The *Playing Teacher* project

A card game to encourage dialogue about professional identity with early career teachers

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Abstract

The *Playing Teacher* project is a playful – yet serious – response to the teacher supply crisis currently experienced by schools in England. The project seeks to develop a set of cards which can be used by those supporting new teachers to open up spaces to talk about 'becoming a teacher'. In doing so, the project aims to create dialogic spaces where dominant cultural and political images of the teacher can be challenged and, if necessary, resisted. In this article, I argue that providing such dialogic spaces is important for the mental well-being of teachers, whose expectations when entering the profession are often at odds with the reality of becoming a teacher within the current neoliberal, performative education environment.

Keywords: new teachers; teacher archetype; teacher professional identity; dialogic space; teacher retention; mentoring

Playing Teacher: a card game to assist with teacher mentoring and promote well-being

The *Playing Teacher* project, funded by the British Academy, is focused on the development of a deck of cards to be used in the mentoring of new teachers. Each card will illustrate a different teacher archetype, or identity. Such archetypes are evident in cultural and political discourse about teachers, informing what we understand to be 'good' and 'bad' characteristics of teachers. However, these images of teaching and teachers are often implicit, they shift and change, and they are understood by different people in different ways. Although cultural archetypes of teachers necessarily impact on how new teachers judge their performance and professional behaviours, these archetypes are difficult to pin down. In the current climate of 'evidence-based' teacher training there is a lack of both time and resources to adequately support new teachers in reflecting on why they might feel compelled to become a certain 'type' of teacher.[1] This is a problem because, as I will argue in the following section, developing an awareness of one's unique professional identity as a teacher is a key factor in why teachers choose to leave the profession, often early in their career. Teachers whose desired professional identities diverge significantly from mandated classroom practices rarely decide to

continue in the profession.

To identify the most common recurring teacher archetypes in recent cultural and political discourse, I have collected together over 2,500 texts focused on teachers. These include Department for Education documents, newspaper reports, Ofsted reports, responses to parliamentary inquiries, and responses to qualitative surveys about teachers and teaching. In total, this amounts to nearly eight million words written or spoken about teachers and teaching, with a particular focus on early career teachers. All of the documents were created between 2010 and 2024 during the period of Conservative-led education governance, but many speak to times before this, providing a long view on how teachers are constructed within societal discourse.

Readers of *FORUM* will be acutely aware that many people do not choose to become teachers because they think it is an easy job, or because they think they will be paid well. Usually, the decision to become a teacher is governed by intrinsic, altruistic motives which are tied up with deeply held moral convictions, emotional and political responses to societal inequalities, and beliefs about the self.[2] Recurring social archetypes of the teacher both engender and reinscribe new teachers' sense of professional agency and identity, and can impact on teachers in unexpected and problematic ways. Think, for example, of the teacher as a saviour archetype, as seen in *Dangerous Minds* or *Sister Act 2*, or the inspirational, rule-bending teacher in *Dead Poets Society* or *School of Rock*. Although generally considered as positive images of the teacher as a hero, we can see these archetypes being used by figures such as Sir Michael Wilshaw or Katherine Birbalsingh to unproblematically embrace practices which oppress and marginalise students rather than supporting and freeing them.[3] New teachers entering the profession have to navigate discourses concerning the role of the teacher, which can sometimes feel and look impossibly different on the ground than in the abstract. It is not hard to see how the process of navigating these expectations could have a negative impact on teachers' mental well-being in those crucial early years in the profession. It therefore makes sense that support to retain teachers in the profession should embrace and encourage dialogue about cultural expectations of teachers and how these relate to practice, opening up meaningful communication about these images of teaching rather than brushing them to one side.

Why is professional identity an important topic for new teachers?

England is currently suffering a crisis in both teacher recruitment and retention,[4] and in the mental health of teachers.[5] During the academic year 2023-24, recruitment to postgraduate teacher training courses was 38 per cent below target, with targets unmet both in the primary (4 per cent below target) and secondary (50 per cent below target) phases of education.[6] Retention is also problematic, with 13 per cent of newly qualified

teachers leaving the state education sector within a year, and 31 per cent leaving within five years of qualification.[7] A crisis around the mental health and well-being of teachers is evident, with 78 per cent of teaching staff reporting feeling stressed, and 38 per cent saying that their organisations fail to support employees who have mental health and well-being problems well.[8] It seems all too obvious to point out that these two factors are likely enmeshed together.

There is a persistent myth which retrospectively categorises new teachers into successes and failures based on their decisions to leave the profession. Teachers who decide to leave are described variously as not really having what it takes to make it in the classroom or not fully understanding what is involved in being a teacher; indeed, I have heard ex-teachers describe *themselves* in these terms when I have asked with curiosity why they decided to move on. However, research conducted with early career teachers does not unambiguously position those who choose to leave as 'failing'. As far back as 1977, Lacey noted in *The Socialization of Teachers* that high-performing entrants into teaching who chose to exit the profession would often find jobs that were linked to education – they remained persuaded by the importance of education, but chose to work outside school settings.[9] Achinstein and Ogawa document the case of Sue, a teacher in the US who took up a stance of principled resistance to a mandatory literacy scheme; her experience of navigating this scheme impacted on a decision not to apply for further teaching roles once her contract was terminated.[10] However, despite accepting that she would become a drop-out statistic, Sue identified as a 'great teacher'.

Closer to home, Perryman's research on teacher retention and performativity located the reason for much early career attrition on current performative structures within education, which function to systematically limit creativity and compassion in the classroom.[11] These limitations cause entrants to question whether they can authentically become the types of teachers they hoped to become. When faced with this identity work, many new teachers realise they cannot work in the system as it stands. It is this realisation – rather than their underperformance – which causes them to leave.

While politicians repeatedly foreground pay, workload and student behaviour as the key reasons why teachers choose to leave the profession,[12] the importance of developing a positive sense of professional identity is generally ignored in policy. Indeed, the initial teacher training and early career framework (ITTECF) – initially developed in 2019 as part of the Conservative government's teacher recruitment and retention strategy - focuses so heavily on rectifying perceived deficits amongst the teaching community that one might fairly assume it was specifically designed to *reduce* teachers' sense of well-being.[13] Standard 8 requires that teachers 'learn how to develop as a professional [and] build effective working relationships', but discussion of profession identity is absent, which is interesting given the repeated claims that the document is 'based on the best available evidence from this country and around the world'.[14] In fact, there

is a large evidence base to suggest that a teacher's sense of professional identity has a significant impact on their job satisfaction and, following this, their commitment to teaching and potential for attrition. Examples of note include: Stephen Ball's seminal article 'The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity', which in 2003 warned that performativity cultures in school would 'have potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and for the inner-life of the teacher';[15] the VITAE project, a major mixed-methods study funded by the Labour government prior to 2010, which found that fluctuations in teachers' professional, situated and personal lives had the capacity to impact negatively on their 'sense of vulnerability, well-being, agency and effectiveness';[16] and, more recently, Ian Cushing's work on the racist ideologies and language experienced by racially minoritised trainee teachers, which argues that 'language oppression is a key reason why England continues to fail to retain racially marginalised teachers'.[17] The list of relevant evidence is far too long to list in its entirety, but it is clear from a wealth of research on teachers' working lives that a positive sense of professional identity is important in maintaining commitment.

The early career framework

If it were a film, the early career framework – designed to improve teacher recruitment and retention – would be euphemistically described as receiving 'mixed reviews'. Nearly half (44 per cent) of teachers surveyed using the Teacher Tapp app would choose to opt out of the external provision part of the early career framework.[18] This is the part run by external providers, which have included Teach First, Ambition Institute and UCL Institute of Education. The majority of these programmes have focused on a deficit model of early career teacher competence and attempted to address this through instructional coaching, which requires that teachers repeatedly practice key observable 'skills', such as greeting pupils when they enter the room.[19] The Department for Education's own evaluation of the early career framework states that it is too early to tell whether the programme has had a positive impact on retention. Whereas almost half (45 per cent) of induction tutors surveyed as part of this evaluation initially expected the early career framework to have a positive impact on retention in their school, only one in five (19 per cent) of tutors had these expectations met.[20] The early career framework was hastily revised in 2024 to incorporate the initial teacher training framework,[21] but its deficit orientation remains, alongside its lack of attention to teacher professional identity.

Of course, new teachers need to develop and improve as classroom practitioners, but such development is inevitably a lifelong pursuit and one necessarily entwined with people's beliefs about what makes a good teacher – as research projects such as *Learning without Limits* have effectively illustrated.[22] As research including the previously mentioned VITAE project shows, demands on teachers constantly change

as new policies are introduced, professional practices develop and as teachers themselves experience fluctuations in their personal lives. These changes require teachers to negotiate their professional identities, building new ways of seeing themselves positively as the demands placed upon them alter. The early career phase is an important time to introduce the concept of professional identity to teachers, and to engage them in conversations about how developing a positive sense of professional identity can help to improve resilience and foster commitment when they face challenges. Successful identity work in the early career phase is important to improve teacher resilience in the face of challenges, and is necessarily dialogic as new entrants to the profession engage in ways of 'literally talking themselves into being teachers'.[23] The absence of spaces to talk about professional identity development in the early career stage therefore disregards years of research on the experiences of both early career teachers and teachers in general, and in doing so risks continuing the worsening pattern of teacher attrition we have seen over the past decade.

Creating spaces for early career teachers to talk about their professional identities is an important factor in ensuring that schools promote well-being amongst their staff. Although we often reduce well-being to a feeling of happiness, contentedness or satisfaction in everyday conversations, well-being is more than this. The World Health Organisation defines well-being as encompassing 'quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose';[24] similarly, the Scottish Government defines mental well-being as: 'our internal positive view that we are coping well psychologically with the everyday stresses of life and can work productively and fruitfully. We feel happy and live our lives the way we choose'.[25] Teachers are leaving the profession because their professional identities are at odds with their working lives, and this is damaging to their mental well-being. The first step to addressing this is to talk more openly about the types of teachers that people want to become – or want to avoid becoming. Given that the early career framework sidesteps this key issue, it is important that we develop resources that help mentors to open up these professional conversations effectively, in the snatched moments available around the edges of the framework's demands.

Developing a pilot card for the *Playing Teacher* project: 'the Storyteller'

One of the most fruitful data sources I used to find out how teachers are constructed in cultural discourse was a collection of responses to a Mass Observation directive in 2012. The Mass Observation project is a long-running social observation project conducted by the University of Sussex, which aims to create 'an archive of everyday life, thought and feeling in Britain'.[26] The project asks a panel of writers – sourced across a range of geographical locations in the UK and including a diverse range of ages, genders,

ethnicities and life experiences – to respond to different issues. Directives are writing prompts issued by the Mass Observation research team, sometimes in partnership with researchers. In 2012, one such writing prompt concerned experiences of teachers, teaching and education generally, and 186 responses were received. Those responding to the directive were asked to consider their favourite and least favourite teachers, how teachers are represented in films, books and television shows, and the public image of teaching and teachers. Some respondents had personal experience of teaching, but the majority did not.

An archetype of the teacher which emerged from reading through these 186 Mass Observation responses was that of 'the Storyteller'. Several respondents noted how their favourite teachers, particularly in the primary phase of education, had a seemingly magical ability to engage their classes in books:

> She had the ability to read aloud in a way that kept the whole class spellbound. (Respondent C3167)
>
> When she closed the book at the end of the chapter I can still hear the soft communal sigh of the whole class who had been listening enthralled. (Respondent B1771)
>
> Her lessons were full of reading aloud to bring texts to life. (Respondent F4813)

A professional identity, or archetype, that seemed to be emerging from these memories was of a teacher who made time for reading, for enjoying books, for becoming immersed in stories. Reading the memories captured in the Mass Observation documents, I was transfixed by how different the construction of the teacher was in these documents to that to which new teachers are exposed in government policies on the new teacher. The English programme of study for key stages 1 and 2 speaks of ensuring that pupils 'develop their love of literature through widespread reading for enjoyment', but at times this feels overwhelmed by the emphasis on phonics, writing transcription and spelling, and comprehension.[27] I was reminded how, as an early years teacher, I felt that one of my key responsibilities was to engender a love of stories and books in my pupils, the majority of whom were beginning readers and too young to read books for themselves. I remembered interviewing two early career teachers I had worked with on a previous project who seemed to identify with this archetype. One was keen to show me a book corner she had developed in her classroom and to position herself as 'a book nerd' who told her students 'all the best people who get anywhere are readers'; another had themed her entire classroom around Harry Potter (this included sewing themed cushions for her book corner). This archetype of the storyteller seemed to make sense of a lot of these professional desires and behaviours.

Working with the illustrator Simon Reid, we created an image to reflect this teacher archetype, which became the first pilot card for the project. On the front, we developed

an image of the Storyteller, and on the reverse included the aforementioned Mass Observation quotes, alongside some possible questions to promote discussion between new teachers and their mentor.

Figure 1: 'The Storyteller' pilot card [28]
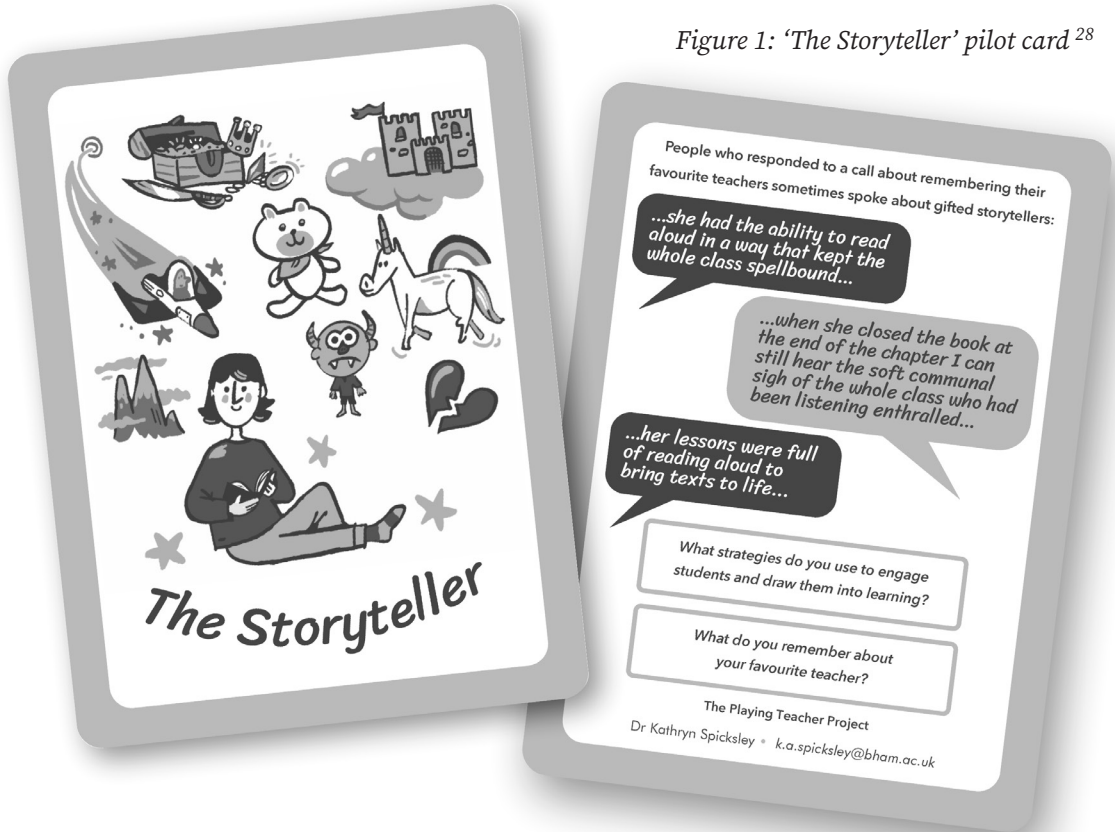
The Storyteller is just the first card; the aim is to develop 15 or so more cards in collaboration with an expert panel of teachers. These cards will aim to make the intangible teacher archetypes that we experience in cultural discourse more defined, so new teachers can more easily recognise and discuss what they are trying to become, and what they are trying to avoid becoming.

How will the cards work? These details will also be fine-tuned with the expert panel. However, when I imagine how they might work in practice, I often think of a meeting I had with my university tutor during my teacher training. I was placed at a school where the ethos was at odds with how I wanted to develop as a teacher – I had chosen an early years teacher training course because I believed in the power of play as a pedagogical tool, only to be met with teachers at the school who said they couldn't understand its value, so tried to restrict unstructured play as much as possible. The placement was not a success, but I struggled to explain why I was so unhappy. I think this discussion would have been easier if I had been supported to better understand my desired identities as a

teacher – becoming a Storyteller, and a playful teacher, were goals that were important to me. However, I felt like these identities weren't possible within this setting.

Perhaps if I had been able to recognise this, and if my university tutor had also been able to recognise this discrepancy, we could have come to a plan of action quicker around how to help me build a positive sense of self during this difficult placement. Perhaps, for example, identifying as a Storyteller would have allowed a clearer understanding of the value of the story we made time to read before the end of every day, facilitating a feeling of accomplishment even within a difficult situation. Such moments of self-efficacy can mean the difference between overwhelming pessimism and glimpses of optimism.

Of course, the cards themselves are a tool. The real magic lies with skilled teacher educators and mentors who can use them to draw out – through meaningful, purposeful dialogue – what is really important to the early career teachers they are supporting, and to suggest ways in which their desired teaching identities can be developed within the restrictive boundaries of current teaching practices in England. We have thousands of committed people supporting new teachers in this country, both in schools and in universities. I hope this resource will provide them will an extra tool to help them with this challenging job, in these tricky times for new teachers.

Building an expert panel of teachers to develop the cards – can you help?

The next part of the project involves developing and refining the cards and ideas around how and when they could be best used, in collaboration with an expert panel of teachers, teacher educators and game designers. This second part of the project will utilise a 'Delphi panel' methodology, collecting feedback on the cards through three rounds of feedback and discussion amongst a small group of research participants with expert knowledge and skills.[29] I am currently recruiting for expert panel members, looking for a diverse range of people. Panel members will advise on the design of the cards and explore how they could be used during teacher mentoring. For example, Simon and I created both a front and a reverse for the Storyteller card, with question prompts on the reverse. But I'm not sure how useful these are – would it not be better just to create images so that people using the cards have free rein to interpret these images as they wish? Using a Delphi panel methodology will allow us to come to a consensus about such issues.

If you are interested, or would like to pass on the opportunity within your networks, further information and the application form for the expert panel are available at: https://forms.office.com/e/j3rfHVBvtS

The QR code can also be used to access the application form and further information:

If you would like to discuss this project, have any feedback or further questions, please contact me at k.a.spicksley@bham.ac.uk

I look forward to hearing from you!

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Notes

1. I use initial teacher training here as this is the term used by the government, although initial teacher education would be preferable.

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6. Maisuria et al., 2023, *op. cit.,* p5.

7. *Ibid.,* pp13-14.

8. Education Support, 2024, *op. cit.,* p8.

9. Colin Lacey, *The Socialization of Teachers,* Routledge Library Editions: Education,

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10. Betty Achinstein and Rodley Ogawa, '(In)Fidelity: What the Resistance of New Teachers Reveals about Professional Principles and Prescriptive Education Policies', *Harvard Educational Review,* 76, 1, 2006, pp30-63.

11. Jane Perryman, *Teacher Retention in an Age of Performative Accountability: Target Culture and the Discourse of Disappointment,* Abingdon, Routledge, 2022.

12. Department for Education, 'Targeted retention incentive payments for school teachers'*,* 2019: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/targeted-retention-incentive-payments-for-school-teachers; Department for Education, 'Reducing school workload'*,* 2023: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/reducing-school-workload*;* Tom Bennett, 'Creating a Culture: a review of behaviour management in schools'*,* Department for Education, 2017: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/behaviour-in-schools.

13. Department for Education, 2019, *op. cit*.

14. Department for Education, 'Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework', DfE, 2024, p26: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/initial-teacher-training-and-early-career-framework; *ibid.*, p4.

15. Stephen Ball, 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity', *Journal of Education Policy,* 18,2, 2003, pp215-228, p226.

16. Christopher Day, Pam Sammons, Gordon Stobart, Alison Kington and Qing Gu, *Teachers Matter: Connecting Lives, Work and Effectiveness,* Maidenhead, McGraw Hill, 2007, p108.

17. Ian Cushing, '"Miss, can you speak English?": raciolinguistic ideologies and language oppression in initial teacher education', *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 44,5, 2023, pp896-911, p896.

18. Teacher Tapp and Gatsby Foundation, *Early Career Framework: The First 18 Months,* 2023: https://teachertapp.com/publications/early-career-framework-the-first-18-months/.

19. See Kathryn Spicksley, 'Instructional Coaching in the early career framework', *FORUM,* 65, 2, 2023, pp46-58: https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/forum/vol-65-issue-2/.

20. Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and BMG Research, 'Evaluation of the national roll-out of the early career framework induction programmes: Annual summary (Year 2)', DfE, 2024, p61: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65dfa86ff1cab36b60fc475f/DfE_ECF_Report_Year2.pdf.

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28. Quotations on the reverse of The Storyteller card are from the University of Sussex Mass Observation archive (Summer Directive 2012). Respondents C3167 (top quote); B1771 (middle quote); and F4813 (bottom quote).

29. An introduction to this method can be found at: https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1164961/how_to_conduct_a_delphistudy.pdf.