

An exploration of what it means to be  
struggling as a secondary teacher in England

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## Abstract

This research emerged from a conversation with a teacher who expressed concerns about the impact of lesson observations on 'struggling' teachers. Struggling is a term found regularly in the literature and it has gained resonance in spite of the absence of an explicit definition of its core meaning. Notions of struggling have been associated with failing, under-performing and a lack of competence or quality. The dominant conceptualisations of struggling tend to view it as a deficit or they focus on the object or resolution of the struggle rather than the experience of struggling itself.

I explored struggling as experienced by teachers with the aim of offering a theorisation of the experience of struggling which better reflects what it means and feels like to be struggling as a teacher. Such a theorisation provides for greater clarity about the experience of struggling itself as expressed by teachers. This study places the voices of teachers at its heart and, as such, helps fill the gap in the literature identified by Yariv and Kass (2017).

Participants were established and experienced teachers and leaders in the secondary school system in England. Fourteen participants were recruited using an innovative strategy involving video and social media. The methodological approach taken used a mix of methods: loosely-structured interviews and an arts-based method, collage. Participants created a particular form of collage – where materials are placed rather than stuck – within the context of a research interview. Arts-based methods such as collage are gaining in popularity as they stimulate visual rather than linguistic thinking and offer the opportunity to express experiences as holistic, non-linear metaphors. Collage also has revelatory potential as it helps uncover that which participants cannot necessarily express in words alone.

Rich data, comprising interviews and collages, were collected in a 5-month period in 2017. The analytical approach taken allowed the verbal and visual data to be intermingled (Grbich, 2007) and each teacher's story is presented as an individual analytical summary. Analysis across the teachers' stories of struggling then produced fifteen themes. Finally, a holistic interpretative approach allowed five key dimensions of the experience of struggling to be established. Together, these five dimensions form the basis of a new conceptualisation of struggling.

Struggling was found to be experienced as a temporary fractured state. Struggling was also expressed by participants as heightened bodily symptoms and is associated with negative moods and emotions; struggling can also involve a damaged self-view, a reduced sense of controllability and may lead to

impaired performance. This final point is, perhaps, of particular importance as it counters the prevailing view that impaired performance leads to struggling.

Implications for policy and practice include a need for leaders to reconsider the support offered to teachers who identify as struggling, with the suggestion that any support is co-constructed with the teacher. Teachers want leaders to know them better and for their work environments to be more compassionate. A culture of 'collective compassion capability' (Lilius et al., 2011) can help alleviate struggling and even help improve a teacher's effectiveness. Finally, stories of struggling could be used as the basis for early career mentoring support.

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I am hugely grateful for the friendship of my PhD buddies, Clare and Jenny, both of whom have traversed this route at a similar time as me. We have drunk much tea, eaten cake and got to know each other well.

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My Buddhist faith has become more and more important to me in these past three years and I rejoice in the merits of my Sangha sisters, Barbara and Sarah, who have always listened to me with patience and kindness. You are my spiritual friends! Particular thanks to my Buddhist teacher, Sanghajata, whose support and challenge has been hugely appreciated. At times, you have known me better than I know myself.

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I will finish with a heartfelt statement to the most important people of all – the sixteen people who participated in this research, in the pilot and main studies. You welcomed me into your homes. You made yourselves vulnerable. You were generous. You were open. You shared your stories willingly. You are fabulous professionals whose voices have now been heard. It was a privilege to spend time with you and it is a huge responsibility to try to present your stories of struggling in a way that is authentic to your experience. I hope you feel I have done your stories justice.

The fact that you're struggling  
doesn't make you a burden.  
It doesn't make you unlovable or  
undesirable or undeserving of care.  
It doesn't make you too much  
or too sensitive or too needy.  
It makes you human.

Everyone struggles. Everyone has a difficult time coping, and there are days when we all fall apart.

During those times, we aren't always easy to be around, and that's okay.

No one is easy to be around one hundred percent of the time. Yes, you may sometimes be unpleasant or difficult.

And yes, you may sometimes do or say things that make the people around you feel helpless or sad.

But those things aren't all of who you are, and they don't discount your worth as a human being.

The truth is that you can be struggling and still be loved. You can be difficult and still be cared for. You can be less than perfect and still be deserving of compassion and kindness.

(Koepke, 2019)

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# 1 Introduction

This research emerged from a conversation I had with a teacher who expressed concerns about the impact of lesson observations on 'struggling' teachers. Teachers' experience of struggling forms my research focus. Struggling is a term found regularly in the literature and it has gained resonance in spite of the absence of an explicit definition of its core meaning. Notions of struggling have been associated with failing, under-performing and a lack of competence or quality (e.g. Bell, 1995; Moreau, 2014; Tucker, 2001; Yariv, 2009a; Yariv and Kass, 2017). I offer a conceptual description of the experience of struggling which better reflects what it means and feels like to be struggling as a teacher. Such a description provides for greater clarity about the experience of struggling itself as expressed by teachers.

Educational policy and the impact of policy changes on teachers and their workloads are pertinent to this research. However, the main focus here is on a detailed understanding of the experience individual teachers have of working within that policy environment, rather than exploring the policies per se. Educational policy is the backdrop to the study; the *experience* of struggling plays the main role. It is a subtle but significant difference in emphasis.

There are frameworks and Standards which set out what teachers in England need to do to gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and policies and guidance for dealing with performance management and capability issues (e.g. DfEE, 2000; DfES, 2002; Lester, 2014; NAHT, 2014; NUT, 2015; Rhodes and Beneicke, 2003). There is a considerable literature on teacher competence and teacher and teaching quality. But again, the focus in this submission is more on the experience of the person than surrounding issues such as competence, policy or procedures.

Different authors view struggling differently; in the literature, school leaders tend to see struggling as a deficit, linking it to poor or underperformance. In some cases, struggling is equated with being mediocre, incompetent or even failing. There is a minority literature which focusses on ridding the system of these teachers rather than remediating them. Whilst not offering a clear definition of struggling, Mendleson (2009, p. 54) does at least suggest that 'not all struggling teachers are beyond help.' Tucker (2001) and others argue that school leaders are morally obliged to support all teachers, whether they are struggling or not.

## 1.1 Researcher Positionality

My years of experience as a secondary school teacher afford me a particular insight into the complexity of relationships in schools (Fahie, 2014). Some of the participants in the study were recruited from pre-

existing relationships and all are from a professional group I have belonged to (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Quinney et al., 2016). Even with participants I did not know prior to this study, there is a shared experience of being a teacher (Quinney et al., 2016).

This research would not have been conceived had I not had the experience of struggling as a teacher. However, I now have some distance from that experience and have adopted a different role, that of researcher. The dyadic relationship - between researcher and participant – is much more than two people just talking about the meaning they bring to the situation (Dahlberg and Dahlberg, 2004). It is a space where dialogues are created and in which both parties attempt to interpret the significance of themes arising from the experience, in this case of struggling (Van Manen, 1997). Clearly, a shared experiential base and some commonality may have improved my credibility with, access to (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) and acceptance from participants (Asselin, 2003; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) and helped me establish the meaning of the data. But it is important to recognise the complexity of any differences we have as well as the similarities (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

There are dangers when positioning oneself as an insider, as findings can be ‘overshadowed by the enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding’ (Mannay, 2010, p. 94). Dwyer and Buckle suggest that it is time to abandon the ‘dichotomous perspective’ (2009, p. 54) of insider *or* outsider as it is unlikely that any one person occupies just one position anyway. As a researcher I could be seen as an outsider, yet my recent experience of teaching – and struggling – affords me some insight as an insider. So, I embrace the complexity of the space in between, the conjunction and disjunction of the insider-outsider hyphen (Kanuha, 2000 & Aoki, 1996 in: Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). I also come to the research process with a sense of *Einfühlung* (empathy) (Keeves, 1997; drawing on Heidegger). By engaging in detailed reflection and being closely aware of my own biases, I have worked to remain open, authentic and deeply interested in the experience of participants so that my re-presentations of their experience of struggling are accurate and adequate (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

Finally, I am a practising Buddhist within the Triratna Buddhist Order. I acknowledge that this influences the nature of my ethical practice as a researcher, especially in terms of how I communicate with and respond to others. My Buddhist practice is based on a desire to reduce the suffering I experience as well as that of others, by acting in ways which are skilful and not harmful to myself or others. I am motivated to explore the stories of struggling as shared with me by my participants in an ethical manner; in my response to their stories, I aspire not to judge. Alongside ethics and wisdom, compassion forms one element of what is known as the Threefold Way. In many academic and philosophical debates about

compassion, there is an idea of a 'sense of deserve,' yet in Buddhist traditions there is no sense of compassion being deserved or not (Gilbert, 2017, p. 54). One does not have to like someone to have compassion and to take action (Gilbert, 2017). As Gilbert states, compassion is a 'prosocial process' which can be extended to everyone (2017, p. 61). Difficult though it may be to act compassionately towards all beings, especially those we dislike, that is the path I have chosen and aspire to tread.

## 1.2 Rationale for the Research

Issues relating to the recruitment and retention of teachers in the English education system are well documented in the media and literature alike (e.g. Foster, 2015; Hilton, 2017; Lynch, 2016; National Education Union, 2018). More teachers are leaving the profession than joining, many within five years of becoming teachers; teacher training places remain unfilled (National Education Union, 2018). Increasingly, graduates are not attracted to teaching or are reluctant to apply to become teachers (Hilton, 2017). Pupil numbers are rising and there are teacher shortages in certain subjects and geographical areas (Foster, 2015). Elsewhere, pupils are being taught by teachers who do not always have a relevant qualification in the subject they are teaching (National Education Union, 2018). Efforts to address the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers include more support for teachers returning to teaching and attracting career changers into the profession (Simons and Darley, 2016).

However, this study is not driven by the pragmatic suggestion that if there were only sufficient teachers, then there would be no need for this research. The rationale is more of a moral one; one which relates to how teachers feel and are treated as professionals. Teacher wellbeing, too, is a common theme in social media discussions (e.g. @teacher5aday and #Teacher5aday on Twitter), the mainstream media more generally and the academic literature (e.g. Acton and Glasgow, 2015; Kidger et al., 2016; Stanley, 2018). Wellbeing is low and depressive symptoms high amongst teachers (Kidger et al., 2016). Budget constraints in education mean that teachers are now doing more in terms of workload than ever before; calls to a mental health charity for teachers increased in the year 2017-18 by over 35% (Stanley, 2018).

One recently published report on wellbeing (Education Support Partnership, 2018) surveyed just over 1500 educators; it found that 67% of teachers describe themselves as stressed, with 74% unable to switch off or relax. The incidence of teachers accessing external Employee Assistance Programmes is reportedly much higher than in other sectors in the UK (10.8% of staff compared with 2.9%). Nearly half of the respondents have had a month or more off work with symptoms of mental ill-health such as sleeplessness, mood swings, difficulty concentrating and anxiety. In 2017 one in every 83 teachers was 'signed off' long term due to work-related anxiety and mental ill-health. Causes reported include excessive workload and

the rapid pace of change in the sector. Perhaps most worrying are the findings about how few educators feel able to talk about their wellbeing problems at work. Reasons quoted for not wanting to talk to anyone within or outside the workplace include disclosure being seen as a sign of weakness (36%) and a sense that support would not be supportive (24%) (Education Support Partnership, 2018, p. 40).

Increasingly, links are being made between teacher wellbeing and pupil wellbeing, with associated repercussions on pupil achievement, (e.g. Kidger et al., 2016). To counter this, schools are being encouraged to adopt a formal staff wellbeing policy as a minimum (Stanley, 2018). Some argue that the neoliberal policy context within which teachers operate is 'incongruent with key aspects of wellness' (Acton and Glasgow, 2015, p. 99). An approach that goes 'beyond managing stress and fosters human flourishing and positive functioning' is needed (Acton and Glasgow, 2015, p. 111).

If we acknowledge that (some) teachers are struggling, then arguably it is the moral obligation of school leaders to notice and at least try to support that teacher who is struggling (Tucker, 1997). The headteachers' standards in England state that all school leaders should create an ethos within which all staff are supported and establish systems and measures for managing staff performance (DfE, 2015). It is perhaps also the responsibility of the teachers themselves to speak up about their experience of struggling, as it is their voices that need to be heard (Yariv and Kass, 2017). Yet many struggle on in silence, fearing the consequences of opening up in cultures where coping alone and an unwillingness to approach others for support is the norm (Kidger et al., 2016). Teachers work in a high-stakes accountability environment where they are essentially in competition with their colleagues and where measures such as performance-related pay prevail; such internal competition with colleagues is seen by some as undermining organisational performance and individual wellbeing (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999).

A 'Leadership for Learning' culture (MacBeath et al., 2018) requires conditions to be in place that are *conducive* to the learning of all. Such professional learning involves dialogue which hinges upon collaboration and a shared sense of accountability (MacBeath et al., 2018). Yet the environment in which many teachers operate is less one of learning and more one of competition and marketisation; learning and learners cannot thrive in such conditions (e.g. Evans, 2011; Valli & Buese, 2007; Wood, 2019). Setting colleagues against each other in this way, whether consciously or unconsciously, reduces the likelihood of them learning from each other or wanting to share their knowledge with 'internal competitors' (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999, p. 20). Similarly, differences in power and status can hinder organisational learning (Bunderson and Reagans, 2011). Struggling might be the consequence of working in such conditions where collaboration is discouraged or only 'contrived collegiality' (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990) prevails.

Conditions which ‘position people unfairly and treat them as a means to an end... are not the most beneficial for human development’ (Woods, 2018, p. 170). Workplace settings where connectedness and unity between people is fostered is likely to lead to reciprocal learning (Woods, 2018). So, competitive conditions are not conducive to collaboration. A competitive mind may also block the ability to act compassionately (Gilbert, 2017). Indeed, the competitive landscape within which teachers operate constrains collaboration and compassion. Waddington (2016) suggests that certain organisational types – such as the health service – have failed to prioritise compassion. This is perhaps a failure in education too where learning environments are not experienced as compassionate; there is a ‘compassion gap’ (Waddington and Kathryn, 2016).

Compassion derives from the human desire to care for others and for many it implies the prevention of suffering (e.g. Gilbert, 2017). As humans have evolved, they have become socially intelligent and capable of meta-feeling and intersubjectivity; compassion is essentially interactional (Vessantara, 2006). Whilst not all suffering can necessarily be fixed, some argue it can be made more bearable in a landscape of compassion (Feldman and Kuyken, 2011). I posit that struggling is a form of human suffering and therefore requires a compassionate response. Gilbert (2017) outlines the key elements of compassion which are linked to the alleviation of suffering. If, as I suggest, struggling is a form of suffering, then Gilbert’s elements of compassion could be reconfigured as set out below (in which I have replaced *suffering* with *struggling*). In this way, I offer a compassion-based framework for the alleviation of struggling which incorporate the following:

- openness to the reality of *struggling*
- desire to work to prevent *struggling*
- desire to acquire wisdom to prevent *struggling*
- desire not to be the cause of *struggling*

Compassion is more than an emotion; there is a clear underpinning motivation and desire for action. This applies equally for the alleviation of one’s own struggling as to that of others. To be truly compassionate, one must not only direct compassion towards others but equally towards oneself. Indeed, it is through self-compassion, so argue West and Chowla (2017), that we develop the resources and wisdom to be compassionate towards others. This is as true for the teachers who are struggling as for the school leaders who have an obligation to support teachers to unstruggle. I use the term unstruggle to mean the process of moving from struggling to not-struggling. The benefits of cultivating a culture of ‘collective compassion

capability' (Lilius et al., 2011) include enhanced performance, reduced absenteeism and an improved quality of professional life.

I start below with a review of the literature associated with the concept of struggling. Then I explain the methodological approach taken to collect data from participants about their experience of struggling. Finally, I share and discuss the findings and outline the implications of this study. This is a study about struggling which allows the voices of those who have experienced struggling to be heard and which appeals for a compassionate understanding of that experience.

## 2 Literature Review

This research looks at what it means to be struggling as a teacher. The context is the English education system, specifically the secondary school sector. Teachers do not operate in isolation; their professional practice is contextually and temporally situated. I suggest, then, that it is important to understand the landscape within which they work, whether they are struggling or not. Struggling is a phenomenon which has been associated in the literature with perceived underperformance and lack of quality. Struggling is situated within the narrative of teaching excellence and so a consideration of the literature on teacher and teaching quality as well as competence and incompetence is needed.

The review of the literature starts with an overview of the educational and policy terrain in England, taking into account key features of the English system. This is the terrain within which all teachers operate and where struggling is experienced. I then move on to present how struggling is currently conceptualised. I do this by reviewing the literature on concepts such as teacher and teaching quality, performance management and competence. I move on to discuss the notion of problematic practice before looking at the literature on coping.

Following an analysis of how the term struggling is used in the English language, I review more specifically the literature on struggling. This is presented in three parts. The struggling literature outside of education can help in an assessment of how struggling is currently conceptualised. There is also a struggling literature *within* the field of education but this does not focus predominantly on teachers. Finally, there is a teacher-focussed struggling literature.

This chapter concludes with an outline of the research questions I posed and an indication of the contribution to knowledge this research was intended to make.

### 2.1 The Terrain

Teachers in the English system work within an environment where an orientation towards student outcomes predominates. There is an assumed link between student results and the quality of teachers (Labaree, 2011). To this effect, the Department for Education has repeatedly stated that the quality of teaching is the single most important school-based factor determining how well children achieve (DfE, 2010, 5). Furthermore, Ofsted – the schools inspectorate – advise that school leaders should have a rigorous approach to eradicating inadequate teaching and should not accept any excuse for mediocrity (Ofsted, 2012a). ‘Good practice’ equates to having a ‘non-negotiable requirement for good teaching’ (Ofsted, 2012a, p. 5). Explicit guidelines outline what constitutes good and better teaching (Ofsted, 2012b,

2012c, 2012a, 2012d); Ofsted welcome the 'rigorous monitoring' (2014, p. 2) of the quality of teaching by leaders. Underperformance is challenged and if a school is found to have a 'complacent ethos' (Ofsted, 2012e, p. 2) then that ethos is to be replaced by a rigorous and systematic management of teacher performance. The ultimate aim is to raise expectations of teachers (Ofsted, 2012d); there is no place for anything other than good or better.

It is within this narrative of 'good or better' that teachers navigate their way through the educational seas of change. Successive educational reforms in England since the mid-1970s have culminated in a terrain in which some argue that teachers feel increasingly deskilled and deprofessionalised (Apple, 1986; Beck, 2008; Hargreaves, 1994; MacBeath et al., 2018). Others argue that emphasising the importance of teachers and their impact on student outcomes is, in fact, professionalising (e.g. Torrance and Forde, 2017). Some of the 'deprofessionalising effects of policy and practice' (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 11) include prescriptive teaching strategies and procedures for inspection which have all required strict compliance. These 'radical, pervasive and controversial' changes have been 'rampant and remorseless' (Docking, 1996, p. x). This epidemic of reform (Day and Smethem, 2009) has perhaps even taken 'the heart out of teaching' (Hargreaves, 2001, p. 3). At the very least, policy-led accountability has impacted on the way in which teacher work itself is understood (Wood, 2019).

Increasingly, teachers work in an environment where their professional judgment is disregarded and they feel they have no input into or control over changes made (Kilderry, 2015). Education policy is dominated by the perspective of economic competitiveness (Ball, 2017) and 'pedagogy has been obscured and distorted' (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 164). Some teachers will do what is asked of them because it is an expectation, even if they do not actually agree with the practice or reform being proposed (Ranson, 2003). Others will balk at the idea of having to execute other people's ideas (Apple, 1986); others again may feel compromised professionally in the face of unrelenting demands and pressure on them to perform in ways which go against their better judgement (Berry, 2016). Wiebe and MacDonald reflect on how much teachers are prepared to put up with, asking 'how much is enough... and ' 'how much is too much?' (2014, p. 11).

Educational policy over the past three decades or so could be categorised under the themes of marketisation and choice, centralization of power, inspection, accountability, standards and effectiveness (e.g. Evans, 2011; Phillips and Furlong, 2001; Taysum, 2012; Valli and Buese, 2007; Wood, 2019). Teaching has increasingly become characterised by a managerial approach to monitoring and measuring what teachers do (Apple, 1986; Ball, 2017). Models of schooling have become based on commercial market

institutions with regimes focussed on competition entrepreneurialism and competition rather than professionalism and ethicality (Ball, 2017). Others argue, however, that the system of 'marketisation and micro-management is breaking down' (Woods, 2011, p. 164) and 'past its sell-by date' (Woods, 2011, p. 2) suggesting that the 'immense pressure to follow economic and performative priorities has to be countered' (Woods, 2011, p. 74).

People who taught back in the 1960s would barely recognise the job now that it is 'dominated by scrutiny, checking and an unthinking adherence to policy' (Berry, 2016, p. 19). Educational policy continues to be driven by an economic logic, with efficiency and effectiveness as the parameters by which education is measured (Apple, 1986; Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2009). A key focus is on value for money; for some teachers, workloads have become intolerable with things being added but nothing removed (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2009). This has resulted, for some, in burnout, superficiality and loss of purpose and direction (e.g. Hargreaves, 1994; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2010). Emotional pressure and an increased pace and intensification of teachers' work has been brought about by more paperwork, more surveillance and a developing gap between senior and teaching staff in terms of values and purpose (Ball, 2017). Valli and Buese (2007) propose the notion of *intensification* of work, defining it as the constant rise in activities which need to be completed outside the classroom.

Increased workload is, in fact, just one facet of the phenomenon of intensification. Intensification can also be defined in terms of the teacher's role, their working conditions and their heightened responsibility for data-driven teaching and learning (Valli and Buese, 2007). It is more than working longer hours, doing more tasks, going to more meetings and doing more paperwork, it is 'emotionally charged' (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2009, p. 1156) and can manifest itself beyond the workplace (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2008; Hargreaves, 1994; Travers and Cooper, 1996). Teachers find it hard to find time not only in their work lives but in their family lives, too (Wiebe and MacDonald, 2014). The extent to which teachers and staff experience their 'intensified' workplace as positive or negative depends to some extent on the organisational climate (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2009, 2008) and the ability of leaders to buffer the effects (Rutledge et al., 2010). Woods suggests that it is possible to foster teachers as creative agents, capable of dealing with the 'pressures of modernity' (2011, p. 65) by engaging in what he terms democratic leadership. Frost, too, talks of enabling teachers 'to become effective agents of change' (2017, p. 5). If a large enough group of teachers can demonstrate their capacity to transform practice 'we might be able to make a difference to the global policy discourse' (Frost, 2017, p. 175).

Clearly, the ability to cope with the pace and extent of change is different for different people (Travers and Cooper, 1996). There is a variety of participants in the policy process (Ball, 2017) and some teachers are able to 'penetrate policy circles' (Frost, 2017, p. 2) at local levels. Indeed, case studies are available (e.g. Woods et al., 2016) which show how some teachers have used their energy, commitment and positive energy to effect change despite barriers presented by the policy context. Others are more likely to struggle in response to intensification and increased accountability. Traits of such teachers include being prepared to work long hours, taking work home, being unable to relax, cutting holidays short, setting unrealistically high standards, feeling frustrated and irritable, and being misunderstood by their leaders (Travers and Cooper, 1996).

Some argue that a teacher's work is never done and can always be improved (e.g. Hargreaves, 2001); teachers feel that it is a part of the nature of teaching. A narrative of never-endingness (Giovacco-Johnson, 2005) dictates that teachers can never do enough (Hargreaves, 1994). The pressure of not being seen to struggle, not wanting to ask for help and a tendency towards pedagogical perfection (Ballet et al., 2006) can all add to some teachers contributing to their own over-burdening (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2008). Despite wide-ranging reforms at policy level, change is often seen as superficial and has often led to only trivial changes in practice (e.g. Coe, 2014; Hargreaves, 1994; Wiliam, 2016). Yet change continues to be the only real constant in the system. Some would argue that teachers are operating within an environment 'ripe for stress' (Travers and Cooper, 1996, p. 3) with some teachers more prone to feeling they are struggling than others.

I have considered in this section so far the policy environment within which teachers operate. I move now to discuss the more immediate context within which teachers work, that of their school and individual classrooms.

Teaching is not an isolated activity. Teachers interact with the terrain within which they operate, which in turn influences their experiences. Moreover, the individual teacher brings a life history to the workplace, where they interact with colleagues to enact school and national policies within particular departmental and school-wide cultures. Different contextual levels can impact upon and influence a teacher and their teaching practice. Drawing on Bresler (1998), school policies and procedures may influence an individual teacher's approaches to teaching; indeed, the culture of any given school may impact on the pressure to teach in a particular way (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2008). School policies are heavily influenced if not entirely determined by national educational policy. Bresler (1998) uses the terms macro, meso and micro as contextual levels to indicate national, school and individual teacher levels. In her model, she argues

that the micro is predominantly determined by the meso which in turn is determined the macro level (Bresler, 1998). She implies that teachers enact national policy as interpreted by and mediated by their school leaders.

There are 'invisible veins of power' (Kincheloe and Berry, 2004, p. 117) located at different contextual levels and Bresler's model is based on a more traditional hierarchy of authority. There is a tendency in that model to exaggerate the inevitability of the top-down linear flow, ignoring other intervening factors such as resistance, headteacher agency, connoisseurship, activism, etc. (e.g. Frost, 2017; MacBeath et al., 2018; Woods, 2011) which can equip educators to challenge policy. However, not all teachers are able or enabled to engage in such 'reasoned dissent' to build a 'bulwark against (the) performativity agenda' (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 170). At the micro level, even a school's view of a particular subject can impact on the teacher, for example in terms of how time or resources are allocated for that subject (Bresler, 1998). This touches the very moral purpose of some teachers who experience 'ethical dilemmas' (Schmidt and Datnow, 2005, p. 951) when having to comply with policies which challenge and displace their values (Ball, 2017). There is a literature which suggests that the locus of control remains predominantly situated at the macro level, with its effects trickling down through to schools and ultimately to teachers (e.g. Ball, 2017; MacBeath et al., 2018; Wood, 2019). Others argue that autonomy – as a form of independence and choice in how schools implement policy, for example - is not only possible at school level but is in fact integral to the self-improving system (Woods et al., forthcoming). Woods et al. (forthcoming) argue further that there are different degrees of autonomy amongst teachers and schools, affected by a range of factors that include the community context, school status, etc. Some school leaders engage in principled infidelity (Hoyle and Wallace, 2008) which means they can follow 'external diktat whilst being critically committed to policy' (MacBeath et al., 2018, p. 165).

Struggling is situated and experienced within a wider context, what I have termed the terrain. Some view struggling as one stage on a continuum ranging from failing to excelling within a particular terrain. I will go on to propose that struggling is an experience which is more complex than that. I move on now to review the literature surrounding the concept of struggling and include references to teacher quality, teaching quality and competence. I also look at ways in which teaching is measured. I conclude this section with the notion of problematic practice and also consider the extent to which coping may be viewed as the antithesis of struggling.

### 2.1.1 Teacher Quality - Teaching Quality

In this section I will be discussing the literature on teacher quality and teaching quality. I consider in particular the extent to which struggling is conceptualised in the literature as a *lack* of quality. The literature on teacher quality and teaching quality spans the domains of expertise and competence, but I discuss the competence literature separately, in the next section. It is also essential to consider the means by which quality is measured, that is how teachers and their teaching are evaluated. I argue below that it is often people other than the teachers themselves – usually people in positions of authority and with power – who decide whether a teacher’s teaching is ‘good enough.’ Quality may comprise different aspects, for example traits, competence, purpose.

Smith (2008) argues that teacher quality will remain a contested and elusive concept so long as disagreement persists about what teachers are trying to achieve (Harris and Rutledge, 2010). Lasley (2006) suggests that there is no consensus on the essential characteristics of high quality teachers. Over the years, different models of teaching have prioritised different traits in teachers and their approaches to teaching (e.g. as summarised in: Harris and Rutledge, 2010); reforms in policy lead to shifts in those priorities and what was previously considered ‘good’ may no longer match perceptions and measurements of ‘good’ teaching capability today.

The educational terrain outlined above has also influenced predominant conceptions of teaching. Teaching is conceptualised in various ways, as a profession, an art or a craft, for example, with each model emphasising different perspectives and priorities (e.g. Harris and Rutledge, 2010). These models have differing emphases on relationships: ranging from collegiality and interaction with other adults, to power relationships with those in positions of authority, to the classroom expectations teachers have and the rapport they build with students. Some models have required teachers to enact measurable demands and procedures; in others, autonomy and the ability to exercise professional judgement are predominant. Teacher personality and the role of subject and pedagogical knowledge also feature to a greater or lesser extent. In short, different notions of teaching call for different teaching approaches and thus different conceptualisations of teacher and teaching quality.

Despite not always being clearly demarcated in the literature, *teacher* quality and *teaching* quality clearly overlap. It can be useful to think of *teacher* quality as focusing on the attributes of the *person*, who the person is and what it means to be a teacher; their moral purpose and their ‘theory of ethics’ (Harris and Rutledge, 2010). *Teaching* quality focuses more on the attributes of the *practice*; it is more about what

that person does, their so-called ‘theory of behaviour’ (Harris and Rutledge, 2010). In many ways, the two are indistinguishable as the act of teaching cannot be separated from the teacher as a person.

Quality can be defined as a ‘distinctive attribute’ and as a standard as measured against things (or people) of a similar kind (Google, 2019a). The previous paragraph showed that teacher and teaching quality can be seen in terms of distinctive attributes, albeit those attributes are not always clearly delineated. The second definition uses quality more in the sense of a benchmark. At times in the literature it is used interchangeably with ‘effectiveness’ and ‘productivity’ (Goldhaber et al., 2011), and there is a considerable body of literature on ‘effective teaching.’ Effective can be understood here as being successful in producing an intended result. Quality - in the narrower sense of effective - is therefore a measure of success in terms of student attainment and outcomes.

There is agreement that effective teachers ‘make a difference,’ for example in terms of student achievement. One meta-study explored effective features of teaching in terms of their impact on student progress (Coe et al., 2014). Despite offering a relatively narrow, progress-focussed definition of teaching quality, the report offers a useful distinction between observable and seemingly quantifiable aspects of effective teaching, and unobservable attributes of teachers and their teaching (Coe et al., 2014). In any case, it has not yet been possible to determine which teacher characteristics are needed to make that difference to consistently predict student outcomes (Angrist and Guryan, 2008; Bakx et al., 2014; Caena, 2014; Pascopella, 2006; Wiliam, 2016).

What is clear then, in terms of teachers and teaching, is that not all agree on what quality means. It certainly appears to be a broader term than, say, effectiveness. This lack of an agreed definition makes quality particularly difficult to measure. MacBeath et al. offer some hope for a renewed focus on professional quality as the cornerstone of ‘what teachers do’ (2018, p. 134). They argue that professional identity and moral purpose are two key dimensions to being a high quality teacher, both of which ‘rest on the centrality of human agency’ (2018, p. 135).

I move now to a discussion of the literature on competence and its counterpart, incompetence.

### 2.1.2 Teacher Competence

When defined as ‘the ability to do something successfully or efficiently,’ competence has clear links to the notion of quality discussed in the preceding section. For some, being regarded as a ‘competent teacher’ can go to the very essence of what it means to be a teacher (Friedrich, 2010). Some define a competent teacher as someone able to combine complex elements and transform them into effective action (Deakin-

Crick, 2008). For others, competence has a less positive connotation, meaning satisfactory, though not outstanding. In one model, for example, it is the middle stage of proficiency between novice and expert (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1980). Using competence in the satisfactory rather than excellent sense, 'competent' teachers are not necessarily able to recognise the salient aspects of a given situation. A 'proficient' teacher, however, is able to hone in on the nuances of the situation (Benner, 2001).

Competence is conceptualised by some as linear, a continuum from incompetence to competence (Raths and Lyman, 2003); others see it as a fixed, absolute notion which rejects learning through practice and experience (Friedrich, 2010; Wiliam, 2016). Some conceptions of competence include the application of knowledge and skills, but also teachers' values and identities, for example in the sense of 'knowing oneself' (Van Manen, 1997; Friedrich, 2010). Friedrich (2010) argues that it is possible to oscillate between incompetence and competence, especially in the early stages of teaching when competence may be emergent. Friedrich (2010) is undecided as to whether competence is acontextual or context-specific; others assert that it is a product of effective social interaction between oneself and one's environment (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Friedrich, 2010). Competence can also be seen as a developmental outcome of knowledge and skills, the mastery of activities in everyday life and evaluated within the setting in which it occurs (Friedrich, 2010).

Competence can be regarded as dynamic with 'no final moment of becoming' (Friedrich, 2010, p. 9); how competent does a teacher have to be, asks Friedrich, and wonders whether a novice teacher who is working towards competence would be deemed incompetent. One could argue that incompetence is merely the absence of competence. Others raise the question of how many times a so-called 'incompetent act' needs to happen before it is transformed into incompetence itself (e.g. Raths and Lyman, 2003, p. 215) or ascribed as incompetence. Incompetence is also a term with seemingly different applications; it can be used on the one hand to identify 'clear malpractice and unethical behaviour' or to acknowledge on the other hand a 'lack of professional skills which can interfere with student learning' (Raths and Lyman, 2003, p. 211).

Competence has come to be fashioned into a set of teaching standards (Kennedy, 2005). These standards set out what teachers are expected to know, understand and be able to do (e.g. Caena, 2014). By outlining in this way what teachers need to know and do, educational policy threatens to 'narrow our concept of teacher competence' (Williamson McDiarmid and Clevenger-Bright, 2008, p. 150). Some argue that standards aim to ensure a 'minimally competent' level of performance (Benner, 2001, p. 183); others

suggest that professional standards set out what teachers are expected to know, understand and be able to do as specialist practitioners in their fields (Caena, 2014). The implication is that if a teacher can demonstrate that they are meeting those standards or the required level of competence, then they are a good (enough) teacher. However, if teaching standards are based on competence – rather than, say, expertise which I discuss below – excellence is not necessarily encouraged. More than that, a narrowly-defined, standards-based conceptualisation of teacher competence has the potential to stifle excellence.

Incompetence is a term found widely in the teacher literature (e.g. Covrig, 2001; Mendleson, 2009; Menuey, 2007; Range et al., 2012; Riley, 1999; Tucker, 1997; Waintroob, 1995; Wragg et al., 1999). Other labels used in the literature to signify incompetent include failing, marginal, plain, bad, deficient and unskilled (Ehrlinger et al., 2008; Hildebrand, 1972; Mendleson, 2009; NAHT, 2014; Pascopella, 2006; Raths and Lyman, 2003; Tucker, 1997; Yariv, 2004). Mediocrity is viewed as incompetence by some who see dealing with a mediocre teacher as a complex issue (Pascopella, 2006). I view mediocre as competent; regarding it as incompetent would appear to set competence at a rather high level. Some argue that ‘plain teaching’ is not only routine and adequate, but also ‘uninspiring and tedious’ (Raths and Lyman, 2003, p. 214). Plain and adequate both signify competent to me. Poor performance or underperformance are other ways of describing incompetence (e.g. Ehrlinger et al., 2008; Rhodes and Beneicke, 2003; Tucker, 1997; Yariv, 2009a).

One term used above to describe incompetent was deficient, which is a term used in the English context. In many English schools, the formal procedure for managing and monitoring the performance of teachers ‘whose practice is found to be deficient’ is called capability (NAHT, 2014, p. 12). A capability procedure is invoked if a teacher’s underperformance has prevailed ‘for some time’ (NAHT, 2014, p. 12); trivial or one-off lapses of performance should not lead to informal, much less to formal, procedures (NUT, 2015). Unfortunately, there is neither a central record of the numbers of teachers undergoing capability procedures, nor any indication of how many improve, stay in teaching or leave.

A number of authors acknowledge the difficulties and complexities of dealing with teacher incompetence (e.g. Menuey, 2007; Tucker, 1997; Yariv, 2011, 2004); the process can be hindered by some school leaders lacking the resolve, willingness or ability to deal with the issue (Menuey, 2007; Yariv, 2011, 2004). For example, Tucker (1997) reported that headteachers were failing to deal with their incompetent teachers, with 36% of school leaders stating they had no incompetent teachers in their schools at all. Empirical research from 20 years ago (Tucker, 2001, 1997) and more recently (Yariv and Kass, 2017) has found that

5-7% of the teaching workforce is made up of teachers performing at ineffective or incompetent levels. In their research, Yariv and Kass (2017) reported that 81% of principals acknowledge they have at least one poorly-performing teacher in their school. If headteachers ignore or fail to confront observed or known-about difficulties, they avoid tricky conversations which might involve the triggering of capability procedures (e.g. Yariv, 2011). Conversations of this type are difficult; they require 'courage, honesty, knowledge and hard work' (Staples, 1990, p. 142). It is important to remember, of course, that the teacher has the right to know that their performance is deemed incompetent, as measured against expectations known to them beforehand; they also have the right to a chance to improve and get help, as well as sufficient time to carry out such improvements (e.g. Munnely, 1979). The measurement of teacher performance is addressed in the following section.

If we view competence as part of a continuum, with incompetence at one extreme and expertise or excellence on the other, it is clearly important to also consider what we mean by expertise. I discuss the expertise literature here. Different types of expertise are expounded in the literature, including specific or general; specific or limited; knowledgeable or skilful; adaptive or routine (Berliner, 2001; Paquay & Wagner, 2001; Schratz et al, 2007, in: Caena, 2014; Ericsson and Charness, 1994; Hatano and Oura, 2003; Wiliam, 2016). *Routine* expert teachers often fail to go beyond 'procedural efficiency' (Hatano and Oura, 2003, p. 28), tending to stick to meeting predetermined standards. Some argue that one can only become really proficient by 'dropping the rules' (citing Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1971, in: Benner, 2001, p. 37). An *adaptive* expert teacher, however, is flexible, innovative and creative and knows how to mobilize knowledge and skills in context (Caena, 2014).

Teachers clearly need knowledge, including knowledge about the curriculum; knowledge about students' understanding (of a subject); knowledge about assessment and of instructional strategies to understand how children learn (e.g. Orleans, 2010). Coe et al. (2014) suggest that when teachers improve their subject and pedagogical content knowledge, there can be a positive impact on student learning. Wiliam (2016) suggests it is not so much the amount of knowledge expert teachers have, but rather *how* that knowledge is organised and used.

Some argue that expert performance is not difficult to recognise, but it may not always be captured by the usual criteria for performance evaluation (Benner, 2001; Wiliam, 2016); the 'expert always knows more than (s)he can tell' (Polanyi, 1958 & 1962 , in: Benner, 2001, p. 43). The main difference might be that expert teachers are better than novices at knowing *how* to react (Wiliam, 2016 my emphasis). Pfeffer

and Sutton (1999) also emphasise that it is not so important *what* we do but *why* we do it; any attempt to merely copy what is done, without holding the underlying philosophy, is unlikely to lead to success.

The way in which competence and its associated concepts tend to be used in the literature is as descriptive labels, terms ascribed in judgment by one person on another. However, it is also important to consider the evaluation of one's *own* competence (Dunning et al., 2004; Ehrlinger et al., 2008; Krajc and Ortmann, 2008; Schlösser et al., 2013), especially in light of this study's focus on the experience of struggling. Some argue that self-appraisal is an accurate reflection of competence (Bandura and Schunk, 1981). Others suggest that self-assessments are often flawed (Dunning et al., 2004). Dunning et al. (2004) also argue that there is not a strong relationship between self-assessment and actual behaviour or performance; other people's predictions may be more accurate than self-predictions. In the case of 'poor performers,' performance can be grossly overestimated and performers do not learn from feedback on how to improve; according to Ehrlinger et al. (2008), it is their incompetence which deprives them of the skills needed to recognise their deficits. Schlösser et al. (2013) suggest that ultimately it is making people more competent which can make them more accurate in their self-assessments.

In summary, struggling has been situated within the wider context of competence and teacher quality. Competence and its counterpart, incompetence, were considered in terms of teaching quality, expertise, evaluation by others and self-evaluation. I turn my attention now to the measurement of teaching, to highlight how struggling – when conceptualised in terms of teacher performance – may be viewed.

### 2.1.3 Measuring Teaching and Teacher Performance

Given that teacher and teaching quality are contested and elusive concepts (e.g. Smith, 2008), measuring teaching has the potential to be difficult. The absence of a clear definition of effective or quality teaching clearly makes the evaluation of teacher performance complex and problematic. Different views of the purposes of education generally, and notions of teaching in particular, influence what is measured and how. Berry argues that an obsession with measurability means that 'we have lost sight of what we know about pedagogy' (2016, p. 72). Ball suggests that individual teacher performances serve as 'measures of productivity' (2017, p. 57) although this only relates to one definition of effectiveness.

In some countries, teaching quality is increasingly described in the form of standards; some see this as a refashioning of competence (Caena, 2014; Kennedy, 2005), as presented in the previous section on competence. Teaching standards are sometimes called competencies, although there is an argument that they are different. In England, teachers and their teaching are currently measured within a framework of

standards for assessing and awarding Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), (DfE, 2014). However, many argue that standards-based models can lack the finesse to account for the variability or instability of teaching and teacher performance, from lesson to lesson (e.g. Hill, in: Wiliam, 2016; Tucker, 2016). Thus, whilst such models may have their place in the assignment of QTS, their role in relation to teacher development is different. Models or frameworks of this kind lack sufficient subtlety and nuance to assess a teacher's performance in a meaningful way. Given that they are based on a particular set of criteria, such models can have negative implications for teachers identified as struggling, for example.

Formal classroom observations, performance management (appraisal), student outcomes, value-added, student ratings and increasingly book scrutiny (despite its low reliability - see Coe et al., 2014) are some of the tools used to measure the effectiveness of individual teachers and their teaching in schools across England. The most prevalent model of measuring teacher effectiveness, according to Coe et al. (2014), is students' academic outcomes, perhaps because they are easily accessible (Linn, in: Harris and Rutledge, 2010). Value-added measures continue to be used as a measure of teacher effectiveness, although they do not always account for 'interference' from outside influences (Harris and Rutledge, 2010). In an outcomes-oriented environment, where a reductionist view of learning prevails (Smagorinsky, 2014), the challenge is to find valid ways of reliably and effectively measuring the teacher attributes and practices that consistently predict these outcomes (Angrist and Guryan, 2008, p. 499; Bakx et al., 2014; Caena, 2014; Pascopella, 2006).

Some argue that the focus on the desire to measure the quality of teachers and teaching in England ignores the complexity of teaching (Bakx et al., 2014; Berry, 2016), such as a teacher's contributions to student engagement, motivation and social skills (Coe et al., 2014). A reductive approach to assessing teaching ignores the complexities and nuances of teaching and focuses predominantly on individual, technical teaching skills (Caena, 2014; Conway et al., 2009). However, teachers make complex judgements on a daily basis; these 'invisible' aspects remain unevaluated, irrespective of their potential impact on student outcomes (Rutledge et al., 2010; Wiliam, 2016). The knowledge embedded in teachers' practice and their beliefs about learning - an important indicator of quality (Coe et al., 2014) - remain invisible to any observer (Benner, 2001; Wiliam, 2016). Benner (2001, pp. 34–35) argues that 'evaluation models cannot capture the knowledge embedded in the expert's actual practice.'

Evaluating teachers can be a summative and formative process. For example, Shulman (2009) distinguishes between the 'assessment *of* teaching' (summative) and 'assessment *for* teaching' (formative). Some conceptualise performance management as a supportive and developmental

(formative) process (e.g. NASUWT, 2012); in reality, for many teachers it is often high-stakes accountability. Many measures are inherently summative; they provide benchmark descriptions of teaching quality and are used mostly for high-stakes decisions, for example pay progression. Others offer formative instructions or guidance as a spur for improvement (Coe et al., 2014; Wiliam, 2016). Standards or sets of criteria may ensure a 'minimally competent' level of performance but do not necessarily encourage or foster excellence (Benner, 2001, p. 183). Rubrics or frameworks which reduce teaching to a set of rules telling teachers what to do can 'depress the quality of teaching' and make teachers 'less effective' (Wiliam, 2016, p. 236). Summative descriptors (such as Teachers' Standards) can limit understanding of the complexity and significance of teachers' practice; to be of formative use, they would need to be reconfigured as aspirational indicators of performance (Wiliam, 2016).

The validity of any model or measure is impossible to establish unless it is clear what is being measured and why (Coe et al., 2014). By validity is meant the ability of any model or approach to measure what it sets out to measure and the extent to which it reflects the reality of what it claims to represent. Different models can rate the same teacher as differently effective (Wiliam, 2016); equally, different teachers with very different sets of skills, knowledge and understanding can achieve similar ends (Coe et al., 2014). There is some agreement, for example, about issues of validity, reliability and the potential for observer bias with formal classroom observations (e.g. Coe et al., 2014; Culshaw, 2015); evidence from observations is not seen as reliable enough. By reliability, I mean the degree to which a measure produces stable and consistent results. For example, observers might - knowingly or unknowingly - take a deficit view of teachers (Yariv, 2004) whose practices differ from their own preferred styles (Pajak, 2003; Yariv, 2004). The consequences of using measures with low reliability and validity for important decisions such as pay progression, promotion or capability procedures are serious (Coe et al., 2014; Wiliam, 2016). Coe et al. (2014) argue that different approaches are needed depending on whether the purpose is to fix or fire the teacher. Wiliam (2016) posits that any measure only really allows the very effective and the very ineffective teachers to be identified; whilst this usage is perhaps valid and reliable, finer distinctions are not discernible and are simply not reliable enough.

In summary, the predominant practice in schools is one which appears to value observable and seen as measurable aspects of effective teaching over unobservable attributes of teachers and their teaching (Coe et al., 2014). Whilst a standardised tool may allow the measurement of teacher quality to be more objective, much teacher evaluation is in reality subjective. Although Smagorinsky (2014) suggests that striving to attain objectivity is pointless, an appreciation of teacher quality can clearly go beyond personal

opinion. The single narrative of standards-based evaluation of teaching is being given precedence over the multiple narratives of the complex classroom; it is perhaps time to multiply the narratives (Kushner, 2017).

Having looked at quality, competence and the measurement of teacher performance I move now to consider the literature on problematic practice.

#### 2.1.4 Problematic Practice

I explore here 'problematic practice' as one conceptualisation of struggling. Struggling has negative connotations as I will outline in a subsequent section. I draw here on Tucker's notion of an 'historically capable teacher' (Tucker, 2001, p. 53) which offers a less negative contrast. 'Historically capable' conjures up images of a teacher who was previously capable but whose practice is now no longer what it was. I discuss here the literature on the deterioration of practice and the notion of what I term slippage.

Deterioration tends to be a gradual process which occurs over time and usually arises from a 'cluster' of difficulties (Wragg et al., 1999) rather than a singular cause (e.g. Brieschke, 1986 & Nixon et al., 2011 in: Range et al., 2012; Yariv, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). There is little in the literature about the precise triggers or causes of deterioration, but there are implicit links between feelings of stress, the inability to cope and 'rapid, imposed educational change' (Webster et al., 2012, p. 7). One needs to also consider the school context itself, the classes being taught, etc. and the extent to which they may make a difference.

Faced with the challenge of maintaining energy for the persistently demanding work of teaching, some teachers are willing and able to change, others do not 'connect' with the change (Webster et al., 2012). This idea of not connecting with change might mean that some teachers are able but not willing to change, others are willing but not able. Finally, some will be neither willing nor able. A gradual deterioration of performance in experienced teachers can lead to a general underperformance. This might be because of factors such as over-work, new initiatives and/or an inability, unwillingness or reluctance to adapt (DfES, 2002; NUT, 2015). Waintroob (1995) argued over 20 years ago that most incompetent teachers have been 'enabled' by school leaders to avoid facing their performance problems. The suggestion is that the incompetence has been tolerated for so long and to such an extent that the teacher is barely to blame; the leader has become 'their own worst enemy' (Waintroob, 1995, p. 37). More recently, others have suggested that avoidance can be in part due to some headteachers lacking the resolve to intervene or address difficulties (e.g. Yariv, 2009b).

When concerns about a teacher's practice *are* acknowledged, however, support plans are often activated. Remediation plans often lack specificity, taking a one-size-fits-all approach (Webster et al., 2012). Teaching unions provide guidance about how best to support a teacher facing such difficulties (e.g. NASUWT, 2011; NUT, 2006) but in reality such plans are often vague (Waintroob, 1995). The teacher may or may not be involved in the co-construction of the support plan. Smagorinsky (2014, p. 183) argues that this one-size-fits-all approach is indicative of a 'standardised, dehumanised system' which treats teachers as a 'single block of professionals' who are essentially 'interchangeable parts, all more or less the same' (Webster et al., 2012, p. 4) and advocates a more individualised, human approach. The suggestion seems to be that any specific causes of deterioration remain unconsidered in the creation of any interventions and the more nuanced aspects of any deterioration of practice are overlooked (Smagorinsky, 2014). Given the complexity of teaching, it is likely that factors causing a deterioration of practice, too, are complex and thus demand a more personalised approach.

#### 2.1.5 Coping and Not Coping

Coping is defined as the ability to deal effectively with something difficult (Google, 2019b). Struggling is sometimes used synonymously to mean 'not coping' as both carry an implied sense of not being able to deal effectively with something difficult. It is for this reason that I also viewed struggling through the lens of the coping literature. Flesch (2005) seems to have conceptualised 'non-coping' as underperforming, although she omitted to define the concept further. Looking closely at Flesch's work, I suggest that her notion of 'non-coping' is more than simply underperforming. Non-coping was equated with having 'problems' with teaching and an inability or unwillingness to sustain change over time. In her study, non-coping teachers were chosen by their headteachers for an intensive mentoring intervention once all other sources of support had been exhausted.

Coping is also associated in the literature with stress (e.g. Alhija, 2015); stress ensues when the demands of a situation exceed the ability to cope with those demands. Stressors identified include workload, students and their behaviour, change and evaluation by others. Others conceptualise coping within the context of coping 'strategies' or 'styles' (e.g. Salkovsky et al., 2015 influenced by Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is suggested that these coping styles can be exercised more or less successfully to deal with the gap between the ideals of teaching and the reality of everyday classroom life. Again, inhibitors can include workload, overload and a lack of support.

Finally, the notion of buoyancy (Parker and Martin, 2009) is perhaps of relevance to a conceptualisation of struggling. Buoyancy is part of the wider coping literature and is defined as the ability to successfully

deal with setbacks, challenges and struggles that are characteristic and typical of the everyday course of working life (Martin and Marsh, 2008; Parker and Martin, 2009). There are overlaps between buoyancy and resilience, where resilience is seen as the ability to call upon reserves of physical, psychological and emotional energy (Day, 2012). Day (2012) defines resilience not as an innate quality but as one that is linked to one's purpose and which can be developed relationally in a caring setting. It would appear, then, that coping is effected through a sense of buoyancy and resilience. When effective coping strategies are enacted alongside a high sense of buoyancy, well-being, enjoyment and participation in the workplace can be enhanced (Parker and Martin, 2009); employee effectiveness can increase and absenteeism decrease. So, if we conceptualise struggling as an absence of coping strategies and the presence of low levels of buoyancy, ill-being and disengagement in the workplace could ensue, with a resultant reduction in effectiveness and increase in absenteeism.

I now shift attention away from the terrain of teaching, the site in which struggling might occur. I discuss first the term struggling itself and its general usage in the English language. I then move on to a review of the wider literature on struggling.

## 2.2 Struggling

Struggling was a term used by a teacher in an interview for a previous study (Culshaw, 2015); by saying 'and we know who the teachers are who are struggling' she implied a taken-for-granted-ness of meaning for the word struggling. Initially I found myself agreeing with her. This assumption of meaning is also prevalent in the wider literature which I expand on in the section below. It would seem we all know what struggling means and feels like, so no further explication is required. I now vehemently challenge that assumption. The aim of this research has been to move beyond the assumed understanding of struggling towards an unravelling of the complexity of the experience itself.

I no longer feel comfortable using the term in its adjectival form, where struggling could be seen as a label; this research focuses on the experience of struggling as a teacher rather than the experience of *struggling* teachers. It is a subtle but important distinction. Before looking at how the term struggling is currently used in the literature, I turn to the origins, meanings and use of the term struggling.

### 2.2.1 Struggling: Etymology

It can be useful to look back at the origins and meaning of commonly-used terms such as struggling. Struggling can be linked back to the Middle English *struglen* or *stroglen* (ca. 1350-1400), the meaning of which is unclear. There are also possible links to the Old Norse *strugr* which means 'ill will.' There are

etymological connections to the Dutch *struikelen* and the German *straucheln* which both mean to stumble. However, modern day usage of the German word *straucheln* would not be an appropriate translation for struggling in the context of this study.

Dictionary definitions are another good starting point. Examples of such definitions include: making forceful or violent efforts to get free of restraint or constriction; striving to achieve or attain something in the face of difficulty or resistance; engaging in conflict; having difficulty handling or coping with. Clearly, struggle is both a verb and a noun. As a verb, there are connotations with hard work, fighting and effort. A degree of difficulty is implied; sometimes even violence is involved. Advancement and progress are also implied. The object of struggling – what one is struggling *with* – is also mentioned and sometimes referred to as a ‘task’ or a ‘problem.’ If one is struggling with an opponent, then that person is deemed an ‘adversary,’ an ‘attacker.’ Already there is a negative association with the object of the struggle. Struggling is also defined as ‘coping with the inability to perform well (or to win).’ Again, the negative – inability – is highlighted in the definition. Used as a noun, struggle is ‘an act or instance of struggling;’ it can also be a ‘war or contest’ (Google, 2019c).

How a word is used idiomatically can also broaden its meaning; there are several to choose from in the case of struggle, with a number of examples found online and cited in the Table below:

**Table 1: Idiomatic use of struggle / struggling**

Give up the struggle	Struggle on with something
Struggle against someone / something	Struggle through
Struggle along with someone / something	Struggle to do something
Struggle with someone / something	Struggle to the death
Struggle for something	Uphill struggle

(Online Etymology, 2017; The Free Dictionary, 2017; WordReference Dictionary, 2017)

We can already see negative connotations of the word struggling, although notions of advancement and progress suggest that it is not an entirely static process. To understand better how the word is commonly used in the English language, I undertook a corpus linguistic analysis of struggle and its derivatives (struggles / struggled / struggling). The analysis is outlined in the next section.

### 2.2.2 Struggling: General Usage

Over time, our view of what a word means and how it is used can change. A closer investigation of how a term is used can be helpful in moving beyond personal interpretations of a term's usage; corpus linguistic analysis allows such an exploration.

Corpus linguistic analysis is an approach to undertaking linguistic enquiry; as a methodology, it allows a corpus to be examined for tendencies in language. In this way, it is possible to assess what is 'normal' or 'typical' in real-life language use; it can allow us to check our intuitions (Gabrielatos and Baker, 2006). Corpora are seen to be representative of language and can be specialised or general. One advantage of using a pre-existing corpus over creating one's own, for example, is that they are often annotated with grammatical codes or 'tags.' With the advent of digital corpora it is possible to undertake an in-depth analysis of words or phrases in just a few seconds. Search facilities allow the generation of lists of frequencies (concordances) and other words associated with the term (collocations); these can subsequently be analysed (Brezina et al., 2015; McEnery and Hardie, 2011; McEnery and Wilson, 2001). Analysing words or phrases that come immediately *before* or *after* the search term – in this case the lemma *struggl\** – can help identify a word's grammatical and collocational behaviour. As with any mode of enquiry, there are limitations. A corpus linguistics analysis provides evidence but no information or explanations; any generalisations are created through a process of induction.

The British National Corpus (BNC) consists of 4,048 files and contains 112,102,325 words (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>). The search I undertook used the lemma *struggl\**; this allows all derivatives of the word to be included in the search. *Struggl\** was found 7,925 times in 1,804 different texts; some form of the word *struggle* appears just over 70 times per million words. The corpus linguistics software (BNCweb, AntConc and later Sketch Engine) I used allowed results (concordances) to be thinned randomly, to enable me to undertake an analysis on a smaller, random, non-reproducible sample. I share my analysis of these thinned results – 1,871 matches – below.

*Struggle* is used as a noun slightly more often than as a verb (55% / 45%); as a singular noun it is far more frequently used than in the plural form (85% / 15%). *Struggling* as one form of the lemma accounts for 17.5% of all use; when used as part of a verb, *struggling* accounts for more than a third of all matches (39%). Verb forms of the lemma *struggl\** include its infinitive form (to *struggle*), different tenses (including past, i.e. *struggled*), use as a participle or gerund (*struggling*), third person use (*struggles*), etc.

Results from the analysis of words preceding or following *struggl\** are presented in the Table below:

**Table 2: Results of corpus linguistic analysis of struggl\***

Lexical examples: <i>before</i>	Lexical examples: <i>after</i>
uphill	for
arduous	to
hard	with
unresolved	against
undignified	on
endless	between
everyday	

Louw (1993, p. 157) describes semantic prosody as the ‘consistent aura of meaning with which a form is imbued by its collocates.’ Here, the items *before* – adjectives – mostly imply an element of effort. The final one, *everyday*, hints perhaps at the pervasiveness of struggling. The items *after* - prepositions – would all be followed by the object of the struggle. Taking this approach to analysing *struggl\** and its use has helped conceptualise struggling as a term with a predominantly negative semantic prosody.

The detailed analysis of the way struggling is used in the English language will help the conceptualisation of struggling in this research as it provides a linguistic benchmark against which I can interpret teachers’ narrated experiences. I move away now from a linguistic focus on the term struggling to a review of the wider struggling literature.

### 2.2.3 The Literature on Struggling

A search in Google Scholar using the key-term ‘struggling’ results in a staggering 1.2 million results. Contexts include health, policy-making, globalisation, management, poverty, gender and many more including education. I limited my search of the literature to review to the field of education generally and teaching more specifically. I used the key-terms *struggling* and *education*, which also allowed for fields beyond schools to be included. This provides a broader base from which to review the concept of struggling.

I begin with the struggling literature in the wider field of education. At times, the word *struggling* appears in the title only; rarely is a definition offered. In two articles authors even stated that no definition is being provided (Blackburn, 2016; Graham et al., 2016). Much of the attention is on the person *supporting* the struggler rather than the struggler themselves. Finding a remedy for the struggler also features regularly. Remedies are offered readily, with the external supporter controlling if and how the struggle is resolved. (e.g. Anderson and Balajthy, 2009; Foran, 2015; Guthrie and Davis, 2003; Tucker, 2001).

Sources or *causes* of struggling can be both internal and external. For example, struggling can arise from a lack of motivation (Blackburn, 2016; Moreau, 2014), social disadvantage or vulnerability (Hollingworth et al., 2012). For others, struggling is linked to stress and high fatigue levels, insufficient staffing levels and excessive workloads (Quaile, 2016); the focus here is on the *object* of struggling, what people are struggling *with*.

The ownership of the struggle is an issue raised by Moreau (2014) who also questions whose responsibility it is to tackle the struggle. Another theme is that of who notices the struggle (e.g. Foran, 2015; Graham et al., 2016) and whether the struggle is recognised and accepted by the struggler (e.g. Evans, 2014; Sobel and Gutierrez, 2009). Others, too, focus on the control of the struggle and argue that interventions or remedies may in fact discourage the struggler (Anderson and Balajthy, 2009). Overwhelmingly the focus in the literature is on struggling readers and writers specifically, and learners more generally (e.g. Anderson and Balajthy, 2009; Blackburn, 2016; Graham et al., 2016; Hall, 2009; Moreau, 2014). In one instance the struggling of readers is conflated with the struggling of teachers; that study looks at struggling as experienced by both the learner and the teacher (Hall, 2009). In other instances, struggling is used as a term to denote a student's status; this can include labelling them in terms of their socio-economic disadvantage, their low prior achievement, or even their specific learning needs (Foran, 2015; Guthrie and Davis, 2003; Hollingworth et al., 2012). There seems to be a tendency to use struggling in the case of particular groups and types of students.

A search of the literature found only three articles which explicitly refer to 'struggling teachers' and the focus is on leaders and how they try to help struggling teachers (Tucker, 2001; Yariv and Kass, 2017). When the literature focusses on teachers who are struggling, struggling seems to be viewed from the perspective of leaders. It is the leaders who are defining the struggling. The word struggling is used exclusively as an adjective; it becomes a category or label. Authors (Tucker, 2001; Yariv and Kass, 2017) write about leaders and how they try to 'help' struggling teachers. Meanwhile, it remains unclear whether the teachers themselves identify as struggling and whether they are willing or able to accept such help. The only article using the term 'struggling teachers' not from the perspective of leaders was by Hall (2009).

Within this small literature on struggling teachers, Tucker introduces the notion of a 'historically capable teacher' (2001, p. 53) as someone who was capable in previous times but, in the current landscape, is not. She equates struggling with poorly performing, although does not define struggling per se. She describes how assistance plans are offered by the leaders to the teachers as a panacea for unstruggling. I am using the term unstruggling to denote the movement from struggling to not-struggling. The solution is created

by the non-struggler, the leader, and it is unclear to what extent the teacher has any say or choice in the process. Given the power imbalance between the teacher and leader, it is perhaps fair to say that the teacher is unable to exercise ‘proactive agency’, which is agency ‘grounded in feelings of sufficient confidence’ to have a meaningful say (Woods and Roberts, 2018, p. 65).

Yariv and others (Yariv, 2011, 2009a, 2009b, e.g. 2004; Yariv and Coleman, 2005; Yariv and Kass, 2017) focus on how leaders can be ‘effective’ in the way they deal with struggling teachers. More recently, Tucker (2016) has reconceptualised struggling, to see struggling from a wider perspective, to include that of the teacher. Whilst still situating herself in the field of leadership development and the evaluation of teachers, she acknowledges that teacher performance is not a stable thing and suggests it is time to stop ‘hammering people about their poor performance.’ She describes struggling teachers as those ‘teachers who don’t burnout per se but are not their full selves due to anemic work environments or life prospects or lots of other things.’ She suggests that leaders ‘need to find ways to reach out and elevate them to be their fully invigorated selves’ (Tucker, personal communication, 26 April 2016)

In all references to struggling teachers, including Tucker (2016), struggling is being conceptualised as underperformance, poor performance, a lack of competence or lower competence levels than in previous times. The struggling is a problem to be dealt with by someone other than the struggler. This is not to say that the struggler does not want to unstruggle, merely that that is not the focus in the literature. As in the wider struggling literature, the focus here again is mainly on the external supporter providing support or remedies rather than on the struggler themselves. The struggling is clearly seen as a deficit; the literature takes a predominantly negative view. The stories of the teachers’ experiences of struggling are missing.

In summary, a search for the term struggling in the literature reveals the use of the word in a range of contexts. Where the context is education, the focus tends to be more on the role teachers play in supporting others – learners, readers, writers, etc. – who are struggling. There is a small literature which looks at how school leaders can support and deal with teachers who are struggling (e.g. Tucker, 2001; Yariv, 2009a; Yariv and Coleman, 2005). The Table below offers a summary of the main themes arising from a review of the struggling literature:

**Table 3: Themes from the literature on struggling**

<b>Themes from the Literature Review: Current Conceptualisation of Struggling</b>
Lack of competence leads to struggling
Struggling conceptualised as underperforming
Solution-focussed – intervention to <i>resolve</i> the struggling

Struggling as defined by others
Struggling as a label imposed by others
Struggling as a problem to fix (deficit)
Struggle owned by the solution-finder
Object-focussed struggling – what struggling <i>with</i>

## 2.3 Research Questions

A review of the literature on struggling showed that research has focused on the object of struggling and/or how the struggle can be resolved. Struggling tends to be identified and defined by others, with the struggler seeming to have very little say. What is missing is the experience of struggling itself, as expressed by the struggler. Therefore, the *experience* of struggling lies at the core of this research. The aim is to find out what *meaning* participating teachers make of the experience of struggling. To contextualise the experience of struggling, it will also be important to explore factors which influence struggling and what not-struggling might look and feel like.

*Experience* and *meaning* are therefore key conceptual features of this inquiry; they are discussed in the following two sections.

### 2.3.1 The *Experience* of Struggling

Experience is a widely-used but often ill-defined term in the literature, in particular in qualitative and phenomenological research. A dictionary might define experience as an event which leaves an impression on someone; in its verb form, experience can mean to encounter or undergo.

A corpus linguistic analysis of the term experience showed that experience is regularly collocated negatively, often associated with difficulty or problems. The nature of the objects of experience – i.e. the difficulties one is experiencing – plays an intrinsic role in the way that experience is conceptualised. Struggling too has a negative semantic prosody. So, in this study, what one is struggling *with* might be part of the experience of struggling itself. The object cannot meaningfully be removed from the experience.

### 2.3.2 What it *Means* to be Struggling

Establishing the *meaning* attributed to the experience of struggling is a further key component in this research. Paley argues that whilst meaning is perhaps an important concept, it is itself ‘indeterminate and a highly malleable idea’ (2016, p. 64). On this occasion, a dictionary definition of the noun ‘meaning’ appears inadequate, repeating merely that it is ‘what is meant by a word, text, concept or action.’ Meaning means meaning. Synonyms throw more light on the term, and include: definition, sense,

explanation, denotation, connotation, elucidation, explication. As a verb, 'to mean' includes an intention to signify or convey. In relation to this research, rather than looking for *the* meaning of struggling, it is more appropriate to think in terms of capturing *a* meaning of the experience, by uncovering various dimensions or properties of the phenomenon without which it would not be (Paley, 2016).

An attempt to elucidate meaning also reflects a moral judgment on the part of the researcher and positions me as a 'knowledge carrier' (Paley, 2016, p. 156). Kushner argues that meaning emerges from theorising, or 'making sense' (2017, p. 38) of real experience data with a view to understanding. Others suggest that meaning-making is a narrative process (e.g. Clark and Rossiter, 2008) which can capture the complexity of experience (e.g. Alterio, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2008); it is important, too, to consider feelings and how they are incorporated into the meaning-making process.

To explore what it means to be struggling as a teacher, I pose three research questions:

- What is the experience of struggling as a teacher? (RQ1)
- What factors influence the experience of struggling as a teacher? (RQ2)
- What is movement between struggling and not-struggling like for teachers? (RQ3)

## 2.4 The Gap in the Literature

The review of the wider struggling literature outside and within education has shown that struggling is a term which continues to be used in an ill-defined way where its meaning tends to be taken for granted. Struggling is assumed to exist, the predominant focus in the literature seems to be on its resolution. The analysis of the word struggling shows it to be associated with effort and difficulty. Linguistically, struggling is often followed by *to + verb* or *with + noun*. The focus seems ultimately to be on the object of the struggling rather than the experience of struggling itself. Where struggling *is* conceptualised in the education literature, it is rarely from the perspective of the strugglers themselves.

The literature review has shown that, whilst struggling is a term found in the literature, there is no consensus around how it is understood. In addition, the voices of teachers who are struggling have been left unheard. One current conceptualisation of struggling is that of poor or under-performance with struggling being seen as a problem to be dealt with. Clearly, there are teachers whose performance is a cause for concern and some teachers should probably no longer be in the classroom. However, that is not the focus of this research. Failing or incompetent teachers may indeed be struggling; the participants in this study would, however, not recognise themselves as incompetent. The concept of struggling is little researched; the experience of struggling – the specific focus of this study – is even less researched.

The way in which many have conceptualised struggling (e.g. Tucker, 2001; Yariv, 2009b; Yariv and Coleman, 2005; Yariv and Kass, 2017) is not the only way to view the experience of struggling. Too often, the experience of the struggler themselves is left unacknowledged. A deficit view of struggling prevails but it is important to remember that ‘not all struggling teachers are beyond help’ (Mendleson, 2009, p. 26). I welcome the recommendation that it is time for other voices to be heard, ‘especially those of the struggling teachers themselves’ (Yariv and Kass, 2017, p. 13). I also agree that everyone, teachers *and* leaders, ‘need support, not criticism’ (Yariv and Kass, 2017, p. 13). Teachers and leaders are *mutually* responsible for finding solutions in order to overcome what Yariv and Kass call ‘professional and personal setbacks’ (2017, p. 13) I have reviewed how struggling has been conceptualised to date and I suggest that this is not the only way to conceptualise struggling.

Mannay suggests that ‘over time our perceptions of familiar, everyday situations become stale’ (2010, p. 98). My aim here is to uncover the experience of struggling as a teacher in its various manifestations by unravelling the ‘invisibility of everyday life’ (Mannay, 2010, p. 94). By examining the seemingly familiar term struggling I aim to make it strange again. It is time for this research to unpack what it *really* means to be struggling as a teacher.

In the following chapter I outline the methodological approach I adopted in order to answer the research questions.

### 3 Methodology

This research focusses on the *experience* of struggling and, as such, helps address the lack of consensus about how struggling is defined by exploring the nature of struggling itself. In this chapter I outline the underlying approach adopted to address the question of what it means to be struggling as a teacher. I explain the assumptions and beliefs which underpin and shape the research design.

#### 3.1 Methodological Approach

There are assumptions underpinning all research so it is important to examine them as they will have implications for research practice and design (Woods, 2014). It is important to be clear about where I situate myself as a researcher as this influences the questions I ask, the way in which I collect and analyse data as well as the conclusions I draw from that analysis (Woods, 2014).

The research questions outlined at the end of Chapter 2 drove the choice of methodological approach. The nature of those research questions was influenced by my experience, philosophical position and interest. In order to answer the questions, the study needed a research design which would allow a deep engagement with participants' experiences and the collection of rich qualitative data. Participants would be sharing their experience of struggling with me; I was looking to interpret their narratives and offer a plausible conceptualisation of what it means to be struggling. The research questions are:

- What is the experience of struggling as a teacher? (RQ1)
- What factors influence the experience of struggling as a teacher? (RQ2)
- What is movement between struggling and not-struggling like for teachers? (RQ3)

This study looks at the experience of struggling from the participants' personal perspective; it is their experience and so it is crucial for me to try to understand which elements of that experience are particularly meaningful to them and how they construct their understandings of that experience (Basit, 2010). I adopt an ontological position of constructivism which means that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being constructed and revised (Bryman, 2004). Recognising that my role as researcher is active, creative and reflexive (Basit, 2010; Woods, 2012), I engage with knowledge that is highly subjective, not fixed, and constantly being revised in interaction with other actors (Bryman, 2004). Participants are presenting me with a specific version of their social reality rather than a definitive one (Woods, 2012); it is my role to accept that knowledge, conveying it in a way that is true to the essence of the participants' experience. I am presenting a truth rather than *the* truth about the experience of struggling.

In terms of epistemology, I adopt a predominantly interpretivist stance. Given that I want to explain the social phenomenon of struggling (Bryman, 2016), I need to understand people and ‘the interpretations which they give of what they are doing’ (Pring, 2000, p. 96). Whilst not taking a fixed epistemological position (drawing on Woods, 2012), the research is situated within the broader interpretivist paradigm, given the concern with understanding the experience of struggling, and the tentative nature of any knowledge claims made. Claims to knowledge are capable of bias and error and so an interpretivist stance requires an understanding of the interpretations people ascribe to the experiences they have and what they do (Pring, 2000), thus acknowledging if not completely avoiding bias and error. Woods (2012) advocates an open and participatory approach to knowledge, which overcomes the need to stake a claim to a definite position but suggests that knowledge develops dialectically over time. Through and by challenging current awareness, new ideas, conditions and opportunities for practice can be co-created and realised (Woods, 2012); this recognises that ideas and theories are continually being tested. There is room for different perspectives; indeed, according to Woods (2005), this is necessary and to be encouraged.

This research encouraged participants to reflect deeply about the meanings they ascribed to the experience of struggling. It offered the opportunity for profound reflection (Van Manen and Adams, 2011) by both the participants and me as researcher; as such, it draws heavily on phenomenology. I have taken what is seemingly unproblematic and problematised it; I have inspected and critiqued taken-for-granted meanings of struggling (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Crotty, 1996). Adopting such an approach allowed me to ‘unpack the complexities’ (Vagle, 2014, p. 118) of the experiences of struggling and uncover the meaning structure of that lived experience (Van Manen, 1997).

A key feature of phenomenology is ‘bracketing’ which is seen as the ability to engage reflexively, without being unduly influenced by one’s own experiences (Dowling, 2007). However, I have principles and beliefs that consciously and unconsciously influence my judgments and decisions as well as other factors like my age, gender, education, professional experience, political and religious beliefs. Rather than bracketing myself out completely, I embrace the ‘bias and baggage’ I bring to the research process (Basit, 2010, p. 7) which affords me a ‘sensitivity to notice and distinguish’ (Mason, 2002, p. 180). I recognised the importance of critical self-examination throughout the research process, especially given my relatively recent positionality as a practice-based insider.

I have been part of the culture under study (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) which could mean that I am more likely to share ‘an identity, language and common professional experiential base’ (Asselin, 2003, p. 100)

with my participants. Insiders can benefit from a commonality with and acceptance from participants (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Dwyer and Buckle argue that the terms 'insider' and 'outsider' are 'constructed dichotomies' (2009, p. 62) neither of which one can fully occupy as a researcher. It is better, perhaps, to adopt more of a 'dialectical approach' (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 60) to embrace and explore the complexity and richness of similarities and differences between these perspectives (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

The ontological and epistemological positions I take, the desire to reflect profoundly on the experience of struggling as narrated by participants and the fact that I am looking to offer one theorisation of struggling rather than an objective definition, all have implications for the methods of investigation and analysis I employ (Basit, 2010; Woods, 2012, 2014). I outline the research instruments chosen below.

### 3.2 Research Design: Methods

This study was necessarily interpretive given that all descriptions of experience are already interpretations (Van Manen and Adams, 2011); I came to the research process with a sense of *Einfühlung* (empathy) to try to understand how struggling was experienced by teachers (Keeves, 1997). German terms can sometimes express things better than or differently to English terms; *Einfühlung* is more than empathy, it implies a real sense of feeling *into* the experience at a much deeper level, as indicated through the prefix *Ein-*. Through an understanding of individual subjective experiences, the meanings inherent in them could be revealed (Van Manen and Adams, 2011).

In order to be able to explore and reveal what it means to be struggling as a teacher, I needed to choose research methods that allowed individual participants both the time and space to reveal and unravel their experience (Webb and Kevern, 2001) of struggling. Mason posits that 'language is the creator of experience' (2002, p. 240) and as such, any attempt to capture experience should perhaps involve the interpretation of spoken or written language. Whilst acknowledging that language would clearly play a role, I also wanted participants to have the opportunity to engage *beyond* the spoken word. I explored alternative, unfamiliar ways of allowing teachers to represent their experiences to counterbalance the view that for some educators 'words are our most effective medium' (Burge et al., 2016, p. 734).

Collective methods, such as group interviews or focus groups, were considered and rejected; whilst allowing perhaps for the discussion of a universal experience of struggling, they would not allow for a deep, reflective engagement with individual experience. The strengths and weaknesses surrounding self-reporting are well documented elsewhere (e.g. Briggs and Coleman, 2007; Burge et al., 2016) and I was

mindful that the data I was collecting was by necessity a recollection - a re-presentation - of an experience rather than the experience itself (Riessman, 2005).

It is important to rationalise the choice of research instruments and the effect of that choice on the way in which data are collected and the resultant findings. I therefore outline below the rationale for the choice of interviews and collage-creation as the two research instruments to explore the experience of struggling.

### 3.2.1 Research Instrument: Interviews

Interviews are commonly used as a research instrument in educational research and are the most popular method of gathering data for researchers working within an interpretive paradigm using a qualitative methodology (Basil, 2010). Popularity is, however, no reason for adopting a particular method. Here I offer the rationale for choosing face-to-face interviews as one method to access participants' highly personalised portrayals of the social phenomenon of struggling. For the purposes of this research, the interviews I conducted were active (Holstein, 2017) and empathetic (Fontana and Frey, 2005); they were also evaluative (Kushner, 2017). Interviews offer the opportunity for a social relationship with the participant in which a 'negotiated text' (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p. 119) is created. It was important that participants saw the interviews as a means of storytelling with me as both their advocate and partner (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

An active interview is a form of interpersonal, interpretive practice involving both the participant and researcher as they articulate experiences and perspectives and bring alternate considerations into play (Holstein, 2017; Kushner, 2017). The interviewer actively encourages a shift in narrative position, allowing the plot to develop further. An 'empathetic' interview is defined in contrast to the more traditional, scientific interview. If one accepts that neutrality in an interview is impossible, then taking a stance is unavoidable (Fontana and Frey, 2005). By adopting an ethical and empathetic stance, the researcher becomes both a partner and advocate for the participants and their concerns (Fontana and Frey, 2005). An interview is evaluative when it is structured in such a way as to generate new knowledge, that is to go beyond mere information retrieval and recall. An interview of this kind is a journey, with the participant taking successive steps to move forward in their thinking (Kushner, 2017). The researcher engages actively as the interview progresses, evaluating along the way.

Interviews are essentially social events, an opportunity to go beyond merely retrieving information towards an exchange of knowledge (Kushner, 2017). They are not just another conversation where

anything goes, rather they are meaning-making occasions (Holstein, 2017) and an opportunity for insight (McCracken, 2017). Kushner (2017, p. 78) argues that a research interview is not an isolated event but part of the intellectual journey of the researcher, and arguably the participant as well; a 'play of inter-subjectivity.' Interviews cannot be a 'neutral tool' (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p. 116) and I did not envisage interviews in this research as such. Rather they are active interactions with the focus on the participant being allowed to decide what to express. Problems associated with interviews can include the fact that they are taken-for-granted; the norms, rules and roles of interviewing are almost institutionalised (Fontana and Frey, 2005). In fact, interviewing can be a harder task than may first seem (Fontana and Frey, 2005).

Active interviewing brings meaning and its construction to the fore (Holstein, 2017). It is fundamentally a social encounter, albeit a 'temporally and spatially situated' one (Talmy, 2010, p. 130); a methodological relationship involving unusual roles, rules and rituals (Kushner, 2017). Others refer to interviewing as a fleeting and illusory friendship (Kong et al., 2003), especially in less structured interviews. An interpersonal drama with a developing plot, interviews are a productive site of knowledge where meanings are not only conveyed but co-operatively built up, received and interpreted (Holstein, 2017) by both the researcher and the participant (Lowes and Prowse, 2001); knowledge is understood here, using Kushner's (2017) terms, as personalised, a product of reflection which includes an element of personal judgment and supported with some analysis.

It is unhelpful to classify interviews as structured, semi-structured or unstructured; arguably, they cannot be entirely *without* structure (Kushner, 2017). Given that an interview is an opportunity to pass interpretive control to participants as a means of finding out how they discover and justify their practices (Kushner, 2017), I wanted the process to be fluid rather than rigid (Ribbins, 2007). As someone seeking to be an active, evaluative, empathetic interviewer I was guided by a loosely structured interview schedule which allowed for give-and-take within the interview process. It was not as simple as getting the questions right; nor was it just a matter of being able to talk, listen and get the relationship right (Ribbins, 2007). Indeed, an evaluative interview involves a flexibility and the reflexivity to ask questions that seek clarification, explanation and examples; this requires the researcher to be busy 'theorising about meaning throughout the interview itself' (Kushner, 2017, p. 81). Evaluative knowledge, itself a combination of information and judgment, is the product of the interview (Kushner, 2017). Considering the criteria for judging where the next question comes from (Kushner, 2017) is a key feature of the reflexive process; a predefined prompt sheet or interview schedule, a particular theoretical model or one's own prior

experience and positionality in relation to the participant plays a role. Indeed, an evaluative interviewer will move from eliciting retrospective views to prospective views, such as ‘what if...?’ thus enabling the participants themselves to become the ‘evaluand’ (Kushner, 2017; Scriven, 1994).

The tenor of the opening gambit in this sort of interview has the potential to significantly influence the participant in the ensuing interview (Holstein, 2017); equally, choosing what (not) to discuss in an interview is important (Talmy, 2010). Notwithstanding the need for sensitivity, being respectful towards the participant does not mean suspending critical judgment completely (Ribbins, 2007); it is possible, even desirable, to ask difficult questions. The participants had the opportunity to narrate their stories of struggling, engage in a process of self-scrutiny and even to experience a kind of catharsis (Gorden, 1956; McCracken, 2017). Strong emotions can arise from storytelling of this kind (e.g. Alterio, 2002); it can cause ‘discomfort or anxiety, hope, insight or a sense of liberation’ (Van Manen, 1997, p. 162). I anticipated and prepared for this with my participants. Whilst the focus of this research was on exploring the experience of struggling, there was the possibility that talking about and reflecting profoundly on the experience would effect some kind of positive or negative change in the participant. Therefore, although the focus was not necessarily on problem-solving, participating in such interviews can have a transformative effect on the participants, as well as on the researcher (Caelli, 2001; Van Manen, 1997).

To uncover the meaning of struggling as experienced by teachers, it was therefore essential to select teachers who have not only an interest in but also *experience* of struggling. I draw, too, on my experience of struggling as a teacher as a gateway to identification with others as an ‘integral (co-) constructor of the social reality’ of struggling (Gall et al., 2007, p. 24; my brackets). Whichever story they decided to tell, the participant was actively encouraged to fashion the story in ways which reveal how they structure experiential meaning (Holstein, 2017).

Even if they are not entirely true in the literal sense, stories can exhibit what Bunge calls ‘symptoms of truth’ (1961; Holstein, 2017). Riessman (2005) suggests that the ‘truths’ of narrative accounts revealed in interviews are refractions rather than mirrors of the past; their usefulness arises from the fact that storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was. Participants are presenting an interpretation of their experience and, as such, the process of storytelling already allows them to reflect on and make sense of the experience of struggling. In this context, this may include a desire to protect themselves. It is less about the factual accuracy of the story and more about the interpretive processing the participant undergoes. Thus their power lies not in their ‘faithful representations of a past world’ but in the ‘shifting connections they forge among past, present and future’ (Riessman, 2005, p. 6).

An interview can help the researcher determine how a phenomenon – the experience of struggling as a teacher – works as a constituent of the participant’s daily experience (McCracken, 2017). To facilitate this, the researcher can often draw on mutually familiar experiences to help secure rapport with the participant. Kushner suggests it is important to activate our ‘bias-sensors’ (2017, p. 81), as well as acknowledging whether one likes or dislikes the participant, agrees or disagrees with them, etc. and considering how best to ignore or overcome the effects of likeability (Kushner, 2017).

In summary, face-to-face interviews were one of the methods I employed to access participants’ expressions of the experience of struggling. Ultimately, the purpose and procedures of the interview were characterised and defined by me (Lowes and Prowse, 2001), with the research questions in mind at all times. Next, I explain the rationale for complementing interviews with collage, an arts-based method.

### 3.2.2 Research Instrument: Collage

In addition to the spoken interview, I used collage, an arts-based approach which is gaining stature as a research methodology in many disciplines (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Woods and Roberts, 2013). Arts-based and visual methods are increasingly positioned as ‘effective ways to address complex questions in social science’ (Kara, 2015, p. 3). A combination of both the visual and narrative can provide new insights into the ‘polysemic and ambiguous nature’ of participants’ ‘subjective worlds’ (Mannay et al., 2017b, pp. 346, 350). Such methods can allow participants to reflect upon and express, slow down and honour the process of meaning-making (Loads, 2009; Roberts and Woods, 2018) and validity of their unique experiences (Roberts and Woods, 2018); collage has the capacity to act as a means to help conceptualise ideas (Roberts and Woods, 2018). It also has the ability to both ‘shock and surprise’ (Burge et al., 2016, p. 735).

One of the arguments for using such a visual method is that we live in an increasingly ocularcentric culture (Mitchell, 2011) where images form a vital part of our everyday worlds and influence both how we see ourselves and how others see us (Mannay, et al., 2017). Furthermore, arts-based research offers an alternative way of representing the subtleties of experience, ‘profound feelings and understandings’ (Roberts and Woods, 2018, p. 2) in creative, non-linear ways (e.g. Loads, 2009; Roberts and Woods, 2018). The teachers in this study are ‘only too familiar with speaking and writing’ (Burge et al., 2016, p. 735) and so an unfamiliar arts-based method of representation can offer the opportunity to pause for thought, ponder, hesitate and examine assumptions ‘instead of repeating familiar viewpoints or quickly coming to settled conclusions’ (Burge et al., 2016, p. 734).

Employing collage as a method allows the participant to engage physically and have agency in the process (Roberts and Woods, 2018), both of which I see as advantages for this type of exploration of experience. Participants make the collage independently, at their own pace and they are able to reflect, move pieces and rearrange as their thinking develops (Roberts and Woods, 2018). Creative methods like collage provide participants with the means to explore elements of their experience in a different way than, say, a more traditional spoken interview as collage-creation can tap into a deeper, more subconscious level of awareness. The process of creating a collage can reveal pleasant and not-so-pleasant memories. Some argue that allowing the surfacing of painful memories is not the most important aspect of the process, (Mannay et al., 2017). One might argue that the specific value of using collage is that it can help reveal what would otherwise not have been revealed. The process of collage-creation can also provide a cathartic opportunity for participants' feelings to be acknowledged and heard. For this reason, extreme care was given to ethical considerations throughout the study, as detailed in Section 3.6 on ethics.

One of the main advantages of using collage to explore the experience of struggling was to allow participants to engage in a process of de- and re-familiarisation. This was particularly important for the concept of struggling, which as outlined elsewhere, is often seen as a taken-for-granted term with its own associated assumptions of meaning. Drawing on Shklovsky's theory, Mannay et al. (2017b) suggest that over time, our perceptions become stale. Engaging in art can force us to slow down, to linger and to notice (Gurevitch, 1988; Mannay, 2010; Mannay et al., 2017b). Burge et al., too, suggest that alternative approaches such as collage can upset our assumptions, 'making the familiar seem uncomfortably strange' (2016, p. 733). So, collage-creation allows a reflection on and the visual reconstruction of an experience to make that experience more familiar and, hopefully, understandable.

Collage-creation allows participants to engage in visual thinking rather than linguistic thinking (Arnheim, 1969; Marshall, 2007); it takes place in different mediums, rather than in words, sentences and grammar rules (Gardner, 1983; Marshall, 2007; Weber and Mitchell, 1995). Collage-creation can extend meaning because participants are engaging in a different kind of 'cognitive action' than when generating ideas using words alone (Bailey and Van Harken, 2014; Kress, 1998). By mixing collage-creation and interviews, participants have the opportunity to express their experience via more than one medium. Mavers (2003) posits that arts-based methods can enable new things to be communicated or the 'same' things to be expressed in a different way. Others argue that there are times where words are inadequate (Frosh, 2002; Leitch, 2006; Roberts and Woods, 2018). Ultimately, of course, this research process used words. But perhaps it is the process of creating a collage which allows participants to access different words, which

in turn represent different aspects of experience. In short, images and objects can sometimes communicate and express that which is not *easily* put into words (Weber and Mitchell, 1995).

Some proponents argue that an arts-based approach can be powerful in eliciting points for discussion from participants (Bessette, 2008; Haney et al., 2004). Others highlight the non-linguistic, non-linearity of collage-making as a key feature of the method, but concede the need to subsequently ask participants to explain their completed collage in words (Roberts and Woods, 2018). Non-linearity is an advantage as it takes the collage-creator away from the constraints of grammatical structures such as sentences. The collages made by my participants were created as a separate element of a research interview. Time was allocated for the process and all participants had the opportunity to discuss, reflect on and explicate the collage after completion.

Collage can have one or more of the following roles: as ‘tin-openers’ for talk (MacBeath, 2002); as images and therefore conveyors of meaning in their own right (Roberts and Woods, 2018); as secondary illustrations of text (Prosser, 1998). Others argue that the speaking about the collage is ‘not so much about an understanding of the data produced, as an understanding with the data produced about the lives of the participants’ (Mannay et al., 2017b, p. 350, drawing on Radley, 2011). In this study, the collages primarily served as conveyors of meaning in their own right. Whatever role collage plays, participants clearly explain the analogies and visual metaphors in their collages using their own subjectively contingent schemas (Mannay et al., 2017b).

Metaphors can be a useful entrance point to understanding an experience (e.g. Bailey and Van Harken, 2014); they are arguably a more imaginative and reflective means of connection-making than words alone (James and Brookfield, 2014). Metaphors emerge through the creation of collage and reveal how we construct reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Patchen and Crawford, 2011); it is part of the nature of collage that visual metaphors emerge. Struggling is an intricate phenomenon and so the process of creating collages – visual metaphors – was a means to enable participants to articulate their perceptions and feelings in ways which verbal language would not allow (Marshall, 2007). In fact, collage can become the language through which participants make sense of their perceptions and feelings (Bailey and Van Harken, 2014). When mental images are exteriorised in art form, they both *accrue* meaning and produce *new* meanings (Ricoeur, 1997; Ricoeur et al., 1988; Marshall, 2007; my emphasis).

It is, of course, also important to consider the limitations or disadvantages of any method. Not all approaches are appropriate to use with some participants, nor will they suit everyone’s preferences

(Johnson et al., 2012). I was prepared to have one or more participants refuse to engage with the collage. I was also mindful that participants would only 'put forward the images and meanings... they most (wanted) to communicate' rather than providing a 'comprehensive picture' of their experience of struggling (Woods and Roberts, 2013, p. 3), which is also true of the stories narrated in the interviews. It was important to remain mindful of the possibility of discomfort when introducing new methods; Burge et al report that some participants felt 'put out or alienated' by methods which had the potential to 'trouble settled worldviews and values' (2016, p. 732). This discomfort can arise from 'buried feelings of shame and vulnerability' or participants feeling that their 'status as adults and as experts is at risk' when asked to express themselves in unfamiliar ways (Burge et al., 2016, p. 734). All of this, of course, had the potential to affect the quality and perhaps the quantity of the data collected.

My decision to use collage was motivated by the freedom it offers participants and ultimately to enhance the quality of the research. It frees participants from the challenge of drawing and allows them to express themselves in a way that does not 'rely on perceived artistic ability' (Woods and Roberts, 2013, p. 10). I created my own collage to put myself in the position of a participant. This allowed me to draw on personal experience of struggling and acknowledge the challenge of the activity; I was mindful that some participants might resist the collage activity in the first instance, although in practice this only happened on one occasion, during the pilot stage of the study.

Ultimately, I argue that the research findings are all the richer for the inclusion of arts-based methods of data collection.

### 3.2.3 An Intermingling of Methods

Research interviews can engage with creative methods 'to enrich their depth and breadth and engender serendipity' (Mannay et al., 2017, p. 17). It is important to see the interviews and collages as a mix – an intermingling (Grbich, 2007) – of methods; creative productions are 'part of the whole picture and cannot be separated from the talk' (Eldén, 2013, p. 76). The collages signify concepts and phenomena that can then be 'read' (Barrett, 1997; Marshall, 2007; Weber and Mitchell, 1995) and exploring their collages can help participants better express their stories (Woods and Roberts, 2013). They may arrive at understandings they might otherwise have missed (e.g. Bailey and Van Harken, 2014; Bessette, 2008; Jewitt and Kress, 2003; Marshall, 2007).

In summary, a combination of the verbal and visual can enable participants to engage in 'generative and reflective thinking' (Siegel, 1995, p. 455). This adds a richness to the meaning-making process for both the researcher and participants alike.

The rationale for the choice of a mix of methods has been outlined. I turn my attention now to the practical research process; from sampling through recruitment to the pilot study, ethics and finally to the process of data collection itself.

### 3.3 Sampling

To answer the research questions, I needed to talk with teachers about their experience of struggling. Given my duty of care to my participants and the need not to cause them harm or distress, I judged that it was not appropriate to recruit teachers who were in the midst of a struggling episode. Clearly, then, I needed to identify teachers who had experience of struggling but were now in a position to reflect on and recall that experience.

Choices and decisions had to be made with regards to sampling. Practical constraints can dictate the approach taken (e.g. Basit, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012) but I am transparent about the selection criteria I finally employed. I essentially used a purposive approach, employing my discretion, knowledge and experience (Basit, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012) in choosing who would be suitable to participate in the study. Given that I was undertaking an in-depth investigation of a relatively small number of teachers to illustrate the experience of struggling, I aimed for a minimum of ten participants. I restricted participation to secondary school teachers who were not recently qualified. I was open to participation from teachers in the independent sector, although my personal teaching experience is in the state secondary sector in England. In the end, I recruited 14 teachers, including one from an independent school.

### 3.4 Recruitment

Recruiting teachers who would be prepared and able to talk about their experience of struggling had the potential to be difficult but was central to the success of this research. Careful consideration had to be given to the approach I took, how I worded any recruitment documentation and, more practically, how I would gain access to potential participants.

Establishing a rapport with the participants was always going to be crucial and potential participants needed to be able to relate to the person they would be opening up to. To this end, I created a short recruitment video which I posted on YouTube and shared on social media, mainly through my Twitter account and my blogsite. The video lasted three minutes and showed me, in my office holding a cup of

tea, talking about the rationale for my study and the kind of teachers I was hoping to attract. My main reason for posting the video was to be seen as approachable, credible and sensitive. The video attracted about 100 views within two weeks of being posted and a number of participants mentioned that they had watched it.

The video was the main promotional tool; the main channel of communication to potential participants was via emails to secondary schools I know within about 40 miles of where I live. The emails were sent either to the Headteacher or to a Senior Leader with responsibility for staff training and/or wellbeing. I emphasised my professional experience as a teacher and, to some extent, my personal experience of struggling, in all correspondence with gatekeepers and potential participants; I also made it clear that any further contact was to be made directly with me. (Copies in Appendix)

I aimed to recruit a minimum of 10 teachers from a range of subject backgrounds, with varying levels of experience and responsibility, and from rural as well as urban school settings. I was open to recruiting teachers from the state and independent sectors. For practical reasons, I restricted my recruitment to the East of England. The only other restrictions on participation were outlined in the participant information sheet (which formed part of the ethics approval and official documentation required by the university):

*You need to be a qualified teacher working in a secondary school in England to take part; alternatively, you are a qualified teacher with recent experience of working in a secondary school in England. There are no age restrictions nor is gender relevant to selection for participation in this pilot study (or indeed the main study). You should consider yourself an 'experienced' teacher and so Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) will not be considered for participation in this study.*

**Figure 1: Selection criteria for participation in the study**

I was approached by 22 teachers for the main study, one of whom was a primary teacher so did not qualify. Two of the teachers were recruited via word-of-mouth; one is the partner of another participant, the other is a colleague of a PhD student familiar with my study. Three others did not respond to further correspondence from me, and a further four dropped out along the way before the first interview was scheduled. In total, then, I had 14 participants in the main study. Seven were classroom teachers with no additional responsibilities; five held a paid position of responsibility, for example as head of subject or a pastoral responsibility. Three teachers were overseas-trained, two were headteachers. Whilst not immediately or obviously meeting the criteria for participation, the two headteachers are qualified

teachers with recent experience of working in a secondary school who were willing to talk about their experience of struggling. They both clearly still identify as teachers in the wider sense; any reticence I may have initially had about their inclusion in the study has since been allayed as their data adds a different and interesting perspective on struggling.

Participants were made aware that there would be up to two interviews, with the first one involving a collage activity. They were free to choose the venue for the interview, but my preference – which I shared with them – was to meet in their homes, to afford us a level of privacy that just could not have been guaranteed in a more public place such as a café.

I turn my attention now to the pilot study I conducted.

### 3.5 Pilot Study

The literature highlights the importance and advantages of conducting a pilot study, as a trial run and an opportunity to identify and iron out any methodological, ethical and practical issues (e.g. Kim, 2011; Sampson, 2004). For me it was a structured way to engage in meaningful reflexivity and learning (Sampson, 2004) with the ultimate aim of enhancing the quality of my overall research design and findings.

Initially, the main motivation for my pilot study was a practical one: to assess the research design and try out the chosen research methods. However, it ended up being much more than that as it reinforced the need for sensitivity in asking questions and attentive listening; I was also presented with the challenge of a participant refusing to engage in the collage activity. Finally, collecting pilot data allowed me to undertake an initial analysis of the data and to refine my planned analytical approach.

I conducted two pilot study interviews in participants' homes; location of the interviews became a key consideration following the pilot study as meeting in participants' homes afforded an appropriate level of comfort and privacy. The interview schedule aimed to cover all three research questions in one sitting and included the creation of a collage. The pilot interviews lasted just under two hours. Interviews started with an 'opener' about how, when and why the pilot study participants came into teaching. This seemed a successful way into the interviews and was retained in the interview schedule for the main study; it also provided helpful contextual data about the participants.

One pilot study participant initially refused to engage in the collage activity, which challenged me to think creatively. He finally started to make a collage of *not* struggling; this was clearly his way into the collage-

making process and I was flexible in allowing him to follow his thoughts in that way. I could not have prepared for what happened next. With a dramatic movement of the hand, he pulled the sugar paper away from underneath all the craft materials he had used, leaving chaos on the carpet below. He explained that that was what struggling felt like. If I had not been convinced of the power of collage before then, I certainly was now.

On a practical level, the pilot study allowed me to get feedback on the material included in the collage box; I subsequently supplemented the items in the box. I tested out the loosely-structured interview schedule and found it suitable. Taking photographs of the collage provided a natural break; with subsequent participants, this became the end of interview one. I practised transcribing and realised a need for regular breaks in terms of re-listening to the stories told. I identified my tendency to code the stories and to quantify themes; I reflected on different ways of analysing the data and subsequently adopted a more holistic method which is detailed in Chapter 5.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Integrity is a key element of the research process and a vital characteristic of the researcher; clearly, the application for ethics approval for this study had to consider the sensitive nature of the research topic and assess the risk of potential harm to participants. Confidentiality and anonymity have been particularly pertinent in this research as has been my duty of care to participants; I provided details of external, professional support at both interviews. The ethics application process was underpinned by guidelines set out by BERA (2011) and approved by the relevant university ethics committee. I outline below the theoretical rationale for the ethical approach I took as well as practical details about how I protected my participants.

Research which delves into deeply personal experiences can be stressful for the participant *and* the researcher (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008b; Lee and Renzetti, 1993). Fahie (2014), for example, found his participant's upset contagious and felt that he did more than record her story, he experienced it with her. This alerted me to the potential for me to become upset during the research interviews. For some participants, disclosure can prove beneficial or cathartic (Davies and Gannon, 2006). Sensitive research topics can deepen the emotional connection between the researcher and participant, as both co-construct the narrative history (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008a; Fahie, 2014). So, it is important to prepare to 'physically and emotionally disengage' at the end of the research (Minichello et al. in: Dickson-Swift et al., 2008b). It is, then, to be welcomed that the latest BERA guidelines (2018, pp. 35–36) include a section on

researcher wellbeing, highlighting the fact that researchers, too, owe a duty of care to themselves as well as to others.

However, the literature suggests thinking *beyond* merely abiding by ethical guidelines (e.g. Dickson-Swift et al., 2008b; Reiss, 2005). Reiss’s (2005) participants had genuine fears about the consequences of publication and the perception of their capabilities by others. So, explaining to participants that what I publish will be *my* interpretation of *their* stories became particularly important (Reiss, 2005). Flaskerud and Winslow (1998 in: Dickson-Swift et al., 2008b) urge researchers to consider whether findings might stigmatise or further marginalise the participants. Given the sensitivity of this study, and the potential for findings to be uncomfortable for the participants as well as those involved in working with teachers such as these, managing issues of confidentiality and anonymity have been in the forefront of my mind throughout.

One way of reflecting on the various dimensions of ethical considerations is to use an ethical appraisal framework, such as that devised by Stutchbury and Fox (2009). I encountered this framework early on in the research design phase and have referred to the four dimensions before, during and since conducting this study, in formal and not-so-formal ways. It helps keep ethics uppermost in my mind. The power of the framework is its ability to allow the researcher to reflect critically and holistically on a range of ethical issues, and it has integrity at its core. Another advantage is that it offers more than guidelines – ‘the 48 shoulds’ – alone (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009, p. 502); instead it steers and situates ethical thinking within the local and specific research context (Simons and Usher, 2000).

**Table 4: Ethical appraisal framework (drawing on Stutchbury and Fox, 2009)**

<p><b>Consequential:</b> Is this research worthwhile?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relates to the wider topic of the research and the specific aims and objectives</li> <li>• considers the benefits for a range of stakeholders</li> <li>• explores how to access participants</li> <li>• assesses risks involved including to the researcher</li> </ul>
<p><b>Relational:</b> Is this research conducted respectfully?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concerns identifying and recruiting participants</li> <li>• explores how to establish relationships and trust</li> <li>• respects autonomy and equality; avoids imposition</li> <li>• values collaboration and reciprocity</li> </ul>
<p><b>Ecological:</b> Is this research conducted responsibly?</p>

- recognises research context and norms of the setting
- identifies stakeholders to whom responsible
- respects cultural sensitivity
- uses language appropriately

**Deontological:** Is this research being 'done right'?

- assesses potential to cause harm
- devises strategies to minimise risk of potential harm
- avoids wrong-doing through honesty and candour
- represents accurately and confidentially

The framework helped guide me in my reflections, decisions and actions on all four dimensions, for example:

- This study is worthwhile in that it provides a platform for struggling teachers to have their voices heard.
- I was able to establish trustful relationships with participants by sharing my own experience of struggling during both the recruitment and interview process; to an extent, I was an insider who spoke a similar language.
- Due consideration was given to the location of the interviews; they were held in participants' homes to ensure an appropriate level of privacy and away from the potential 'site' of struggling, the workplace.
- I informed participants of the availability of professional counselling and support, should the need arise, and have abided by the need to protect all participants' identities.

On a practical level, I stored all participant data securely and with password protection. I assigned pseudonyms for all participants and anonymised some of their professional details such as subject taught.

Having considered the ethical implications of this study into the experience of struggling, I now outline below the practical steps undertaken to collect the verbal and visual data from participants.

### 3.7 Data Collection: The Process

Turning to consider my method of data collection, clearly direct interaction with participants was essential to access their personal perceptions and subjective knowledge about the experience of struggling. Decisions were needed about whom I interact with and how (Basit, 2010). Loosely structured interviews,

for example, can help generate in-depth, complex, qualitative data pertinent to a specific phenomenon, experience or context.

Fourteen participants were recruited and interviewed; all created a collage to help express their experience of struggling. In this section I outline the steps involved in the process of data collection, from the first contact with potential participants to thanking them afterwards for their participation. The process of corresponding with participants is summarised in the Table below:

**Table 5: Overview of contact with participants throughout research process**

1.	Recruitment / promotional materials created <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vlog uploaded to YouTube</li> <li>• Blog written</li> </ul>
2.	Email sent out to headteachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Details of the study, including links to vlog and blog</li> <li>• What participation would involve</li> <li>• Details of how to contact me</li> <li>• Password-protected spreadsheet created for participant details</li> </ul>
3.	Email contact made with potential participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More detailed outline of the study</li> <li>• Ethical guidelines, including consent, right to withdraw</li> <li>• Information about collage</li> <li>• Invitation to meet – request for location, date, time</li> </ul>
4.	Arranging / confirming interview 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of date, time and venue</li> <li>• Copies of paperwork</li> <li>• Details about focus of interview, including collage</li> <li>• Gantt chart created with overview of all interviews</li> </ul>
5.	Follow-up after interview 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thanks to participant</li> <li>• Invitation for interview 2</li> </ul>
6.	Arranging / confirming interview 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of date, time and venue</li> <li>• Details about focus of interview</li> <li>• Gantt chart updated with overview of all interviews</li> </ul>
7.	Follow-up after interview 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thanks to participant</li> </ul>

In the pilot study interviews, I covered all three research questions and did the collage in one meeting. I subsequently decided to conduct separate interviews with all other participants as far as possible. I felt this would increase the validity of the process. I met with nine of the fourteen participants on two separate occasions, at least 4 weeks apart. This was partly to allow me to start to analyse the data from the first

interview in preparation for the second meeting. Collages were created in the first interview; photos were taken of each collage and participants had the opportunity to revisit their collage during the second interview. Three participants did not arrange a second interview. The first interviews tended to be much longer than the second, and so I do not feel that the quantity of data was significantly reduced by not having second interview data from these three participants. I had their collages and interview transcripts which focussed on their experience of struggling, which is the main research question. With two other participants, interviews one and two were combined, for practical reasons, with a break for lunch in-between.

All interviews except two took place in participants' homes. One participant, a headteacher, arranged the first interview in her office at school outside of the school day; the second interview was also in her office, and took place during the summer holidays. She was open with her immediate colleagues that she was taking part in the study and was comfortable being interviewed in her workplace. We were not disturbed at any point. The other participants were mostly at home alone during the interviews, although on a few occasions, partners and their small children did make themselves known to me. I was made to feel very welcome by all participants who gave generously in terms of their time, as well as providing me with ample refreshments.

The meetings opened with me explaining the paperwork associated with the study and sharing details of the Education Support Partnership, a charity which provides help and support to teachers in the form of telephone or online counselling. Each participant received the details of this charity at each interview (see copy in Appendix).

The interviews then started with the opportunity to share how, when and why participants became a teacher. The rationale behind this opener was to help establish a relationship with the participants, many of whom were unknown to me, and to contextualise their later accounts of experience within their career trajectories as teachers. When the biographical account seemed to be coming to an end, I followed with a reminder of the main focus of the study: exploring what it means to be struggling as a teacher. I asked participants to talk to me about a time when 'you knew you were struggling.' This open question allowed participants to decide which direction to go in their account of their experience of struggling. Some participants looked to me for confirmation; some involved me by asking questions of me; others narrated their stories in great detail whilst others needed some prompting, with follow-up questions like 'how did that feel?' or 'can you expand on that for me a little?' The accounts of the experience of struggling

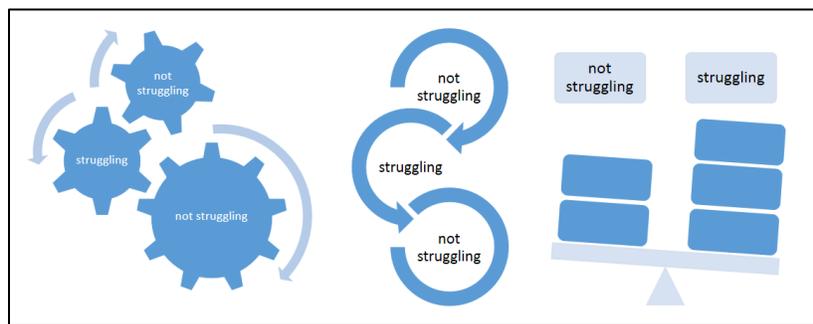
focused for some on specific incidents; for others it was a more general story of various times throughout their careers when they knew they were struggling.

When these accounts of struggling seemed to have finished, I asked participants whether they thought this 'might be a good time to do the collage?' All had been informed in advance that this would be part of the first interview and I had reassured them that it was not about their artistic ability. All fourteen participants created a collage using the materials I provided; some added various personal items from their home to their collages. For example, one participant used a body board as the underlay for his collage. He also added a number of tools. Another participant wanted toothpicks so got some from his kitchen. One participant used a dinner plate to draw round. A photo of the collage box and the items in it is included in the Appendix.

Most of the collages were created relatively quickly, within about 10-15 minutes; more than one participant checked with me whether there was a 'time limit.' Some asked whether they could stick items down; the particular method of collage I used is one in which items are placed rather than stuck, thus allowing the movement of materials as the participant creates the collage. Most participants focussed exclusively on the collage-creating process, not talking throughout. Others chatted with me; one chose to have music on in the background. I took some notes while participants created their collages, capturing anything I wanted to follow up on or noting if they moved certain items around during the process. I photographed the collages when they were complete; some participants also took photos of their collages to keep. Nearly all participants offered to explain their collages straightaway; one asked me to interpret his for him. I responded with a counter-question: 'why would you want me to interpret this?' Several told me that they had quite enjoyed the process; two admitted to finding it quite emotional.

The explanation of the collage was the final stage of the first interview, after which time I wrapped up the interview and thanked the participant for their time and contributions. I reminded them of the opportunity to meet for a second time and explained the focus of that interview: factors that influence struggling and the movement between struggling and not-struggling. It would also be an opportunity to revisit and reflect on the collage they had created. Nine participants arranged a second interview; two other participants covered the ground of the second interview within our one meeting. Three participants did not follow up the option of a second interview; after two attempts at contacting them by email, I emailed one final time thanking them for their involvement in the study and checking whether it was still alright to use their data.

The second interview started with an opportunity to revisit the collage; I had printed each photo onto A4 paper and laminated it. The main focus of the second interview was to identify factors which influence struggling and to consider how it feels to move between struggling and not-struggling. Most participants emphasised factors which influence struggling in a negative sense, i.e. factors which hinder rather than help. To help participants to think about the movement between struggling and not-struggling I presented a range of visual prompts to stimulate discussion. The prompts were created in Powerpoint and represent different ideas for possible conceptualisations of struggling, for example as an imbalance or tipping point, or a movement from not-struggling to struggling and back again. Ideas for the images were drawn in part from the literature and also from an initial analysis of data from the first round of interviews.



**Figure 2: Discussion prompts for the movement between struggling & not-struggling**

Second interviews tended to be shorter than the first; on average, first interviews last 91 minutes, second interviews lasted 70 minutes. They concluded with the opportunity to talk about anything else that might be relevant or useful in terms of struggling generally.

All interviews were audio-recorded digitally so that I had verbatim record to refer back to. The audio files were then transcribed by me with all audio files and accompanying text documents password-protected and stored safely. One advantage of transcribing one's own interviews is the 'unparalleled level of content knowledge this method generates' (Ribbins, 2007, p. 217). Whilst some argue against transcribing, claiming that it is time-consuming (e.g. Basit, 2010), I saw it instead as the first step towards interpreting the data.

I outline how I approached the analysis of the verbal and visual data in the next section.

## 4 Analytical Approach: The Theory

Here I outline the approach I took when analysing the data collected via interviews and collage-making. The analysis of qualitative data has the potential to be messy (O'Dwyer, 2004) and so the approach needed to be systematic yet not rigid (Roberts and Woods, 2018). The analysis of the data would require an 'attention to subtlety' and so I expected it to be slow and painstaking (Riessman, 2005). Analysis requires, of course, high degrees of reflection and comparison, both across the data set and with the literature previously reviewed. The process involves higher-level synthesis and interpretations made are often tentative and eclectic (Ely, 1997). I needed to engage passionately with what I saw in the visual and verbal data collected (Rose, 2007) in a 'continuous, recursive process of thinking, collecting, writing (and) reading' (Ely, 1997, p. 32). This allows the 'separate pieces' of data to become a pastiche, something which is 'stitched together into a more meaningful whole' to 'communicate particular messages above and beyond the parts' (Ely, 1997, p. 97).

This study explores struggling, as experienced by teachers. Stories of the experience of struggling were collected via loosely-structured interviews and collage-making. An 'innovative mix of data sources' (Grbich, 2007, p. 195) can allow the researcher 'to explore more fully the range of meanings invested' in the data (Rose, 2007, p. 260) and may allow a broader view of the research questions (Grbich, 2007).

The analytical approach taken here involved a mixture of interactive reading, comparing with own experiences, reading in different sequences, playing with visual and verbal metaphors, analysing specific words, phrases and images, looking repeatedly and listening to overtones and subtleties (Collier, 2001; e.g. Dey, 1993; Ely, 1997; Grbich, 2007). I also draw on Roberts & Woods' (2018) recent work on analysing collage specifically which included listening carefully to the accounts of the collage given by the collage maker during interviews, reading across the collages visually – attending to images as images and grouping the collages according to 'striking elements' – honouring aspects of the stories which appear most significant.

Below I outline in more detail the approaches taken when analysing the verbal data, the visual data and how I tackled the intermingling (Grbich, 2007) of both data sets. The role of metaphors is also discussed in a separate section.

### 4.1 Introduction

The analysis of data in this study required an approach which allowed the verbal and visual data to be interpreted in ways which did not favour one dataset over another; one which allowed similarities,

differences and ambiguities in the data to emerge and which ultimately would enable a re-presentation of the experience of struggling as narrated by the participants. I was mindful that participants had narrated stories as refractions rather than mirrors of the past (Riessman, 2005).

The data collected by conducting interviews and asking participants to create collages was both verbal and visual. The process of analysis evolved from one of description to interpretation; an analytic progression' (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Woods, 2012) which moves from the basic to the sophisticated (Woods, 2012). Initially, then, the data needed to be described. I engaged with the data on a descriptive level as a bridge to accessing a more interpretive level of engagement, by listening to the interviews again and again, taking notes and highlighting specific aspects of participants' experience. This allowed me to write up descriptive stories of each teacher's account of their experience of struggling. In this way, these initial descriptions could be said to be thorough (Dey, 1993) as they involved detailed scrutiny. Indeed, they provided a foundation for interpretation (Rose, 2007), for illumination and explication (Moustakas, 1994 in: Grbich, 2007). In this way, I began to transform the data 'into something it was not' before (Dey, 1993, p. 30).

A phenomenological approach offers participants an opportunity to make sense of their experiences, which helps to bring that experience to life and enhances an understanding of those often rich but buried meanings (e.g. Ely, 1997; Grbich, 2007). Where my approach differed, however, was that rather than bracketing out my own experiences for the process of analysis in the form of 'an empty head' (Grbich, 2007, p. 84). I followed Dey (1993) and adopted more of an open mind. Equally, however, it was necessary to ensure as far as possible that my own interpretations did not 'act to frame and fix the data' especially in a way that might '*silence* the meaning-making of the participants' (Mannay et al., 2017, p. 16; my emphasis). Mindful of the fact that where and how I locate myself influences what I see, and that interpretations arise from that seeing (Ely, 1997), I strove to acknowledge my own stance and use existing accumulated knowledge rather than dispense with it (Dey, 1993).

I explain below how I arrived at an approach for the analysis of the visual data.

#### 4.1.1 Visual Data Analysis: Collages

All participants created a collage using a range of art and crafts materials; they were also encouraged to use items of their own, if they so wished. The particular method of collage used was one of placing materials rather than sticking them.

My analytical approach draws on a review of the literature in the fields of visual and arts-based research methods; until recently there was very little on the analysis of collage (e.g. Roberts and Woods, 2018; Rose, 2007). The term 'image' is often used in the literature and can mean pictures or photographs; the images created in collages are perhaps more abstract, yet a consideration of this literature was nevertheless useful in planning an appropriate approach. Visual images 'cry out to us to imbue them with meaning' (Grady, 2004, p. 20). 'Images encode an enormous amount of information in a single representation' and it is possible for an image to store 'complexly layered meanings' (Grady, 2004, p. 18) and 'to sustain multiple interpretations' (Grady, 2004, p. 20). Visual images are said to be able to 'convey emotional tone' (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004, p. 12) and have the capacity to reveal 'what is hidden... the taken-for-granted.. reach(ing) beyond and beneath common understanding' (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004, p. 7). This is one of the key reasons for the inclusion of collage-creation as a research method.

Mitchell (1996, in: Rose, 2007) maintains that the power of images can exceed our ability to interpret them thus presenting the researcher with a challenge of how to approach the interpretive process of such images. Some (e.g. Bailey and Van Harken, 2014; Jewitt and Kress, 2003) suggest that the meaning of an image lies within the image itself; others posit that the study of the images alone is a mistaken method (Banks, 2001; Mannay, 2010), arguing that it is the meaning assigned to those images that is of significance. Given that I am interested in how the participants assigned meaning to their collages, the study of the images alone would have been a mistaken method. Ultimately, my approach was influenced by Rose (2007) and Mannay (2010) who argue that in order to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, it is imperative to acknowledge the image-maker and be alert to what the creator intended to show. Thus, the spoken interviews were key as I was analysing the collages to a great extent through what the participants said of them.

There is disagreement in the literature about the analytical power (Collier, 2001) of images, with some arguing that they are 'vehicles to knowledge and understanding via the responses they trigger' (Collier, 2001, p. 46). Others maintain that they act more as 'tools of elicitation rather than objects of analysis per se' (Mannay et al., 2017a, p. 6), an argument that could be made of my use of collage as a catalyst to conversation. I would assert that they *are* tools of elicitation by reasserting the revelatory value of collage-creation.

A number of participants were concerned about the perceived *quality* of their collage, but I was less interested in the 'status of the image itself' and more in 'its conceptual, analytical and theoretical possibilities' (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004, p. 6). In terms of the meaning of a collage, or the elements

within it, it is not helpful to debate about the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ meaning of an image but rather to talk in terms of ‘equally plausible - though sometimes competing and contesting - meanings and interpretations’ (Rose, 2007, p. xiii). Indeed, ambiguity in a collage provides a ‘way of expressing the said and unsaid’ and can reveal both ‘the intended and the unintended’ (Butler-Kisber, 2008, pp. 268–9). Rather than it being perceived as a problem, ambiguity in visual data is perhaps to be embraced (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004).

Rose (2007) argues that there are three sites at which meanings of images are made; how an image is made; what it looks like and how it is seen. Indeed, a detailed scrutiny of the image lies at the foundation of analysis (Rose, 2007). This involves paying attention to both the compositionality and the production of the image. Such steps were integral to my approach. Yet Rose also suggests that there is ‘no stable point that can provide an entrance into the meaning-making process’ (2007, p. 98) and so it is only through revisiting the data and engaging with it in different ways at different times that we can tentatively enter that realm of meaning-making.

The literature offers a variety of ways in which one might undertake an analysis of images; the models I have reviewed all consist of three levels. The Table below synthesises the various approaches and their constituent levels. In short, the approaches discussed in the literature focus on structure, layers and/or semiotics.

**Table 6: Approaches to image analysis**

Approach	Levels of analysis		
Structural ( <i>Jewitt and Oyama, 2001</i> )	<b>Conceptual structure</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spatial distribution of concepts</li> <li>• More descriptive level of analysis</li> </ul>	<b>Symbolic structure</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How meaning is carried in an image</li> <li>• More interpretive realm of analysis</li> </ul>	<b>Analytical structure</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Way in which parts of the image (elements of the collage) relate to each other and the whole</li> <li>• More intensely interpretive level of analysis</li> </ul>
<b>Three-layered</b> ( <i>Collier, 2001, p. 100</i> ) ( <i>Rose, 2007, pp. 41–47; 57</i> ) ( <i>Grbich, 2007, p. 160;</i> <i>Panofsky, 1974</i> )	<b>Primary level</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Descriptive – visual impact</li> <li>• Focus on factual and expressional representations (denotation)</li> </ul>	<b>Secondary level</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representational – more abstract and conceptual</li> <li>• Focus on compositional</li> </ul>	<b>Tertiary level</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretation of that which the image-maker may not have been aware</li> </ul>

(Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, pp. 141; 147–152)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content and colour</li> </ul>	context and spatial relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘visual syntax’ and ‘visual lexis’</li> <li>• Significance of content and colour, placement of items</li> <li>• iconographical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the ‘more-than-visual meaning’</li> <li>• iconological</li> </ul>
<b>Semiotic</b> (Barthes, 1964; Grbich, 2007, p. 155)	<b>Context &amp; content</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focus on what the image is of</li> <li>• context of production</li> <li>• how image conveys meaning</li> </ul>	<b>Links</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• finer look at how the image reflects or departs from dominant cultural values</li> </ul>	<b>Interpretation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the most obvious reading of the image</li> <li>• followed by alternative readings</li> </ul>

These approaches all allow the researcher to move from a more descriptive approach towards analysis through to a more interpretive level or layer. The elements of the image are considered in terms of their actual appearance – colour, position, etc. – as well as their symbolic placement. The tertiary level of the three-layered approach moves beyond the meaning-making of the image creator to include the notion of meaning beyond the visual. The *links* level of the semiotic approach advocates an analysis of the wider context and culture within which the image is created; the *interpretation* level proposes contrasting an obvious reading of the image with alternative readings.

Synthesising the literature in this way helped me identify key methods to adopt when analysing the collages created by my participants. I wanted to describe elements within the collage and how they relate to each other. I also wanted to describe the collages as a whole, as well as explaining what they might mean. How meaning is represented and conveyed was also important. Finally, I wanted to look at obvious readings as well as spend time looking for possible alternative meanings. I identified the levels of analysis most appropriate for the visual data collected and constructed a framework accordingly. My approach is summarised in the Table below:

**Table 7: My approach to image analysis**

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Levels of analysis</b>		
<b>Structural</b>	Conceptual	Symbolic	Analytical
<b>Three-layered</b>	Primary	Secondary	
<b>Semiotic</b>	Context & content	Interpretation	

In this section, I discuss the approach towards analysing the visual data separately from the approach taken for the verbal data for practical rather than ideological reasons. Realistically, the two sets of data cannot and should not be kept separate, instead they are inextricably linked both in the process of data collection as well as during the analysis process. That intermingling (Grbich, 2007) is integral to how meaning is made. Indeed, Rose argues that ‘visual images do not exist in a vacuum’ (2007, p. 39), suggesting it is unusual to ‘encounter a visual image unaccompanied’ (2007, p. 11) either by text or narration. Given that ‘images can contradict and work against spoken or written messages’ (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001, p. 155), a particular challenge here is how to ‘intermingle’ the visual and spoken data and how to ensure they are each given due consideration (Grbich, 2007, p. 195).

Below I consider the approach taken to analysing the verbal data, before addressing the challenge of intermingling (Grbich, 2007) this mix of data.

#### 4.1.2 Verbal Data Analysis: Interviews

Visual methods are rarely used alone; they are often combined with other methodologies (Grady, 2004). In this study, visual images – collages – were created and explicated within the context of loosely-structured interviews. Participants spoke before and after making the collage about their experience of struggling, and some chose to speak *during* that process. If we agree as suggested above that ‘images do not exist in a vacuum’ (Rose, 2007, p. 39), it follows that a ‘good image’ needs contextual information and annotation to make it analytically intelligible (Collier, 2001). My participants were offered the opportunity to explain their collages, with most choosing to do so upon completion of the collage. This is distinct from a ‘think-aloud’ approach which explicitly encourages participants to provide a verbal commentary while creating the collage (e.g. Roberts and Woods, 2018).

The interviews I conducted were both active (Holstein, 2017) and long (McCracken, 2017; Moustakas, 1994), with some lasting up to three hours. Active interviewing brings meaning and its construction to the fore (Holstein, 2017); as the plot of such interviews develops, they can become the site of knowledge-production where meanings are not only conveyed but co-operatively built up, received and interpreted (Holstein, 2017) by both the interviewer (researcher) and the narrator (participant) (Lowes and Prowse, 2001). A narrative approach to interpreting (in this case verbal) data considers the actual plot of the story being told as well as how it conveys meaning (Labov and Waletzky, 1967 in: Grbich, 2007). It also considers the broader cultural context, in this case the educational landscape within which the experience of struggling occurs - to make sense of particular incidents.

The macrostructure of a narrative was also considered as a potential framework for exploring teachers' stories of struggling (Grbich, 2007). I adapted the framework for my own purposes, which allowed me to analyse teachers' stories of struggling in a methodical way. It was useful to have a framework which guided me through the sequencing of participants' stories including specific times, places and events. I was then able to identify the potential significance of events and meanings before arriving at a final outcome of the narrative. The Table below sets out the structure I used:

**Table 8: Macrostructure of narrative – my framework for analysis**

<b>Macrostructure Framework</b>	<b>Application to this Study</b>
1. Summary of entire sequence	Description of whole account
2. Time, place, events	Specifics within the story
3. Main body, what happened	Focus on main account of the experience of struggling
4. Interpretation of significance of events and meanings– importance of narrator's situation, experience and views	Revisit specific elements of the story, bringing in experiences prior to the struggling, incorporate beliefs, values and ideologies of teaching etc., identify (positive/negative) influencing factors
5. Final outcome of narrative	Summary of experience of struggling in light of having narrated the account
6. Tie narrator and audience back to the present (often missing)	Current position in terms of struggling

For most participants, the interview process took place over two separate meetings, with each meeting having a discrete focus. However, using a framework such as the one above allows the researcher to identify the so-called macrostructure of the narrative. In turn, this allows a more holistic description and creative understanding (Woods, 2012) across both interviews, rather than viewing them as separate events.

#### 4.1.3 Intermingling the Visual and the Verbal Data

The collage-making and spoken interviews were both complementary and supplementary; things emerged in some collages which were not spoken about in the interview. Conversely, some participants spoke of things in the interview that did not appear in their collage. Finally, some participants duplicated the spoken in the collage. Arguably, then, both are needed to engender an understanding of the metaphors (Mannay et al., 2017b).

#### 4.1.4 The Role of Metaphor

Given that 'human thought processes are largely metaphorical' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 6) the verbal and visual data I collected was unsurprisingly 'riddled' with metaphors (Eisner, 2008, p. 8). Most people understand metaphors as a poetic or rhetorical device, a characteristic of language alone. However, metaphor is 'pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 3). Perhaps we do not realise how 'intensely metaphorical our language is' (Sangharakshita, 2014, p. 109) and underestimate the capacity of metaphors to capture and express different forms of feeling. A metaphor can help make sense of experiences (Ely, 1997) and make meaning 'immediately understandable' (Sangharakshita, 2014, p. 110). By analysing the metaphors we use, we can become aware that 'language has a depth and resonance that we don't usually appreciate' (Sangharakshita, 2014, p. 111).

Metaphors have been described as 'containers for meaning' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 11) and they can play an 'extensive role in the way we function, the way we conceptualise our experience and the way we speak' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 115). A metaphor is said to work when it 'satisfies a purpose, namely understanding an aspect of a concept' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 97). As such, metaphors can be a useful entrance point to understanding an experience (e.g. Bailey and Van Harken, 2014). They can emerge both through the process of narrating experience and the creation of artefacts and images as collages, for example, helping to reveal how we construct reality (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Patchen and Crawford, 2011). Metaphors have the potential to enrich accounts of experience by 'conveying connotations which elaborate on and illuminate a basic meaning' (Dey, 1993, p. 245). Equally, however, they can contribute to confusion rather than clarity; metaphors can get murky and messy in their complexity (Ely, 1997), especially when they do not immediately relate to or resonate with the other person's experience.

Metaphors can serve as an 'anchor' (Ely, 1997, p. 117) for data analysis as they can aid in establishing relationships between something we already know and something we are attempting to understand (Ely, 1997). Alternatively, metaphors can be seen as a means of learning or even transformation (Ely, 1997), as they allow us to 'understand one domain of experience in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 117). It is not that one separate thing is being compared to another separate thing, rather it is the metaphor which enables the common element(s) in them to be seen, to see how they overlap (Sangharakshita, 2014). It is important, however, to also recognise an inherent danger of metaphors, in

that 'systematicity allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept... (yet) keeps us from focussing on other aspects that are inconsistent with that metaphor' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 10).

The process of creating a collage is in itself an opportunity to create visual metaphors as a distinct form of data. Items are chosen and placed to give a sense of something rather than a literal expression of an idea (Butler-Kisber, 2008); the collage created is then a metaphorical product which signifies concepts and phenomena subject to or available for different readings or responses (e.g. Barrett, 1997; Butler-Kisber and Poldma, 2010; Marshall, 2007; Weber and Mitchell, 1995). Collage-creation can help extend meaning because participants are engaging in a different kind of cognitive action than when generating ideas using words alone (Bailey and Van Harken, 2014; Kress, 1998) and exploring their collage might help participants better express their stories (Woods and Roberts, 2013). Thus, they may arrive at understandings they might otherwise have missed (e.g Bailey and Van Harken, 2014; Bessette, 2008; Jewitt and Kress, 2003; Marshall, 2007).

Struggling is an intricate phenomenon and so the process of creating collages - visual metaphors - enabled participants to articulate their experience and feelings in ways which verbal language would perhaps not have allowed (Marshall, 2007). In fact, collage offered a 'language' through which participants might be able to make sense of their experience and feelings (Bailey and Van Harken, 2014).

Once we realise how intensely metaphorical our language and experience are, it becomes obvious that the analysis of metaphors needs to be a key element of the interpretive approach adopted here. Visual and verbal metaphors were identified and listed for all participants and the subsequent analysis of these metaphors was integrated into the narrative macrostructure framework and image analysis approaches outlined above.

Below I outline the practical processes undertaken when analysing teachers' stories of their experience of struggling, before offering analytic summaries of each individual teacher's story.

## 5 Analytical Approach: The Process

In this section I explain the practical process adopted when analysing teachers' stories of their experience of struggling. The theoretical overview in the previous chapter outlined the rationale for the approaches I chose to adopt. The overall approach I took enabled me to work systematically with the visual and verbal data on descriptive and interpretive levels. The data I collected was rich and such richness of data requires a robust response from the researcher (Knowles and Sweetman, 2004). One challenge I faced was how to preserve the richness and complexity of the data whilst retaining the depth of experience.

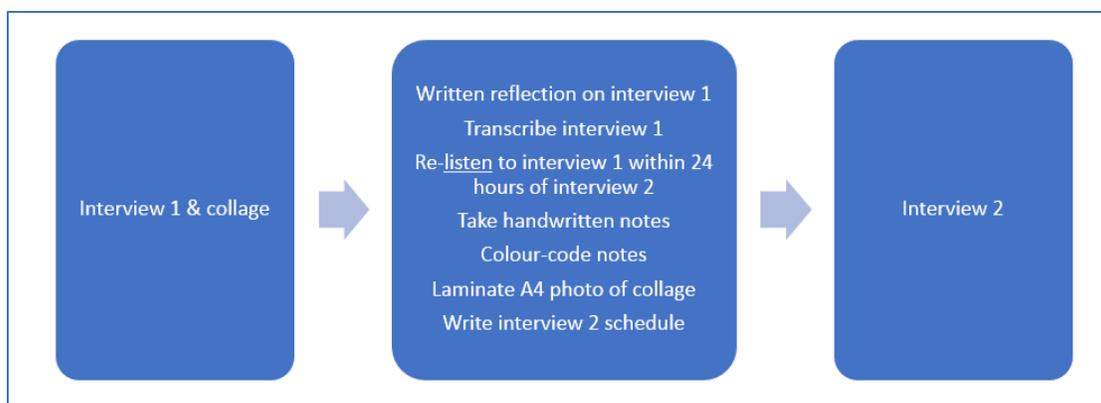
The table below provides an overview of the data collected:

**Table 9: Overview of data collected**

No. of participants	14
Total no. of interviews	23
of which: interview 1	12
of which: interview 2	9
of which: interview 1 & 2 combined	2
Total no. of collages created	14
Total no. of interview hours	34
Average interview length per participant	2.6 hours

Essentially, there are two dimensions to the analytical approach taken. First, I described and analysed the data on the level of the individual participant to enable an understanding of each teacher's experience. I have named these *Analytic Summaries*. They offer an account of the teacher's experience of struggling, the factors influencing that experience and their experience of moving between struggling and not-struggling. Each summary incorporates the visual and verbal data from the interview(s) and the collage. An overview of themes is offered at the end of each individual Analytic Summary. Secondly, I described and analysed the data *across* participants to allow me to engage in analysis across stories and to explore similarities and differences and to identify wider themes.

In total, I interviewed 14 participants, each of whom created a collage; the majority of participants were interviewed on two separate occasions, which had implications for what to do with the data from the first interview, in preparation for the second. The process is described below:



**Figure 3: analytical approach between interview 1 & 2**

After each interview, I took time to absorb the experience by writing a reflection. These reflections included thoughts about the content of the interview but also about the conduct. Furthermore, they were an opportunity for me to admit to myself how I felt about the process. These documents were stored safely along with other participant data and have not been seen by anyone other than me. Only after I had written a personal reflection did I start to transcribe the interview. I decided to transcribe the interviews myself to allow me to immerse myself again in the interview; indeed, transcribing became the first stage of analysis.

Once the second interview had been arranged, I re-listened to interview 1, taking handwritten notes as I listened. This allowed me to refresh my memory of the first interview and to note anything of seeming significance, pertinence or salience to pick up in the second interview. In effect, the handwritten notes were a summary of the interview. I then colour-coded parts of the notes which seemed to address one or more of the research questions. I used the colour-coded notes to write up a personalised interview schedule, which became a sort of prompt sheet. Finally, I laminated an A4 photo of the collage to take with me. This was not possible with all participants as not all had a second interview (3 participants: Amanda, Jonathan, Heather). Two other participants (Ben, Rhiannon) covered the ground of the second interview but within just one meeting on one day. These interviews were particularly long.

After the second interview, I transcribed from the audio file and created a 'scrapbook' for each participant. The scrapbook is an A4 exercise book with the top half of the page plain paper and the bottom half lined paper. The idea was to use the plain part to explore the collages, to draw, doodle and scribble pictures or notes; the lined part was more for writing. The first page provides an overview of the participant, with an annotated photo of the collage in the top half, and some details about the teacher and when they were

interviewed in the lower half. This is also where their pseudonym appears; all names except for two were chosen by me.

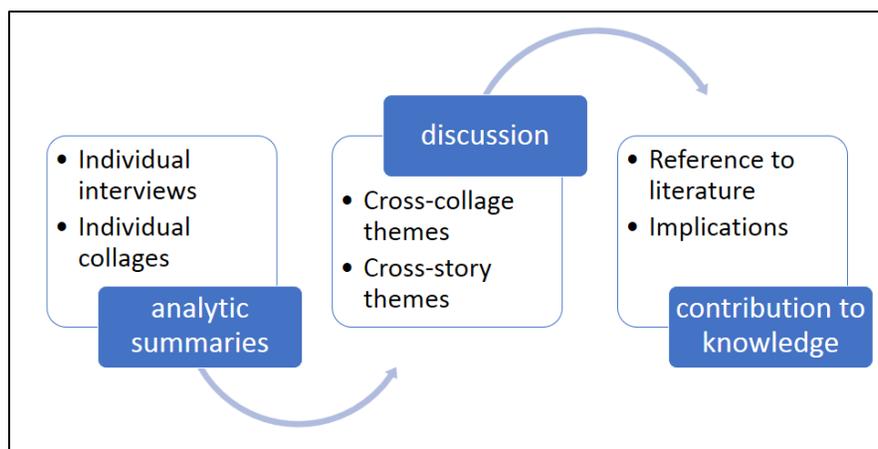
The next re-listening of the audio files involved me handwriting a narrative of the story in the lower half and picking out phrases, metaphors and key expressions to place randomly in the upper part of the page. Handwriting can allow you to slow down and think about material rather than merely record it (Mueller and Oppenheimer, 2014). I found this a useful way to extract some of the language out of the story for further analysis. While listening I had the laminated photo of the collage in view. At the end of the listening process, I used sticky notes to note down any key themes that seemed to be relevant for that participant or that had appeared significant to me, e.g. fear, collegiality, collaboration, government policy. I also undertook a descriptive analysis of the collage, looking at where items were placed, use of colour, use of space, etc. From these notes, I wrote up a draft 'story' for each participant, which have subsequently become what I term the Analytic Summaries. Sample pages from the scrapbooks have been photographed and can be seen in the Appendix.

The next stage of analysis, still at individual teacher level, focussed on the research questions specifically. Pages were assigned in the scrapbooks for each research question and as I read through the transcript again, I noted down how the research questions were being answered. There was a separate page for 'other' for themes or issues that did not immediately fit the three research questions. I devised a scheme for the analytic summaries which starts with a brief biography to contextualise the teacher. Then follows a photo of the collage. Finally, I wrote up their story in a way which addressed all three research questions, included quotes and interpreted the collage. At the end of each analytic summary, I created a table as an overview of themes within that story. Tables from each participant were then collated into one large table, as an overview of how the 14 participants had contributed towards answering the research questions. The table below shows an extract of themes from each participant, which forms the basis for subsequent discussion.

Name	RQ1 - experience	RQ2 - factors	RQ3 – movement (S/NS)	Themes
James	Complex Bodily tensions Uncertainty Wanting to escape Feeling inauthentic	Critical self-voice Others giving you a sense of perspective Self-compassion Training and induction Coaching	Struggling is never far away Fluid not linear Acceptance that there is always an element of struggling Combined weight of many factors	(in)authenticity and vulnerability self-voice and self-criticism; questioning, 'should' complexity of struggling water
Sandra	Depression but not necessarily dark Vivid experience Stimulation overwhelming Not wanting to live Despise system Self-voice (incl in text)	Competent line manager Menopause Lesson observations School culture Playing the game	Superficial survival Resilience Nothing really wrong	Gender – struggling being a woman?
Jane	Teaching 'out of subject' Personal events Vulnerability (not) playing the game Trying hard but it is never (good) enough – effort	Choice of mentor – lack of say / agency Line manager Trust and respect Partner and family Not being micro-managed Facebook group	Tipping point Fine line between 'normal' stress and struggling	Support that is not supportive Centrality of students Professionality Gender – struggling being a woman?
Solomon	Pathway to struggling Darkness	Leaders and managers Inexperience	Change of school / setting Team ethos	Survival

**Figure 4: extract of tabularised themes for all participants**

The next level of analysis moves from the individual participant level – the stage at which initial themes have been identified – to the cross-participant level where wider themes became more visible.



**Figure 5: overview of analytical process**

I colour-coded similar themes from participant to participant, then categorised them using an overarching label. For example, 'everything hurts,' 'knots in stomach,' 'bodily tensions,' 'physically pummelled' were grouped under the term 'embodied symptoms.' I then assigned these overarching terms to the research questions. For example, *embodiment* falls under the 'experience of struggling;' *teaching out of subject* falls under 'factors that influence struggling.' The notion of a *tipping point* and the *cyclicity* of struggling were assigned to the research question about 'the movement between struggling and not struggling.' There was one category – 'dealing with others' struggling' - that could not be directly categorised and so

it was kept separate as I felt it was too important a dimension of struggling to be omitted. The table below shows how I structured the wider analysis, with the first column indicating the research question being addressed (1-3); the second column is for the overarching labels. The third column contains participants' names and the final column shows examples, quotes or reference points. I structured the initial draft of my discussion using this table.

RQ	Theme / metaphor	Participant	Examples
1	Embodiment	James Solomon Veronica Jane Heather Ben Amanda Gina	Bodily tensions Physically pummelled, tiredness In collage – head, stomach In collage Tiredness, insomnia Everything hurts Illness, shattered, no energy, health, diagnosis Feet not touching the ground, eyes out of their sockets (collage)
1	Fear	James Jonathan Veronica	Uncertainty Fear Fear, being <u>brave(r)</u>
1	Anger	Daniela Jonathan	Anger, rage, agitation Anger
1	Water	James Jonathan Kathryn Ben	Float not swim, drowning Collage - under water, pressure of water, drowning Collage - Shark-infested waters of accountability, lapping waves, buoyancy Swimming pool – float, stand, pretend, shallow end,

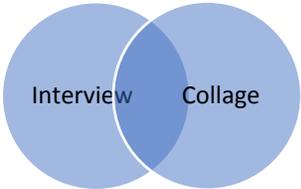
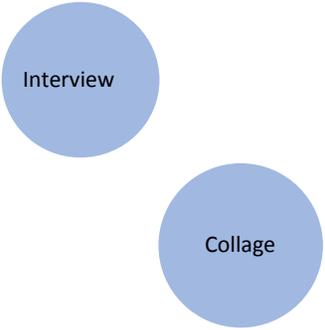
**Figure 6: extract of themes ordered by Research Question**

The analytical approach I took allowed me to intermingle (Grbich, 2007) the visual and verbal data and create individual stories for each teacher. Furthermore, I was able to look across all of those stories to identify commonalities, differences and ambiguities. Below I present the teachers' stories, one by one, before discussing more widely themes across these stories.

### 5.1 Analytic Summaries: Teachers' Stories

The experience of struggling lies at the heart of the participants' narrated stories and collages; throughout the process of analysing their stories I have intermingled (Grbich, 2007) the visual and verbal data, not prioritising one over the other; in some cases, participants duplicated in their collage what they had spoken about in the interview. Others made connections between the collage and the spoken story. With others there was no explicit connection between what they spoke about and what they presented in the collage. This is illustrated in the Table below.

**Table 10: Process of intermingling verbal & visual data – three different outcomes**

		
<p><b>Connection</b> (e.g. Jonathan) – research methods appear to complement each other to an extent; they also supplement each other</p>	<p><b>Duplication</b> (e.g. Kathryn) - research methods appear to complement each other</p>	<p><b>No explicit connection</b> (e.g. James) - research methods appear to mainly supplement each other; any connection is not made explicit</p>

In all three instances – connection, duplication, no explicit connection – the mix of methods used added to the richness of data collected. That argument is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the case of James where, to some extent, there was a disconnect between what he spoke about in the interviews and what he expressed in the collage. I would suggest that much would have been missed out from his particular story had there not been a mix of methods.

The stories I present below are my interpretation of what I heard and saw; they serve as analytic summaries of the stories told to me by the 14 teachers who were prepared to share their experience of struggling. All data were collected between May and October 2017. The summaries follow a similar schema, starting with a short biography to contextualise the story. Then follows an analytic summary of their experience of struggling as expressed in the interviews and through the collage. Finally, themes arising from each story are categorised according to the research question they address or wider themes to be discussed subsequently. I present the analytic summaries in the order in which participants first confirmed their willingness to be interviewed.

### 5.1.1 James

James is a headteacher of many years and now CEO of a small MAT (Multi-Academy Trust). He comes from a family of teachers and says that going into teaching was his default career choice; he would have needed a reason *not* to become a teacher. His parents saw education not only as worthwhile but important in



in his own head. He is keen to learn more about this and recommends the books he is reading (Gilbert, 2009). He goes on to suggest that 'sometimes the person with whom you're most struggling is yourself' and the only way to resolve that is to deal with your self, i.e. by addressing things rather than avoiding them.

He talked about his early days of headship when he 'wanted to escape, to run away from the job ... into the hills' and he sought comfort in different ways, including actually running, daydreaming and alcohol. Part of the reason for wanting to escape was, perhaps, his sense of 'coming up short;' James was struggling to align what others thought he would be capable of ('I think you should be a head one day' says an influential head to him quite early on in his teaching career) with what he believes he could or should do.

James struggled at first to engage with the collage activity; eventually, having chosen to have music on in the background, he started to drop items from the collage box onto the sugar paper from some height. Thus, the immediate focus of James's collage is the mess in the centre of the picture. It did not seem to matter what the individual items were, nor where or how they landed. The majority of items landed in the centre of the page, with a few spreading towards the upper left and bottom right quartiles of the collage. He was then tempted to start consciously arranging things before stopping himself, realising that that would no longer truly represent the experience of struggling. The rearranging would be the beginning of trying to sort out the struggle. This idea of resolving the struggle came up again later in the interview when he introduced the idea of a 'double-struggle', where you struggle with the actual sense of struggling and struggle with the search for action to resolve the struggle.

James then proceeded to frame the 'chaos' with red pipe cleaners. He ran out of red ones and so then used blue, but stated clearly that, ideally, he wanted the whole frame to be red; in terms of compositional meaning, red is considered eye-catching and a very salient colour. Across the top, the frame has a 'break' in it, which was not originally intended but James felt that, once I pointed it out and on reflection, it was appropriate to leave it like that. Also, in one place along the top (left side), a strand is poking out through the frame. Again, James felt comfortable leaving it there, suggesting that it is part of the inner struggle that has pushed through the boundary and can be seen on the outside. The cartoon-type drawn 'tag' at the top, right hand corner of the frame was added in towards the end of the collage-making process when James seemed to want to add a personal note, to signify that this is about him. He gave me the impression that this is a tag he has used before and noted that he (the tag) looked sadder than usual. Afterwards, he said that he actually thought it looked rather 'out of place.'

James calls the pipe cleaners around the collage both a boundary and a mask. When talking about this imagery in more depth, he explains that it is there 'so others don't get to see the struggling which is going on inside... so you're not found out.' He goes on to add that 'you don't want people to see that you're struggling,' as they might see that 'what you've been doing all along is a con.' The trouble with a boundary though, he adds, is that 'whilst it stops people getting in, it also stops you getting out.'

James chose to have music on while doing the collage and throughout he did not speak at all, although he admits to normally being 'quite a talker.' He told me that doing the collage was quite uncomfortable and surprisingly emotional. He wanted it to look 'decent' and whilst he knows he can talk well, he feels he cannot draw well – he did not really know how to do it, despite me emphasising that it is about the process rather than the product. On reflection (in interview 2) he felt that the collage looked childish. Clearly, however, there were important aspects of struggling from James' perspective which arose out of the process of collage-making.

The predominant imagery in the spoken interviews was that of water, and how in order not to drown you need to relax and float for a while rather than splashing around like mad. James described struggling as coming in waves, and he went on to add that on the same beach there can be waves crashing down near the cliffs and rocks, and at the other end of the beach the water can be quite calm. Later on, when responding to a very direct and potentially uncomfortable question about the extent to which he might have contributed to other peoples' struggling (in his leadership role), James realises that in the midst of your own struggling you might be thrashing around in the water, and that will inevitably mean that others also get wet. He seems to start to notice while he is speaking that when you are struggling, you might also cause others to struggle. James is quiet for quite some time after I ask the question and admits 'until you asked, I hadn't really thought about it.'

James talks about feeling isolated as a headteacher. The tendency for schools to be organised hierarchically means that leaders like James are often alone when it comes to having someone to confide in or look out for you. People lower down in the hierarchy are unlikely to feel able to manage upwards. Equally the dominant discourse of leaders being strong can mean that showing vulnerability is equated with weakness, and even if a leader is not actually feeling confident or competent, there is an expectation that they at least present themselves as confident and competent. James talks of the culture of performativity within which he enacts his leadership and explains how he sometimes has to 'sell something you don't inherently believe in' which leads him to feel that he cannot be his authentic self. He tells me about a research project he undertook in which he explored the concept of 'ethical labour' and

is clearly able to reflect on the tensions he has experienced by having to act in ways which do not align with his moral purpose. He goes on to explain that the composite model of headship – based on prominent role models and formative experiences over the years – is not one in which he can be ‘authentically truly me.’

James offers a number of positively-framed factors which help him in coping with or lessening the sense and impact of struggling. Factors that would have helped James not to struggle include better training and induction; his preparation was ‘deeply inadequate.’ He mentions a range of people who can help him not to struggle, including ‘someone who can give you a sense of perspective’ be they from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT; headteachers’ union), or people outside the organisation or even outside the profession. Training the mind to think differently (soothe mode) is a further technique which James is finding useful as part of being more (self) compassionate. He feels he needed to be better equipped; coaching in how to respond in situations would have been beneficial. More widely, James would welcome an acceptance that school leaders are not necessarily always strong nor do they have all the answers would help. He suggests that struggling is an omnipresent part of everyday life, albeit not necessarily a visible one. It is a fluid experience rather than a linear one; it is subtle and nuanced, where sometimes all it can take to tip into struggling is ‘one more wafer’ (quote from a film).

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within James’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 11: How James’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Complex Bodily tensions Uncertainty Wanting to escape Feeling inauthentic
Factors that influence struggling	Critical self-voice Others giving you a sense of perspective (positive) Self-compassion Training and induction (would help) Coaching (would help)
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Struggling is never far away Fluid not linear Acceptance that there is always an element of struggling Combined weight of many factors (tipping point)
Themes	(in)authenticity and vulnerability self-voice and self-criticism; ‘should’

	the complexity of the experience of struggling water causing others to struggle
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5.1.2 Sandra

Sandra is a 6<sup>th</sup> form classroom teacher in her early 50s with no additional responsibility. She talks of becoming a teacher as a ‘happy accident;’ having graduated with an English degree, she completed a secretarial course and started temping at a local FE (further education) college where her mother worked. This was to be serendipitous as Sandra soon started creating resources for the lecturers at the college, partly to relieve her boredom as a secretary. The lecturers were extremely grateful. When offered the opportunity to do some teaching – which also paid a higher hourly wage than the role in the office – she jumped at the chance. This was the moment she knew ‘I wanna be a teacher... it’s absolutely me!’ Following a period teaching abroad and then the successful completion of her PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education) she had a varied career as a teacher including being Head of Department. She has since undertaken a conversion course to teach psychology as she had become bored with English and drama.

We met on two separate occasions; she constructed her collage in the first interview.



**Figure 8: Sandra's collage**

Although she did not label it as specifically gendered, Sandra’s experience of struggling appears to be linked to the fact that she is a woman. She spoke with great emotion about an incident following her

maternity leave, and more recently she bemoans the lack of acknowledgement of difficulties associated with the menopause.

Many years ago, Sandra was due to return to work, following a period of maternity leave for her third child. She had three children under the age of five, and her 'marriage was in meltdown.' Her headteacher was pressurising her to confirm if and when she would be returning and sent her what she terms 'a vile letter.' The experience does not seem to be entirely resolved for her as she is quite agitated as she speaks and she clearly continues to hold this head in disregard: 'I hate him. I wish him bad things!' When she did eventually return to teaching she felt like 'a glorified supply teacher' despite having been a successful and highly regarded teacher previously. Her colleagues could not understand why the head was acting this way. Sandra calls his treatment of her 'casual cruelty' and wonders out loud 'what was in it for him?' She felt a sense of shock, as she was unsure as to what she had done to deserve such treatment. In the end, she broke down in the middle of a Year 10 lesson, saying 'I just can't do it.' She stayed briefly with friends as she did not feel able to be on her own looking after the children, and, having consulted the doctor, reluctantly started taking anti-depressants: 'I'm pathetic' she says about herself, and admits to thinking 'I don't want to be alive.' She uses the present tense throughout her account, even though this all happened well over a decade ago. She eventually resolved to getting out of that job, that school. She also feels some satisfaction in having told the head, to his face, that he was bully: 'I had my day in court with him, that felt good.'

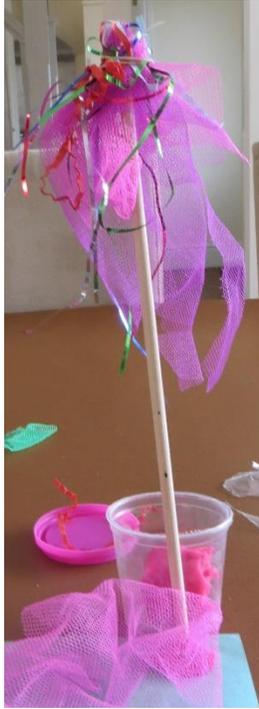
Her experience of struggling seems also to be linked to a sense of 'having to' do things; she felt dependent on the job for many years – 'handcuffed by my job' - as she had a mortgage to pay and, as a single mother, children to support. This lack of alternative seems to have caused a tension in her, a tension which has been relieved to some extent in more recent times by her ability to pay off the mortgage and consider teaching part-time: 'I had years of struggling financially, I know what it's like... that's not the case anymore and I want to claim something back.' This sense of agency, having some control over what she can do, comes across strongly at times during our conversation: 'I'm not tied to anywhere... I'm now prepared to take a risk.'

Sandra expresses strong views on the wider education system as well as policies and practices within her own school environment. She believes some children just should not be in a classroom and she asks 'where is the joy in school? Where's the creative, lateral thinking?' She tells me that she was a 'good child' but seems to have developed into a rebellious adult; 'I hate towing the party – school – line, I can't buy

into it.' She openly acknowledges that her current school 'isn't a terrible place to work' but goes on to say 'I just don't wanna do it anymore.'

At one stage she compares schools with prisons. She feels that prisons have failed, and that a better alternative would be to look after people who have committed crimes and model good behaviour to them, as they have mostly had such awful experiences in life and suffer from mental ill health. In a similar vein, she says 'what I hate (about schools) is the hypocrisy, the cowardice, the hiding behind.' Instead, she suggests, 'schools should nurture their teachers.' She says she can feel the pressure 'dripping down' from above and she speaks of a 'mountain of things to do.' As far as exam pressure is concerned, 'the onus shouldn't be on us (the teachers) going the extra mile, the onus should be on the kids ... making the extra effort.'

Sandra enjoyed creating her collage, which ended up being three-dimensional. She created herself out of pink playdough and placed herself in the centre, surrounded by mesh; 'trapped by all that I have to do.' Surrounding her are 'harsh, metallic' items such as springs, coils, nuts and bolts. The springs, she explains, can spiral out of control and spoil other areas of your life, which hints at the all-encompassing nature of being a teacher. The nuts and bolts are stuck down with playdough and represent obstacles, some of which can hurt, some of which are dangerous. She explains that sometimes it is possible to leap over these obstacles, at other times you have to haul yourself over. Later she mentions that not all obstacles are the same, and they are not all insurmountable. The black straws are her 'moods' and suggest that there is a darkness to struggling, although on reflection she actually perceives it as a more 'vivid' experience. She used orange pipe cleaners to create 'goal mouths' which are ways out of the experience of struggling. There are two distinct paths leading out of the central vortex of struggling; the detailed photos illustrate these differences more clearly.



**Figure 9: Detail of Sandra's collage**

The path leading up to the top left corner is the path of 'superficial survival.' Sandra called this a 'pink party' where, at the end of the week, you reward yourself with a gin and tonic, and tank up energy for the following week. It is a relatively easy route, involving lots of stimulation which is something Sandra is drawn to. The other path, leading towards the bottom right corner, requires Sandra to 'embrace adversities and difficulties. It is a harder route which can be more dangerous but it helps you build up your resilience.' The end result is one of feeling better and thinking in a more measured way; 'even if it's not easy and you won't always like it, there are softer colours at the top' once you have climbed through the red feathers at the bottom. She explains the salience of red as a colour of danger and the danger here is also linked to having to climb. Elsewhere during our conversation, she described struggling as climbing a steep cliff face with only a small ledge to balance on.

Factors which influence Sandra's experience of struggling include being tired or feeling 'tainted by the horror of depression;' she has clearly struggled with identifying with this mental illness. She knows she could teach better if she had fewer lessons on her timetable and mentions timetabling more than once as a constraining factor: 'this is your timetable... no choice.' But she talks excitedly about how she has started using a 'flipped learning' technique this year which has freed her up in lesson time: 'my life has been revolutionised' she tells me joyfully.

Whilst feeling 'trapped by the security' of being a teacher she feels 'institutionalised.' She also dislikes being 'held hostage every summer' while awaiting her students' results. She goes on to say that 'the holidays shouldn't be what keeps you in (teaching)' and tells me more than once that she would love the freedom to go on holiday when she likes or visit her ageing parents in the North when she needs to. She has noticed in herself what she terms a 'sea change' and says that struggling 'comes and goes really... it comes quicker now. I used to tolerate it.'

The idea of 'playing a game' is a feature of Sandra's story. She admits to being complicit in this game, especially when it comes to lesson observations which she sees as being artificial, where you just 'pull extra things out of the bag.' She sees observations as a 'pointless exercise' and whilst she says she despises the system she admits 'but yet I don't want to be rubbish.' She has always done well in lesson observations and feels that 'they leave you alone if you're good.'

Yet the rebel in her wants to 'break out' but, she admits, 'I'm scared... I can't be sparkling all the time,' which is especially hard in an organisation with a culture of 'you'd better be perfect or else.' She talks with great concern for other teachers at her school who she recognises as struggling, and who have been on the receiving end of 'informal support plans.' She explains: 'they'll (senior leadership team) do it for the most stupid things, stupid stupid things.' Some teachers have been 'pushed out' of their jobs via the 'façade of procedure' with what seems to be the flimsiest of evidence.

This feeling of hating the 'playing the observation game' whilst admitting you have to comply with it is clearly a source of tension for Sandra. She asks; 'who's winning (the game)? Is it me or the students?' She also struggles with the perceived incompetence of those in positions of authority: 'I could do that job standing on my head'. On the one hand she is glad to have no TLR (teaching and learning responsibility) yet in our second interview she suggests that she *should* have one, considering everything she does in her role. She refers to herself as a 'regular teacher – just a pleb' but feels strongly that if she is as good as others say she is, she should be paid more. She has a particular issue with her immediate line manager: 'she's absolutely crap... distant, uncommunicative.' She explains that this current line manager is part of a 'little huddle... a clique' and whilst Sandra does not want to be a member of that club, their behaviours can make her feel an outsider. When asked what would help her not to struggle, Sandra responds in an instant: have a line manager 'who knows what was going on.'

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Sandra's story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 12: How Sandra’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Depression but not necessarily dark Vivid experience Overstimulation Overwhelming Not wanting to live Despise system
Factors that influence struggling	(In)competent line manager Menopause Lesson observations School culture Playing the game Timetabling Education system
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Superficial survival Resilience
Themes	Gender – struggling being a woman? Others’ experience of struggling

### 5.1.3 Jane

Jane is a PE teacher with pastoral responsibilities, who is in her mid-20s. She talks at some length about her own school days and how she found a niche for herself in PE, to counter comparisons with her more academic siblings. Her story involves reference to two role models from her school days, one positive and one not-so-positive who, for different reasons, have shaped how and who she is as a teacher. Jane did not seem to struggle at school and to an extent did not experience failure until she was at university where she failed an exam; ‘I went mental... my world had ended.’ She talks in a similar vein about her lack of success in interviews to secure a role as a teacher upon completing her teacher training. She explains, ‘after countless interviews, it wore very thin.’ Jane has a strong relationship with her partner and talks very fondly of her parents. At the time we met, it was towards the end of the school year and she was busy preparing to get married. Her skin ‘was bad’ and her hair was falling out, but apparently ‘that’s just normal stress’ rather than struggling.

We met on two separate occasions; she constructed her collage in the first interview.



collage. 'You literally tie yourself up.' She described the effort of having to get 'through the armour' to the students; different ways are needed for different students but 'you always find a way through.' By poking straws (representing different approaches) through the holes in a kind of mesh material, at times with some difficulty but with great effort on her part, she reaches through from her position as a teacher to the 'eureka moment' – the yellow tissue. Yellow is her favourite colour, it is bright and happy, and reminds her of why 'I put up with so much crap.' In the lower right corner, her teacher self is illustrated as leaves, which start off happy (red) and slowly 'turn sour' (yellow to a pale green); they go from bright to dark. It is clear that as things fade, she becomes more and more distanced from the students and her whole reason for being a teacher. She asks herself 'why am I doing this? Who am I doing this for?' When talking through the collage afterwards, Jane was stroking the colourful plastic 'beads' – which she had explained were her students – in a very caring manner. 'You go through what you go through for the kids.... It's why I do what I do.'

Another incident illustrates the intimacy of the relationship Jane has with her students, and Jane explains how she felt when this was questioned by her line manager. The incident starts with Jane being called in to 'have a word' about her 'professionalism.' In summary, some students had bought flowers for Jane's birthday, and the line manager felt this was inappropriate. Jane was horrified that her relationship with her students was being questioned. Jane's response was typically sarcastic: 'unfortunately for you, I'm a human being for my students.' This notion of feeling questioned professionally comes up more than once in our conversations. Jane is not one to 'play the game' and feels she has paid the price for this on a couple of occasions, by missing out on securing a job at interview. She takes the 'playing the game' image further by relating a story of being on an interview panel, interviewing candidates for a teaching role at her school. The candidate who got the job – not the one she would have chosen – was able to 'say the right things to the right people.'

Eventually, when things came to a head with her line manager, Jane refused to work with her anymore; with her new line manager, a male deputy, she was 'in and out of meetings in 5 minutes... we didn't feel we needed to waste each other's time... the biggest compliment I can be given is being left alone, not being micro-managed or having someone sitting on you... having confidence (in me) without pressure.'

Other factors which influence whether Jane is struggling or not include the issue of praise: 'tell me I'm doing a good job... it's nice to get recognition from higher powers' although she admits 'I prefer it from the kids.' However, being praised or recognised for doing a good job also has its downside. She explains: the more you do a good job, the more you are expected to do a job, only to find that what you do 'is still

not good enough.’ Struggling seems to increase as your capacity and capability to do the job becomes constrained. Jane feels a sense of pressure. She feels she ‘should be doing more, working harder’ but she reaches the point in our conversation where she simply says: ‘what more can I actually give?’

Events in Jane’s personal life have also contributed to her experience of struggling, exacerbated further by the response from her line manager. Jane had miscarried and was trying to return to work. The topic she was teaching was related to parenting, and so the nature of the subject she was due to teach was hard to engage with. Jane feels that the fact that her line manager was a woman made the experience worse. Jane feels that she – a mother herself - should have understood the situation better: ‘You should *know* me, who I am and what I’m going through.’ In the end, Jane tries to see the situation from her line manager’s perspective, suggesting that the line manager was clearly under so much pressure herself and perhaps needed ‘to be seen to be doing a good job’ by addressing Jane’s absence and strictly following school policy.

A more general, systemic point was raised by Jane who feels that her specialist subject, PE, is being marginalised and squeezed out at her school - and perhaps even nationally - by other seemingly ‘more important’ subjects. She talks at length about how PE halls are regularly needed to house students sitting more and more exams throughout the year, and how the PE department is expected to vacate that space, often at short notice: ‘we’re giving way to other subjects.’ Jane is clearly also aware of changes within the curriculum and the move towards different types of assessments (linear GCSE exams, 9-1 grading, etc.) and expresses her views about such changes with typical sarcasm: ‘it’s the luck of the draw of the wonderful government we have.’ She also suggests that ‘students are not allowed to be unintelligent anymore’ hinting at the policy agenda for all students to achieve a pass in English and Maths and to follow a more academic curriculum. ‘What good is it being able to do an equation if you’re too fat to walk anywhere?’ In her mind, a healthy lifestyle should overlap with a drive for academic achievement.

To support her to move away from struggling, Jane mentions practical things like joining a subject Facebook group which she has found really helpful in terms of sharing resources, discussing issues and making connections. But the most significant sources of support are those people dearest to Jane outside of teaching and she talks with great affection about her partner and her parents. They feature on the collage as nuts and bolts; ‘they keep you grounded... Without them, I’d be lost.’ Her partner, in particular, is a source of strength and encourages her to see things from a different perspective: ‘when I get in a ranty mood, I’m very blinkered’ and so, by being presented a range of viewpoints by someone she loves and trusts, Jane says she can start to see things differently.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Jane’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 13: How Jane’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Bodily tensions Personal events Vulnerability (not) playing the game Trying hard but it is never (good) enough – effort
Factors that influence struggling	Teaching out of subject Choice of mentor – lack of say / agency Line manager Trust and respect Partner and family (positive) Not being micro-managed Facebook group (positive)
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Tipping point Fine line between ‘normal’ stress and struggling
Themes	Support that is not supportive Centrality of students Questioning self-identity & professionalism Gender – struggling being a woman?

#### 5.1.4 Solomon

Solomon is a ‘career changer’ and still considers himself a relatively new teacher. He is single and in his 40s. During his teacher training, he remembers being asked to describe his most influential teacher or lesson at class; he could not come up with an answer, somewhat to the surprise of his peers and lecturers on the course. Solomon does not talk much about his own schooling during our interviews but his passion for his subject – Design Technology – really comes across. When learning about ‘types’ of teacher during his PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education), he concluded that there are mainly two types: ‘career teacher’ and ‘subject passionate teacher.’ He quickly decided that he fell into the latter category. He talks a lot about management and leaders in both interviews, drawing on his experience of being managed well outside of teaching; ‘in previous jobs, they were supportive and grown up about deadlines ... and able to genuinely prioritise.’

We met on two separate occasions; he constructed his collage in the first interview.



**Figure 11: Solomon's collage**

Solomon tells me that he was recently qualified when he first felt that he was struggling. He had secured a position as a NQT (newly-qualified teacher) at a school where he had spent time during his training. Whilst he was aware that it was not what you would call a 'good school,' when a job came up there, he saw it as a 'stepping stone.' However, he was not supported well during that NQT year and had more than one change of mentor. A year later, there was a change of SLT (senior leadership team), when the school became a sponsored academy, as part of the drive to improve the school. The sponsor organisation had what Solomon calls a 'narrow vision of education' and the culture of the school changed almost overnight. Solomon's head of department left under a bit of a cloud. Expectations of all teachers were raised – 'expectations they (SLT) couldn't model themselves' – and slowly, the culture of the school became 'incredibly scary, incredibly stressful.' Solomon was an inexperienced teacher in a school undergoing significant changes; the environment within which he was struggling seems to have played a key contributory role.

Solomon's experience of struggling involves feeling threatened, like he was being bullied and as if he was firefighting. He was working all hours of the day but still felt that 'everything's a disappointment to them,' referring to Senior Leaders. He noticed that he was 'making lots of basic mistakes,' 'getting more and more confused' and one morning, when he was 'exceedingly tired, I dozed off' while driving to work, crashing his car. He says: 'I never perceived myself as someone who would struggle in this role as a teacher' but increasingly the job and school culture felt 'demoralising' and he was left 'physically pummelled.' He asks himself: 'why can't I do this?' He was trying to plan his lessons to be 'all bells and whistles' by using what

he calls his 'box of tricks' which included gimmicky items such as blow-up microphones, supposedly to increase student engagement in lesson. But he was finding planning and teaching 'extraordinarily challenging' and realised that, ultimately, how he was working was unsustainable. Self-doubt was creeping in and a voice in his head was saying: 'maybe my whole life I'd kidded myself that I'm better than I probably was.'

The school's leadership and management approach seems a key factor which exacerbated Solomon's experience of struggling. When talking about the academy's headteacher, Solomon exclaims: 'she was nuts! She had a personality disorder, a narcissist. Not one thread of empathy... what are you doing in a school if you have no empathy?' He goes on to say that she was 'blind to the work I was doing... it was never enough.' Elsewhere in the interview he talks about struggling feeling like a 'never-ending treadmill.' Solomon is now teaching in a different school where he says his 'boss is brilliant!' He describes him as 'eminently sensible' and 'grounded'; 'he allows me space to be the teacher I want to be.' He speaks of his more recent teaching experience with increased professional confidence.

When he was at the academy, Solomon felt isolated, sensing that he was the only teacher who was struggling: 'I thought it was my problem.' But one night, when emailing at 3am, he received an immediate response from another colleague. He realised, but was not reassured, that 'this was normal.' Conversely, the headteacher at his new school takes a completely different approach, saying publicly that a 'good school has unknackered teachers.' This is a message which clearly resonates with Solomon. However good that rhetoric is, though, Solomon's experience has in fact been somewhat different; there are knackered teachers at that school, including Solomon.

Solomon teaches a subject that could be described as creative; it is certainly one which involves problem-solving. It was interesting, then, to observe how he approached the collage-making process. After some hesitancy, he put a number of items onto the sugar paper and proceeded to move them about. The overall emphasis of his collage is one of a pathway – illustrated by his use of a dark coloured twine - and what he calls a 'central bleakness.' He explains that the surrounding environment is 'not inviting but non-threatening' and he illustrates this with the use of leaves. Autumnal shades, he suggests, are not entirely cold but are also not warm: 'there's no warmth to struggling.' You could see his collage as a type of maze and he explains that there is a 'vortex sucking you in' and 'no easy escape route.' The loops in the twine symbolise a rollercoaster, albeit one that you might not intentionally get on – 'the onset of struggling is unassuming, you can fall into it.' It would seem that struggling may, for some, have a cyclical nature: 'you come out (of the loop), it's ok, you go back in...'

Along the path there are cut-up pieces of black drinking straws which Solomon calls 'small snippets of extreme hardship.' These are purposely placed perpendicular to the path as a blockage. Solomon explains: 'you get through them, then you think they're normal.' This movement between struggling and not-struggling is interesting, as there seems to be an acceptance – a normalisation – of the struggling experience, yet no resolving of it as such. Along the path there are also other obstacles, such as springs which symbolise tension and frustration. Some of these springs are intact, others have been stretched and/or bent out of shape.

The centre of the collage is a pile of black drinking straws – a 'volcano of straws' - which Solomon cut up with dogged intent. Ideally, he tells me, the pile would have been even higher. Whilst not entirely visible on the photo, the centre is in fact 'coming out at you.' Solomon explains: 'I would've stacked so many more, so high... (then) when you try to get out, they all fall down. It makes even more of a mess. Then you try to fix it and it doesn't work, everything just collapses around you.' It would seem that when you are already struggling, trying to get out of that struggle can be not only difficult but can in fact make the struggling feel worse.

When we met for the second time, Solomon had the chance to look at his collage again, this time as a photo. He reflected that it would be good to make this experience of struggling part of a timeline, with lines veering off to the left to indicate the past and to the right for the future. He is clear that this experience was a 'blip' in the 'grander scheme of things' which is now over, although he does admit later that the experience has left a permanent mark on him.

Having changed schools, Solomon is now able to compare his experience at the academy with the experience of teaching in his new school. When his Head of Department at the academy left, Solomon tells me that he was asked by the headteacher to rewrite all of the Schemes of Work. This involved writing detailed, prescriptive lessons and was, essentially, an extremely time-consuming administrative task. Solomon was only in his second year of teaching and feels that he could not possibly have had the experience to complete such a task alone, although he was unable to express this at the time. He now talks of writing Schemes of Work not as a 'chore' but as 'rewarding, a privilege;' he sees it as an 'opportunity to shape my idea of my subject.' He also admits: 'I now know what I'm doing... it was too early then.' Time, experience and a change of school seem to have contributed to this shift in perspective.

A theme of 'survival' emerges from Solomon's story; not just his own, but that of all the teachers at the academy. He uses strong, emotive language to express this, saying things like: 'everyone's in the firing

line, no-one's safe. You couldn't get away with anything. Who's going to get picked off next?' He uses Nazi- or Stasi-esque language to conjure up violent images, suggesting that the tactics being deployed by SLT were 'grim' and 'brutal.' When talking about support – which he says is a 'misnomer' – he uses the imagery of 'standing in line to the gas chamber.' Clearly for him, support was not something he welcomed or experienced as positive. He also says that he 'didn't dare collaborate' with other teachers in the academy, explaining that he felt 'teachers were being pitched against each other.' This feels indicative of a culture of fear, isolation and having to look out for oneself. Solomon unpacks this further by explaining: 'teachers have a ration pack (which) they're not happy to share because you don't know when you might need it.' He says that the prevailing culture was one of 'pseudo-collaborativeness' where suggestions from teachers were bypassed; everything was just top-down.

When recalling a particularly unpleasant experience of receiving feedback from a short classroom observation, he says it felt like a 'character assassination.' He admits that he was already 'on the path to struggling' and so this feedback merely seems to have added to his existing sense of inadequacy. This incident became a critical event in Solomon's teaching career; from that moment on, he decided he needed a 'get-out plan.' He saw his employment as a mere transaction, there was no longer any 'buy-in' from him. He had resolved to leave; the observation feedback seems to have been the tipping point. Having been 'compliant up until then' he now vowed to do nothing but the bare minimum. At the end of our second meeting, he wonders: 'why did I stay so long?' A question which hangs in the air and remains unanswered. He also reflects on his treatment, determined that he 'would never treat another human like that.'

When asked what would have helped, Solomon feels that he missed out on having a good mentor. He sees mentoring as a 'key learning avenue' and since leaving the academy, he has benefitted from the support he has received from his new Head of Department and the wider team. His new boss knows 'clever ways of doing things' and Solomon now feels that he is 'working in a community of teachers... we work in a team, and we all get involved, otherwise we'll all struggle.' He reports feeling more empowered, more confident and better able to 'rely on my professional judgment.'

Solomon remains a 'subject passionate' teacher with an awareness of the bigger picture in terms of policy priorities and funding cuts to education generally, and his subject in particular. He explains that it is an 'expensive per outcome subject.' He quotes former Secretary of State, Gove, as having influenced how his subject is perceived: 'it is undervalued and under attack.'

But he also knows that he is ‘not as robust’ as before. His experience of struggling ‘is part of me... I’m very prone to not dealing well with stressful situations.’ For some time after leaving the academy he continued to have a ‘phobia of observations’ but found doing supply teaching ‘one day at a time’ a form of rehabilitation, in part because he felt that there were ‘no strings attached.’ As a supply teacher, he could pick and choose where and when to teach. Now he feels confident enough to teach with the door open and says: ‘if someone comes in, tough!’

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Solomon’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 14: How Solomon’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Pathway to struggling Darkness Cold Physically pummelled Making mistakes Overwhelming Self-doubt
Factors that influence struggling	Leaders and managers Inexperience Workload Tiredness Policy, how subject is viewed
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Change of school / setting Team ethos Experience Professional confidence
Themes	Survival

#### 5.1.5 Jonathan

Jonathan is a Humanities and Latin teacher in his mid-30s with a Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR) as Head of Subject; he is the lone teacher in the school for Latin. He comes from a family of teachers – parents and grandparents – and always knew he would eventually become a teacher himself. He describes his PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education) experience as amazing and loved both placements. He spent some time teaching in France and at a private school before finding employment in the state sector. He explains that he got the job at his current school ‘in a weird way – there wasn’t a job!’ He admits that he ‘immediately loved the kids there.’ He is keen for me to know that ‘people bent over

backwards to help me in my NQT year... and the previous head was amazing.’ He is in his seventh year of teaching.

We met on just one occasion; he constructed his collage towards the end of that interview.



**Figure 12: Jonathan's collage**

Jonathan narrated much of his experience of struggling through a specific story of being on a so-called ‘support plan.’ A support plan is a formal intervention used with teachers where an aspect of their work has been highlighted as an issue or concern; there can also be informal versions of such plans. The context leading up to this event was that, as the sole teacher of his subject, he teaches everyone, i.e. 400+ students. During a scrutiny by senior leaders, some of Jon’s books were found not to have been marked as per the school policy. He uses the imagery of drowning and suffocating regularly, and it is easy to see how having to mark that many books could feel that way. Prior to this, Jon’s professional practice had never been found wanting; his teaching had always been found to be good. The support plan involved him having to meet with and talk to a mentor, who was not a subject specialist. He appears frustrated at having had to explain his subject to the mentor, which he explains left him with even less time to mark and thus struggling even more; he bemoans in particular the ‘lack of say in the choice of mentor.’

The main emotions Jon expresses in terms of being on the support plan were anger and feeling upset, especially as he felt his professionalism was being questioned. He seems particularly affronted at the suggestion that ‘I was failing the kids’ especially in light of the fact that his were the ‘best grades in the department.’ His exasperation is clear when he is talking about the marking issue: ‘what do you want me

to do?’ he asks of the senior leaders. There is a clear tension between the expectations in the school marking policy and the reality of marking 400+ students’ books.

In hindsight, he considers himself lucky to have been paired up with a mentor who gave him advice on ‘how you game the system.’ Eventually, Jon explains, the support plan ‘fizzled out, it just disappeared’ never to be spoken of again. He just shrugs his shoulders at the ridiculousness of the whole process. In fact, he considers himself lucky – compared perhaps to other colleagues - as his particular support plan does not seem to have had any lasting, negative effect on how he is viewed at his school. He also adds: ‘everyone I know’s been on a support plan... What does the number of completed support plans show?’ In his blunt manner, he concludes that the whole process was an ‘utter inconsequential f\*\*\*\*ng load of sh\*t... it felt like an entirely pointless exercise.’ Whilst he might have considered himself lucky in one sense, there is clearly some residual anger and frustration about the validity of the process itself.

A further source of struggling comes from the fact that Jon teaches two different subjects. He explains: ‘you can’t give 50% to each, if you did they’d both be sh\*t.’ He also tells me that he will be required to plan one of the new GCSEs from scratch, on his own, during the upcoming summer term (we met in May 2017). This is clearly a source of tension for him, as he states: ‘this half term will about as scary as it gets.’

The feeling of struggling, he tells me, comes from there being ‘too many balls, not enough hands.’ He extends this further, using the metaphor of a waiter, bouncing between tables in a restaurant and hoping ‘they’re (customers) happy enough at the end of the day.’ This is not the first time that Jonathan introduces the idea of customers into our conversation. It is not clear whether the students are the customers or the school leaders; in any case, Jonathan certainly feels that he is having to serve. He also uses a shop assistant analogy to further explicate how he has experienced management in his school:

In a shop, the customer says ‘your product’s sh\*t.’ Your manager would say ‘no, it’s not, Sir.’ In a school, they’d say ‘oh yes it is, so sorry, here – have something else and by the way would you like to slap our assistant here?’

The implication here seems to be that the managers are not backing up and supporting the teachers; rather, they appear to be taking the side of the customers, be they students or their parents. It was a difficult anecdote to listen to as the teachers appeared completely voiceless and disenfranchised. Jon uses the phrase ‘consumer facing’ on more than one occasion and bemoans his perceived lack of professional autonomy when his expertise is challenged or questioned, for example in the form of parental complaints or complaints from the students themselves.

Not only does he feel that managers fail to back him up, he also feels that ‘people are looking inside me, judging everything I’m doing and thinking.’ Furthermore, that judging is not always explicit or shared and he expresses strong views about how managers need to measure everything: ‘if they can’t measure it, it makes them nervous.’ One such example is the grading of lesson observations, which to all intents and purposes has been removed. Grading lessons is no longer seen as good practice, but Jonathan feels that the practice of measuring – grading – lesson observations is carrying on, adding ‘they’re just not telling us.’

Jonathan appears to have a good understanding of the education system both at policy (government) and whole-school level and we talk together at some length about the impact of various policy changes and the legacy of Gove (previous Secretary of State for Education). In this context, he uses the consumer-facing expression again, stating that ‘kids and parents are king.’ He is aware of the presence of various academy sponsors and chains in the system and seems pleased that his school has escaped what he calls the ‘corporate style’ of many sponsored Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). He also states that he ‘could never handle being a McDonalds school,’ thus suggesting that he enjoys some of the freedoms of working in the school he is currently at. But still he uses strongly emotive language when referring to the leaders and managers there who he says ‘are terrified Ofsted – and another Gove - are gonna come in.’ He goes on to explain why he thinks they act in the way they do: ‘they feel they have to justify themselves.’ He tells me that the headteacher is seen as a ‘very hard man’ and that that feeling trickles down to the deputies and assistant heads influencing, negatively, the language they all use. Jonathan feels that they are hiding behind what he sees as ‘very damaging’ things they are doing, using Ofsted as the rationale. They need to be seen to be doing certain things and these things become ‘shields for when the (next) change comes.’

Jonathan is clear that, in the long term, ‘you can’t scare people, fear doesn’t work as a motivator.’ Yet elsewhere in the interview he talks about management ‘scaring us into the shape they want’ which suggests that management by fear can and does work to an extent. One extreme example of this is Jonathan’s suggestion that once you are on what he calls the leadership radar, there is not much you can do: ‘if they say you’re struggling, you’re f\*\*\*ing f\*\*\*ed.’ Once labelled, there appears to be very little you can do to escape their gaze.

Jonathan engaged very positively with the collage-making process, saying that it is rare that you get the chance and time to think about what you feel. He feels that ‘we teachers are quite low on the list of priorities’ when it comes to being asked for their views. His collage is a powerful expression of struggling

which incorporates not only *his* experience of struggling but that of teaching and teachers more generally. There is a real collective feel to his expression of struggling, implying that ‘we’re all in it together.’

This expression of struggling takes place under water; water features on a number of occasions when talking with Jonathan, who equates struggling with ‘feeling like drowning.’ In fact, when first thinking about the collage, he immediately says that he needs some ‘water for the drowning.’ He draws a water line across the page. He goes on to explain that the struggling takes place under the pressure of the water, which is ‘all surrounding.’ It is not entirely clear what the water symbolises and how it contributes to the experience of struggling.

When making his collage, he also says that he wants ‘some chaos... levels of chaos... all those things you can’t control...that are unresolved... confusion.’ He chooses a variety of seemingly random items from the collage box and spreads them across the page, below the water line. There are some good things amongst the chaos– which are expressed by the colourful items on the collage – but they are so jumbled up with everything else, the result seems to be just more chaos.

The dark-coloured, central feature of Jon’s collage is made up of black straws, tied together with brown twine. He calls this bundle a tree, then renames it a ‘fascio’ which is a historical, Latin/Italian term which symbolises strength through unity; each independent rod is fragile, yet as a bundle they are strong. The word can have revolutionary and political connotations, and given his subject specialism, it is not entirely surprising that Jonathan uses a reference such as this. To create this fascio, he wrapped mesh-like material around the straws. One of these stayed put after he released it, whilst the other kept ‘unwrapping’ despite a number of attempts to fasten it. When talking about it afterwards, he explained: ‘when the meshy stuff unravelled, it felt right.’ He explains further that the straws represent teaching or teachers more generally. He was clear that it is ‘not just me.’ At the base of the straws (fascio/tree), he drew a number of lines to illustrate a break and a cracking sound. This fascio is in danger of cracking away from its base due to the pressure of the water, and this breakage causes chaos. Of course, Jonathan explains, the sound would not be heard outside of the sea. He adds: a ‘powerful thing is happening (but it is) unheard by other people.’

Throughout his story Jonathan expresses strong views about the importance of collectivity in teaching; he uses the plural forms - ‘we’ and ‘us’ – regularly and refers to the teaching unions on more than one occasion, saying with some regret that they ‘have got quieter and quieter.’ He adds that there has been a ‘weakening of the unions’ and he even calls them toothless at one point: ‘the things my parents fought

for, we've lost all of it.' The fascio in the centre of his collage clearly represents this collectivity, which he adds to as he narrates events from his early teaching career, when he shared classes with the head teacher which he tells me was 'an amazing experience.'

Some of the more negative experiences he talks about are also expressed in the plural 'them and us' mode: 'they're not trying to get rid of us as such, just trying to scare us into the shape they want... once we've scared you... into the position we want then we'll back off.' At one stage he suggests that 'the profession nowadays is all about struggle... I don't know anybody who isn't (struggling)... with everything on us at the minute, what can we do but struggle?' Again, using the plural professional 'we,' Jonathan states 'we're losing the fact that we're all colleagues, all of us... we're all teachers.' Drawing on his subject specialism, Jonathan uses imagery from World War One, suggesting that teachers need to feel like 'we're in the trenches with people.' However, he feels that Gove (former Secretary of State for Education) took more of an 'over the top, boys' approach, standing back and sending the teachers into the firing line. He looks at the fascio, noticing how it is not entirely held together and reflects on what binds teachers together: '(I'm) just not sure what that thing is anymore.' He voices his fears for the future of the teaching profession more generally: 'if we don't come together, I don't know what's gonna happen... (it's) hard to imagine a world where people are being taught by people who don't know how to teach... it's not that hard to imagine, it's happening right now.'

Jonathan recognises that he works in a 'good school' and wonders 'what's it like in a bad school?' He values his home as an 'inner sanctum' and tries to keep his personal and professional lives as separate as possible. Jonathan has friends and colleagues who are leaving teaching, a profession which he admits is not for 'the faint of heart.' He gets cross and defensive when people 'slag off' teachers. He sounds particularly irate when he talks about 'ill-informed people, and the Daily Mail's view of teachers as idle, work-shy and untrustworthy.' He tells me that he was recently asked if he would recommend teaching. On the one hand, he responded, it is 'the most rewarding job in the world.' But an honest answer would have to be 'under no circumstances' although he then added 'maybe in ten years ... but not now.' However, he remains hopeful to some extent, saying that the education system is 'not unfixable' but it does need money.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Jonathan's story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 15: How Jonathan’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Drowning Suffocation Fear Anger
Factors that influence struggling	Leadership and management Support plans Teaching 2 subjects Policy change Working in a ‘good’ school Too much to do
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	What binds teachers together (collectivity)
Themes	Water – drowning Collectivity of teaching (fascio)

#### 5.1.6 Gina

Gina is an overseas teacher from Southern Europe who teaches 6<sup>th</sup> form students. She works in an international school context and teaches a range of subjects to a mixture of home and international students. She tells me that she got into teaching by chance, having applied for a job at her current school back in 2012 ‘out of despair.’ She had had some teaching experience with students of a similar age in her home country. Interestingly, she was keen to emphasise that ‘I work as a teacher’ rather than ‘I am a teacher.’ This seems to be in part a cultural thing; being a teacher is seen as a fairly permanent job in her home country and it requires a qualification. At the time, Gina saw this part-time employment as a ‘temporary measure’ and she tells me that she still does not hold a formal teaching qualification. When we met in 2017, we talked briefly about Brexit which she explained was ‘not yet acute’ in terms of recruiting students to the 6<sup>th</sup> Form nor did she feel it impacted yet on her immediate future plans.

We met on two separate occasions; she constructed her collage in the first interview.



**Figure 13: Gina's collage**

Gina's experience of struggling is inextricably linked to her particular cultural background. She speaks at length about the 'cultural identity' she brings to her teaching style and how this is 'part of the struggle.' Teaching in English – rather than in her mother tongue – is a 'big source of stress' for her, although she clearly speaks English fluently. She reports experiencing what she terms 'communication problems' with British students which she feels would not be an issue with Southern Europeans. She explains this by telling that she feels 'British students look at me with some suspicion.' She has reflected on her tone of voice which she says 'can seem aggressive to some... and then you're ignored by others.' Gina feels strongly that 'leadership don't understand the culture thing... they don't understand the cultural-related difficulties, not now, not in a million years... and most colleagues aren't widely travelled.' She adds that leadership positions are held 'by locals.'

Working in an international school context is important to Gina: 'I love it but it's hard' she tells me. She explains that 'if I was in a traditional British, A Level context, it would be easier to apply a code' although she admits that she would not actually want to work in such a context. As it is, expressing herself in a foreign language and dealing daily with a mix of cultures are sources of struggling for her. Gina also talks in some detail about her fear of teaching larger group sizes. She explains: '10 to 15 in a class is ok... but I'm uncomfortable with larger groups... I'm not a public speaker.' She also defines herself as an outsider although it is not clear whether this is in relation to just her students or possibly to the staff as well. She

does however talk about 'not being one of them' when teaching a class of British students; she explains that she previously did not appreciate how difficult it is for different cultures to co-exist. She adds that 'people above me don't always realise the challenges facing me as a foreign teacher.' Gina feels that it is the Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) teachers who probably understand her best.

Initially, inexperience was a factor which Gina perceives as contributing to her experience of struggling. She tells me: 'everything was new' and it was taking her four hours to plan one lesson. She does not appear to realise that new, inexperienced 'local' teachers would probably also need as long to plan their lessons. She adds: 'I wasted time, I didn't know how to channel (my) energy.' She was teaching a range of subjects and different qualifications, none of which she had taught before and it is clear that these were factors contributing to her sense of struggling. She did not know how to plan or assess; it was not that she was 'ill-equipped, I was *not* equipped.' She tells me that she was not aware of any support to help her, and in any case she would not have known how to access it. She now realises that 'support is there' adding 'people who know will ask for it... (but) nobody offered me anything.' On reflection she realises that this is not entirely the case, as she talks appreciatively of the support she received from a recently retired teacher who 'was helping me out as a favour... I felt shy to ask, if possible I avoided calling her... I didn't perceive her support as from the school, but from her own heart. She wanted to help, but I thought – I can't expect her to carry on for free. I was so indebted to her...' Gina seems to view the support from this retired teacher differently from any support available within the school context.

Gina's experience of struggling is felt in her body, for example as knots in her stomach and it also manifests itself in an inability to sleep. She explains how she would not sleep on a Wednesday evening, for example, knowing which lesson she had to teach on Thursday. She reports feeling very anxious and inadequate, as if she were 'consistently on the edge of my seat.' She adds: 'that's not nice over time.' One way of coping, she says half jokingly, was to shout at her boyfriend! At first, Gina found it hard being observed teaching; that does not happen back at home. She had 'no idea what they were looking for' but she admits to then 'understanding what they wanted' and reflecting that 'I've learned valuable things from the feedback.'

Gina seems to view struggling as having to overcome obstacles in teaching; she feels that obstacles are 'part and parcel of the job.' In her collage, obstacles are a central feature and are illustrated by her use of the clear boxes – which contain a range of craft materials – which she placed in the centre of the collage. She explains: 'you can see through the glass, the obstacles are in there, but you are separated from them. You attempt to reach something, and you may hurt yourself if you don't notice the glass.' She seems to be saying that you may want to deal with – try to overcome - the obstacles but the glass is between you

and them, blocking your progress. She goes on to explain that the pots of playdough which she placed on top of the clear plastic boxes are 'colourful other obstacles... which look nice.' It is interesting to think that obstacles can appear nice yet contribute towards a sense of struggling.

Finally, on top of the playdough pots Gina placed a ball of dark twine with a thread purposely hanging down, which symbolises a rope. The rope is there to help you. She explains: 'you're given a rope to save your life. It's sold to you as a way to solve the problem... (But) if you don't secure it to something stable, the person will fall off the cliff... so it's a fake help, it makes the problem even worse.' Gina seems to be saying that support is there to help you overcome obstacles but that support is itself not safe. In which case, it would arguably be better not to access it as it would exacerbate rather than alleviate one's feeling of struggling. When I offered Gina the English phrase 'give you a rope to hang yourself' in this context she appeared taken aback, as she had not intended to present that meaning. The English phrase, which implies that someone is offering you the means by which to kill yourself, perhaps appeared initially to be too stark an image. However, we revisited this in the second interview and she was keen to emphasise that, on reflection, it did seem an apt phrase after all.

The left side of Gina's collage shows what she calls the ideal of teaching. She explains that the cloud contains lots of 'colourful things, nice and bright, different shapes, beautiful... (like) expectations, enthusiasm and a desire to test myself.' The ideal of teaching, then, is that it is a pretty mess. Conversely, the right-hand side of the collage shows the reality of teaching. Gina has created an image of a person – herself – using pipe cleaners and springs and by drawing a few lines. She explains that her eyes 'are out of my head, I have an expressionless face. I'm not showing unhappiness or anything.' She also has a red knot in her stomach: 'red is all about pain, blood... red is a good colour for struggle.' Gina also adds that she is 'not standing on my feet anymore' and the ground below is covered in feathers and leaves. This sense of not feeling grounded is in contrast to elsewhere in the interview where she says that when she is with her students, she can clearly feel her feet on the ground. She explains that leaves only fall when they are dead, and in Gina's culture, feathers are a symbol of defeat and can represent an 'animal that has just been killed.' This idea of defeat is raised elsewhere in the interview where she says she feels 'completely defeated.' When I ask her to explain further she says: 'defeated in the battle against the system, the idea of education as (only being about) results.' This focus on results is mentioned again where she tells me that she feels any judgment of you as a teacher is 'based on your results.' When we were talking about the 'culture of accountability' in her current school she hints at the idea that accountability is linked to blame.

Gina has a particular view on the purpose of education and struggles with the idea that it is all about exam results. She bemoans especially the way students' targets are calculated, saying that you are not allowed to moderate predictions which are automatically generated by a particular software package: 'our judgment as teachers is completely ignored.' Results have become the be-all-and-end-all and are seen 'as an objective way of measuring abilities.' Gina is far more interested in the process of learning and student progress. She is also clearly uncomfortable knowing that she operates in an environment where you are 'surrounded by people who end up cheating.' She goes on: 'some teachers are pushed towards cheating, otherwise they risk their jobs.' She recalls how she was encouraged to 'give your students some hints' and she laughs at the British understatement in this advice: 'hint means give it to them!' Whilst clearly ill at ease with the idea of cheating, she reflects; 'if not, your students are disadvantaged.' She also states: 'it's not their fault if the system works this way.'

She struggles with the way that 'teachers are held by the balls, by parents and pupils... you have to do what parents want.' She returns to this later in the interview, using the balls imagery again: 'they hold us by the balls... they squeeze more, we say what they want to hear.' Gina clearly feels constrained in her ability to act in a way of her own choosing. This lack of agency is particularly illustrated in an example she offers when line managers 'asked me to say something completely untrue... say what they want to hear, lie if you have to' in order to resolve a parental complaint. When she first started teaching, Gina struggled to deal with such complaints and she remembers feeling 'really really scared' early on when 'dealing with a paranoid parent.' Whilst she is clearly uncomfortable with the idea of lying to a parent if a manager asks her to, she now feels more able to handle interactions with parents, stating confidently: 'if it happened now, I'd have them raw for breakfast!'

The issue of complaints is not confined to parents. Gina feels that students, too, have become accustomed to 'complaining for complaining's sake.' In one particular incident, Gina was 'told off' by her line manager following a student complaint. She recalls this incident with some residual feelings of anger: 'my side of the story is not even taken into consideration... it's not worth listening to what we (teachers) have to say, my perspective is not important.' She goes on: 'what message does this send to the teacher? You're not worth anything! And the message to the student? You can get away with murder!' She clearly feels that her perspective is not being taken into account and her sense of indignance is clear. She reflects on how this would probably be viewed differently in her home context where the teacher's views would – rightly or wrongly - definitely be prioritised over those of the student.

Gina tells me that she feels everything you hear and read about teachers is that they are failures, a view also held by her boyfriend. However, despite his negative view of teaching, he sees how much Gina loves it and is actually very supportive. Having initially applied for the job as a temporary post, five years on Gina now reflects: 'it's fine... it was meant to be.'

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Gina's story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

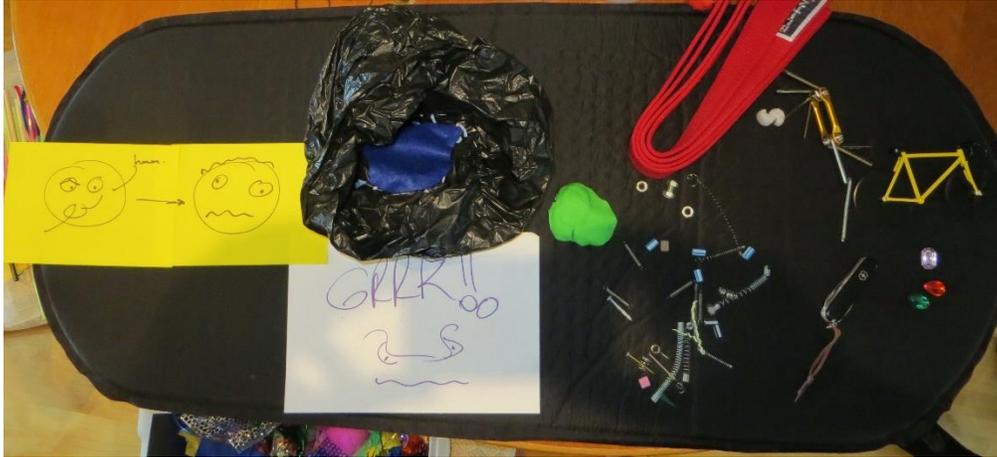
**Table 16: How Gina's story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Mix of students Defeated Feet not on the ground Teaching more than one subject Teaching in English
Factors that influence struggling	Cultural identity Parents Student complaints Obstacles Leaders and managers Support
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Learned to change approach Ask for help More aware More pressure Autonomy – don't care attitude
Themes	Culture

#### 5.1.7 Mark

Mark is an overseas-trained teacher in his early 30s. He has been teaching at the same school for 7 years, and he tells me that he has struggled at different stages of his teaching career. He explains that teaching is the 'family business' as 'both parents are in the industry' but he 'didn't want to be a teacher and become my father.' He always hated the assumption that he would go into teaching: 'I'd rather cut my legs off' was his younger self's response. So, after graduating, he spent some time working in a bank but then, when 'the stars aligned' he moved into teaching. He is extremely sporty and married with one young child and another on the way.

We met on two separate occasions; he constructed his collage in the first interview.



**Figure 14: Mark's collage**

Mark's experience of struggling is intrinsically linked with his mental health, which he talks about openly and freely. Depression is a key feature both in the spoken interviews and the imagery in his collage. He clearly has high standards of himself, saying 'I don't like doing a poor job. Dad always said if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well.' He feels that his Dad's mantra has rubbed off on him, 'but it grates on me too.' He is aware of his own high expectations and he certainly seems to hold himself to very high standards. This is particularly clear when he talks about an incident where concerns were raised with him about his students' controlled assessments (work which is part of a qualification and which is completed in lesson time under strict conditions). His professional integrity shines through when talking about doing controlled assessments 'by the book,' and he is clearly uncomfortable talking about how he was encouraged to do what is known in his department as 'controlled cheating.' In his mind, it is simple: 'you don't break the rules.' He explains how a colleague advised him of the approach he needed to adopt: 'you walk up to the line in the sand in terms of breaking the rules.' Mark then goes on to admit how 'by the end of the year I went through that line and well over it.' Elsewhere in the interview he talks again about integrity: 'being a professional with integrity can be a negative (thing)... if you feel you've done all you need to do and it's not good enough, where do I go from here?' This is further illustrated in the example of using post-it notes in students' books to provide written feedback; those post-it notes can then be easily removed if anyone needs to look at the books as part of a work scrutiny, for example. 'If the books are called in, the post-it notes can come out' he was told.

Mark's own high expectations of himself mean that he also has high expectations of others and he clearly struggles with so-called double standards from colleagues in positions senior to him: 'when a member of SLT (senior leadership team) is telling me to do something I know for a fact it's not something he does...

that really irritates me. I have an issue with that.’ He goes on, as if talking to that particular senior leader: ‘you have absolutely no grounds to judge my practice if this is your practice.’ Yet Mark is acutely aware that, if he wants to progress on the pay scale, he will need that senior leader – who is in fact his line manager - to ‘tick the boxes’ during his appraisal meeting. Mark bemoans the fact that a lot of the focus in those appraisal meetings is exam performance, almost to the exclusion of everything else. This clearly irks him as he seems to value his holistic contribution as a teacher rather than a narrow focus on his performance with specific groups of students. He goes on to add: ‘unless you prove without any doubt that you’ve done everything in your power to get these kids a result, it’s not good enough.’ Mark also feels that he lacks confidence in his ability to play what he terms the appraisal game, adding that he knows he is ‘having an impact on students but I know I’ll have to fight the school to pay me more if the exam results aren’t in line with expectations.’ What is actually measured and what Mark ultimately values in educational terms are not necessarily the same.

This is further exemplified when Mark tells me that, in a previous appraisal cycle, he was pulled up on his marking. He clearly has pretty strong views about marking and formative feedback, which do not necessarily align with the whole-school policy. He explains: ‘for some kids it makes a difference... for others, not a jot. And so the question is – does it actually matter at all?’ He relates a particular incident towards the end of one academic year where he was told - at short notice - that he needed to mark a set of books, retrospectively. He was aware that students would not have the opportunity to respond to the marking and feedback and so it seemed to Mark to be a pointless exercise driven by overly bureaucratic motives. ‘It drove me mad,’ he tells me, just ticking a box when he knew that he had provided ample verbal feedback to students in that class. But he explains that such verbal feedback is ‘not tangible, visible, it’s not evidenced in their books.’ However much he might disagree with the policy and the expectations of him in terms of marking, he now keeps a folder full of evidence, to ‘back myself up... (to prove) I’m doing my job and worthy of a pay increase.’

As an overseas-trained teacher, Mark feels that he was ‘coming in as an outsider’ and he certainly felt ‘unfamiliar with the (English) education system.’ At times he still feels very much away from home, his family and a support network. His overseas training was eventually accredited here in England, although he tells me that it was an onerous process with a complete ‘lack of guidance and support.’ He had no real say in who his mentors were and received very mixed messages depending on who was evaluating his teaching. On the one hand, according to people observing him from the Overseas Training programme, he was ‘outstanding.’ However, when evaluated against the English system’s NQT standards, his teaching

was found to be 'inadequate.' He struggled with these mixed messages. On reflection, he says, his overall experience of training 'wasn't brutal enough' especially as, on reflection, he realises his 'training at home was very supportive.' A key standout moment for Mark was when an English colleague told him that to learn, he needed to 'screw stuff up.' Until then he had perhaps not really realised that in order to succeed, you also need to fail.

Mark threw himself into the collage activity with great enthusiasm, spending a long time considering how best to illustrate his experience of struggling. He used a variety of objects from his own daily life and home surroundings which add a really personal touch to his collage. Whilst the collage is clearly linear, from left to right, he explained afterwards that he feels struggling is actually more of a cyclical process. The backdrop to his collage is a black body board. The collage then develops from left to right; the yellow paper, which he was initially unsure about using, shows a happy face followed by a confused face, where 'the eyes are looking off in different directions.' The 'GRRR!' is a written sound and symbolises Mark's mental health, which at this stage is starting to deteriorate. Above that is a black plastic bag with a piece of blue felt placed in the bottom. Mark talks about the common image of a 'black dog' for depression but feels more that for him depression is blue. He explains that when he is depressed he would actually like to turn blue so that people could see that something was wrong or different. The black bag contains 'all the crap we have to deal with' and he speaks of it as an 'abyss you fall in.' The green blob of playdough illustrates illness, both mental and physical. Mark struggled to open the playdough so used a tool to break into it which is interesting as, on reflection Mark's desire to use 'tools to fix problems' emerged as a theme throughout the interview and collage-making process.

Towards the right, the collage then seems to veer off in two different directions, into the right top corner and the bottom right corner. The red belt at the top is Mark's martial arts instructor belt. He explains his reason for adding it to his collage, in relation to the experience of struggling: 'I suffered physically and mentally doing it.' The bits and bobs which he tells me are the result of struggling – when you fall apart - include springs, nuts, etc. He makes a point of telling me that he is particularly 'drawn to metal stuff.' He adds that these kinds of things might normally be laying around in a workshop, waiting to be put back together or used to improvise a fix: 'to get things done you need certain equipment... sometimes you can improvise.' He goes on to explain, however, that whilst 'you can have the right tool, (you still) need to know what you're doing.' I feel that in relation to teaching, Mark is suggesting here that you can have a range of teaching strategies in your pedagogic toolbox, but you still need to know how to use them practically in the classroom.

On Mark's collage there are two different types of tools. The collage finishes on the right with a model bike – which he takes from his desk - and some gems from the collage box. Cycling is a key activity for Mark and one that he says acts as a decompressor. Being active helps his mental health enormously and when he is able to cycle to work he starts the day off feeling he has already achieved something. This physical struggle – he cycles in all weathers and seasons – is one that Mark finds 'immensely rewarding, even it is painful' and he explains that he likes this kind of struggle – a challenge – because it is self-determined and not imposed. This is a key theme for Mark who is able to differentiate between positive struggling and negative struggling. Mark says at one stage: 'I like doing hard stuff' but he is also aware of the need to stop or get away, to have the 'chance to unplug, to disconnect.' At times he feels he just needs 'to escape' and his rucksack is packed and by the door at all times, just in case. Escaping allows him to 'return refreshed, feeling normal.' Otherwise, 'my mental health just goes.' He explains to me that struggling in cycling can involve mechanical problems which need to be fixed; struggling in teaching, on the other hand, tends to involve 'depression, confusion and frustration.'

According to Mark, there are different types of struggling; one which can lead to something rewarding, and another where you feel have no control. The gems – Mark calls them 'shinies' - symbolise those rewards you get from struggling. He uses the image of a diamond which he explains needs pressure to be made, suggesting we too are under pressure when struggling but that there will be a reward - a gem - at the end. He also quotes Hemingway (Mark's words, not an original/accurate quote): 'life breaks everyone, but at the end some are strong in the broken places.' Mark maintains at one stage that 'struggling makes you a better person' although it is not entirely clear that he can relate that statement to his own experience of struggling as a teacher.

Mark has strong views on what is happening in the English education system, in terms of academisation, the marketisation of education, etc. He talks at length about how 'we're trying to take a human profession and formulate it into a factory model that is profitable.' He continues with the business imagery: 'I'm on the production line. My responsibility is one component on the assembly line, and I need to make sure they're all the same shape and size.' He takes this further: 'but there's no quality control of the components coming in, and you can't turn away substandard components.' It is clear as he speaks that he disagrees with current approaches to measuring student attainment, for example. He finishes by stating that what is fundamentally wrong with the system is its focus on the development of the *cohort* rather than the development of the *individual*. He also voices concerns about 'cheaper teachers' being hired in what he calls a financial 'race to the bottom' to have the 'best quality product at the cheapest rate.'

Mark experiences negatively the impact of a lot of school-based policies such as those for marking, reporting student grades and lesson observations. He told me that, even in the most extreme circumstances which involved the tragic, sudden death of a student at his current school, deadlines for reports seemingly could not be moved. The new lesson observation policy at his school states that, if the first observation of the academic year is deemed successful, you will not be observed again that year. So, he explains, pressure is on all teachers to ‘have this perfect wonderful lesson’ when you are observed so that you do not need to be observed again later in the year. In terms of reporting student grades, for example, Mark cited an incident where he was made to feel anxious after being asked to check a student’s report. He had mistakenly put the wrong mark in for that student – human error – but then became really worried about the repercussions. ‘What if the parent feels I haven’t done my job properly?’ he asks. Mark’s anxiety is clearly part of his experience of struggling.

Mark talks openly about his mental ill health. He has had a number of depressive episodes and told me about a panic attack he once had in his classroom. On another occasion, he came home from work and found that he just could not unbutton his jacket. He curled up, cried, and allowed himself to be held by his wife. It was harrowing to listen to him recalling these experiences. He uses a diary to ‘catalogue what’s bugging me’ and has had counselling on a number of occasions. He finds colleagues a source of support and feels he can ‘let off steam’ with some of them. He is drawing on lessons learned from reading *The Chimp Paradox* (Steve Peters) which helps him differentiate between what he can and what he cannot control. He has plans to move back to his home country in the next 12-18 months and feels he might be ready to take on a position of responsibility there, where the education culture is perhaps not as pressured, and where he feels there are not the same expectations and struggles as here in the English system.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Mark’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 17: How Mark’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

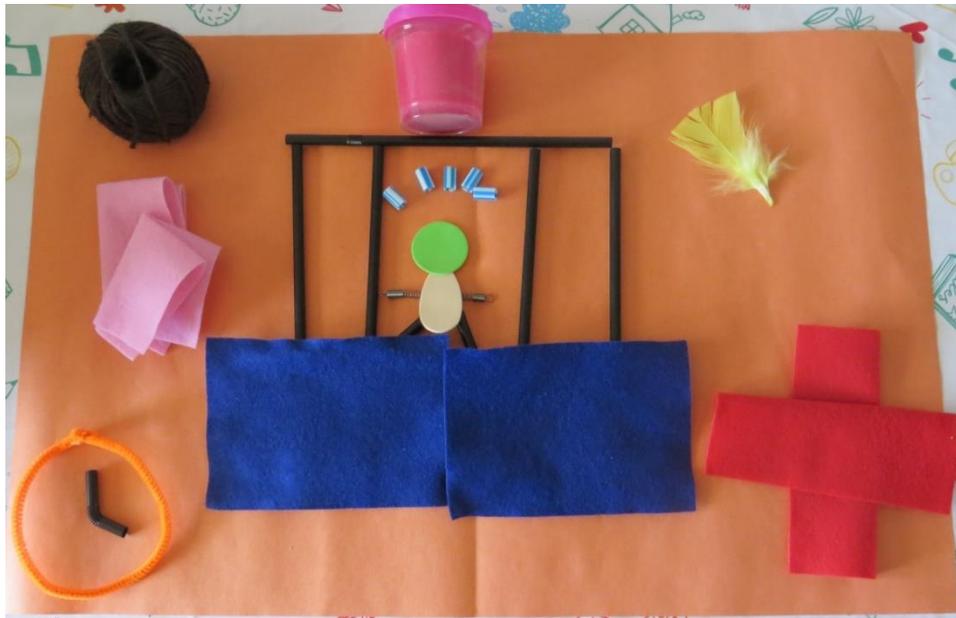
Experience of struggling	Depression – colour blue Outsider Positive and negative struggling Play the game No say (in mentor) Nature of mentoring relationship Integrity High standards / expectations of self
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	Different dimensions of struggling – positive / negative
Factors that influence struggling	Diary Tools – to fix the problem Rewards Others’ judgments Colleagues
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Happiness – confusion – fall apart – fix Linear Cyclical reward If something is fixable
Themes	Education as a factory model Self-determined struggle (cycling) (Breaking) rules Tools

5.1.8 Kathryn

Kathryn is a part-time middle leader in her late 30s. She is married and has a young child. After graduating, she spent some time working abroad, in the business sector, but she found the hours too long and life consisted of ‘just work’ with ‘no time to see friends.’ Moreover, she saw no opportunities to progress in the job she was in, and so returned to England to complete a PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education). She chose the so-called fast-track route into teaching as it is specifically aimed at ambitious teachers new to the profession who are expected to take on responsibilities early on in their teaching careers. Kathryn loved the PGCE – it was ‘amazing’ – and she enjoyed bringing a passion both for her subject and for teaching to the classroom, where she was ‘hoping to make a difference.’ She had some tough classes early on in her first school which she admits ‘stood me in good stead.’ At one stage early on in our conversation she pauses and reflects: ‘how did I manage then?’ This reflection seems to remind her of how much energy and enthusiasm she was able to bring to her role in the early stages of her career. A few years later, for personal reasons, she moved to a different region in England and worked her way up to a senior leadership post in a small rural school, before going on maternity leave.

We met on two separate occasions; she constructed her collage in the first interview.



**Figure 15: Kathryn's collage**

Kathryn's experience of struggling is linked to feelings of anxiety, stress, ineffectiveness and uselessness. She admits putting herself under pressure and holding herself to her own very high standards, telling me 'I like to do a proper job.' She is very interested in the field of educational leadership and is pursuing a Masters in this area. Perhaps this has heightened her awareness of her own and others' leadership styles. For example, she has noticed tensions arising between the view of herself as a leader and her experience of others leading her. She tells me that she finds the relationship with her current line manager difficult – he is only 'focussed on the small things' - and she also struggles to some extent with other members of the senior leadership team. She mentions on more than one occasion her need for and desire to have 'trusting relationships' with people she works with. It is clear from the way she describes feeling undermined and questioned in her professionalism she does not feel entirely trusted in the prevailing school culture. Referring to her line manager, she says 'it's a professional relationship which doesn't work.' She misquotes from her leadership reading and inadvertently creates a concept of her own, that of 'insincere fidelity.' It is clear that she wants to be faithful to her own values and beliefs yet the fidelity she has to show externally – for example to the school and her current line manager – feels insincere.

Kathryn has clear views on what she thinks constitutes good leadership and admits: 'the senior leaders are not the kind of leader I want to be.' She adds: 'they're not focussed on teaching and learning but on tick boxes and evidence.' Later in the interview she reflects that this might be because the school has been

graded as RI (requiring improvement) by Ofsted; she quotes some of the literature she is reading for her Masters research, in which she states 'heads in RI schools are constrained.'

Kathryn tells me in some detail about a conversation she had with her headteacher about 6 months after starting in post. The headteacher asked her whether she felt she was 'in the right place,' which Kathryn interpreted as whether she was in the right job at the right school. She goes on: 'that knocked me 6 foot backwards.' Kathryn seems to have interpreted what the headteacher said as 'you are not in the right place' and this led to her to reflect quite deeply on who and how she is as a leader. She tells me that she went on to question herself and her capabilities. She ended up wondering whether her self-perception had been wrong all along especially in light of what she had previously told me of her success as deputy head in a small rural school, where she felt she was highly regarded. This question by her current headteacher, however, had made her wonder: 'was I that successful?' At one stage in our conversation, her out-loud reflections lead her to say: 'd'ya know what, I can't do this... I'm supposed to be a good or outstanding teacher, a good leader, but I'm not good at any of it.'

Kathryn's collage is, in her own words, 'not abstract.' Rather it is more a literal representation of the experience of struggling and depicts a number of factors which influence struggling. Kathryn placed herself in the centre, in what she calls a cage made out of black drinking straws. She explains that she sees no way out of the cage, which is both a physical and mental space. Kathryn explains that the cage could be her classroom: 'your classroom can be your safe space... it can also be your prison.' She talks of a feeling of 'hemmed-in-ness.' When your classroom door is shut, she tells me, it is a sign that 'you're not coping.' She adds that the cage is also transportable which suggests that your struggling might be with you wherever you go.

The plastic beads coming out of the top of her head illustrate a 'mental explosion,' although she adds that 'struggling can't be seen.' She explains further what this mental explosion is like: 'the mental to-do list hits a critical mass, the straw that breaks the camel's back and I think – that's it, I'm done.' This is not the only time she talks about 'being done' with teaching, leading, and the job generally.

Above the cage is a pot of playdough which symbolises for Kathryn the pressures she feels from above, by which she means the leadership team and the headteacher in particular: 'it weighs you down... (then) you explode.' I asked whether the choice of pink was intentional, as she had already explained that her headteacher was female; she is keen to emphasise that the colour choice was coincidental, and she adds that the pressure actually comes more from her male line manager.

Beneath her, she uses a piece of blue felt to illustrate what she calls the 'shark-infested waters' she is operating in. During the process of creating her collage, I observed her moving this piece of blue felt up a number of times until the level had almost reached her waist. She had not realised she had done this until I pointed it out after she had finished her collage. When talking about the symbolism of the blue felt she returned to the imagery of water, telling me that the movement of the blue felt represents the 'swelling waves of accountability.' It is here that she raises the idea of buoyancy which she describes as being able to cope when the conditions are right. At other times, however, she can feel like she is floundering. She finishes by adding that 'anyone can go under at any time.'

The collage shows clearly that Kathryn feels there are pressures coming both from above and below her. She also talks about how the school 'squeezes people... to make every person work as hard as they can... and to get value for money.' She feels she is operating in a 'dog eat dog' environment where market forces prevail; a system in which there is a recruitment crisis and where teachers are not staying in the profession long term.

Around the edges of the collage, there are various items which help express Kathryn's experience of struggling or which symbolise factors which influence that experience. Starting from top left, she used a ball of dark coloured twine to represent a hamster wheel. She explains that she feels she is on this wheel; she is constantly tired and does not feel able to get off. She is so busy, she tells me, that she sometimes works at school from 8am through to 5.30pm without eating or stopping to go to the toilet. She also adds that it is hard enough being on that hamster wheel but then things are also being thrown into that wheel which get in your way. She cites new policies as an example. The overwhelming feeling of exhaustion is clear as she tells me that you just get 'tired and tired' on this wheel and there is a risk of burning out. When she hears herself say burnout she stops and reflects: 'earlier in my career, I saw others at risk of burnout, but it didn't resonate then.'

In the top right-hand corner, Kathryn placed a yellow feather but made it clear that it should be viewed as white (there was not a white feather in the collage box). 'I put it on the right-hand side because... you look automatically top right, don't you, so that's ultimately where I think this issue of struggling is... all about being judged and ... I guess that's why I put it there because it is the most important thing, the difficulties that you face...' She explains that the feather symbolises 'some sort of failure... you're not capable, you're shirking responsibilities... soldiers in World War One were given feathers because they were considered ... well someone like you, you're a failure.'

This idea of being considered a failure comes up elsewhere in our conversation where she suggests that 'it's all about being judged.' She appears to be perceiving judgment here as negative. When talking about whether you can admit that you are struggling she tells me: 'it's difficult to open up, because people come and judge you.' She bemoans, too, the responses of leaders when she does open up: 'No teacher likes asking for help, for fear of failure... I asked for help and got told – read the policy.' She concludes: 'you can't ask for help, help equals failure, you're a failing teacher.' Later in the interview, she tells me about teachers she knows who 'openly moan in the staffroom' and wonders whether they are, in fact, strong teachers who are 'open about their struggling.' They are not hiding away; they have identified an issue and are freely discussing it. This leads her to wonder whether moaning is a way of keeping the struggling at bay: 'when you're not struggling, (maybe) you're able to articulate an identified problem.' She references her first aid training to explain this further, suggesting that the moaning teachers do not need the help most because in an emergency 'you go to the quiet ones first, not those who are screaming.'

The issue of trust - or its opposite mistrust - comes up on a number of occasions and Kathryn seems to link it to the notion of being judged. She tells me: 'it's not right to be looking over my shoulder, we should be a trusted profession.' She adds: 'I feel undermined... all this double-checking... they're (SLT) not satisfied with someone's word... treat me like a professional, don't go and check up. Trust me!' Kathryn exemplifies this in her collage where she uses folded-up pieces of pink felt to illustrate the 'piles of pointless paperwork' she has to fill out this paperwork to 'prove I'm doing my job.' While expanding on this, she starts to sound quite irritated: 'it's outrageous how many issues are not linked to teaching and learning... a lot has nothing to do with the children... SLT (senior leadership team) are not focussed on teaching and learning, but on tick boxes and evidence.' She ponders whether these 'stupid pieces of paper' and the 'meetings coming out of my ears' are part of the culture of a RI\* school (\*requires improvement – a judgement by Ofsted). She feels that in a good or outstanding school, a confident head would have more autonomy to be more flexible in terms of which hoops to jump and which boxes to tick.

Kathryn used two pieces of red felt to create a red cross in the bottom left corner of her collage. The symbolism is clear, the British Red Cross (2018) being an organisation that 'helps people in crisis, wherever and wherever they are'. She admits being desperate for help, whilst also stating elsewhere in the interview that she is fearful of asking: 'I don't feel I can ask... and it's out of reach. My arms aren't bendy enough.' She raises an important point here about her perception that help is available but not accessible. She is also mindful of the need to offer help to others, for example those in her departmental team. As a middle leader herself, she says 'it's my responsibility to spot signs and triggers before someone topples over.' She

adds: 'it's not a weakness to say - I'm struggling. It's my job to encourage and say – how can we help, what can we do, how can we take this away? It's my job to spot that... and it's other people's jobs to spot it in me.' Yet, her experience of asking for help has not been entirely positive nor does she feel others have recognised her need for help. She suggests that the leaders just do not know her well enough. She feels she operates in a culture where the children are helped, but as an adult you have to 'suck it up' because 'you're paid to do it.' Later in our conversation, she reflects on how differently children are treated in schools from the adults. Adults, she says, are 'just big kids. They need recognition and differentiation too... We're humans, not robots.'

In the bottom left of the collage, Kathryn has created a clock out of a pipe cleaner and a piece of a drinking straw. She tells me that the actual time indicated on the clock is not significant. However, time is a definite theme throughout both interviews and Kathryn was clear that it had to be included on the collage. More precisely, it is the lack of time or the pressure of time which influences Kathryn's experience of struggling. She talks at some length about how people's 'last-minute-ism' can become 'someone else's stress factor.' She also feels that things are 'pushed onto me (as a middle leader) which are actually senior leadership things.' She suggests that senior leaders might do this in 'the name of distributed leadership,' or as a way of making middle leaders feel more empowered. Kathryn clearly does not see it that way.

The fact that Kathryn works part-time is a further factor which influences whether she is struggling or not. She holds a Teaching and Learning Responsibility post (TLR) for the leadership of a small department. She works on a 0.6 contract, i.e. 3 days per week; the TLR is paid pro rata yet she feels she is 'expected to do 100% of the job.' A lot of her non-teaching time in school is spent on this leadership role, which takes time away from planning her own teaching: 'I have no time to plan in depth... and planning is crucial.' She is aware that the quality of her teaching is suffering, which seems to be a source of discomfort to her. She tells me that she often goes from thinking 'I know I can teach' to thinking 'I can't do this, I'm gonna quit.' As a mother of a small child, she explains that evenings are spent getting dinner ready and getting her son ready for bed. She is adamant that she is 'not willing to let go of family time.' Yet her professional role does seem to penetrate her personal life, too: 'I have no time to cook properly, to watch TV... it's just check emails, eat, bed.'

Another factor linked to the issue of time is emails. Kathryn explains that 'everyone can have a piece of you' via email. She bemoans how the cc and bcc (copying and blind copying) functions are used in her school adding that 'emails don't promote positive relationships between people.' She even suggests that email has become an accountability tool. She is particularly appalled at the use of email to 'name and

shame’ teachers who have not completed certain tasks on time, recalling an ‘outrageous’ example of such a ‘list of shame’ which was sent out one Sunday evening to the whole staff.

On more than one occasion, Kathryn uses the term ‘critical mass’ in relation to struggling. She lists a whole host of factors which influence whether she is struggling, including: a change of school, having a small child, being tired, not having enough time, more classroom teaching than in a previous role, hormones, differing views of education, knowing that Ofsted is ‘looming’ and feeling ‘on edge.’ She recognises that these factors can stop the cogs turning, as she terms it. These factors are the sorts of things that get stuck in-between your cogs and slow you down; it is a bit like her idea of things being thrown into the hamster wheel while you are on it. To get out of a period of struggling, she says, ‘you need sheer determination to force through’ otherwise ‘you’d grind to a halt.’ She sees no alternative than to ‘carry on... it’s my duty, I have to, it’s about the kids.’ But she adds that it would help if there was more ‘grease’ to keep the cogs moving. Taking that imagery further, she explains that the grease is good leadership. She exemplifies this: ‘people who say – I’ll help with that, let’s work on that together.’

Between meeting on our first and second occasions, Kathryn had clearly become more aware of how the term struggling gets used, and how frequently. She was keen to report back to me on this: ‘people use the word struggling a lot. It seems such a mild term, but there’s deeper stuff underneath. It needs to be taken more seriously... because it’s not mild when it’s used as a label.’ It seems that the worst thing that can happen to you, according to Kathryn is ‘being described as struggling.’

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Kathryn’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 18: How Kathryn’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

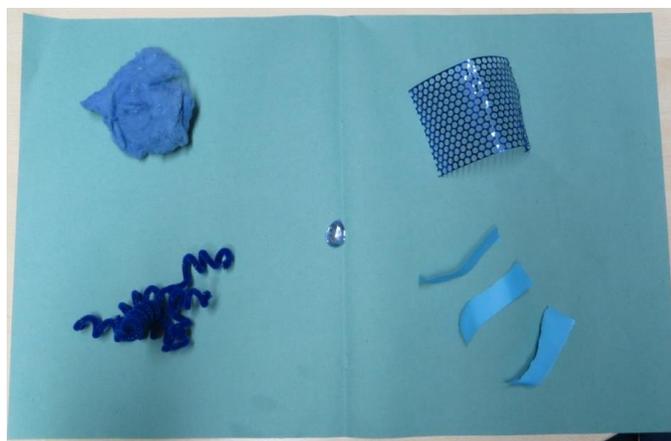
Experience of struggling	Self-doubt Mental explosion Self-perception / self-evaluation Leaders and managers
Factors that influence struggling	Time Pointless paperwork Leadership – need to know us RI school Help Visibility of struggling
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Critical mass Determination
Themes	Buoyancy

	Water Labelling Authenticity
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### 5.1.9 Veronica

Veronica told me that she had always wanted to be a teacher, possibly a primary teacher. But after graduating, she decided to get some experience working in industry first. After a few years of getting ‘no job satisfaction’ she applied to do a PGCE (secondary) because she felt she wanted to ‘impart knowledge and make a difference.’ She knew immediately: ‘it was right!’ Now, she is the headteacher of a small, town-based secondary school within a Multi Academy Trust. She is still in the relatively early stages of headship, following a period of being interim head for a year. She explains that she actually became headteacher ‘by accident, by default’ because her job description as deputy expected her to ‘step in as required.’ I approached her as a local headteacher and asked her to promote this research project to her teaching staff. She decided she wanted to volunteer to participate in the research herself. She still identifies very strongly as a teacher, but her experience of struggling is very much narrated through her perspective as a headteacher. Her story of struggling is a mixture of her experience of struggling as a headteacher and her experience of dealing with teachers who appear to be struggling. Veronica is in her early 40s and has been at her current school since qualifying as a teacher in 2001. She feels ‘morally aligned’ to the Multi-Academy Trust and enjoys the autonomy she has.

We met on two separate occasions; she constructed her collage in the first interview.



**Figure 16: Veronica's collage**

Veronica’s experience of struggling seems linked to her relative inexperience as a headteacher. She talks of experiencing ‘wobbles’ and ‘wrangles.’ She also expresses the feeling that - at times - ‘this isn’t for me’

and tells me that at such times she has to 'dig my heels in.' There is a sense of 'not knowing things' and having feelings of self-doubt: 'I sometimes feel like I don't know what I'm doing... I'm not sure I can do this... I didn't want the job in the first place.' This can lead her to feeling 'completely overwhelmed and not wanting to go in' to school. On occasions throughout our conversation, she questions herself: 'have I done this right? Have I done this right?' and she tells me that she tends to beat herself up quite easily.

Veronica wonders about the extent to which struggling is 'part of the job,' adding 'I'd like it not to be.' She suggests that struggling is natural and feels that it 'isn't necessarily negative... it's a very positive thing that makes you resilient.' On the other hand, she associates struggling with the colour blue, which makes her 'think that struggling is sad... I clearly think that struggling is a negative thing.' Through talking together, Veronica was already realising that struggling seems to have different aspects to it.

Veronica talks to me about having to balance the loneliness of being the headteacher with being open to her staff: 'I have to choose what to reveal and to who.' She adds that she is careful who she talks to 'as you don't want to be judged.' She knows that she is under huge scrutiny this year as it is the first exam results that she feels accountable for: 'they're my results.' She talks about sources of support within and outside the MAT and explains that she has a 'natural affinity, an allegiance with some people in the trust.' She is mindful that 'people don't always support you' and she talks with some humour about the 'alpha-male dominance' in the MAT and how she sometimes just sits and listens to how 'groups of men communicate.' She admits: 'I don't respond to perceived male aggression.' Connections with the right type of people seems really important to Veronica.

She tends to see struggling as cyclical – going from a 'strop to crying to feeling fine' - and this is a theme Veronica returns to again and again. 'It's a fine line between having a lot to do and struggling... Struggling goes in cycles, one day to another, even hour to hour. I can go from feeling I'm the best headteacher in the world to feeling like I'm crap.... Things build up, you get overwhelmed, you feel fear, then you can't actually do anything at all.' This idea of a fine line, a tipping point, comes up on a number of occasions and this leads to us discussing whether there is a difference between the use of 'struggle' as a noun – which Veronica suggest feels more surmountable - and 'struggling' as a verb.

Fear, too, features as a theme. She describes waking up in the middle of the night: 'at 3am everything feels like a catastrophe.' She also talks about 'self-generated elements of fear.' Things that wake her are boring things like budgets, governance and Health and Safety, because these are 'out of my comfort zone.... Some heads are obsessed with this' but, she suggests half-jokingly, 'they're not a human anymore.'

She explains: 'I feel under-skilled and not good enough' and she bemoans how ill-prepared she feels as a headteacher. She rolls her eyes and says: 'that's another thing they didn't teach us on NPQH (national professional qualification for headship).' She also talks about the importance of controlling her fear but warns: a 'little bit of fear is fine (but) if you don't control it, it becomes a frozen fear.' Her use of blue in the collage might also suggest a hint of feeling frozen.

In addition to support from other people in the wider Multi Academy Trust, she acknowledges that there are 'tight policies in place' which act as a reference point. The idea of not having a 'scheme of reference' is something Veronica mentions early on in our conversation, where she admits feeling inexperienced and ill-equipped to deal with the role. She talks about the uncertainty of the job, especially compared with what she perceives as the structured predictability of being a teacher. She admits, however, that this uncertainty is also the 'joy of the job.' She talks about having to deal with 'life things amplified... I'm dealing with hundreds of people... no-one can teach you that, you have to trust your instinct.' She talks elsewhere about the issue of trust, and how she needs to feel trusted. She would not cope, she says, in a 'corporate style' academy chain or 'if someone starts to tell me I can't do things my way.'

Veronica's experience of struggling is metaphorically expressed in her collage as elements which are overwhelmingly physical and emotional. She chose the colour blue as a 'filter' through which to consider the experience of struggling because 'struggling looks like a colour... struggling means sad.' The uniform use of blue as the theme of the collage was a deliberate choice by Veronica, once she had resisted the temptation, on seeing the collage box, to just 'tip it all onto the page.'

She also refers to freezing as a sign of struggling, which could further explain her choice of colour. She then chose other blue items to place on the collage. The central item is a gem, which symbolises crying. She told me that placing the gem in the centre was intentional. 'Crying (was) a big thing for me as a leader, feeling I shouldn't cry, then reaching a stage of being strong enough to cry openly in front of people.' She feels that it is a 'pretty little teardrop, I don't think that's a bad thing.' She has since explained that the gem could be interchanged with a heart. Veronica tells me that her husband says: 'if you didn't cry, you wouldn't be you' and she admits to 'crying a lot, whether happy, sad or frustrated' or 'just watching ads on TV.' She reflects: 'I used to worry about crying' but she has since learned to self-regulate and sees herself as 'strong, not weak and wet... but that's taken time... if I'd cried a couple of years ago I would've thought – you silly cow – but now, no, it's just human.... Maybe 12 months before I would've been defensive, I would've cried...'

Top left of the collage is blue cotton wool, which she placed first. This illustrates what Veronica terms head fog. Elsewhere in the interview, which took place at the beginning of the summer holiday, she explains that 'these first few days... are spent in a bit of a fog.' She uses the term fog another time when talking about feeling stuck. Fogginess seems then to be suggesting that her ability to think clearly is impeded by the experience of struggling. In the top right corner she has placed a piece of blue coloured mesh to symbolise the idea of 'picking holes in myself... being my own worst critic.' Bottom right are pieces of blue paper which Veronica tore up purposefully in front of me, to illustrate 'feeling torn.' She feels that there are three different aspects of feeling torn: tearing oneself apart emotionally; feeling physically torn, what she terms 'can't do wrong for doing right;' torn between priorities, and the fact that when you are struggling at work it overtakes everything else.

The coiled springs at the bottom of the page on the left, which are made of blue pipe cleaners wrapped around a pen, are 'the stress element' of struggling. She explains that the coils represent the knots in her tummy. Veronica talks elsewhere about feeling completely overwhelmed and doubting whether she can 'do this;' her confidence levels fall, her self-doubt creeps in and she can physically feel it in her stomach, and elsewhere in her body in the form of headaches, or as sleeplessness. She admits: 'when I'm sleeping well, I'm know I'm coping ok.'

Having created her collage, she reflects: 'it's very organised, considering my first instinct was to throw everything...' She also considers adding in a sunrise, to indicate that 'it's all going to be ok.' This seems to imply that Veronica feels it is possible to move out of struggling to sunnier times. She uses the weather metaphorically on a number of occasions, stating that it is her job to 'set the weather' even if that involves wearing what she calls a 'headteacher mask.' She admits: 'I have to be careful with my face, I'm quite expressive' and it would seem that, at times, she has to 'take a deep breath, and say what people want to hear' rather than being truly authentic.

Veronica admits that she has 'learned to be thick-skinned' and she says she has 'got used to change being the constant.' She feels she has become braver over the past year and both experience and just the passage of time have helped. She tells me that she now feels more confident communicating with parents, for example. A lot of this confidence has come from the fact that her position as headteacher has now been made permanent, rather than having to work 'term by term' as interim head. At first, she felt 'in the shadow of the previous head... a very strong personality' and she explains how this made her feel constrained: 'I couldn't make the changes I wanted... I needed the freedom to do that and be myself.' Not

having control over things was an issue for her, but now she is 'able to make changes, I'm able to say – at my school we do this.'

For a large part of our second meeting, Veronica talked about how her role often involves her dealing with other people's experiences of struggling. I sense some discomfort from her when she is talking about this. She starts off by emphasising that 'nobody deliberately wants to do a bad job' and she absolutely wants to feel she is dealing 'humanly' with anyone who feels they are struggling: 'I pride myself on being a decent human being... I don't want to hit someone when they're down.' She talks at some length about this, suggesting: 'sometimes you know people are struggling.' As far as knowing if and when to intervene when someone is struggling, Veronica is clear: 'you don't always do anything (but) sometimes there are tangible things you can do. Even just offering to help...' As she is talking she realises: 'I don't want to be somebody that leads to other people feeling like they're struggling... (but) I think I am sometimes.' This seems to me to hang in the air once she has said it out loud.

During our conversation about others and their experiences of struggling, we talk about whether struggling is visible or not. Veronica suggests that with some teachers you either notice they are struggling or they tell you, whilst other teachers do not tell you that they are struggling nor do you notice it. Veronica tells me about an incident where she received a 'cross email' in which a member of staff seemed to be having an emotional outburst. This member of staff then arrives at Veronica's office and 'plonked himself down.' This staff member then asked her: 'are you doing an investigation on me?' Whilst this came as a surprise to her, it was not the case and she was able to reassure him on this occasion. But by recalling this incident, however, she starts to reflect: 'where does that fear come from?'

Veronica talks at some length about the challenges of dealing with one particular teacher who has clearly been struggling for some time. His struggling has been noticed by others as she tells me 'I've had people in his team saying he's not doing his job properly.' When confronted directly by Veronica, this teacher replied: 'I'm gonna do it, it's fine, I'm gonna do it.' But Veronica says that, actually, things have not been fine for quite some time now. She provides some background to this story, explaining how this member of staff had had an extended period of absence and was then supported back in the workplace via a 'phased return.' She also outlines the various forms of support offered to him which included a reduced timetable, coaching in teaching and learning as well as in leadership (he is a Head of Department). She has suggested moving to another school within the trust for a 'fresh start' or covering a maternity period in another school. She emphasised to me that, for some, a 'fresh start' can really help but equally she is mindful of not wanting to just 'move the problem on' as she calls it. To further help contextualise this

man’s story, she tells me that he originally ‘got the job by accident’ because no-one else had applied. She goes on, adding that, since then ‘the demands of the role have changed... the sands have shifted around him. Everyone’s growing around him and he’s not, that’s really sad.’ There is a clear sense of empathy towards this man’s situation yet Veronica can also see that it is something that she must face up to.

Ultimately, what is clear to her is that she has to consider the impact of this man’s teaching on the children in his classroom and asks herself: ‘would I want my child in that classroom?’ She does not answer but her silence implies a no. She is mindful that there are processes and procedures that need to be followed, but she is quite frank when she states: ‘if 6 weeks of informal coaching is not having an impact (on him), how on earth is 6 weeks of capability going to make any difference?’ By reflecting on this out loud she seems to realise: ‘if someone’s struggling, any procedure or process is not going to help, is it?’ She admits not liking the capability process, especially as she has never seen it ‘used to a positive end for the teacher.’ She seems reluctant, to some extent, to admit that the time has arrived for this teacher to have to undergo this procedure but adds with what feels like a heavy heart: ‘this is the beginning of the end... we’re at the end of the line. I have to draw a line. If I know in my head I’ve given (him) all the possibilities... then the end of the line comes.’

Veronica clearly has a strong motivation to ‘deal with people properly.’ She is open about how she knows teaching is hard work and she has taken steps at her school to help reduce teacher workload: ‘this is a tough role, we love it, but you have to think about how you pace yourself... let’s be sensible with things.’ She worries about teachers ‘marking until 4am – it’s bloody pointless.’ She seems to have reflected a lot between our first and second meetings, as she tells me she has ‘become much more conscious about struggling.’ She wonders, too, whether struggling is contagious: ‘is there such a thing as a struggling culture?’ She goes on: ‘negativity can lead to people feeling like they’re struggling... maybe if people are feeling like they’re struggling, that can lead to negativity.’ She bemoans the ‘normalisation of busy’ and questions whether certain personality types – ‘perfectionists’ rather than the ‘rough and dirty teachers’ - are more prone to struggling than others.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Veronica’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 19: How Veronica’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Crying as manifestation of struggling Fear Frozen as result of struggling
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	Negative Sad – blue (in)visible
Factors that influence struggling	Inexperience Time Inadequate training / preparation for the role Sands have shifted ('historically capable teacher')
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Cyclical Being braver Experience Passage of time
Themes	Setting the weather Managing others' struggling

5.1.10 Daniela

Daniela is an overseas-trained teacher who shares her experience of struggling in two different secondary school settings; those experiences, however distinct, are helpful in determining if there are common and discrete aspects of struggling in different contexts and conditions. Daniela completed her teacher training in her home country at the age of 28, having previously worked in business. She explains how competitive it is in her country to get into teacher training, and how difficult it is to secure permanent employment once you have trained as a teacher. Originally, she trained to teach in the primary sector, but upgraded later on to allow her to teach maths and business studies at secondary level. She came over to England in 2013 to teach on a supply basis, having never actually taught in her home country. She has now been teaching in England for the past 5 years. She has a strong philosophy of teaching and education which is grounded in a focus on good citizenship. She explains: 'at home, you have to have a philosophy and that drives what type of teacher you are' and contrasts that with her experience of teaching in England when her impression is that 'here you kinda have to just fall in line.' She would love to have the opportunity to teach back home one day but she admits 'it's not all bad (in England) and I love teaching. I just don't like the system, that's what it comes down to.'

We met on two separate occasions; she constructed her collage in the first interview.



**Figure 17: Daniela's collage**

Daniela narrates her experiences of struggling from two distinct school perspectives. In the first school, she arrived as a supply teacher on a temporary contract. She says she became highly regarded there: 'no-one ever thought low of me... they really did believe I could do anything.' In contrast, at her second school she felt that 'people didn't know me as a teacher at this school.' To counteract this, she accepted an invitation to present at a TeachMeet, a training event to other teachers at her school: 'it was majorly out of my comfort zone... the only reason I did it was to try to get out of this hole like I'm feeling I'm in... I was up there just thinking the entire time don't stutter erm ... I tend to get really really nervous but no, it was good, it was, it went pretty smoothly.' Her determination to be seen in a good light at this school, and the extent to which she was willing to shift out of her comfort zone, is evident as she narrates this particular account.

Daniela describes struggling as a feeling of rage, anger and agitation, and there are regular references throughout our conversation to crying. She seems to perceive a tension between how she was trained back home and how she is expected to teach in England. She has strong views and tells me how she fundamentally disagrees with the narrow focus on exam results here in England and the use of targets generated from standardised tests: 'targets are all that matters... (but) telling a 11-year old you're

destined for a D, we know you're gonna fail... that's not setting them up for hope.' Back home she feels that every year at school is meant to count. It appears she would like that to be the case here, too. She explains that 'the mentality needs to change from "don't worry you're not year 11 yet"... so that every year matters... everything you do should count, (but here) it doesn't count until the last minute.' She recalls how her older students have said to her, to her dismay, 'it's just a mock, it doesn't actually count for anything, miss.' She also reflects on the extent to which a school's culture can influence 'what counts.' The two schools she talks about have very different catchment areas with one drawing its students from much lower socioeconomic groups. One is more academically driven, the other not so. In terms of the schools' Ofsted ratings, one school was in 'special measures' the whole time Daniela worked there; the other school is graded 'good.'

Daniela tells me that she has felt like an outsider at times and this has been the source of some struggling, too. She explains that she 'learned about the system from the students' and that in fact she 'had no preparation for teaching in the English system.' Interestingly, she adds: 'as a supply teacher, I didn't need to understand the system.' But despite this lack of insight into the system, she quickly came to realise that in England 'we teach to the test – which is so boring – because we have to. I disagree with that greatly... everything we do is for Ofsted... tick a box... unfortunately that's the game.' Her sense of frustration is clear; she seems to feel constrained in how to teach.

At her first school she was quickly encouraged to take on the role of head of subject, a subject in which she was qualified but had no experience of teaching. The headteacher did what Daniela calls his 'selling speech' to her, adding that he 'has a way of convincing' people to do what he asks. Initially she turned it down, perhaps because she felt it was too soon. However, she was eventually talked into taking it on, partly because she had been led to believe she was following in the footsteps of a highly regarded and capable teacher and so the transition should be relatively smooth. She was given the impression that the subject was well organised, well resourced, but she quickly found that this was not the case. She had no experience in teaching the subject, let alone leading it.

On the first day in post, at the start of a new academic year, Daniela was confronted with a 16-page document, containing exam data to analyse. Despite clearly being new in post, she was made to feel responsible for the poor results, in which she had had no involvement: 'it was hard to be called a failure on day one, to be told your subject is failing.' She bemoans not only the quantity of data she was given, but also completely disagreed with the leadership view that 'this much data is beneficial.' Later that year, she was due to submit students' controlled assessments (coursework) to the exam board for external

verification, an administrative process with which she was, of course, unfamiliar. She approached her line manager and asked for help. Specifically, she asked her line manager to make a phone call to the exam board on her behalf, to confirm when the paperwork needed to be submitted

The line manager refused to make that phone call, responding via a 'sharp email' telling her that she 'should've done this by now.' Daniela was left feeling both agitated and angry. She says, almost as if talking directly to her line manager: 'I'm asking you for help, you know the situation I'm in.' I wonder whether the line manager was aware of the situation, which Daniela proceeded to outline to me in detail. She tells me how she had spent a whole weekend typing up 'witness statements' for each module for each student; 'I was really really panicked... I was obviously stressed... I was typing like crazy... I worked all day Saturday... the muscles in my hands hurt so much.'

What is clear from this account is that it clearly takes Daniela a lot to ask for help, something which her line manager was perhaps not all that aware of: 'I'm not one to ask for help... when I do, it means I really need it... I bawled my eyes out, so I'm crying, all I want is a phone call...' She returns to this incident later in our conversation, repeating: 'I didn't get the support I needed.' This difficulty in asking for help is mentioned again when she talks about her second school where she explains that there, too, she would feel 'uncomfortable asking her (the line manager) for help.'

Daniela's collage shows a clear silhouette of a head, with lots of colourful items placed within the skull. She explains that these items symbolise chaos: 'you can't see all the things going on in one's mind... what is going on is more than you see here.' She says the items on the collage look a bit like a 'fascinator' and she refers to the pouring out as an 'explosion.' She adds that the 'pouring out' you can see on the collage is indicative of how much you carry around in your head but also represents the fact that you can 'pour it out to colleagues.' She suggests that 'struggling is visible beyond the skull. It just kind of pours out... it doesn't just stay in your brain, you're always talking about it. You're always trying to make sense of it. You're always worried about it... it is a permanent state.' Struggling feels like you are 'thinking a million things through, it's completely chaotic in my brain.'

When asked, she tells me that the face is not just her face, but 'anyone who has to work in a position where they think all the time, and they struggle all the time...' She goes on: 'it's not humanly possible to complete all of the things they want me to complete.' The sense of chaos is palpable and she is agitated when she asks herself 'how much do I put up with?' She concludes by saying she 'can't foresee a future where I'm not struggling.' When asked what might help to alleviate this feeling, Daniela mentions things

like 'having a good laugh' and enjoying the company of 'like-minded people' because they understand. A lot of Daniela's friends are teachers, many of whom are also from overseas, who she tells me also help compensate for family particularly when she is missing home.

Lesson observations have been a source of struggling for Daniela at both schools. At her first school, she 'failed' a lesson observation when a student was found to be playing a computer game during the lesson. As background information, Daniela explained that she felt the SLT put students into her class because it was seen as an 'easy subject... a mickey mouse subject.' She explains that she was expected to welcome to her class 'SEN kids who couldn't string a sentence together ... but I was somehow expected to get them a grade.' She also tells me that the other half of the class were 'really behaviourally challenging.' Despite the specific learning needs of many of these students, she had no Teaching Assistant (TA) support with the class. Feedback following the observation was not good and the phrase 'if Ofsted was here...' clearly annoyed her. Daniela seems convinced that the student had decided to 'play a computer game so that I would fail my observation.' The experience left her feeling 'everything's my fault' although in the next breath she asks out loud: 'how is that my fault, *he* decided to go on that game...' She continues to wonder what she could have done differently.

A different lesson observation, this time at her second school, illustrates how observations have been a source of struggling for Daniela. She was observed teaching her second subject and says: 'I thought this looks amazing – (the students) were doing phenomenal... they were 100% engaged, they were running the show.' Two weeks later, she heard via her head of department that the observers (two members of the senior leadership team) had questioned why she had taught that lesson, as it did not appear to fit with the Scheme of Work. Daniela makes it clear that she had in fact been asked to teach that particular lesson by her Head of Department. Daniela's sense of injustice at others questioning her professional judgment is clear: 'they could've asked, what made you choose this?' She goes on, referring to the written feedback following this observation, which up until this point in the story Daniela had not seen: 'things get written about you that just aren't true... (they) can't just assume something that big and then write it down.'

More recently, Daniela seems to have learned her lesson from her experience of observations, telling me: 'I didn't want a repeat of last time, so I tried to make sure there was nothing they could say.' She has developed a bit of an antenna when people come into observe her. She tells me: 'you can tell me when someone's there to see what's there and when someone's there to criticise.' She says that you need to know how to play the game and 'make it seem like I'm a good teacher.' As soon as they come in, she tells

me, 'I tell them what I'm doing, otherwise when they come in, they look for the negative. That's the wrong way round.'

This negative way that leaders perceive and engage with teachers is part of a wider issue that Daniela is keen to flag up. She is keen to advocate positivity, saying that it brings more positivity, but is fairly scathing when talking about the praise postcard system at her school: 'we genuinely don't need a postcard... what I need is for you not to tear me apart if I do something.' She finishes with 'if they built us up more, we'd in general be happier.' On more than one occasion, Daniela talks about making sure she is in the senior leaders' good books which she explains is done by saying what they want to hear, playing the game so that 'hopefully they get off my back.'

This is part of what Daniela sees as a wider issue, that of a lack of conversations between leaders and teachers. She is clear: 'in managing people, you need to have a conversation every once in a while.' Following the difficult lesson observation described above, Daniela says she 'felt like I was avoided for a couple of months' by the leader who observed her although apparently 'we're back on the pleasantries now.' She tells me that a lot of the time she feels like she is 'in trouble' and admits to feeling 'very very wary about what I say.' At times, she feels she has to compromise what she says – 'I said what I knew she wanted to hear' – as it is easier to just 'smile and tick the boxes.'

Issues with a particular student at her first school caused Daniela to feel like she was struggling. One particular girl apparently 'crossed the boundaries' in lessons many times. Daniela explains that this girl's behaviour was notorious and senior leaders had said on more than one occasion that they had reached the end of the line with her. However, Daniela says, 'her last straw was all the time.' She tells me how she felt about having this student in her class: 'I didn't know if she was going to be violent or just verbally aggressive... I thought she might throw a chair at me... She was so rude to me, the way she speaks to you... (and) she went in my cupboard, pulling hand cream out of my handbag.' Daniela had eventually reached the stage where she said to senior leaders: 'it's either her or me.' This student was subsequently removed from her lessons for a few weeks, and there was even talk of her moving to a different school. Daniela then tells me how the situation was resolved when a senior leader 'caught up with me in the hall' and stood 'rubbing his hands' saying 'we're gonna have you take her back... like it was a joke.' So, the student was brought back to Daniela's lessons with an expectation that she would help her pass the subject. 'The senior leadership team made it my issue that she wasn't going to pass... I felt very undermined a lot of the time.' Daniela felt extremely let down, stating: 'they knew what I went through, I asked for support with her all the time... they even let her go to the prom and put her photo up on the wall... and that's not fair...'

you gave that girl everything she wanted and she was so horrible to me... she was literally the hardest person I've ever had to teach.' She finishes: 'it's part of the reason I left.' Daniela had reached a point where leaving was becoming a viable option and by starting to apply elsewhere, Daniela hoped to find a way to leave her experience of struggling behind her.

After moving to a new school, Daniela was hopeful that support there would be better. Within one term, however, Daniela was struggling with a low-ability Year 10 class. She had taken the brave step of opening up and admitting that she was struggling with these students, and an interim solution was to help her teach that class by sending in senior leaders to support her. Eventually, however, she explains that 'they were taken off of me... that was a really hard experience... I had no inclination, no idea that that was going to be the result.' She recalled in some detail how she had worked with that group from September where 'they wouldn't even pick up a pencil' to January where she slowly felt like 'I was getting there.' One senior leader who had been supporting her lessons was indeed supportive and could see that a lot of the problem was in the students' lack of confidence. Daniela felt that 'she understood.' But, she goes on, 'they want instant results, to show progress in a fast way' and so the class was given to a different teacher. Daniela recalls how her Head of Department tried to follow this decision up by having a conversation with her: 'we don't want you to feel you've failed, you haven't...' But the depth of her emotion is clear when she tells me how she 'bawled my eyes out, in my eyes I did (fail).' She explains how she has always seen herself as a high achiever: 'I've always been at the top.' This move, to get that year 10 class taken away, however, felt like a 'real blow.'

When asked when she is less likely to struggle, Daniela says she is glad she will not have to start again from scratch next September, adding 'for the first time, I get to improve on what I taught this year.' She also mentions the time of year as being a factor in struggling, explaining in some detail that 'the workload in the summer isn't easier, it's not light, it's different though. It's not lighter by any means but altogether it feels different. I don't feel stressed. Maybe it's the weather. The winter, that's the hardest months.' Right at the end of our conversation, Daniela brings up an interesting question about whether teaching is a young person's job. She then goes to talk at some length about how education is a business with teachers as resources, which once used up – after five years or so – can be replaced by younger, cheaper models.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Daniela's story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 20: How Daniela’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Culturally different system Anger, rage, agitation as manifestations of struggling Tears, crying as part of the experience Philosophy at odds Compromising oneself
Factors that influence struggling	Leadership – ‘they’ Other overseas teachers Finding it difficult to ask for help Lesson observations Time of year Age
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Changing school Staying at school – not starting from scratch Feeling out of comfort zone but having success
Themes	Compromising self Million things to think about Struggling – a permanent state Pouring out of the skull

#### 5.1.11 Rhiannon

Rhiannon comes from a family of teachers; in fact, a number of her relatives – including her mother - are headteachers. She was reluctant to go into teaching herself, partly because everyone kept on saying she would or should. When talking about herself as a child, she tells me she was quiet, someone who never put their hand up. She speaks fondly of a PE teacher who encouraged her to become a Sports Ambassador and who was clearly a very positive role model. Rhiannon did a subject degree, in sports science. On finishing school and then again after university she spent time helping out in her mother’s primary school. One year after graduating and having decided that primary teaching was not for her, she embarked upon a secondary PGCE. She completed this in 2012. She secured employment as a PE teacher at one of her placement schools, where she has now been for just over 4 years. She has also taught science at that school. However, when we met she had recently made the decision to resign and was due to move schools from September 2017. She is a runner and is not into team games. She refers to herself on a number of occasions in the interviews as ‘Miss Goody Two Shoes,’ as this is what some of her students have affectionately called her.

We met on just one occasion but there was a break between the two interviews (for lunch); she constructed her collage towards the end of the first interview.



**Figure 18: Rhiannon's collage**

Rhiannon's experience of struggling centres predominantly around a broken intimate relationship with another member of staff at her school. It was not the breakup itself that caused Rhiannon to struggle but more what happened in the subsequent two years: 'he didn't like the fact that I was fine... the only way he could control me now was through work.' Looking back on the relationship, she now realises that it was 'toxic... it was an abusive relationship, emotionally.' On two occasions, things got so serious that Rhiannon ended up in hospital, following what she refuses to call 'suicide attempts; I never refer to them as (that)' She feels very strongly that 'I didn't have depression... I've got anxiety... it's too easy to be labelled as (having) depression, and actually it's not depression... it was toxic.' She was relieved when a nurse in the hospital said: 'you've just had your heart broken' which helped counter the feeling that she was going crazy, which her ex-partner would try to make her think: 'he would call me crazy and I'd start to think I was... I believed I was crazy.'

Rhiannon first worked at this school during her initial PGCE placement; she then secured employment there as an NQT. She explains how, early on in the process, the PGCE course tutors told her she was 'the biggest cause for concern' because she did not fit the usual PE teacher mould of being extrovert and loud. She soon proved them wrong, when her observations and progress as a trainee teacher turned out to be

excellent. Rhiannon admits to preferring individual to team sports, and she was herself a successful runner at school having been spotted by an influential PE teacher. A lot of the metaphors she uses throughout the interviews are sports-related, including things like 'the games started' when her ex-boyfriend was still trying to control her. This winning-losing imagery was particularly pertinent when she tells me about a note she wrote. This note was written after an especially harrowing panic attack and ongoing bullying by her ex-partner. She explained to me how 'he'd trigger my panic attacks knowingly, he'd manipulate my reactions in front of everyone else; no-one would see what he was doing to trigger me.' On one occasion, she ended up taking an overdose of tablets. The note she left simply said: 'I've decided to stop playing. You win.' She added: 'everything's like a game to him. That's his mindset, all a game.'

Rhiannon has a very particular philosophy of teaching and strong beliefs about the profession: 'I follow the rules... you *should* set high expectations.' She admits being a perfectionist and tells me how she does not like the 'work smarter not harder' ethos which she has seen spread in schools: 'that entails cutting corners, not following rules, which I can't quite handle... that's not watertight, and I feel strongly everything should be watertight. Yes, it takes me two hours longer by doing it the right way... (but) I feel a lot more comfortable.' This sense of right and wrong is a strong theme in Rhiannon's story, which she returns to at the end of our time together. Towards the end of the interview she quotes from Harry Potter: 'we all must face choices between what is right and what is easy.' She has decided to leave the school and move elsewhere, a step that she describes as easy: 'it is easier to move (schools).' She adds that, before leaving, she could have her day in court, adding 'it would be easy to cause havoc... but that's not right for me.' What is right for her is to leave the school. She goes on to say: 'that person they created... that's not me... I've decided to walk away, head held high, knowing I did everything right.'

She tells me that she had noticed a shift in her own attitude towards her chosen career, which she had always been really passionate about: 'up until two years ago, I wouldn't call it work, I saw it as a career.' She adds: 'you can't come into teaching thinking it's an easy job... (but) it *is* just a job. It's not the wrong career, it's the wrong *school*.' So things have changed and she reflects with some sadness on how her ex-partner's behaviour 'massively affected my professionalism.' But she had realised that she 'couldn't sacrifice myself anymore... I realised I can't be me there... I wanted to heal and recover from everything.'

Factors which exacerbated Rhiannon's experience of struggling include feeling really unsupported: 'I feel let down by the school, they let all this happen.' She adds: 'I hoped it wasn't personal... (but) they did everything possible to try and make me want to leave.' Things were made worse by comments from people like the HR manager who 'accused me of still being in love with (him).' When she reported issues

to SLT 'they just thought I was emotional.' When she raised concerns with SLT about things being moved from her classroom she was reprimanded for raising it. Others urged her to raise constructive dismissal but, she explains: 'I've raised a grievance in the past and they manipulated it so he (ex-partner) didn't do anything wrong, so he was right.' She was sent home on more than one occasion following panic attacks in school. In fact, it was the school who asked her to stay off work rather than a doctor signing her off, stating that they were 'concerned for my mental wellbeing.' Rhiannon clearly feels, however, that their concern was not genuine, stating: they were 'using my mental health issues as an excuse, as a label.' Being 'stuck at home was no good for me' as it caused a 'downward spiral.' She felt she had reached a low point, something that she illustrates clearly in her collage: 'I'd basically hit rock bottom.'

More generally, she feels that 'schools don't do enough to support the wellbeing of their teachers.' At one stage, she was a member of the school's wellbeing committee and she recalls telling the other members: 'flower funds, that isn't helping wellbeing at all!' She feels schools have a duty of care not only to the children 'whose home life is terrible' but also to the adults working there. Rhiannon was clearly well informed when it came to what the school should have been doing to support her and she expressed that she had them 'bang to rights on a number of issues.' She recalls her last day at the school, where it is customary for leaving teachers to make speeches to the whole staff. She explains: 'on my leaving day, SLT were petrified about the stuff I was going to say.'

In the end, she decided not to say anything publicly, instead writing a letter saying that she had consulted legal advice and 'they say I've got a strong case.' It was her decision alone to leave when she did. Many others had advised her to leave much sooner, including the police who told her that she was not safe at work and her counsellor telling her 'you need to leave that place'. But at that stage, her duty of care to her students overrode everything, they kept her there: 'no matter how much I'm struggling, I wouldn't let the students struggle... there was no way I'm gonna ditch them.' After a period where she admits to 'being stubborn by staying,' she made the decision to leave on her own terms: 'two years on, I've had enough.'

One of the strategies adopted by SLT to address the issue with Rhiannon and her former boyfriend was to move her into the science department to teach. The headteacher said: 'it's easier to move you than him' adding: 'you're not going back (to PE) unless he leaves.' This was clearly a wrench for Rhiannon who is passionate about her subject and clearly an excellent teacher of PE. She was also offered the opportunity to move to a different school within the partnership, which she refused. Whilst she does not explain exactly her reasons for refusing, there is a sense of injustice at her treatment when she is relating this account. She explains that, while she 'really enjoyed teaching science, it's not what I *love* doing.'

She goes on to talk about her identity as a teacher once she was teaching outside of her subject specialism: 'I felt lost. I lost my identity as a PE teacher. It really did damage my identity, it was really frustrating, really hurtful.' The following academic year, the headteacher accused her of 'coasting in science' which really took her aback. His assessment of her seems to have hurt, as the type of teacher she had portrayed in our conversation thus far was far from one that would consider coasting, under any circumstances. Rhiannon is a teacher who takes her teaching extremely seriously. She explains the bigger - far more complex - picture to me, which the headteacher had clearly failed to see: 'I'm teaching 8 different courses, 7 of which I've never taught before.' She adds: 'I didn't have that subject confidence in science.' Meanwhile she also had to deal with 'the daily battle' of students asking her 'why aren't you teaching PE, miss?'

Elsewhere in the interview, she tells me how she had to fight to be allowed to continue to teach A level PE. She exhibits a professional confidence and strength not always visible throughout the rest of our conversation: 'I know my worth, I know my value... this stuff has dented my identity but it hasn't reduced my value and worth.' This confidence in herself is stated again later when she tells me: 'I know who I am as an individual; I know I did nothing wrong.'

Different from many of the other participants' collages, Rhiannon's is portrait rather than landscape. It has two clearly distinct sections, separated by pieces of wooden dowel and autumnal leaves. The top half illustrates the 'happy non-struggle.' The leaves are green and healthy, and they represent something growing. The two people clearly have smiles on their faces. The choice of brown, fallen leaves is significant as this middle section of the collage illustrates a transition; like leaves, everything dies. Rhiannon explains: 'you can take them (the leaves) away, or just let them rot.' She adds: 'you can learn from those mistakes, and that feeds back up' indicating the idea that the dead leaves provide compost. Leading down into the bottom half of the collage is a spring, a 'downward spiral' where things 'just keep getting worse and worse.' The choice of a spring was intentional, as it allows you to 'yoyo back and forth... you can jump back up again.' Rhiannon explains that it is not a straight line, it is something which goes 'round and round' and that once you have pulled on it, the spring will never be the same again... it's bouncy so long as it's not overstretched.'

The person under the piece of red plastic film is 'literally (at) rock bottom,' a phrase she uses elsewhere in the interview to describe how she felt after being sent home from school. Rhiannon refers to the person on this part of the collage as 'this poor guy here' then adds 'or it could be a woman.' She is clearly not necessarily directly identifying herself in the collage. This person is on their own: 'if you're struggling, you're very isolated... and you see things through a kind of negative lens... It's just one colour, you only

see one thing.’ Whilst clearly symbolising love, red can also mean ‘anger, frustration.’ Rhiannon goes on to explain: ‘people who aren’t struggling see things a lot more colourfully.’

Elsewhere in the interview, Rhiannon talks at length about what it means to be struggling: ‘you feel like you’re being pulled apart, in the wrong direction, in every direction possible.’ Referring back to her collage, she adds: ‘this guy is on his own... people start to dissociate from you, they don’t want to be seen, associated with someone who is struggling.’ She wonders whether, by association ‘could it mean *you’re* under-performing too?’ Here, Rhiannon is conceptualising struggling as a deficit in performance. She adds: ‘struggling is situated in the person themselves’ and ‘it isn’t a fixed point... you can move either up or down the spiral.’ Struggling also seems to be linked to being directionless: ‘you’re so all over the place, you don’t have that end goal... you don’t understand the big picture, if you’re starting to struggle, everything’s all over the place, and you don’t know why you do certain things.’

Rhiannon was asked to be a ‘buddy’ for struggling teachers who were labelled as a ‘cause for concern’ at her school. She refers to these colleagues as ‘stressed teachers who couldn’t see a way out.’ This seems to be a very different conceptualisation of struggling from the one that Rhiannon presents in our conversation and in her collage. Following a lesson observation in which the teachers were graded ‘3’ (requiring improvement), or if they had consistently not been meeting deadlines, the Head of Department raises concerns and talks to the buddy. Only after that does the teacher themselves become involved in the ‘support’ plan; the teachers did not have much say in the process, it was mostly ‘prescribed’ by others.

Rhiannon explains that the issues ‘were not so much identified by the teachers...’ citing parental complaints as an example of such support being triggered. A leader initiates the procedure based on their assessment of the situation, seemingly with no or very little involvement from the teachers themselves. She reflects: ‘I don’t really think it helped... them or me.’ She goes on to add that the teachers ‘admitted they were struggling, but they didn’t want to ask for help.’ Such support plans typically involve additional observations, meetings, etc. and Rhiannon reflects: ‘if you’re struggling, you’re less likely to take on extra things... not got the time, the resources or even the confidence.’ What she seems to be saying is that support plans can add to the experience of struggling rather than being inherently supportive.

Reflecting on her own experience of struggling as well as more generally, she says: ‘the more you carry struggles or anxious thoughts round, the heavier it is... not having someone to download it all to has meant I’ve kept it all bottled up.’ This was illustrated in her collage by the person all alone at the bottom of the image. She goes on: ‘you bring your struggles home, and they add up and bottle up ... it’s that dripping

effect and it does start to overflow when you're not getting rid of some of that each day.' Clearly, having someone to share your struggles with could be one factor that helps alleviate the experience.

When revisiting her collage later in our conversation, Rhiannon says: 'no matter what support there is, I'm the only one who can change my circumstances' and she adds: 'my struggling was the environment.' 'My values mismatch the values of my SLT, causing me to struggle. I was struggling to deal with their decision-making.' She reflects on the importance of a 'supportive environment' one in which you feel 'comfortable in yourself' and where everyone feels 'strong enough to identify (it) as struggling... SLT need to admit it, when they're struggling, and not cover it up.' She would welcome an environment in which 'it's ok to struggle.' Instead, she says, there is a 'mindset (of teachers/SLT) thinking they're not meant to struggle.' 'It's almost as if struggling is a bad thing... in nature, they've always struggled, to survive. Those who do better in struggling circumstances, they're the ones who'll survive.' They would be those who can 'bounce back' into the upper zone of the collage.

She says that 'as a runner, the word struggle is a good thing. A challenge rather than a threat.' In the case of struggling as a teacher, however, Rhiannon suggests that the first step requires 'reaching out... being proactive, you need to ask for help, you need to have people you can go to, without that fear of judgment.' But, she adds: 'some people don't know how to organise themselves... don't know how to prioritise' and struggling can sometimes mean that you are static: 'you need to have a professional receptivity and know what works for your students... but I think lots of teachers are struggling just with day-to-day teaching. Lots of teachers are struggling because it's too hard.' She talks about how 'teachers are struggling because they're not enjoying the lessons... you can't enjoy if you're worried.' Elsewhere, however, when referring to Ofsted, she says: 'if you're doing your job right, why would you worry?' She says something similar about performance-related pay: 'PRP is a good thing, if you're doing a good job, why would you worry?'

More widely, Rhiannon bemoans the 'pressure coming in from government that's filtering down' and she talks about how that pressure is on teachers rather than on students. She finishes: 'if you don't want teachers to struggle, you have to focus on the teachers themselves and start off with their wellbeing... it has to be the teachers who blossom.' Yet, she concludes, she works in an environment where 'if a student doesn't do well, it's the teachers' fault!'

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Rhiannon's story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 21: How Rhiannon’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Lack of SLT support Toxic relationship with former boyfriend Loss of identity Anxiety Dissociation – isolation Underperformance Internal
Factors that influence struggling	Let down by the school Taking sides Not being believed
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Changing school Change in mindset It’s just a job
Themes	Doing things right – doing the right thing

5.1.12 Amanda

Amanda tells me that teaching was one of the two things she always fancied doing when growing up. The other was to go into scientific research. She experienced a lot of family turmoil in her family in her younger years which she feels contributed to her achieving poor A level results. After leaving school, she took on a job in a laboratory and her talents were soon recognised. Her employer put her through college and ultimately she completed a degree. After a period of severe ill health, she decided to apply to train to become a teacher; she followed the School-based Teacher Training (SCITT) route which she thoroughly enjoyed because it meant ‘being in the classroom... I would walk into a school on 1<sup>st</sup> September and be around kids, be around practising teachers and learn.’ Amanda is a science teacher of 14+ years in her early 40s who also teaches outside of her subject specialism. She has worked at the same school for many years and has struggled for some time with a number of serious health issues. She also has some caring responsibilities within her family.

We met on just one occasion; she constructed her collage towards the end of that interview.



**Figure 19: Amanda's collage**

Amanda's experience of struggling is intrinsically linked with her health. For years, she has struggled with physical and mental symptoms and ailments. She explains how she was aware that she 'wasn't keeping up, I knew I wasn't keeping up with the marking, I wasn't keeping up with the planning, I wasn't keeping up with anything.' She identified key times in the school year when she knew she would struggle: 'each October my voice would go, I'd be ill in the first week of the summer holidays, and I'd not feel well for a couple of weeks after Christmas. I felt like a hypochondriac.' She would regularly consult doctors, only to be fobbed off with 'it's a virus' or 'it's your age.' Things came to a head at the start of one particular summer holiday when she collapsed in the street. 'I felt dizzy, I was violently sick... I ended up sleeping for 15 hours.' She explains further: 'everything aches, everything aches, everything hurts, I can't lift my arms, my arms are going numb, my knees are going numb, my ankles are going numb... I've got pins and needles... it just went on and on.'

Amanda's illness came to a head in 2016. She had resolved to change her approach to work and felt that whilst she had 'learned to say no and really back off' she realised she was still having to push on 'cos you have to.' In the end she became so ill that she ended up having 3 months off work. Finally, a locum diagnosed her with fibromyalgia, an 'invisible illness.' Whilst the doctor had been concerned about telling her the diagnosis, it actually came as a huge relief to Amanda: 'I went fine, that's fine! The diagnosis has made me understand why I've been struggling... I'm not a hypochondriac, I'm not stupid, I'm not going mad. I am genuinely shattered... and it's because I'm not well.'

She speaks highly of the support she received from the union representative while going through this diagnostic process– ‘it was good to feel that supported’ – and the school response was: ‘fine, we’ve got a label, you need to see occupational health.’ She feels that the school handles things really differently with her now: ‘they’ve backed right off... they’ve stopped piling it on.’ Her invisible illness is considered a disability and the school is supporting her needs adequately.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Amanda’s illness features in the centre of her collage, where there are all the ‘things that can’t fall by the wayside.’ She tells me: ‘my health was the thing I used to put last, but my illness can’t fall by the wayside anymore.’ She is now working part-time and says that is going pretty well: ‘I’ve had 4 or 5 days off ... but I don’t feel guilty anymore.’ Previously, when working full-time, she had often felt anxious in meetings as she was unable to keep up. Now, she acknowledges, there are meetings that she cannot and does not attend, which frees her up to ask: ‘what have I missed?’ when she *is* there.

Her collage has a clear centre to it, with an enclosed circle containing a number of colourful, plastic beads. At first, the circle was drawn in pen but later Amanda encased the circle using a yellow pipe cleaner, to better contain the beads inside, as distinct from the outside. There is a clear separation between what is going on ‘inside’ Amanda – ‘things that have already made it in’ - and what is going on ‘around’ her. The contents of the yellow circle were all laid down at first, but as she went on, Amanda stood some of them up as they needed to be ‘more spiky.’ She explains that they are ‘my own anxieties day to day.’ They are a struggle in themselves. A couple of them are a different colour, as they have been ‘chucked in by others.’ The circle is very full and some things in here ‘can’t fall by the wayside;’ there is really no room for anything else. Amanda explains that some of the contents are related to teaching, or particular students.

On the outside, Amanda used a mixture of materials to express ‘all the stuff going on around me’ which she described as ‘sparkly, squiggly and fluffy.’ If one looks closely, there are also small coloured matchsticks amongst the other materials, which she terms ‘spiky bits’ which are ‘trying to poke through.’ The orange pipe cleaner on the left side was originally planned as a pair of scissors, although she does not offer any further explanation. She tells me that the outside stuff includes things like: ‘changes in September... leadership... Government... becoming an Academy Trust...’ She ends with ‘if all that (on the outside) b\*ggered off, I could probably deal with the spiky things as well.’

She narrates a number of experiences of struggling as a teacher, beyond her health issues. She had a change of line manager after about three years, and they had what she calls a ‘personality clash.’ She feels that he ‘made it his life’s work to make my life difficult.’ She goes on: ‘I was older than him, more

experienced than him, I don't tend to take a lot of rubbish. I don't think it helped I said no to him a couple of times.' She also observes: 'he didn't like women unless they were blonde, tall and skinny... it was a standing joke.' When he observed Amanda teaching, he fed back saying: 'he didn't understand how I'd ever got into a classroom, that I was appalling. He said – don't let Ofsted near her, she's a loose cannon.' Amanda's teaching had previously always been found to be 'good or outstanding' and so she decided that she 'wanted someone else to see me teach.' After that observation, she was rated as good. She 'attempted to put a complaint in, but it never got taken seriously. He was required to apologise but really just laughed it off.' She finishes: 'after he'd gone, a couple of SLT said – we knew he was bullying you, but we couldn't do anything about it.' Her response was suitably pointed: 'oh do f\*\*\* off!' She adds: 'obviously you don't swear at members of leadership.'

Amanda talked at length about the students she has taught and says the school she works at 'feels like home.' She has had a number of 'wobbles' over the years and 'the kids are little buggers' but she has ended up staying. She has taken on whole-school responsibilities which she has 'enjoyed immensely,' but the most recent promotion left her feeling too ill and she had to step down after a half-term. She also bemoans a perceived lack of support when working with particularly challenging classes or students. 'You get told to use the behaviour system... then you get told you're using it too much.' On one occasion she sent an email round to all teachers of a particular class she was struggling with, saying: 'look, I'm really struggling, anyone got any ideas?' She goes on: 'I was saying – I don't know what to do. Nobody is asking for help, nobody else was willing to speak up. Somebody help me! But nobody would support me.' She clearly felt fed up, cross and frustrated. In the end, she called a meeting to discuss ways to move forward with that class. This email invitation led to what Amanda calls 'an absolute bollocking from SLT' because they felt that she had gone 'behind their back.' The irony was, however, that Amanda *had* invited SLT to the meeting.

Amanda compares how teachers are treated with how we deal with students, stating that 'we do everything for the kids:' but there is 'no requirement to adapt for *our* needs... kids are allowed to display emotions, we're not.' She goes on to explain how 'failing teachers' get lots of attention, in the form of support or the capability procedure. On the other hand, those teachers who are 'loud, out there, pushy' get promoted. She then ponders about those 'in the middle.' She comes up with the idea of the 'invisible teacher,' drawing on the notion of the 'invisible child' in the classroom who just gets on with their work:

*I do feel like the invisible child in the middle of the classroom.... If you're not vocal enough, you don't get support, you're looked at funny. People say 'you're fine.'*

One final theme that comes out of Amanda’s story is that of ‘faking it’ and the fear of being ‘found out.’ On more than one occasion, she mentions a ‘voice... telling you you’re a fraud’ and expresses concern or self-doubt in her teaching. On the one hand she says: ‘I can teach, I know I can teach’ but then goes on to say she fears: ‘someone’s going to come into your classroom and say we’ve finally worked out you’ve been faking it for 14 years.’ She says again: ‘I know I am a good teacher’ yet struggles with the constant changes and what she terms having to ‘play the game.’ She tells me how many different versions of the GCSE and BTEC curricula she has taught. She explains how, for many years, she ‘bloody loved it (teaching) but could the government please stop changing the curriculum!’ And referring to the abolition of levels in KS3 (key stage 3) and the move from A\*-G for GCSE to 1-9 grades she just says: ‘who knows?’ She goes on: ‘if you want to know why teachers are struggling’ she suggests just looking at how much change there has been in the system. ‘It’s awful. I feel I’m failing students, I’m failing parents... I have no energy for it anymore... or the patience to deal with that level of change.’ So, what one is left with is the fear and anxiety of being found out; hence the perceived requirement to ‘fake it’ with a smile on your face and a false air of confidence.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Amanda’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

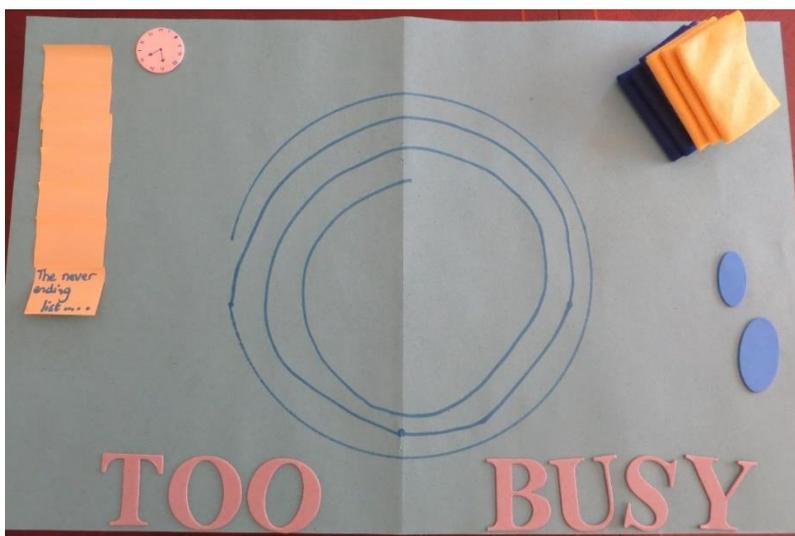
**Table 22: How Amanda’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Illness – lack of diagnosis Faking it Shattered Not keeping up No energy, no patience
Factors that influence struggling	Others – line manager, SLT Change Health Diagnosis as explanation for how and why feeling like this Self-doubt / self-belief
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Diagnosis Learning to say ‘no’
Themes	Health Invisibility Change

### 5.1.13 Heather

Heather tells me early on in our conversation that her mother was a teacher: 'I was never naïve about what teaching might be like.' Despite having seen her mother struggling at times, she was not put off teaching nor did her mother discourage her in her choice of career. She enjoyed her teacher training (PGCE) at Cambridge, which she completed after gaining a degree in history. Her teaching career has been exclusively in the independent sector, and her experiences of struggling were narrated from the perspective of having worked in a number of different private schools. Heather is married to a teacher who works in the state education system and they have a teenage daughter. Heather has held a number of different positions of responsibility, including Head of Subject and Head of Department. In her current school she has held a pastoral responsibility - as Head of Year - for several years.

We met on just one occasion; she constructed her collage towards the end of that interview.



**Figure 20: Heather's collage**

Heather narrates what it feels like to be struggling predominantly through the experiences of others who she deems to have struggled. On several occasions she emphasises that she is not struggling, but arguably there are aspects of the story she tells me which illustrate that she has struggled at times. Her view of struggling is that it tends to be associated with adults rather than children. She tells me that she herself has 'not had many experiences of struggling in the classroom' and seems to link struggling to having responsibilities outside of the classroom: 'once there's a responsibility involved it's other adults they're struggling most with, that's when tensions seem to come.' The use of 'they' is interesting as she is clearly not including herself.

She talks to me at length about a young female colleague - 'a girl' - she was working with in the previous academic year. This teacher was newly qualified and 'very able... if you talked to the children or the parents, they thought she was wonderful.' But, at times, Heather says: 'you'd look at her and all of a sudden she'd have tears coming down her face... in her perception she was a disaster.' She explains that this inexperienced teacher had set incredibly high expectations of herself, adding: 'since you've set yourself that standard, then you can't keep to your own standard, so that upsets you.' In Heather's mind, this teacher's struggling arose from her 'trying to be perfect... you just can't sustain that' adding 'but that's what you're encouraged to do.' Heather goes on: 'She's up half the night, writing individual feedback... you need real stamina to actually sustain the year. She had issues with perfectionism as well as mental health issues. On top of this, a high-pressure timetable and dealing with a stroppy, unreasonable parent at parents evening... we were just setting the poor kid up to fail.' It is interesting to note the shift to the use of 'we' in terms of who is partly to blame for that teacher's experience of struggling. Heather's sadness is noticeable.

Still talking about this young teacher, Heather explains: 'she was teaching A level and she'd do something with them and they wouldn't get it, so she blamed herself.' Heather tells me how the Head of Department 'didn't help her' then adds 'but he wasn't coping himself.' She is hinting at the idea that when someone is struggling themselves, perhaps they cannot see that others, too, are struggling. She ends the story: 'that stroppy parent was the tipping point. And the kids had seen her cry eventually so that's why I don't think she could stay.' It seems to Heather that this teacher had reached a tipping point and she was left with no other choice than to leave. Early on in the interview Heather says: 'I think a lot of teachers do go under' adding 'we see them leaving the profession.' She feels that 'people who've struggled aren't in a position to even ask' for help whereas she realises 'I'm slightly older and a bit more experienced, so I feel I can just go and say...'

Heather was quite hesitant when first starting to create her collage and made some decisions almost immediately about some of the materials provided in the collage box: 'I associate them with happy things... and I associate sad with struggling, leaves aren't sad so I won't use them.' Her first decision is to choose the base colour of her collage: 'teal, it's our school colour.' Straightaway she seems to be contextualising the experience of struggling within that school environment. Eventually, she gets into the swing of creating the collage and I even notice her humming at one stage.

Heather uses foam letters to create the words 'too busy' which she places across the bottom of the collage, but she tells me that they could quite easily have been at the top. On the left-hand side of the

collage, she has created a long list of post-it notes and wrote on the last one 'the never-ending list...' To the right of the to-do list is a clock face which she moved a couple of times before placing it there: 'it doesn't have to be there' she told me. I noted that she chose a disc which already had a clock face drawn on it and so the choice of time – 8.30 – appears random.

On the top right-hand corner of her collage, Heather places some folded pieces of felt. She tells me that these are 'neat piles of work' adding 'I wanted to get a bit of height. Piling it up is symbolic, it feels as if they're teetering.' She explains that if purple felt had been available she would have used that, to represent her history exercise books. But she adds that the pile actually represents more than just students' books.

On the right-hand side she has also placed two shapes, which she tells me depict teardrops. She does not talk about crying elsewhere in the conversation and she does not elaborate on why she has chosen to include teardrops on her collage. She then goes on to explain that she would like to include a sense of tiredness or feeling physically ill. She tells me how it is 'horrible being away cos you get behind' and she asks out loud: 'how to depict insomnia?' She explains: 'when you're tired, you don't function well, don't deal with things very well... when you're exhausted and then you're awake...' So whilst illness and tiredness do not feature explicitly on her collage, they do appear to be key aspects of struggling for Heather.

In the middle is a large, hand-drawn spiral. Heather could not decide how to draw this at first, and then went off into her kitchen to find a large dining plate to draw round. She tells me that struggling feels like a downward spiral. This is linked perhaps to the idea of 'getting behind' she mentioned before; she also talks in some details about 'not feeling on top of things.' The downward spiral is perhaps an illustration of that tumbling movement: 'I don't feel on top of it – can't be on top of it cos you're struggling (laughs)... I don't like it when I'm not on top of things, I don't like being behind... then I'm not moving forward, I'm thinking of what I should've done ... rather than going forward with anything else.'

When she finishes the collage, Heather stands back and says: 'this is what I'd have on my desk... this is how I'd sort my desk out, if I had a desk.' She reminds me that she does not really have her own desk or space any more: 'it's a bit of a disaster now I'm hot-desking.'

Heather details a range of practical factors that can contribute to a teacher struggling. They might include not having a designated work space, to make calls to parents, to store your resources, etc.: 'we don't have a classroom, we don't have a desk, we don't have a space, we don't have anything, we don't have a phone,

we don't have any parking...' She explains how, over a period of time, communal staff areas have been removed or decommissioned. Areas such as departmental offices have been 'eroding away' and she compares the practice to a 'very modern approach in businesses' where staff have to 'hot-desk' and clear all desks at the end of the day. Teachers do not feel they have their own individual space any more. She says that she and colleagues have 'found it very difficult to work seriously anywhere' adding 'we are adrift.' She reflects on the reasons behind the decision to break up subject departments in this way: 'it breaks down power bases... I think teachers are quite a feisty lot, once they get together, they're the kind... to get stroppy.' She seems to be suggesting that keeping teachers away from each other has been a deliberate move by management.

Parental pressure also comes up as a theme on a number of occasions throughout the interview. Heather explains that sometimes they are fine and 'work alongside' her; at 'other times they are completely unreasonable' citing their expectations in terms of 'I'm paying therefore you're delivering.'

Another factor which can influence whether a teacher is struggling or not is the ability to manage time and being organised. Heather explains that, as a teacher, you have to be 'super organised' and 'efficient with time.' She adds: 'there is 'no substitute for hard work, you have to put the hours in... and you have to have a lot of energy... but learn how to conserve it.' She bemoans the additional workload that is 'being put on us from outside forces' citing one personal example which impacts on her, that of changes to both the A level and IB (international baccalaureate) specifications. Whilst she is mostly able to manage her time and energy, these external factors are clearly having some effect on her. Once things are starting to mount up, Heather worries about having enough headspace to cope: 'if my head is worrying about what I haven't done then there's no space for what we want, and what we want are creative, fun, meaningful learning experiences.' The perceived impact on her teaching is obvious. One final interesting comment about time emerges when Heather is talking about 'you can't wait for term to end but actually there's not enough time to do all the things you've got to do.'

Struggling seems to be an inherent experience facing all teachers and Heather suggests that we need to 'accept that, at some point in your career, you will struggle... and maybe you actually need to a bit.' She adds: 'you're meant to struggle, it's ok to struggle a little bit... it makes you stronger' but she also emphasises that the struggle needs to be contained within a 'safety net, so you don't go too low.'

Heather offers some interesting ideas about how one might conceptualise struggling, for example: 'you can struggle because you're a perfectionist, you can struggle because you're blooming lazy and don't do

enough.’ This idea of laziness is extended when she starts to talk about how different teachers perceive school holidays differently. Indeed, she talks at some length about the issue of teacher holidays and how she feels there ‘should be an expectation that you are doing work, spending some of your non-contact (working)... I think calling it holidays is unhelpful. Some people spend all of the holidays working, and you get those martyrs ... and that’s not good either. Other says no, I’m on holiday so I’m doing nothing.’

When talking from her own experience of struggling earlier on in her career, Heather mentions feeling out of her comfort zone when she was asked to be head of a subject she is not a specialist in. She explains: ‘when you’re not confident in a subject, you don’t have things that can captivate (the students) ... in my own subject, I’ve got lots of stories around it, lots of tricks up my sleeve.’ In addition to her perceived lack of subject knowledge, she also talks about how having a ‘relatively weak Head of Department, well busy and weak’ made her feel on her own, adding to her feeling of struggling. She tells me: ‘I begged him to come and help me.’ For Heather, this lack of subject knowledge is just one aspect of the experience of struggling: ‘you struggle if your relationships aren’t built, you struggle if your subject knowledge isn’t good, you struggle when you’re dealing with other things in your life (which are) pulling you in many directions.’

She also relates a story of the first time she ever had to write reports. She sounds quite annoyed relating this story now, as she tells me how it felt ‘being told you’ve done it wrong, but you couldn’t really do it right... if you’ve not been told exactly what’s required of you.’

She wonders whether her teacher training prepared her adequately for the role and she admits to having undergone a ‘nurturing PGCE.’ She also explains that she has never ‘really worked in a difficult school’ and talks of her first school, an all-girls school, as ‘easy to work in.’ When she moved to a mixed school elsewhere, she ‘had to rethink how to teach’ but admits ‘it did me good.’ She tells me: ‘I was struggling with my Year 11s, but by the end of the year I had won them.’

One thing that Heather talks about at some length is her experience of leaders and managers. She admits to having ‘worked with wonderfully, inspiring, charismatic managers and ... with people ... well it’s about respect, isn’t it?’ She also tells me about one senior leader in her current school - with responsibility for digital technology - who came to tell her that she did not need any paper to teach. She was just incredulous. She goes on: ‘if people who made these decisions actually had to teach... they are so removed... I don’t think he was very bright.’ She talks at some length about technology and how it is supposed to be seen as cutting edge, but she calls it ‘bling, it’s rubbish ... younger teachers (may know

how to use the technology but) don't work the room... my current school is very technology driven and that worries me as an older person' But, she concluded, 'when something goes wrong, they (younger teachers) don't have a backup plan.'

She says elsewhere in the interview: 'I'm happy to say when things are wrong... that may be why management at times find (me) difficult... if you are nervous in your management, you'd find that quite irritating.' But she also demonstrates some sympathy, stating: 'I suspect some of those managers are under pressure as well... with lots of decisions being made, so actually if they had time to think them through...' She is able to acknowledge that others, too, are struggling, and see how that experience of struggling might contribute to the way they act: 'it sounds really simple when you can see it, but when you're in the middle of it, you can't analyse at all.' Heather suggests that what is needed in education, perhaps, is a 'built-in system of supervision for teaching, for someone who's wobbling, with no power relationship.'

Heather tells me she 'lived two lives' at one particular school early on in her career. She explains that when she joined the school, it was 'very nurturing' and run by nuns. Over time, however, it got 'taken over by a business... it became a business thrusting environment... a very different feel. I could feel that financial thrust coming through... and we had to be suited and booted.' She admits that going through this conversion 'made me more cynical.' She adds: 'schools do go bust... it will (all) become more corporate, more business-y.' She tells me how she was expected to 'put on extra activities to try to tout for trade' and recalls a time when she had to work five weekends in a row. She goes on: 'it was a Mother's Day... and I was sat in the chapel, I just sat there surrounded by other people's children.' Interestingly, she uses the 'touting for trade' phrase again but in a more positive way later on when telling me how an exam board was keen to recruit her and her students: 'they were really really helpful, they sent me lots of resources.'

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Heather's story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 23: How Heather's story contributes to addressing the research questions**

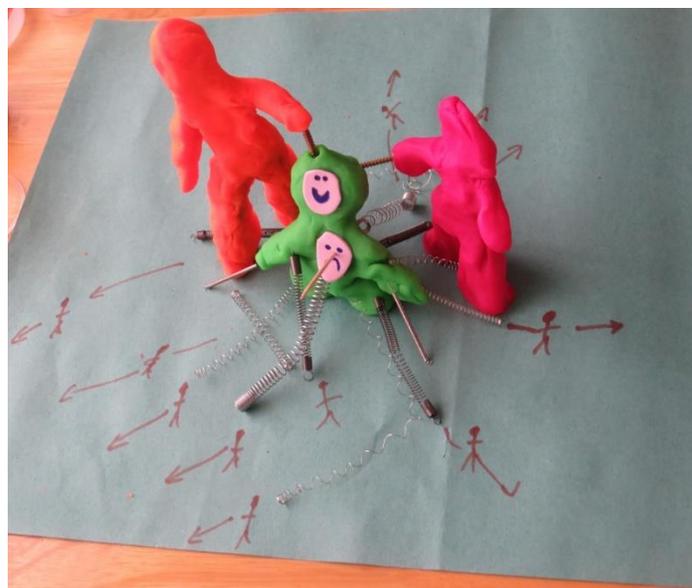
Experience of struggling	Adults not children An experience everyone faces Not knowing what to do and how to do it Being pulled in different directions Not feeling on top of things Getting behind
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	Feeling sad / tears Struggling perceived as something <i>other</i> people experience
Factors that influence struggling	Responsibility One's own standards - perfectionism Inexperience Outside forces Teaching outside subject specialism Corporatisation of (independent) schools Not being able to ask for help Having no work space Headspace Parents
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Experience Knowing who to talk to / approach Not being afraid to speak out/up
Themes	Others' struggling

5.1.14 Ben

Ben is a part-time music teacher in his early 50s. He is married with a small child. He admits to having 'seriously messed up' both his A levels and his degree out of 'general laziness and shabbiness.' Interestingly, Ben suggests that people probably think he did badly at school because he was lazy, but 'if kids do badly now, it's because of the teachers.' Eventually, after a period of working as a temp in offices, he started tutoring students at weekends. He tells me how much he enjoyed this and how it sparked off the idea of training to become a teacher, something he had bet a friend £50 he would never do. Following his PGCE, he managed to secure a job in one of his placement schools where he stayed - and worked his way up from assistant director of music to head of faculty - for 12 years.

We met on just one occasion; he constructed his collage towards the end of that interview.



**Figure 21: Ben's collage**

When Ben reflects on what it feels like to be struggling, he describes it as 'something a bit hard but you get on with it, you just do it... it's difficult but not necessarily impossible.' His experience, he tells me, 'went beyond struggling... I associate struggling with something that is less significant (than depression)' and it is his narrative about his depressive episodes that make up most of his story. At one stage he equates struggling with laziness, saying that some teachers are struggling because they want others to do the work for them.

Ben's teaching career has involved him assuming a number of leadership roles. The main task he has faced as a leader has been to improve his department. He explains that he was asked to go to a school 'where the Head of Department was failing miserably.' The head told Ben at interview: 'I want you to make music happen...' He was worried that this might be a 'difficult job description to fulfil.' However, he talks fondly of the headteacher at that school, who he came to know and respect deeply: 'you felt he was listening to you... I learned so much from him about leadership.' On a more recent occasion, he was called in by a school in Special Measures, to help sort out the music department: 'I felt I had to give it a go.' He added: 'the head took a risk, he had faith in me.' This seems to be a key factor in his decision to accept the role. Meanwhile, Ben also reflects on the way in which the 'failing' Head of Department he replaced was treated: 'they got rid of him... a real shoddiness in terms of procedure. He'd been on capability for about 10 years... he must've had a horrible life... in the end, they paid him off.'

In a different school context, Ben talks about the fluctuations in his team - with teachers leaving or going off on maternity - as a potential source of struggling for him in his leadership role. 'Covering colleagues on maternity leave was a trigger point' he explains. When one particular teacher left, who had specialised in teaching music technology, Ben explains 'there was a lot of pressure on me to teach music tech... an entirely new subject.' No-one above him seemed to understand that teaching music technology amounted to Ben feeling he was teaching an almost entirely new subject.

On a different occasion but at that same school, Ben tells me that the number of students taking music GCSE as an option was falling 'because dance became more popular and there was a new teacher in drama too... I was really pleased for them, but it hit music.' When creating the departmental timetable, Ben assigned all the best music lessons to his departmental members and ended up 'being too nice' and doing 'all the poo.' His rationale for doing this, he tells me, is that it is 'my job is to make your life easier.' This meant he was teaching a range of different subjects outside of his specialism which involved a 'massive amount of reading.' This is significant, because Ben tells me at length how his dyslexia was not picked up on until relatively recently.

As a child, he tells me, 'I just took ages and ages to read stuff. He talks of a 'massive realisation' saying 'I hadn't been diagnosed as dyslexic because when I was at school, dyslexia hadn't been invented... I didn't understand the rivers between the words. I have always read with my finger on the line and a ruler, otherwise I can't keep track.' He goes on: 'I'm used to it now, it's quite liberating. I used to envy people who could do it quicker, I thought I must be a bit special.' However, despite being seemingly 'used to it,' when he was struggling with BTEC paperwork and marking at one stage, he struggled on without really asking for help. He tells me, in his inimitable humorous way: 'BTEC paperwork – imagine Mr Dyslexic doing that sort of thing!' He did ask other BTEC teachers 'but they were all up to their eyes in the work, they'd say all you need to do is this, this and this... but it would take me 4½ days which I didn't have.'

In more than one of his schools, things got to the point where Ben consulted a doctor who 'signed me off because I just couldn't cope.' At first, he tried to resist being signed off, claiming that 'I can't have that, I've got a thing tomorrow...' He relented, however, and was initially signed off for six weeks; he ended up being off school for three months. The doctor said he had been 'running on adrenaline' and when he started taking the tablets to counteract this, he 'woke up, feeling like I'd been run over by a bus... everything hurts, even your hair hurts.' When seeing the doctor another time, he was advised that he needed to see a psychiatrist, but that the waiting list was eight weeks to which the doctor said: 'I don't think you'll make eight weeks.' So, Ben went private and ended up spending £2000 on therapy. It was only

after he had run out of money that he found out he could have accessed free and immediate treatment on the NHS, if only he had known about it. This idea of there being help available but only if you know about it also comes up when Ben is discussing his collage: 'the mental health services are great if you know they're there... but it's like a telephone helpline for people whose phones don't work.'

On a different occasion, when the emergency crisis team called him to say 'we're going to take you in' he responded 'I can't, I'm busy, I have shopping to do... I'll talk to you later, what about if I promise not to kill myself in the next day?' He finished: 'that's a kind of teacher thing' by which he means not being able to stop and realise what is actually going on. He admits to sounding blasé when talking about suicide: 'I'd been suicidal for ages... I talk about it flippantly... but it comes to a point where there is no other option.' He tells me how he had often considered, when driving to school, whether to turn off towards the school or 'drive into that bridge?' He admits he must sound quite rational about it all now.

Depression – 'the D word' – is a key theme throughout the interview. Controversially, perhaps, Ben says: 'depression is the new gay. People didn't used to want to say I'm gay... but now people say I'm gay and people are like – why are you telling me?' He goes on: 'I genuinely wish it (depression) was accepted because statistically so many people are on the happy pills.' He refers to his medication on a couple of occasions, shifting from 'loony pills' to 'happy pills' and stating: 'I feel ok, I keep taking the tablets.' He explains that 'depression affects different people in different ways' and he describes his experience of it as follows: 'when I was off with the D word I felt like there was a neon arrow pointing at me going – him! Him! He should be at work, he's not ill, he's fine, look!' At one stage he tells me it would be easier if he were to wear a lapel badge saying 'depressive.'

He clearly distinguishes being off with a physical ailment from being off with a mental health issue: 'absence for physically reasons is massively different... so, breaking a leg, you can see it's broken. Depression, that's something you can't see and it's probably more serious than breaking your leg as you can die from it.' However, his experience of being absent with physical problems has not been exclusively positive either: 'my wife called in to say I'd be taken to hospital in an ambulance to have my gall bladder out... and they said, well he'll have to set cover.' It just seems ridiculous that the school would expect him to provide cover for his lessons while clearly in an emergency health-related situation. Interestingly, elsewhere in the interview, Ben actually refers to depression as physical: 'depression wasn't about being sad... it was a physical thing which was bigger than sad... like nothing's working at all.'

Ben made a decision to 'come out' as depressive but feels 'I got my arse badly bitten.' He explains: 'I levelled with my two colleagues that I've been diagnosed, and they were great for about a week.' He adds: 'if you admit to having it anywhere other than amongst close friends, you'll get crucified, taken to bits... people are sympathetic for about a week.' Once he had opened up, he knew that his colleagues were 'talking to others about their concerns about my performance.' Ben realises that, for colleague, his depression is 'just another thing for them to deal with.' He clearly perceived a change in attitude from many towards him, but, he adds: 'I can't be what I'm not.' Towards the end of our conversation, he suggests it is difficult to know whether to come clean to a new employer about your depression, adding: 'it genuinely is a consideration for an employer.' He seems to understand why an employer might favour a non-depressive over him, for example.

Things escalated in the department, with team members accusing him: 'you haven't done this, you haven't done that, you've let us down, you've really let yourself down, the department's going downhill and it's your fault.' He goes on, imitating his colleagues: 'you never do this, and you never do that, you don't prep us well, you don't give us anything.' Eventually, they filed a formal complaint 'about my capability as a teacher and as a manager... I felt rather let down, but they're absolutely right, I was failing as a teacher.' He admits: a 'lot of the stuff thrown at me which, if I'd been in a good frame of mind, I would've taken on the chin.'

One particular member of the team seems to have been instrumental in Ben's eventual downfall. He refers to her as D throughout our conversation. 'She was key in all of this... one day, she came into my classroom and said in front of my class – you haven't done this, you haven't done that. Afterwards, I asked her not to do that again, and she accused me of shouting at her.' Things had got to the stage where team members would not talk to Ben, they would take notes of everything discussed at meetings, and keep files of evidence in a portfolio. Eventually, Ben's friends advised him to take out a bullying complaint, and there followed an internal and an external investigation: 'it came out with no case to answer.' The verdict: 'the way they had behaved was quite reasonable.'

Things escalated further when these colleagues then took out a bullying complaint against Ben: 'it felt like a huge conspiracy.' He tells me about one occasion where his line manager tried to mediate a meeting with the whole department: 'we even had a kind of group therapy session where I was completely open, I bared my soul. But they said no, we're not doing it.' In the end, the headteacher admitted to Ben: 'I can see what's going on, but I can't prove it.' Ben admits that 'the head was really supportive... I hated her to start with... but I could see she was very upset by the whole thing.' Looking back though, he says, 'she still

let them carry on.’ He reflects here, too, on how differently schools seem to deal with bullying amongst children compared with bullying amongst staff.

Ben’s time at that school came to an abrupt end when, towards the end of the summer term, discrepancies were found in his BTEC marking and an external investigation was raised by the exam board with an accusation of malpractice. ‘My target was to get to the last day of term, just don’t die, just get there and then you could just reassess.’ There was a request to view the coursework, which was actually at his house, so Ben drove home to collect it. On his return, he saw D standing in the corridor ‘with a smile on her face.’ She was clearly aware of the unfolding situation. Ben said to her: ‘you’re so pleased this has happened’ to which she replied: ‘yes, I am.’ Ben goes on: ‘it’s destroyed me’ to which D says: ‘you’ve done it and you’ve nearly taken us with you.’ Ben drives away from that school, never to return. He tells me that the union was ‘very supportive.’ He had an agreement with the school not to return in September, instead he spent time in the new academic year looking after his dying mother.

Perhaps predictably given his subject, Ben hummed while creating his collage. He clearly enjoyed having a range of materials to work with and was particularly excited about the playdough: ‘is that real playdough? Can I open this? I do like that smell... it’s rich people who have real playdough.’ He was keen not to mix the colours. Almost immediately he tells me that he needs ‘an armature... that word came into my head for no reason.’ He did not expand on this further.

His collage features three characters made out of playdough, with the central character identified as Ben: ‘it’s definitely me... it’s my face, sad inside. I’m quite little.’ The other two characters are ‘the many people who are putting pressure on me. They’re bigger than me, stronger than me. They’re screwing deep inside.’ He explains that they are ‘not gender specific at all.’ The smiling face is a ‘mask;’ he is ‘pretending to be happy where I’m really very sad.’ The other face is secured with a cocktail stick which he got from his own kitchen. He explains that it was originally to ‘attach the face, but then I thought having a javelin was quite good.’ The face is not sad, it is more a ‘feeling of turmoil... an overarching not good face.’ The springs he has used represent that he is being pulled by people in different directions, ‘demanding things of me’ and he draws many other people pulling in directions to symbolise this further. He liked the metallic mechanical feel of springs: ‘people pulling, pulling... a constant strain... stress... tension.’ On reflection he explains that he had considered adding some red crosses and a little flag, not to represent that struggling can be alleviated but more to make it obvious that help is there if only you knew where.

When we discuss factors which might influence struggling, Ben talks at some length about the issue of asking for help. He suggests that it is ‘not acceptable to ask for help’ which he adds ‘is ironic, because we’re there to help (the kids)!’ Many of the schools he has worked in have made it difficult for people to ‘genuinely express that you’re struggling... you’re not able to say I’m struggling because of the environment.’ Conversely, however, Ben feels that actually if people say they want to help you, they are in fact lying: ‘whatever people say about tell me, I’ll help you, it’s a lie... we’re here to help, if you’re having trouble let us know... those same people are writing it on a list which goes towards your capability procedure.’ He also tells me that struggling is like ‘a sliding door, the tiniest thing’ can set you off.

Ben admits to me that he has ‘a lot of internal dialogue.’ He asks himself lots of questions such as: ‘why did they do that? What did I do to make them do that?’ He concludes: ‘and I’ll never know, maybe I didn’t do anything wrong, maybe they didn’t do that to me...’ His thoughts seem to spiral off. It is not entirely clear what Ben does to alleviate his experience of struggling but he does state that it is so important to ‘have a means to vent, to relieve the stress so you don’t fall over.’ He uses the imagery of a Russian samovar to illustrate how depleted you can become if you do not look after yourself: ‘you just keep taking stuff out of the bottom, but you have to top it up.’

Finally, Ben comes up with what seems a simple yet possibly effective way of alleviating struggling, using the imagery of a swimming pool: ‘if some people are drowning, they’re not gonna tell you. Ok, so why not have a shallow end where you can just stand and float and pretend?’ This hints at the fact that some people will not admit to struggling. It also suggests that struggling is not necessarily visible to others: ‘so many people hide it’ he tells me. But by having a shallow end the struggling teacher might be able to carry on swimming.

The Table below provides a summary of the themes within Ben’s story and how these might be assigned to the research questions.

**Table 24: How Ben’s story contributes to addressing the research questions**

Experience of struggling	Hidden Everything hurts Suicidal thoughts Pulled in different directions
Factors that influence struggling	Not being able to ask for help Depression Undiagnosed / undisclosed dyslexia Support from head, union Tablets

	Coming out as depressed
Movement between struggling and not-struggling	Sliding door – tiniest thing Complaints
Themes	Swimming pool Physical v mental illness

5.2 Themes Across Stories

The individual analytic summaries in the section above have allowed me to present the rich experience of struggling narrated to me by each participant in their own right. Each summary concludes with an overview of possible themes for that participant which I separated into sections for each distinct research question and a more general ‘other’ category. These tables were then collated so that I could start to analyse the data across the stories rather than just within the stories. By looking across all 14 stories I started to find similarities, differences, ambiguities and omissions in participants’ experiences of struggling. I was especially interested in analysing the use of verbal and visual metaphors across the stories and undertook a preliminary analysis by focussing on three teachers. I noted down their use of metaphors, interesting turns of phrase and symbolism; I had photos of their collages in front of me. I captured themes and thoughts on post-it notes then presented them in a table. This approach became the one I used for the remaining participants.

I have reservations about using the term ‘emerging’ for the themes I had initially identified in the data. Ely suggests that the term ‘can be misinterpreted’ (1997, p. 206), asking: ‘do themes reside in the data? Do we just need to look hard enough?’ She posits that, perhaps, themes are just in our heads. Paley also argues that too often something is posited as an ‘emergent theme only because (you) want it to be’ (2016, p. 127). My intention, then, has been to try to ‘compose meaning’ (Ely, 1997, p. 20) by acknowledging that I noticed themes across the stories and using the research questions as my compass.

Below I use the research questions, one by one, to guide the initial analysis of themes across all stories. I start with the experience of struggling.

5.2.1 The Experience of Struggling

Asking participants to express their experience of struggling verbally and visually was the main focus of the interviews. The first research question focusses exclusively on the experience of struggling and participants were encouraged to talk in response to my question ‘could you tell me about a time when you knew you were struggling.’ They were also encouraged to create a collage which ‘expresses the

experience of struggling.’ Some participants asked for clarification of the instructions for the collage, so I added: ‘what it feels like to be struggling.’

The Table below gives an idea of themes and imagery – both verbal and visual – which are related to the experience of struggling. It provides an indicative overview of the kinds of themes and shows which participants mentioned them. Where examples are from collages, this is indicated.

**Table 25: Themes relating to the experience of struggling (RQ1)**

<b>Themes &amp; metaphors</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Embodied symptoms / bodily tensions	James Solomon Veronica Jane Heather Ben Amanda Gina	Bodily tensions Physically pummelled, tiredness Head, stomach (collage) Stomach (collage) Tiredness, insomnia Everything hurts Illness, shattered, no energy, health, diagnosis Feet not touching the ground, eyes out of their sockets (collage)
Feeling torn	Veronica	Strips of paper (collage)
Picking holes	Veronica	Mesh material (collage)
Cold	Veronica Solomon	Frozen Cold, no warmth to struggling
Being pulled	Heather Ben	Being pulled in different directions Pulled in different directions (collage)
Spring, coil, spiral	Rhiannon Heather Solomon	Downward spiral (collage) Spiral (collage) Maze, vortex. Stretched, never to be the same again (collage)
Mental (ill) health	Sandra Solomon Mark Rhiannon Ben	Depression but not necessarily dark – vivid, not wanting to live Anxiety, depression Depression – colour blue Anxiety not depression, 2 hospitalisations but not ‘suicide attempts’ Suicidal thoughts, coming out as depressed, tablets
Sadness	Veronica Daniela Heather	Sad – blue (collage), tears, crying Tears, crying Feeling sad, tears (collage)
Fear	James Jonathan Veronica	Uncertainty Fear Fear, being brave(r)
Anger	Daniela Jonathan	Anger, rage, agitation Anger
Mind load	James	Combined weight of many factors, complexity of struggling

	Sandra Daniela  Heather Solomon Gina Kathryn  Amanda	Overwhelming Million things to think about, pouring out of the skull (collage) Headspace; never-ending to-do list, too busy (collage) Overwhelming, making mistakes Defeated Mental explosion (collage); pressure (pot of playdough on collage) No space for anything else (collage)
Mess, chaos	James Jonathan Gina Daniela	Instinct to tip it all out (collage) Chaos (collage) Pretty chaos – positive thing, ideal of teaching (collage) Over-spilling (collage)
Not feeling on top of things	Heather	Getting behind, can't move forwards; never-ending list, too busy (collage)
Imposter syndrome	James Solomon Amanda	Being caught out, a con all along Maybe kidded myself Caught out
Visibility	James Veronica Ben Gina Jonathan  Amanda	Mask, border / boundary, gap (collage) Headteacher's mask Hidden, happy face on outside (collage) Expressionless face (collage) Cracking sound – under water, can't be heard / seen (collage) The 'invisible teacher'
Setting the weather	Veronica	Headteacher's job to set the weather, climate
Authenticity	James Gina Solomon Kathryn Daniela Heather Jonathan Rhiannon	Feeling inauthentic Autonomy – don't care attitude Professional confidence Authenticity, labelling Compromising self Not being afraid to speak out/up Speaking up for others, collectivity of teachers Doing things right, doing the right thing
Vulnerability	James Jane	Feeling vulnerable Vulnerability
Wanting to run away	James	Escape
Positive or negative	Mark	Depends on who determines it
Role of colour in expressing struggling	Veronica Mark Solomon Rhiannon  James Jane	Blue – as a filter (= sad?) (collage) Blue – depression Black Red – a lens through which you see things, anger? Green leaves – healthy, not struggling (collage) Mask, boundary – red round edges Colours of leaves fade as you get further and further away from the kids (collage) Yellow – favourite colour, eureka moment! (collage)

Water	James	Float not swim, drowning
	Jonathan	Under water, pressure of water, drowning, suffocation (collage)
	Kathryn	Shark-infested waters of accountability, lapping waves, buoyancy (collage)
	Ben	Swimming pool – float, stand, pretend, shallow end, drowning

Asking participants what it feels like to be struggling gave them the opportunity to focus on the *experience* of struggling itself. In this way, what struggling *feels* like has the potential to become what it *means* to be struggling. Given that struggling can be defined as ‘striving to achieve something in the face of difficulty’ (Google, 2019c), elements of physical tension and effort were perhaps to be expected. I therefore start with a discussion of these bodily tensions.

Struggling is clearly an embodied experience; from head to toe, participants talked about sensations in their bodies. Gina said her eyes were popping out of her head; Solomon felt physically pummelled; Veronica and Jane had knots in their stomachs. Ben said everything hurts. Amanda felt shattered and many others talked of tiredness, too. A metaphor that is used more than once is that of being pulled in different directions (e.g. Heather, Ben). Gina’s collage in particular shows how each of her limbs is being pulled. In other collages (e.g. Heather, Rhiannon), either real springs or drawings symbolise a downward spiral. A number of participants mention that once the spring has been stretched, it will never be the same again. Solomon, too, creates a kind of spiral maze on his collage and talks of being a different man since one particularly bad period of struggling. Veronica’s collage clearly shows a number of visual metaphors to express the embodied symptoms of struggling. She uses cotton wool for her ‘foggy head,’ a mesh-like material to symbolise ‘picking holes in myself’ and she rips up paper to express ‘feeling torn.’ Finally, she creates tight spirals using pipe cleaners to illustrate knots in her stomach.

Beyond the physical, mental ill health featured in several of the stories of struggling. The use of dark colours, such as black or in Mark’s case blue, to indicate depression was clearly visible in the collages. Conversely, Sandra sees struggling in vivid almost overstimulating colours. Three participants talk in terms of suicide or not wanting to live, and others hint at their use of anti-depressants and the perceived stigma of being depressive or anxious. Linked to mental health concerns is perhaps sadness more generally. Veronica’s whole collage was blue; not only the sugar paper she used as the background but also each item she placed. She realised upon completion that she seems to equate struggling with sadness. Tears are central in Veronica’s collage, and they also feature in Heather’s collage and in Daniela’s interview. Other emotions associated with struggling include fear and anger. James, a headteacher of many years,

talks in terms of feeling uncertain in his role; Jonathan senses the fear of Ofsted felt by leaders in his school which he says drips down to teacher level. Veronica talks of the fear of inexperience, and the need to be braver. Anger is mentioned by both Jonathan and Daniela.

I use the term 'mind load' for one category of images and metaphors in the data; eight out of 14 participants mentioned in different terms the cognitive weight of struggling. James talks about the combined weight of many complex factors that make him struggle; Sandra says that struggling feels overwhelming. Veronica ponders to what extent struggling is more than just 'hard work.' Solomon explains how, when struggling, he makes mistakes and also describes the feeling as overwhelming. Daniela's collage shows the silhouette of a skull with a million things to think about pouring out. Heather talks about how important it is to have headspace and, as indicated on her collage, is often 'too busy' with the 'never-ending list.' Kathryn's collage shows a 'mental explosion' with sparks (plastic beads) literally coming out of her head; Amanda's collage shows a mental space absolutely packed with things to think about and no room for anything else. Linked to this is, perhaps, the phrase not (always) feeling 'on top of things' which Heather uses on a number of occasions. She fears 'getting behind' because she is 'not on top of things' which means she cannot move forwards. Struggling is, perhaps, linked to feeling static or stationary. The idea of struggling being static can also be found in the imagery of feeling frozen, which Veronica raises. Solomon, too, talks of how cold struggling feels; there is no warmth to it.

Linked perhaps to mind load is the sense that struggling feels like a mess, it feels chaotic. This is illustrated in four collages, including James's. His instinct was to simply tip items out onto the sugar paper. Others too (e.g. Veronica, Ben) had this urge when first faced with the challenge of creating a collage. Daniela's head is overflowing with such a mess. Gina's idea of a 'pretty mess' is different, however; she uses a range of colourful materials to illustrate the ideal of teaching, how she would like things to be.

Imposter syndrome is how I have labelled the experiences a number of participants described; James, Solomon and Amanda all talked of their fear of being 'caught out' in terms of being found not to know what they are doing. They seem to question their own abilities, with Solomon suggesting 'maybe I've just kidded myself.' James wonders if he has been a 'con all along.' In some ways, this is linked to the idea that struggling is not visible; Ben says that struggling has to be kept hidden. Veronica talks of the headteacher's mask and how she has to set the weather, thus hiding her struggling if need be. This seems to be a constraint to her in terms of her authenticity. Gina has an expressionless face on her collage, not showing how she is truly feeling, and Ben chose to have a happy face on the outside on his collage. James puts a boundary around his 'mess' so that others do not see that he is struggling. When I pointed out that there

was a small gap in that boundary, James reflected that perhaps the struggling can be seen by others after all. In Jonathan's collage, because everything is happening under water, the struggling is perhaps not visible, and the cracking sound is inaudible.

Struggling tends to be predominantly seen as a negative concept. On the whole, it has a negative semantic prosody and is often linked to difficulties and problems. The literature also tends to frame struggling from the perspective of someone who is not struggling looking in at the struggler; the view is one of deficit, struggling is a problem that needs to be dealt with. This tendency towards labelling others as struggling did come through in the data and is discussed further in Chapter 6. It was interesting, therefore, to hear some participants see struggling through a more positive lens, albeit in very specific terms. Mark is very sporty and sees struggling as part of the challenge of cycling, for example. He tells me how he enjoys a self-imposed struggle, but struggling is negative if he has no control over it. Rhiannon, too, is able to conceptualise some forms of struggling positively, from her perspective as a runner. Others see the use of the noun 'struggle' as less arduous and something to overcome, compared with the more difficult experience of 'struggling' when used as a verb. (e.g. Veronica, James).

Above I suggested that dark colours such as black or blue were used for depression and/or sadness. I feel the use of other colours is worthy of further discussion here. Veronica used blue as a filter for sadness. Mark used blue to depict depression. Solomon used black straws to depict extreme hardship. Kathryn's cage was constructed out of black straws. Rhiannon used a red filter for the experience of struggling, which could indicate anger; she certainly intended to illustrate that struggling is experienced through a lens of just one colour. Everything looks red. She also used green leaves in the top half of her collage to illustrate health and growth, and not struggling. James explained that he wanted all of the boundary around his struggling to be red, but there were not enough red pipe cleaners. He suggested that red here might mean danger. Jane uses three colours of leaves which progressively fade from green to brownish to red; the direction of this fading is significant, she tells me, as it takes her further away from the students who are on the opposite side of the collage. On that opposite side of her collage Jane has placed some yellow tissue paper; yellow is her favourite colour and so she associates it with something positive. She explains that it is the 'eureka moment' when she has got through to her students.

One final but substantial theme relating to the experience of struggling is that of water. Water-related imagery featured overtly in four participants' stories. Two participants, James and Ben, referred to the idea of floating not swimming in order not to drown, in line with advice from the major national lifeboat charity in the UK (the Royal National Lifeboat Institution). James talked at length about the conditions

needed for a world class swimmer to be able to swim well in the Scottish Highlands and survive and how, in the absence of such conditions, all swimmers – teachers - would be vulnerable. Ben’s analogy focussed on a swimming pool with a shallow end to allow swimmers – teachers – to float, stand or just pretend. In his collage, Jonathan focussed on the pressure of water; he called this suffocation. Indeed, the first thing he drew was a blue line ‘for the drowning.’ The pressure of the water has caused the fascio – a collective of teachers bound together - to crack, yet the sound of that cracking cannot be heard. Kathryn’s collage features a large piece of blue felt which symbolises waters lapping at her feet. As she created the collage, she moved the blue felt up the page a number of times. She was not aware of this until I pointed it out to her. She explained that these are the ‘shark-infested waters of accountability.’ Kathryn also raises the idea of buoyancy, a concept linked to coping in the literature (Parker and Martin, 2009).

In summary, then, struggling is experienced physically, mentally and emotionally. It can be associated with feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability in terms of professional confidence and competence. Struggling can feel overwhelming and it tends to be experienced negatively. When experienced positively struggling usually has a different – personal – locus of control. Dark colours can help illustrate struggling and metaphors such as drowning and water imagery can help reveal what it feels like to be struggling.

### 5.2.2 Factors that Influence Struggling

Having established how it can feel to be struggling, I turn now to the factors that can influence the nature of the experience of struggling. I purposely chose the word *influence* as I wanted participants to be able to express what *helps* them not to struggle as well as what *hinders* them. On the whole, however, participants shared factors that cause or exacerbate struggling rather than those that might help alleviate the experience.

The Table below gives an idea of themes and imagery – both verbal and visual – which are related to factors that can influence struggling. It provides an indicative overview of the kinds of themes and shows which participants mentioned them.

**Table 26: Themes relating to factors influencing struggling (RQ2)**

<b>Themes &amp; metaphors</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Inexperience as a teacher	Solomon Gina Veronica  Heather	Inexperience – professional confidence now Learned to change approach with experience Inexperience as a head, experience, passage of time Not knowing what to do and how to do it due to lack of experience

	Rhiannon	Change in mindset; increased agency due to more experience
Teaching out of subject / more than one subject	Jane Jonathan Gina Rhiannon Ben	Teaching a classroom-based subject Teaching 2 subjects, can't give 50% to each, both would be crap Teaching more than one subject and teaching in English (which is a foreign language) Teaching out of subject – being removed from specialist subject Teaching 'literacy-heavy' subjects despite being dyslexic, taking on the 'poo' to give team an easier time
Obstacles	Gina	Collage – plastic boxes to overcome
(Lack of) Agency	Jane Mark Jonathan	Lack of say in choice of mentor No say in choice of mentor No say in choice of mentor
Agency (positive)	Gina Rhiannon	Learned to change approach Change in mindset
Asking for help	Jane Gina Daniela Heather Ben	I asked for help and this is what you do to me Not wanting to ask for help when new Asking for help – don't like asking Not being able to ask for help Not being able to ask for help
Educational terrain	Sandra Jane Mark Kathryn Veronica Daniela Amanda Heather Jonathan Ben	Playing the game (Not) playing the game, government Education as a factory model Accountability (collage), pointless paperwork, RI school The sands have shifted – historically capable teacher Benefit of staying at same school, not starting from scratch Change Outside forces, corporatisation of (independent) schools Change, accountability, weakening of 'rights' Teachers are replaceable 'things'
Support (as experienced negatively)	James Jane Solomon Jonathan Mark Rhiannon Gina	Wholly inadequate preparation Lesson observations, support plans (others) Choice of mentor, support that isn't supportive Leadership approach/style, support plans Choice of mentor Lack of SLT support, let down by the school, leaders taking sides False help, rope to hang yourself (collage)
Support (suggested as ideal)	James Sandra Solomon Jonathan	coaching, training and induction Competent line manager who can support Trust and respect, not being micro managed Team ethos
Interaction with other adults	Sandra Jane	Incompetent line manager Line manager. Kids keep me going

	Solomon Jonathan Gina Mark Kathryn Daniela Amanda Heather Rhiannon	Leaders and managers Leadership and management Parental complaints, student complaints Others' judgments Leadership Leadership – 'they' Others – line manager, SLT – kids keep me going parents SLT
Time	Kathryn Heather	Clock, time, lastminute.com, collage - clockface Time, being behind, collage – clockface
Time / season	James Daniela	Can cope differently at different times of year Summer term, easier to cope
Gendered life events	Sandra Jane	Maternity leave, menopause Miscarriage
Self (belief, doubt, voice, identity)	James  Sandra Solomon Mark Kathryn Amanda Heather  Rhiannon	Critical self-voice, self-compassion, self-criticism, questioning (should) Self-voice Self-doubt Expectations of self, high standards Self-doubt, self-perception, self-evaluation Self-doubt, self-belief One's own standards – perfectionism (in another teacher) Loss of identity

When recruiting participants, I was looking for teachers with some years of experience in the profession. I was not focussing on what it means to be struggling as a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT), for example. However, some teachers did relate experiences they had from much earlier in their careers and these are included in the discussion here. For this reason, I start with the concept of in/experience as the first theme for this research question.

When narrating his story of struggling, Solomon explained that it was at a time when he was recently qualified. He was tasked with responsibilities - such as creating new Schemes of Work - which he felt were incommensurate with his level of experience. He had not yet established himself as a teacher yet was being expected to complete tasks possibly usually associated with a middle leader, such as a Head of Department. Solomon reflects from the perspective of now being in a different school and is able to speak with a degree of professional confidence. He even tells me how much he enjoys creating Schemes of Work now. Veronica talks openly about feeling ill-equipped as a newly appointed headteacher; James too talks about feeling woefully prepared for the role. Gina, Mark and Daniela offer a particular dynamic in that they are all from overseas, which has been a contributory factor to their experience of struggling, albeit

in different ways. Heather reflects back on writing reports in her early days in teaching; she did not know what to do nor how to do it. This movement from feeling inexperienced to experienced is discussed further in the following section where I analyse themes relating to the Research Question 3.

When teachers are expected to teach outside of their subject specialism, they can feel ill-equipped. In turn, this can be a factor which contributes to them feeling like they are struggling. This was the case for five of the 14 participants and was clearly a source of anxiety for many. Jane expresses her sense of vulnerability at teaching a subject which is completely new to her; Jonathan is responsible for teaching two subjects but feels that he has to give each of them 100%, which is of course impossible. Gina's anxiety arises not only from having to teach more than one subject but also having to teach in English, which is not her mother tongue. Ben explains how uptake for his subject, music, decreased leaving his team too big to teach just music. He ended up teaching a number of different subjects to give his team 'an easier time;' this was further exacerbated by his difficulties with literacy-rich subjects, given his undiagnosed dyslexia. Rhiannon's situation seemed to her particularly unfair; a decision to move her from PE to science – rather than dealing with the manipulative ex-boyfriend she was working alongside – hit her extremely hard. She explains how she *liked* teaching science, but it was not what she *loved*.

One factor that can influence a teacher's experience of struggling is the extent to which they can exercise agency. Three teachers (Jane, Mark, Jonathan) expressed a lack of agency whilst on a support plan; they all felt they had no say in the process. In terms of agency, both Jane and Mark talk quite indignantly about their lack of say in choosing a mentor. In fact, Jane is quite outspoken about the mentor who was assigned to her. Others (e.g. Jonathan, Jane) related stories of support plans which were enacted following an unsuccessful lesson observation, for example, with these plans being universally perceived as 'done to' the person who is struggling rather than 'done with.' More positively, Gina and Rhiannon both report that, over time, they have felt able to exercise more agency by learning to change their approach and/or mindset. This is analysed in more detail in the section below (Research Question 3).

Linked to this is perhaps the fear of asking or inability to ask for help. Five teachers felt unable to ask for help or had negative experiences if they did ask. Jane had requested support teaching her second subject; she knew there were issues and she was keen to improve. She was observed and the lesson was found to be inadequate. This triggered a more formal system of support. Jane's frustration at being treated this way is clear: 'I asked for help and you do this to me!' Gina was reticent to ask for help when she first started teaching in England, feeling unable to access the support of a recently retired teacher who, on reflection, was clearly more than happy to guide her. Daniela is clear that she does not like asking for help,

and when she does it means she really needs it. Heather and Ben, too, both admit to not being able to ask for help. This fear of asking is perhaps indicative of the environment and conditions within which these teachers are operating. Arguably, by not asking they are not making their struggling visible, a theme outlined in the section above (Research Question 1).

In recent years, teachers in the English education system have experienced an array of changes in terms of educational policy, assessment approaches, curricula and preferred teaching styles. As Veronica says, change is the only constant. Amanda says that if we want to know why teachers are struggling we just need to look at how much change they have experienced. One might suggest, therefore, that change in the educational landscape is a factor that can contribute towards whether teachers are struggling or not. I discuss here not only change in terms of reforms which impact more directly in the classroom and on school life more generally. Ten of the 14 participants mentioned this in some form. Sandra and Jane both talk about the pressure to 'play the game,' a phrase Rhiannon uses albeit in a different context. Mark compares the education system to a factory model where teachers are operatives on the assembly line and students the 'widgets' being produced. Ben says teachers are like photocopiers, they are replaceable 'things.' Heather offers a perspective from the independent school sector, bemoaning how the ethos of many private schools is being eroded in favour of a corporatised model; this is something that teachers in the state sector might equally recognise. Jonathan recalls how things were different in the past, when the unions had more leverage and he talks at length about how the accountability agenda drives everything in schools. Kathryn, too, illustrates the shark-infested waters of accountability in her collage. She also talks of pointless paperwork and the challenge of being in a school deemed by Ofsted to be 'requiring improvement' (RI). Daniela speaks more generally and personally about change; she was pleased to report that she would be staying in the same school in the following academic year, explaining how this means she would not need to start from scratch again, allowing her more headspace. Veronica talks about how the 'sands have shifted,' by which she means that expectations of teachers and leaders have changed significantly over time. She talks at length about a Head of Department she is dealing with whom she deems to be struggling. He has clearly been a 'good' teacher in the past but seems not to have managed to keep up; this teacher could be seen to be what Tucker refers to as a 'historically capable teacher' (2001, p. 53).

Support is a topic mentioned by eight participants and it can involve support from family and friends outside the workplace as well as in-house support. Some expressed their actual experiences of support; others reflected on what support they would like to receive. On the whole, support from within the work

context has been experienced negatively; it is not perceived as supportive and more than one participant did quotation marks with their hands when saying the word support. James bemoans the support he received in becoming a headteacher, stating that the preparation was wholly inadequate; he would prefer a model of coaching, better training generally and a structured period of induction. Sandra just wants a 'competent line manager;' she does not elaborate further on what this person might look like or do, instead she talks about the incompetence of her current line manager. Jane has had a negative experience of so-called 'support' in the form of a support plan, an imposed mentor, imposed targets and a series of additional lesson observations over a period of six-eight weeks. She wants to be trusted and respected rather than micro managed. Micro-management can be an approach adopted in a high-stakes environment. Solomon takes issue with the leadership approach taken to inform him that he required 'support.' The way things were handled ultimately led to him taking a protracted period of absence and eventually leaving the school. He reflects on things at his new school, talking about how supportive the team is where he works now and telling me how much he enjoys the 'team ethos.' Mark has experienced 'support plans' and bemoans the lack of say in the process, including the choice of mentor. Rhiannon was faced with a lack of SLT support when dealing with a very unpleasant breakdown of a relationship with another member of staff; she says she felt let down by the school, especially as the leaders took sides (i.e. not her side).

The next theme I consider is that of interactions with adults generally – as opposed to students or children – and within that, leadership and leaders more specifically. I also look at the role of parents. It is of note perhaps that students were not mentioned by any of the participants as a major source of struggling. In fact, Jane says that it is the kids that keep her going. A couple of individual incidents were named (e.g. by Daniela, Gina) but the behaviour of students does not appear to be a key factor. For example, Gina felt undermined professionally when a student filed a complaint about her and her line manager did not then bother to get her version of the incident. Daniela talks at some length about having to deal with a particularly difficult student, but it is more the adult's – the leader's – response that she bemoans rather than the student's behaviour per se. Heather and Gina mention parents and specifically parental complaints as a factor in whether they struggle or not. Gina has felt unsupported by her line manager when facing parental complaints and has even been encouraged to lie to them, to just tell them what they want to hear. Gina clearly feels uncomfortable telling me about this as she senses her integrity is being undermined. In Heather's case, dealing with parents is part and parcel of her pastoral role and she suggests that, given that she works in a fee-paying school, she is expected to be on-call for parents 24/7; 'they are paying, we're delivering.'

Three participants felt that leaders do not know their teachers well enough (Daniela, Kathryn, Gina). Generally, some participants feel that leaders mostly stand in judgement of teachers rather than looking to praise and/or support them. Mark talks about how his line manager's judgement of him forms the basis of whether he will progress on the pay-scale or not. Amanda, Daniela and Jonathan tend to use the pronoun 'they' when referring to leaders; there is a sense of othering, of difference. Kathryn's collage shows pressure from above – metaphorically leaders tend to be higher up – as illustrated by a pot of playdough weighing down on her. Jonathan talks about how his headteacher sets out to be scary, on purpose. Solomon's experience of one particular headteacher - a narcissist in his view – seems to have broken him; he took a long time to recover and has never felt the same since. Sandra and Jane narrate experiences they have had with their respective line managers, neither of whom come out glowingly. Rhiannon's experience with leaders is already outlined above, but it is of note that the leadership team was fearful of what she might say in her leaving speech; a sign perhaps that they knew they had not handled the situation particularly well. Heather is the only participant who voices a different opinion; she seems able to see things from the leader's perspective, suggesting that there is a lot of pressure on them, too.

Of the 14 participants, seven are in fact in positions of leadership themselves, be that in middle leadership positions or as senior leaders such as headteacher or executive headteacher. In the case of the two headteachers, I asked the question: to what extent might you contribute to the fact that teachers are struggling? This was, of course, a sensitive question to pose and I was clear that they were not obliged to respond as it was not the predominant focus of this study. However, both responded very quickly with 'massively.' James admits that he had not ever considered that before I asked the question. Veronica was perhaps more reflective, telling me at length how she likes to deal with people on a 'human' level; one phrase she uses is 'I don't want to hit them when they're down.' Elsewhere in the interview, however, she adopts a more pragmatic tone when explaining how, eventually, decisions have to be taken to deal with teachers who are deemed to be struggling. Whilst not a headteacher, Heather is in a leadership position and a lot of her story is narrated through the lens of seeing others struggle. She talks at length about a newly qualified teacher (NQT) who was struggling, for example, rather than reflecting more directly on her own experience of struggling.

Time is a theme that is expressed as a contributory factor in a variety of ways. Kathryn and Heather both have a clock face on their collages, to illustrate the omnipresence of time pressure and deadlines. Kathryn in particular talks about how other people's poor time management – what she terms 'working

lastminute.com' - adds to your own experience of struggling. She is herself part-time and this could be a further factor as to why she struggles. Conversely, following her diagnosis, Amanda decided to go part-time and that has helped her not to struggle as much. James brings up the idea of time of year as a factor towards struggling; in his swimming / drowning analogy, he suggests that you could ask a swimmer (teacher) to do something in September and they would cope. However, in July that might not be the case. Daniela, however, sees the summer term as 'different' from the winter months; there is still a workload, and it is definitely not lighter, but it is different, she tells me.

Eight of the 14 participants are women, and although gender was not a lens for my study, it is of note that for two female participants issues related to their gender can be a source of struggling. I am calling these gendered life events. Sandra recalls the time when she was on maternity leave with her third child. Her return to work was handled extremely badly by the headteacher and she ended up spiralling downwards into a period of depression. The situation was exacerbated by other family issues outside of school. She was given a timetable similar to that of a supply teacher and one which matched neither her capabilities, her specialism nor her experience. More recently, she has been dealing with symptoms of the menopause and feels strongly that it is an issue which needs to be acknowledged more widely and more openly in the workplace. Jane told me an emotional story of how she lost a child through miscarriage. She felt extremely unsupported by her female line manager, and despite trying to return, she ended up having several days off work. She was called in for a return to work interview which was handled insensitively. Added to this, Jane was teaching the topic of pregnancy to her class at that time. She feels that she was treated without compassion and without understanding.

Finally, the concept of the self, in different guises, was raised as a factor by eight of the 14 participants. They expressed feelings of self-doubt, lack of self-belief, a negative self-voice and issues with their professional self or identity. Associated with this are feelings of inauthenticity and vulnerability. For example, Ben's collage shows a happy face on the outside, but clearly that is not how he truly feels as depicted by the unhappy face lower down in his stomach. Veronica talks of the headteacher's mask and James puts a boundary around his struggling so as not to be seen. James and Sandra admit to having a critical self-voice. James regularly questions whether he 'should' have become a headteacher. He is learning about self-compassion as an antidote to this, to engage in what he calls 'soothing mode' (Gilbert, 2009). Solomon, Kathryn and Amanda all voiced an element of self-doubt, mainly in their ability to teach. Mark, James and Heather talk of their (overly) high standards, which they tend to feel they do not meet. Heather raises concerns about perfectionism – in other teachers – and Rhiannon admits to being a

perfectionist, referring to herself as a 'goody two shoes' who follows the rules. Rhiannon also talks about how she feels that she lost her teacher identity – or how it was at least 'dented' – when she was removed from PE to teach in science.

Feelings of inauthenticity and vulnerability can be noted in several participants' expressions of struggling. Daniela talks of having to compromise herself in order to keep in her line manager's 'good books.' Jane regrets opening up and asking for help – making herself potentially vulnerable – because of what that led to. Heather, however, feels able to speak up and suggests that that might be why some managers find her difficult. She is, at least, able to be authentic to herself. James talks of feeling inauthentic as does Kathryn. In his first school, Solomon seems to have had no professional confidence; there was an atmosphere of contrived collegiality (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990) where no-one really wanted to collaborate or share. In his new school he is able to act confidently and open up to his vulnerabilities without fear of reproach. Rhiannon eventually decided to leave the school where she had suffered so much; as a professional whose belief is to 'do things right,' she felt it was time to 'do the right thing.'

There are multiple factors which can influence the nature of the experience of struggling, from a lack of experience to time pressures or time of year. Teaching more than one subject or outside of your subject specialism is one such factor which can contribute towards struggling. Teachers reported a lack of agency and the inability to ask for help as further factors. The conditions within which teachers work can influence whether they struggle or not and the current educational landscape has undoubtedly contributed to these teachers' experience of struggling. Teachers explained that 'support' is not experienced as supportive and that it is adults, predominantly leaders, rather than children who precipitate struggling. The concept of self, including self-doubt, lack of self-belief and a critical self-voice were also highlighted as factors. Finally, gender – specifically being a woman - was identified as a factor for two participants.

### 5.2.3 Movement Between Struggling and Not Struggling

The final research question focusses on the movement between struggling and not struggling. I begin with a discussion of how struggling seems to be perceived as something experienced by everyone at some stage in their lives. I then turn attention whether struggling and not struggling are at opposite ends of a linear continuum. The idea that struggling could be cyclical is discussed as is the notion of a 'tipping point.' Finally, I outline the extent to which actions such as changing schools can help participants move from struggling to not struggling.

The Table below gives an idea of various themes and imagery – both verbal and visual – which are related to the movement between struggling and not struggling. It provides an indicative overview of the kinds of themes and shows which participants mentioned them as well as some examples.

**Table 27: Themes relating to the movement between struggling and not-struggling (RQ3)**

Themes & metaphors	Participant	Examples
Universality of struggling – experienced by everyone at some stage	James Jane Daniela Heather	Accept there’s always an element of struggling, struggling is never far away Fine line between normal stress and struggling A permanent state An experience everyone faces
Struggling – linear, cyclical, fluid?	James Mark  Veronica Solomon	Fluid not linear Linear, cyclical – happiness, confusion, fall apart, fix (collage) Cyclical Pathway to struggling (maze/vortex), no exit point (collage)
Labelling	Kathryn Jonathan	Struggling is not mild when used as a label When they say you’re struggling you’re f***ed
Tipping point	Jane Kathryn Ben	Tipping point Critical mass Sliding door – tiniest thing
Moving schools	Solomon Daniela Rhiannon	Changing school helped Changing school helped to start with Changing school – hope it will help

A number of participants suggested that struggling is a fact of life. James accepts that there is always an element of struggling; struggling is never far away. He does not make it clear whether he feels it is closer at some times compared with others. Heather feels that it is an experience that everyone faces; Jane feels there is only a ‘fine line’ between normal stress and struggling. In the extreme, Daniela suggests that it is in fact a permanent state, although she is able to reflect on the movement out of struggling to not-struggling. For this reason, I have termed this overarching theme the ‘universality of struggling’ by which I mean that it appears to be an experience everyone has at some stage in their lives.

Two collages show quite clearly a linearity or cyclicity to the experience of struggling. Mark’s collage is perhaps an example of linearity, as it progresses from left to right, from happiness through confusion to falling apart and then fixing. On reflection, Mark suggests that struggling feels more cyclical than linear, as after one period of struggling has been ‘fixed,’ a new cycle of happiness followed by confusion, etc. will surely follow. Solomon did not describe his collage as a maze, but it is clearly a ‘pathway to struggling’

which becomes increasingly more and more difficult to escape. The end result is a vortex of darkness, as symbolised by a huge pile of cut-up black drinking straws. When we meet for the second time, Solomon explains that he would now add to his collage something to indicate a before (on the left) and after (on the right) to symbolise the passage of time and the fact that it is possible shift out of a period of struggling. James feels that struggling is fluid rather than linear; Veronica sees it as cyclical.

Three participants suggested that there is a 'tipping point' which determines whether you are struggling or not. Kathryn uses the term 'critical mass;' Ben refers to it as a 'sliding door,' explaining that the tiniest thing can lead to you struggling. No one really gave a clear indication of how they might move out of a period of struggling, although some (e.g. Gina, Rhiannon) hinted at how they have changed their approach or mindset. Solomon speaks about his more recent experience with an air of professional confidence which seems to have been lacking in his first school. Rhiannon talks of changing her mindset, by which she specifically means the way she views the work she does. Now she says: 'it's just a job.' With experience, Gina has developed more of a sense of autonomy and explains how she now has more of a 'don't care' attitude, although she does not specify what it is she no longer cares about. Veronica, too, talks about the passage of time and gaining more experience as a headteacher, both of which have helped her struggle less.

Finally, three participants had changed or were about to change schools, as a way to shift from struggling to not struggling. Solomon has established himself at a new school and has managed to recover to a great extent from the experience he had early on in his teaching career. Daniela's move was not entirely successful at first, but one year on, she is pleased to be staying there for the upcoming academic year so that she does not need to 'start from scratch' again. Rhiannon made the decision to change school, having come to the realisation that she had 'had enough.' She now knew that it was not the wrong career, it was the wrong school.

#### 5.2.4 Dealing with Other People's Struggling

This study is focussed on what it means to be struggling as a teacher. As such, the main research questions have looked at the experience of struggling itself, from the perspective of the participants. Alongside looking at the nature of the experience, there has been an exploration of factors which can influence struggling as well as the movement between struggling and not struggling. Dealing with other people's struggling was not something I had purposely intended to research. I might have expected the two headteachers involved in the study to narrate experiences of this kind. James, however, is now perhaps further removed in his executive headteacher role from dealing operationally, day-to-day, with teachers.

He admits that, before being asked, he had never really reflected on whether he contributes to others' experience of struggling. He seems more focussed on struggling with his own struggling; he introduces the notion of a double-struggle by which he means the thing you are struggling with and the feeling of struggling to find a solution.

Two other participants (Heather, Veronica) did narrate specific accounts of *other people's* struggling. Heather told me of a Newly Qualified Teacher who eventually left her school. Veronica told me in detail about how she is currently having to manage one particular struggling teacher. I thought for some time about whether to report this, given that the Head of Department in question has not consented to his story being told. On reflection, I realised that many other participants, too, had related often critical accounts of other third parties as part of their own experience of struggling. I conclude that there is minimal risk of harming the teacher concerned. My argument for including it, then, is that having to deal with situations like this may be one factor which influences whether Veronica is struggling or not. I am not concluding whether the teacher in question is, in fact, struggling or whether he would identify as such and am reminded of the need to question whose struggle it is (Moreau, 2014).

So, I focus here on Veronica's account of having to manage a situation in which she identifies a Head of Department as struggling. Veronica wants to be seen to be dealing with the situation as humanly as possible but is aware that capability – a formal process in which targets are set and monitored and after which time a teacher can be dismissed – tends not to end well for the teacher. It always seems to be 'the beginning of the end.' Veronica tells me that the support offered to this particular Head of Department included a reduced timetable, coaching in terms of his teaching and his leadership, and the option of moving to another school in the Multi-Academy Trust. Veronica is keen to state that this teacher was 'capable at one stage' but goes on to say that 'the sands have shifted around him.' He had become Head of Department 'by accident,' doing it temporarily for a while and then it 'merged into permanent.' One of the factors influencing struggling, discussed above, is the changing demands of the role of a Head of Department, for example. Veronica explains: 'the environment has moved and he hasn't... so he's actually behind the game.' She feels that he is stuck, which is in line with the way some participants expressed how it can feel to be struggling (Research Question 1).

Veronica explains that whilst priding herself on being a decent human being, if she had a 14-year old child she would not want them to be in his classroom. She tells me that admitting that is both tough and stressful. She wants to deal with it in 'the right way' to which I ask whether there *is* a right way. She reassures herself that, morally, she has done everything she can for him but that she feels they have

reached the ‘end of the line.’ Having reflected in our first interview together what it feels like to be struggling, she recalls in the second interview feelings such as feeling frozen, static, being stuck. She relates these feelings to the Head of Department we are talking about and she realises that adding something to that person in terms of ‘boxes to tick’ and ‘hoops to jump through’ is just asking the impossible. If six weeks of informal support have not helped, she explains, then six further weeks of formal capability is probably not going to make any difference. If we add in the possibility that this Head of Department has no or little say in who might support him during the capability process - in line with reports from participants such as Mark, Jonathan and Jane – then it is unlikely that the process *will* end well.

Towards the end of the story, Veronica ponders on whether struggling generally is visible or not, saying that if only you could see it early enough – by which she implies in others - you might be able to ‘catch it.’ Something she said earlier, though, shows that certain types of struggling *might* be visible as she clearly *had* noticed a deterioration in the Head of Department’s practice over time. She seems keen to be able to intervene and help before it is too late. However, she also realises that, by the very nature of her position of authority and given that she ultimately has the power to hire and fire, she may never be able to be seen as the person to approach for support. There seems to be a tension between having to be seen as the headteacher and her self-identity as a supportive and ‘decent human being’. A not insignificant part of Veronica’s story focussed not on her own experience of struggling.

### 5.3 Summary of Themes

I conclude this analysis chapter with a summary of the themes identified in the data, categorised by research question.

#### 5.3.1 The Experience of Struggling

This research question looks at the experience of struggling; participants shared the process of struggling, what it feels like and what it means to them. When grouping themes together, the main focus was on how struggling is felt and experienced and therefore includes, for example, embodied symptoms and emotions as well as any sense of controllability the struggler has.

**Table 28: Summary of themes for Research Question 1**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Exemplification</b>
1. Embodied symptoms of struggling	Bodily tensions described; springs, coils and spirals

2. Negative moods and emotions	Expressions of fear; anger; sadness; accounts of episodes of mental ill-health;
3. Mind overload	Feeling overwhelmed; being pulled; not feeling on top of things; feeling torn; picking holes; getting behind; feeling like an imposter; feeling frozen; feeling static; mental explosion and overflowing skull
4. Invisibility of struggling	Expressed as border or boundary; hidden face; expressionless face; unheard cracking sound
5. Lack of control	Struggling experienced as positive when the struggle is self-determined; struggling experienced as negative when it feels imposed by others there is a lack of control over it
6. Imagery associated with struggling	Water imagery to express drowning; swimming analogies; cold expressed in collages using colour (blue); no warmth in struggling; feeling frozen; blue for depression; black for depression; vivid almost overwhelming colours

### 5.3.2 Factors which Influence Struggling

This research question looks at factors which can influence the experience of struggling. Participants spoke of factors which help and things which hinder. For ease of presentation, I have divided the factors into internal and external factors as one way of separating factors from within the person and those which are more within their environment. Such a distinction, however, is artificial given that external factors, such as the poor handling of gendered life events, also impinge upon the internal.

**Table 29: Summary of themes for Research Question 2**

<b><i>Theme – internal factors</i></b>	<b><i>Exemplification</i></b>
7. Inexperience	Not knowing what to do and how to do it; lack of experience; teaching outside of subject specialism
8. Negative self-expression	Critical self-voice; self-doubt and lack of self-belief; measuring performance against own very high standards and expectations; loss of professional identity; self-questioning
9. Lack of agency	Lack of say in choice of mentor; not feeling able to ask for help; asking for help but not feeling helped; able to shift mindset to feel more positive; change in attitude (negative to more positive)

10. Poor handling of gendered life events	Negative experience following maternity leave; poor handling of absence following miscarriage; lack of understanding surrounding menopause
<b>Theme – external factors</b>	
11. Pressure of change	Increased accountability demands; pointless paperwork as illustrated in collages; constant changes; outside forces; feeling like you have to 'play the game;' education as a corporate or factory model; the 'sands have shifted;' incompetent manager; senior leaders; increased parental and student power to complain
12. Deficiencies in support	'Support plans' that are not experienced as supportive; high-stakes lesson observations; lack of support from senior leaders; lack of trust from leaders; no say in who supports you; positive support from colleagues, friends and family

### 5.3.3 Movement between Struggling and Not-Struggling

The final research question looks at the movement between struggling and not-struggling. Participants were not always able to express what it is exactly which helps them shift out of struggling. However, many felt that struggling was a fact of life, an experience you move in and out of.

**Table 30: Summary of themes for Research Question 3**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Exemplification</b>
13. Universal experience	An experience everyone faces; accept there's always an element of struggling; struggling is never far away
14. Non-linearity	Critical mass; fluidity; cyclicalness; moving in and out of struggling; tipping point; sliding door; 'the tiniest thing'
15. Imagery of movement between struggling and not-struggling	A pathway; a maze; linear; cyclical; fluid

The analysis of the verbal and visual data has brought me to a point where I have identified these fifteen themes. In the subsequent chapter I discuss these themes in relation to the literature on struggling.

## 6 Discussion

I discuss here the themes and ideas that arose from the analysis as reported in the previous chapter. A thematic analysis of the data produced fifteen themes relating to the research questions (RQ1-3). These fifteen themes are themselves a combination of Tables 28, 29 and 30.

**Table 31: 15 Themes from thematic analysis**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Themes</b>
RQ1 Experience	1. Embodied symptoms of struggling
	2. Negative moods and emotions
	3. Mind overload
	4. Invisibility of struggling
	5. Lack of control
	6. Imagery associated with struggling
RQ2 Factors	7. Inexperience
	8. Negative self-expression
	9. Lack of agency
	10. Poor handling of gendered life events
	11. Pressure of change
	12. Deficiencies in support
RQ3 Movement	13. Universal experience
	14. Non-linearity
	15. Imagery of movement

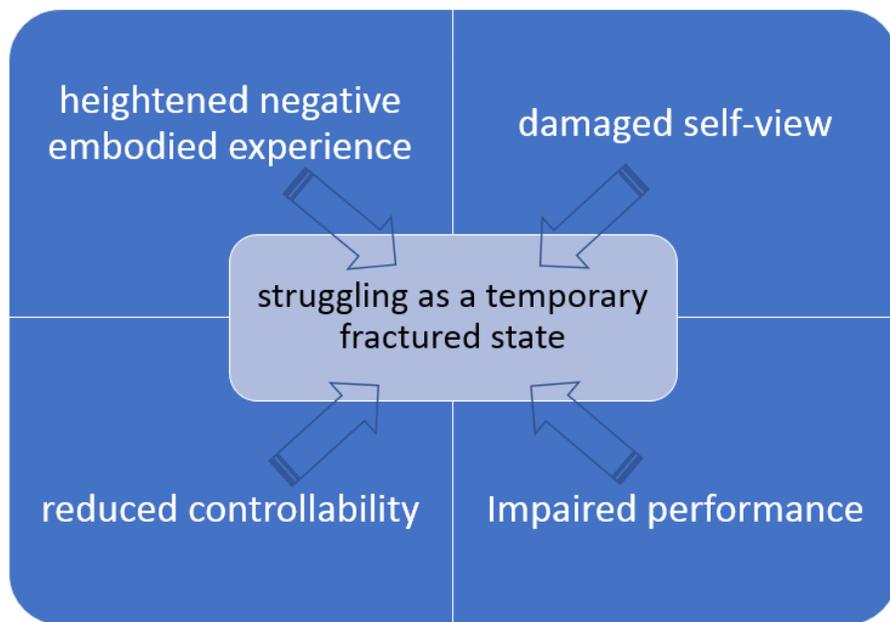
The advantage of a table of this kind is that it presents, in a summarised form, the wide-ranging themes which arose from analysing the data. One disadvantage of this table is that it delineates items rather sharply from each other, suggesting a lack of connection between themes within a research question or between different research questions. In reality, when looking at the experience of struggling, that delineation is not there. There is some overlap between the three research questions, which could perhaps be illustrated by an intersecting Venn diagram.

However, presenting themes in this way still underplays the complexity of the experience of struggling as narrated by participants. Struggling can involve feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability and can be associated with mental ill-health; a displaced feeling of controllability is another feature for some who experience struggling. Factors which influence the experience of struggling can be those which are directly linked to the professional setting, such as experience or inexperience, leaders and managers and support that is not experienced as supportive. Other factors are external to the immediate workplace, such as the support of family and friends. Struggling is seen, by some, as a universal experience, one that everybody

experiences at some stage in their lives. It is also an experience that comes and goes, even if the movement between struggling and not-struggling is not always easy to clearly identify from the data. What is clear from the data is that struggling is a complex phenomenon with emotional, embodied, affective and cognitive dimensions. For this reason, I will discuss the themes more holistically.

The following discussion is presented in light of the analytical themes and the holistic approach I have taken, drawing on a new literature as necessary. This new literature helps deepen understanding of the findings and strengthens the theorisation of the experience of struggling that I make.

The figure below is designed to present the experience of struggling diagrammatically. There are four key dimensions of struggling, presented around the edges, which contribute towards struggling being experienced as a temporary fractured state, presented in the middle. The five elements in the figure below provide a theorisation of struggling, based on an interpretative synthesis of the themes in Table 31. This theorisation is the basis of the conceptualisation of struggling put forward in Chapter 7.



**Figure 22: Theorisation of the experience of struggling**

These theorisations were reached not by categorising themes or sub-themes under the umbrella of a specific research question but by looking at the themes more holistically. It was a conscious decision not to force the themes to 'fit neatly' into the separate research questions.

The five theoretical dimensions of experience of struggling are:

1. a heightened sense of negative embodied experience, making emotional work harder;
2. a damaged self-view;
3. impaired performance *resulting* from struggling;
4. reduced controllability, all of which lead to;
5. struggling as a temporary fractured state.

The order in which the first *four* theoretical dimensions are presented is not significant. However, I argue below that, together, the first four lead to the fifth, which is the suggestion that struggling is experienced as a temporary fractured state.

### 6.1 Heightened sense of negative embodied experience

The first theoretical suggestion that I propose is that struggling involves a heightened sense of negative embodied experience. I use the term 'heightened' in the sense that the body was explicitly mentioned to express sensations or emotions. I use negative to suggest a particular character of the bodily tensions and emotions.

Participants used verbal and visual metaphors to describe the experience of struggling, with many of them referring to sensations in different parts of the body. For example, Veronica and Jane referred to knots in their stomach; Solomon felt physically pummelled; Ben said everything hurts. In her collage, Gina's feet were not touching the ground and her eyes were popping out of their sockets.

There is a wide-ranging embodiment literature, but the essential premise is that the body is inseparable from its feelings and functions (Mooney, 2017); the integration of thought and emotion is felt throughout the body, with thought being conceptualised as 'embodied, embedded cognition' (Payne, 2017, p. 3). It is for this reason that I include in this section the suggestion that struggling also has a negative *emotional* tone.

Human beings are quintessentially 'situated, feeling and interacting bodies' (Gallese, 2018, p. 5). Gallese (2018) argues that it is wrong to divorce the brain from the body, maintaining that understanding ways of functioning and the meanings we ascribe to our experience are first and foremost *experienced* meanings. The fact that participants are using body-related imagery in their expressions of struggling may be seen as indicating that struggling, a word with negative semantic prosody, is associated with a *heightened* sense of *negative* embodied experience.

Drawing on the work of Husserl (1952) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), Payne (2017) suggests that the body is the vehicle for emotional expression; feedback from interactions with the environment affords bodily resonance. Experiences of the lived body – somesthetic experiences – can have a bearing on perception and other cognitive processes and phenomena (Gallagher, 2011). Gallagher (2011) further distinguishes between the body-as-object and the body-as-subject, highlighting the difference between what one perceives to be happening in or to one’s body as opposed to bodily experiences that have an effect on the way one experiences the world. In the case of bodily tensions associated with struggling, such as knots in the stomach and headaches, the body may be seen as both object and subject. The knots in the stomach appear to be real and the acknowledgment of these feelings may alert me to the associations of that bodily tension with the experience of struggling, for example.

Participants were using body-related imagery and metaphors to help them express - and understand - what it means to be struggling. Metaphoric language can arise in part from ‘people’s ordinary, felt sensations of their bodies in action’ (Gibbs et al., 2004, p. 1190). The argument for integrating the brain and body as a means of understanding experience is also supported by Gibbs (2003). Gibbs (2003, p. 2) argues that the ‘subjective, felt experiences of ... bodies in action provide part of the ... grounding for language and thought.’ Whilst not arguing that embodiment is the sole basis for metaphoric language, Gibbs et al (2004) do claim that a significant aspect of such language is motivated by such bodily experience. When the knot is used as a metaphor it represents a real phenomenon (an object). The experiencing of this phenomenon (the knot experience) leads the person to interact differently with the world (it affects the person as a subject). It is notable that by interpreting the knot in the stomach in this object-subject way allows an understanding of struggling as a negative embodied experience to emerge.

The experience of struggling, whilst at times intensely personal and even invisible, is often the *outcome* of an interaction with others; in this sense, our bodies interact with other bodies. Gallese (2017) argues that human experience should always be understood as a form of relational experience. It is important, then, to acknowledge that our interactions with others have embodied dimensions (Payne, 2017). Indeed, Payne (2017, p. 9) suggests that ‘witnessing the actions of others... co-involves our own actions and emotions.’ People are affected by the emotional expressions of others; they experience their response through their body’s sensation and kinaesthesia. At the same time, they are also affecting others’ bodily resonances thus creating a ‘mutuality of intersubjective affectivity’ (Payne, 2017, p. 18). In this way, the experience of struggling may also be felt bodily and emotionally in response to external factors.

Struggling was expressed by two participants (Sandra and Kathryn) in terms of an embodied tension arising from not really being known or understood as a person. If struggling is experienced and expressed as a tension in a professional relationship or a specific working environment, the failure to be noticed by others at ‘the implicit level of intercorporeality’ (Gallese, 2017, p. 45) suggests an empathy void. Gallagher and others posit that the ability to empathise is based on the recognition of another’s emotions by noticing their expressive behaviour (Gallagher, 2011; Payne, 2017, drawing on Prinz, 2004). A limited ability to empathise, not only of the struggler but of those in the wider context of struggling, is perhaps a further dimension of the experience of struggling.

As a further element of the theoretical suggestion that struggling involves a heightened sense of negative embodied experience, I discuss now more explicitly the emotional aspects of struggling.

In their accounts of struggling, teachers talked of emotions they experienced such as fear, anger, sadness and frustration. There were also several stories of mental ill-health. Hargreaves (2007) suggests it is important to consider not only the rational and cognitive dimensions of teaching but the *emotional* dimensions, too. Whilst Hargreaves (2007) argues that the literature tends to focus on the fact that teachers think and act rather than feel, there has in fact been an increased research focus on the emotions of teaching (e.g. Kelchtermans, 2005; Mevarech and Maskit, 2015; Schmidt and Datnow, 2005; Uitto et al., 2015), what Uitto et al. (2015) call an affective turn. This has helped highlight the extent to which teaching is ‘emotionally laden’ (Schmidt and Datnow, 2005) and reinforces the notion that personal and professional emotions are intrinsically intertwined (Kelchtermans, 2005; Nias, 1996). Whilst emotions are difficult to disentangle (Schmidt and Datnow, 2005), teachers’ emotions are clearly linked to both their sense of personal wellbeing and their sense of professional efficacy.

Factors which influence struggling for the participants in this study include changes to curricula and assessments, pointless paperwork, emails, etc. which take teachers away from the things they *love*. Hargreaves sees teaching as a ‘labor of love’ (2007, p. 281) which cannot be reduced to technical competence or standards. Although not a specific focus of my questioning, participants did talk about their motivation for becoming teachers and it was the love of their subject, the love of learning, the love of children – or a combination of some of all of these – that they talked about most. It is perhaps for this reason that struggling is experienced almost as a falling out of love.

Teaching involves significant emotional labour, which is seen by Hochschild (1983) as a largely negative phenomenon as it requires trading in part of the self for the security and (profitable) reward from an

employer (Hargreaves, 2007). Furthermore, it exposes teachers making them vulnerable when their working conditions or demands on them make it hard to do their 'emotion work' properly (Hargreaves, 2007). Solomon expressed some sadness, mixed with anger, at losing an emotional connection with his teaching when he started to experience his work as a teacher as a mere transaction:

*you've got to have buy-in ... there has to be something in it for you it can't be a one way, it is a transaction I think any job is a transaction and I don't know why teaching at (name of school) it was very one way...*

#### Solomon, teaching as a transaction

Vulnerability is one of the emotional aspects of struggling, although some might argue that it is a *mood* arising from the conditions one finds oneself in, rather than an emotion (Kelchtermans, 2005). It is seen variously in the literature as a positive attribute – one of a willingness to be open – or more negatively as a feeling of powerlessness and defencelessness. I am drawing on Lasky's (2005) conceptualisation of vulnerability, in which it is seen as an interplay between how the present situation is perceived by someone, their beliefs and their sense of competence. Teachers are perhaps less likely to take risks, and to feel able to be openly or willingly vulnerable (Cuban, 2003). A teacher may feel vulnerable when forced to work in ways which are inconsistent with their beliefs and/or when they lack direct control over changes being made, for example. A teacher's moral purpose may feel threatened by changes in a landscape where success is not self-defined but rather depends on satisfying others' definitions of teaching (Hargreaves, 2001; Lasky, 2005). It is perhaps not the teacher per se who is vulnerable but the change that makes them feel vulnerable. In this sense, teachers may experience struggling as a tension between what they are expected to do and what they believe is the right thing to do because they are acting in a way that is inconsistent with their beliefs and values (Kelchtermans, 2005; Nias, 1996). This was illustrated in Gina's response to being asked to lie in response to a parental complaint. Mark, too, talked of how his professional integrity felt challenged when he was expected to 'cheat' in assessments.

Whilst not an emotion per se, inadequacy is a concept that has emotional dimensions associated with it. Feeling inadequate has a negative emotional tone and professional inadequacy is characterised by powerlessness, limited means of action and uncertainty (Lindqvist et al., 2017). It is perceived as having a weak sense of self-efficacy; it can involve a feeling of dissonance between ideals and reality (Lindqvist et al., 2017). There are links here with the concept of vulnerability as feeling inadequate, too, can be experienced as a *tension*.

Inadequacy can relate to the individual (relating to one's own ideals) or collective, in terms of being dependent on others. If a teacher is aware of, but unable to take, the morally appropriate action because of external or situational obstacles, for example, an ethical dilemma can result which can lead to feelings of distress and/or struggling (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Again, this is represented in accounts of struggling from Gina and Mark, for example, who felt constrained in their professional integrity by the expectations of others. Their experience of struggling emerges from what might be termed constrained competence and contrived compliance, for example when confronted with ethical dilemmas. By constrained competence, I mean having the knowledge and understanding (competence) of what to do in a situation but being constrained – by others or the context – in doing so. Contrived compliance means conforming to and complying with expectations in a way that is not true or natural to one's own standards and beliefs.

The ways in which participants expressed struggling reveal an overall sense of a physical, emotional and mental *tension*. The predominant *tone* of this tension is negative. This aligns with the negative semantic prosody revealed in the corpus linguistic analysis of the term struggling in Chapter 2. For the reasons discussed, therefore, I suggest that the experience of struggling involves a heightened sense of negative embodied experience.

I turn my attention now to the next theoretical suggestion that struggling involves a damaged self-view.

## 6.2 Damaged self-view

The second theoretical suggestion that I propose is that struggling involves a damaged self-view. I use the term 'damaged' to reflect a predominantly injured tone in which the participants presented this aspect of their stories to me. The experience of struggling is linked to concepts of identity, self-efficacy and self-voice, as seen in Table 31, and participants questioned and doubted their identity and the professional nature of their performance

The way in which a teacher identifies as a professional is influenced by relational, contextual and emotional factors (e.g. Rodgers and Scott, 2008). Much of the literature sees teacher identity and the notion of a teacher self as intertwined (e.g. Nias, 1996). Identity is not an entity in itself but rather an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation (Beijaard et al., 2004), negotiated in a specific context (Rodgers and Scott, 2008).

Rhiannon talks at length about how she feels she lost her identity as a PE teacher. To resolve a difficult situation with another PE colleague, her ex-partner, the school decided to ask Rhiannon to teach science instead.

*It really did damage my identity as a teacher because on my ID (badge) it still had like science and PE and I was just like but you're not a PE teacher and I was like I am like if you ask me about anything in sport I'll be able to tell you and yeah it's been difficult because it's what I love doing... when I basically lost my teacher identity and I think that's where I was a bit stubborn because I didn't want to leave the profession I didn't want to leave that job but I obviously didn't want to leave the profession and I think and I also knew that if I didn't move this year I wouldn't get back into PE because I would've had a whole year without not teaching core games ...*

Rhiannon, loss of identity

A sense of self is influenced by the beliefs one holds, beliefs which in turn influence perceptions and judgments and affect behaviour and decision-making (Pajares, 1992). Participants experienced a clear tension when being asked to act in a way that was inconsistent with their beliefs. Whilst beliefs cannot be directly observed or measured (Pajares, 1992), I infer from what Gina and Mark told me (about being made to cheat) that they have deeply-held beliefs that teachers should have integrity. Self-beliefs have strong affective and evaluative components and are difficult to alter once incorporated (Pajares, 1992); Gina and Mark might, therefore, struggle to change their beliefs. Amanda, too, talked about 'beating herself up' after doing what she initially believed to be the right thing with her students. She then clearly experienced some self-doubt. Her frustration is clear in the extract below.

*It's **soul** destroying it's soul destroying and it just upsets me and then I get cross and then I get frustrated because I don't feel that I'm doing the right thing and then I go and say to somebody what do you think about this any chance of some help and they just look at you funny and it goes right round in a circle again and **you start beating yourself up** that you're not doing the right thing ...*

Amanda, expressing self-doubt (my emphasis)

Some argue that because we are the tellers of (our own) stories (e.g. Rodgers and Scott, 2008); we are also authors of our experience and authors of our identities (Britzman, 2012). This implies a level of engagement with one's self, a notion of self-understanding (Kelchtermans, 2005). It also suggests a need for self-reflection in which one seeks to evaluate and modify one's thoughts and behaviour. Self-efficacy is a concept associated with Bandura (1997) who suggested that self-efficacy beliefs are the strongest predictor of human motivation and behaviour. Self-efficacy can be defined as the belief in one's ability to plan, organise and carry out activities to achieve certain aims or goals (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2010). Pajares (1992) posits that self-efficacy beliefs can affect motivation and learning. Thus, self-efficacy beliefs can be

influenced by repeated strong (negative) experiences, such as struggling. Such beliefs might also colour how subsequent events - such as further incidences of struggling - are experienced and understood as they provide memory material to draw upon and strongly influence the processing of new information (Pajares, 1992). The argument here is that struggling involves a weakening of self-efficacy, and weakened self-efficacy is a component of a damaged self-view.

The extract below is a selection of statements made by Solomon in which I have highlighted for emphasis references to his self. He talks about his self-perception, a loss of self-belief and the notion of kidding himself. He also refers to his 'former self,' that is the person he was before the experience of struggling he had told me about. Solomon was able to engage in a deep reflection. Throughout, he expresses himself in a tone conveying a sense of a weakened, injured self.

*To start off with I'd never perceived myself as someone that would struggle in this role in this job as a teacher ... I think it was the first time in my career I really felt I really really frustrated and after a while you start losing self-belief ... I thought maybe my whole life erm I'd kidded myself maybe I was better than I probably was or something I started to think like that ... the former self wouldn't have been like this, so it has had long term damage in that respect erm so I just have to be careful so red flags come up ...*

Solomon: examples of weakened self-expression

Van Dinther et al. (2011) suggest that self-efficacy is a cognitive judgment of one's competencies but also maintain that levels of self-efficacy can affect not only behaviour but also thoughts and feelings. Low levels of self-efficacy have been found to be linked to feelings of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2010). This would suggest an additional affective dimension to self-efficacy, more in line with conceptualisations of self-esteem, for example. Self-esteem involves a judgement of self-worth and is arguably an emotional reaction (van Dinther et al., 2011). Furthermore, self-efficacy beliefs are similar to Archer's notion of reflexive *internal conversations* (Archer, 2010, 2007) in that they are both concerned with an internal reflection on one's ability to carry out activities. I return to this in more depth in the discussion on temporary fractured state. Below, I provide examples from two participants, Sandra and James, who referred to self-talk. The first quote is from Sandra.

*You don't want to feel like you're rubbish, even though you despise the whole system if someone says well it wasn't quite ... and even though that **voice in your head** is saying well what do you know it's still a bit wounding so I'm not like this*

*iron-clad nothing affects me because it does affect me and it does make you feel a bit down if somebody says well I didn't see this in the lesson ...*

Sandra, self-voice (my emphasis)

Sandra's self-talk seems supportive; it is the external comments which appear to cause the wounding. Whereas James (below) appears to be being damaged by his own voice.

*There's a kind of **voice** that proliferates that seems to be on kind of a repeat why are you doing this what are you doing this for why this you know erm I think... That voice is my voice it's a **self-voice** so it's not someone else's voice ...*

James, damaged self-voice (my emphasis)

Participants expressed their experience of struggling in ways which revealed details about who they feel they are as teachers. Some, like Rhiannon, had previously had a very clear professional identity which she felt had been lost. Kathryn expressed strong beliefs about leadership which had been established during her time in previous leadership posts but which she was unable to enact in her current post. Others, like Solomon, Amanda and Jane expressed self-doubt; James in particular felt he had a critical self-voice. The experience of struggling appears to have damaged how they see themselves and how they are able to act as teachers. It is for this reason that I argue that struggling involves a damaged self-view.

I turn my attention now to the next theoretical dimension of struggling, that impaired performance can result from struggling.

### 6.3 Impaired performance resulting from struggling

The third theorisation of the experience of struggling that I propose is that struggling can lead to impaired performance. This is in stark contrast to conceptualisations of struggling in the literature which equate struggling with poor performance or suggest that poor performance leads to struggling. This is especially the case when a teacher who performs poorly is deemed – by a leader, for example – to be struggling (e.g. Tucker, 2001; Yariv and Kass, 2017). I argue here that impaired performance can also be a *result* of struggling.

As discussed so far, struggling can be experienced as a heightened sense of negative embodied symptoms, including negative emotions and feelings. It can also involve a damaged self-view. Other dimensions of struggling which arose out of the analytical process included mind overload and dealing with change,

especially the pace and nature of change. It is these that I discuss here to underpin the theoretical suggestion that struggling can lead to impaired performance.

Collages created by Amanda and Daniela, for example both expressed a busy-ness either in the head or within an enclosed circle. Kathryn talks of a 'mental explosion' which she presents in her collage. Amanda is clear that when she has too much to deal with, something – which can include the quality of her teaching – falls by the wayside. James, a headteacher, knows that if he asks his teachers to do something in September they would probably cope but when they are what he terms 'depleted' in July, they would struggle and their performance would be impaired. Ben, a head of department, noticed how his own teaching began to suffer when he was struggling to deal with issues within his team.

Performance is one of many terms used in the educational discourse in England where terms such as 'effectiveness' and 'productivity' are also readily found (e.g. Goldhaber et al., 2011). The focus in the educational landscape is predominantly on student outcomes and high-stakes accountability measures prevail (e.g. Ball, 2017; Evans, 2011; Phillips and Furlong, 2001); a teacher's performance is measured within this context. Standards or competences are set out in frameworks against which teachers and teaching quality are evaluated and pay decisions made. A teacher's *poor* performance – their *lack* of quality and productivity - can be picked up via lesson observations, work scrutinies or the appraisal process, for example, although the validity and reliability of these measures have been questioned by some (e.g. Coe et al., 2014).

Two participants (Heather, Mark) talked about how schools are becoming more and more like businesses. Mark provided a detailed image of a factory (school) where workers (teachers) are churning out widgets (student results). Ben suggests that teachers are 'replaceable things,' comparing them to photocopiers which are removed and replaced once they break down. Others (Sandra, Jane) talked about how they feel they have to 'play the game,' for example by ticking all the necessary boxes for a lesson observation. Even if it goes against their beliefs, it makes life easier for them.

External factors such as educational policy have the potential to influence the experience of struggling; Amanda has lost count of how many times GCSE and BTEC courses have changed. She has experienced multiple reforms over the years and her frustration is clear when she says: 'stop changing things!' In particular, it is the nature and pace of such change which can contribute to teachers feeling they are struggling. School-based policies, such as expectations for marking, can also cause tensions. Jonathan, for example, talked about being monitored via a 'support plan' because he had not marked students' books

according to the school policy. Piles of paperwork, which were perceived by Kathryn and Heather as 'pointless,' also added to workloads; Kathryn in particular explained how administrative tasks were taking her away from her core purpose of being a teacher. She knew the quality of her planning and teaching was suffering. Being asked to teach a subject as a non-specialist was a further factor with teachers - like Jane and Ben - feeling this led to a diminished quality of teaching; impaired performance was an outcome of their experience of struggling.

A number of participants referred to what they perceived as 'constant changes' in their work lives. It was a particular focus in one of the interviews with Veronica:

*And we've had a lot of change in the last two years and I think we've weathered through it quite well but change is a threat isn't it... we were going through a big change we changed trusts we joined the multi academy trust ... at first I didn't make the changes I wanted to make ... once I got the freedom to make those changes (I did) ... and sometimes change is just needed for change's sake... I then felt much freer to be myself with it ... two of my senior team are off at the moment... they went within a week of each other so a constant sort of change and I think I've got used to change being the constant now ... it's just a constant state of everything's on the move so let's just get on with it really.*

Veronica, theme of change

Teachers do not simply accept or reject change, they position themselves in relation to the change with reference to their own values and beliefs (Ketelaar et al., 2012). Change per se need not be problematic. There will be always be teachers who are willing and able to change, and others who do not connect with the change (Webster et al., 2012). If a teacher supports the idea of a particular change or innovation, they may be willing to invest their time and energy. When experienced as a challenge which can be overcome, change can be endured with buoyancy, a form of everyday resilience and the ability to deal with setbacks typical of daily life (Martin and Marsh, 2008). The notion of buoyancy was mentioned explicitly by Kathryn; the idea of drowning more specifically and water more generally were elements of the stories told by Jonathan, Ben and James. A lack of buoyancy – that is, a lack of everyday resilience and an inability to deal with setbacks in daily life – may be a factor influencing the experience of struggling. Because of the pressures and paperwork, some participants (Kathryn, Mark, Ben) clearly felt they were beginning to struggle, and as a consequence, their performance suffered. Their experience of struggling led to impaired performance. The extent to which teachers feel they have a say over change is discussed in the next two sections.

Finally, the poor handling of gendered life events can lead to struggling and then impaired performance. Whilst not a specific focus of this study, struggling as a result of the poor handling of such events emerged as a theme with potential implications for policy and practice. Two female participants, Jane and Sandra, both told accounts of negative experiences associated with life events only women can have. They experienced as inadequate the support provided following events such as childbirth, miscarriage and going through the menopause. Sandra also spoke about the tensions of working full-time as a teacher and having elderly parents with increasing care needs. These women expressed bewilderment at the lack of understanding and compassion shown to them by people in authority during or following these gendered life events. The following extract gives a feel of the raw emotion Jane revealed when we met:

*I ended up losing a child, it was quite emotional... I requested to have a bit of leeway of absence then she (line manager) basically said it's your job you've got to teach it and I was like I'm 26 years... and we were on pregnancy at the time (note: she was teaching childcare; pregnancy was the topic)... but you get on with it don't you ... sorry... it's like give me a break just give me a couple of weeks off it (voice breaks) but no ... I got put on absence review because I had 7 days off in 2 weeks ... and said woman knew what was happening to me I didn't want to tell her but I thought I'm going to have to because I'm going to be off quite a lot (cries) and she put me on absence review because I'd had too many sick days in a short space of time... and I was like what's the matter with you?*

Jane, gendered life event

Both Jane and Sandra reported being unable to teach well during these periods. These are examples of constrained competence. These two women began to struggle because of how they and their specific life events were responded to. As a consequence, their performance suffered. In the literature, impaired performance seems to be the precursor to struggling; it causes or leads to struggling. When conceptualised in that way, leaders have identified poor or under-performance which they then label as struggling (Tucker, 2001; Yariv, 2009a; Yariv and Kass, 2017) before setting about trying to resolve this. From my data analysis, however, impaired performance can be the *outcome* of struggling.

In the discussion of this theoretical dimension of struggling, attention has been focussed on internal factors, such as mind overload, which can impair teachers' performance as well as changes in the external context within which a teacher operates. Finally, the response of leaders to gendered life events was discussed as a specific factor which can influence the experience of struggling and lead to impaired performance.

In the following section, I introduce the fourth theorisation of the experience of struggling, that of reduced controllability.

#### 6.4 Reduced controllability

The fourth theoretical suggestion that I propose is that struggling involves a sense of reduced controllability. In this context, struggling has been viewed as an experience narrated by people who 'own' that experience or who control how they choose to narrate that experience. Moreau (2014) suggests that struggling should be 'owned' by the struggler rather than determined, defined or imposed by someone else. I have presented self-reported accounts of struggling by teachers who voluntarily identified as having struggled. Their stories offer one particular perspective of how they make sense of their experience of struggling.

Whilst the experience of struggling was something which teachers chose to talk about willingly, the experience of struggling itself was influenced in part by what I term reduced controllability. Controllability reflects the degree to which one perceives events to be under one's control (internal locus) or under the control of others (external locus) (Phillips and Gully, 1997; Rotter, 1990) and is closely linked to the concept of agency. Controllability is therefore the level of control one has over that performance, i.e. the extent to which the performance – or non-performance - is 'up to them' (Ajzen, 2002, p. 671) and has links to a sense of buoyancy, mentioned in the previous section.

A number of participants expressed a frustration with – or in some cases a resignation to – having no or little control over the course of their day-to-day professional lives. With busy work lives, piles of 'pointless paperwork' (e.g. Kathryn, Heather) and an ever-changing working landscape, some teachers felt their capacity to have a meaningful say (e.g. Mark, Jane) about their work was constrained. Their ability to exert control over their work, to be able to act in accordance with their beliefs and make decisions and choices about their professional situation was compromised. Participants reported a tension between what they wanted to do and what they were being asked to do; for example, Gina having to lie to a parent, Mark having to cheat in controlled assessments. Both teachers felt a reduced controllability over these situations and ultimately complied with the requests from their managers.

Wood (2019) and Bandura (1997) suggest that perceived controllability is related to greater self-efficacy, although clearly there is a conceptual distinction between the two. Perhaps, then, lower controllability is related to lower self-efficacy. Teachers in this research reported feeling unable to 'have a say' in how things are done in their schools and felt on occasions at odds with what they are being asked to do. This

can lead to contrived compliance. Conversely, participants like Mark and Rhiannon talked about the positive tone of struggling when the task and goal - such as running or cycling - is self-determined.

Being labelled negatively - in this case as struggling - can also lead to a reduced sense of controllability. The education system in England uses many descriptive and evaluative categories and labels. They range, for example, from outstanding to inadequate with various levels in between. Whilst originally devised to describe an evaluation of a whole school following an inspection by Ofsted, for example, and not intended as labels for individual teachers and their teaching practice, it was not uncommon during my teaching career to hear these categories being used as labels for teachers. Whilst struggling is not a formal, official label applied to teachers in English schools, it has been used informally and appeared in a number of participants' stories.

Scheff's (2010) theory of labelling alerts us to the potential dangers of labels, although there are of course labels which are positive. A label with negative associations can lead to feelings of rejection and difference; rejection may not be obvious and outright, it can also be subtle. If the term struggling is used as a label, especially given its negative semantic prosody, it is likely to be seen as something negative. Bianchi et al. (2016), too, suggest that labels can have different social representations, with some being 'less stigmatising' than others. Jonathan, for example, was clear that things can only go downhill once you have been labelled as struggling:

*And the problem is it's language that management use with negative connotations as well if they say you're struggling you're f\*\*king f\*\*ked pardon my language... you're pretty much f\*\*ked at that stage... you know I mean I had a friend of mine described as struggling and then that was it, he disappeared and it was like oh right ok...*

Jonathan, being labelled as 'struggling'

Jonathan's narrative finds resonance in the literature: 'we feel like a somebody when we are accepted, and like a nobody when we are not' (Scheff, 2010, p. 2). Kathryn, too, suggests that whilst struggling is commonly used in what she terms a 'mild' way, it can also have a darker side:

*People use the word (struggling) a lot and I don't know whether it gets taken seriously it's almost like a mild term which could be mild or it could actually reveal a huge amount of deeper stuff underneath... And if your terminology is usually I'm struggling with this I'm struggling with this I'm struggling to get my head round this I'm struggling with this child erm that's all very mild whereas actually to be a*

*struggling teacher is not mild, there's a huge amount behind that and people know that...*

Kathryn, struggling is not mild

When used in the literature, struggling has tended to be used as 'othering;' examples from the literature often have the non-struggler - the leader dealing with the teacher, or the teacher dealing with the students - at the centre. By positioning struggling in this way, the non-struggler becomes 'somebody' whilst the struggler is 'nobody' (Fuller, 2003). This notion of a nobody, someone who is not 'an accepted member of society' (Scheff, 2010, p. 5), also ties in with the perceived invisibility of struggling which was one theme within the experience of struggling.

This study set out to listen to teachers' own accounts of struggling. The data generated from the interviews and collages are the result of teachers self-identifying as having struggled and their being prepared to share their accounts of struggling. The control of the experience of struggling, and how that experience is narrated, was handed back to the teachers in the research study.

In the discussion of this theoretical dimension of struggling, the experience of the struggler themselves has been placed at the centre. Struggling involves a reduced sense of controllability in that participants felt they did not always have control of or a say in how they performed their roles. This section also discussed the issue of labelling, of others having control over whether someone is struggling or not.

In the following section, I introduce the final theorisation of the experience of struggling, that struggling is experienced as a temporary fractured state.

## 6.5 Temporary fractured state

The final theorisation of struggling is that it is experienced as a temporary fractured state. This temporary fractured state is characterised by embodied symptoms, negative moods and emotions, a damaged self-view and reduced controllability all of which can lead to impaired performance. Struggling is temporary in that it is a non-permanent state which one can move into and out of; at the time of interview, the participants were not in the midst of an episode of struggling. They were able to reflect back on times when they knew they had struggled. As such, that particular experience of struggling had passed.

The term fractured implies a complete or incomplete breakage, perhaps resulting from a trauma. With Archer's (2003; 2007), work in mind it is the idea that a teacher's *reflexivity* is fractured as part of the experience of struggling that I discuss here. In Archer's analysis of types of reflexivity, a 'fractured

reflexive' is someone who is rendered passive, an agent to whom things simply happen. This is in contrast to 'active agents' (Archer, 2007, p. 6) who have the capacity to exercise some control in their lives. They are resigned to 'agential passivity' (Archer, 2003, p. 305), which I term reduced controllability and which has been discussed in some detail above. Teachers who are struggling are fractured reflexives to the extent that they are unable to engage meaningfully in their professional practice and their self-talk does not serve them as a guide for action (Archer, 2007, 2003). It is the temporary but disabling dimension of fractured reflexivity which resonates in particular with participants' accounts of struggling. They remain stuck in the status quo of their practice; they are vulnerable, inhibited and pedagogically frail (Kinchin et al., 2016). Some participants, for example Veronica, used the imagery of feeling stuck or frozen when struggling. Rhiannon, too, talks of feeling static; Kathryn uses the image of the wheels of a cog which are stuck because there are things in the way which slow her down. Veronica also uses cotton wool to illustrate the fogginess of her thinking when she is struggling. Others, too, indicate that their thinking is impaired or slowed down in some way (Daniela, Kathryn).

Reflexivity is the 'means by which we make our way through the world' (Archer, 2007, p. 5) and thus perhaps the precursor to agential activity. It is central to agency and influential in determining people's actions (Archer, 2007; Sharar, 2016) and inactions. Internal conversations are an important element of reflexivity which Archer defines as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability... to consider oneself in relation to one's social contexts' (2007, p. 5). Whilst self-talk is clearly a feature of several participants' accounts of struggling, especially James, it is perhaps the *quality* or tone of that self-talk which is more pertinent. The experience of struggling appears to impede one's ability to engage in a deliberative and conscious internal conversation (Archer, 2007). I argue here that struggling is a fractured state in which one's reflexive ability is slowed down if not stalled completely.

Archer (2007) also suggests that some people are more prone to fracture than others, positing that it is the communicative reflexives – those who require confirmation by others before deciding on a course of action – who are most prone to fracture. Teachers who tend to require reassurance from others that what they are doing is right can be vulnerable to feedback which disconfirms their practice. Jane told me: 'I don't wanna be praised all the time but if I'm doing a good job I wanna be told I'm doing a good job.' Sandra bemoans the fact that 'there's nothing at the end of the year no little postcard no nothing it's just like oh we're supposed to do the job.' Daniela expresses at length her views on staff receiving thank-you postcards, quoting a senior leader who was wondering what else he could do:

*Yeah staff postcards... we email you thank you and you know he's listing all of these things and he's like we don't know what more to do and you know I think we discussed this afterwards and all of us said all of that stuff yeah it's nice it's ticking a box but it is nice you know like sending a postcard it's all we want you to do, we don't need stuff we genuinely don't need a postcard it's nice but if I don't get one I'm not gonna be gutted what I need is for you not to tear me apart if I'm doing something not so ... just a little bit of positivity like when you come in for a learning walk don't, you know, be positive that's it. Because you wouldn't do that with a child would you, you wouldn't you wouldn't say 3 bad things about the child well about what they're doing and then not find a positive you'd flip it and find a couple of nice things to say and you might like to think about this...*

Daniela, views on feeling validated

However, communicative reflexivity is conducive to stability (Archer, 2012; Woods and Roberts, 2018) yet teachers are operating within an ostensibly unstable environment, one characterised by relentless change, increasing extensification and intensification (Wood, 2019).

Others (Woods and Roberts, 2018, p. 69) have developed the notion of 'critical reflexives' who are characterised by 'enhanced personal capabilities for reflection and deliberation and an intensified sense of the need and desirability for making choices and devising innovative practices and policies.' Such critical reflexivity involves teachers and leaders becoming 'proactive agents of change' (Woods and Roberts, 2018, p. 67); if a critical reflexive's agency is impeded, for example because of contextual or relational constraints, tensions may arise; a fracture may occur. An example of a fractured critical reflexive could be Kathryn who views her leadership style as very different from the prevailing style in her school. This is a source of tension for her and is one element of her experience of struggling:

*...she said you know the deputy head finds you very difficult I said I find her very difficult erm I gave her my philosophy of senior leadership which was if you don't want to help people and you find people an irritation to your daily work don't go into senior leadership if you want to help people and you want to be a good leader and you want to encourage your staff then yes go into senior leadership and if people ask for help give it because a good leader will enable other people to do their job well and a bad leader will make it more difficult for you erm and I don't know to what extent that's taken on board...*

Kathryn, conflicting leadership styles

She explains that she feels she has to engage in 'insincere fidelity,' a concept she misquotes from the educational leadership literature; later she corrects it to 'principled infidelity.' The misquote is of interest

in itself as Kathryn introduces the idea of insincerity, a compliance that is contrived. She explains that, in her experience, leaders say ‘yes, of course we’ll do that, yes, tick that box... and then do what they want to do... they have their own principles and are following things for government and policy but they’re actually just doing their own thing.’ The degree to which this feeling of infidelity, insincerity or contrivance creates tensions in her ability to be a critical reflexive is perhaps what causes fracturing. This feeling may, in turn, become an experience of struggling.

If one conceptualises fracture as a breakage, then it is useful to look at what contributed to that breakage. The fact that the teachers in this research had tended to conceal their experience of struggling, for fear of revealing it, suggests that the fractured state is not always visible externally. The breakage occurs out of sight. I argue that the pressure of keeping one’s struggling hidden or concealed contributes to that fractured state. There is a notion of ‘concealed suffering’ in Buddhist teachings which I have adapted into the idea of *concealed struggling*. It appears to be a key feature of the experience of struggling for several participants who expressed a need to hide their struggling, perhaps out of fear of being judged or labelled. For example, in his collage, James formed a boundary around his collage which he called a ‘mask that you wear and have and therefore most people don’t get to see the struggle.’ Kathryn enclosed her struggling within a cage. Ben portrayed a face which was happy on the outside; Gina’s face was expressionless, she did not show how she was really feeling. Jonathan expressed the idea of struggling being inaudible rather than invisible; his collage shows a cracking sound under water which cannot be heard. Struggling for some certainly seems to be an isolating experience. Amanda uses the imagery of the ‘invisible child’ in a long reflection:

*I think as teaching staff we are the invisible child, if you’ve got a failing teacher then they get lots and lots of attention and get the capability or whatever or support and they either sink or they swim ... If you’re loud and out there and pushy you get promoted and then those of us who are sat in the middle just getting on with it are the invisible child, we don’t get invited to go on the trips because we’re not vocal enough erm we don’t get the support even when we ask for it because we just get looked at funny and go yeah but you’re fine and you ... actually not thought about it like that but yeah actually I do feel like the invisible child in the middle of the classroom.*

Amanda, feeling like an ‘invisible child’

To her colleagues, Amanda does not seem to be struggling. Even when she reaches out and asks for help, her request is rebuffed with a ‘but you’re fine.’ So, not only is her experience of struggling invisible,

Amanda, too feels invisible. Veronica introduced the notion of the 'headteacher's mask' and explained that she 'sets the weather' at her school. The very idea of a mask is that it can be something to hide behind. I would suggest that Veronica and others who are hiding their experience of struggling are fearful of displaying that experience openly and authentically.

Wanting to conceal their mental health issues was an integral part of the experience of struggling for some participants. Ben was very open to me about his various episodes of depression; his experience of opening up about his mental health at work has not always been positive.

*I came out got my arse bitten badly ... if you admit to having it anywhere other than amongst close friends erm you'll get crucified, taken to bits, people are really sympathetic for about a week... good friends will always be there even if they don't understand they'll try and if they don't understand they'll still forgive you cos it's you and they're your friend and they love you but colleagues it's just another thing for them to deal with another thing and ... that will always be there as your little lapel badge saying depressive ... you mention depression erm and it's like alarm bells, I even having suffered with it and suffering with it I would still be wary of somebody who had depression because I don't know how that's going to affect them cos it affects people in different ways.*

Ben, on being open about depression

Whilst Ben's collage appeared to keep his struggling invisible to others by having a happy face on the outside, the tensions inside were clear; he used a cocktail stick to attach an unhappy face to his body. Hiding how he really felt is enough for Ben to consider himself to be struggling. However, this experience of struggling was further exacerbated by opening up about his mental ill-health. He was fractured from his experience of struggling as a teacher and leader as well as fractured from the experience of exposing his mental ill-health. In a way, Ben was in a doubly-fractured state.

Archer (2007, p. 96) suggests that everyone experiences periods and instances in their lives when 'their reflexive deliberations... make them feel... impotent and helpless.' Reflexivity is thus seen as a 'fragile property, ever liable to suspension.' As such, we are all susceptible to fracturing, which is experienced as 'difficulties in making decisions, in defining a course of action and in engaging in anything more than day-to-day planning' (Archer, 2007, p. 249). If struggling is a fractured state, as I argue, then it also appears to be a *universal* experience, albeit a temporary one. By universal I mean a universally human phenomenon, likely to be experienced at some stage by most people. Four participants (James, Jane, Daniela, Heather) suggested that struggling is a part of life, an 'experience everyone faces' (Heather). James felt that he has

to accept that ‘there’s always an element of struggling... it is never far away.’ Daniela called it a ‘permanent state.’ Jane told me that there is only a ‘fine line between normal stress and struggling.’

Struggling as a *temporary* state can also be argued from the perspective of experience over time. In his account of struggling, Solomon reflected back to his first few years of teaching, giving clear examples of how it felt to be struggling early on in his teaching career. As a recently qualified teacher he was tasked with responsibilities incommensurate with his level of experience, tasks which he can now undertake with ease. The perspective of the overseas-trained teachers participating in the study also highlighted feelings of inexperience in, and a lack of familiarity with, the English education system. Gina, for example, felt different culturally and saw this as a factor which contributed to her sense of struggling. Initially, Veronica felt inexperienced in her headteacher role. She talked openly about not having a schema of reference for dealing with certain issues; this caused her to ‘get the wobbles’ because she felt she was having to ‘second guess.’

The temporary nature of struggling can be further exemplified by the imagery of a tipping point, which three participants referred to directly (Kathryn, Ben, Jane); James and Mark described reaching a tipping point more indirectly. On the whole, the tipping point was from not-struggling to struggling rather than the other way around. Indeed, there is very little in the data to suggest what might help move from struggling to not-struggling. One dictionary defines a tipping point as ‘the point at which a series of small changes or incidents becomes significant enough to cause a larger, more important change’ (Google, 2019d). In the case of struggling, there are various factors which influence whether a teacher is struggling or not. This tipping point can also be seen as the moment of fracture.

Jane also mentioned the idea of a tipping point, suggesting that there is a fine line between not-struggling and struggling. Ben used the imagery of a sliding door, stating that the ‘tiniest thing’ can tip you into struggling. Kathryn used the notion of critical mass, stating:

*I think that’s the mental to-do list the mental to-do list hits a critical mass at which point you just go... So it’s not one thing it’s that kind of accumulation cumulative, the straw that breaks the camel’s back.*

Kathryn, notion of ‘critical mass’

Gladwell, like Kathryn, describes a tipping point as a ‘critical mass’ with Gladwell adding that it is ‘the threshold, the boiling point’ (2006, p. 12). His concept is built on the premise that it takes only the smallest of changes to ‘shatter an... equilibrium’ (2006, p. 18). In the field of education, a tipping point has been

defined as a 'point beyond which many teachers are no longer effectively enabled to creatively transmit knowledge and stimulate learning among their students' (Livingstone, 2018, p. 360) which seems to suggest a lack of competence or teaching quality. Struggling has previously been conceptualised in a similar way. However, this research has sought to establish an understanding of the contributing cognitive, emotional and affective factors, which has hitherto been missing in the literature.

A tipping point appears, then, to be a 'critical moment' that determines whether subsequent events will 'explode' (Schmidt and Olson, 2008, p. 199). In their review of Gladwell's work, Schmidt and Olson (2008) explain that tipping points can be reached in communities of rapid change; such change has indeed been a feature of the educational landscape in England. The intensification of teachers' workloads - in which they have increasingly lost control over their working conditions - could contribute to them tipping (Livingstone, 2018) or fracturing. It is perhaps how teachers respond to change in the education system which in part determines whether they reach a personal tipping point and whether they feel they are struggling.

A further factor which can influence whether a teacher is struggling or not is their buoyancy, the ability to deal with setbacks typical of daily life (Martin and Marsh, 2008). Buoyancy was mentioned explicitly by Kathryn both in the interview and within her collage, as well as by others as part of the water imagery associated with struggling. The ability to be buoyant might itself be influenced by the extent to which a teacher has resources and experience to draw on. One of the criteria for participating in this research was that teachers should be all 'experienced' in the secondary sector of the English education system in the sense of not being a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT). Experience alone, however, clearly does not preclude teachers from the experience of struggling.

The term support featured in some form in most accounts of struggling and was mentioned explicitly by seven participants. They talked about the support they had received early on and throughout their careers; some recalled it as supportive, others found it less helpful, unsupportive and for some it was a negative experience. At least six participants did quotation marks in the air with their hands when saying support, suggesting that the word is not being used in its original sense or meaning; there appears to have been a semantic drift in the meaning of the term support.

I discuss here in some detail the perceived deficiencies of support, including support plans, as it relates to the theorisation of struggling as a fractured state. The theory or assumptions underpinning support for teachers appear to be at odds with the theorisation of struggling that I have developed. Seeing struggling

as a fractured state will have implications for supporting those experiencing struggling, on which future research is needed.

In schools in England, 'support packages' are a feature of a process designed to help teachers improve their teaching practice. Such packages can be part of an informal or a more formal process, including the practice known as 'capability.' Model capability procedures can be found online and they define a 'lack of capability' as a situation where a teacher 'fails consistently to perform his/her duties to a professionally acceptable standard' (ATL et al., 2012). The procedure is not intended to deal with issues arising from ill-health nor with cases of misconduct (NUT, 2006). In practice, they are often initiated following an unsuccessful lesson observation or following ongoing concerns about a particular issue, for example, marking. Support is identified as necessary to rectify a problem; it is inherently a process arising out of a deficit, as perceived by another person. This aligns with existing conceptualisations of struggling in the literature which equate struggling with a lack of teaching competence or poor performance.

Participants with experience of such packages reported feeling disempowered by the procedure, having no real say in the process, for example Jonathan and Jane. The support packages cited by the participants revolve around observations of a teacher's teaching, irrespective of the original reason for the support. Jonathan, for example, was put on a support package because of issues with his marking, although the situation was much more complex than simply not having marked his books. The timescale reported was about six weeks, after which time a teacher is re-evaluated to see if they have made the necessary improvements. Jonathan and Jane reported feeling that it was 'done to' rather than 'done with' them, with both expressing some concern over whether it would be noted on their record or not.

Five participants mentioned explicitly their issues about asking for help. Jane specifically requested help with a class and received what she felt was a damning criticism in return. Gina felt unable to ask for help when she was new in post, which she puts down in part to a perceived cultural difference. Daniela admits that she only asks for help when she really needs it. Ben did not feel able to ask for help. Ajzen (2002, p. 677) suggests that the crucial factor in help-seeking behaviour is 'whether people believe that it is within their power to secure the needed help.' Employees feel more able to ask for help in an environment of trust and expertise; they tend to ask for help from individuals above them in the organisational hierarchy (van der Rijt et al., 2013). Jane's request for help to her line manager triggered an informal support plan:

*I thought it was an informal observation, tried my best to kind of not plan it too meticulously but obviously you want to present yourself in a good light ... So you do and then she puts me on an informal support plan and I was like I asked for your*

*support and then you go and do that to me and then she gives me a mentor, someone who I can't stand who basically just patronised me.*

Jane, asking for help

Similarly, Daniela's negative experience of receiving feedback from a lesson observation has made her wary of asking for help:

*I like (name of line manager) in terms of a person but I don't trust her like in terms of a line manager I can't say that I've ever had a conversation with her that I would feel comfortable I wouldn't feel comfortable asking her for help for anything and every time they walk into a room I get really scared now ...*

Daniela, asking for help

In the case of some participants, instead of resolving their struggles, asking for help appears to have exacerbated the extent to which they experienced struggling.

In a context of high-stakes accountability, there is insufficient 'space to help teachers engage in more agentic and proactive ways with the situations they are in' (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 638). For example, Kathryn bemoaned the 'pointless paperwork' she has to fill in and also cited emails both as a workload issue and as an accountability tool:

*... but I think email communication has a lot do with the issues and can have a lot to do with a lot of the communication problems and a lot of the personal issues that go on within the school you know I work part-time but if I don't check my emails I have maybe 30, 40 in a day... and it's all about tick boxes and making sure that you have this evidence and that evidence and probably one of the greatest annoyances and stresses that I have that I've also struggled with getting my head around it I still don't accept it is the use of email as an accountability tool so anytime anybody emails me they put my line manager in as well ... On a Sunday a list of shame of people who had not written up their behaviour logs and issues so I then over half term received 2 emails cos I was checking my emails but I wasn't I was refusing to send any and sometimes I will let my email I will write emails at 10 o'clock at night and then I'll put a wait on them so they'll got a 7 o'clock in the morning so at 7 o'clock in the morning there's 20 emails gone out from me (she laughs) ...*

Kathryn, the issue with emails

Contextual factors at micro, meso and macro levels influence teachers' work and 'shape their professional agency' (Toom et al., 2015, p. 617). Toom et al. (2015) argue, for example, that professional agency can be promoted in a collegial, professional climate where teachers feel nurtured through social support and recognition and a sense of equality (Soini et al., 2016); it is 'relationally embedded' (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 8). Struggling is experienced within embedded relationships and is highly temporal and situational. When struggling, a teacher's agency appears to be diminished; the teacher's ability to act appears injured. Mark narrates a particularly tragic event at his school which involved a student's death by suicide, which coincided with a deadline for reports. In this account, there is a real sense of community amongst the teachers and with the students. It appears, however, that Mark and his colleagues were unable to exercise any agency in the face of a fixed deadline set by senior leadership:

*So in this week (when a student had died from suicide) we were supposed to be taking time to mark exams we're being asked to support the year group who'd been informed of the attempt on the Tuesday they were then subsequently informed of his death on the Wednesday and staff were asked to support and staff being caring considerate practitioners professionals prioritised the students' wellbeing over exams and spent hours giving up time to support students to talk with students to be present to make sure students were safe that all being said that then compounded the week further and there was not much leeway given in my mind for from (name of deputy head) and it still needed to be done to the deadline as planned.*

Mark, feeling constrained in the face of fixed deadlines

This diminished agency has been recognised as a problem among teachers (Toom et al., 2015). It can impose a 'threat to the worker's health and the management of other areas of adult life ... whether within or beyond working life' (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 62). Vähäsantanen (2015, p. 6) offers the notion of 'subordinated agency.' He suggests that agency cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power (Vähäsantanen, 2015) and so, by disempowering teachers and (over-) regulating their work, their agency is not only subordinated but also constrained (Vähäsantanen, 2015). The imposition of a 'support plan' is one example perhaps; Jonathan's agency appears subordinated and constrained in the following account. The context was that he appeared not to have marked all of his books in line with his school's marking policy.

*... don't worry about it we'll put you on a support plan... and I went so what you're going to competency me over half a set of books? And it was no no no you don't understand what support is and there was this real kind of like well tell me what*

*support is... As it turned out support meant observing you continuously and being giving you mentors and stuff like that but the only problem is none of them knew what the bloody hell I was doing with the (subject) so all the mentoring I got for that was utter inconsequence. And I was sat there explaining something I don't need to explain you know and I was kind of like look I'm spending time explaining to you what I'm doing which is means I have less time to mark. I can remember coming home thinking I'm not going back you know and really meaning it.. and since then everybody that I know has been on a support plan you know it's very much the latest tool of even if it's threatened or you're told you will or might be put on one ... it's like we don't like what you're doing do this instead... I'm not sure what having a huge number of support plans really shows ...*

#### Jonathan's experience of being on a 'support plan'

What remains unclear, however, is what support would help teachers in repairing that fracture and shifting out of the experience of struggling. Analysis of the data has indicated what did *not* work for some teachers, for example one-off lesson observations to monitor teaching quality or marking (Jane, Jonathan, Solomon). Induction or preparation for the role, either as an overseas trained teacher (Mark, Gina, Daniela) or as a headteacher (James, Veronica) has been experienced as inadequate. Support plans which are not tailored to the individual teacher have been experienced as unsupportive (Jane, Jonathan). Having no say in who mentors or supports you is a further factor (Jane, Mark). Some participants were able to express what might help them to unstruggle. James would have liked coaching and better training. Sandra wishes for a 'competent line manager.' Solomon focusses on trust and respect from leaders and expresses a desire not to be micro managed. Jonathan talks about the importance of a 'team ethos.' Further research is needed to delve into what constitutes effective support, including from leaders.

I have discussed that struggling is a complex phenomenon which is experienced as a temporary fractured state. Struggling is characterised by embodied symptoms, negative moods and emotions, a damaged self-view and reduced controllability. In turn, this can lead to impaired performance. This is a theorisation of struggling that is very different to the definitions predominant in the literature. Such definitions focus on the object of struggling, as identified by the non-struggler, and the tendency is to seek a resolution of the struggle almost to the exclusion of possible causes or factors. How the struggle feels and what it means to the struggler is missing. The focus here has not been on the resolution of the struggle; there is the potential for further research in this area. However, noticing and reflecting on the experience had the effect, for some participants at least, to help make sense of the experience and to aid the process of unstruggling.

In any case, the struggler is at the heart of the definition I offer. My analysis has established a conceptualisation of struggling which forefronts the voices of teachers and which embodies their experiences. As such, this research therefore clearly helps fill the gap identified by Yariv and Kass (2017, p. 13) who suggested that other voices need to be heard, 'especially those of the struggling teachers themselves.'

## 7 Conclusion

I set out to explore the experience of struggling as a secondary teacher in England. The aim was to offer a conceptual description of struggling which better reflects what struggling means and feels like, from the perspective of the teacher. The intention was not to interpret the data with a view to identifying a global experience of struggling but more to have other insights and levels of understanding about struggling and to enable the reader to judge any generalisability through recognition of patterns (Larsson, 2009; Lindqvist et al., 2017). Any understanding of the meanings people ascribe to their experience within a research context requires a ‘double reflexive interaction’ between the researcher and the participant to create something bigger than their individual interpretations alone (Sharar, 2016, pp. 82–84, influenced by Giddens’ double hermeneutic, 1984 & Archer’s work on reflexivity).

The experience of struggling can involve a heightened sense of negative embodied experience. It is also associated with a reduced sense of controllability. It can involve being in a temporary fractured state. Factors which influence struggling can be internal, such as a damaged self-view, or external such as the reactions and responses of others, such as leaders. Finally, impaired performance can be the result rather than the cause of struggling.

I identified three research questions to explore what it means to be struggling as a teacher. The individual stories of 14 teachers, as interpreted by me, have been shared in the form of ‘analytic summaries’ which are necessarily shortened versions of much richer narratives. Nevertheless, I have captured the essence of those experiences in such a way that the deeply emotional, embodied, affective and cognitive dimensions of struggling are visible. Struggling is clearly a temporal, situational and relational experience. The discussion of themes *across* stories offered the foundation for a new conceptualisation of struggling; that new conceptualisation is offered below. The argument I put forward here is that a better understanding of what it means and feels like to be struggling – which is different for everyone and not always fixable – allows struggling to be surfaced and attended to (Lilius et al., 2011).

The Table below provides an overview of the themes discussed in the previous chapters. I then turn my attention to reviewing the extent to which I have answered each research question.

**Table 32: Overview of research questions and themes**

<b>Research Focus</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Experience of struggling	Embodiment of struggling Negative emotional tone Mind overload Invisibility of struggling Sense of controllability Imagery of struggling
Factors influencing struggling	Inexperience Negative self-expression Agency and help-seeking Gendered life events Working in a landscape of change Support within and outside the workplace
Movement from struggling to not-struggling	Universal experience Personal tipping point Imagery of movement

### 7.1 The Experience of Struggling

All participants were able to narrate experiences of struggling; some related their experience through the struggling of others. Some participants told me of their mental ill-health; others focussed more on workload and leadership practices, for example. Feelings of shame and the wish to keep the struggling hidden also featured in the data. The ways in which participants have interpreted and re-presented their experience of struggling is as varied as the participants themselves. However, there is a commonality of experience in that struggling is often experienced as a heightened negative embodied feeling and is associated with a damaged self-view. Several participants seem to accept struggling as part of the job, part of life perhaps although my findings suggest that it is a temporary state. It is possible to move away from struggling towards not-struggling. This, in fact, was the focus of the third research question below.

## 7.2 Factors that Influence Struggling

Whilst focussing predominantly on what it means and feels like to be struggling – the experience itself – it was important to contextualise that experience. The negative semantic prosody of the term struggling presupposes an element of difficulty and effort with the experience. As such, factors which influence struggling were likely to be ones which cause or exacerbate it. Participants named things like paperwork, leadership practices, unsupportive support and never-ending changes to policy, curriculum and assessment as potential factors. Others related accounts of events in their personal lives which impacted upon their work lives, which contributed to them feeling as if they were struggling.

It is useful to develop an understanding of the causes and objects of struggling. Acknowledging their presence and striving to remove them may help other teachers and leaders in the future with the alleviation of their own and others' struggling. Some participants presented the idea of an overfilled headspace in which nothing else will fit without naming the actual individual elements. Perhaps they were unable to even discern what those individual elements were. Struggling might be the *result* of this overfilled head but it is not the individual factors per se which *cause* it and it is not the struggling *with* them that is predominant. It is far more complex than that. For some, struggling can be a feeling of stuckness, or being frozen as Veronica called it. I am calling this dimension of struggling 'temporary stasis' or a temporary fractured state.

What became clear when interpreting the data was that struggling is not a phenomenon with a simple causal linearity. An excessive workload does not necessarily lead to struggling, poor leadership practices do not always cause struggling. Thus, I argue that the object of struggling – what one is struggling *with* – is of subsidiary importance in the conceptualisation of struggling compared to the experience of struggling itself. Whilst external factors were mentioned, such as those relating to social interactions and relationships with others and system-related issues, it was internal factors that seemed to affect the experience of struggling to a greater extent. Negative self-expression is a factor that both influences and exacerbates the experience of struggling.

## 7.3 Moving from Struggling to Not-Struggling

When recruiting participants for this study it was important for them to be able to talk about their experience of struggling; I was not looking for teachers in the midst of struggling. As such, the teachers involved are evidence in themselves that it is possible to move from struggling to not-struggling. This third

research focus was intended to look in more detail at how the temporary nature of struggling allows people to unstruggle, i.e. to move out of struggling to not-struggling.

Participants were able to reflect to some extent on how to move out of struggling, with a key theme being the passage of time and the gaining of experience. Change of context or a change in attitude were also mentioned as possible strategies to move away from struggling. Several reflected on the universality of struggling – as a fact of life – and the firm belief that one can come through it. Others suggested that struggling is never far away and so could strike anytime. The notion of a tipping point was also discussed - a critical mass of factors coming together and creating an imbalance - which can then lead to struggling. It could be argued that a critical mass of *different* factors could create a more positive tipping point, a shift towards not-struggling. The imagery of a tipping point is, however, perhaps too linear, too causal, as it fails to capture the complexity of the experience of struggling.

I have gained a deep insight into the experience of struggling by listening to the stories of teachers who self-identified as having struggled. An exploration of the external and internal factors has allowed me to contextualise the experience of struggling. It has also been possible to consider, to some extent, the movement between struggling and not-struggling. I have a better understanding of what it feels like and means to be struggling. I am more familiar with the context in which struggling occurs. I can offer insight into the factors which influence struggling. I have learned about the procedures applied in school as well as the reactions and responses of leaders to teachers who are struggling.

I offer below a new conceptualisation of struggling, one in which the experience of struggling is central.

## 8 Contribution to Knowledge

The literature on struggling has shown it to be an ill-defined term with a taken-for-granted meaning. Where struggling is defined, it is rarely from the perspective of the strugglers themselves. The focus is often on the object or causes of the struggling rather than what it feels like; the experience itself is left unacknowledged. A deficit view of struggling prevails, one which is often characterised by poor or underperformance as defined by others, such as leaders. I have unpacked what it *really* means to be struggling as a teacher and have allowed the voices of teachers themselves to be heard.

### 8.1 Offering a new conceptualisation of struggling

When setting out on the journey to explore what it means to be struggling, I encountered definitions, discovered idioms and analysed the general usage of the word in all its guises (lemma: struggl\*). Struggling has long-established associations with stumbling, hard work, effort and difficulty. This understanding was further underpinned by an analysis of words associated with struggling which include hard, uphill, unresolved, endless and arduous. If struggling is linked to effort, hard work and difficulty, one might need to consider who puts in the hard work and effort to overcome the struggle. Thus, ownership of the experience may become key; one might ask whose struggle it is (Moreau, 2014).

Struggling does not appear to be an entirely static phenomenon as advancement and progress are implied in some explications. The object of struggling – what one is struggling *with* – is also included in some definitions; the causes of struggling less so. An adjective often linked to struggling is ‘everyday’ which hints at the pervasiveness and universality of the phenomenon of struggling.

A thorough analysis of the data collected in this study highlights the affective and cognitive nature of struggling; participants spoke of the embodied and emotional nature of struggling as well as their cognitive engagement with their experience. Struggling was associated with certain colours and temperatures; dark and blue to express a sense of sadness and depression, for example. A number of participants referred to struggling as feeling cool, cold or having no warmth. Some associate struggling with a linear path, as a gradual ‘becoming;’ others see it as a cycle, even as a maze which is relatively easy to get into but difficult to get out of.

The main research question being addressed here focusses on the experience of struggling. The other two questions focus on factors which influence struggling and how one might move from struggling to not-struggling. There was some commonality amongst the factors named by participants which included: constant change, paperwork, expectations from others and self, lack of time, lack of agency or control

over decisions and different conceptions of teaching. It was important to consider not only factors which might, on the face of it, cause struggling but also those which might exacerbate or alleviate the experience. A linear conceptualisation of struggling, where there is a *subject* (source) which causes struggling, is too simple. What one is struggling with, the *object*, is arguably another integral aspect of the experience. Perhaps, however, it is not helpful to characterise aspects as *subjects* and *objects* given that many of the factors named were seen as both sources of struggling and objects of struggling. What *causes* struggling can thus also be the *object* of struggling.

I am suggesting, therefore, that one views struggling not as a phenomenon which is concerned with subjects and objects. I argue instead that struggling is more to do with the process of interacting with and responding to those objects and subjects. In this way, struggling is more about an attribution of meaning, a process of sense-making. Struggling is a response to events; an interaction with events; a sense-making of events. An event is experienced as struggling once it interacts with other things such as when one feels a reduced sense of controllability or is in a temporary fractured state. It is less helpful, then, to think of struggling in terms of an outcome of a set of influences or causes. The ontological question of struggling is more one of seeing struggling as a set of complex interactions in perpetual motion.

Dictionary definitions of struggling make reference to forceful efforts to achieve something in the face of difficulty or resistance. Struggling can also mean having difficulty coping with something. The teachers in this study reported such difficulties. I offer below a new definition of struggling, drawing on my interpretation of the experiences of struggling they shared with me.

*Struggling is a complex but impermanent state associated with a heightened negative embodied feeling and a negative emotional mood. The experience of struggling is situated in the individual but experienced within a social context. It can manifest itself as a feeling of temporary fracture. Struggling arises out of situated responses to and interactions with events (people and/or objects) in perpetual motion. It is less about the object or causes of struggling - the events themselves - and more about the feelings, thoughts and perceptions one has about one's inability to cope or perform well in relation to such events.*

The Table below provides an overview of how struggling has been conceptualised in the literature to date as contrasted with the new conceptualisation of struggling offered here:

**Table 33: Conceptualising struggling**

<b>Previous conceptualisation</b>	<b>New conceptualisation</b>	<b>Conceptual Statement</b>
Struggling as a rational, mechanistic phenomenon Object-focussed – what struggling <i>with</i> Solution-focussed – intervention to resolve the struggling	Experience-focussed struggling – what it <i>feels like</i> Struggling as a deeply emotional, affective, cognitive and embodied experience Struggling as a complex set of interactions	Heightened sense of negative embodied experience  Damaged self-view
Lack of competence results in struggling Struggling equated with underperforming	Struggling can <i>lead</i> to a lower (sense of) competence Underperformance or impaired performance as a <i>possible consequence</i> of struggling	Impaired performance resulting from struggling
Struggling as a problem to solve or fix (deficit view)	Overcoming or moving away from struggling	Temporary fractured state
Struggling defined by others Struggling as a label imposed by others, often those in leadership positions Struggle ‘owned’ by the solution-finder	Struggling as a self-identified and self-reported experience Struggle acknowledged and ‘owned’ by the struggler	Reduced controllability

## 8.2 Strengths and Limitations

A study which sets out to explore the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of teachers who identify as ‘having struggled’ was always going to require a particularly sensitive research design. It was especially important to me to appear credible and approachable to the participants, from their first contact with me. Getting teachers to reflect deeply about their experience of struggling required the use of methods with which participants would feel comfortable on the one hand whilst being challenged and supported to go beyond a taken-for-granted understanding of struggling on the other. I have acknowledged my positionality as a researcher and the extent to which my own experience of struggling had the potential to influence my interpretation of others’ experiences.

It is a balancing act for any researcher to quickly establish a rapport with a participant and to collect sufficient data for a meaningful analysis and interpretation. The potential dangers of research interviews include the inherent power of the researcher to control and steer the content and direction of the interview and the possibility of the participant saying what they think the researcher wants to hear. I was meticulous in the way I stored participants’ data and have ensured confidentiality and anonymity; on occasions, this has required me to omit certain possibly identifying details in teachers’ stories of

struggling. Ending the relationship with participants also had the potential to be tricky; this has not been the case, however, and I have enjoyed hearing updates from several of the participants.

In terms of the research questions, I focussed mainly on the experience of struggling. To a lesser extent, I was able to explore factors which influence that experience. It would have been useful to ask participants to reflect on what not-struggling looks like and to think about whether there is an opposite to struggling; managing, coping, thriving, succeeding, achieving, excelling might all fall into this category. Further research would be useful to explore this in more detail.

The research design was robust and rigorous; my findings, too, are rooted in the rich data which were collected from two different yet complementary sources. A mix of methods enabled the collection of a broader and rich data set; whilst this added to the complexity of the analytical process, it also served to enhance the validity of the findings. The power of these teachers' stories lies not in their 'faithful representations of a past world' (Riessman, 2005, p. 6) but more in the way they exhibit what Bunge calls 'symptoms of truth' (1961, in: Holstein, 2017). What was narrated was affected by a variety of processes and factors, including my positionality as a researcher and the fact that participants were both self-selecting and self-reporting. I also acknowledge that these stories were re-presentations of experience – refractions rather than mirrors of the past (Riessman, 2005) - and were therefore necessarily interpretive.

Whilst arts-based methods are clearly being used more often in research, using a method like collage was initially new to me; it was certainly new to all my participants. The idea caused some uncertainty in some of them as they were keen to 'do it right;' presenting the task and materials required both a clarity of communication and reassurance. Doing my own collage and reflecting on the process allowed me to be flexible to participants' approaches to collage-making. Conducting interviews in participants' homes – which is also where the collages were created – afforded a vital level of privacy and a sense of comfort.

Such a combination of methods – loosely-structured interviews and collage – led to the collection of very rich verbal and visual data. The process seems, to some extent, to have been a cathartic opportunity for participants' feelings and experiences to be acknowledged and heard (Mannay et al., 2017b).

The intermingling (Grbich, 2007) of data presented an additional challenge, especially as in some cases the verbal data contradicted the visual data for particular participants. I have recognised that with some participants there are ambiguities between the narrative accounts and the visual expression of struggling; I have embraced these inherent differences and complexities. However, I remain convinced that the combination of methods has not only provided richer data per se but also has helped me better

conceptualise struggling as a complex phenomenon situated in the individual but experienced within a social context. Struggling is a set of complex interactions – with other people and objects – in perpetual motion.

Whilst I can report confidently on the experiences of struggling as expressed by the fourteen participants in this study, naturally it is not certain that other teachers in the wider teaching population would have expressed the experience similarly. Despite the self-selectivity of participants and the relatively small sample, the findings from this study may still be transferable to other situations (Basit, 2010). I have taken a ‘reflexive translation’ (Woods, 2012, p. 12) approach to generalisability, in that I have assessed critically and reflectively the extent to which findings might be applicable in other settings. I suggest that lessons learned from how the experience of struggling has been conceptualised here would find resonance with, for example, primary school teachers, further education lecturers and perhaps even university-based educators in England and perhaps further afield.

Furthermore, it was clearly not possible for me to gain insight into the perspectives of other people mentioned by the participants. The person seen to be ‘causing’ the struggling in one person’s story is possibly struggling in their own particular context. What I have tried to do, therefore, is to consider for each participant, what the world must be like for the phenomenon (of struggling) to be occurring (Sharar, 2016), without judging or attributing blame to any other in a given story.

This study set out to place teachers at the heart of the experience of struggling; my intention was to listen to and interpret their stories and to offer a new conceptualisation of struggling. I have achieved that.

### 8.3 Implications and Recommendations

This new theorisation of struggling has, of course, implications for practitioners and policymakers alike. An immediate concern for school leaders will be the potential impact struggling might have on teaching and learning, and in particular the outcomes of students. If struggling is associated with impaired performance, then it makes sense to address struggling. My findings counter the conventional view of struggling in which poor performance was seen to lead to struggling. Traditionally, interventions were then made to address that poor performance rather than focussing on the sense of struggling itself. Reports of support plans being experienced as not supportive should be a cause for concern. From the perspective of those who struggle, support plans which focus almost entirely on lesson observations appear to serve very little purpose. There is an opportunity for such support plans to be devised together with teachers. Teachers need to be involved in the co-construction of support and to have a say in the

process, including who their mentor or coach will be. Teachers need support which addresses their real concerns; any off-the-shelf remedy is more than likely to miss the mark.

There is an argument for school leaders and line managers to get to know all of their teachers better. Several participants felt unable to ask for help and support; those who did ask for help either received none or it was experienced as unhelpful. The climate within which teachers operate influences whether they can open-up and admit they are struggling. Keeping the struggle invisible was one sub-theme and teachers talked of their fears of being judged or blamed in some way. By keeping their experience of struggling hidden, their sense of drowning and suffocating remains unseen. If struggling is a universal experience which we all face at some stage, then teachers need to see that struggling is 'allowed' in their school environment. School cultures in which teachers can be open about their struggling are to be welcomed. This is especially important given that struggling is a temporary state. By modelling their own experience, others might see that it is alright to be struggling.

I suggest that 'collective compassion capability' (Lilius et al., 2011) be encouraged. A culture of compassion embeds norms and behaviours in such a way that members of the organisation feel able to open up about their experience of struggling, in the knowledge that they will be attended to with compassion. Defined at its simplest, compassion is the courage to face and take action (Gilbert, 2017). Compassionate behaviour has the potential to shape an individual's appraisal not only of themselves but also of their peers (Lilius et al., 2011). When leaders' behaviours are underpinned by a theory of compassion, their interactions and decisions demonstrate compassion in three directions: to themselves, to others and from others (Gilbert, 2017). I argue that a consideration of compassion – whether to oneself or to others – has the potential to alleviate struggling. Given the complex emotional, cognitive and embodied nature of struggling, there is a moral imperative for those in the education system to assist in the alleviation of that struggling.

I argue, therefore, for an improved, more personalised and compassionate response to struggling. I argue, too, for improved, more personalised and compassionate support which listens to and addresses the real concerns of teachers. The implications and benefits of such a culture of compassion might be an overall improvement in the retention of teachers. More specifically, a culture of collective compassion capability can help employees to perform better, can lead to a reduction in absenteeism and an enhanced quality of professional life (Lilius et al., 2011).

The stories of struggling captured here could be used as the basis of early career mentoring support. Such rich accounts of struggling can help mentors and school leaders alike understand early career development and contribute to our understanding of how to support it. The proposed Early Career Framework which incorporates mentoring into the programme of support for newly and recently qualified teachers is to be welcomed. There are also implications from the learning about struggling emerging from this research for the field of teacher wellbeing, for inclusion perhaps in a publication similar to the Teacher Wellbeing Index (Education Support Partnership, 2018).

Originally, I had not anticipated two headteachers participating in the study. However, the addition of these participants has added an extra dimension - the leader's perspective - to understanding what it feels like to be struggling. This opportunity to delve into the experience of struggling as a headteacher opens up opportunities for further research. There are implications for leadership preparation and development in terms of the leaders themselves, but also for the way in which they might better deal with others' struggling.

One recommendation for further research would be to explore what not-struggling looks like, as I feel I did not have the chance to explore this in sufficient depth. It would also be interesting to research if and how compassionate communication can be embedded into a school's culture and how such communication might impact upon a teacher's sense of struggling. Finally, I would suggest a deeper research focus on what I term 'gendered life events,' such as miscarriage, maternity and menopause, and how teachers experiencing such events can be better supported.

*The fact that you're struggling  
doesn't make you a burden.  
It doesn't make you unlovable  
or undesirable or undeserving  
of care. It doesn't make you  
too much or too sensitive or  
too needy. It makes you human.*

(Koepke, 2019)

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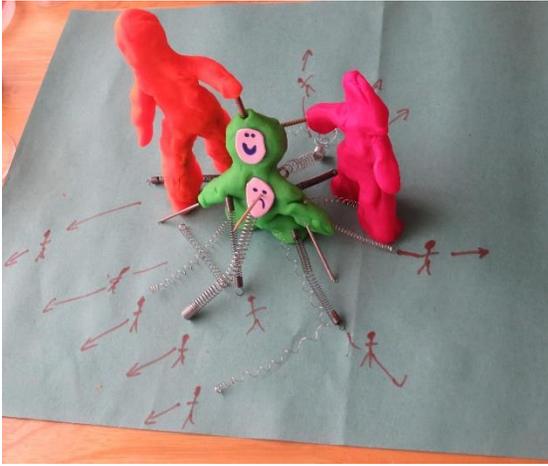
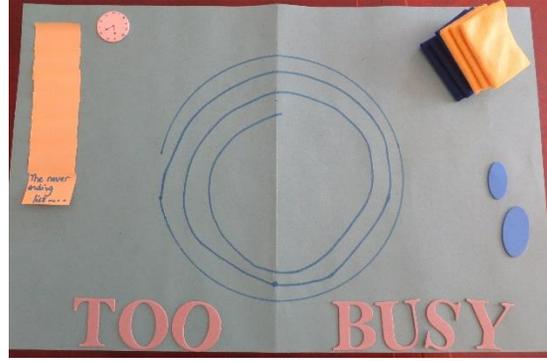
## Appendices

### A. Photo of collage box

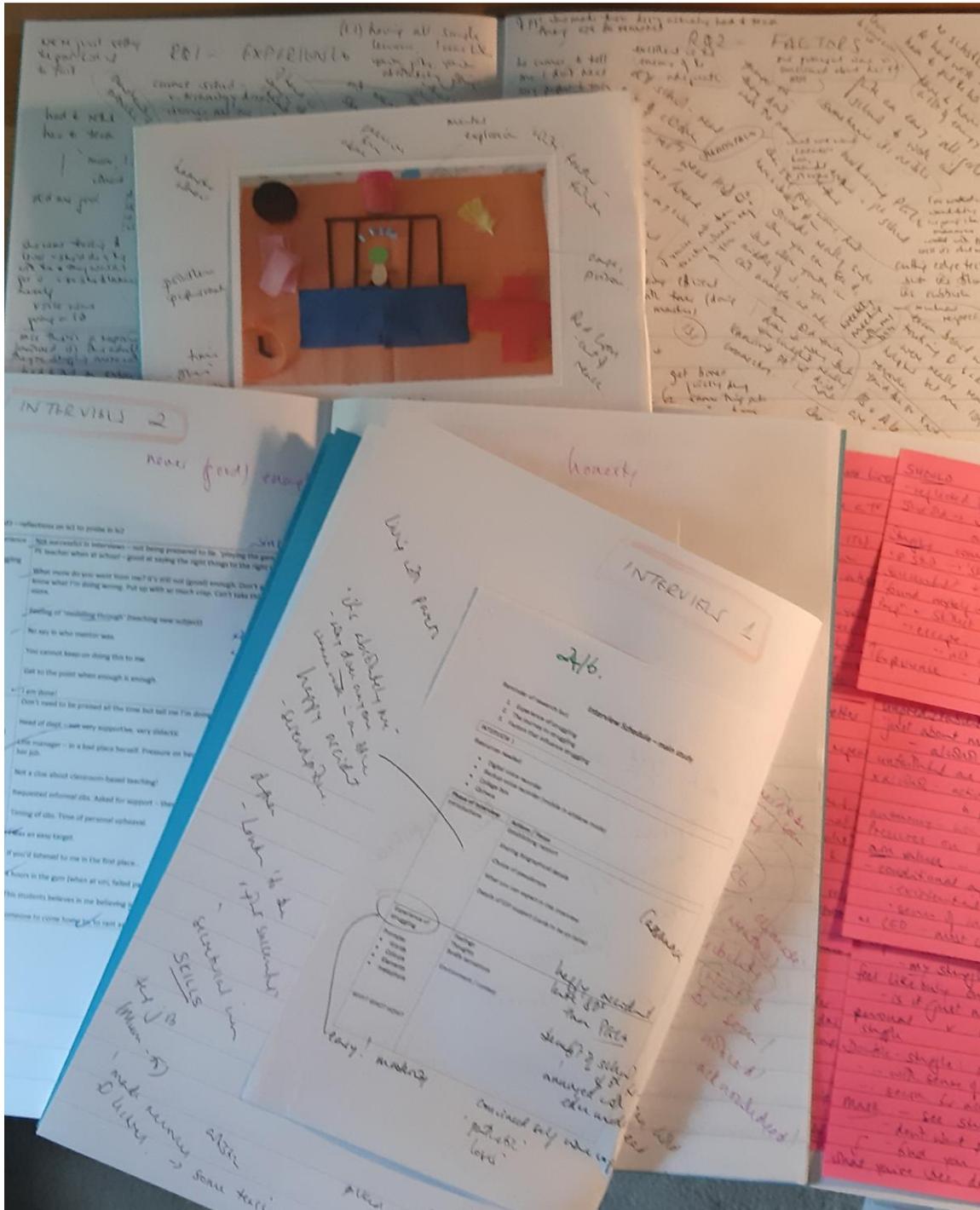


B. Photos of all collages





C. Scrapbook pages



#### D. Correspondence with participants (sample)

Hello XXX

Thanks again for your email volunteering to take part in my PhD study. Much appreciated! I have ethical approval from my university to conduct this study and can assure you that your identity remains **anonymous** and your data remains **confidential**, and is stored in a password-protected file. Can I also just remind you that participation is completely **voluntary** and you are free to withdraw at any stage, with no reason needed.

You might prefer to use a private rather than your school email address when corresponding with me.

There is a collage activity in the first interview (but not in the second, you might be glad to hear!), which is intended to help you think through what struggling means and feels like. I've got a "box of tricks" which I'll bring with me, but again you might like to think about any **materials** you'd like to use to express your experience of struggling. Don't worry about this activity – it's not about your artistic ability, it just gives us something to focus on while you're thinking through and reflecting on your experience.

Meeting in peoples' homes worked particularly well during the pilot study, as it affords a level of comfort and privacy which just cannot be guaranteed in a more public place, such as a café. So my preference is, therefore, to meet in participants' homes. I live in Clare, Suffolk and would be more than happy to travel. But of course, I need you to feel comfortable with that, given that you don't actually know me! (If you watch my YouTube video about the study, you do get a feel for who I am... that was the idea, really: [https://youtu.be/3S\\_wlotcuF4](https://youtu.be/3S_wlotcuF4) )

There will be 2 documents I would need you to **sign**, which outline the aims of the study and what your participation would involve. They can be sent to you by email before we meet, and then signed when we meet, if you do decide to go ahead.

And finally, you might like to think about **when** you'd like to meet. I can fit around you, and am happy to meet early morning, after school, evening or weekend – I'll leave it up to you! We'd only need to get one date in the diary to start with, the 2<sup>nd</sup> interview can be sorted later on.

I can be contacted by **phone** if you'd rather speak with me directly, on XXXXXX. This is my private mobile and no-one else has access to the voicemail.

I am heartened that so many teachers can see the value of my study and are expressing a willingness to get involved. If you do want to take things further, then I look forward to hearing from you. Otherwise, thanks for your interest, and wishing you well.

Suzanne Culshaw

PhD student, School of Education

University of Hertfordshire

## E. Details of Education Support Partnership support

Education Support Partnership is a UK charity, dedicated to helping education staff and organisations to boost health, happiness and wellbeing through individual support and great management.

Trained counsellors are available on the telephone 24/7 to listen and help teachers think through problems, to find a way forwards. Online chat support is a free 24/7 service. There is also an email support service.

Free helpline           08000 562 561

Text line                07909 341229

email support         [support@edsupport.org.uk](mailto:support@edsupport.org.uk)

Online chat via CHAT NOW button on

<https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/helping-you/email-support>

Home                   <https://www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk/>