothy	5	Dorothy's mum and dad did not enjoy school but were able to get stable jobs they have done well in. Both her parents were supportive of her decision to attend university. Dorothy self identifies as working-class.	Dorothy always wanted to be a teacher and decided university was the way to make this happen.	Attending an open day and seeing how friendly people were made her feel excited to attend. There were times in the beginning when she felt left out but has made friends now. The work can be challenging but she is able to use evidence of previous successes to remind herself she can do it.	Dorothy enjoyed getting to know the children and staff at placement and pushed herself to talk to people in the staff room. She felt a sense of satisfaction knowing she has taught the children things. Guided reflection sessions helped her to see how much she has developed in her teaching.	Dorothy wants to help others and encourage them to be their best. She does not feel like a teacher yet but has delivered some 'proper teacher lessons' which helps her to feel like a teacher sometimes. She is proud of what she has achieved so far but feels class status should not matter.
Jane	6	Jane's parents worked manual jobs and did not have a positive experience of their own time at school. Jane sees her dad as intelligent, but he did not have many opportunities. Jane has children of her own and self identifies as working-class.	Jane always did well at school. She could not attend university earlier as her family could not afford it.	Jane doubts she is academic enough despite passing her degree course. She supports others but doubts herself. Jane found it easy to make friends but was terrified of failing. Having lecturers with the same background as her has helped Jane feel valued.	Jane worried her language was not formal enough and this would come across as unprofessional. The children at staff at placement were lovely and she settled in easily.	Jane's working-class identity is part of the reason she wants to teach. She wants to hold onto her identity and use it as an asset when supporting pupils from disadvantaged areas. She always feels as though she does not belong because she perceives everyone around her to be more skilled than she is. Jane feels like a teacher of her own design.
Ava	6	Ava's dad worked as an engineer after doing an apprenticeship which meant they had a nice house growing up. She self identifies as working-	Ava was always in trouble at school and wonders if she had ADHD. She was academically able and	Being a mature student was difficult, and Ava had to manage the financial pressures. She made friends and enjoyed discussions with a diverse group of people.	Ava felt welcomed at placement and this helped her. There were challenging times, but she enjoyed supporting pupils	Ava feels like a teacher because she was left alone a lot at placement and had to get on with it. Having the responsibility for the class meant she felt at home with her professional teacher identity.

Participant	University level	Family Background	Deciding to go to university	University Experience	Placement Experience	Identity Elements
		class despite acknowledging a comfortable childhood.	achieved good grades with minimal effort.		who had a strong character.	
Ruby	6	Ruby is from a Chinese family, and her parents supported her decision to attend university. During her final year her mum was in hospital which made things difficult. Ruby self identifies as working-class.	Ruby is working-class but attended a high school with lots of middle-class peers. This was not an issue, and she had lots of friends.	Being the only Chinese student was difficult, and she questioned if she belonged. Making friends was hard but eventually she settled in.	Ruby struggled in her first placement but her second and third were more positive and support from the mentor helped her to succeed. She experienced a child making a racist comment which was hard.	Ruby feels like a teacher to a certain extent and thinks this will increase the more she does it.
Melanie	6	Her family and friends were supportive of her decision to attend university. Melanie has children of her own and through working, recognises her own children have had a more privileged upbringing. Melanie self identifies and working-class.	Melanie knew she wanted to attend university when she was at high school, but her family could not afford it. She worked at a school and her headteacher encouraged her to attend university.	Melanie has had an autism assessment during her time at university which helped her to understand some of the social difficulties she experienced. She was able to make friends with other mature students but found elements of this difficult at first. She is very reliant on getting good grades.	Placement has taken Melanie out of her comfort zone, but she can see the learning she has taken from difficult experiences. She has a temporary teaching job until the end of the term which she is finding a challenge due to the workload.	Melanie feels like a teacher now she is working in the role of a teacher. She does question if this is the right career path for her because of the high workload. Melanie feels she will always feel working-class as this is all she has ever known.
Sarah	6	Sarah's parents are hardworking and is from a working-class family. Both her parents were excited she was attending university. She self identifies as working-class.	Sarah worked in a nursery before applying to university and then spend a short time on a paramedic course before switching to teaching.	Sarah was nervous about being older but found the lecturers and her peers friendly and supportive. She made a close friend which helped her to settle in. During university Sarah was still	Sarah has had mixed placement experiences due to the level of support she had received from the mentors. She expected her nursery background to make it	Sarah has secured her first job and is looking forward to starting. She feels ready now and she has found her own way of teaching.

Participant	University level	Family Background	Deciding to go to university	University Experience	Placement Experience	Identity Elements
			She felt frustrated to be attending a few years later than everyone else.	working at a nursery and found balancing work and study difficult.	easier, but it just highlighted how much she did not know. She has enjoyed being in different types of schools.	
Laura	6	Laura never had much money growing up. Her parents worked but they could not afford holidays abroad. Her parents questioned her decision to go to university at first. Laura self identifies as working-class.	Laura wanted to be a teacher but staying local was important to her.	Laura found the lecturers supportive and made some good friends in the first few weeks. There were moments when she felt lonely and was too nervous to talk to other people. She worried about not fitting in. During her second year Laura experienced a bereavement at the time assignments were due. This was extremely difficult.	Laura was nervous but excited to meet the pupils at placement. She enjoyed building those relationships and placement was a supportive and enjoyable experience. Doing well at placement helped her to feel like she did belong on a teacher training course.	During her third year, Laura now feels like a teacher. She has had to be professional and stand up for herself. People treat her like a teacher when she is doing teachery things. She has a job secured for September and is looking forward to starting. Laura is looking forward to being middle-class and having nice things.

4.2 University Student Narratives

In the findings, participants shared their memories of university. Participants were prompted to reflect on the first week (welcome week) and recall positive and negative experiences which enabled a summary of master and personal narratives to be made visible relating to the figured world of university. Within this structure, there are perceptions of what a *good* student is which in turn acts as a benchmark for student identity development. Being first-generation students, the participants spoke about how their lack of experience or family knowledge affected both their decision to attend university and knowledge of how to apply. A summary of the master narratives can be seen in tables 4.4-4.8 (appendix W). The effect of student identity development as part of teacher identity development was significant and not fully anticipated. Although student identity is significant, the findings related to this area have been summarised more concisely to leave room for an exploration of professional teacher identity. Figure 4.2 below summarises the findings relating to university student narratives.

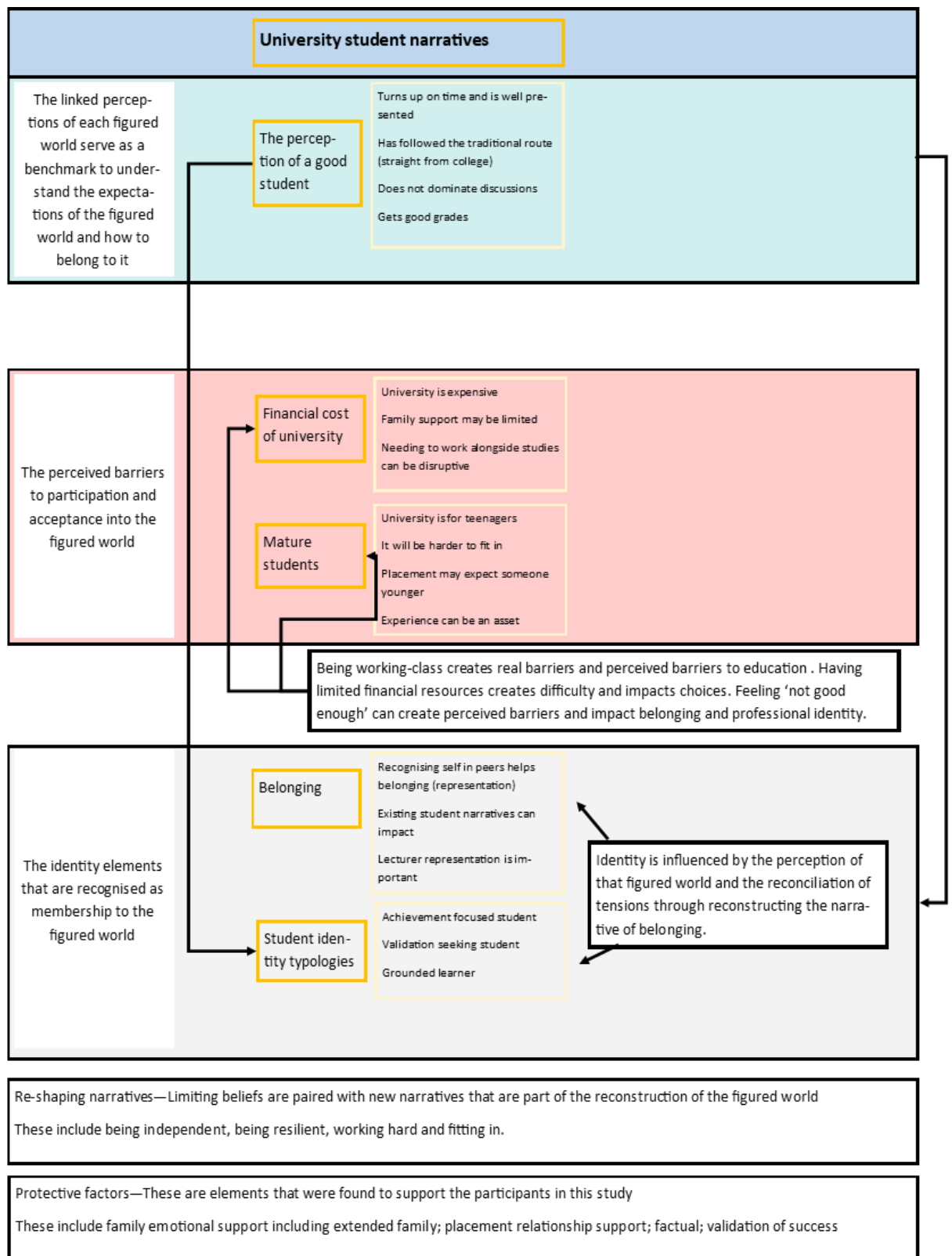


Figure 4.2: A summary of university student narratives

4.2.1 Perceptions of a *Good* Student

Student identity was observed to develop alongside professional identity and as such will be explored here to understand the student experience before moving on to discuss professional identity development. The master narratives surrounding university influenced the perception of a *good* student and impacted the identity development. For all participants, 'effort' was seen as the one factor they believed made a difference to their success. Here the reproduction of the meritocratic discourse can be observed through the participant retelling of these master narratives. The perceptions of a *good* student are explored through the student typology later in 4.2.6. In the recollection of experiences shared by participants, several master narratives were constructed, and these can be seen below.

A good student:

- Turns up on time and is well presented
- Has followed the traditional route (straight from college)
- Gets good grades

When recalling the experiences of the first week at university, both Dave, Rebecca and Melanie spoke about travel disruptions and being concerned this would mean they did not take the course seriously, reinforcing the discourse: good students turn up on time.

The second day of university I was waiting for a drink during a break, and it took much longer than I expected. I was then in a rush and spilt it all over me, I didn't have time to clean myself up and ended up being late. This was a negative experience because I felt awkward walking in in front of everyone and I also felt really rude for walking in late, I didn't want the lecturer to think I didn't care for their time or was being disrespectful. (Rebecca, journal)

For Rebecca, fear of being perceived as not respectful of the lecturer's time highlights the behaviours perceived as not being a *good* student, and therefore representative of their commitment to the course and a perceived expectation of the teaching profession and university. When in fact it could equally be a lack of experience of the university environment and a limited understanding of how to navigate campus spaces. This was also the case for students who had taken a non-traditional route to HE. For the six mature students (4.2.3), this created more anxiety around being a *good* student. Jane wrote about how she compared herself to her peers in the first week, comparing her perceived shortcomings as a gauge of her ability to belong:

I remember looking around the class and feeling insecure about my subject knowledge and knowing that others had more confidence and ability than me and hearing stories of

students coming straight out of high school, to college then to university with a strong study ethic made me question my place on the course as my journey through high school to college to working various minimum paid jobs then to university was very different. (Jane, journal)

The perception of how a *good* student behaves in lectures acted as a benchmark to compare to and facilitated a sense of either belonging or disconnect with the figured world of university. For students doubting their ability or place at university, there was a heavy reliance on course results as a display of being a *good* student, an example of grade-dependence (5.2.1). For Melanie, the need to perform well to prove she was capable also created a fear of failure:

Probably when I kept getting good grades because I was, I like to be the best at everything. So, it's not necessarily about getting the highest grades in the class, but it's about getting a grade that I'm happy with. Like I've not got below a first, however I feel that's coming. And that fear's been hanging over me all the way through. (Melanie, interview 1)

Jane and Ruby also spoke about feeling glad they had passed but the specifics of the grade outcomes were not mentioned, and the remaining participants did not mention it at all. The absence of this is significant when considering student identities as it demonstrates for some students, the individual grades are not something to attribute to complete success or failure, it is the overall outcome of the course.

4.2.2 The Financial Cost of University

The findings linked to the financial cost of university exposes the master narrative university is expensive, potentially impacting an individual's ability to fully engage. Dorothy's decision to live at home to mitigate the cost of university affected her experience:

Yes, arguably I have missed out... You know, I wouldn't be performing my best on placement if I was worrying about cooking. I know I've got food in. Obviously, my parents buy things in for us. (Dorothy, interview 2)

For Dorothy, missing out on social elements was something she had chosen to do to ensure her basic needs were met, something more affluent students may not have had to worry about. Dave noted financial pressures as his worst memory of university:

But by far the worse bit of university is the financial worry. Being married with a family I have always paid for the bills. Three years at uni was a massive financial gamble which

was made even worse by the state of the economy allowing the cost of living to be so very high and the maintenance loans not reflecting this. (Dave, journal).

Although he does acknowledge seeing the student loan as more of a tax, has helped him to feel better about needing this financial support, the worry of managing household bills put additional pressure on the university experience, something arguably shared by the other mature participants. For Sarah, financial support was something to be ashamed of and caused anxiety:

Although my family always tried to support me financially wherever they could, I hated it. I liked to earn my own money. I wanted to be financially secure....I did worry that I wasn't going to be able to last three years living off a student wage, especially coming from a working-class family. (Sarah, Journal)

Sarah's class identity has impacted her willingness to receive financial support, and the master narrative of independence is explored further in 4.3.2. For Sarah, this challenge meant working alongside her studies which necessitated careful time management. Interestingly, the ability to be able to reframe barriers into positive factors was more likely with students who were older than their peers when entering HE. Laura was more pragmatic about the need to make use of student loans to support her studies and noted:

I won't miss the student finance coming out [of the wages] because I've never earned that much anyway. (Laura, interview 1)

This is evidence of positive reframing where the negative of not having family financial support was minimised. Jane felt her family were more supportive of her wish to go to university at an older age because they recognised, she could do it independently, rather than relying on financial support. Independence is one-way participants reframed the working-class financial deficit as a positive trait, something that could be seen as an asset in teaching. Here, Jane also divulges her lack of understanding of the student finance system was part of the reason she did not attend university straightaway. Being older gave her the confidence to be able to navigate this:

I felt more like I'd had more world experience... so I was more prepared to tackle things like linking into student finance and looking into UCAS and things like that. (Jane, interview 1)

Not having a financial safety net from family caused worry and necessitates those individuals either worked alongside their studies or tried to work within the available student loan support budget. For others, the financial cost of university also created pressure and completing the course is high stakes and the only option however, this commitment could have enhanced the professionalism of these students.

The cost of university can be linked with the working-class narratives where it presents as a barrier through the reduced financial support available. Melanie explained:

It became very evident that it wasn't something that my mum and dad were going to be able to afford. And it wasn't something that was going to be available to me. We just financially didn't have the money. I wouldn't be able to support myself. It just it wasn't an option. (Melanie, interview 1)

For Ava, being made redundant provided the financial security needed to take the risk and apply to university whereas Louise and Dorothy saw university as the only way to become a teacher, an aspiration important to them. Laura needed need to work to support herself during university which created a time management problem when her employer wanted her to take on more hours, for Laura financial pressure soon turned into a pressure of managing not only her finances, but her time too. The findings suggest financial concerns are something working-class/first-generation students can struggle with due to the need to work alongside their studies or make other adjustments such as living at home.

4.2.3 Mature Students

For six out of the ten participants, university was not something they chose straight after school/college but after a period of employment. The impact of a mature student identity seemed to be a persistent influence, spoken about often (34 mentions across the six participants compared to eight for non-mature participants) and was also reframed to manage the tensions. Sarah falls within the 18-25 age range but consistently mentioned the struggle of attending university several years after her peers. This affected her confidence at the beginning:

I probably felt older, even though there were people who were older than me... Initially that was a bit daunting and I felt like, "oh, I'm going to be 24 when I qualify everyone else is going to be 21." (Sarah, interview 1)

Jane is within the 25-35 age band and sees her mature student status as helpful because of her reduced confidence at 18, reframing the tension as one of experience and capability:

I'm on a course now with a lot of my peers that are straight out of high school, and I always compare myself to them at that age and I just cannot get over their confidence... But even if I was in their position at that age, I just, I just don't think I'd have the confidence to do what they're doing at that age. (Jane, interview 1)

Dave, Ava and Melanie are all 35+ and spoke about being older than others in the student group in a negative sense. For Dave, he was very aware of his age in relation to his peers and despite asserting this did not bother him, it was something he mentioned 11 times across the findings, for example:

It's hard because everyone's so different. Like everyone's like at least 10 years younger than me. And it's just finding the little thing in common with everyone to talk about. (Dave, interview 2)

For Melanie, her family reiterated university was for teenagers:

My husband was a bit like, he was sort of like, why would you want to go to university? You know, that's for teenagers. You're not a teenager. (Melanie, interview 1)

Melanie reframed this tension by suggesting it was better to attend later as she had time to know what career path she really wanted:

It is better to go later in life and truly know what career you want, rather than wasting it on something you are not sure on. (Melanie, interview 1)

Ava experienced similar concerns saying:

I was incredibly nervous about being older than the other students. (Ava, journal)

However, this age gap was not mentioned again for Ava apart from reframing her age as a positive by saying:

Being older means understanding the professional expectations better. (Ava, interview 1)

The impact of age on belonging emerged for these participants and was influential, creating an intersectionality between being working-class/first-generation and mature students affecting their experience.

4.2.4 Belonging

The perceptions and assumptions about university were both positive and negative in nature and impacted the individual's sense of belonging. The preconception of what university would be like was not always seen in practice, providing early challenge to the master narratives. For example, Laura and Dorothy found the HEI welcoming and friendly. For Jane, recognising the lecturers with a similar background to her, helped foster a sense of belonging whereas Rebecca, Laura, Ava and Dorothy talk about the significance of those early peer relationships. Often the master narratives

became apparent when they were in contradiction to personal values/behaviours. For example, both Louise and Laura spoke about not fitting into student drinking culture whereas Dorothy acknowledged it was not her main priority.

I don't like get involved with anything to do with the uni because half the times people are just going out drinking and I don't care. (Louise, interview 1)

For Louise, not fitting into the perception of 'students like drinking' became a barrier to making friends with people in her halls of residence and anyone outside of the course. This was isolating and Louise commented three times that it did not matter as she was at university to learn anyway, not make friends. Laura was also aware of her resistance to student drinking and was secure in her decision to focus on her studies:

I think like, a lot of people come to uni to socialise and like the uni life of things, I know I didn't come to uni for that, not going out on the weekends, drinking. (Laura, interview 1)

Dorothy shared similar, noting although she enjoys socialising, it was not her focus:

My friends have always been excited about the social life and going out and things like that, which I do enjoy, but my focus has always been to get on this course to be a teacher. (Dorothy, interview 1)

Dorothy is acknowledging the student narrative of drinking and socialising alongside her commitment to the course. The goal of being a teacher was more important to her. This is an example of how participants reframed the master narrative of student drinking culture to one of personal commitment and were able to hold space for an awareness of the master narrative whilst also reconstructing what that meant in terms of their developing student identity.

4.2.5 Developing Relationships

The findings highlighted the sense of belonging came from peer relationships and lecturer support. The experiences of belonging as perceived differently by participants will be discussed in turn. Louise and Dave displayed a drive to complete the course whilst disregarding challenges along the way. Both students experienced difficulties building peer relationships but did not see this as significant or were attempting to reframe this narrative into a positive. For Louise, she attributed the lack of peer relationships to her own ability:

It was fine. Just I'm not very good at making friends. So, I felt very alone most of the time. (Louise, interview 1)

Despite this difficulty, Louise was able to rationalise it as not important and she was happy to get a sense of belonging from her family rather than her peers on the course. For Louise, one protective factor was her older sister who was in her final year of the same course at the time of data collection. Having family close by was something Louise spoke about as comforting. Dave also found it difficult to build a friendship group in the early weeks of the course but similarly to Louise, commented it was not important.

For students who sought out external validation, peer relationships were much more significant. Both Melanie and Ava both discussed peer relationships as important to belonging (20 instances across all data elements for these two participants). For Melanie, her concern about making friends led her to organise a meet up prior to the course starting, in the hope she would begin making friends early:

I took it upon myself to arrange a meet up with everyone prior to us starting the first day on welcome week because I thought if I could try and meet some people before it'd make that first day a little less daunting. (Melanie, interview 1)

It was a lovely experience to meet and share a quick drink and a nervous chat before we all tried to find our way to the lecture theatre for our very first lecture. I was incredibly nervous about being older than the other students. (Ava, journal)

For Rebecca, Jane and Ruby, friendships were also important (Ruby mentioned friends 18 times across the three data elements), and Ruby remembered finding it difficult in the beginning. For Jane, her initial worries were eased by being around friendly peers and staff. The background of the staff made an impact for Jane and helped her to feel valued and accepted:

I think it's really helped having [lecturer] because when he talks about his experience from being from [local area] and like I feel just mentioned things about [local area] or if his accent comes through a little bit, it just makes me feel a little bit more, I was going to say valued. (Jane, interview 1)

Both Ruby and Jane were mature students which may have increased the worry about not fitting in or making friends. This was not the case for Rebecca but family circumstances at college and the start of university provided some anxiety about making friends. During her college years, the COVID-19 pandemic also necessitated a period of online learning which increased her anxiety about being able to make friends:

When I got to university, I saw a group of girls lost and helped them find their way and we realised we were all on the same course. The lunch break that same day we all sat together. This was a really positive experience as I no longer felt anxious about meeting people, and we now go out together outside of university as well as sitting together in class and at lunch. I feel relieved as I had worried that maybe no one in college spoke to me not because I hadn't been in for a year but because I wasn't likeable. (Rebecca, journal)

Despite her initial shyness, Rebecca pushed herself to speak to her peers and was able to recognise everyone would be feeling nervous, reframing the narrative:

I'm very like shy and then I don't really know, like initiate conversations, but I just thought like, "everyone's going to be nervous." (Rebecca, interview 1)

As well as the impact of peer and staff relationships at the HEI, placement relationships contributed to the overall sense of belonging for students relating to the importance of placement learning as part of identity development (4.4). Following the data analysis of university student narratives, a student typology was created to summarise the shared experiences of participants.

4.2.6 Student Typology

When analysing identity production through narratives, participants talked about how they performed in the role of a *good* student. Linking the elements together (figured world of university, positionality and identity production), a student typology was created comprising of three types. This summarises how students view their identity as a working-class student. Two of these types reflect students with low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and a fragile sense of achievement success and have been categorised as deficit types. The final type describes a secure student identity accompanied with average self-esteem and self-efficacy. These types should not be seen as distinct categories but instead as dominant identity types. These are presented below and are explored in turn.

- Achievement-focused student – able to ignore any challenges, focus on the end goal. Stubborn in the face of challenge and determined to prove themselves. High fear of failure showed as a single mindedness to succeed. Low self-belief but high self-efficacy.
- Validation-seeking student – This student type is characterised by a constant drive to prove they deserve to be at university or belong. High fear of failure and fragile student

identity reliant on positive academic feedback. These students hold a deep-seated belief they are not good enough. Working hard to deserve their place but doubting each step and doubting they are good enough to be a teacher. Seeking validation to address their low self-esteem and low self-efficacy.

- Grounded-learner – This student type is characterised by a well-integrated academic identity, marked by realistic confidence, emotional resilience, and a belief in their capacity to succeed. These students were not always the most successful but were self-aware and had the belief they could work hard and achieve.

Table 4.2: Participants dominant student identity types

Participant	Dominant student identity	Secondary student identity elements
Louise	Achievement-focused	
Rebecca	Validation-seeking	
Dave	Achievement-focused	Emerging grounded-learner identity
Dorothy	Grounded-learner	
Jane	Validation-seeking	
Ava	Validation-seeking	
Ruby	Validation-seeking	Emerging grounded-learner identity
Melanie	Validation-seeking	Achievement-focused
Sarah	Grounded-learner	Validation-seeking
Laura	Grounded-learner	

The first student type discussed is the achievement-focused student identity. Students in this group (Louise and Dave) are heavily focused on the end achievement of becoming a teacher, and this is a driving force to help them dismiss or overcome any challenges. There can be a high fear of failure, but this comes second to the single-mindedness to succeed. Louise spoke about the need to get things done and acknowledged the challenges whilst also being dismissive of their impact initially:

All the assignments the way they were all thrown at us with very little information... I was like, "do I stick it out? Do I not?" But I'm still here. [...] I'm kind of doing it for my own benefit. (Louise, interview 1)

Seeing the course as more of a job was one of the ways in which Louise reframed her challenges. Despite displaying an achievement-focused mindset, Louise found the pressure of the course difficult, being determined against all odds can be an uncomfortable position:

The pressure on me has increased while attending university so have my stress levels (Louise, journal)

The second type is the validation-seeking student. This student type is characterised by a relentless need to prove they belong at university. Their academic motivation is often fuelled by a fear of failure, and their student identity is closely tied to external markers of success — particularly high grades. While they may appear high achieving, their sense of self-worth is fragile and conditional. Melanie demonstrated these qualities more strongly than any other participant:

I kept getting good grades because I was, I like to be the best at everything...It's about that I can't do something half-heartedly. So I feel like if I get less, that shows that I didn't do it right or I didn't meet what the expectation, which means that I failed. (Melanie, interview 1)

Ava spoke in a similar way about getting a lower grade on an assignment, but Ava was able to use this to motivate her to do better:

I mean it does definitely drive me because when I get something like that, it makes me at first feel really deflated. And then and then I think, "well... I've got to do better." (Ava, interview 1)

Ava was also strongly influenced by the outcome of her lesson observation at placement which will be explored more in 4.4. Validation-seeking was present in most participants in varying degrees. But ultimately, Ava received the validation she needed by being signed off the support plan and passing placement. For Ruby, the acceptance to university was the initial validation providing her with the confidence to continue:

People who said I can't go university because, "I'm a girl" or because like "I wasn't born clever and because of your of your grades. You're not like you don't get straight A's. So you can't go to university." I proved those people wrong. (Ruby, interview 1)

This confidence was fragile and dependent on external validation. At the core, these students hold a deep-seated belief they are not good enough to be at university, or to succeed in teaching. They work diligently, but with ongoing self-doubt at each step. Their efforts are often motivated

by a desire to earn validation, compensating for low self-esteem and a lack of belief in their own capabilities (low self-efficacy). One example is where Jane shared her concerns about her ability to succeed at university:

My default language isn't academic or formal... and it does make me worry. (Jane, interview 1)

Often these doubts presented in a reflection of whether they were capable to complete the course:

I don't know if I can do this, don't know if this is for me. I don't know if I'm clever enough that one always comes up. (Dorothy, interview 1)

I've always felt like I've never really had confidence in the academic side of things... There's always been that element of feeling like I don't know if I'm academically up to date to do this job because I've always felt like my educational attainment doesn't match everybody's. (Jane, interview 1)

Both the achievement-focused student and the validation-seeking student are characterised by a deficit belief. The underlying motivation is not believing they are good enough to attend university, and they respond by placing high expectations on themselves (e.g. Melanie, Ava) or expecting they will fail (e.g., Jane).

Sitting apart from these two deficit types is the grounded-learner type. This type is different and these students are defined by a well-developed academic identity, grounded in realistic self-confidence, emotional resilience, and a strong sense of self-efficacy. These students demonstrated self-awareness and a consistent belief in their ability to succeed through effort and perseverance. This student identity type can be seen as the closest to the *good* student benchmark as perceived by participants. Both Dorothy and Laura demonstrate the dominant grounded-learner type. Although Dorothy has experienced some challenges, these were seen as learning opportunities and demonstrate a good level of resilience and a stable self-esteem. Dorothy was excited to start university and eager to learn:

But I remember being excited. And I remember having a lecture from [lecturer's name], and she was talking about all these different things and outlining you'll be doing this by the end of this year, "You will have done all of this and you'll have taught all of these lessons." (Dorothy, interview 1)

Dorothy's experiences continued to push her out of her comfort zone whilst encouraging her to learn and develop. Dorothy's grounded-learner identity enabled her to approach these experiences with an openness to learn without it affecting her self-belief:

I went into the room for my lecture trying to feel optimistic despite having a little voice in my head saying, 'I can't draw'. However, having sat in the lecture for the first five minutes I started to feel so relaxed and at ease. The starter task involved discussing negative art experiences and this really helped me to realise I am not the only one feeling like this. (Dorothy, journal)

Her grounded-learner identity also enables her to strive to improve without such a desperate need to prove something to herself or others:

The only thing I would say that is different is probably that I am constantly trying to find ways about how I learn best and how to tackle assignments. (Dorothy, journal)

This is also present in examples of resilience where she found the workload demands overwhelming. Here Dorothy was able to reflect on past successes and understand these were due to her ability and could be replicated:

But then sometimes I have to stop myself and think well, I did it last year, so I've got to be able to do it this year. (Dorothy, interview 2)

Laura displayed a similar grounded-learner identity and was able to recognise many developing skills that would support her. When discussing academic writing she noted:

It's quite formulaic, isn't it? You know, you just need to get the pattern. (Laura, interview 1)

Recognising the opportunity for learning comes from peers as well as the learning activities, Laura was able to reflect on her own growth and development:

And when you come to university, it's there's so many different people around you that you, you learn so much off of them. (Laura, interview 1)

Resilience was also part of Laura's success:

I've probably learned to be more resilient cause, because if you'd known me four years ago, I would just give up on everything. (Laura, interview 2)

Both Dorothy and Laura were able to overcome challenges by understanding they had the skills and knowledge to succeed. Using the memory of previous successes and the understanding that the learning process includes moments of challenge, has helped them both to be secure learners. The student typologies were shaped from the perceived gap between participants' own student identity and the *good* student benchmark. The impact this has on how student-teachers make sense of their developing professional identity will be explored in 5.3.3. In summary, the participants entered the figured world of university and changed it from within, so the new figured world of the working-class university was one where identity tensions were reduced.

4.3 Working-Class Narratives

Participants stories co-constructed and reinforced the master narratives and personal narratives of being part of a working-class family/community. This provided an understanding of working-class identity elements, which affected the development of student and professional identities. A summary of these assumptions can be seen in appendix W. and will be further explored in chapter 5 and are summarised below in figure 4.3.

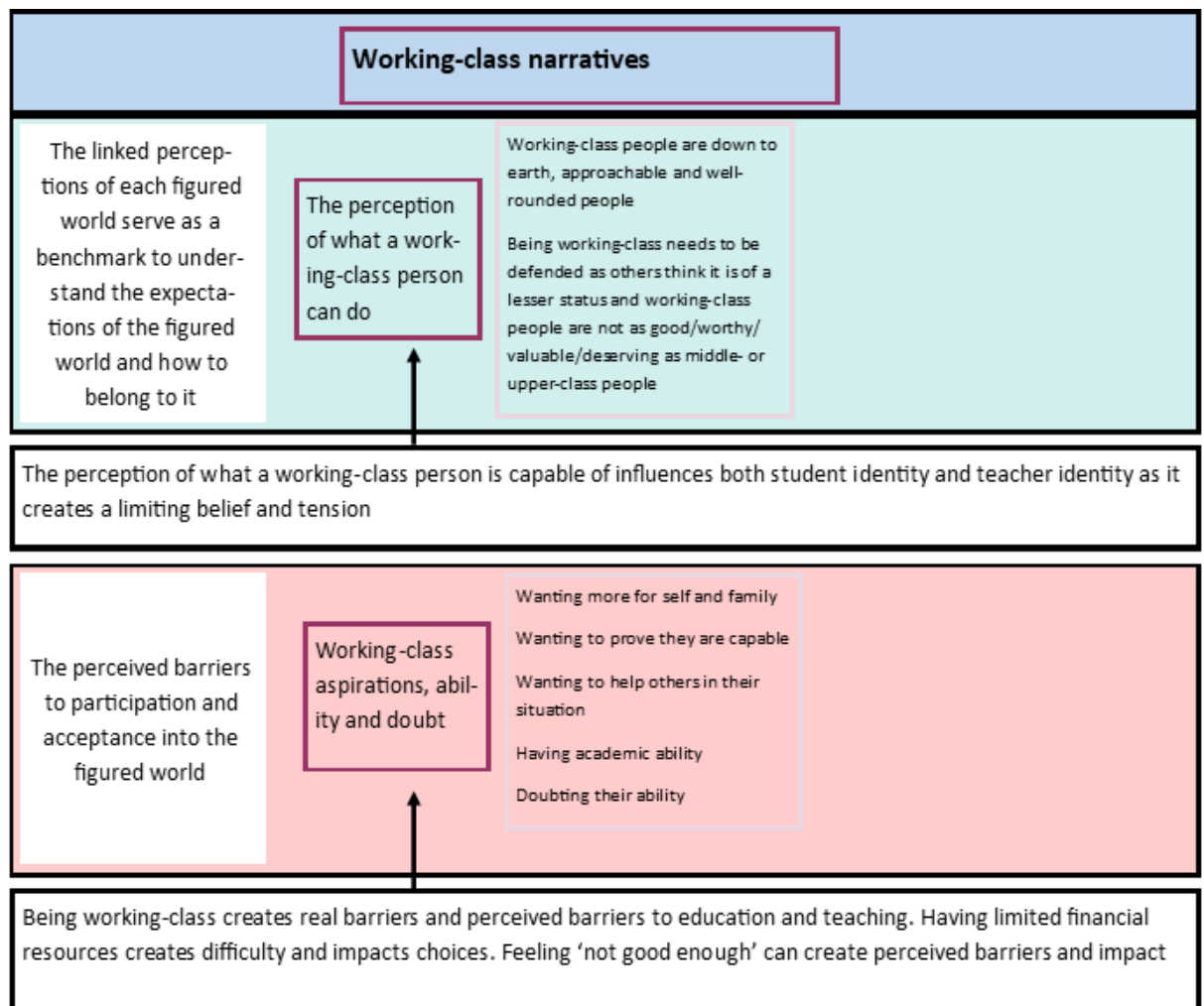


Figure 4.3: A summary of working-class narratives

4.3.1 Perceptions of Working-class People

Through exploring participants' understanding of the term working-class, it was possible to identify the master narratives that describe what it is to be part of a working-class community. Class identity was often (mentioned nine times) attributed by participants as the class you were

born into and contained the belief working-class people are hardworking (three mentions). For example, Melanie defined working-class as, *The class you are born into...they're grafters, salt of the earth types (Melanie, interview 1)*, and Jane continued to relate class to parental occupations and backgrounds saying:

Being from a family where the parents have got jobs that are not considered professions. Working-class people are more down to earth, (Jane, interview 1).

As well as the importance of family background, effort was a factor and Ava noted working-class people are:

Hardworking... somebody that didn't necessarily always have a lot of saving put away, but is somebody that has to work extremely hard and often do jobs that are quite difficult for very little pay (Ava, interview 1).

Participants with a strong working-class identity were more likely to show resistance to social mobility and found the acknowledgement of moving to a middle-class identity very uncomfortable. For Rebecca, even though she is working hard to better her situation and have a job with a good income, there is a worry that she will always feel different to people that she perceives as middle-class. This was also the case for Jane who recognises the persistence of a working-class identity. Jane knows that teaching was once considered a working-class job and is now seen as middle-class, but regardless, she does not want to classify herself as middle-class. Despite the acknowledgement that attending university and gaining a professional qualification would by current definitions align with middle-class, this also made Dorothy feel uncomfortable and she noted a resistance to reproducing inequality:

I wouldn't really walk around and say, "Oh, yes, you're middle class now." My God, I don't know. I wouldn't want to ever feel like I'm feeding into people that thrive off that status. (Dorothy, interview 1).

The persistence of the working-class identity was also discussed as a positive trait to keep hold of:

And there is an element of not wanting to... let go of that identity and be quite protective of it and still wanting to keep those traits as well. Like I like to be, especially when you're working in deprived areas I like to be thought of as approachable and down to earth and you know, understanding of every issue in the community in the area. (Jane, interview 1)

However, for some participants, their class identity was not as strong and in this case the shift from working-class to middle-class was less of an uncomfortable prospect with Louise stating, for example:

I'm not really bothered, but it doesn't really affect me either way. Cool. I'm a teacher. Great. Going to do a good job. Don't really care. (Louise Interview 1)

Considering how these working-class narratives impacted student identity development is explored below.

4.3.2 Aspirations, Academic Ability and Doubt

Linking working-class identity to family background is present in the findings and the impact of family support was spoken about by most participants. Jane's parents were supportive but did not understand the university system so were unable to practically help her:

I was encouraged by my parents to achieve well in school...They wanted me to achieve well, but they didn't understand the processes of anything. I found that quite difficult. (Jane, interview 1)

Emotional support and encouragement without the associated practical support was something Rebecca also struggled with and she ended up applying for the wrong course initially as there was no one to help her with the application. The mature participants also noted family support and Dave shared:

They're all supportive. I mean, my nan especially wants to know every, every grade. (Dave, interview 1)

This was also the same for the other mature participants with Jane, Ava, Melanie, Ruby, Dorothy and Laura all speaking about family and friends being supportive of their decision to attend university. In addition to the master narratives of being working-class that emerged from the findings, there were also personal narratives often voiced as challenges, barriers and tensions because of attending university as a working-class individual. These tensions and the subsequent reframing are presented in 4.6. Rebecca was talking about her experience compared to others who she perceived as middle-class and noted:

It's like this is the option that we have, and we've got to do it as it's the only way you know out of life, that low income. (Rebecca, interview 1)

This highlights the lack of a safety net, for Rebecca, this felt like her only chance to build a better life for herself, and she later commented how others from more privileged backgrounds did not

seem to feel the same way. Rebecca perceived university for her middle-class peers as one of many options.

The impact of being working-class on self-belief was also noted. Six participants spoke about not feeling good enough for university with Sarah questioning, *am I good enough to do this?* (Sarah, interview 1). For Melanie, it took a well-meaning headteacher to encourage her to follow her dreams while she was working in the school office. Ava needed the push of being made redundant to reflect on what she really wanted to do despite a negative school experience. For Jane, her lack of self-belief resulted in her choosing a course she was not passionate about initially:

Performing Arts felt OK because I could go at it from lots of different angles. But I suppose holding me back is that lack of self-belief. (Jane, interview 1)

Not feeling good enough to attend university or enter the professional world of teaching is further explored in 5.2 and 5.3 but it is important to note this was a common theme all participants spoke about in some way. As well as the perceived negatives of being working-class reported in 4.2.2, 4.2.3, 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, there were also positive elements in the findings. Being working-class does not always carry a deficit perception and positives were also noted including having the ability to understand working-class pupils more, being more accepting of difference and developing skills such as resilience and independence. These positive elements are reported below.

There was evidence of reframing linked to participants' working-class identity where participants worked to reconcile the tension between a perceived student/teacher identity and their own identity. This reframing can be categorised in two ways, the first being concerned with seeing working-class traits in a positive light and drawing on elements such as aspirations, resilience and persistence. For these individuals, attending university enabled them to reach their potential and show they were able to overcome challenges to achieve. This can be seen in the examples of Rebecca, Ruby and Jane:

This is the chance to improve and do better. The only chance. (Rebecca, interview 1)

Working hard, all the time, is what is needed to succeed. (Ruby, interview 1)

Being working-class is an asset as you understand local children better (Jane, interview 1)

The second category of how participants reframed their working-class background related to resources and some of the financially driven decisions had to be made to make university a possibility. Dorothy and Louise made decisions based on financial considerations. For Dorothy, living at home made it affordable despite missing out on social elements:

It is a privilege to stay at home and be looked after (Dorothy)

I don't want to go out socialising anyway... It is important to be professional and see this course more like a job. (Louise)

Dorothy chose to see the benefits of staying at home whereas Louise felt these social elements were not important to her anyway. Following on from this, it enabled her to approach the course with a professional attitude.

4.4 Primary Teaching Narratives

Central to the findings is the participants' perception of primary teaching (see tables 4.4-4.8 in appendix W). These master and personal narratives can be seen to arguably have the most influence on the development of a professional teacher identity and will be explored further in chapter 5. The narratives related to primary teaching have been experienced by participants as part of their school placement on the course and related to research objective 1: Explore the figured worlds experienced by working-class/first-generation student-teachers. A summary of primary teaching narratives can be seen below in figure 4.4.

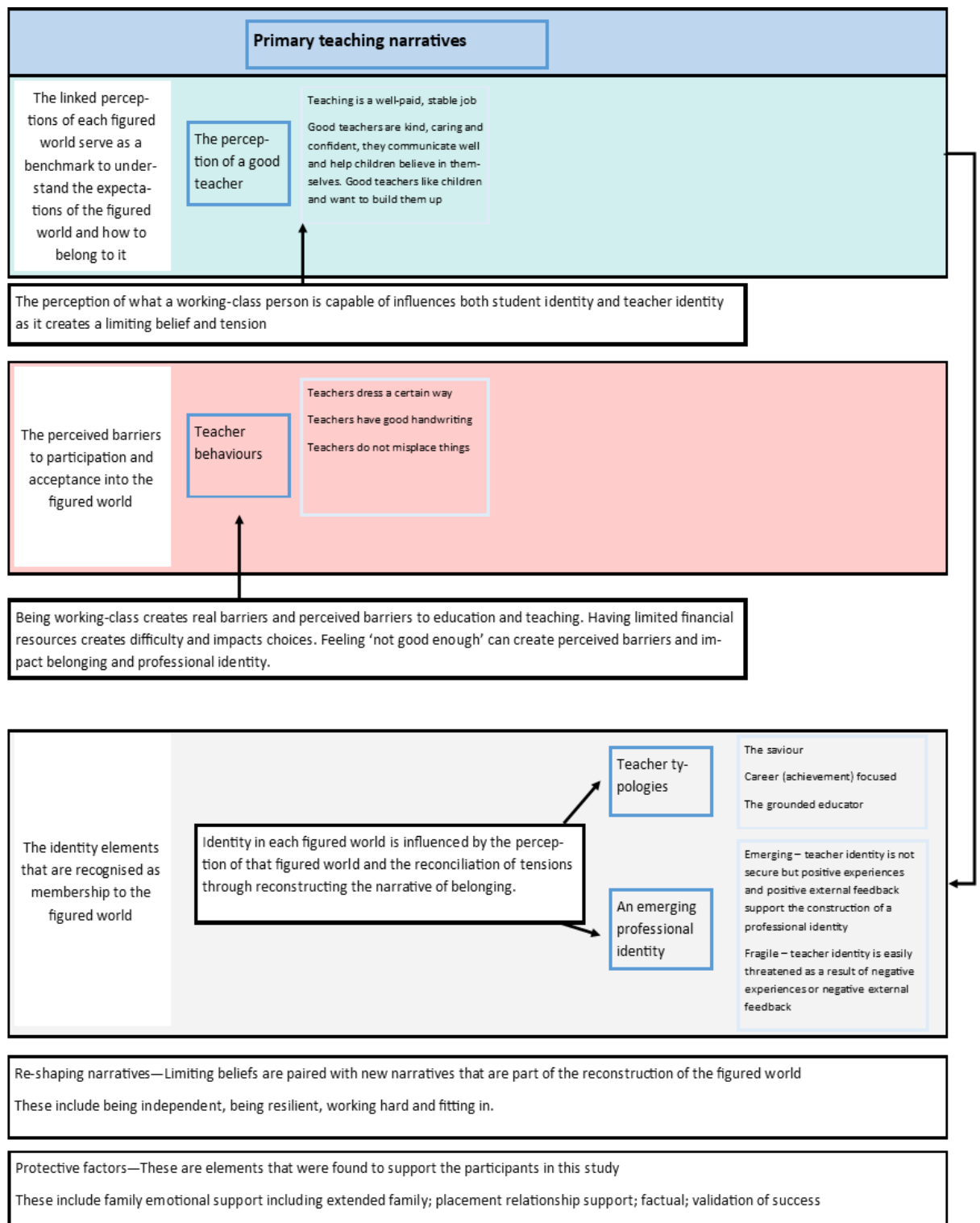


Figure 4.4: A summary of primary teaching narratives

4.4.1 Perceptions of Teaching: Being a *Good* Teacher

All participants shared reasons for wanting to train as a primary teacher and this allowed the internalised narratives around primary teaching to emerge. When talking about why they chose this career, participants indicated their perceptions of primary teaching and what a *good* teacher is. Participants spoke about having a desire to work with children (Rebecca, Jane, Ava, Dave, Sarah, Laura) and wanting to 'give back' or make a difference (Ava, Louise). Here the motivations were focused on the impact on others and perceive teaching as a selfless profession, directed at improving the lives of others. These were often the validation-seeking students who doubted their own ability to achieve. For those with a more stable student identity, the motivation was similar but characterised by a lifelong passion for teaching (Dorothy, Laura). In addition to the philanthropic motivations, there were also personal drivers including seeking out a better career or life for themselves (Melanie) and the perception that teaching is a stable career (Jane).

Exploring the outward facing narrative, Rebecca was motivated by wanting to work with children and support them to be the best version of themselves. Reflecting on the best moment from her placement, Rebecca noted:

The best moment on placement for me, was when I had just finished teaching my first lesson ...Being able to make children excited to learn felt really special and I was so happy to see them actually enjoying completing work. (Rebecca, journal)

This demonstrates a personal narrative of wanting to help others and gaining personal satisfaction from this. It also highlights the master narrative perceiving a *good* teacher as someone who excites and motivates their pupils. Although Melanie developed her desire to become a teacher after working as a school administrator, the desire to challenge herself and be in a profession she enjoyed was a key driver along with her own positive experiences of primary school:

[Primary school] was always my favourite years of education, and I suppose I wanted to have a part in playing that role in somebody else's life or being a part of that. (Melanie, interview 1)

Sarah wanted to work with children, and this was a key motivation for choosing primary teaching. As well as wanting to work with children, Dave had more to give:

And I've always had a sense that I have got more to give especially with kids. (Dave, interview 1)

This shows a personal drive to support others, which is further supported by the journal entry, noting the best moment of the year:

The best moment though was one of the children saying, 'I love doing science now.'
(Dave, journal)

Combining the desire to 'give back' with the personal satisfaction gained from supporting pupil learning demonstrates how Dave is motivated by having a positive influence on those around him. Ava spoke about loving helping children but also recognising everyone deserves a chance to be their best. Noting elsewhere this was not her experience of school. Ava felt most people have an influential teacher they remember and wanted to be that influence for someone:

Everyone deserves that chance to enjoy education... And I think a lot of people can reflect on a teacher that kind of did that for them, which is why they wanted to carry on with learning in education. (Ava, interview 1)

For Ava, the perception of a *good* teacher is someone who encourages and supports children in an inclusive way. This is similar for Louise and experiencing a difficult time through her own school years, created a need to provide differently for the children she will teach. Sharing an inclusive attitude, Louise commented:

My primary school wasn't very good, the whole experience. So being able to give them [children] that opportunity no matter what their situation to progress and become something. (Louise, interview 1)

This shows the influence of individual's own school experiences when deciding to go into teaching. This element arguably influences professional identity development through personal narratives about what teaching is and is not. This will be explored further in chapter 5 through the discussion of a teacher typology (4.4.2) and professional identity development (4.5).

For some participants, the ambition to become a teacher is something they had always wanted:

I've always known I wanted to be a primary school teacher. That's always been something from a young age that I've always thought. (Dorothy, interview 1)

The narrative here is teachers are someone who can be relied on. Some participants centred their narratives inwards, focusing on wanting to become a teacher to better their own situation or their family. For Jane, the experience of working at a day nursery cemented her decision to work with children. She felt restricted in her nursery role and expressed a need to give herself more of a challenge. As well as this drive to be better, Jane also acknowledged the financial stability of teaching. She noted:

Financial stability... job security. I think security is a lot of it actually because it's such a supportive career to go into if you find the right place. (Jane, interview 1)

This master narrative can be seen reflected in education policy. Sarah, Dave and Melanie also spoke about wanting more from life and teaching was seen as an improvement from their current situation.

The participant motivations for teaching highlight perceptions of a good teacher. Further discussion of how to look or feel like a teacher exposed additional narratives contributing to the figured world of teaching and in turn affects professional identity development. More than this, the perception of how a teacher looks, also suggests an element of being self-conscious about their working-class background. This was something Dave spoke about several times:

The next-door neighbours kid says, "you look like a teacher you do." I thought I did look like a teacher when I got out the car. (Dave, interview 1)

Interestingly he does not expand on what a teacher looks like, but the findings suggest he had a preconceived idea. As well as motivations for teaching exposing perceptions of what a *good* teacher is, additional findings related to placement experiences can add more detail to the narratives of primary teaching. For Sarah, this includes good communication and good colleague relationships, and Rebecca added being patient and confident. Being knowledgeable about education and teaching was important to Dave, Ruby and Louise while managing class behaviour was something Ava wanted to achieve. Being able to imagine what a teacher looks and acts like helped participants make a judgement on whether they matched the image of a teacher and these elements can be viewed as artefacts. This was combined with external feedback to help them feel like a teacher. For Laura, Lucy and Ruby, the act of teaching 80% of lessons in the final placement and applying for jobs has helped the development of a teacher identity. For others (Sarah, Dave, Dorothy, Melanie) the recognition of developing increasing knowledge and skills helped them to feel like a teacher. This feeling of being a teacher and therefore having a teacher identity, was still developing for some individuals. Jane was not fully convinced of her ability to become a teacher, despite successfully completing the course and securing her first job by the time interview 2 took place. For Jane, it was important to reconstruct what being a teacher meant, and she said:

I think I feel like a teacher of my own design. (Jane, interview 1)

This demonstrates identity reframing is taking place for first-generation/working-class students and will be explored in 4.6, 4.7 and 5.3.4.

4.4.2 Teacher Typology and an Emerging Professional Identity

Three teacher identity types were created from the findings which relate to how participants saw their role as a teacher. These are:

- The saviour – A stable person to help children who do not have stability in their family life. A drive to provide consistency and care to counteract any perceived deficit in the child's family life. Inclusive, outward facing motivated (deficit student identity types – validation-seeking). A good teacher is someone who encourages, nurtures and provides stability.
- Career-focused – Enjoys the stability and status of teaching. Inward facing motivations (deficit student identity types – achievement-focused). A good teacher is someone who helps the children progress and gets good results.
- The grounded-educator – Helping children behave well and grow up to be the best they can be in life. Based on a belief it is a teacher's role to help children be successful adults. Positive own experience of school. Outward facing motivations (grounded-learner student identity type). A good teacher is someone who nurtures and encourages while also being successful in terms of progress and results.

Table 4.3 below shows the link between the participants student identity type and their dominant teacher type. The teacher typology can be defined by master narratives relating to *good* teaching and motivations for choosing teaching as a career. Personal narratives also influence the teacher typologies through either intrinsic motivation to better their own life options (career-focused) or extrinsic motivation to better the lives of others (saviour). The grounded-educator showed elements of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, often linking to the grounded-learner student identity type. The teacher types are not distinct categories but will be presented separately for the ease of the reader.

Table 4.3: A summary of participants student types and associated teacher types

Participant	Dominant student type	Dominant teacher type
Louise	Achievement-focused	Saviour
Rebecca	Validation-seeking	Saviour
Dave	Achievement-focused	Grounded-educator with elements of career-focussed
Dorothy	Grounded-learner	Grounded-educator
Jane	Validation-seeking	Career-focussed
Ava	Validation-seeking	Saviour
Ruby	Validation-seeking	Career-focussed
Melanie	Validation-seeking	Career-focussed
Sarah	Grounded-learner	Grounded-educator
Laura	Grounded-learner	Grounded-educator

The saviour is a teacher who is extrinsically motivated to improve the lives of others. This can be exemplified through Louise, who as a care leaver, wanted to be the stable person in a child's life to compensate from her own negative memories of primary school. This motivation to improve the lives of others, combined with an achievement-focused student identity type, meant Louise was resilient and persistent in the face of challenge. She was able to see past difficulties because it was important to her to 'give back' to the children she would be teaching. Louise spoke of challenge dismissively, for example when she noted it was hard to make friends, it was not important as she just saw the course more like a job. Ava shared she did not have a positive experience of school and for her, it was important to help others as she remembers one teacher did for her. Rebecca did not have a negative school experience but illness in her family meant she needed some extra support and found this in her teachers. This positive experience motivated Rebecca to positively influence children and provide them with a stable place in case they could not access at home.

The teacher typologies are not distinct categories and although each participant demonstrated a dominant teacher identity type, elements of the other identity types can also be seen. One example of this is how Rebecca also viewed teaching as a stable career, she was heavily motivated by improving the lives of others but also felt it would be nice to be middle-class and have a more comfortable life. The working-class impact of struggle cannot be ignored and motivated all individuals to some extent. This intrinsic motivation of wanting to improve their own lives can be seen in the teacher identity type of the career-focused teacher. Three out of five (Jane, Ruby and Melanie) of the validation-seeking students were also career-focused teachers, where their main motivation was to improve their own lives. Jane was motivated by job stability:

Financial stability, when I'm in a role that's definitely, part of it, job security. I think security is a lot of it actually because it's such a supportive career to go into if you find the right place. (Jane, interview 1)

This shows a narrative of aspiration although for Jane, working in a nursery gave her the confidence to challenge herself more and move into teaching feeling she would not have felt ready to tackle university straight after college. Ruby had always wanted to work with children but teaching was not something her home culture valued as a career, despite this she was focused on her career and spoke outwardly of this as if she was convincing herself of the value of teaching as a professional role, stating *I'm actually proud of me being a primary school teacher because it's hard (Ruby, interview 1)*. The career-focused teacher is motivated by a job well done, being heavily influenced by the perception of a *good* teacher and what the narrative of professional success looks like. Finally, Melanie demonstrated a career-focused teacher identity type driven by the need to prove herself but also improve the life of her family in turn. Melanie shared:

But for me a big thing was I wanted to show that I was capable, and I could do it and that it was my choice not to have done it back then, but it didn't mean that I couldn't do it. (Melanie, interview 1)

Despite this, it took the advice of a headteacher to encourage Melanie to investigate training as a teacher which shows part intrinsic motivation but also a doubt that change was possible. The encouragement and influence of key people was seen in other participants including Dave (his wife's encouragement), Louise (her sister) and Melanie (her aunt). This will be discussed further in 4.6.

The grounded-educator is a teacher who has intrinsic and extrinsic motivations linking with the grounded-learner student type. All grounded-learners were also grounded-educator types (Sarah, Louise and Dorothy) with the addition of Dave also demonstrating a grounded-educator dominant identity type. These individuals are teachers who want to do well for themselves but also want to teach others and improve lives. This identity type shows high self-efficacy and resilience in learning being able to develop new skills and identity elements, despite challenge. For these individuals, challenges do not make them doubt their place in the figured world of university or teaching as they have the belief they belong. For Dave, although he struggled to belong to the student peer group as a mature student, he found placement somewhere he did belong and was able to add value. One key turning point was in placement two when Dave had to cover teaching the class in his teachers' absence:

When the mentor was off and then I just thought, you know what, just teach as much as you can. And I did it. And that week I really felt like, yeah, maybe I could do this all day long. (Dave, interview 1)

Doing the job well encouraged Dave and although enjoying validation of a job well done may fit the career-focussed teacher identity type, Dave also demonstrated a real commitment to improving the lives of others by *'trying to...have a bit of influence and change'* (Dave, interview 1), linking to younger family members experiencing learning challenges at school and not always being supported.

Sarah enjoyed working with children at a nursery and started a paramedic degree before deciding she was not enjoying it and moved to teaching. She sees a *good* teacher as someone who communicates well, is organised and supports others. She also was looking forward to earning the wages of a qualified teacher and was eager to save and buy her first house. Sarah is categorised as a grounded-educator because there was not one influence (intrinsic or extrinsic) pushing her into teaching, instead it was a well-balanced mix of influences. Similarly, Laura had always wanted to be a teacher and commented on looking forward to the wages in her first job as a nice change from growing up with not much money. Finally, Dorothy demonstrated a grounded-educator identity type in a similar way, from a persistent desire to work with children and seeing teaching as a stable, well-paid job, commenting *I've always known I wanted to be a primary school teacher* (Dorothy, interview 1).

4.5 The Development of a Professional Identity

In 4.4, participants' beliefs about what makes a successful teacher were reported along with the master narratives about teaching. These perceptions impact professional identity development and will be further discussed here in relation to the emergence of a professional identity.

Discussion relating the findings to the process of identity development within a figured worlds framework will follow in chapter 5. Professional identity development was seen as emerging and fragile in nature and heavily affected by positive or negative experiences (tables 4.4-4.8 in appendix W).

Professional identity development for the participants was dynamic and often affected by what had happened in a particular day. The impact of a positive experience confirmed the individual was heading towards being a teacher, whereas a negative experience made the individual doubt it would ever happen. The effect of these experiences was often internalised and created a deeper doubt over whether they were *good* enough. One example of this came from Ava, where a bad lesson observation instigated a spiral of concerns around whether she should continue:

The worst moment at university was when my tutor told me that I hadn't passed the lesson assessment, it really made me question what I was doing at university and if I wanted to continue. (Ava, journal)

Melanie also experienced moments of doubt relating to a conversation with her mentor:

My mentor explained that I wouldn't be able to teach the two lessons that were detailed in the placement booklet for this week, as it is their school policy to not allow student-teachers to teach in the induction week, however, I found myself wondering whether it was because she didn't feel I was up to scratch. (Melanie, journal)

Dorothy experienced a moment of doubt when she forgot to save her files, resulting in her losing the lesson plan and resources for the next day:

My work hadn't saved and I was absolutely distraught and I couldn't find my worksheets that I printed the week before and I'd put them... Not feeling prepared is not a nice feeling. (Dorothy, interview 1)

The difference here is Dorothy's student identity is stable, and she was able to notice the positive learning from a difficult experience:

I guess I did deal with it, but I think it's just one of them things. A shock, isn't it? But I guess now it does give me a bit of confidence because I think, "if I can deal with that, if it happened again at least I know I could deal with it." (Dorothy, interview 2)

These examples show how fragile the emerging professional identity is for these students and highlights the importance of being resilient so all experiences, positive and negative, can be seen for their learning value. Dave felt comfortable covering the lesson for his mentor during placement but the additional challenge of being without a teaching assistant made it a negative experience:

When it was 8:30 and I realised my TA wasn't coming in I felt lost. Due to you spending so much time with them and you rely on each other so much, I felt very uneasy teaching maths that morning as we bounce ideas and questioning of each other a bit like a double act. Realised how much difficult teaching is without support staff. (Dave, journal)

Even though this experience was one of his worst, Dave also spoke about teaching and covering absent staff as a reason he felt like a teacher. Ultimately, teaching has its' challenges and unpredictable things happen.

Throughout the findings a tension was noticed. Limiting beliefs were used by participants to reframe the narrative around being a successful student/teacher. Part of identity development (Holland *et al.*, 2001) is the continuous construction and reconstruction of identity elements, because of experiences and social interaction with others. Personal identity elements relating to social class and the perception of a *good* student are present and as individuals enter the professional world of teaching, this pre-existing identity is synthesised with perceptions of a *good* teacher to present a blueprint of professional identity. The experiences and tensions enable such a synthesis to take place, and individuals' self-author their new identity in line with pre-existing narratives and through reconstructing existing narratives through reframing and changing what a professional teacher identity is.

Positive reframing occurred when participants adapted the narrative to make it more compatible with their class and community identity. This also happened when considering their emerging professional teacher identity where participants spoke of being the teacher that felt right to them. Rather than trying to fit into a pre-conceived ideal of what a professional teacher is, the tension existed due to a perceived identity mismatch and was reconciled through a synthesis of a new teacher identity. For example:

I think I feel like a teacher of my own design, if that makes sense. I feel like I could fit somewhere in the right circumstance, and I think I could thrive. And I think the children could thrive. But it would have to be in the right circumstance, in the right school, with the with a lot of support around me and working with a team full of like-minded people. (Jane, interview 1)

Finding my own way of teaching. (Sarah, Interview 1)

Participants also engaged in negative reframing where a single negative incident made them question their teacher identity and belonging (e.g. Ava having a negative observation or Dorothy losing her memory stick).

4.6 Protective Factors

Several protective factors were observed supporting individuals to continue with the course despite challenges. These can be summarised as external support (4.6.1) and factual validation (4.6.2) and will be explored below.

4.6.1 External Support

External support is provided by others, for the participants this was family members, friends, course peers and placement colleagues. The positive impact of this support enabled individuals to be motivated and overcome challenges to attend university and continue with the course. For Melanie, extended family members telling positive stories of university supported the decision to attend:

My auntie... she's not that much older than me, really. And at the time I remember her being at university and she was having an amazing time and telling me all these stories, and I was just like, "yeah, I really want to go and do that." (Melanie, interview 1)

For those with siblings (Rebecca and Louise) who had attended university, this also acted as a protective factor and enabled family to be more supportive:

I mean my mum had doubts, but kind of just eventually, as you as getting into uni progressed, she would then kind of like, "OK, cool. Yeah, it'll be all right." I mean, obviously, you know, my sister's in same course. (Louise, interview 1)

Despite the participants being first-generation students, many had people in their lives who encouraged the decision to attend university. This was often a result of strong attainment results at school and a perceived academic ability. This is in alignment with policy often implies education

is a priority for those academically able and individuals should aspire to achieve this (DfE 2016, 2022). Despite Jane's family encouragement, it took working in a nursery for her to realise she was good at working with children and had more to give:

I wanted to go to university. I was encouraged by my parents to achieve well in school because they wanted me to achieve well...They've all been really supportive and I've had quite a lot of comments from my grandparents that they always knew that I'd go into a teaching world because I'm so good with children and they could see it from when I was a really young age. (Jane, interview 1)

Sarah's journey is like Jane's, and she worked at a nursery prior to starting the course. Her family were proud of her decision and there was a clear recognition of the academic ability:

Very supportive actually. It's a bit like a wow moment. Like somebody's going to university. So yeah, they've always said that like I've been quite an academic person. So I've always been like the academic, one of the family, if you like so yeah, really supportive. (Sarah, interview 1)

For some participants, attending university was personal and fully supported by those around them. This acts as a protective factor as family support is crucial:

You've made that decision [to attend university]. That's brilliant. We [parents] will fully help you with that and support you with whatever that means. (Dorothy, interview 1)

As well as having supportive family and friends as a protective factor, Jane also spoke about feeling a sense of belonging due to the lecturer being local and having a similar background. The impact of hearing a lecturer with a similar accent, helped her to feel valued (4.2.4 and 4.2.5).

Placement support acted as a protective factor for some, and five participants spoke about feeling supported in their placement school. As the placement element of the course makes up a large part of the experience, this can be seen as an important protective factor. Building placement relationships and feeling understood was something Laura and Mark felt helped them be successful:

Yeah, I settled in really. Well, the mentor was amazing. Gave me everything that I needed was just really comforting and just really understood. (Laura, interview 1)

The banter's really good between the three of us, like the teacher, the TA and myself. I don't know if banter is the right word, but there's a good relationship. (Mark, interview 1)

This was also the case for Ava, Sarah and Rebecca. Although a supportive placement experience can be seen to be important for students of all backgrounds, for students struggling to see

themselves in a professional environment it is arguably more important. The quotes below demonstrate this:

I had a really positive experience at the whole school...But I got on really well with the mentor. You know, she was really constructive with her feedback as well. So it would be almost instant. (Ava, interview 1)

My second year I had a very supportive mentor who I still speak to now. I think she had a lot of understanding. (Sarah, interview 1)

I think I got really lucky with my placement in terms of the staff. They were really welcoming, really nice. (Rebecca, interview 2)

The findings show how outside support from family, friends, peers, university staff and placement staff can have a significant impact on someone's ability to settle into the course and placement which in turn supports the development of a professional identity (Roksa and Kinsley, 2019).

4.6.2 Factual Validation

As well as family support, factual validation was also something many participants spoke of. For these participants, seeing the results of their hard work helped them feel as though they had made the right decision and were able to succeed which can be linked to the belonging-performance dependence. However, this effect was short-lived, and those individuals relied on factual validation continued to chase this as evidence of belonging. One good grade was not enough as this could be seen as luck. This aligns with the concept of imposter syndrome. Melanie was particularly motivated by good grades and expected a lot of herself. Rebecca also felt relief at the validation her grades were good, and she had evidence of doing well:

I think when I got this time around my first assignment back. It's kind of like they've seen that. I did well and it's just like, like I can breathe like, I know, like, roughly what I'm doing this. (Rebecca, interview 1)

Laura used her success at placement to help her feel as though she was on the right track:

In my first placement... that's where I felt like I belonged on a teacher training course because I was doing well. I think I was doing well in my placement, and I think that's when I realised. (Laura, interview 1)

Factual validation can challenge notions of imposter syndrome through providing contradictory information to participants negative self-beliefs. Such protective factors can be useful in identifying how to best support students through a widening participation agenda.

4.7 Summary

This chapter has presented the findings in line with the figured world of university, the figured world of the working-class family and the figured world of primary teaching. The findings' led to the creation of student and teacher typologies. The tensions existing between the good benchmark models and an individual's self-perception have been presented alongside the different figured worlds and detail about how participants reframed these challenges have been discussed. In addition, protective factors were summarised. Chapter 5 will analyse these findings in relation to the literature reviewed in chapter 2.

Chapter 5: Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings and explores the figured world of university and primary teaching to analyse the personal and master narratives present in the findings so the question of how working-class/first-generation student-teachers experience their developing professional identity can be answered. The findings relating to a working-class identity are reported in isolation in 4.3 however in the discussion, working-class identity is discussed in relation to both the figured worlds of university and primary teaching rather than as a separate element. This is because it is impossible to separate out the influence of these elements due to the intersecting nature, however this was done in the findings to aid the reader. First the figured world of university is discussed (5.2), including belonging (5.2.1), the perception of a *good* student (5.2.2) and identity development (5.2.3). Following this is a discussion of world-making (5.2.4) where the combination of narratives and identity development in turn both reproduce and recreate what it means to be a working-class/first-generation student at university. Moving on to the figured world of primary teaching (5.3), the discussion of the cultural context includes master and personal narratives about what teaching is (5.3.1), leading onto primary teacher identity by exploring the perception of a *good* teacher (5.3.2) and the development of a professional identity (5.3.3). Section 5.3.4 discusses identity tensions and the reframing of narratives participants used to ensure the new identity elements were compatible with existing personal identity elements. These reframed narratives contribute to the definition of the figured world of primary teaching as defined by the research participants.

The characteristics, identity and cultural elements of figured worlds can be found in figure 5.1 along with four contexts of identity production. These will be applied to the figured world of university, drawing on the university student narratives emerged from the findings (4.2).

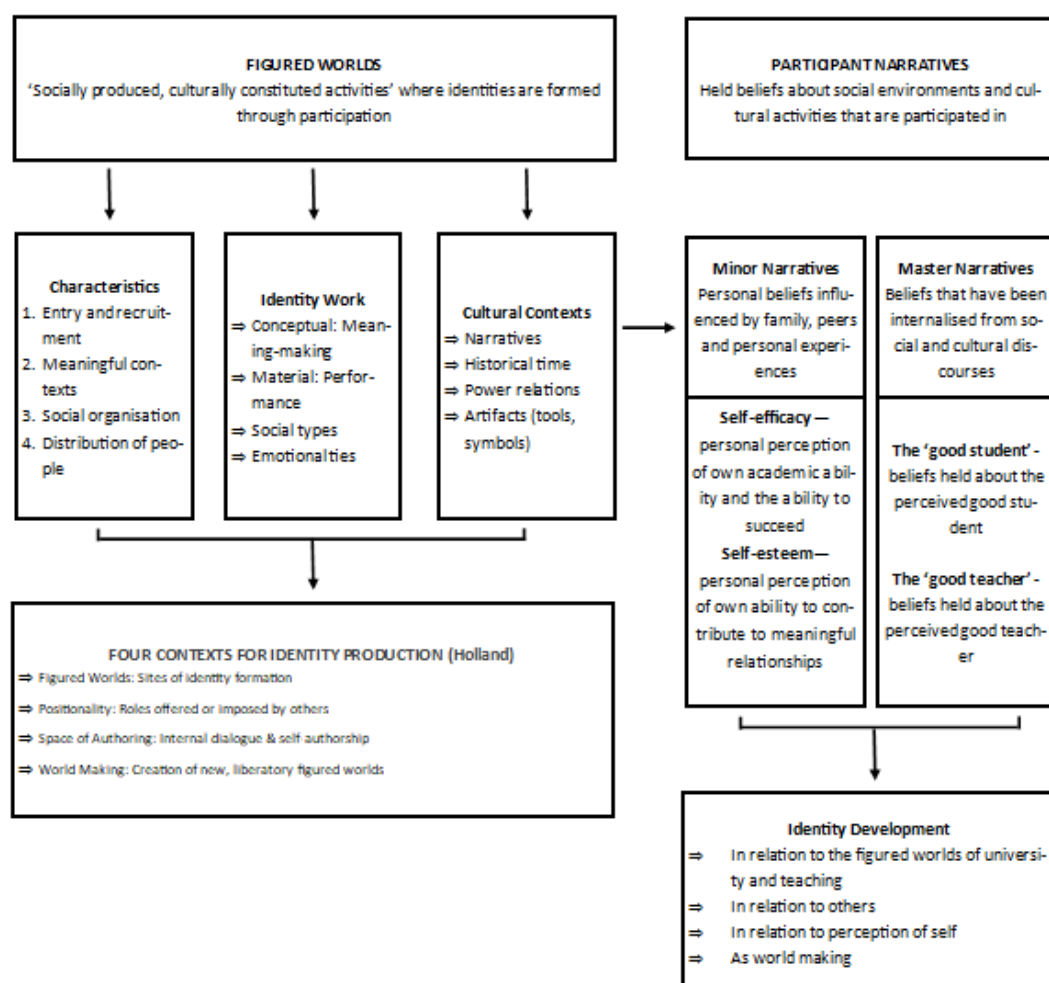


Figure 5.1: A diagram summarising the elements of a figured world and the effect on identity production. Drawing on the theory by Holland *et al.* (2001)

Figure 5.1 shows the different elements of the figured world theory (Holland *et al.*, 2001) serving as a theoretical framework for this research. It shows the effects of figured world elements on identity production relevant to understanding how the different narratives impact identity production. Here, personal narratives are those specific to the individual and master narratives are the re-telling of cultural norms as perceived by the individual. Both narrative elements are influential when considering how individuals experience identity development and can be seen as the mechanism which individuals use to conceptualise meaning and relevance to their own identity shift.

5.2 The Figured World of University

The findings chapter shared the narratives present in participant findings relating to being a student and attending university. Expectations, assumptions and personal beliefs were identified in the findings to enable the figured world of university to be exposed, as interpreted by the participants. These narratives affect identity development and are explored in this chapter (5.2.2, 5.2.3). Linking to the figured worlds theory of self and identity (2.4.2), expressions of narratives imply a subjective sense of self as an actor within the figured world in question. The perceptions of what it means to be working-class impacted the pre-existing view university participants held and are explored in relation to the figured world of university. Table 5.1 (appendix X) summarises the organisation of 5.2.

Considering first the characteristics of the figured world of university, belonging is explored as a key element in identity development before discussing the development of a student identity. This student identity can be seen as emerging alongside a professional teacher identity and therefore has significance relating to positionality and authoring within identity production. This dual identity process will be analysed separately for the ease of the reader but there is recognition these two processes are taking place alongside each other. The findings demonstrated the development of student identity inextricably linked to the development of a professional identity.

5.2.1 Social Belonging and Academic Doubt

Within this section, the findings relating to perceptions of belonging (4.2.4), the financial cost of university (4.2.2) and mature student experiences (4.2.3) are discussed. Although belonging was considered in 2.3.3 of the literature review, the significance of belonging relating to identity development emerged as more important than anticipated. Master narratives of how participants perceived a student should behave are indicative of the figured world of university and are influenced by personal experiences, family influence, cultural and historical factors as well as the participants own personal narratives. These narratives both reproduce and reconstruct the class inequality. The individual's perception of their own identity in comparison changes how they experience the developing professional identity.

Class-based assumptions were noted to be persistent and influential (Goldstone, 2020; Friedman *et al.*, 2021) in several ways. The way participants perceived being working-class affected belonging and self-belief which in turn affected the development of a student identity. The development of a student identity takes place alongside a professional identity for student-teachers, and the feeling of belonging comes from the match between an individual's identity and the perceived group (an imagined *good* student). Where participants spoke frequently about their class identity, this was viewed as more important to them and as such was more of a persistent influence. In line with this, how participants spoke about social mobility in terms of accepting/welcoming it or resisting it indicated how comfortable they were with accepting change to their class identity. Participants with a stronger working-class identity were more likely to resist social mobility change. The working-class identity was persistent, reluctant to change and accepted as something they had little control over (Reay, 2025).

The concept of belonging emerges from the findings and through statements of fitting in (or not), the social and cultural context is exposed. When participants shared their reasons for feeling settled and like they belonged, the stories exposed the master narratives around university which they were comparing themselves to. Acknowledging the figured world of university and its characteristics such as the imagined *good* student and the expectations around behaviour and performance, shapes the identity development as individuals strive to be part of the figured world. Belonging is considered from both a social and an academic context recognising the work of Ahn and Davis (2020) where four types of belonging has been identified. From the findings, the significance of being with like-minded peers created a sense of belonging. This contradicts the work of Reay who found that working-class students often felt out of place (Reay, 2013), however it is important to recognise that Reay's research took place in an 'elite' university whereas the post-1992 institutions may be seen as more accessible to people from a diverse range of backgrounds. Elements that impact belonging for working-class individuals include appearance, language, etiquette and cultural references (Bettencourt, 2021) and the individual's perception of themselves in relation to others either creates this sense of belonging or a disconnect. Where the student group at the case study HEI consists of many working-class students, social belonging could be easier to achieve.

The development of peer relationships as significant to a sense of belonging is something supporting the body of research in this area (Bettencourt, 2021) but can be affected by social class and student living arrangements. Class identity can also be seen to affect belonging, with class identity markers often overlooked as significant in the focus on fair access (Snee and Devine, 2018). The case study HEI is a widening participation university (3.5) and therefore has a large percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, with 36.27% of students being from the most disadvantaged category (IMD, 2025) and 91.26% of students living at home and commuting to university. For the case study HEI, this means a unique figured world combining historical and social influences on HE, as well as local influences, including social class. The case study HEI promotes itself as a civic university, committed to widening participation and making university accessible for people in the local area who are broadly from a working-class background. Meaning the perception of the imagined environment and *good* student is embedded in a working-class culture instead of a pre-1992 institution which may promote middle-class norms (Reay *et al.*, 2009), not seen at the case study HEI.

Students living at home are more likely to struggle with peer relationships and a sense of belonging (Hope and Quinlan, 2021). The findings confirmed this with Dorothy missing out on social opportunities by living at home. Sarah and Laura also commented on living at home, rejecting student drinking culture and choosing to focus on the course as a profession. This demonstrates how the dual development of a student identity alongside a professional identity is unique to courses designed to provide entry to a particular professional sphere (e.g. teaching, nursing). The impact of a working-class identity created a tension to the perceived *good* student affected by both the simultaneously developing professional identity and the case study HEI's commitment to being a civic university (5.2.2). The discourse of 'hard work' being the answer to success for students from a working-class background is relevant here and all the participants spoke of the importance of commitment and hard work (Snee and Devine, 2018). This links to the discourse of teacher quality being the solution to social mobility (Steadman and Ellis, 2021) and educational challenge in disadvantaged areas and is discussed further in 5.3.

Institutional support for peer relationships can promote belonging (Chrobak, 2024) and all participants in this study spoke of the welcome week treasure hunt where students were encouraged to complete a group activity around campus with the aim of both exploring the

environment and encouraging group participation. In fact, all participants spoke about recognising themselves in their peers, and the advantage of a university recruiting mostly from the local community is that students can see themselves in each other. The overwhelming percentage of students who live locally and commute to university (91.26%) means students living at home are the majority, not the minority which can be seen to mitigate any negative effects shown in research (Hope and Quinlan, 2021). Participants could draw on their class identity and recognise both the individual working-class identity and the collective identity formed by recognising themselves in their peers (Snee and Devine, 2018).

Participants who demonstrated a strong class identity (Jane, Melanie, Dave, Ava) which was resistant to change, found this was reinforced through their peers. Building a sense of belonging with other working-class students who held an equally strong working-class identity, had a reproductive effect where these identity elements were reinforced rather than challenged. Specifically linking to the work of Reay (2013) and her research around belonging to elite universities, the findings here show, for many students, they do not experience such an 'othering' effect. Instead, there was a pride and persistence of working-class identity where students resisted the assimilation of middle-class norms (Bettencourt, 2021) and instead created a sense of belonging through a shared working-class identity and desire to teach. Although the findings show students develop a sense of belonging through positive relationships with their peers (Maunder, 2018; van Lamoen *et al.*, 2025), there was a persistent doubt around their academic abilities despite all individuals meeting the university entry criteria.

The findings suggest imposter syndrome affected participants' academic belonging (Mack, 2018) but not social belonging. One of the explanations for successful social belonging within this study can be linked to the social organisation and cultural context of attending a post-1992 university in contrast to a Russell Group university (Mulrooney and Kelly, 2020). In relation to academic belonging, arguably the HEI where the research took place mirrors a more meritocratic society model where individuals are rewarded according to merit (Young, 2019). Within this model, students meeting the entry grade should feel confident of their ability to succeed, regardless of the background. However, what was seen was a persistent doubt over their ability. Although the literature review included research (2.3), relating to the struggle of belonging at university for working-class students, the link between imposter syndrome can be seen for those working-class

students attending Russell Group universities (Breeze, 2018; Maclean, 2022) but has not been explored in relation to post-1992 institutions. The findings show a persistence of doubt which affected academic belonging for mature participants (Melanie, Jane, Dave, Ava, Laura and Sarah) more than students who attended university aged 18. Reay (2005) suggested working-class students hold a sense of shame, not by failing but somehow feeling like they failed to be the perceived *good* student which can be exemplified by Jane's experience of HE characterised by persistent doubt about her ability to pass. Even at the end of the course, when Jane had received her results and passed, she doubted if she was good enough to start a teaching job. Despite this, Jane continued to push forward, having secured a job and deciding to redefine her professional identity. Jane articulated this as *becoming a teacher of my own design* showing it is not essential to leave behind a working-class identity and assimilate middle-class norms (Bettencourt, 2021) but instead, creating a sense of professional and student identity belonging through a redefinition of what success might look like. This process was not always without conflict for the participants and elements of Steadman's work on transition and conflict were seen (Steadman, 2021). One of these elements of conflict can be seen in imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome emerged because of the social elements of their identity making them feel as though academic attainment was not enough (Reay, 2021). It is not an outward struggle to make friends and fit in but instead an internal struggle of worth. Reay (2021) further explored how young people manage the tension between a working-class background and a middle-class university asserting that despite the rise of disadvantaged students attending universities, their experiences are characterised by a lack of academic confidence which was seen in 8 out of 10 of the participants. The social assumption here of middle and upper-class individuals being more intelligent forms part of the figured world of university (Reay, 2008) and the imagined *good* student which will be explored further in 5.2.2.

Another cultural factor for working-class students is the financial cost associated with university. It could be argued the financial cost of university affects all students, but with working-class students being less likely to receive family financial support (Pilgrim-Brown, 2023) and the limited support of student finance (Baines *et al.*, 2024) it can be seen as more significant for working-class individuals. The impact of such financial risk is considerable (McCabe *et al.*, 2022) and can be seen both positively and negatively. The impact of working alongside studying was shown to make the experience harder for those individuals (e.g. Sarah) but also teaches resilience and is in alignment with a hardworking, working-class ethic. Accepting the financial risk was discussed in some aspect by all participants and 6/10 participants directly discussed being worried about money. In

addition, two participants delayed the decision to attend university over financial concerns, meaning they were attending as mature students which can present a further challenge, supporting the work of Pilgrim-Brown (2023) who recognised the narrative of fear around debt and poverty affecting individuals' decision to study.

Protective factors were identified within the narrative reframing (4.6) where students reshaped the identity narrative, reducing the tension between being a *good* university student and a working-class individual. One key protective factor was working-class identity representation (Wilkins and Burke, 2015) in the university staff which reaffirmed university could be for everyone, and Jane spoke about this as being key to her continuation with the course. Other protective factors included peer support and support by other colleagues such as placement staff. The impact of this support will be discussed in 5.2.4 where the mechanism of how students re-created the figured world of university to support identity development is detailed. In summary, the figured world of university influences social and academic belonging through the comparison of the imagined environment and its' members to the individual wanting to belong. For this reason, belonging is key to identity development both socially and academically. The perception of a *good* student influences identity development alongside the social context and will be explored next in 5.2.2.

5.2.2 Student Typology and the *Good* Student

The perception of a *good* student is part of the figured world of university and acts as a benchmark for student identity development. The thoughts, actions and academic performance of the imagined *good* student is something all participants mentioned when comparing themselves to this benchmark to position their feeling of belonging and ultimately 'worthiness'. This notion of a *good* student also becomes a comparative factor to the student types created in 4.2.6 where we see the tensions between different elements of belonging resulting in dominant student typologies relating to academic belonging. Considering the perception of a *good* student (4.2.1) as someone who turns up on time and is well presented; has followed the traditional route (straight from college); does not dominate discussions and gets good grades, the student typologies highlight tensions alongside the mechanisms participants used to navigate these tensions. These elements are shaped through HE policy, specifically the widening participation

agenda, which conceptualises working-class students as a particular individual in need of support (Rainford, 2021a).

The achievement-focused student is centred on their studies and achieving positive outcomes first and foremost. It is concerned with academic belonging through engagement with studies and the ability to ignore challenges and focus on the end goal. Recognising the importance of academic belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023), the achievement-focused student showed a strong desire to belong academically through a recognition they have chosen the right course (Kahu *et al.*, 2022) and demonstrated a reliance of grade outcomes to show they belonged academically which demonstrates the belonging-performance dependence (Buckley, 2025). Linking to identity formation, the underlying doubt these participants communicated created a tension and challenge which appeared as a low self-belief but high self-efficacy. This self-efficacy can be seen in the drive to work hard but also the absence of continued doubt around their academic performance. The difference is subtle but for Dave and Louise, they were focused on achieving but did not constantly refer to a fear of failing. Linking this profile to the perception of a *good* student the beliefs about the figured world of university and places an importance of results above all. Students with this dominant characteristic used the focus on achievement to explain their lack of engagement with certain social elements such as student drinking culture (5.2.1) and was also a way to manage their fear of failure. Self-efficacy can be seen as important to academic belonging (Kahu *et al.*, 2022) and is often lacking in working-class students (Ahn and Davis, 2023) and has been found to be more important than social belonging overall (Lawrie *et al.*, 2024). The achievement-focused identity type can be seen as a deficit type where individuals experience a mismatch between how they see themselves and what they perceive as required to be a *good* student. This was also seen in the other deficit type of the validation-seeking student but the difference here is mindset. Achievement-focused learners choose to ignore the importance of social belonging and focus on academic belonging where success is gauged by a job well done (Jin and Ball, 2021). Underpinned by a strong and stable working-class identity, both Louise and Dave were able to manage a dual identity (Bettencourt, 2021) by seeing hard work as the defining characteristic providing membership to the figured world of university. The achievement-focused student also adopts the neoliberal narrative of hard work (Lawler and Payne, 2019) and the concept of effort being the defining quality to support success and social mobility. The process of identity construction is a social process (Scheepers and Ellemers, 2019) and has the potential to challenge an existing narrative (or discourse) or reproduce its unequal effects (Melville and

Bartley, 2013). The findings show the achievement-focused student type reinforces inequality by internalising the belief working-class individuals are less intelligent (Tittle and Rotolo, 2000) and less able to succeed at university. Unfortunately, there is the risk that participants will make sense of this success by believing it was luck or some external factor enabling this rather than intrinsic effort and ability.

The second deficit student identity type is the validation-seeking student. These students display a constant drive to prove they deserve to be at university through good grades. There is a high fear of failure and fragile student identity. These students hold a deep-seated belief they are not good enough both academically and socially, linking back to the different elements of belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023). In contrast to the achievement-focused student, the validation-seeking student looks to others for validation, displaying the belonging-performance dependence (Buckley, 2025) as a significant influence in their experiences. These students have low self-esteem as was the case for the achievement-focused student but also display low self-efficacy where they doubt their ability. For these students, social belonging was also important, and they looked for validation through social means (peers and colleagues). Validation-seeking was the most common student identity type with 5 out of 10 participants showing this dominant identity type. Noting the importance of belonging as something all students need for success, working-class students start university possessing a perceived deficit, this sense of both social and academic belonging can present an identity disconnect. Considering the tensions between the imagined *good* student and the participants' self-perception, seeking external validation helped them to progress and can be seen as an important influence rather than a limiting dependence.

The third student type is different to the deficit types above and can be seen as a positive type. The grounded-learner is someone who understands their capacity for both making friends and belonging academically. This contrasts with the validation-seeking students who demonstrated less internalisation of their ability to make suitable friends and a persistent doubt over their academic ability. The grounded-learner is characterised by realistic confidence in their academic and social ability, emotional resilience, and a belief in their capacity to succeed. These students showed high self-efficacy and had the belief they could work hard and achieve despite any presenting challenges which are important factors in academic belonging (Kahu *et al.*, 2022). Three participants demonstrated this student type as the dominant (Dorothy, Sarah and Laura)

and were able to talk about their experiences with reflection, drawing on the learning taken from any challenging situations and held strong in their belief to succeed. Dorothy had faced challenges through the course (4.3.2) but was able to take the positives from these experiences and be excited for future learning. One challenging situation at placement when Dorothy lost some saved work and had to redo it, provided the opportunity to reflect, which gave her confidence to know she could deal with a similar situation in the future. This self-narrative supports identity development rather than creating an example of difference. Here the story told, impacts both student identity and professional identity simultaneously. For Dorothy, it could be assumed this resilience was present because of her working-class upbringing (Reay *et al.*, 2011) but looking more closely at her experiences, parental, peer and institutional support also had a strong influence. Here the emotional and practical support provided by her family, helped Dorothy to develop a positive mindset (Roska and Kinsley, 2018). Sarah and Laura both displayed a grounded-learner identity type and spoke of how finding a like-minded peer helped her to challenge the imagined *good* student and create a sense of social belonging (Bettencourt, 2021). The protective factor of social belonging as a mechanism to support academic belonging cannot be discounted here and should be viewed as significant alongside academic belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023; Buckley, 2025; Kahu *et al.*, 2022). The grounded-learner type shows high self-efficacy and social belonging can successfully impact academic belonging and smooth the tensions of identity development when entering the figured world of university.

5.2.3 Student Identity Development

Considering identity self-authorship within figured worlds enables us to understand how the process of identity development is experienced by individuals. For Holland *et al.* (2001), identity development was a self-authored process but also problematic in nature. It is important not to take such identity development as an automatic process as often individuals do not fully immerse themselves in the figured world for long enough to enable this identity to develop. One significant element in the identity authoring process is the importance of artefacts. These are tools or signifiers of the new identity and in the figured world of university, can be seen as signifiers of being a *good* student. This imagined ideal student presents the socially acceptable artefacts adopted by individuals, for example punctuality, engagement and academic results (4.2.1). However, where tension exists, it challenges the pre-existing figured world and presents an opportunity for world-making where members reinvent what the rules of engagement are. This

was evident in the findings where participants reimagined what being a teacher looked like, challenging the pre-existing benchmark and creating a new image they were more comfortable with. These processes are important as they contextualise the experiences of the participants of this study when developing new identities through the membership of both university and primary teaching.

Attending HE is a time of growth and identity change (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021). The findings demonstrate how the sense of belonging was fostered by meeting peers they recognised as similar. The challenge of developing a professional identity alongside school staff is explored in 5.3 and the process of developing a student identity is discussed here. Individuals with greater cultural capital perform better academically (Andersen and Hansen, 2012) but can struggle to develop a sense of belonging due to a habitus mismatch where an individual's experience and knowledge does not match what is expected of them (Ivemark and Ambrose, 2021) and can also experience challenges through the compartmentalising of the academic and the social (Jin and Ball, 2021). For the participants, making friends and belonging was easy for eight participants with a further two (Louise, Ruby) building peer networks over time. This removes any perceived inadequacy linked to non-middle-class demeanour (Crew, 2020) present for working-class students attending a university with middle-class peers. This perceived class inequality has been seen to dominate elite (Russell group) universities but is not something shared by participants in this way. Where Reay (2021) found that working-class students are intimidated by their middle-class peers, attending a university where many students are working-class meant that for my participants belonging came from being surrounded by like-minded peers. The challenge of working-class students meeting academic requirements, but not social ones (Reay, 2021) is something contradictory as the findings show participants of this study were secure socially but doubted their academic and professional teacher capabilities despite successful grades. All participants met the academic requirements but still expressed a great deal of doubt relating to their ability.

The persistence of class identity influence (Goldstone, 2020 and Friedman *et al.*, 2021) was present in the findings with 8/10 participants noting they would not feel comfortable calling themselves middle-class, despite having many markers of middle-class including a university education and professional career. All participants were able to identify one peer who seemed

more middle-class. Often this comparison was negative until they had got to know the individual suggesting a working-class identity is persistent and students looked to reinforce this with their peers rather than challenge this. The consideration of shame with working-class individuals being seen as deficit in some way (Loveday, 2016) was showcased by students speaking of issues around travel to campus, financial worries relating to work and appearing like a good student. Myles (1999) spoke of language structures and the differences linked to class, Jane was very aware of this and felt that her language was not formal enough. Considering the historical narrative that HE is for the elite, these students became classed actors at university, competing for value through grades and placement successes. Combine this with many first-generation and working-class students not growing up around HE language (Crew, 2020) or lacking cultural norms of HE (Rubin, 2012), this competition for value becomes even more difficult.

Despite the challenges experienced by students as evidenced in the findings, post-1992 universities are seen as more accessible which makes university a possibility for many who would not feel comfortable attending a Russell group institution. This is supported by Reay, (2018) who found that due to the perceived status of elite universities, working-class students usually attend low-status universities. This is arguably a positive stance as despite their perceived low-status they are better equipped to support working-class students socially as well as academically. This is supported by Read *et al.* (2003) who found working-class students often select post-1992 HEIs with a perception they will belong compared to elite HEIs. In addition, Crozier and Reay (2011) found working-class students can succeed at both elite and post-1992 universities if they receive the right support.

As with the social protective factors, there were also family factors that helped to mitigate some of the academic doubt and perceived class inferiority. One of these can be described as intergenerational learning (Wainwright and Watts, 2021) where having other family members attend university supported the possibility. Although the participants were all first generation, Melanie spoke of an auntie who attended university while Louise and Rebecca had siblings who attended, and Dave had his wife's support who had attended university previously. Parental co-agency Schoon *et al.* (2021) was also seen where families were encouraging and continued to be supportive of student successes, demonstrating a shared responsibility and mutual support. The findings show the intersection of being working-class and first-generation meant for Jane,

Rebecca, Melanie and Ava, they were unaware of the process of applying to university and had no one in the family to offer sufficient help. The support from college staff and university staff was crucial for these students and programmes such as 'step-up to HE' which supports students to gain the skills and qualifications needed to attend university, are key in supporting the widening participation agenda.

5.2.4 World-Making

In the findings, participants experienced an identity tension to the perceived *good* student which was affected by both the simultaneously developing professional identity and the case study HEI's commitment to being a civic university (5.2.2). The individual participant stories were both cultural reproduction and production. Revisiting figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001), the combination of developing identities and relational social practices brings light to world-making where individuals can engage in redesigning or reconstructing the figured world to create new liberatory worlds. In the instance of working-class students, this is the world of the working-class university.

To reconcile the tensions between a working-class identity and the *good* student benchmark participants shaped new narratives, in collaboration with their like-minded peers rather than changing to meet existing narratives. They entered the pre-existing figured world of university and reconstructed the existing narratives to co-author a new figured world of the working-class university through self and group mediation. The creation of new liberatory figured worlds was evident in both the working-class identity and professional teacher identity. This process included internal dialogue and self-authorship to recreate a student identity. Such recreation of narratives resulted in the qualities of a working-class student being independent, resilient, hard-working and able to get good grades alongside the protection of working-class narratives such as being down to earth and understanding. This is supported by Reay *et al.* (2009) who found where working-class students made up more than 50% of the student population, individuals were able to participate without challenging their working-class identities. This reluctance to change class identity may be perceived as a difficulty when entering the 'middle-class' world of teaching however Keane (2024) observed working-class students were able to acknowledge and claim the middle-class status of teaching without abandoning their working-class identity. Instead, these

students held onto the mentality of hard-work and resilience, making it a professional asset. This also can be school dependant however as Jones (2019) found working-class student-teacher identities were not equally valid in all settings.

5.3 The Figured World of Primary Teaching

The findings chapter shared the narratives present in participant findings relating to being a primary teacher (4.4.1) and the processes of developing a professional identity (4.5).

Expectations, assumptions and personal beliefs emerged from the findings to enable the figured world of primary teaching to be explored, as interpreted by the participants. These narratives affect professional identity development and will be explored in this chapter (5.3.2). The perceptions of what it means to be working-class (4.3), and a university student (4.2 and 5.2) impacted the development of a professional teacher identity and will be explored in relation to the figured world of primary teaching. Table 5.1 (appendix X) summarises the organisation of 5.3.

It can be seen in 5.2 how a working-class identity shapes the development of a student identity and can lead to a re-authoring of the narratives associated with the figured world to create a new space, more socially familiar to the individual leading to reduced identity tensions. This process can also be applied to the figured world of primary teaching. This figured world is a professional sphere, dominated with historical, political and cultural views of what it means to be a primary teacher (2.2, 2.4.3). These influences shape the narratives that act as both identifiers and reproducers of the accepted concept of what it means to be a professional primary teacher. Historical notions of what a *good* teacher is influences how outsiders perceive the identity of a primary teacher and in turn will affect the identity change of individuals entering the professional teaching arena.

5.3.1 The Social and Cultural Context

For many working-class individuals, the decision to attend university is dependent on several factors (financial, academic and social). From the findings successful support mechanisms included college support, family support, university open days, financial advice, intergenerational learning and parental co-agency. These social and cultural elements helped to remove some of

the barriers to university attendance for the participants. The decision to train as a teacher felt worthwhile and achievable for participants. This supports the work of Folkes (2022) who explored working-class motivations for attending HE and concluded they were often philanthropic in nature, wanting to give back to the community. This was seen in both Dave and Dorothy who specifically chose to attend a local university to make a difference in the local community on completion. Another factor for choosing teacher training was the perception that teaching is a stable and supportive career. Jane noted how her family were supportive of her decision because teaching is a stable job. This was echoed by Rebecca and Dorothy. The narrative of teaching as a stable career however can be seen to conflict with research around teachers' wellbeing and job satisfaction (McCallum, 2020; Green, 2021). The persistent narrative of teaching is one from policy and government ideology rather than grounded in research. The shift of educational questions being framed as policy problems requiring solutions can be seen as the process of individual responsabilisation of teaching quality (Steadman and Ellis, 2021).

As well as the narratives of teaching as a career, the findings also highlighted narratives of a perceived *good* teacher. This acted as a comparison to their own emerging professional identity at the beginning and became the starting point of figured world transformation and authorship later. The key narratives of a *good* teacher can each be traced back to government policy narratives relating to teacher quality, and research into teachers' experiences to provide an insight into the more dominant narratives (e.g. Nias 1989; Lortie 1975; Mahony and Hextall 2013; Apple, 2021). One such example is the perception of a good teacher supports and encourages pupils in an inclusive way (4.4). This reproduces the policy tension of the inclusion agenda versus the standards agenda (Walton, 2025). Viewing both these agendas together, a teacher needs to be inclusive of all but also achieve high expectations for all, meeting government standards of reading, writing and maths. This does not acknowledge the individual challenges pupils with additional needs may face or the fact high expectations for all is not the same thing as meeting government set standards at the end of the primary phase.

When developing a professional identity, the role of artefacts was evident from the findings (Banegas *et al.*, 2022). For Dave, looking like a teacher was important. He saw this as an artefact of belonging to the professional world of teaching and spoke of needing to make sure he looked like a teacher. This also extended to having handwriting like a teacher. For Dorothy, being

organised like a teacher was important and she gave weight to one mistake she made around organisation. Other participants spoke of having a positive impact on pupils and centred their identity artefacts as external pupil success.

As well as the master narratives exposing cultural and social beliefs around primary teaching, there were also personal narratives in the findings. These are influencing beliefs (Breen and McLean, 2017) personal in nature and intersect with master narratives and are likely to have been shaped by master narratives but are also subject to family influences as well as personal experiences. For many participants, the desire to teach came from their own experiences of school, either positive or negative. For some (Louise, Dave) a negative school experience was the catalyst for providing better for today's pupils. Other participants (Rebecca, Ava, Ruby, Jane, Melanie) a difficult time at school, combined with supportive teachers, resulted in a desire to be a positive figure in children's lives. Finally, the remaining participants had a positive memory of school and wanted to be part of shaping the future of young people. The student typologies presented in 5.2.2 can be linked with the motivations for choosing teacher training. Those students with an achievement-focused dominant student identity (Louise and Dave) both had negative experiences in their own school history and wanted to provide better. Linking with the work of Keane *et al.* (2023b) who noted working-class teachers often held personal values of wanting to be an inclusive and relatable teacher. Like this, the validation-seeking students (Rebecca, Jane, Ava, Ruby, Melanie) also spoke of negative school experiences but the difference here is they could remember teachers that positively supported them through this. For these students, the motivation came from wanting to provide a positive influence for young people, drawing on personal experiences.

The grounded-learner student types (Sarah, Laura, Dorothy) demonstrated a desire to work with children and help them see their full potential. For Sarah, this was developed through working in a nursery while Laura and Dorothy attended university straight after college, choosing childcare and child development subjects at college. Differing from the deficit learner types, these participants were able to transfer their grounded-learner mentality to become a teacher who was able to see the value in learning from their placement experience and were more resilient when overcoming challenge. One example of this was Dorothy when she lost her saved work when about to deliver

a lesson. Although this was an uncomfortable experience, Dorothy could see she coped well and was able to deliver a good lesson, despite having to re-make resources at the last minute.

5.3.2 The *Good* Teacher

The perceived *good* teacher highlighted beliefs and assumptions about what it means to be successful at teaching and was used as a benchmark for individuals when considering their developing professional identity. As individuals entering a profession where *good* teaching has already been politically defined (Calabrese Barton and Yang, 2000), this benchmark can be seen as being historically and culturally created within the figured world of primary teaching. This benchmark is also seen within political discourse where teacher quality is the answer to improving education's role in social mobility (Steadman and Ellis, 2021). Interestingly, the student identity was seen as developing alongside a professional identity and was influenced by class assumptions as well as the perception of a *good* student (5.2.2). This co-authorship of identity (student and professional) emerged from the findings as important despite it not being initially considered and could be considered as a combined student-teacher identity.

To understand how the participants experienced their developing professional identity, it is necessary to also see how they experience the development of their student identity alongside their pre-existing working-class identity. Considering Carswell and Conway's (2023) four elements of professional teacher identity: the end goal of being a teacher; the ethical substance of teacher identity; discursive authority sources and; self-practice, the experiences of the participants in this study can be seen to align with each element through the teacher typologies considering what is perceived as a *good* teacher along with personal motivations and identity development as a self-authoring process. The master narratives around being a *good* teacher was summarised in the teacher typologies (4.4.1) and will be explored in more detail here. Remembering education policy discourse of what a good teacher is, the teachers' standards (DfE, 2011) were influential in the redefinition of what it is to be a teacher (Mahony and Hextall, 2013) which can be seen through the participant narratives of both the nurturing/encouraging teacher as well as the standards driven teacher. However, it is also helpful to remember the drive for these standards was to improve progress and attainment, linked to OFSTED outcomes, meaning certain areas of teaching were seen as valuable (performance) and others as less (holistic self-development) (Carswell and

Conway, 2023). Individual motivations for teaching shaped participants' beliefs about what a good teacher is and uncovered the master narratives around the perceived *good* teacher (Calabrese Barton and Yang, 2000). The three types are: saviour, career-focused and grounded-educator and will be discussed each in turn.

Hulme and Quirk Marku, (2017) presented a matrix of teacher professionalism which can be used here to understand the different elements of the figured world of primary teaching. Within this matrix, the contextualist/reductionist discourse of teacher professionalism, combined with the level of teacher autonomy can be seen as significant. This was also echoed by Steadman's work on transition, agency and conflict being drivers for identity development in student-teachers (Steadman, 2021). High levels of teacher autonomy see the teacher as a change maker, something Dave aspired to be within his career. This community centred approach can also be seen in Jane who shared a strong desire to improve the lives of the children she would teach and is linked to both the grounded-educator and saviour teacher typologies. The perceptions of what a *good* teacher is, was seen to be internalised by 8/10 participants through their narratives where the historical, political and cultural discourse of good teaching has been taken on as their own. This limits the capacity for change in terms of the social-class perception of teachers, but both Dave and Jane displayed disruptive identity elements. The catalyst for this was the struggle to reconcile their own identity with a professional (middle-class) teacher and the result was a recognition that they had the agency to become a different kind of teacher, one they have defined.

The saviour is a teacher who is motivated by the drive to improve the lives of others (extrinsic motivation) and wants to either replicate teacher support they found influential in their lives (e.g. Ava) or replace a negative personal experience by being a positive influence for others in the way they had wished for. This can be described as (re)creating the caring school (Bergmark *et al.*, 2018) and embodies altruistic motivations for improving the lives of others (Lauermann *et al.*, 2017). For these participants, being a teacher meant being there for young people and providing stability, nurture and encouragement. Participants spoke of encouraging each child to be their best regardless of background (Louise) or helping others love learning (Ava). The significance of this is by understanding what these teacher types are motivated by, we can also understand how they value success in teaching. The associated policy discourse internalised by participants is the concept that education has the power to affect social mobility and overall life outcomes (e.g. DfE

2016, 2022, 2026) and this internalised policy discourse creates a community centred motivation where individuals enter teacher to support this social mobility discourse (Folkes, 2022).

In contrast to the saviour teacher identity type which has an extrinsic motivation for improving the lives of others, the career-focussed teacher identity type is concerned with improving the lives of the individual or their family through meeting certain teachers' standards (DfE, 2011) or gaining visible results such as pupil progress. This could also be described as a commitment to professionalism (Lauermann *et al.*, 2017) or the recognition of teaching as a stable and intellectually challenging career (Richardson and Watt, 2014). The motivation is focussed inwards but heavily reliant on external validation, supporting the belonging-performance dependence (Buckley, 2025). For these participants, the end goal of being a *good* teacher was motivating as this was seen as associated with a stable career and good financial benefits. Linking to the teacher professionalism matrix (Hulme and Quirk Marku, 2017), the belief of a specific set of skills or qualities that make a *good* teacher is linked with low teacher autonomy. This was evident in the findings when both Melanie and Ava saw success as performing a certain way and getting positive results (both academic and in terms of pupil progress). This more compliant professionalism can be linked to the teacher type of the career-focussed teacher and does not strive to disrupt any potential class inequality but instead acts to reproduce the hierarchy (Reay, 2020).

The policy discourse supported here is one of professionalisation and standards to achieve success. Thiele *et al.* (2017) found the motivation of working-class students to attend HE included wanting to be better or escape certain conditions or quality of life which was the case for both Jane and Melanie. Interestingly, Walters (1996) discovered mature students often selected a course based on a desire to change their self-concept which aligns with many of the participants here (Jane, Melanie, Dave, Ava). The career-focused teacher also adopts the standards agenda as a gauge of success and aligns with the professionalisation of the teaching profession. Even with this alignment there were challenges around the large workload (Melanie) and a work/life balance (Ava). Jane summarises the tensions perfectly when, rather than adopting the policy narratives associated with a professional teacher, she asserted she was '*becoming a teacher of her own design*' (Jane, interview 1). Which arguably takes more self-awareness and growth than she understood at the time. Jane spoke this way to balance the tension but in fact was world-making by recreating the narrative of what a *good* teacher is. The development of the teachers'

standards (DfE, 2011) has contributed to the politicalisation of a preferred teacher identity (Carswell and Conway, 2023) and acted to legitimise the perceived *good* teacher (Smyth *et al.*, 2001) but this is not necessarily something all participants were accepting, instead opting to change the definition (4.6, 5.3.4).

The final teacher type is the grounded-educator, this identity type shares similarities with the grounded-learner student identity type as it is characterised by a balance of self-efficacy, motivation and acceptance. The grounded-educator shows both awareness of the potential for education to shape lives and the professional nature of performance. Within this identity type, there is a distinction in what caused participants to say they felt like a teacher. For the grounded-educator, feeling like a teacher was being able to do the job in practice, which was characterised as supporting pupils, seeing progress in pupils and recognising a job well done as a result of school mentor feedback. Here a professional sense of belonging was created through the development of a teacher identity and an alignment of both social, academic and professional belonging (Kahu *et al.*, 2022). The comparison between the perceived *good* teacher and the perception of their own performance resulted in the grounded-educator participants (Dorothy, Sarah, Laura and Dave) being more likely to say they felt like a teacher. These participants moved away from the belonging-performance dependence and towards a belonging competence mindset (Buckley, 2025). It is no surprise none of the level 4 students commented on feeling like a teacher due to them being at the start of their journey. The concept of feeling like a teacher is important here as it is evidence of membership and belonging to the figured world of teaching. Unlike the career-focussed professionals which demonstrate compliant professionalism (Ball, 2003b), the grounded-educator can work within policy but also sees the benefit in challenging this when it does not provide the best experience for the pupils.

All participants were motivated in some part by the stable career as an improvement on their working-class upbringing however grounded-educators (and the saviour professional to an extent) used other motivations to justify their place in HE including improving the lives of others as well as their own. This extrinsic focus could be explained by the participants' feeling university was not for them so instead, they explained their drive and ambition to be better by channelling it into the lives of others. This supports how working-class students may select a course based on either professional status (Davies *et al.*, 2016) or altruistic motivations (Folkes, 2022). The findings also

showed that participants experienced a complicated relationship around their own ambition where academic doubt (4.3.2) often resulted in a downplaying of ambition to manage any expected failure. Melanie and Ava were both mature students who struggled at school and were driven to prove themselves alongside academic doubt resulting in a dependence on grades to foster academic belonging (Buckley, 2025). Jane doubted her academic ability throughout, even doubting herself after knowing she had passed the course and gained qualified teacher status which demonstrates the persistence of academic doubt. There is also a link to the aspiration deficit discourse of working-class individuals in education policy (DfE, 2016, 2022) which has been challenged in current research (Rainford, 2023).

5.3.3 The Development of a Professional Identity

Understanding how working-class students experience the process of professional identity development will be discussed in relation to identity work and the contexts for identity production (table 5.2, 5.1). Identity work includes meaning-making, performance and social and emotional engagement. These processes are influenced by the social and cultural contexts including the influence of master narratives affecting the perception of what a *good* teacher looks and behaves like. Power relations are relevant here through the placement experience and artefacts are ways in which individuals show belonging to the figured world in question and are referred to as positional identities (Holland *et al.*, 2001). Individual agency is also important as the capacity and ability to shape a professional identity through the emotional process of experience is limited by access to such meaningful experiences (Zembylas, 2003). The theory of identity within figured worlds is explained in 2.9 to 2.14 and proposes there are 'conventional means for representing the intrinsic capacities and processes that are presumed to share a person's actions,' (Holland *et al.*, 2001 pp 19). In turn, these internal processes can be seen in the way an individual modifies, monitors and evaluates their own behaviour to present a version of themselves in alignment with the figured world they are hoping to belong to. The way an individual talks about themselves in relation to others and when retelling events (personal stories), are both explanatory and productive in nature. These stories are the way individuals show who they choose to be and help shape who they are.

When considering the development of a professional identity, the influence of others perceived to already belong to the figured world of primary teaching, have a power influence in terms of identity and shape the positional identity of the individual. For the participants in this study, identifying themselves as a teacher is a key moment where they are accepting the identity elements of being a professional teacher and presenting them as their own. It is a marker of professional belonging. Linked with this personal acknowledgement of being a teacher, the cultural influences of what and who a teacher is, become internalised and can be reaffirming or tension producing. One of these cultural influences is of government (DfE) education policy and the teachers' standards (DfE, 2011). The ability for policy linked to both education and initial teacher training, along with regulatory bodies such as OFSTED, culturally shape the perception of teaching as a profession (2.2 and 2.4). Through the introduction of the teachers' standards (*ibid*), a cultural picture of what a teacher should be able to do was presented and the standardisation of teaching contributed to the professionalism of teaching (Carswell and Conway, 2023; Grundoff *et al.*, 2017). These standards provided consistency and enabled view of professionalism and professional development (Mahony and Hextall, 2013).

For Ava and Louise, the desire to 'give back' motivated their decision to train as a primary teacher. This can be seen as influenced by several education policy documents such as the 2016 and 2022 white papers detail the important role education has to both affect social mobility and life outcomes (DfE, 2016; 2022). Rebecca found satisfaction from teaching pupils' new knowledge and defined a *good* teacher as someone who excites and motivates their pupils. However, what a *good* teacher is perceived to be from policy, becomes a form of ideological control where policy beliefs become a culturally accepted view of good teaching in turn promotes a particular set of values as important and correct. These values become internalised in individuals who are seeking to belong to the figured world of primary teaching and are also used to legitimise the choice to attend university as a working-class individual. There is a blurring of values here where the participants of this study presented such values as their own, not recognising the dominating influence of education policy. Such standards used in a regulatory way have the danger of removing individual agency and professional trust (Ball, 2021). Carswell and Conway (2023) explain an increase in teacher competency frameworks contribute to the politicalisation of teacher identity and the presentation of a preferred teacher identity which can be seen within the participants of this study when Dave internalises certain behaviours such as having good handwriting, to be a marker for membership into the figured world of teaching. This can also be

seen when Dorothy focused on her data loss mistake initially questioning her ability to be a teacher but ultimately contributing to her sense of self-efficacy and professionalism (Zembylas, 2003). Being grounded-educators, both participants were able to see past their shortcomings and recognise the experience of teaching, for example when Dave recognised his impact on motivating learners in science. Despite the potential for regulatory frameworks (e.g. teachers standards', ITTECF) to have a limiting factor on individuals, this was not the case for the participants. They were able to work within these frameworks and view the standards positively as a measure of success (Frostenson and Englund, 2020). The link between increased accountability and professionalism can be argued to give a higher status to the profession and enabled the participants to see the importance of what they were doing (Mayer and mills ,2021). The standards almost operate as a guide to membership of the figured world of teaching but also reproduce political ideals and inequality.

Considering professional identity development within such regulatory frameworks, using the model of Carswell and Conway (2023) is appropriate here. The four elements of professional teacher identity as shaped by teacher frameworks are:

1. End goal of being a teacher,
2. ethical substance of teacher identity,
3. discursive authority sources,
4. self-practice.

For participants, all four of these elements were present in the narratives they shared. Elements 1 and 3 are heavily driven by regulatory frameworks where elements 2 and 4 are more individual. Grounded-educators demonstrate a clear drive to reach the end goal of being a teacher and see self-practice as evidence they are participating (Clarke, 2009). In contrast, the saviour identity type values the ethical substance of teaching above all else with the career-focused professional favouring element 1 and 4. Alongside this internal process, artefacts were given importance when developing student identity and many participants, across all identity types, discussed how artefacts supported (or challenged) their figured world membership. For Dave, his handwriting was something he needed to improve to feel like a teacher, but others viewed artefacts from a deficit stance. Jane struggled to feel like a teacher due to her local accent and use of informal English but the support of having a university tutor who spoke like her, made a positive difference. Meeting the required standards within the teacher training frameworks meant the

level 6 participants were able to see themselves as a teacher, showing that such frameworks can be supportive in identity development (Mahony and Hextall, 2013) but can also add to the politicalisation of *good* teaching (Carswell and Conway, 2025).

5.3.4 Identity Tensions and World-Making

Participant narratives highlighted tensions in the professional development identity experience where the individual's perception of self, clashed with the perception of who a professional teacher should be. These tensions presented through both the student identity and the professional teacher identity but due to the complex and intertwined nature of the identity development process, the impact of these tensions will be discussed in combination with each other here.

The first limiting belief, being too old for university, arose as part of student identity development but also affects the development of a professional identity as the emerging professional identity was experienced alongside the student identity process. This focus on age was not anticipated to be significant but for those students who did not follow the traditional route to university, it was something they mentioned often, linking to Kahu's (2014) research stating mature students often report less of a sense of belonging. This highlights a gap which Boren *et al.* (2017) identified showing mature students are often overlooked in terms of the widening participation agenda. For Melanie, attending university later in life meant she was confident about her choice of subject. This was also a way of reframing a limiting belief into a positive trait to reduce the tension which can be seen as a process of mediation where participant stories contribute to cultural production (Holland *et al.*, 2001). Jane also spoke about having increased confidence attending at an older age, demonstrating the process of how stories contribute to cultural production and reproduction. To explain this process, Jane internalised the discourse that university students are young and compared herself to this as a part of the experience of developing her identity. This mismatch between the perceived cultural model (figured world) and herself is inherently uncomfortable and the reconciliation is the process of world-making, where individuals redefine the cultural model of a *good* teacher to ease tensions. Not all participants saw their age as a positive identity marker however, Dave felt self-conscious attending placement as a mature student, mentioning the school would have been expecting someone younger. A negative belief

can be seen as a personal narrative that was influential in the process of identity development (Schei and Schei, 2017) and an example of cultural reproduction where students are perceived as being younger. Sarah was only a few years older than her peers but the frequency she spoke about being older, shows it was significant for her own experience of identity development. By positioning age and maturity as a positive factor, participants implied their younger selves would somehow not have been ready for university. Interestingly there was no correlation between being a mature student and the type of student or professional identity type that was dominant (table 4.3 in 4.4.2). This indicates that despite the individuals focus on age, the impact on identity formation was limited to personal feelings.

The second limiting belief was university is too expensive. This is part of the challenge of attending HE as a working-class individual. The financial risk can affect decisions to attend university (McCabe *et al.*, 2022) with all the participants choosing to stay locally to study (within 1 hour commute) and perceive the chance to attend university as something they needed to get right due to a lack of financial options to restudy. For Jane, she was unable to attend university at age 18 due to family finances but was proud to independently support herself at a later age. What these participants had instead was family emotional support as a protective factor which is something supported by Roska and Kinsley (2018). Their need to navigate financial risk was not seen as a deficit but enabled them to develop key skills such as independence, resilience and determination. This complex perception of a limiting belief (financial risk) and a positive reframing (independence) was the mechanism in which participants presented their working-class narrative. The complexity here is there are examples of both cultural reproduction and production. The acceptance of a working-class narrative reproduces class inequality whilst the cultural production or reframing their identity elements as positive and beneficial for teaching, challenges the existing model of class and professionalism. This can be seen as a reframing of the working-class narrative as a pedagogical asset (Crew, 2024) where the participants could support disadvantaged pupils more authentically. Challenging the working-class narrative of being resistant to change (Beider, 2015), Jane continuously developed her professional identity in a way unique to her, rather than adopting that of her placement mentors.

The final limiting belief was the presence of a working-class identity somehow defining the worthiness of the individual and whether they belonged or not. This was the hardest limiting

belief to reframe and rather than shifting the meaning, participants drew upon narratives of hard work and aspiration seen in the widening participation agenda and education white papers (DfE, 2016, 2022). The cultural reproduction through the participant stories is evident here where discourses of aspiration and hard work are internalised to show their right to belong. Here the participants wanted to hold on to their working-class identity and by framing the narratives in terms of positive qualities, there is the assumption working-class identities are somehow under threat (Reay, 2018). These examples of cultural reproduction can be exemplified by Rebecca who felt university was the only chance she had to better her life. Ruby noted, *working hard, all the time, is what is needed to succeed* (Ruby, interview 1). There were also examples of shifting the narrative away from a deficit approach however where Jane commented, *being working-class is an asset as you understand local children better* (Jane, interview 1), showing that the working-class narrative can be an asset supported by Crew (2024). These examples show the persistence of the perception of working-class identity and how it affects membership to both the figured world of university and primary teaching showing working-class teachers' backgrounds as central to professional identity development. Such major cultural narratives are persistent and to mediate tensions, participants shared altruistic motivations for attending university (4.4) which suggests working-class teachers want to help others (Keane *et al.*, 2023a) and display stronger social justice motivations (Keane *et al.*, 2022). Despite the desire to help others like them have a successful life, the cultural reproduction of class inequality through teacher talk plays a role in the reinforcing of such inequality (Young, 2019).

Although the initial decision to attend HE often relied on external support (family, school experience, academic encouragement), this can be seen to depersonalise the desire to enter teacher training and somehow legitimise it. The inherent fear in admitting aspiration could be seen across eight participants (excluding Dorothy and Laura) and demonstrates the persistence of the aspiration deficit narrative (Stahl, 2018). Despite this shame in admitting their own personal aspirations (Loveday, 2016), there was a personal drive to attend university and better their own lives, through improving the lives of others, but it was the support of others in their lives encouraging them to take the chance. The findings show outside support from family, friends, peers, university staff and placement staff can have a significant impact on someone's ability to settle into the course and placement which in turn supports the development of a professional identity (Roksa and Kinsley, 2019). However, this effect was short lived, and those individuals that relied on factual validation continued to chase this as evidence of belonging. One good grade was

not enough as this could be seen as luck. Aligning with the theory of imposter syndrome (Breeze, 2018) showing working-class students can doubt their academic ability which affects academic belonging (Mack, 2018).

The new figured world of the working-class teacher is one where social class difference is seen as an asset, a way to understand the world more sensitively and challenge the deficit discourse (Crew, 2024). When answering the question of how working-class/first-generation students experience professional identity development, the process of developing a professional identity is one not in conflict to a working-class identity but instead as compatible and even enhanced by a working-class identity. Here the participants saw the benefit in their background despite challenges around feeling good enough and it can be argued all students feel an outsider to some extent at the beginning supported by Lawrie *et al.* (2024). The working-class element enabled participants to understand their pupils and draw on their own school experiences as a motivator to be the positive influence in children's lives. Despite this, it can be recognised that their experiences also upheld the policy narratives around aspiration (duty to use academic ability etc.) and contributed to some challenging feelings around the shame of not being good enough (Loveday, 2016). As a result, it is important for HE institutions to recognise the impact of representation in their staff body and carefully selecting the placement schools they choose to support students fully (Rickett and Thompson, 2024). External validation was important and as a result, institutions need to recognise the importance of feedback in a tangible form (grades) as well as giving time for reflection for students to recognise their own progress (Buckley, 2025).

5.4 Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings in relation to how working-class/first-generation students experience the development of a professional identity. Figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) provided a theoretical lens from which to identify and analyse the master and personal narratives. Notably, the student identity develops alongside a professional teacher identity and the two are reliant on each other. The intersection of age and identity is significant and mature student participants experienced the additional influence of being older than their peers. This affected their identity both negatively (feeling out of place) and positively (being confident). Considering the student identity, this was heavily dependent on external validation for most (8/10). Belonging

was key for individuals when feeling settled at university and these includes both social and academic belonging. These findings enhance the body of knowledge relating to student belonging and identity by considering the intersecting elements of class identity alongside the challenge of entering a professional, traditionally middle-class, field.

Professional identity development was linked to personal narratives about age, ability and personal value as well as master narratives of what it means to be a *good* teacher. The influence of being working-class often amplified these doubts but participants were able to reframe these negative beliefs into strengths aligned with the teaching profession such as resilience, hard-work and relatability. The influence of class identity was persistent, and many participants held onto this while still being able to acknowledge their developing teacher identity. This process involved a re-design of what the *good* teacher benchmark was, taking the positive elements of this and including positive working-class elements such as being determined. Contributing to the knowledge base of professional identity and expanding on research about working-class teachers (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Keane *et al.*, 2023; Keane, 2024) to show how a post-1992 institution can support working-class/first generation students to succeed in entering the teaching profession.

Chapter 6 provides the conclusion and summarises how the findings have addressed the research questions. Each research question is considered in turn before making recommendations for HE, methodology and future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the findings to demonstrate how working-class/first-generation student-teachers experience a developing professional identity within undergraduate ITE. The research questions are discussed to summarise how the findings and analysis have met the aims shared in 2.6. The subsidiary questions are discussed first, as each contributes to the conclusion that addresses the main research question: 'How do working-class/first-generation student-teachers experience their developing professional identity and what are the factors that contribute to this process?' Literature and research implications are shared before recommendations are identified. Finally, researcher reflections and research quality are considered.

6.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

This section offers a concise summary of how the findings address the research questions.

6.2.1 Cultural and Personal Assumptions

The first subsidiary question (SQ1) is: what cultural and personal assumptions (narratives) are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences, which in turn influence an emerging professional identity? Findings were collated into pen portraits for each participant and analysed using thematic analysis through the lens of narrative methodology and figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001). The analysis showed that the development of a professional identity is tied to the emerging student identity. The participants' pre-existing class identity (3.6) acted as a foundation for the simultaneous development of student and teacher identity. The retelling of experiences at university and placement enabled personal and master narratives to be identified, along with tensions (SQ2) that existed between the two narrative forms. These narratives were analysed within the figured worlds of university (5.2) and primary teaching (5.3), whilst class identity influenced all elements.

The *good* student benchmark which individuals used to interpret their own belonging was a key element that emerged (Hecht *et al.*, 2021). It guided individuals and became a set of criteria by which they gauged their worth. The student identity types (4.2.6, 5.2.2) illustrate the different dominant identity characteristics influenced by the master and personal narratives. External validation, as a supportive mechanism for developing student identity (Buckley, 2025), provided the reassurance that all participants needed. The grounded-learner student identity type shows how high self-efficacy and, social belonging can successfully influence academic belonging and smooth the tensions of identity development when entering the figured world of university.

The *good* teacher benchmark emerged from the findings and demonstrated how teacher competency discourses (Carswell and Conway, 2023; Steadman and Ellis, 2021; Smyth *et al.*, 2001) are persistent and influence the development of a professional identity in several ways. Participants demonstrated internalised performance outcomes as interpretations of teacher competency. These discourses demonstrate policy reproduction by adopting the importance of standards above other indicators. Feeling like a teacher was possible through the perception of doing teaching well. Although this benchmark created tensions for some participants, this process enabled individuals to reframe what it meant to be a teacher within a working-class identity space. Aligning to the work of Thorius (2015) who noted that tensions between personal identity elements and the figured world of education can encourage individuals to engage in critique and change of positioning and structural barriers.

The findings demonstrate a need for a re-evaluation of the class assumptions in HE (6.5.3). Instead of reproducing class inequality by promoting social mobility, HEIs should aim to disrupt class assumptions (6.5.3) by recognising the strengths of all individuals without prioritising middle-class cultural capital, recognising that working-class students bring their own cultural capital with them to teaching, that supports resilience and enables them to relate to a diverse range of pupils. It is important to acknowledge that middle-class individuals possess such skills, but this is beyond the remit of this research. Adopting caution against an over-reliance on resilience narratives is also important. Farley *et al.* (2021) argues that an emphasis on over resilience can risk placing the responsibility on individuals to overcome systemic inequalities, potentially diverting attention away from the need for structural change within institutions and placing the responsibility onto individuals (McCluskey, 2015). While these concerns are valid and

highlight the complexity of narrative framing within HE, the findings from this research indicate that resilience and hard work were not seen by participants as compensatory but as sources of agency which, when recognised and valued, contributed positively to their sense of belonging and identity development.

The findings and analysis contribute to the literature of identity, belonging and social class in the following ways. Understanding the intersectional nature of identity is key to understanding individuals' experiences linking to the work of Jones (2009). Often identity is researched in relation to one identity element, which may fail to recognise the co-construction of multiple identities as significant. Self-identification of identity elements is also arguably important and potentially more so than demographic markers or statistics supported by Rickett and Morris (2021). The reason for this is self-identification recognises how an individual feels about their place in the world, which will affect their actions and interactions more than an externally imposed category. Intersectionality is at the forefront with multiple identity elements impossible to separate.

6.2.2 Emerging Tensions and Reframing: Existing Narratives and World-Making

Subsidiary research questions two and three are considered together to address the tensions that emerged between a personal/class identity and a professional teacher identity, and how these lead to a reframing of existing narratives in recognition of the intersectionality of identity. Considering the master and personal narratives (6.1.1), the perceptions of the *good* student or teacher also presented a disconnect through comparison. These tensions affected an individual's ability to achieve social and academic belonging. The process of identity development is arguably more complex when the perception of membership in the figured world is mismatched with the self-perception of the individual. For working-class/first-generation students moving into the professional world of teaching, this shift is significant. Holland *et al.* (2001) call the process of identity change 'self-authoring', where individuals re-create their identity through interactions with others in the new figured world. For the participants, working within a group of perceived working-class students, supported the process of world-making. Although the difference between the participants' perception of self and the perception of a *good* teacher or student was evident, the collaboration with like-minded others enabled a collective self-authoring. The emerging

tensions participants navigated, such as financial risk, age and self-image, enabled new narratives about being a working-class student or primary teacher. Here, self-authoring rejected the working-class deficit perception and recognised personal strengths that enabled the management of these tensions. Rather than abandoning their working-class identity, participants constructed a new teacher identity that accommodated both their working-class identity and the acknowledgement of middle-class teaching narratives. Linking to the work of Keane (2024), who found participants were able to separate middle-class mentality and materiality, accepting their middle-class material gains following university but not relinquishing their working-class mentality.

Experiencing these tensions does not mean HE is more challenging for working-class individuals or that they do not belong. In fact, many middle-class students may also experience challenges with academic and social belonging. Instead, these tensions provided a catalyst for world-making through challenging the narratives of what it means to be a *good* student or teacher. The findings show this process was uncomfortable for the participants but was an important element when developing a new identity and reframe what being a teacher meant to them.

The findings and analysis contribute to the literature of figured worlds and the critical research paradigm by exemplifying the way in which the figured worlds concept can be used as a theoretical model from which to understand the experiences of individuals within HE and teaching. Recognising the intersecting elements of the developing student and teacher identity enables HEIs to better understand and support students. This may support recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds by challenging the perceptions that certain types of students begin with a deficit. The implications of this research include the need to recognise how much of a barrier traditional narratives of HE and teaching are in encouraging a diverse population.

6.3 The Main Research Question

Now the subsidiary research questions have been discussed (6.2.1, 6.2.2), this section explains how the findings have enabled the main research question to be answered. After consideration of the main research question, methodological conclusions are drawn.

6.3.1 How do Working-Class/First-Generation Student-Teachers Experience their Developing Professional Identity and What are the Factors Contributing to this Process?

It is important to clarify the scope of this research before presenting the main claim. The findings are based on data collected from a single HEI and focused on primary ITE students. As such, while the insights generated here are valuable for understanding the experiences of working-class/first-generation student-teachers in this context, they may not capture the full breadth of experiences across different HEIs or professional courses. Recognising these boundaries provides critical context for interpreting the findings and helps to reduce over-generalisation.

Working-class/first-generation students can develop a professional identity without threatening their working-class identity by reconstructing what *good* teaching is, challenging middle-class norms and combining working-class pride with a student/teacher identity (Keane, 2024). This process is not one of assimilation but reconstruction, and the significance of the developing student identity alongside the professional primary teacher identity is key. The perception of *good* teaching can be traced back through government policy and the history of the teaching profession (2.2) and initially created a tension between the participants' self-perception of their identity in relation to the perceived rules of figured world belonging. Government discourses relating to *good* teaching are shaped from regulatory systems such as the teachers' standards, OFSTED and the primary curriculum itself contributing to the perception of teaching as a professional endeavour, measured in terms of results. It is also clear in policy that education is the answer to the social mobility problem (DfE, 2016; 2022; 2026), placing the burden of class inequality on teachers and diverting systemic inequality to individuals (McClusky, 2015).

Despite these challenges, the participants were able to self-author their identity without losing who they were. More than a chameleon habitus process (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013), this reconstruction incorporated identity elements to create a working-class student professional. This new working-class, student-teacher identity enabled participants to define what belonging looked like by challenging narratives as they navigated tensions. Artefacts were present in participants' stories, and markers of belonging to the figured world of teaching included looking like a teacher, having teacher handwriting and being organised. For student identity, the important artefacts

were punctuality and getting good grades. The grade-dependence (Buckley, 2025) on academic belonging was evident in both deficit student identity types, and although potentially negative, can also be seen as a factor in increasing academic belonging. The challenge here is the grade-dependence on belonging only supports academic belonging for able students and does not appear to support average or struggling students.

The student typology that was created from the findings show that the achievement and validation student types operate with a deficit, internalising the belief of not being good enough. The discourses of aspiration and hard work were present in the findings and participants with these dominant student identity types looked for external validation in the form of good grades, or overall course success. Supporting factors for these students included regular feedback and reflection opportunities to support the shift to a more positive mindset. In contrast, the grounded-learner type could experience challenges and see them as opportunities for growth. This student type can be linked to a positive mindset and is arguably the aim for students when developing their identity. HEIs should look to identify deficit learner types and provide targeted support in the form of regular feedback, to build academic belonging and increased self-efficacy.

The teacher typology that was created from the findings linked closely to participant motivations and personal school experience. The saviour type was motivated to provide a stable influence in their pupils' lives and provide consistency. This type demonstrated a need for external validation from a job well done. Similarly, the career-focused teacher type seeks external validation, coming from measurable progress from their pupils. The difference comes from how the individual views *good* teaching, and the career-focused type internalises policy driven teacher competency narratives. Finally, the grounded-educator demonstrated a balanced motivation. This type is motivated to help children grow whilst recognising the role they play in progress. It is a combination of both deficit types and although this research does not suggest that the grounded-educator should become the benchmark for *good* teaching, it was the identity type that produced the least identity tension for participants. This suggests that supporting teachers to become grounded-educators may support retention and job satisfaction. I argue HEIs play a fundamental role in supporting students in developing a positive, balanced student identity enabling a positive professional identity to emerge. Through enabling both academic and social belonging (6.5.1, 6.5.2), individuals can begin to recognise their strengths and explore their contribution to the

professional world of teaching. Although the influence or class identity of the placement staff did not come through as significant, the relationships formed on placement highlighted the importance of belonging. Working in schools with a similar demographic enabled participants to see where they could add value and became a positive factor in relationship building.

The implication of this research includes a call for professionals and HEIs to challenge the narrative that professionalism is a middle-class trait and to recognise that working-class qualities such as resilience and understanding can be an asset in professional environments (6.5.3). Recognising working-class language forms can support relationship building and break down barriers between teaching staff and the local communities they serve. Finally, to reinvigorate the HE commitment to supporting the local area HEIs should celebrate the values the majority demographic embodies (6.5.3). Throughout this process, my own positionality as a working-class/first-generation academic has been explicitly considered as an autobiographical reference and a methodological tool. By engaging in reflexive practice, I carefully analysed (3.16, appendix C) how my perspectives and background shaped both data interpretation and the construction of participant narratives, enhancing the analytic credibility of this research.

6.3.2 Methodological Conclusions

The methodological process highlighted the value of figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) as a theoretical framework for understanding identity production in education. Working-class self-identification of participants was a significant methodological decision within this research. This enabled participants to decide for themselves which is, arguably, a better indicator of class influence than demographic markers. The intersectionality of identity development is a key factor in the findings and calls for further research into identity elements not considered in the research, such as gender, race, age and school experience.

The use of narrative interviewing exposes narratives as an important means of understanding the positioning of the self in social realms. The importance of individual agency through personal narratives can create a deeper meaning and lead to recommendations for insightful improvements within HE. Within the critical research paradigm, individual voice is key and can challenge cultural norms often reproduced through policy. I argue that narrative methodologies

enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences in a way quantitative methods would not allow (6.5.1). It maintains the authenticity of participant voice and recognises the complexity of human experience. The use of pen portraits in organising and analysing the findings was an effective way to create a coherent sense of each participant by bringing together the different data elements from the journal entries and interviews. The pen portrait process enabled me to deeply immerse myself in the findings to understand their meaning. Narrative interpretations were then edited by participants to ensure a shared understanding despite my own narrative interpretation. This was an important step in data analysis and research trustworthiness and should be considered a valuable analytical element.

The research contributes to the research methods literature by providing a case study of how narrative methodology can be used to explore identity within primary teaching by recognising the intersection of different identity elements. Combined with the figured worlds theory as a theoretical framework, this enables the research to situate these narratives within the cultural, political, historical and social influences whilst acknowledging the influence of power relations. The influences contributing to figured worlds theory (2.4.1, 2.4.2) enable a more holistic way of understanding the world and are a useful framework for education and identity research. The potential implications of these methodological choices are that research quality becomes something different. It becomes authenticity and credibility rather than traditional notions of validity and reliability. By focusing on the narratives of individuals, individual experience can be better understood in a way that may not be generalisable but also challenges deeper thought and reflection on social processes.

6.4 Knowledge Contribution

This research has contributed to knowledge in the following areas: developing a greater understanding of working-class/first-generation students' experiences of HE, specifically whilst undertaking a primary teacher training degree, understanding and challenging the *good* teacher benchmark and, the use of narrative methodology alongside pen portraits within educational research.

By focusing on the intersecting student and teacher identity elements, the influence of a working-class background can be better understood. This can help HEIs better support a diverse range of students and take steps to remove inequality by challenging the master narratives surrounding class and social mobility. By acknowledging the challenges and successes of these individuals, it becomes clear that, although identity development is a complex process, protective factors can support it, and the influence of belonging is significant. Exploring how students from a working-class background with little family knowledge of HE (first-generation) shows although there are similarities with elite universities, post-1992 institutions have a place in challenging the narratives of class-related professionalism by showcasing success achieved by students from a range of backgrounds. The consideration of a mature student identity, and how this can bring the benefits of added employment experience and professionalism, can be seen as an asset alongside resilience, independence and the effort demonstrated by all participants. Supported by the work of Steel *et al.* (2024), resilience can be an essential trait for mature students when overcoming challenges in HE. The creation of student and teacher typologies (4.2.6, 4.4.2) can help foster a deeper understanding of these experiences and provide a language to understand them.

The benchmark of a *good* teacher, defined by political policy, and reproduced through institutional discourse and master narratives, should be challenged to enable the recognition of a more diverse set of skills. This research contributes to this challenge by presenting successful individuals who recognise the benefits of their working-class background and use these skills to better understand their pupils. This research also provides a contribution to methodology by demonstrating how the figured worlds concept can be a valuable tool for analysing identity development within education and ITE. Utilising narrative methodology, specifically episodic narrative interviewing (Mueller, 2019) alongside journaling, has been shown to be effective when collecting data relating to individual experience and identity development. The alignment between the figured worlds theory and narrative methodology has also been demonstrated here. Pen portraits are a key tool for both organisation and analysis. Introducing a narrative element does not fictionalise the data but instead provides a coherent account of participants' experiences, linking all data collection elements together and presenting a clear voice. Working with participants to ensure a shared understanding and authentic representation through member checking of the pen portraits demonstrates how researchers can be sensitive to their own influence and ensure individuals have a say in how their words are presented, contributing to ethical research practices and enhancing research trustworthiness.

This research created two typologies (teacher and student) which provide a new language in which to talk about identity development for working-class/first generation student-teachers. Viewing identity development as a complex and interconnected process across university and school figured worlds, the typologies provide a language of reflection that can be used to support identity transition and promote emerging agency. Although the typologies are presented as distinct categories, they should be seen as overlapping and not separate. This ensures that they are not used as categorising labels but as developmental descriptions to facilitate deeper understanding. Supporting students towards a more grounded-learner and educator results could support the sometimes-uncomfortable identity transition and acknowledge the possibility of holding both working-class ideals alongside middle-class professionalism.

Although the research aims did not focus on the gendered experience of student-teachers, this research contributes to understanding how working-class women's struggle for equality and professional recognition shapes identity development among teachers today. Supporting Nias' (1989) work by showing that feminist discourses of care within primary teaching are still exerting an influential factor alongside the reduced professionalism of primary teaching, which can be seen through the motivations of the participants, wanting to give back to legitimise participation in HE. Linking to the work of Oram (1996), who details how the historical feminist movement for equal pay may have been achieved in teaching, but that workplace status and gender norms persist through the legitimisation of teaching as a 'safe' profession for working-class women. Apple (1988) highlights the discourse in which teaching is seen as women's work, and labour positioned as care is seen as less professional, supported by the findings where participants had to explain the value and academic nature of a teacher training course. The findings and analysis contribute to the body of knowledge identifying that professional recognition requires structural change starting with ITE. Revisiting caring motivations for teaching as an emotional process (Nias, 1989), the findings show how participants used care to speak of satisfaction in their placement. This emotional component in teaching deserves professional status and not a reduction of teaching quality to standards.

6.5 Recommendations for Teacher Educators

Based on the discussion above, the following recommendations have been made relating to HE practices and research methodology. Supporting student identity development will enable student-teachers to better navigate the experience of their developing professional identity during the course.

6.5.1 Recommendation One for the Case Study HEI: Increasing Academic Belonging

Recommendation one is for the case study HEI to build academic belonging activities into their programmes. To illustrate how social belonging can be supported, an example from the findings shows that the welcome week treasure hunt activity, mentioned by over 50% of participants, facilitated social belonging. During this activity students completed campus-based activities in mixed groups in an informal and supportive environment. This helped them to feel physically orientated and provided reassurance that they belong in the university space. This practical experience encouraged shared problem solving and the opportunity to build friendships. Structured yet informal activities provide initial social integration and a sense of ownership over the university environment. Although activities like the treasure hunt can provide the opportunity for social belonging, the findings demonstrated that more can be done to support academic belonging.

One-way the case study HEI can do this is by providing regular feedback to reassure individuals that they are working at the required standard at interim points through the course, rather than reserving this for scheduled high stakes assignments (Geringer *et al.*, 2025). Guided reflection (Smith *et al.*, 2021) has been shown to support academic belonging and support individuals experiencing imposter syndrome and should be a regular feature of HE programmes, for example scheduling a biannual reflection session to support guided reflection. This is something the case study HEI does annually at present and two participants (both grounded-learners) mentioned it as a useful way to see their progress. Supporting regular reflection on professional practice is embedded in ITE, but linking this to personal growth and development by summarising previous successes and key learning may help students make the links between what they have experienced and how it influences their own views of academic belonging.

6.5.2 Recommendation Two for Teacher Educators: Utilising Student Typologies

Using the student typologies, HEIs should identify deficit learner types to provide targeted support in the form of regular feedback. The findings have shown that several risk factors are present and increased the likelihood of a deficit learner type, including being a mature student, low self-efficacy and a belonging-performance dependence. Utilising early conversations, assessment and mentoring could identify those learners experiencing imposter syndrome and reduced academic belonging while regular feedback and reflection can move students towards a grounded-learner. Applying evidence-based approaches to support learners in developing a growth mindset (e.g. guided reflection, Geringer *et al.*, 2025) and encouraging a meta-cognitive approach to learning could support the development of grounded-learners and reduce imposter syndrome. Further research would be needed to assess the effectiveness of such strategies.

6.5.3 Recommendation Three for Teacher Educators: Promoting Class Diversity

Recognition of like-minded others can be a supportive mechanism, and HE institutions should consider the demographic makeup of their staff to enable working-class students to relate to their lecturers, which in turn can support academic belonging. The findings show that employing individuals from the local area supported local representation and was a contributing factor for some participants in deciding they were on the correct course. This is supported in Keane *et al.* (2023a) who suggests that local representation within ITE Ireland supports student-teacher retention. In addition, considering the diversity of race and social class could support recruitment and retention of a diverse student group. Linking with the work of Crew (2024) and the concept of pedagogical asset, working-class academics can enrich their teaching and support disadvantaged students by drawing on their experiences, values and working-class capital. This approach is further supported by Yosso (2005) who suggests that community cultural wealth can highlight other forms of capital that are shared by working-class individuals. Working-class lecturers can support working-class students by teaching the unwritten rules of academia and provide a model of success. This can be supported by recommendations 6.5.1 and 6.5.2 above but can also be achieved through organisational changes.

6.5.4 Recommendation Four for Teacher Educators: Increasing Access

Recommendation four suggests HEIs develop a programme of support to help students during the application process. The findings show that two students chose to attend university later due to not understanding the application and finance systems. Practical support from the application stage is recommended to address the knowledge gap families may have when no family members have experience of university. For this to be effective, the links between level 3 education and HEIs need to be strengthened and the process of accessing student financial support simplified. Creating regular opportunities for level 3 learners to attend sessions at a HEI campus will provide experience and in turn help the environment feel more familiar. Although some HEIs offer pre-application residential visits, these are often difficult to get accepted to (when funded through disadvantaged groups) or cost-prohibitive for those who do not meet the disadvantaged threshold. Student finance support may also help individuals understand the support available to them. Although many providers do include student finance workshops as part of their provision, the findings show these support systems do not always reach those in need. Providing individualised support could help these individuals as well as timetabled group sessions that are not self-selecting. The findings showed confusion around finance combined with fear of not being good enough to attend university meaning optional sessions may not have the desired impact as such individuals may opt out.

A levelling of HEIs in terms of how the quality of education is perceived is important to support the widening-participation agenda, as seen in the findings where participants often selected the case study HEI due to its locality. This could be achieved by working with schools and 16-19 institutions in an equitable way to showcase strengths at a course level, as well as an honest comparison of degree outcome data and employment destinations.

6.5.5 Recommendation Five for Teacher Educators: Enabling Participation

Recommendation five calls for HEIs to celebrate diversity and provide an accessible, student-led experience. Recognising the strengths of individuals from non-standard academic backgrounds can improve the university experience for all students by both challenging the cultural norms of HE and, in turn enhancing the learning experience through discussion and collaboration. One way to support participation would be for HEIs to consider offering more flexible study patterns and

part-time options, enabling students to work alongside their studies and thereby mitigating the financial risk barrier. The findings showed working around their studies made managing the course workload difficult at times, and the decision to have enough money to pay bills conflicted with wanting time to work towards the course requirements. Another way to increase participation is to offer paid routes into teaching. The TeachFirst scheme and recently created teacher apprenticeships may be a solution here, enabling individuals to earn money while studying. It is important to note here though; the structure of a teaching apprenticeship can be demanding and is better suited to individuals who have worked in schools in a supporting role previously.

Recognition of parental support as a supportive factor means engaging with parents, carers and families of student is important, and something often ignored with adult learners. Although there are considerations around the general data protection rules (GDPR) in England, finding ways to include parents, carers and families of students may be a protective factor when considering student retention. HEIs could develop a process where supportive adults are involved, with the student's consent, at certain points in the HEI process, for example during enrolment, when concerns arise and, when receiving formal grade feedback.

6.5.6 Recommendation Six for Teacher Educators: Utilising Teacher Typologies

Recommendation six relates to the use of teacher typologies to support student-teachers to develop a professional identity. Exploring their own professional identity elements in relation to the typologies can support reflection and self-authoring. Enabling student-teachers to understand their role in professional identity development could provide the agency needed to reframe what this means for them. Supporting student-teachers to hold space for their class identity alongside a professional identity could remove some of the tensions that emerged from the findings. Supporting the work of Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) who noted that a new teacher identity was seen to emerge that valued the working-class identity.

6.6 Recommendations for Policy Makers

Drawing on the findings of this research, there is a need for policy makers to move beyond a deficit-based construction of working-class students and teachers and instead recognise the strengths and knowledge they bring to the profession. The way that social inequality is problematised to focus on the aspirations of the individual serves to reinforce such an inequality that is internalised by individuals. Instead, social class should not be framed as a hierarchy in which middle-class identities are seen as the benchmark of quality, and working-class identities viewed as deficit. Such assumptions remain evident within policy discourses (DfE, 2026) that frame education through the language of social mobility, where working-class individuals are often constructed as requiring transformation rather than recognition. Class diversity is a difference not a deficit. Contemporary policy documents, including the 2026 white paper (DfE, 2026), continue to emphasise narrowing attainment gaps and mobility outcomes, yet the language used to describe disadvantage can unintentionally reproduce deficit narratives. Consistent with critiques of deficit thinking, including Cushing's (2023) work on linguistic and cultural deficit discourses, policy should challenge the assumption that underachievement is situated within individuals or communities and instead adopt a more holistic understanding of the structural, social and cultural factors shaping educational experiences.

Furthermore, policy should recognise how gendered assumptions continue to influence notions of the *good* teacher, where care, nurture and relational practice, historically associated with women's work, remain undervalued in comparison with performative measures of teacher competence and accountability. Rather than responding to international comparisons and performative pressures, education policy should be grounded in the lived realities and needs of teacher, students and communities within England. Such a shift would support more inclusive narratives of teacher professionalism and enable working-class identified to be viewed as assets rather than deficits. This recommendation aligns with the finding that professional identity development is shaped by wider social structures and narratives, not solely by the actions or characteristics of individual teachers.

6.7 Methodological Reflections and Recommendations

Following this research, several methodological reflections have been made.

6.7.1 Methodological Recommendation One: Pen Portraits and Narratives in Research

Supporting the critical research paradigm, narrative findings have provided an authentic way to learn about individuals' experiences and identity development. Personal interpretations of events, alongside the personal perceptions of identity in relation to others, can provide a rich understanding of experience, which I would urge researchers to consider. Pen portraits, combined with narrative methodology are underused in educational research and are often used as data organisation. This ignores their full potential as a valuable data analysis element allowing a holistic understanding of each participant as well as enabling the researcher to reflect on patterns, contradictions and interpretation of themes. Pen portraits play a valuable role in data organisation and can provide a holistic summary of each participant. They also enable reflection (Blundell and Oakley, 2024). The framework developed by Sheard and Marsh (2019) should support the use of pen portraits in educational research as the inclusion of pen portraits in analysis is included.

Narrative methodology enables the researcher to understand individuals' experiences as the retelling of experiences includes individual interpretation of the events, showing which elements were more significant. Pen portraits should be seen as contributing to a researcher-participant collaboration (Byrne, 2017). The creation of pen portraits from the findings and member checking enabled a shared meaning to emerge whilst also reaffirming their experiences by retelling it back to them. The narrativised pen portraits should be seen as valuable data in themselves, enabling coherent individual narratives to be accessible to others through the research process.

6.7.2 Methodological Recommendation Two: Self-Identification as Participant Selection

Participant sampling reliant on statistical markers does not acknowledge the personal and subjective nature of identity (Adams, 2009). Identity can be value-laden and reducing this to statistical elements can be seen to reinforce inequality. Enabling participants to define their own

class identity can support research quality and participant autonomy (Rickett and Morris, 2021). Both enabling participants to self-identify at the sampling stage or define their own identity within the data collection stage (Field and Morgan-Klein, 2013) has valuable implications for research.

6.7.3 Methodological Recommendation Three: Figured Worlds as a Valuable Theoretical Framework in Educational Research

Figured worlds (Holland *et al.*, 2001) as a theoretical framework has proved to be a valuable tool for understanding the process of identity development within localised *worlds*. Although this framework has been applied to medical research (e.g. Cantillon *et al.*, 2022) and some educational research (e.g. Chao *et al.*, 2019), it has the potential to add value to educational research in a way that Bourdieu's (1977) theory does not. Recognising the localised interpretations of identity (Choudry and Williams, 2017) and how these are self-authored can recognise the influence of place. Identity tensions that encourage world-making can show how certain spaces enable personal identity change which in turn can challenge existing discourses, adding to the aim of critical research in reducing structural inequality.

6.8 Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for future research have been made. Understanding how middle-class students experience identity development at post-1992 HEIs would provide a valuable comparison of how different groups of individuals experience student/professional identity development. In addition, including further intersecting identity elements such as gender, race, age and historical school experience could provide further insight. To further understand the barriers for working-class/first-generation students attending HE, researching college leavers who do not enter HE could provide insight into the different motivations for education and identify barriers around the application process.

Exploring current support mechanisms for school/college leavers in relation to HE uptake could help understand how to better support students from diverse backgrounds. This research focused on students entering a professional field via a professional degree course. Further research exploring working-class/first-generation students on other professional and non-professional

courses could provide additional understanding which may contribute to a new narrative of HE. Most importantly, the need to continue research into class inequality should be taken carefully so as not to reproduce discourses of aspiration or deficit. Continuing research with early career teachers in the first five years of their career, focusing on working-class/first-generation individuals would extend the knowledge presented here and consider how this affects early career experiences. This could support teacher retention, wellbeing and job satisfaction.

6.9 Researcher Reflections

As a working-class/first-generation student who progressed into primary teaching, education consultancy and then ITE, this research has provided a learning opportunity and space for personal reflection. This section reflects on the professional learning, personal learning and the contribution to my own identity development, linking back to my initial research reflexivity work (appendix C). Each element of professional and personal learning has influenced my professional identity and is discussed together.

Through this research, I have gained valuable knowledge of the historical and political context of teaching, including the role of working-class women. This helped contextualise my experience as a woman in teaching and enabled me to understand its influence on my career journey. Before beginning this research, I was aware that my working-class HE journey was fully supported by my parents, with university being discussed as a 'given' route. On reflection, this provided some mitigations to the potential challenges of academic belonging through continuous encouragement which mirrored some of the participant experiences in the findings. The researcher positionality map (appendix C) shows I had considered the challenge of being academically able. There has always been a pressure to perform well, often coming from within myself, and exploring the social mobility policy agenda has helped me understand how I had internalised the aspiration deficit hypothesis meaning I felt obligated to attend university. It can be a complex position as I was valued and praised for my academic ability meaning I began to attach value to this and was proud to attend university.

The creation of student and teacher typologies have provided me with a language to interpret my own experiences of HE and teaching, recognising that I am a grounded-learner but also a saviour teacher type. Being academically able supported my learning and enabled me to see success in various ways, however I heavily relied on external validation in my teaching and always wanted to make a difference for pupils that I was teaching. This provided tensions where my inclusive ethos was at odds with the standards agenda and resulted in a move to special education.

Exploring literature concepts including chameleon habitus (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) and Reay's work on fitting in (e.g. Reay *et al.*, 2010) helped me explain some of my experiences while also challenging them. Although some literature resonated with me, there were many times I did not feel a mismatch. Doing well in my studies at university helped me to academically belong and social belonging felt easy being surrounded by like-minded peers. My ease of experience could be attributed to my own self-selection of a post-1992 HEI, as in the work of Reay (2018) and Read *et al.* (2003), or a self-authoring of my identity through the development of a student identity. The participant assertion that she was becoming a teacher of her own design resonated with me in the way that I also reshaped my own identity and stood out in a meaningful way.

The professional learning relating to narrative methodology and pen portraits has enabled a deeper personal reflection. Although there are elements of both insider and outsider research here (3.16), the parallel comparison between my educational journey and the participants' is present and is something that has helped me reflect through viewing the experience as an outsider. Hearing participant narratives like my own enabled personal growth and acceptance of the identity I have developed during my career and contributes to an authentic research output.

The figured worlds theory (Holland *et al.*, 2001) which I read in the first year of my doctoral study instantly resonated with me. The combination of influences combined with detailed examples in practice, made more sense than any of the individual theories in isolation. Working with this framework has also provided a language for personal identity reflection. I have gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of figured worlds and how individuals build belonging. Exploring the process of authorship within identity has supported my personal growth in recognising where I hold privilege and where there is tension. Ultimately, it has enabled me to

dispel some of the imposter syndrome beliefs about my career and to help students I work with do the same. Reflecting on the quote that resonated with me the most, I think we have all (participants and researcher) become teachers of our own design.

6.10 Research Quality Reflections

It is important to revisit research quality and to reflect on the extent to which this research has upheld the proposed measures (3.17). Weekly personal reflections through journaling and peer discussion took place to ensure the trustworthiness, credibility and transparency of the findings. Presenting authentic voices was important, and participant involvement within the pen portrait process enabled a shared meaning to emerge. The findings and analysis are trustworthy in how they reflect the participants' experiences, and I took steps to build a shared meaning during interview 2 and the pen portrait process (3.10). Appendix Y shows a sample of email responses following the initial pen portrait draft. Credibility has been sought through regular supervisor discussions that challenged the research stages, resulting in a thesis that feels both authentic and credible in relation to the literature base and findings. Transparency was achieved through honestly reflecting on the interpretations of the findings which were clarified with participants at interview 2 and regularly with the supervision team. Managing the multidimensional researcher positionality as an insider/outsider researcher has required regular reflections and awareness of professional boundaries. Not being directly involved in the teaching of participants during the research process enabled me to interact authentically while still maintaining role appropriateness.

6.11 Summary

This research sought to understand the experiences of working-class/first-generation students as they developed a professional identity whilst undertaking a primary teacher training course. The findings have enabled the research questions to be answered and provided an analysis of these experiences. Student and teacher typologies were created to summarise participants shared experiences, and recommendations have been made for HEIs and the research methodology. My own personal growth has been explored, as has a final consideration of research quality.

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Appendices

Appendix A: An Overview of the Historical and Political Context (Education and HE)

- **1841–1846:** First Conservative government.
- **1833:** First government grant to provide education for working classes.
- **1870:** the Elementary Education Act made provision for children aged 5-13 which created a demand for teachers and in 1870 there were approximately 12,000 qualified teachers, with 50% of these being women.
- **1900:** Labour Party founded.
- **1906:** Liberals win landslide; introduce major social reforms.
- **1944:** the 1944 Education Act established universal free secondary school places, meritocracy promoted through policy.
- **1964–1970:** Labour government was committed to comprehensive schooling and facilitated the opening of more inclusive schools.
- **1979:** Conservative party and under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the political aim was to reduce the 'welfare state' mentality and introduce an individualism. The dominant strategy was one of 'levelling up' standards (Mahony and Hextall, 2013).
- **1980:** Education Act introduced parental choice, in turn beginning the marketisation of education. Based on a private sector model, education became competitive in nature.
- **1988:** The 1988 education reform act continued to reinforce neoliberal ideals and included the introduction of the national curriculum, a focus on teacher professionalism and a continued right for parents to choose (Ball, 2021).
- **1997:** New Labour government commissioned the Dearing report (Dearing, 1997) which presented a review of HE. This report contained a 20-year vision for inclusive education through widening participation and access.
- **2010:** The Coalition government began a reform of public services, including education and from 2004, universities were permitted to charge variable fees and following the end of the 'Aim Higher' strategy (DfE, 2010), university fees heavily increased.

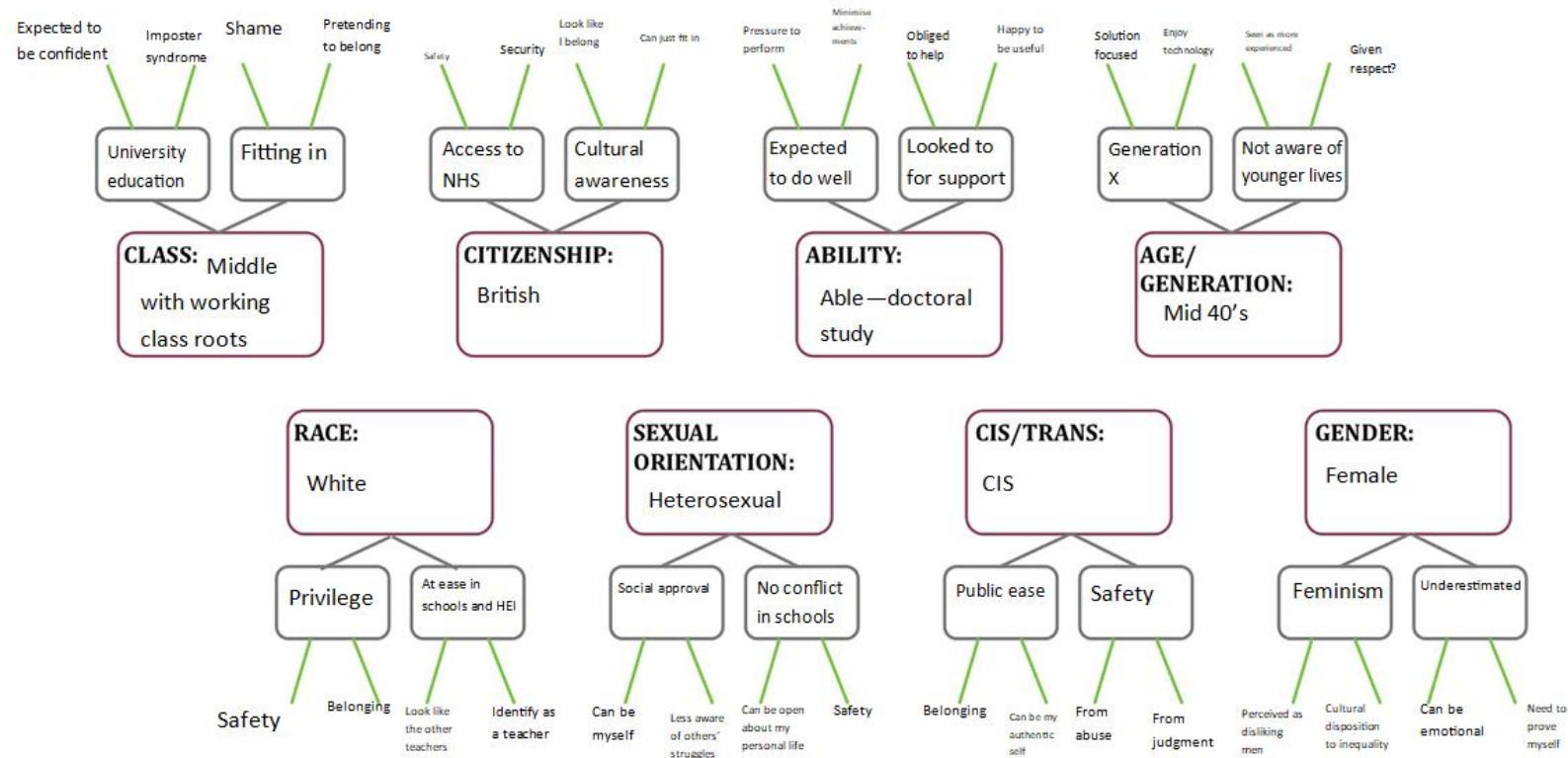
- **2015:** Conservative government. Widening participation targets aimed at doubling the proportion of disadvantaged students attending university and included students from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Connell-Smith and Hubble, 2021). Legislation required young people to remain in education/training until age 18.
- **2016:** Education white paper details social mobility as the solution to unequal education and attainment for working-class families. University financial reform.
- **2020:** COVID response and amendments made to ITE requirements.
- **2024:** Schools Bill proposal. 39 new measures, including requiring academies to follow national curriculum and teacher standards; implementation begins from 2026
- **2026:** Education white paper focusing on disadvantaged and pupils with additional needs. Suggests that the education system has been failing those from white working-class backgrounds.

Appendix B: Social Class Categories

Table 2.1: The proposed seven social classes. Adapted from Savage et al. (2013)

Class category	Description
Elite	The most privileged group. Scoring highest in economic, social and cultural categories.
Established middle class	The second wealthiest group scoring high in all three categories.
Technical middle class	A new group that has high economic wealth but low on social and cultural factors.
New affluent workers	A new young group that is socially and culturally rich but middle on economic wealth.
Traditional WC	Scoring low on all categories but not especially deprived.
Emergent service workers	A new young group that has low economic wealth but high social and cultural capital.
Precariat, or precarious proletariat	The poorest, deprived class. Scoring low on all areas.

Figure 3.3: Research positionality map



Appendix C: Researcher Reflexivity Diagram

Appendix D: Pre-Existing Participant-Researcher Relationships

Participant	Pre-existing relationship
L4	
Rebecca	Supported through academic mentoring in 2021-2022
Louise	Taught participants older sister in 2020
L5	
Dave	Supported through academic mentoring in 2021-2022
Dorothy	Met previously during welcome week
L6	
Jane	Taught participant from 2020-2022
Ava	Taught participant from 2020-2022
Ruby	Taught participant from 2020-2022
Melanie	Taught participant from 2020-2022
Sarah	Taught participant from 2020-2022
Laura	Taught participant from 2020-2022

Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Initial Participant Questionnaire

Please complete the demographic information below

1. First name

2. Email address

3. Age band

- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 25-35
- ☐ 35+

4. Gender?

5. What qualifications did you complete prior to attending university?
Please include qualification type and outcome.

6. Are you a first-generation student? This means that your parents or grandparents did not attend university.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

7. Has anyone else in your family attended higher education?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

8. Do you consider yourself to be from a working class background?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9. What placement schools have you attended so far as part of your degree course?

Appendix F: Journal Prompts

Date	Journal prompt	Link to interview Q	Link to obj/RQs
9 th October	1. Write about a positive experience in your first week at university and one negative experience.	2.3 2.4 2.5	SQ1 SQ2 SQ3
2 nd January	2. If you spoke to people about university over the holidays, write about a conversation you had relating to your studies. Was anything different since attending HE?	2.5 4.1 5.4	SQ2 SQ3
First week of placement L4 15 th Jan L5 11 th Dec L6 4 th Dec	3. Write about your first day at placement. What was the best and worst part of the day? How did you feel?	3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4 4.3 4.5	SQ1 SQ2 SQ3
Mid placement L4 5 th Feb L5 29 th Jan L6 5 th Feb	4. What has been the best and worst moment at placement	3.3 3.4	SQ1 SQ2 SQ3
15 th April	5. What has been the best/worst moment at university so far?	2.3 2.4 2.5 4.1 4.2 5.4	SQ1 SQ2 SQ3

Appendix G: Interview Schedule

Interview one: The narrative interview

The interview will be split into three main parts:

1. Introducing the topic and key concepts
2. An invitation to tell personal stories
3. An invitation to add any further information

There will be a follow up interview to probe further following initial analysis and clarify emerging themes.

Part A: Introducing the topic and key concepts:

Introduction -

I am going to be inviting you to recall situations that have helped you decide why to attend university and what it has been like so far as a student-teacher. Before we start, I would like to ask you a few questions about some of the concepts included in this research.

- a. What does social class mean to you?
- b. How would you describe your own class identity?

Part B: An invitation to tell personal stories

Decision to attend university -

- 2.1 Can you recall the moment you decided to come to university? Tell me a story about that?
- 2.2 Can you think of an experience or moment in your life that helped you decide to become a teacher?

Experience of university -

- 2.3 Think back to your first few weeks at university, can you tell me about your best memory in those first few weeks of university?
- 2.4 Can you tell me about your worst memory in the first few weeks of university?
- 2.5 Tell me about the people you met in the first few weeks of university and how you felt about them? Is there anyone in your cohort that you think is middle-class? How are they different?

Experience of placement -

- 6.1** Think back to your first day at placement. Tell me about the moment you arrived and met your class teacher.
- 6.2** Tell me about meeting your class, do you remember anything from that first week?
- 6.3** Can you tell me your most positive memory from your placement?
- 6.4** Can you tell me your most negative memory from your placement?

Belonging -

- 4.1 If you look back, was there a moment when you felt like you belonged at university? Can you tell me about that?
- 4.2 Was there an experience when you felt like you did not belong?
- 4.3 Was there a moment when you felt like you belonged at placement?
- 4.4 Was there an experience when you felt like you did not belong?

Professional identity -

- 5.1 Do you feel like a teacher? When did you feel like a teacher?
- 5.2 What does being a teacher mean to you?
- 5.3 Teaching is a middle-class occupation so once you have qualified you will be middle class. How do you feel about that?
- 5.4 Do you feel like you have changed/will change attending university?

Possible additional probes:

How did that happen?

What happened next?

Who was involved?

How did you feel?

Can you tell me more about...?

Part C

Is there anything else you would like to share before we finish the interview?

Interview 2: The reflexive interview

The interview will be split into two main parts:

- A. Participant reflection
- B. An invitation to add any further information

Part A

Questions to reflect initial data analysis and may include:

1. In-depth questions such as, 'You told me that...., what other situations have you been in that made you feel like that?
2. Clarification questions such as, 'In the interview you said.... Can you explain what you mean by this?'
3. Confirmatory questions such as, 'You mentioned that.... Are you referring to ...?'
4. Questions to organise events such as, 'You wrote in the journal that..... Did this happen before or after the event you spoke about.....?'
5. Questions to explain contradiction such as, 'In our first interview you stated that..... but I notice that you wrote in your journal. Could you explain to me?'
6. Questions to elicit reflections such as, 'During the first interview Can you tell me how you feel about that now?'

Part B

Is there anything else you would like to share before we finish the interview?

Appendix H: Participant Journal Response Times

Participant	Prompt 1	Prompt 2	Prompt 3	Prompt 4	Prompt 5
L4 dates sent	10/10/23	2/1/24	15/1/24	5/2/24	15/4/24
Rebecca	17/10/23	10/1/24	2/2/24	22/2/24	Not completed (participant requested to continue)
Louise	13/10/23	26/1/24	26/1/24	13/2/24	17/4/24
L5 dates sent	10/10/23	11/12/23	2/1/24	29/1/24	15/4/24
Dave	13/10/23	12/12/23	4/1/24	30/1/24	17/4/24
Dorothy	16/10/23	12/12/23	4/1/24	13/2/24	23/4/24
L6 dates sent	10/10/23	4/12/23	2/1/24	5/2/24	15/4/24
Jane	13/10/23	15/1/24	15/1/24	Not completed (participant requested to continue)	Not completed (participant requested to continue)
Ava	13/10/23	4/12/23	19/1/24	13/2/24	17/4/24
Ruby	10/10/23	6/12/24	15/1/24	17/4/24	23/4/24
Melanie	13/10/23	4/12/23	16/1/24	20/2/24	7/5/24
Sarah	17/10/23	6/12/23	4/1/24	12/2/24	17/4/24
Laura	17/10/23	4/12/23	6/1/24	6/2/24	17/4/24
Participant 11	Not completed	Withdrawn due to non-engagement			
Participant 12	Not completed	Withdrawn due to not engagement			

Participant 13	16/10/23	Withdrew at participant request	
Participant 14	31/10/23	Not completed	Withdrawn due to not engagement

An orange-coloured cell notes that the participant response was more than two weeks late.

Appendix I: Sample paper-based coding

	Rebecca	Chris / Hugh	Orally	Louise
Master narrative	Students should be on time to show they care	Working class people are salt of the earth writers. This is expensive. The mixed POF. Parents are on leavers. Finds problems and puts up barriers to go to uni and work. Stability. Self blame. Sensitive to success - self sabotage. Some.	Teaching is a stable career. This only route to QTS. There is a 'proper teacher' lesson.	Teachers make a difference. Teachers are caring + compassionate.
Personal	Teaching helps others. Teaching helps others be the best version of themselves.	Working better for our child. Happy to earn money get the variety and not have more have.	You can help people in teaching. Don't go back to local community. Not good enough academically. Protect self?	Supportive teachers can make the difference. Teaching can provide help + support for others. Stressed from workload.
Figured out	Uni leads to a better paid job.	Actor - needs to understand what role to play. Positive feedback boosted confidence.	Disdain at staying local. Since this is the better. Shakesy group. Felt left out. Shows signs of being a nurse. (before I)	Uni was supportive and helped her move. Does not belong w/ drinking culture.
Not visible	See self in others being helped.	Making good money means a happy job. Those that can't go to uni. Struggle away without financial barriers did not really do anything with that qualification.	Dealing with 1st year stick. Give confidence. Being the teacher. Children. Perfect. How have come. For they have come.	Satisfaction of teaching someone something.
Beliefs	No help to apply. Filled out wrong uni. Working hard to be better. High stakes - need this to succeed, not on other.	Older than everyone. This is too expensive. Choosing a course based on interest and not job prospects is a luxury that only financially stable people can afford. This would mean sacrifices financially.	Privilege to have parents support. Long at home. Even though moved out on 15th. Parents manage to self that she can't do it.	Feels it like a job as does not feel belonging - belongs at home.
Tenure	Amos but made a point of helping others.	Produce at organ meet up?	Financial burden. Not feeling clever enough. Felt like idiot at home when. Reached peak. Then started to go down. Those that stay. Those that stay. Those that stay. Those that stay.	Factor child.
Below			Below	Felt lonely at start.

Tension	Reframing
Older than everyone	Best to go late and know what you truly want to. Unpleasant have been curriculum. Unpleasant not executed better. Important to see it as a job - be professional.
Don't belong/fit in	Privilege to have parents support and have someone care for you. Focus on what's left to learn. High-stakes. Strive to be better.
Have to live hard due to finances	It will get easier when she is more experienced and better.
Not feeling good enough	Need to prove self.
Working-class deficit	Better to be in dependent than. Strive to be more like student than.
Teaching is hard	Benefit of peer identity - being able to talk to children about local football.
Asian teachers don't belong	
Financial issues / going uni later	
Accent and non-standard English not sounding professional.	

Figured world of professional

- Teachers have good handwriting
- on time is expected from students
- All students like drinking
- Teachers are confident, caring
- Teachers change lives
- Teachers are successful if they teach children something and help them believe
- Never make mistakes (not new skills)
- ^{good} Students do not dominate discussion
- A good student gets higher grades
- Teachers like children
- Teachers help everyone and build children up
- Informalizing when things go wrong
- Knowledge is a precious commodity + has the power to change lives
- If you are trusted to do something they must believe you can do it
- This is the tension
- Teaching is a supportive career
- Good students give the right answers in class
- Transient teachers have a lower status
- Teachers are good communicators

Figured world of working class family

- WCs are single-minded about / racist
- Teaching is a good stable job
- Teaching is a job with financial security
- Being academically able means you shall go to uni and not waste time
- Unable to help financially/practically but highly supportive of change for better
- Working class people are just trying their best in challenges
- Some uni anxiety / uni is overwhelming
- Grateful for what they have and being able to pay the bills and go on holiday etc.
- Working class people are well rounded, approachable, not too far
- Disadvantaged children need saving
- Choosing an uneducated job can be a choice to be more family orientated
- Good to be independent at uni and not need family financial help
- Working class people are approachable and down to earth
- Middle class students want uneducated working class children
- Not like accepting help
- Working class people are not as good as others with a ~~different~~ ^{different} ~~down~~

Selection of data - some may need to be set aside. Don't use what doesn't answer questions

Compare and contrast students

Present findings - main headline things

Beliefs about teaching

- Teachers have good handwriting
- Can provide help + safety for others
- Change to give back to community
- Stable job
- Helps others be the best version of themselves
- Teachers are patient and confident
- Teachers change lives
- Teaching provides financial security
- Teachers are role models
- Primary teaching is babysitting

Analysis notes Dec 26

- belonging + self talk as a counter to class / not tension
- Important to see self in others
- Experience of teaching someone something helped reaffirm ones identity
- Guided reflection shows how far they have come
- Reluctance to buy into middle class - don't want to feed into that
- Tension about not feeling able enough
- Support from family is key
- buy in to the aspirational deficit narrative
- Attending uni leads to a better job
- Students care if they are on time and being late shows you are laid back
- Course is high-stakes need to succeed and only way out, not optional
- Uni seen as expensive and a financial burden

Appendix J: Sample NVivo coding

Name	Files	Reference	Created on
Barriers and challenges	2	6	10/04/2025 12:04
Belonginng	12	24	02/12/2024 09:28
Cultural assumption	10	26	02/12/2024 09:27
Figured world evidence	11	34	02/12/2024 09:28
Identity	1	2	10/04/2025 11:37
Institutional	0	0	10/04/2025 11:38
Narrative evident in emerging professional identity	10	35	02/12/2024 09:27
Personal	0	0	10/04/2025 11:39
Personal assumption	11	49	02/12/2024 09:27
Placement	1	2	10/04/2025 11:40
Reshaping of narrative to fit new identity	8	20	02/12/2024 09:28
Tension between class and professional identity	11	30	02/12/2024 09:28

Barriers and C	2	6
Belonginng	12	24
Cultural assu	10	26
Figured worl	11	34
Identity	1	2
Institutional	0	0
Narrative evi	10	35
Personal	0	0
Personal assu	11	49
Placement	1	2
Reshaping of	8	20
Tension betw	11	30

Files (Vangel-Louise) - 34 references coded (11.10% Coverage)

Reference 1 - 4.25% Coverage

The best moments of placement have been seeing the progress the children make and making a difference within the children's school life so quickly. Louise feels like she has been accepted by the school and treated kindly and evenly. It is not all positive however, Louise has also had days at placement where the children have been hard to deal with. She feels her inexperience makes this even harder as she does not have previous examples to draw on.

Reference 2 - 1.77% Coverage

She tried to shadow one child in particular for a few days and tried to encourage him to behave more, this started to work and it was great to see how she was starting to make a difference.

Reference 3 - 2.12% Coverage

Although there were some ups and downs with this approach Louise felt proud of the difference and felt that it was really good to see the difference in his behaviour. There was so much more progress, and it was great to see.

Drag selection here to code to a new c

Appendix K: Sample interview 2 questions

1. You told me that your parents always supported your decision to attend university, can you tell me a bit more about their background and how they found education?
2. Do you feel that you had a working-class upbringing?
3. You told me that You had always wanted to be a primary school teacher, can you tell me a bit more about when you first realised this? Are there any moments in your life that helped you decide this?
4. In the interview you said that you wanted to be a teacher to help others? Can you tell me a bit more about this?
5. You mentioned an open day in helping you decide to attend the case study HEI. Can you tell me a bit more about what made a positive impression on that day?
6. You told me that you are living at home to help the financial pressure. How are you finding that? Does it feel like a compromise?
7. You mentioned that in L4 you felt a bit left out because you didn't join the WhatsApp group, can you tell me why you didn't join it?
8. You mentioned that some of the other students made sacrifices to be here, Did you? Can you give me any examples?
9. I know that the transition back to university after placement was overwhelming due to all the assignment information, you also mentioned that you doubted if you were clever enough to be at university, do you still feel like that? Are there any other times you have felt like that?
10. You said a pupil made you a picture and it made you feel welcomed, when in the placement did this happen?
11. I know the memory stick incident was stressful, but can you take anything positive from it?
12. What do you hope to learn more of in the future? What are your hopes and fears for L6?

Is there anything else you would like to share before we finish the interview?

Appendix L: A Summary Of Research Influences On The Interview Schedule

Author	Key ideas	Influence on the interview design	Reference to interview questions
Flick (2018)	Episodic interviewing – memories are tied to concrete circumstance. Concerned with context within specific events. Repeated questioning.	The reflexive follow up interview to check for meaning and shared understanding.	Part 2 Q2 Q3 Q4
(Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)	Phases of narrative interviewing.	Followed the process of asking participants for the main narration then questioning for more detail without opinion.	2.1 2.2 2.3 3.1 3.2 3.3 3.4
(McAdams and McLean, 2013)	Storytelling as a way to research narrative identity through life-story interviews.	Through their coding constructs the concept of recalling negative moments was added.	2.4 3.4 4.2 4.4
Mueller (2019)	Episodic narrative interviewing- an approach to conduct experience related interviews within a bounded circumstance.	Inclusion of defining question. Invitation to tell stories related to their experience of university and placement.	1a 1b 2.3 2.4 2.5 3.3 3.4

Appendix M: Master Pen Portrait Headings

Pen portrait – Pilot study participant (first person as narrative journal entries)

Central ideas of narrative – character, scene, place, time, point of view (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004)

Past

Upbringing:

Reason for attending uni:

Family background and attitude to education:

Additional barriers to HE and own edu journey:

Present

First impressions:

Hopes/fears:

Settling in:

Belonging and experiences:

Placement:

Future

Hopes for the future and experiences of being a student:

Point of view

Feeling like a teacher:

Class identity:

Pen portrait – Dorothy

Dorothy always considered herself to be working-class because her parents had to work hard for their income. She is a second-year student on a teacher training degree course.

Dorothy's parents did not really enjoy their own time at school. Her dad does not remember any positive experiences and often did what he could to skip school days. Although her mum has more positive memories of primary school, neither of them went to university. Both her parents got jobs as soon as they left school and did not feel like university was something they needed to do this. Dorothy's Dad was more encouraging of her desire to be a teacher, noting that teaching is a good stable career, while her Mum wanted her to stay open minded and suggested working with animals.

Dorothy had always wanted to be a primary school teacher. She felt like university was the only option to achieve this. Her parents recognised this and although they did not see university as important in their own lives, understood that it was the only way Dorothy could realise her dream of being a teacher. Her parents have her a lot of encouragement and wanted the best for her. Dorothy was not that eager to attend university but saw it as the only way. Becoming a teacher was important to her, it was something she had thought about since she was eight years old. She remembers teaching her teddy bears and then completing work experience in a primary school reaffirmed that this is what she wanted to do.

It was important for Dorothy to be able to help people in whatever career she chose. She wanted to be able to provide children with new knowledge and enjoy the process of learning. Dorothy knows that she can be her worst critic at times and wanted to support children and provide that consistent positive influence to build their confidence and help them stand up a bit taller. There is a strong sense of belonging to the place she grew up and wants to work in a school near her home. Knowing the area feels safe and giving back to that community feels like a complete cycle.

Coming to the open day helped Dorothy to realise that this university could be the right place for her. The atmosphere was welcoming and staff she met were supportive and were trying to help her straight away. She visited other universities, but they felt cold in comparison. Although many of her friends moved away and tried to encourage her to do the same to have the 'full experience', Dorothy doesn't think she would have enjoyed that as much. It is a privilege to attend university with her parents supporting her while she lived at home. It also removed the

financial burden of supporting herself and the challenge of cooking for herself during placement. Dorothy does admit that she may be missing out on some of the experiences but having her parents as supporters provides her with a sense of security and comfort.

On the first day at university Dorothy felt a lot of excitement. She was ready to focus on the course rather than social life and although she recognised this would be different living at home, she felt she had made the right choice for her. Some of her friends showed a bit of disdain about her attending the local university but Dorothy did not purely choose it because it was local. It was somewhere she could feel at home. The lectures in welcome week introduced all the fun things she would be doing on the course which made her more excited she couldn't wait to get organised. Dorothy tried to walk around and chat to people, but certain groups did not want to talk as much as others. There were times in the beginning that she felt a bit left because some of the students had been part of a WhatsApp group that she wasn't in. Dorothy reflects on this as a positive at times as the WhatsApp group has also been a cause of anxiety for other students comparing themselves to each other and worrying that they have missed something. She sometimes feels this too but can manage it. When the other students are saying they would start researching the assignments early it worried her as she knew she couldn't start that early.

Now that she is in her second year, Dorothy feels some apprehension about the work or expectations being more challenging. She remembers some of the module assignment discussions in the first week feeling overwhelming, like she was being overloaded with information. She was nervous about having three months away from university and combined with the enhanced expectations made it a challenging time to settle back in.

There were a surprising mix of people in the group and Dorothy soon felt reassured that there are other people who have made sacrifices to be there. Her sacrifice of living at home felt less isolating when she realised that people had children to care for and jobs they had left to try and change their lives. Being surrounded by people who saw teaching as important as she did, helped her to belong and feel that people around her were similar. The support at the university was good and Dorothy never felt on her own. Although the assignment timetable was overwhelming, and at times difficult, she was able to stop and remind herself that she had been successful so far and that she is able to continue to be successful. It's a challenging course and sometimes, amidst the treadmill of work and placement, she must remind herself of that. Even then there have been moments when she doubted if she could do this or if it was for me or if she is clever enough.

Dorothy remembers a moment of belonging in a music lecture. All the students stood up and were encouraged to sing, she didn't think anyone else would do it, but they did and it got everyone laughing and talking to other people. This moment made her feel so comfortable. The art module made Dorothy feel nervous as she had negative school experiences with art. Talking this through with other students helped her realise others felt like this too. It really helps when she can see the shared challenges with the other students around her.

Dorothy has enjoyed placement. The first couple of weeks were difficult. It was daunting thinking what is required of her, but the school staff were a caring bunch, and they checked that she had everything she needed. It was good to get to know the children and how things were done at the school but trying to not compare to her first placement was difficult. It helped that her friends experienced the same challenge when letting go of the positive memories from the first placement and getting to know a different school and staff. Initially it was strange that the classroom doesn't have a door and is open plan. Teaching a music lesson felt very strange being overly aware that the glockenspiel would make too much noise. As the time passed, Dorothy felt more at home in the new placement. She remembers then a pupil made a picture and gave it to me, then a pupil mentioned they learned something a few weeks ago from her. There was a great sense of satisfaction from knowing that she taught someone something.

Unfortunately, not all placement memories have been as positive. Dorothy lost her memory stick and hadn't saved her work which meant she couldn't find the worksheets that I had printed the week before. Dorothy had to redo them the moment before the lesson which was stressful and resulted in her having to make adaptations in the moment. Although this was a stressful and difficult time it has helped her trust herself more. She knows that although she will double check everything is saved in the future, she also knows that she is resilient and knowledgeable enough to act in the moment and still teach a good lesson. This was a key moment in her professional development and seeing herself as a teacher.

Dorothy likes to be proactive when building professional relationships. Even though it pushes her out of her comfort zone, she makes a point to talk to other staff in the staff room. There was a moment that another staff member started a conversation with her. Being asked when she was coming back felt nice. Although teaching more has made her feel nervous at times, she has risen to the challenge.

A moment of guided reflection at the end of the first year made Dorothy realise that she has grown and developed a lot, and she is able to see how much further ahead she is now than when

she started. Dorothy is always trying to find ways about how she learns best and how to tackle assignments but also feels that people around her do not understand the complexity of university with a placement.

Dorothy does not fully feel like a teacher yet. But sometimes she will deliver a lesson and feel like it was a 'proper teacher' lesson. One that she has planned herself and done it all. She feels like she is on the way. Being on placement in other people's classes means having to use their routines and techniques. Dorothy feels that when she is a proper teacher, she will have her own ways that she can choose and won't have to ask permission.

Although she is proud of how far she has come, Dorothy wouldn't want to ever feel like she is feeding into people that thrive off a high-class status because it shouldn't really matter that much. So far with her journey at university Dorothy feels that she is very much the same person, but she has learned a lot.

Appendix O: Pilot Study 1 Interview Schedule

Interview questions (*semi structured*) –

Warm up question to define the phenomenon of interest:

1. Being the first in your family to attend university, can you tell me about why you chose to come here?
2. What does the term 'social class' mean to you? (RQ2)

Main questions:

3. Think of a time that you felt 'at home' at university/placement. Can you tell me ~~story~~ about that? (RQ1)
4. Think of a time that you felt 'out of place' at university/placement. Can you tell me ~~story~~ about that? (RQ1)
5. Has attending university changed you in any way? How/why? (RQ2)
6. Do you feel like a teacher? When do you think you will develop your professional identity?

Follow up group discussion (conducted several weeks after initial interviews) –

I will conduct initial data analysis and then invite participants to a group discussion also over teams where I will share initial themes and invite discussion around these. As this is a pilot, I am interested whether the group element here will be restrictive or empowering. As well as reflecting on the data analysis this group discussion will also ask participants the following questions:

1. What do you think about being asked to recall an example of an event (story) in the interview?
2. Did you understand the questions? Do you think the order of the questions made sense?
3. How did you find the group discussion? Is a group or individual discussion preferable to you? What were the benefits of each?
4. How much ownership do you think you have over your data and how this is reported?
5. Do you have anything else to add?

Appendix P: Amendments To The Interview Following Pilot 1

Development point	Justification
Include more warm up questions	Participants needed more general concept discussion before moving onto personal and detailed experiences Cridland <i>et al.</i> (2015).
Include more questions directly related to identity formation by conducting more research into what methods identity researchers adopt	Data collection related to identity happened incidentally and needs to be more explicit. Breen <i>et al.</i> (2021) demonstrated the narrative interviewing approach to elicit identity data.
Consider a narrative interview approach that enables participants to talk about their family and family influences	Family influences were spoke about in each interview despite there not being a question related to this. Consider including a specific question to maximise the responses linked to family influence. Barkhuizen <i>et al.</i> (2014)
Consider the added value of a group discussion	The group discussion enabled participants to reflect on the interview process and further discuss their views on social class but did not encourage meaningful participation of data analysis. Consider how to engage participants meaningfully and the ethical challenges of this (Prior, 2018).

Appendix Q: Pilot Study 2 Interview Schedule

Part A: Introducing the topic and key concepts:

Introduction -

I am going to be inviting you to recall situations that have helped you decide why to attend university and what it has been like so far as a student-teacher. Before we start, I would like to ask you a few questions about some of the concepts included in this research.

- a. What does social class mean to you?
- b. How would you describe your own class identity?

Part B: An invitation to tell personal stories

Decision to attend university -

- 2.1 Can you recall the moment you decided to come to university? Tell me a story about that?
- 2.2 Can you think of an experience or moment in your life that helped you decide to become a teacher?

Experience of university -

- a. Think back to your first few weeks at university, can you tell me about your best memory in those first few weeks of university? (2.3)
- b. Can you tell me about your worst memory in the first few weeks of university? (2.3b)
- c. Tell me about the people you met in the first few weeks of university and how you felt about them?

Experience of placement -

- 4.1 Think back to your first day at placement. Tell me about the moment you arrived and met your class teacher. (2.4a)
- 4.2 Tell me about meeting your class, do you remember anything from that first week? (2.4b)
- 4.3 Can you tell me your most positive memory from your placement?
- 4.4 Can you tell me your most negative memory from your placement?

Belonging -

- 5.1 If you look back, was there a moment when you felt like you belonged at university? Can you tell me about that? (2.5a)
- 5.2 Was there an experience when you felt like you did not belong? (2.5b)
- 5.3 Was there a moment when you felt like you belonged at placement?
- 5.4 Was there an experience when you felt like you did not belong?

Professional identity -

- 6.1 Do you feel like a teacher? When did you feel like a teacher? (2.7a)
- 6.2 What does being a teacher mean to you?
- 6.3 Teaching is a middle-class occupation so once you have qualified you will be middle class.
How do you feel about that?
- 6.4 Do you feel like you have changed/will change attending university?

Possible additional probes:

- How did that happen?
- What happened next?
- Who was involved?
- How did you feel?
- Can you tell me more about...?

Part C

- Is there anything else you would like to share before we finish the interview?

Pen portrait – Pilot study participant

Sarah grew up in a working-class area of the northeast of England. Her parents did not have a university education and struggled initially to find a suitable job which resulted in Sarah recalling them doing a range of jobs.

Sarah was clear that she wanted something better, something more stable where she was not passed from pillar to post in jobs that were unqualified. She wanted to give herself more opportunity.

No one in her family had ever been to university, she was the first person in the entire family tree including about 15 cousins. She feels that her family just settle for what is there. Her brother is a successful self-made businessman, but she is more intellectual and values education. He values designer clothes and nice cars. Her mum and nan were proud of her decision to attend university, but her dad does not buy into education in the slightest. She explained that he often would keep her and her siblings off school just for fun. He will help her out financially if she is struggling but also doesn't really care what she's doing. She can't remember a time when they said they were proud of her. She thinks they would like it more if she ran a business, but her mum always told her to do what makes her happy. Her mum has an administration job in the government and drives a nice car (on finance). She might own a house but will be paying the mortgage off until she is 68. Sarah talks about going on holidays, but they were always camping. Sometimes people don't understand how different it is and middle-class people will think nothing of popping off to Morocco for a month.

Sarah comes from a family of neurodivergent people. Her little brothers have ADHD and autism. She thinks she has this too. She was the naughty kid at school. She loved her teachers and loved learning but would often do stupid things and dash out of class. She was always shouted out no matter what she did. She wishes she had more support when applying for university and sorting out bursaries and financial support. Although her family help her when they can, they do not have the money to fund her education.

Her first attempt at university was not successful. She chose a course based on how clever it sounded and the fact that she could get a bursary for exceptional grades. After a year, she realised that although the degree was interesting, it was not something she would ever want to do as a job. A stroke of coincidence or luck meant that Sarah attended a university open day with

a friend, not looking for anything, but just to support her. She noticed straight away how this university was friendly and helpful, not at all like where she was currently studying. She felt accepted and represented in a way that she hadn't felt previously. It seemed a big deal that her parents had not been to university at her current place, but this new university seemed more inclusive.

Jumping forward and Sarah has left her original university and is enrolled on a undergraduate teacher training course. She was excited to be doing a professional course that would lead to a specific career. She felt like she was a working-class student and was worried about not fitting in. After the first failed attempt at a degree, it was important to Sarah to make this work. She thought about the open day and the types of people that she met there and hoped that the course would be the same. She felt that it was often people who came from lesser backgrounds who got left out and left behind. She felt so anxious about this that she read the profiles of the staff that would be teaching her, looking for commonality.

Noticing that not everyone attended a red brick group university made her feel better. Fortunately, she was right and she settled in without too much challenge. She noticed that the other students around her were similar and that they all felt the same about education. There was the odd occasion where she still thought, 'God, I shouldn't be here', but mostly she felt as though she was able to accomplish something here. Although her grades weren't as good as her friends she still felt as though she was proving something to herself more now.

Sarah sometimes found it difficult to speak up in lectures but having her friends around her helped. It has taken some time to make friends because she didn't speak to many other students at first and one of the lecturers scared her to death. She was pleasantly surprised that, when she spoke, no one said 'Oh lord, why is she saying that?' In fact, the other students seemed really interested in what she had to say. Either that or they were good at pretending. Although Sarah felt settled, the experience was not without bad moment. Getting back grades was always difficult and all her friends seemed to get higher marks. She felt that this was related to achievement and was disappointed in herself, like she wasn't as good as everyone else, not good enough to be there.

Fitting in at the placement school was hard too. At one placement, Sarah felt like she 'stuck out' and was different to the other teachers there. This continued and the placement ended early. Sarah was able to turn this around with her final placement to such an extent that the deputy head of the school even tried to offer her a job. She feels the school makes a really big difference

and wouldn't want to be put in a 'posh' school. Sarah recognised that her mental health situation was quite important to the feeling of belonging. When she feels like an outsider, she feels this is down to her mental state and disappointment in herself.

University has given Sarah a reason to look forward to the future. At times, being a student was hard. Struggling to manage three jobs to pay the bills and keep up with the demands of the course. There were times when Sarah was not sure it was all worth it. But she valued herself differently now. It's not about the money in the bank but about what she has achieved. Her grades keep improving and she has a roof over her head. She has a car and is still going in her final year. She feels as though she has done more with her life than her brother, despite his claims to be a millionaire in the future with £15k in savings. She is proud of going to placement in her 'teacher clothes' and sees value in being an educator. Sarah believes in education and says, 'you can have money, money comes and goes, but knowledge doesn't.' You can't lose knowledge, when you understand something and truly grasp it, you can use it for so much more than money or social status.

Although Sarah doesn't feel like a teacher yet overall, she does at times when she is teaching her placement class. Still feeling like she needs the reassurance of her mentor, and she feels that when she truly feels like a teacher, she would believe in herself more. Maybe she will feel like one when it is her actual job? She would never consider herself middle-class though.

Even with the degree, she'll always be working-class. She has had struggles getting to uni and often feels below working-class and doesn't feel that she could ever put herself in middle-class. No matter how much money she has in the bank. She feels that middle-class people are 'stuck up' and it just isn't the way she was brought up. It just doesn't sit right with her. She feels as though teachers can be working-class because they work hard for a living and help others. She is proud to be WC and wouldn't want that to change. She feels as though her family would make fun of her if she started saying she was middle class. There is a lot of reluctance to let go of those working-class roots. Her dad has his own business and builds houses, but she still chooses to say her dad is a builder rather than a business owner.

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Project Reference Number: SU_22_366

Title of study

‘Becoming a teacher of my own design’: Exploring professional identity development in first-generation student-teachers from a working-class background

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project which forms part of my doctoral research. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The purpose of the study

This research aims to explore the processes and influences that impact First-Generation student-teachers’ professional identity development. This research aims to answer the question: How do working-class/first-generation student-teachers make sense of their developing professional identity and what are the factors contributing to this process?

To answer this question, you will be asked about your experiences of university and how your personal circumstances have impacted how you feel about being a teacher.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited you to take part in this study because you are a first-generation university student undertaking a teacher training course at university. A first-generation student is someone whose parents or grandparents did not attend university or other HE. You have also self-identified as being from a working-class background.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be asked to complete a pre-interview questionnaire and complete the consent form.

By agreeing to take part you will need to complete five journal entries between October 2023 and April 2024. These will be prompted by an email which will ask you to complete a short journal entry using a personal one note document.

There will be an individual interview that will take place over teams between January 2024 and February 2024. This will be approximately 1 hour. There will be an additional follow up interview in May-June 2024. The follow up interview will discuss key elements of your initial interview, journal entries and will aim to clarify meaning. You do not have to answer any questions you are uncomfortable with and have the right to withdraw before, during or after until the 31st March 2024. During the interview you will be asked to select a pseudonym (fake name) that will be used in the data analysis and final report.

Following the journal entries and interviews, a pen portrait will be created to summarise your data in an accessible way. This will be shared with you after May 2024 and you will have the ability to provide feedback on this to ensure it captures your data authentically.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is completely voluntary. You should only take part if you want to and choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in anyway. Once you have read the information sheet, please contact me if you have any questions that will help you decide about taking part. If you decide to take part, I will ask you to sign a consent form and you will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

During the interview and follow up discussion we will be talking about your identity in relation to social class and how you have found your experiences of university so far. In doing this it may recall some difficult memories or experiences that could be upsetting. I will ensure all participants are provided with the contact details of the university support services and offer support to access these if requested.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I will provide you a space and opportunity to reflect on your experiences so far. By sharing your experiences, you will contribute to social equality research and support the aims of this study which is to highlight good practice in widening participation at university and in professional careers.

Data handling and confidentiality

Your data will be processed in accordance with the data protection law and will comply with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR).

Data Protection Statement

The data controller for this project will be Staffordshire University. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. The legal basis for processing your personal data for research purposes under the data protection law is a 'task in the public interest' You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this study by completing the consent form that has been provided to you.

You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the Staffordshire University Data Protection Officer. If you wish to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk.

What if I change my mind about taking part?

You are free to withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. Withdrawing from the study will not affect you in any way. You are able to withdraw your data from the study up until the 31st March 2024, after which withdrawal of your data will no longer be possible as the data will have been processed.

If you choose to withdraw from the study, we will not retain any information that you have provided us as a part of this study.

What will happen to the results of the study?

Following the individual interviews, the results will be analysed using a thematic analysis. The findings of the research will be included in my final thesis.

Who should I contact for further information?

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details: redacted

What if I have further questions, or if something goes wrong?

This research is being undertaken for the purpose of completing a Professional Doctorate in Education at Staffordshire University. If you have any concerns about this research, please feel free to contact my supervisor Dr Gillian Forrester.

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact the module tutor or the Chair of the Staffordshire University Ethics Committee for further advice and information: Redacted

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research

Appendix T: Participant And Researcher Power Influences

Table 3.5: Consideration of power balance

Possible assumptions about WC students (to be challenged)	Knowledge of social class and HEI	Knowledge of teacher training	Recent experience of teaching in schools	Recent experience of being a student	Knowledge and experience of teacher professionalism
L4 Participants L5 participants L6 participants Researcher	Researcher L6 Participants L5 participants L4 participants	Researcher L6 Participants L5 participants L4 participants	L6 Participants L5 participants L4 participants Researcher	L6 Participants L5 participants L4 participants Researcher	Researcher L6 Participants L5 participants L4 participants

Appendix U: Participant Consent Form

Title of Project: ‘Becoming a teacher of my own design’: Exploring professional identity development in first-generation student-teachers from a working-class background

Researcher: Emma Clayson

I have read and understood the information sheet. Yes ☐ No ☐

I have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and I have had any questions answered satisfactorily. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without having to give an explanation. Choosing to withdraw will not affect my treatment now or in the future. Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that the interview will be recorded using teams. Yes ☐ No ☐

I consent that data collected could be used for publication in a scientific journals or could be presented in scientific forums (conferences, seminars, workshops) or can be used for teaching purposes and understand that all data will be presented anonymously. Yes ☐ No ☐

I agree that data will only be used for this project (‘Becoming a teacher of my own design’: Exploring professional identity development in first-generation student-teachers from a working-class background), although the data may also be audited for quality control purposes Yes ☐ No ☐

All data will be stored safely on a password protected computer (electronic data) for 10 years before being destroyed Yes ☐ No ☐

I understand that I can withdraw my data from the project up to 31st March 2024 without having to give an explanation Yes ☐ No ☐

I hereby give consent to take part in this study

Yes ☐ No ☐

Name Participant (print)

Date

Signature

Name Researcher (print)

Date

Signature

Appendix V: Post Participant Information Sheet

Thank you for taking part in this study ('Becoming a teacher of my own design': Exploring professional identity development in first-generation student-teachers from a working-class background).

During the individual interview you were asked to recall stories of your own experiences. If anything in the interview has caused you distress, please reach out to the university support services detailed below. If you require any support to access these services, please contact me on: redacted

How to access?

For students to access support and arrange an assessment appointment, they need to simply fill in the online form which can be found in the below link:

Redacted

Alternatively, if they are having any difficulties filling out the form or have any queries, you or the student can contact the Student Wellbeing team on: redacted.

Appendix W: Findings Overview Diagram and Master Narrative Tables

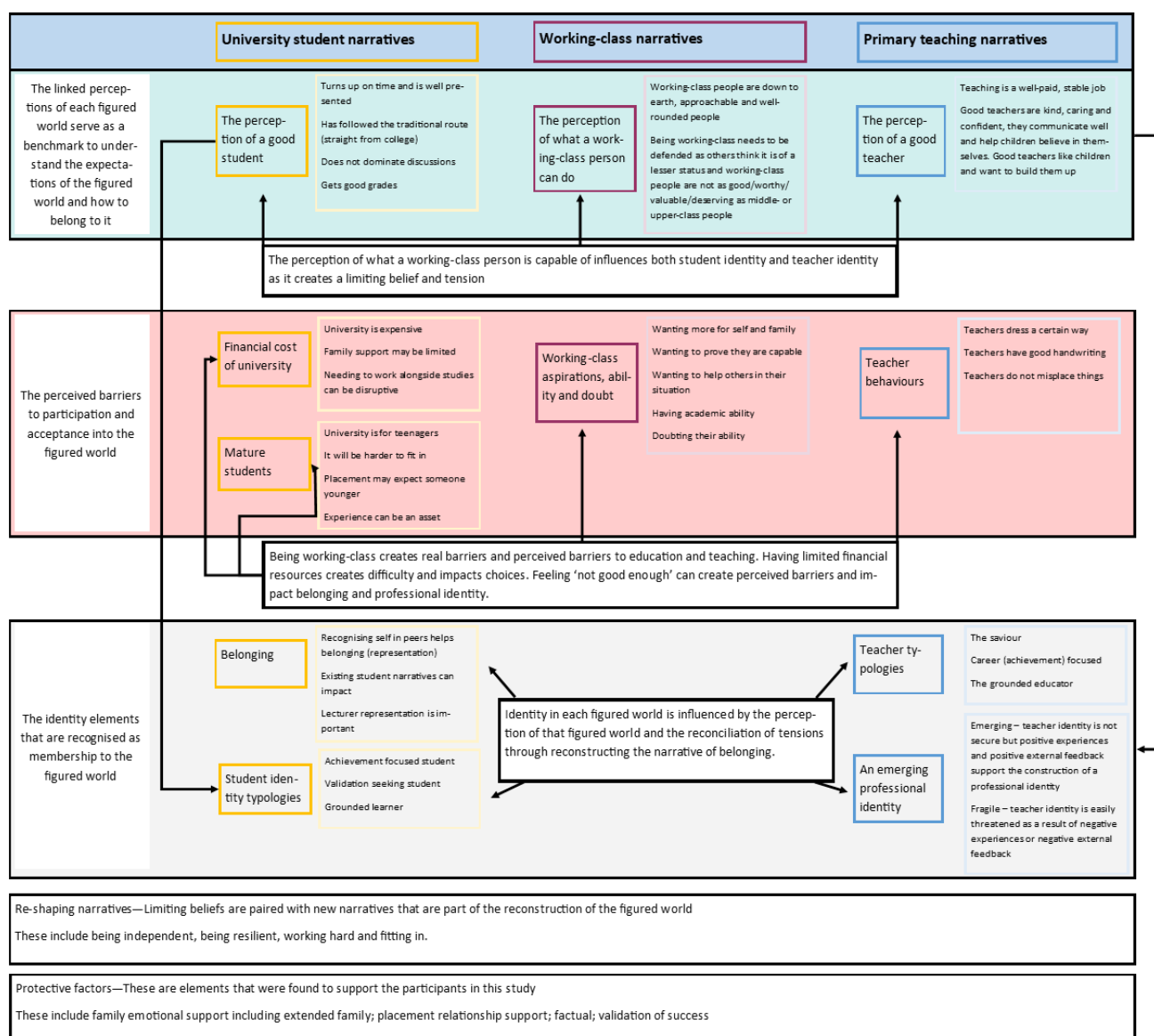


Figure 4.1: A summary of findings

Table 4.4: The Figured World of University

Section	Master narrative – cultural assumptions
4.2.1 The perception of a good student	Makes an effort Arrives on time, gets good grades, does not over-dominate discussion, is confident to speak about themselves, gives the right answers in class, does not make mistakes
4.2.2 Financial cost of university	University is expensive Choosing a course based on enjoyment is a financial luxury Financial support is important to success
4.2.3 Mature students	University is for teenagers
4.2.4 Belonging	Participates socially in drinking University is for teenagers
4.2.6 Student typologies	A summary of each figured world element combined into student typologies

Table 4.5: The Figured World of the Working-Class Family

Section	Master narrative – cultural assumptions
4.3.1 Perceptions of the working-class people	Working-class people are down to earth, approachable and well-rounded people Being working-class needs to be defended as others think it is of a lesser status and working-class people are not as good/worthy/valuable/deserving as middle- or upper-class people
4.3.2 Academic ability, aspiration and doubt	If a working-class person is academically able, they have a duty to use this skill to better themselves

Table 4.6: Narratives of Primary Teaching

Section	Master narrative – cultural assumptions	Tensions that were present between personal and master narratives
4.4.1 Perceptions of teaching and being a <i>good</i> teacher	Teaching is a well-paid, stable job Good teachers are kind, caring and confident, they communicate well and help children believe in themselves. Good teachers like children and want to build them up by motivating them.	Teachers do not talk in the same way as working-class people. Wanting to teach as it is a good profession Concerns around not having the same cultural and social experiences as other professionals.

4.4.2 Teacher typologies and an emerging professional identity	Professional trust from others means that you are good enough to be a teacher Teachers dress a certain way Teachers have good handwriting	Doubt relating to looking the part or having the right skills/knowledge.
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Table 4.7: Participant beliefs about teaching

Professional identity characteristics	The impact of experiences
Emerging – teacher identity is not secure but positive experiences and positive external feedback support the construction of a professional identity	■ Doing the job well supports feeling like a teacher ■ Seeing pupils learn new things helps to shape a professional identity ■ Other people in the community thinking you look like a teacher ■ Doing ‘teachery things’ ■ Professional trust from others
Fragile – teacher identity is easily threatened as a result of negative experiences or negative external feedback	■ Having a bad lesson observation or experience made participants doubt that they were cut out for teaching altogether. Many considered quitting ■ Making a mistake, such as losing a memory stick, made participants doubt they were cut out for teaching ■ Feeling like they are in someone else’s shoes or playing a role ■ Fake it til you make it

Table 4.8: Limiting belief and participant reframing

Limiting belief	Reframed belief
Being too old for university	■ It is better to go later in life and truly know what career you want, rather than wasting it on something you are not sure on. ■ I would not have been confident or capable enough when I was 18 ■ Being older means understanding the professional expectations better
Financial concerns and pressures	■ It is a privilege to stay at home and be looked after ■ I don't want to go out socialising anyway ■ It is better to be independent and not need financial help ■ The student loan is more like a student tax
Working-class identity (including feeling not good enough)	■ This is the change to improve and do better. The only chance. ■ Working hard, all the time, is what is needed to succeed. ■ Being working-class is an asset as you understand local children better

Appendix X: Tables To Summarise The Organisation The Discussion Chapter

Table 5.1: A summary of how the discussion chapter 5.2 is structured in relation to the findings

Discussion section	Included findings sections	Corresponding subsidiary research question
5.2.1 Social belonging and academic doubt	4.2.1 Perceptions of a <i>good</i> student 4.2.2 The financial cost of university 4.2.3 Mature students 4.3 Working-class narratives	What cultural and personal assumptions (narratives or figured worlds) are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences that in turn influence an emerging professional identity? (SQ1)
5.2.2 The <i>good</i> student	4.2.1 Perceptions of a <i>good</i> student 4.3.2 Aspirations, academic ability and doubt	What tensions emerge between a personal/class identity and a professional teacher identity? (SQ2)
5.2.3 Student identity development	4.2.1 Perceptions of a <i>good</i> student 4.2.4 Belonging 4.2.5 Student typologies	What tensions emerge between a personal/class identity and a professional teacher identity? (SQ2)
5.2.4 World-making	4.2 University student narratives 4.3 Working-class narratives 4.6 Protective factors	How do student-teachers reshape existing narratives to combine their class identity and emerging professional teacher identity? (SQ3)

Table 5.2: A summary of how the discussion chapter 5.3 is structured in relation to the findings

Discussion section	Included findings sections	Corresponding subsidiary research question
5.3.1 The social and cultural context of the figured world of primary teaching	4.3 Working-class narratives 4.4.1 Perceptions of teaching and being a <i>good</i> teacher 4.4.2 Teacher typologies	What cultural and personal assumptions (narratives or figured worlds) are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences that in turn influence an emerging professional identity? (SQ1)
5.3.2 The <i>good</i> teacher	4.4.1 Perceptions of teaching and being a <i>good</i> teacher 4.4.2 Teacher typologies	What cultural and personal assumptions (narratives or figured worlds) are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences that in turn influence an emerging professional identity? (SQ1)
5.3.3 The development of a professional identity	4.4.2 Teacher typologies 4.5 The development of a professional identity	What cultural and personal assumptions (narratives or figured worlds) are demonstrated through the retelling of experiences that in turn influence an emerging professional identity? (SQ1)
5.3.4 Identity tensions and reframing	4.3 Working-class identity 4.6 Protective factors	What tensions emerge between a personal/class identity and a professional teacher identity? (SQ2) How do student -teachers reshape existing narratives to combine their class identity and emerging professional teacher identity? (SQ3)
5.3.4 World-making	4.3 Working-class narratives 4.4.2 Teacher typologies 4.5 The development of a professional identity 4.3 Working-class identity	How do student -teachers reshape existing narratives to combine their class identity and emerging professional teacher identity? (SQ3)

Appendix Y: Participant Pen Portrait Responses

- 'Thank you for sending over my pen portrait. I've had a look, and I'm happy to say that it's all fine and accurately reflects my experiences. No changes are needed.'
- 'I have really enjoyed reading this, it has been quite nice to reflect on. I am happy with the pen portrait; feel it captures me and my experiences very well. '
- 'I really enjoyed reading it. Thank you very much for letting me take part in your research and I hope it was helpful.'
- 'Feels like you're writing a memoir, It's spot on'
- 'Yes, that sounds absolutely fine to me.'
- 'Yes, that all sounds alright'
- 'Brilliant, thank you.' – After amending the pen portrait following initial comments to clarify