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WELCOME FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to volume 5, edition 2, of the Birmingham City University (BCU) Education Journal Magazine (EJM).

This issue presents a timely collection of scholarly inquiries into the dynamic and often challenging landscape of contemporary education. Each contribution offers an exploration of applicable pedagogical, social, and systemic factors impacting teaching and learning today.

This edition will hopefully promote a re-evaluation of educational purpose, urging readers to consider "As a teacher, you have to ask yourself—why are you doing this?". Holding this introspective starting point in mind underpins subsequent analyses, including a critical exploration of the Neoliberal Educational Context and its discernible influence on assessment methodologies within the Drama classroom. Further contributions delve into the crucial area of reading comprehension support, presenting actionable strategies for older students in economically deprived educational settings"

This edition also embraces diverse methodological approaches. A Rhythmanalysis provides a unique phenomenological perspective on the daily life of an educator, while a reflective analysis traces the evolution of religious education in response to the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review. The profound impact of socio-economic factors on educational equity is addressed through an examination of social class in shaping educational opportunities, drawing on critical reflections inspired by Diane Reay's work on white working-class masculinities.

Innovation in pedagogy is showcased through discussions on Mapping Pedagogical Journeys through the use of storyboards and the efficacy of Educomix in exploring the impact of character design and closure on learning. Furthermore, articles investigate the transformative potential of Drama in Education and Virtual Galleries in fostering cross-cultural understanding and a shared sense of humanity by connecting teachers and students in the UK and the occupied West Bank. The increasing intersection of technology and professional development is explored in an analysis of emotional self-awareness in teacher development with Artificial Intelligence (AI). Finally, a bounded case study provides critical insights into maths curriculum access for learners with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) at KS3 and KS4 within a specific local authority.

Collectively, these contributions offer a nuanced and evidence-based perspective on current educational challenges and opportunities. I trust that the research and insights presented herein will stimulate further academic discourse and inform effective practice across our educational community.

Our aim

Our aim is to help support practice across our partnership schools and promote enquiry and research. We welcome contributions from students, teachers and academics who wish to make a positive difference to teaching and learning and believe they could help develop and support other's practice. We aim to support new and experienced writers to submit their work so that we share a variety of perspectives.

Our goals

- Showcase the excellent work our BCU Students produce
- Allow an opportunity for those interested to publish their work to promote positive development and reflection across our partnership schools
- Promote confidence and competence to write for an education publication
- Promote interest towards research and enquiry

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You do not need to decide which chapter you wish your article to appear, but you can indicate this if you wish. Please ensure you follow the house style. Final decisions on publication are made by the editorial board. You can submit as many articles as you wish. If the editorial team have received a large number of contributions, your article may be held for later editions.

House style

When submitting an article for consideration, please aim to follow the subsequent house style:

- Documents must be submitted in Word in font Calibri, size 11, with 1.5 line spacing.
- Include your full name and role/school – this will appear under the title.
- Any web links given should be accessible by the reader and not sit behind passwords or paywalls.
- Word count is expected to be 500 to 3000 words "all in" (including references lists).
- Acronyms and abbreviations must be written in full the first time they are used in each article; thereafter the abbreviation may be used, e.g. "The special educational needs and disability co-ordinator (SENDCO) is … "
- UK English should be used, e.g. "…ise" endings instead of "…ize"
- Numbers one to ten written in full; thereafter numerical (e.g. 28 pupils aged nine completed… etc.)
- Double speech marks for direct speech or quotes; otherwise single speech marks
- Please use the Harvard referencing system (where applicable – we can support with this if necessary).

Please note that the editorial team will amend the final copy to suit our house style. You will receive a copy back if any major changes have been made for you to proofread.

ENQUIRY AND SUPPORT WITHIN THE PARTNERSHIP

The evolution of religious education: A reflective analysis of the latest Curriculum and Assessment Review

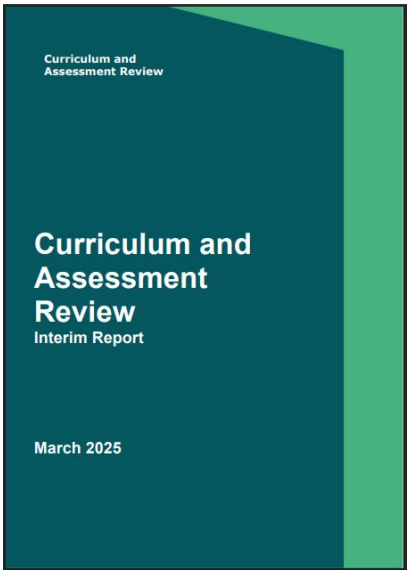
Imran Mogra

Introduction

The last time the national curriculum (NC) in England underwent a review was in 2013. It is now over a decade, and so the government in England decided that a comprehensive review of it was due to ensure it remained innovative and effective. Thus, in July 2024, the government commissioned Professor Becky Francis CBE to convene and chair a Panel of experts to conduct the Curriculum and Assessment Review.

On Tuesday 18 March 2025 the curriculum and assessment review interim report, was published (DfE, 2025). The Review was informed by research evidence, data, a wealth of perspectives from experts, stakeholders and the public, including over 7,000 responses to their Call for Evidence and a range of research and polling. This gives it much credibility and seems to have been welcomed in many quarters. The Interim Report presents their initial findings and insights.

In this article, I reflect on and critically analyse some key messages presented in the report within the wider context of religious education (RE). The reflection considers RE as it was excluded from the previous review (DfE, 2013) and welcomes RE into the future framework.



Building on strengths

I gained satisfaction from knowing that the Interim report proposed to build on existing strengths rather than making root and branch changes to the NC. It confirmed that many aspects of the curriculum and assessment system are working well. Nevertheless, it found that the current system is not delivering for every child. Thus, it emphasises the need for proper support for pupils with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (p. 6). This is significant for an education system that aims to provide the best opportunities to all its pupils to achieve the best that they can and more.

RE *has* featured

Unlike the previous review (DfE, 2013), the current Panel has included RE as part of its

review of the curriculum. Philosophically, this is encouraging as it is likely to indicate the holistic approach to education adopted by the Panel members. However, the inclusion of RE is welcomed on principle as well, because Ofsted reports (2021, 2024) and others (Conroy, et al., 2014; REC, 2018; Mogra, 2024a) have expressed concerns for improvements and change to happen in RE. Not only that, but it is also noteworthy that some Panel members may have played a role in ensuring RE was included. One panel member had been a primary teacher with expertise in religious studies and another was a member of the Commission on Religious Education (DfE, 2024) which reported a national plan for RE (REC, 2018). The report has also been positively received by two influential RE based organisations (CSTG, 2024; REC, 2024).

Reduction in the curriculum

One of the concerns raised by the Panel across the subjects is about the specificity, relevance, volume and diversity of content (p. 9). As a result, the Panel intends to conduct a closer analysis to diagnose each subject's specific issues and explore and test a range of solutions. I wonder what this will mean for RE and what solution/s they will propose.

Primary practitioners and subject experts informed the Panel that "the curriculum at key stages 1 and 2 is not effectively balancing depth and breadth" (p. 21), meaning that the amount of content prescribed at primary level is likely to be reviewed and/or reduced. An overloaded curriculum is reported "to lead to a struggle to cover all content with sufficient depth and negatively affects pupils' ability to master foundational concepts" (p. 21). For RE, the depth of understanding is important as RE often deals with complex and abstract concepts, and encourages critical thinking and analysis of different viewpoints, which require time and thoughtful engagement. Thus, in its next phase, the Panel will look at the "volume of specified content at key stages 1 and 2 to ensure that a good level of breadth across the curriculum is achievable, while continuing to drive high and rising standards in all subjects" (p. 21).

Questions of depth and breadth have been long-standing issues in RE. Locally agreed syllabuses and schools are expected to consider the need to offer breadth of content, depth of learning and coherence between concepts, skills and content (DCSF, 2010). Recently, the REC (2023: 6-7) presented the breadth, depth and ambition of the curriculum that is required in a curriculum that would meet the National Content Standard. Moreover, Ofsted's (2024) RE subject report also explored these matters and emphasised the importance of a comprehensive approach. It will be interesting to see how this balance is achieved in the context of diverse belief systems, RE statutory requirements, local diversity, educational goals, ambition and practical matters.

There is a long history of the existence of religion in education (Fancourt, 2022), therefore, I hesitate to imagine that RE would be taken out of the curriculum. Otherwise, it would result in a seismic shift in the English

education system. In fact, I am optimistic that it remains secure (see below). Nevertheless, I have some reservations that in striking a balance between an overloaded current and subject specificity, RE might be made a bedfellow of the humanities, specifically history and geography. There is a plea for a revolution towards cross-curricular teaching (Seleznyov, 2025). Whilst I can see this being a possibility, it may still mean some undoing of some of existing national legal and local structures that have been upholding RE for many decades. Having considered some general matters, I turn to the specifics of RE in the section below.

What is on offer for religious education?

In the context of the NC the reports says that the national curriculum plays "a crucial role in providing the knowledge and skills required to build a prosperous economy and flourishing civil society, as well as promoting social cohesion and sustaining democracy" (p. 5). Whilst a contentious aim (Conroy, et al. 2014; Orchard, 2015), I would argue that RE is an important subject that is well positioned to make valuable contributions to civic education, social harmony and democratic principles.

Looking forward, the report has identified four areas to focus on in the next phase. According to the Panel, these four areas are where the greatest opportunities and need for improvement lie. The Panel also heard that in some subjects the current construction and balance of content are inhibiting the secure mastery of subjects and reduces the time available for breadth of learning, with a knock-on impact on time for other subjects (p. 27). There is evidence that RE is one of the subjects that might be suffering from this situation. In secondary schools, only 44% met the threshold of curriculum time with 34% of all academies reporting no timetabled RE (NATRE, n.d. [a]), that RE is undervalued and that it is an afterthought (Tudor, 2024). Thus, it is encouraging to read that this issue is gaining prominent and will be considered closely.

Moreover, the Panel will ensure the national curriculum is "inclusive so that all young people can see themselves represented in their learning, as well as seeing others' perspectives and broadening their horizons" (p. 6). Here again, RE provides many opportunities to learners to listen and learn through, for example, direct encounters with individuals and communities from religious and non-religious backgrounds. Any future curriculum that tries to ensure that its learners do not feel alienated would be wise to incorporate religious and non-religious material in its content so that learners feel represented and have their outlook on life expanded. For the first time in a census of England and Wales, less than half of the population (46.2%) described themselves as "Christian" and "No religion" was the second most common response (37.2%). There were increases in the number of people who described themselves as "Muslim" (6.5%) and "Hindu" (1.7%) (ONS, 2021).

There is another paragraph which gives hope that RE will be (re)positioned to where it belongs. It states that the Panel "will review the

volume of specified content at key stages 1 and 2 to ensure that a good level of breadth across the curriculum is achievable" (p. 21). The phrase "across the curriculum" (I surmise) includes RE, since the report recognises the subject as a basic component of the curriculum which schools are required by statute to provide. Still, it will be interesting to see how/if this will be applied to RE.

Subjects not on the national curriculum

National agreed content standards

It is most gratifying that a specific section has been dedicated to subjects which do not feature in the national curriculum (one of which is RE). The report refers to the *Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report* (Ofsted, 2024) and states that :

> Despite the fact that RE is compulsory for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless they are withdrawn), evidence suggests that a lack of *national agreed content standards* [emphasis added] has led to national disparities in the quality of provision (p. 29).

1. To begin with, the position of RE as a subject in schooling is highlighted by drawing attention to its current statutory requirement. RE, it reinforces, is a compulsory subject for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless they are withdrawn). This is an important reminder for all phases of education, including further education colleges and sixth forms, as there is evidence (Ofsted, 2024) that some secondary schools are not meeting this statutory requirement, which is illegal.

2. This paragraph has captured a crucial issue facing RE. Currently, in the absence of a national curriculum for RE, local authorities provide a locally agreed syllabus for the schools that they maintain (Mogra, 2024b). The absence of agreed standards is a factor leading to inconsistencies in the design of these syllabi (Ofsted, 2021; Smalley, 2024). In addition, the Panel sees the lack of nationally agreed content standards impacting the quality of RE being taught. However, Barnes (2020) questions the attribution of this to the Agreed Syllabus since matters relating to the level of subject knowledge or the expertise of teachers are not curricular issues. These could be due to weaknesses in teacher training (Barnes, 2020). On the other hand, it may be argued that an agreed national syllabus solution would aid teacher trainers, since they would only have one curriculum to train teachers for (Smalley, 2024). Thus, this acknowledgment is significant as it indicates an intention to address a key challenge that many in the RE community are concerned about. By recognising this issue, the Panel appears to validate the experiences of RE educators, perhaps making them feel heard. Thus, the recognition of this disparity in provision at a national level is welcomed.

3. This paragraph appears futuristic. It seems to indicate what is to come for RE in the final report as a way of moving the subject forward from being hyper-localised and confusing (Ofsted, 2024). They are intimating a move towards work at national level. That does not necessarily mean the demise of locally agreed

syllabuses, but were a national framework to be published, then one would expect all syllabuses, whatever their origin, to demonstrate how they meet these standards. A path that RE has trodden before with the Non-Statutory National Framework of RE (QCA, 2004).

4. Moreover, the phrase "national agreed content standards" appears to endorse the call from some major RE organisations. These include the Religious Education Council of England and Wales who have supported a non-statutory benchmark, entitled National Content Standard for RE in England (REC, 2023). However, it is important to clarify that this is not a curriculum but a standard by which different RE curricula, content, pedagogy, and provision can be benchmarked. In 2018, the Commission on Religious Education, an independent commission established by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, published a report setting out proposals for a national plan (REC, 2018). The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education called for an urgent need for a national plan, as one in five schools report including no lessons of the subject on their timetables (NATRE, 2022). The plan proposed the introduction of a statutory national *entitlement* [emphasis added] which would set out what all pupils in publicly funded schools should be entitled to be taught up to the end of year 11.

5. In the eventuality that nationally agreed content standards materialise, a serious matter that would be required is that holding schools accountable to it. This is because even though currently RE is a compulsory subject, some schools fall short of fulfilling this legal requirement (Weston, 2022). I wonder what mechanism, if any, the Panel would propose towards this end. In any case, there is hope that having some kind of national standards might make for better quality of RE.

6. Finally, apparently, it alludes to the idea that Panel may not be thinking of proposing a national curriculum for RE as it has referred to standards rather than to curriculum. If so, there may then be some Early Career Teachers who might be disheartened (Mogra, forthcoming).

Quality and flexibility in curricula

Within the same section, the Report recognises the need to strike

> a balance between securing an entitlement to high-quality content for all, and, particularly in the case of RE, the need for flexibility to be retained for different school types (i.e., schools with a religious designation and those without (p. 29).

1. To begin with, balancing the entitlement to high-quality content for all, while retaining the existing flexibility for different school types presents complexity and challenges. Should the current flexibility be retained, then the question of consistency might persist, since faith designated schools have specific requirements for RE that differ from maintained schools, and academies have a choice in

determining their curriculum (Long, Loft and Danechi, 2019).

In relation to maintained schools striking a balance between standardised content, which might ensure high-quality curriculum content may prove challenging as local needs and contexts are different. This variation is currently manifested in about 140 locally agreed syllabi in operation, admittedly, with some overlap between them.

Consistency between academies and maintained schools might be addressed relatively easily. One option would be to use the nationally agreed content standards to create common grounds. Faith designated schools, could still operate with these standards with some tailoring of content to meet their specific needs. In this way, a benchmark for all types of schools like that provided by the REC (2023) could come into existence for all schools. This is important as the REC maintains that the National Content Standard could be used to clarify the regulations about the nature of provision required in Academy schools. It may helpfully provide non-statutory guidance for the arms-length curriculum bodies, like Oak National Academy and others, in the development of a fully resourced curriculum in RE. Likewise, it may support SACREs and others with responsibility for RE to play their part in raising standards for all children (REC, 2023: 3).

2. The Panel proposes to consider an entitlement to high-quality content for all children in their analysis of RE before publishing their final report. Curiously, the word entitlement appears only once in the entire report and that is in the context of RE and RSHE. In referring to entitlement, here again, the Panel seems to have drawn from the Big Ideas Project (Wintersgill, Cush, and Francis, 2019) and/or the report of the Commission on RE (REC, 2018). Recently, it has been proposed that the National Statement of Entitlement sets out (i) a benchmark for standards in a religion and worldviews curriculum about how worldview(s) work in human life, and (ii) a pedagogical tool for the selection of content and of appropriate teaching and learning approaches to enrich and deepen pupils' scholarly engagement with religion and worldviews (Pett, 2024).

3. It is commendable that RE will continue to feature in their deliberation at the next stage. This is important if some of the persisting issues, such as non-compliance by some schools and what high-quality in RE looks like and assessment are to be addressed.

4. Finally, this also suggests that distinct types of schools will continue to provide RE, as is currently the case, according to their religious character and deeds.
In the next section, two other matters which might impact RE are discussed.

Knowledge rich-curriculum

With its focus on knowledge, the Panel appears to acknowledge the importance of teachers who support mastery of the subjects. In other words, they appear to be viewing subject

knowledge as a way to put the values that they have identified in the Report into school-based action. Thus, the following two sentences have stood out and resonate closely and where RE can contribute to:

> Education is inherently valuable and important for its own sake, but it also plays a crucial role in preparing young people to address the civic and economic needs of our country and the wider world (p. 5).

The other relates to the Panel seeking to support the Government's mission:

> to break down barriers to opportunity by equipping children and young people with the knowledge and skills to adapt and thrive in the world and the workplace (p. 5).

In highlighting a knowledge-based curriculum, they seem to emphasise that RE, like other subjects will be expected to be an academically rigorous subject for pupils to engage with. But a knowledge rich curriculum should also be expected to move learners beyond their immediacy and include challenges they will face such as the ethics of economic instability, exploitation, ethical use of AI, natural disasters, climate change, peace, armed conflict, political oppression and to try make sense of an uncertain world and humanitarian crises.

Curricula linked to identities

The focus on a knowledge rich curriculum is unambiguous, although the Review records that "securing mastery in a subject is vital for raising standards and enabling future expertise" (p. 6). This suggests that deeper understanding and competence is a foundation for future expertise. However, there is a phrase that needs to be highlight wherein it is emphasised that learners will not be left out from the curriculum. In other words, there is a hint that social identity theory has worked its way into their thinking (Daniels, 2009).

> We will also ensure that the curriculum (and related material) is inclusive so that all *young people can see themselves represented in their learning* [emphasis added], as well as seeing others' perspectives and broadening their horizons (p. 6).

Whilst the extent to which this is a realistic proposition is debatable, nevertheless, this evinces that learners might see themselves represented in their curriculum. A wise move to enhance their self-esteem and sense of belonging. If so, it also becomes a culturally responsive curriculum as it will recognise learners' backgrounds in the learning process. A wise move to reduce alienation and enhance respect and effective classrooms. For RE, this means that pupils will see their sacred beliefs, leaders, scriptures, spaces, festivals, rites and rituals in their curriculum. However, in their curriculum, learners will also see their peers' perspectives locally, nationally and globally. In this sense, RE is already there as RE is diverse.

Procedural matters

The Review expects to recommend a phased programme of work across the subjects listed in

the national curriculum. This will allow reforms to be made incrementally in a way that does not destabilise the system (p. 9). I wonder why RE was absent from being mentioned explicitly here, granted it is included as discussed above.

Since 2018, there has been considerable work gradually undertaken by RE communities, led by REC. This is akin to the evolutionary approach adopted by this Panel. Such an approach is pertinent for RE because the subject has a long historical entanglement with legislation, policy, the Church of England, and religious and professional stakeholders, and, indeed the spiritual, moral and social purposes of schooling. That said, a sudden and total overhaul of RE appears to be unlikely. This is probably because the previous Government stated in 2019 that it had a commitment to make no changes to the curriculum for the remaining lifetime of the Parliament elected in 2017 (Long, Hubble, Danechi and Loft, 2019). However, in a cross-party Westminster debate, in 2022, then Shadow Education Minister Stephen Morgan said that a Labour government would deliver a 'well-rounded' education and challenged the Government for its failure to introduce a National Plan for RE (NATRE n.d. [b]). This would imply that the current Government might endorse national agreed content standards were it to be recommended by the Panel.

Conclusion

In the recent on-going development of education in England, this Interim report appears to be a significant milestone. It highlights evidence-based areas for improvement to ensure the curriculum evolves with changing times, innovation and continues to be effective in achieving its purpose. It has emphasised the strengths of many aspects of the curriculum and assessment. Therefore, the Panel is committed to enhancing existing strengths, rather than starting anew.

The inclusion of RE within the Interim report suggests that it has significance for the Panel in the educational curriculum of the country. It shows that the Panel holds RE as a key subject for the education of the next generations of children in England. The affirmation that RE remains a compulsory subject for all pupils up to the age of 18 (unless withdrawn) is a vital aspect, which schools should take note of. The Report highlights the retention of the flexibility to cater to the diverse needs and contexts of different schools.

The Report acknowledges challenges in RE, specifically the absence of national agreed content standards which it suggests is contributing to disparities in the quality of provision across the country. Therefore, some recommendations having national bearing for RE is to be expected.

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CURRENT ENQUIRY AND PRACTICE

"As a teacher, you have to ask yourself—why are you doing this?"

Molly Bettencourt

Introduction

During my day at a school gaining SEN experience, the deputy headteacher said something that truly stuck with me. He posed a question that made me pause and reflect deeply: "As a teacher, you have to ask yourself—why are you doing this?"

At first, the answer felt obvious. I love my subject, I want to make a difference, I care about young people. However, the more I thought about it, the deeper I had to dig. It was not just about what I wanted to do, but why it mattered to me on a personal level.

So, after reflecting for a while, on my own experiences as a student teacher, on the moments that shaped me, on the kind of teacher I want to be, here is what I discovered…

How I See Being a 'Teacher':

Students in schools are not just students. They are people. They have thoughts, emotions, stories, and battles they carry with them every day. The same goes for teachers, we are more than just educators delivering a curriculum. We are human beings with our own struggles, emotions, and histories. But somewhere along the way, the system often forgets this. It builds walls between "teacher" and "student," reinforcing a dynamic of authority rather than connection.

I never wanted to be the kind of teacher who stands at the front of the classroom and says, "I'm right, you're wrong. I'm big, you're small". That "Matilda" moment of power imbalance. It has no place in my classroom. Yes, I am a teacher. Yes, there are boundaries. But more than anything, I am human. I get tired. I have days when I so not feel my best. I make mistakes - plenty of them. I believe that acknowledging this, showing my students that I am just as imperfect as they are, makes the biggest difference. When students see that their teacher is human, they begin to understand that making mistakes is okay. That struggle does not mean failure. That learning is not about perfection, it's about growth.

Relationships and Connection:

Since stepping into schools, I have developed a deep passion for working with students who have Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Maybe it is because I see pieces of my younger self in them. Maybe it is because I know, firsthand, what it feels like to be misunderstood.

I have noticed that schools in disadvantaged areas often have a higher intake of students with SEMH needs. This has been particularly evident in the settings I have worked in, where many pupils face external challenges. At times, these factors present themselves in the

classroom through emotional dysregulation, low resilience or difficulties with behaviour and focus. It is reassuring to know that my observations are supported by wider research. For example, Public Health England (2014) highlights how children growing up in poverty are more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which can directly impact their mental health and emotional development. The Department for Education's (2025) SEND statistics also show that students eligible for free school meals are significantly more likely to be identified with SEMH as a primary need. Similarly, NHS Digital (2020) found that children from low-income families are twice as likely to experience a mental health disorder compared to their more affluent peers.

Knowing this, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of trauma-informed practise and inclusive strategies in my approach to teaching. I see supporting students' emotional needs not as a barrier to learning, but as a necessary foundation for it. This has really shaped the way I view behaviour – not as something to be managed, but as something to be understood.

Every child deserves to be heard, not just the ones who struggle the loudest. I want to be their voice. I want to advocate for them, push for change, and help create a school environment where they feel valued, not just managed.

I truly believe that behaviour is communication. Too often in schools, especially under pressure or policy constraints, teachers may focus on managing or punishing the behaviour they see, rather than pausing to ask 'why' it is happening. But behind every outburst, every refusal, every disruption, there is a child trying to tell us something. A student who lashes out is not 'bad' – they are hurting. A student who refuses to engage is not lazy – they are likely overwhelmed. A student who constantly calls out in class is not simply being annoying – they might be fighting an invisible battle in their own mind, whether it is anxiety, ADHD, or something they can not even find the words to explain.

This mindset shift is something I have come to hold very closely, and it is deeply informed by wider research such as, Dr. Louise Bomber (2007) who emphasises that "behaviour is communication" and that students with attachment difficulties or trauma histories often communicate distress through what we label as "challenging" behaviour. Her work taught me that what some children need is a safe adult who does not punish their pain but patiently co-regulates with them.
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) also reminds us that students cannot be expected to access learning if their fundamental emotional needs – safety, connection, security – are not being met. I have seen this first hand. Students who come into school hungry, anxious, or dysregulated simply cannot engage with content, no matter how well the lesson is planned. Similarly, Bruce Perry's work on trauma (2006) opened my eyes to the

neuroscience behind this. He explains that when a child's brain is in survival mode, their ability to reason, reflect or even listen is diminished. I remember reading 'The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog' and being struck by the idea that you cannot reach the "thinking brain" until the "survival brain" feels safe.

Dan Siegel's concept of the "flipped lid" helped me better understand emotional regulation in real-time. He explains how when children are emotionally overwhelmed, their logical brain essentially shuts down, which means consequences or reasoning will not land. What they need instead is connection, grounding and calming co-regulation (Siegel and Bryson, 2012).

All of this research echoes what I feel deeply as a teacher; behaviour is not the enemy – it is the symptom. And when we commit to understanding the needs behind it, we create a space where students feel seen, heard, and safe enough to learn.

All students can learn and succeed. Just not in the same way, or on the same day.

If students are not ready to learn, they will not learn. And why should they? If they walk into a classroom and feel unseen, unheard, and unvalued, how can we expect them to engage? Students are incredibly perceptive. They can sense when a teacher does not want to be there. They pick up on our energy, and in turn, reflect it back at us. That is why relationships are at the heart of teaching. The classroom is not just a space for learning; it becomes a home. A safe place. A space where they can let their guard down. When students feel safe, when they feel like they matter, they behave better, they try harder, they believe in themselves a little more.

Lev Vygotsky (1978), a key figure in educational psychology, once said, "Through others, we become ourselves." His Social Development Theory suggests that learning is deeply rooted in social interaction. We do not learn in isolation, we learn through relationships, through communication, through meaningful exchanges. This is why a teacher-student relationship matters so much. Students do not just learn from what we teach them; they learn from how we treat them, from the way we interact, from the way we make them feel.

The best teachers in my life were not just the ones who explained things well. They were the ones who saw me. Who recognised when I was struggling before I even found the words to say it. Who made me feel valued not just for my ability to learn, but for who I was as a person - and that's the kind of teacher I want to be.

All the little things, the smiles, the jokes, the moments where we take the time to ask, "are you okay?"—they matter. They stay with students long after they leave the classroom. Sometimes, those tiny moments are the only ones in a student's day where they feel noticed, where they feel like they belong. I want my students to know that in my classroom, they are more than just a grade. More than just a behaviour report. More than just another name on a register. When a student feels seen, they

start to see their own potential. And that is when real learning begins.

Reflection on My Journey:

I know what it is like to be the misunderstood student. I was the girl who spoke too much, called out too often, disrupted the lesson without meaning to. The girl who zoned out in class and could not explain why. The girl who needed extra math tutoring for years and still could not grasp the concepts. The girl who physically could not touch flour in cooking lessons because of sensory issues, only to be given a humorous award for it. The girl who was anxious. The girl who forgot her equipment. The girl who could not follow verbal instructions.

Now, as an adult with a late diagnosis of ADHD and dyslexia, I grieve for that girl. I did not know why I could not stay focused, why I could not remember things, why I felt like I was constantly trying to catch up but never quite getting there. I did not understand why I could not sit still, why I blurted things out before I even had time to process them. I was told I was 'too much'. 'Too loud'. 'Too easily distracted'. 'Too forgetful'. 'Too sensitive'. When you hear those words enough, you start to believe that maybe you are just too difficult to teach.

Now, I understand. My zoning out was not because I did not care; it was my ADHD making it impossible to regulate my attention. My forgetfulness was not laziness; it was my working memory struggling to hold onto verbal instructions. My anxiety was not me being dramatic; it was my brain, overwhelmed by the constant feeling of not being good enough. My refusal to touch flour in cooking was not stubbornness; it was a sensory processing difficulty I did not have words for at the time.

Now, as a teacher, I look at my students and wonder: Who in this room is feeling the way I felt? Who is struggling but doesn't have the words to explain why? Who is trying their absolute hardest but still being told it's not enough?

I think about my own experiences every time I work with students. When I see a student staring out the window, I do not assume they are not listening; I wonder if their brain is simply overloaded, the way mine used to be. When a student asks the same question multiple times, I do not assume they were not paying attention; I recognise that maybe they struggle with working memory, just like I did. When a student calls out impulsively, I do not see them as disruptive; I see a mind that works quickly, that struggles with impulse control, that might not even realise they are doing it.

Every student has a story. When I take a moment to truly see them, to meet them where they are rather than where the curriculum expects them to be, I know I am teaching in the way I needed to be taught.

Why the Subject 'English'?

I chose to teach English because language is more than just words, it is the bridge between thought and understanding. It is how we

express, how we connect, how we tell our stories.

Writing has always been my way of making sense of the world. The act of putting words onto a page is like untangling the mess inside my mind. It gives clarity to the chaos, structure to the thoughts that feel too big to hold inside.

Books, too, have always been my escape. They are a doorway to different worlds, a space where we can lose ourselves and find ourselves at the same time. They teach us about others, about emotions, about experiences we may never live but can still feel. They remind us that we are not alone in our struggles.

Then there is poetry. Where words become music, where language itself feels alive. Poetry is proof that emotions cannot always be explained in direct sentences; sometimes, they need rhythm, imagery, metaphor. Sometimes, they need to be felt more than they are read.

English is, at its core, communication; and communication is everything. It is in the way we speak to one another, in the way we express our emotions, in the way we navigate relationships, in the way we understand the world. Teaching English is not just about literature, it is about life. It's about equipping students with the ability to express who they are, to find their voice, to tell their stories in a world that often tries to silence them. When students struggle, they communicate through their actions, their silence, their resistance. When they feel safe, they communicate through engagement, creativity, expression.
I teach English because I want my students to feel empowered to communicate their thoughts, their struggles, their dreams. Because I know, firsthand, what it's like to feel misunderstood. I teach because words have power. Stories have power. The power to heal, to inspire, to connect.
Lord Byron once said, "A drop of ink may make a million think."

That is why I teach. Because I want my students to think. To feel. To know that their voices, their stories, their struggles—all of it matters. I once sat in their seat, and I know what it's like to need someone to believe in you. So, I can be that person for even one student, then every challenge, every late night, every moment of doubt will have been worth it.

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The Neoliberal Educational Context; How Is It Shaping Assessment Choices in the Drama Classroom?

Nathan Wyer

One of the key factors that I believe has shaped my position as a researcher and drama teacher is the rise of neoliberalism within education. Neoliberalism can be conceptualised as a market-based ideology focused on competition, individualism, and accountability (Mudge, 2008; Giroux, 2013) and it has increasingly shaped the educational landscape. For example, the rising importance of high stakes testing, Ofsted inspections, data driven league tables, and a move toward more prescriptive teaching can all be considered a result of the adoption of a neoliberal ideology (Ball, 2003, 2013; Biesta, 2007) in the British educational context. This has arguably led to schools favouring that which is measurable and marketable (Giroux, 2013; Reay, 2020) such as results and progress scores. With regards to education, Ball (2003) suggested that the influence of neoliberalism is evident through the rise of the importance of data analysis and high stakes testing to ensure that teaching staff can be made accountable for the outcome of their practice.

With the introduction of the 1988 Education Act (Department for Education, 1988), various political regimes have put neoliberal ideas to work, both explicitly and implicitly, to promote the accountability of teachers through the importance of data and performativity. The ability to control, change and judge teachers practice via inspection and analysis of data (Ball, 1993; 2003; 2013) has resulted in a detrimental impact on the professional lives of people working in schools (Walker et al, 2023) in a desire to make education "strong, secure, predictable and risk free" (Biesta, 2013: 3).

The relevance of this to my experience as a drama teacher is compounded by Warren's (2017) implication that neoliberal pressures are simultaneously co-existing within the educational establishment, visible through the rules and policies in practice. Foucault (1982, p.17) describes these co-existent pressures as "technologies of power" whereby external regulations that control the actions of individuals generate specific behaviours. Warren continues that these pressures exist within the individual and the way that people seek to portray themselves professionally, again referred to as "technologies of self" by Foucault (1982, p.17). In turn, they become self-imposed internalised behaviours. It is my position that the continuous pressures of policy and a results driven narrative in education creates a panopticon within educational establishments (Foucault, 1975), where teachers feel as if they are constantly watched, and must be on their "'best behaviour". I believe that this is one of the reasons that education is the third highest industry in Britain for work-related absence, with 53% of self-reported illness in the sector, relating to stress (Health and Safety Executive, 2024).

Personally, I discovered this high-pressure

nature of neoliberalism via my own autoethnographic research (Wyer, 2024). Autoethnography, as defined by Leavy (2020), is a form of research where the researcher participates simultaneously as the subject and analyst of the researcher. I discovered that to survive and prove my worth within a neoliberal context as a drama teacher, I was willing to adapt my own practice and values, which had been shaped by my experiences on the PGCE Secondary Drama course. I was willing to move away from the child-centric benefits of a democratic drama classroom (Demo:Dram, 2018) and move towards a goal-oriented form of education that focussed primarily on student achievements and results. I learnt that due to neoliberalism's grip on education, I needed to exist in a state of 'metaxis', as defined by Boal (1995) as a sense of dual existence- the ability to shift between roles and responsibilities, within my professional career. Within the context of the drama classroom, metaxis allows both the students and the teacher to straddle two worlds at once: fiction (the drama), and reality (Dunn, 2016; Wells et al, 2023). This therefore allows students to consider other world views alongside their own (Wells et al, 2023), to connect classroom-based learning with a personally connected understanding of real-world issues (Bolton, 1985). It is my ontological position that the idea of interconnectedness (Whelan, 2008) between two worlds is made possible due to metaxis and that this way of thinking can also be applied to reality and the professional expectations of assessing drama in the neoliberal context.

From my autoethnography, I also discovered that I needed to switch between the autonomous worlds (Linds, 2006) of the neoliberal teacher, succumbing to the neoliberal pressures by maximising student data to survive and thrive in the current educational context (Wyer, 2024) whilst at the same time being a teacher that emphasised a democratic space within my classroom (Demo:Dram, 2018). For me, the role of the neoliberal, results driven teacher is quickly becoming my normal (reality) in the classroom, with the democratic classroom slowly fading into fiction. Reflecting upon my position as a drama teacher, I am aware that I have a sense of professional guilt that is linked closely to the adoption of neoliberal assessment procedures within my own classroom and that this 'role shifting' requires me to simultaneously juggle my own personal values and beliefs alongside the neoliberal values and beliefs that are necessary for progression within my own career to promote the worth of myself, and my subject (Ball, 2013).

Due to my autoethnography and continuing research on the Educational Doctorate (EdD), it is my position that with the rise of neoliberal, market/results-driven school accountability systems in the British educational context (Ball, 2008; Giroux, 2013; Mudge, 2008) many schools strive to maximise teacher accountability to prove their worth in a market-driven context (Hogan & Howie, 2017). Reay (2020) highlights that the focus on school effectiveness has encouraged tighter regulation

of teachers, their practice and actions, and the commodification of education in such a way that has resulted in an uprise of educational consultants, all of whom are selling their 'what works best' school improvement. For example, Sherrington (2019) Lemov (2021) and Oak National Academy (2024) are three sources that are consistently cited as the primary sources of research-led practice in my professional context, without consideration of other pedagogical approaches that may offer alternatives to these sources. This means I have experienced first-hand the way that neoliberalism is leading many schools and Multi-Academy Trusts to lose sight of the fact that education is not simply for teaching a student this, or that (Pring, 2001).

Evidence- based practice is potentially accepted too widely by senior leadership in schools without discussion related to the aims of education (Biesta, 2007, 2010), forcing staff to work with a shared pedagogical approach often found in the works of Lemov (2021) and/or suggestions of Bennett (2020). This has therefore impacted the approaches I have taken to assessment in Drama as I have found I have been willing to take less risks from a curriculum and assessment perspective as neoliberal agendas within my own school have pressured me to conform to expectations in order to maximise pupil achievement.

For example, when I first became a subject lead of Drama, I found personal value in creating schemes of learning that focussed on experiential learning championed by leading drama in education (DiE) thinkers such as Fleming (2011) and Neelands (2004). It was my belief that one of the principal purposes of DiE was to allow young people an opportunity to experience a sense of 'other' (Neelands, 2004) that might therefore encourage the development of empathy for others (Heathcote, 1995) and an understanding of the world through the lived experience (Bethlenfalvy, 2017) within the drama classroom created via the teacher as a facilitator of learning. This approach to curriculum development in drama provided many challenges regarding what to assess. It was easy to assess visible skills such as thought tracks, monologues and cross-cutting. However, regarding assessment of the lived experiential aspects of drama, it was nearly impossible to identify *what* had been learnt, the *duration* of time spent in lesson, and what *quality* of learning had taken place (Bolton, 2010). As an ideology, the neoliberal educational establishment requires proof of *what* has taken place in the classroom and the *progress* of students (Humphreys, 2023; Perryman et al, 2023).

This consistent challenge in the drama classroom is the primary reason that I intend to conduct my thesis within the specialism of drama assessment. I have yet to identify *what* should be assessed, *how* it should be assessed, and *why* it should be assessed. However, it is worth noting that upon reflection via this article, and my previously discussed autoethnography, that despite my awareness of the pressures that neoliberalism can place on teachers, even I have begun to succumb to

the neoliberal pressures discussed in this article. Due to the rising pressure of performativity (Ball, 2013) I now create schemes of learning that focus solely on the development of performance skills and oracy in order to maximize the potential of the outwardly facing statistics that my line managers view when deciding if drama is a worthwhile subject to include on the curriculum.

The rising pressure of performativity through testing (Lyotard, 1984; Ball, 2013) is dominating many educational systems (Fleming, 2011). However, the mechanisms of performativity and efficiency within the neoliberal educational context are in direct opposition to the creative freedom under which the Arts thrive (Koopman, 2005). Attempts to develop attainment targets and progression levels within the Arts generally, and drama specifically, are often vulnerable to criticism because they demonstrate only a partial aspect of the vastness of the subject they are attempting to describe (Fleming, 2011). Neelands (2004) explored the idea of how Drama's 'value' within a school is decided by the school itself. He suggested that in educational establishments, where Drama is perceived as personal and social education, assessment emphasises the development of objectives linked to social, personal and moral values. In establishments where Drama is viewed primarily as a sub-strand of the English department, assessment emphasises skills related to speaking, listening and written responses to Drama and text. Neelands continued to suggest that when Drama is viewed as a subject in its own right, there is often a primary focus on pupils' ability to develop performance skills, understand the history of theatre and the production of play texts. The viewpoint of drama's validity being linked to assessment criteria is echoed by Jacobs (2016, 2022), and Chapell et al (2021) who state that many drama teachers find assessment in drama helps to legitimize the subject. This, however, raises the question of what is legitimate- do we value what is assessed or assess what we value?

It is my position that the very nature of assessment (and therefore curriculum development) within DiE is inadvertently impacted by the core beliefs, values and ambitions of subject leaders, senior leadership, or a combination of both and is a core part of the legitimization and survival of drama as a subject in the neoliberal context. I believe this is inescapable, in no small part, due to the lack of agreed legislative framework for Drama in the United Kingdom; Drama itself, existing with the National Curriculum of English as a subject (National Curriculum, 2013).

As a researcher in DiE, I must admit that in my idealistic utopian drama classroom, there would be no formal assessment. It is my position that it creates boundaries and limits to the scope of what can be taught, with teachers often being forced to focus on objective and quantifiable knowledge (Haanstra et al, 2015). From an epistemological perspective, Rasmussen (2010) stated that it may benefit

drama teachers to move towards a mode of assessment that takes in both cognitive *and* aesthetic knowledge and they are not seen as secluded categories. However, this therefore raises questions about what is valued within the neoliberal context; what makes an aesthetic tool of performance or exploration equally or more valuable to cognitive knowledge regarding the history of the subject?

It is my opinion that drama teachers are becoming tools of neoliberal performativity (Ball, 2003) in order to compete within an education marketplace (Lambert et al, 2015) that does not value drama as a subject. This is demonstrated by its lack of inclusion within key school measurement systems, such as the English Baccalaureate (Department for Education, 2014). However, I am also aware that my own cultural and professional capital (Bourdieu, 1986) have been shaped and affected by assessment regimes in drama that I have experienced myself in secondary schools. For example, without my Drama GCSE, I would have been unable to undertake my A-Level Theatre Studies, which then led to my degree and eventually culminated in my acceptance on to the Educational Doctorate (EdD). I am ultimately aware of my position that despite my personal preference for a drama model that does not require the use of assessment, I see the necessity of its use in order to evidence and promote the inclusion of Drama as a subject within the neoliberal context that many schools exist within.

When reflecting upon the impact of neoliberalism on teachers, I am reminded of a quote from Lorrie Moore's *Like Life* (2010: 14), a collection of short stories that explore stories of people who are adrift, confused and often frightened within their own world:

"One had to build shelters. One had to make pockets and live inside them."

I find the imagery of this quote strikingly relevant to the current neoliberal climate in education. Teachers are constantly having to find ways to defend themselves temporarily against the pressures of performativity, and unfortunately those shelters (grades, mock results etc) are only temporary- until they must do it all again, and again, each academic year on the never-ending cycle of the system of terror that is performativity (Ball, 2013). As drama teachers, in order to survive and thrive within the neoliberal context, we must consider *what* we assess, *how* we assess it, and *why* we assess it in order to satisfy personal positions and beliefs about the important aspects of the subject whilst simultaneously keeping the neoliberal terror of performativity at bay.

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How can teaching practitioners embed support for reading comprehension for the older years in an economically deprived context school?

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Introduction

Reading develops a child's skillset to become successful in education. However, this skillset is often limited to "particular groups" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 19) who encompass "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986). The research school's Free School Meal (FSM) pupils were above the national average and were consistently performing below their non- FSM peers in the New Group Reading Test (NGRT). Therefore, this research became focused towards knowledge equality (Maton and Moore, 2010), through developing the pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) of teaching the content knowledge of reading (Shulman, 1986). The knowledge has been collected from the researcher's employment school and interpreted from the social realist perspective combining the positivist and the relativist views (Maton and Moore, 2010). As knowledge can only be collected from a "coalition of minds" (Collins, 2000: 7) there was an aim to inspire other teachers' "judgement" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 131) towards these values.

Research questions:

- What reading interventions have the most impact for Year 7 and above?
- How can these interventions become embedded in these classrooms across the context school?
- What leadership is required to embed the importance of reading comprehension in all classrooms?

Literature review

Knowledge and Leadership debate

Leaders influence others "to achieve desired purposes" (Bush and Glover, 2003: 5). To do this, new pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) must align to the school's "vision" and "values" (Bush and Glover, 2003: 555). Yet, "knowledge acquisition" (Robertson, 2009: 11) is problematic. How is new knowledge acquired? What knowledge is most important? The English National Curriculum proposes that Key stage three (KS3) pupils "should read whole books" (Department for Education, 2013: 3). However, there is minimal reference made to teaching reading comprehension.

The knowledge acquisition debate (Robertson, 2009: 11) influences leadership in schools (Bush and Glover, 2014: 555). The instructional ideology (Bush and Glover, 2014: 565) prioritised pedagogical canons based on "structural features …[and]… principles" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 131). Ball et al. (2012: 518) suggests that this leads to "totalis[ing] and individualis[ing]" pupils' achievement. The NGRT data presents the issues with this "machined" (Ball et al., 2012: 524) nature of teaching, as it shows underperformance despite pedagogical structure.

Distributed leadership "engages expertise of an

organisation" (Harris, 2004: 13), but access to this was limited as an Early Career's Teacher. Visionary leaders promote knowledge distribution (Goleman et al., 2004:32) and authentic leaders encourage employees' "knowledge sharing behaviours" (Edu-Valsania et al., 2015: 489). Thus, to approach the research aims, a blended visionary (Goleman et al., 2004) and authentic leadership (Edu-Valsania et al., 2015) stepped towards distributed leadership (Bush and Glover, 2014).

Reading comprehension and school's current strategies

Hoover and Gough's (1990) Simple View of Reading model suggests successful reading depends upon decoding and language comprehension skills. The school implemented the Fresh Start programme to support the pupils' reading through phonics. However, the NGRT data did not flag the pupils' cause of reading challenges and meant minimal support was provided to pupils with language comprehension barriers.

Language comprehension skills are developed by a pupil's access to "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) and their schematic "assumptions about the world" (Axelrod, 1973: 1248). Schema theory suggests that learning occurs when information is integrated with prior knowledge (Mclaughlin 2012: 433). Therefore, a child cannot connect with a text without relevant experiences. Lo (2012: 12) suggests to decrease these barriers teachers must discern the "critical features" of teaching reading. It became necessary to determine staff's understanding of this.

To support the pupils' schema, the school's Senior Leadership Team adopted Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction (2012). This encouraged connections by "reviewing prior learning" and teaching in "steps" (Rosenshine, 2012: 12) according to the pupil's status in their "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978: 86). Wood et al's (1976) scaffolding metaphor outlines the teacher's ability to progress a child through their ZPD, by providing and "reducing" (Wood et al., 1976: 99) support. To do this, teachers are guided to utilise Lemov's (2015: 157) "I do, we do, you do". Pupil variation however, limits the success as it is unlikely every pupil is at the similar development stage.

Language comprehension is also dependent on vocabulary knowledge and disadvantaged pupils often lack exposure to tier two and three vocabulary (Quigley, 2018). The school adopted The Frayer Model (Frayer et al., 1969) scaffold to explicitly develop vocabulary understanding. However, this model restricts independence as "reducing" (Wood et al., 1976: 99) the support is limited.

These challenges of teaching meant possible reluctance to new research. Therefore, there was a need to "serve collective interests" (Edú-Valsania et al., 2015: 490). Finding a strategy to encourage the reluctant learner to foster autonomy in reading would lessen a teacher's workload and pressure.

Monitoring and Remedial Strategies

Moroni (2011: 3) sets out the five steps of action-based research, the first clarifying the investigation's purpose. Reading autonomously depends on the "ability to [actively] monitor one's understanding" (Pitts.,1983: 516) and activate a "remedial strategy" (Pitts., 1983: 527). Thus, this research became focused towards the pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) of two possible comprehension strategies; monitoring and "remedial" (Pitts, 1983: 516).

A child can only monitor their reading if they are able to make connections with a text. This relies on their schema (Axelrod, 1973). Therefore, "critical features" (Lo, 2012: 12) were needed to support these connections. Oczukus (2018) applies this through a reciprocal reading strategy, focusing on predicting, clarifying, questioning and summarising a text. Yet, these activities were self- testing and a certain "level of development" (Vygotsky, 1978; 86) was required for completion.

Quigley favours teaching pupils to "high quality question" (Quigley, 2020: 171) their reading, to monitor inferences. Should a pupil be unable to answer or generate the questions, a comprehension obstacle may have occurred. There is however, limited support for the pupil if this does occur. Zipoli (2016: 224) addresses this by supporting sentence level comprehension through "directing the questions" towards the passive voice. When pupils encounter barriers, Zipoli (2016) recommends sentence decomposition, a remedial strategy (Pitts, 1983), that simplifies compound sentences aiding comprehension. There is risk a pupil loses the wider ideas of a text, thus, Davey (1983: 45) encourages the use of fix up strategies (see figure one). Pacheco and Goodwin (2013) provide a "remedial strategy" (Pitts, 1983: 527) focusing on word morphology. They suggest a school focus on teaching "meanings of roots and affixes" (Pacheco and Goodwin, 2013: 543) to be able to interpret unknown words through "semantic information" (Pacheco and Goodwin, 2013: 542).

Methodology

A Social Realist and Interpretivist Approach

The strategies aimed to support a component from The Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Gough, 1990) and this depended on the knowledge held by the school's teaching staff. For the strategies to achieve **impact**, threats of implementation must be mitigated. To understand these threats, data was gathered by a questionnaire and group interview. The qualitative methods were analysed through the interpretivist ontology and meant occurrence of natural bias. Thus, a reflective approach was adopted.

Questionnaire

Twenty-Six participants engaged in the questionnaire, ranging from ECT Year One to ten plus years' experience. To limit workload, the questionnaire included closed, multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire was created by Microsoft Forms which had an in-built software for data analysis and was distributed by All Staff Microsoft Teams. The

data collection was anonymous and stored on an encrypted Birmingham City University (BCU) One Drive.

Group interview

The group interview ranged from an ECT Year One to a Second in Department. This was influenced from the questionnaire's findings that the English department favoured teaching reading comprehension strategies and experienced their threats and opportunities.

A Participant Information Sheet and consent form was emailed to all participants of the questionnaire and group interview. This included the risks, their rights to withdraw and the nature of the study (BERA, 2018:9). The group interview was communicated by a Microsoft Teams call, which was recorded, transcribed, made anonymous and stored on the encrypted BCU One Drive all within the same evening of the interview. The Group interview findings were thematically coded.

Findings

Research questions (RQ) (see figure one for data)

RQ One

- Questionnaire Question (QQ) six: participants were confident in developing pupils' vocabulary, but uncertain on language comprehension support. Raised question on the questionnaire's reliability.
- QQ eight: Comprehension questions favoured. Misconception: appropriate for comprehension assessment rather than monitoring.
- QQ eight: participants favoured vocabulary teaching.

RQ Two

- QQ nine: most participants claimed teaching reading was not a priority every lesson.
- GITH: implemented routines as a barrier to strategy becoming **embedded** across the school.
- GITH: participants concern over academic achievement for KS4.
- GITH: reference to school priority of inclusion.
- GITH: reference to reading comprehension as a department priority.

Discussion- RQ Three

Moroni (2011:3) suggests the second and third process of action research to be "planning the intervention" to "put into practice". The research outcomes will be "distributed" (Goleman et al., 2004: 32) to the colleagues through a booklet (see figure one). As the school already implemented The Fresh Start programme, it seemed justifiable to support teachers' "judgement" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 131) on developing pupils' language comprehension through vocabulary. The Frayer Model's (Frayer et al., 1969) flaws could be mitigated if adapted and it was favoured by staff, meaning likelihood of use.

Contributions and practical implications

Staff will be advised to **embed** these strategies into their classroom routines during their Year 7 classes, mitigating concern over KS4 data. This will maximise the likelihood of the teachers to make the "judgement" (Maton and

Moore, 2010: 131) to use these strategies and allows the pupils to become autonomous readers by KS4.
The monitoring and "remedial" (Pitts, 1983: 527) strategies are blended respected pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986). These strategies have not been trialled due to time restrictions but are a useful starting point to the research in question.

There was merit training the pupils to follow the reciprocal reading (Oczukus, 2018) tasks using "high quality questioning" (Quigley, 2020: 171). As suggested by the questions in the monitoring strategy (see figure one), it is "critical" (Lo, 2012:21) that the questions are not testing but monitoring their understanding of the text. A multitude of "small steps" (Rosenshine, 2012: 12) were provided should their comprehension falter, to decrease the "machined" (Ball et al., 2012: 524) nature of learning. This included Davey (1983: 45) and Zipoli (2016: 222) strategies before directing the pupil to identify the challenging vocabulary. The strategy's **impact** of an autonomous reading cannot be achieved if the task is beyond the child's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, to achieve **impact** by **embedding** this strategy into a routine, "I do, we do, you do" (Lemov, 2015) will be utilised. To adhere to the school focus of inclusion, there is need to emphasise to the staff that each step of the monitoring strategy are the "critical features" (Lo, 2012: 24) for success.

Pupil autonomy in their reading can only occur if they have access to a "remedial strategy" (Pitts, 1983: 527) to re-achieve comprehension. Teaching practitioners are encouraged to use Pacheco and Goodwin's (2013) morphological strategy (see figure one), providing common prefixes and suffixes when using the Frayer Model (Frayer et al., 1969). To contribute towards the whole school priority of "inclusion" (see figure one) it was "critical" (Lo, 2012: 27) for staff and the pupils to have strict "morphological understanding" (Pacheco and Goodwin, 2013: 542) of words. To support pupils' schema and promote inclusion, staff will still be asked to prompt pupils to consider the characteristics of a word (see figure one). This aims to support pupils to "integrate" (Mclaughlin, 2012: 433) new vocabulary to words that they "already know" (Mclaughlin, 2012: 433).
Staff will be advised to initially teach tier two vocabulary. This allows the pupils to become accustomed to the model before introducing more difficult vocabulary (see figure one). Clear guidance for decreasing support has also been depicted in the booklet (see figure one). Age does not define a pupil's development in their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) but there was an attempt to portray the strategy's "critical features" (Lo, 2012: 24) according to a pupil's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

Future Research: assessing the objective.

Moroni (2011: 3) asserts that action research should be "assessed". This will involve the "analysis and interpretation" (Moroni, 2011: 3) of data before, during and after the implementation of the strategy. This will be achieved by staff feedback. From a social realist

perspective, the subjective nature of these "judgements" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 131) can be further "justified by" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 4) coinciding it with numerical data. Therefore, analysing the NGRT data would indicate success of the strategy.

Conclusion

In summary, the suggested monitoring and "remedial strategy" (Pitts, 1983: 527) begins to address the enquiry of supporting socio-economically disadvantaged pupils' language comprehension to achieve autonomy in their reading. Reading autonomy can occur if the strategies are **embedded** into the routines during Year 7 and the correct support is provided. Visionary leadership showed strengths through ensuring knowledge "distribution" (Goleman et al., 2004: 33). However, the authentic leader (Edu-Valsania et al., 2015) attunes to the colleagues' attitudes. After "distributing" (Goleman et al., 2004: 33) this information, there is aim to promote future discussions and "engage expertise" (Harris, 2004: 13) across the school to take steps towards a distributed leader (Bush and Glover, 2014).

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Supporting Reading Comprehension in the classroom

Remedial strategy: Adaptation of the Frayer Model (1969) and morphological teaching of words (Pacheco and Goodwin, 2013)

YR 7 start:

- Heavily modelled focusing on the explicit teaching tier two words
- This step will be repeated when tier three words are explicitly taught during year 7 and 8.

Definition and word root A way in which something is usually done. **Word root:** Con- with/ together Venio- come	**Essential characteristics:** accepted by a wide amount of people. Set standards of norms and influence for how things should be done. Can change over time.
VOCABULARY: convention	
Sentence Origin sentence: Surveillance is a dystopian convention. My sentence: The book draws on various conventions.	
Linked examples characteristics, genre	**Linked non examples** dystopian, unorthodox

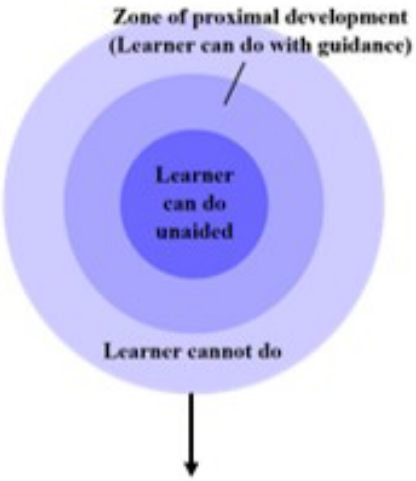
The "critical features" (Lo, 2012: 27) of the strategy is dependent on the child's level of development. There is emphasis on the child's morphological understanding of the word to achieve independence.

Consideration for building a child's schema through integrating new knowledge to their previous understanding.

Year 9:

- Reducing the degrees of support by focusing on the essential characteristics and applying the word to a sentence. This will encourage practise of using the new word in a multitude of settings.
- Pupils should begin to take responsibility for their learning but teacher support may still be necessary.

Definition and word root The leading character in a novel, film or play. **Word root:** Proto- first Agoniste- actor/ competitor	**Essential characteristics:**
VOCABULARY: protagonist	
Sentence Origin sentence: My sentence:	



Year 11:

- Expected independence in completing the strategy based on acquired morphological understanding of the word.

Word root: Proto- first Agoniste- actor/ competitor
VOCABULARY: protagonist

Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Through "reduc[ing] [the] degrees" (Wood et al, 1976: 99) of support a teaching practitioner supports a child to develop through their ZPD towards independence.

Figure 1

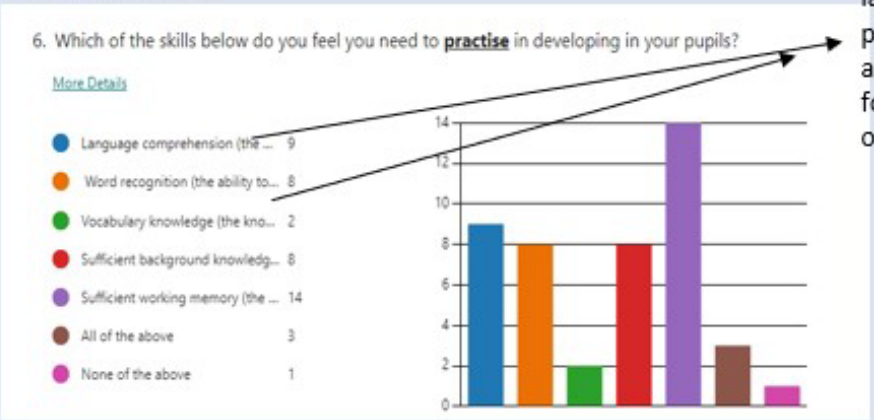
Findings

Research methods:

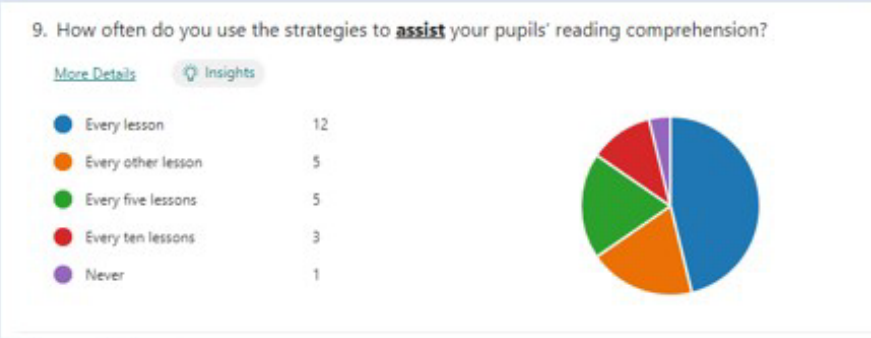
To gather staffs' prior understanding of reading comprehension and to uncover possible threats and opportunities that may occur during the implementation of the strategy an anonymous questionnaire and group interview was conducted.

Threats to leading a strategy at the context school.

Questionnaire:



Staff misconception: findings show that staff felt confident in supporting vocabulary knowledge but uncertain on supporting language comprehension. This presented a possible misconception as language comprehension is formed by a pupil's understanding of vocabulary



Findings suggested supporting reading comprehension may not be a whole school priority.

Group interview

Themes		Linguistic choices used
Content coverage	⟹	"content" "time" "time consuming"
Minimal trust in pupils	⟹	"potentially lose" "over scaffold" "just tell them"
Teacher performativity	⟹	"grade" "higher leverage for teachers" "data will slip"
Pupil variation	⟹	"lower reading ages" "student weakness" "COVID"

Figure 2

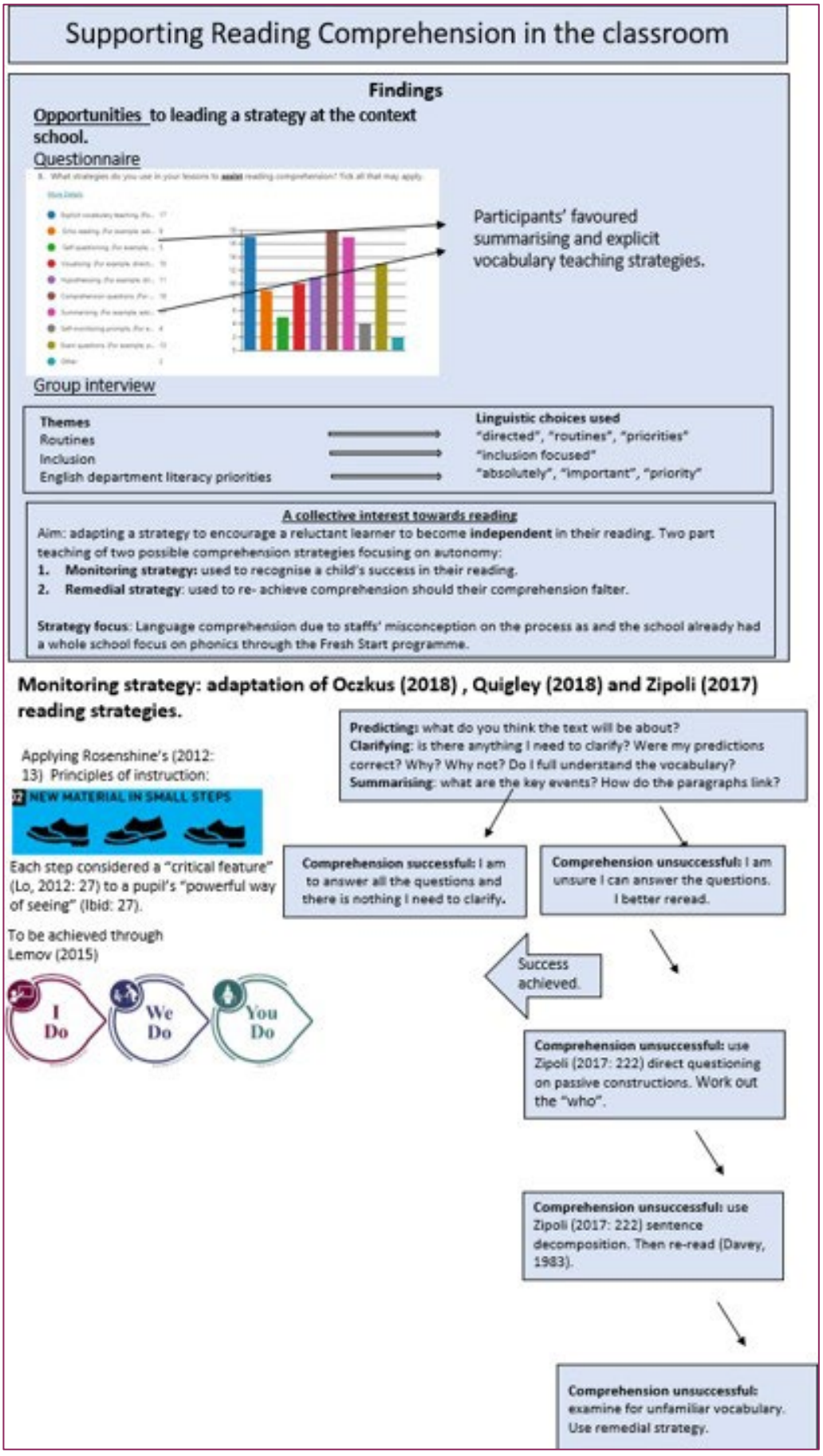

Supporting Reading Comprehension in the classroom
Findings
Opportunities to leading a strategy at the context school.
Questionnaire
Participants' favoured summarising and explicit vocabulary teaching strategies.
Group interview
Themes
Routines
Inclusion
English department literacy priorities
Linguistic choices used
"directed", "routines", "priorities"
"inclusion focused"
"absolutely", "important", "priority"
A collective interest towards reading
Aim: adapting a strategy to encourage a reluctant learner to become independent in their reading. Two part teaching of two possible comprehension strategies focusing on autonomy:
1. Monitoring strategy: used to recognise a child's success in their reading.
2. Remedial strategy: used to re- achieve comprehension should their comprehension falter.
Strategy focus: Language comprehension due to staffs' misconception on the process as and the school already had a whole school focus on phonics through the Fresh Start programme.
Monitoring strategy: adaptation of Oczkus (2018) , Quigley (2018) and Zipoli (2017) reading strategies.
Applying Rosenshine's (2012: 13) Principles of instruction:
NEW MATERIAL IN SMALL STEPS
Each step considered a "critical feature" (Lo, 2012: 27) to a pupil's "powerful way of seeing" (Ibid: 27).
To be achieved through Lemov (2015)
I Do
We Do
You Do
Predicting: what do you think the text will be about?
Clarifying: is there anything I need to clarify? Were my predictions correct? Why? Why not? Do I full understand the vocabulary?
Summarising: what are the key events? How do the paragraphs link?
Comprehension successful: I am to answer all the questions and there is nothing I need to clarify.
Comprehension unsuccessful: I am unsure I can answer the questions. I better reread.
Success achieved.
Comprehension unsuccessful: use Zipoli (2017: 222) direct questioning on passive constructions. Work out the "who".
Comprehension unsuccessful: use Zipoli (2017: 222) sentence decomposition. Then re-read (Davey, 1983).
Comprehension unsuccessful: examine for unfamiliar vocabulary. Use remedial strategy.

Figure 3

Rhythmanalysis: A Day in a Life as a Teacher

Hayley Tatlow

6:30 am; Home

It's too early in the morning to listen to my favourite radio presenter, so I plug in my phone and search for the audiobook that will accompany me on the drive to work. Unlocking my phone, the screen is filled with my email inbox – the last page that I had open. It's a dangerous habit that I developed at my old school: the compulsion to check my work email first thing in the morning. Working my way through my inbox from the comfort of my home made the demands they contained feel a little less threatening, less urgent, less imminent; it made me feel like I had more time to deal with the things being asking of me and that I'd be in less of a panic when I started work. Yet in reality, all I was really doing was bringing my workday forward and bringing my work to home, creating a tense hybrid and amalgamation of work and home. Even though not in the building, I was most definitely at work.

There was no *need* to check my inbox this morning, though. I'm no longer an employee of such a toxic and demanding workplace where constantly being connected felt like a necessity, and the act of switching off and disconnecting was framed as being morally wrong (Powers, 2010). Now, the only emails I ever receive past 9pm consist of 'wot was the hw????' written in the subject line, and all contain the following reassuring signature (see image at the bottom of this page).

However, messages like these from students suggests an assumption that my email is an extension of me, and my teaching services are accessible at all times. Technological developments and 'work extension technologies' have muddied the boundaries of working conditions, removing the need of a place of work to be able to do our jobs, making it easier to complete tasks from elsewhere and indeed, anywhere. Places such as cafes, bars, restaurants, bus-stops and even public bathrooms have transformed into places of work (Wajcman, 2008; Duxbury et al., 2006). At what point did working from home become living at work?

But just because we can work anywhere at any time, does that mean we should? We're more than entitled and deserving to time to ourselves not spent working, yet deadlines, to-do lists and other pressures deem any "[t]ime not spent on producing […] as time-theft-procrastination, the deadliest of sins" (Walker, 2009: 499), and internalised neo-liberal values create feelings of guilt, thus ensuring that we self-govern ourselves to be more productive (Foucault, 1977). Paradoxically, "private time has become one which is always connectable, available and *public*" (Nowotny, 1994: 31, emphasis added).

We respect the work-life balance of all our staff. If this email has been sent out of normal working hours, there is no expectation for you to provide an immediate response.

The modern worker is in constant pursuit of free time, "[l]eisure is time off the books, off the job, off the clock… It is unrestricted time, unemployed time, unoccupied time" (Gleick, 2000: 10). Lefebvre notes that leisure is time intended to "stop [the modern man] from being tired and tense, from being anxious, worried and preoccupied… he craves *relaxation*" (1991a: 34), indicating the harried nature of today's society, and the constant nagging feeling that we ought to be doing *something* productive. In today's fast-paced civilisation, any preoccupied time not spent producing is considered an indulgence, a waste of time, and leaves us feeling guilty.

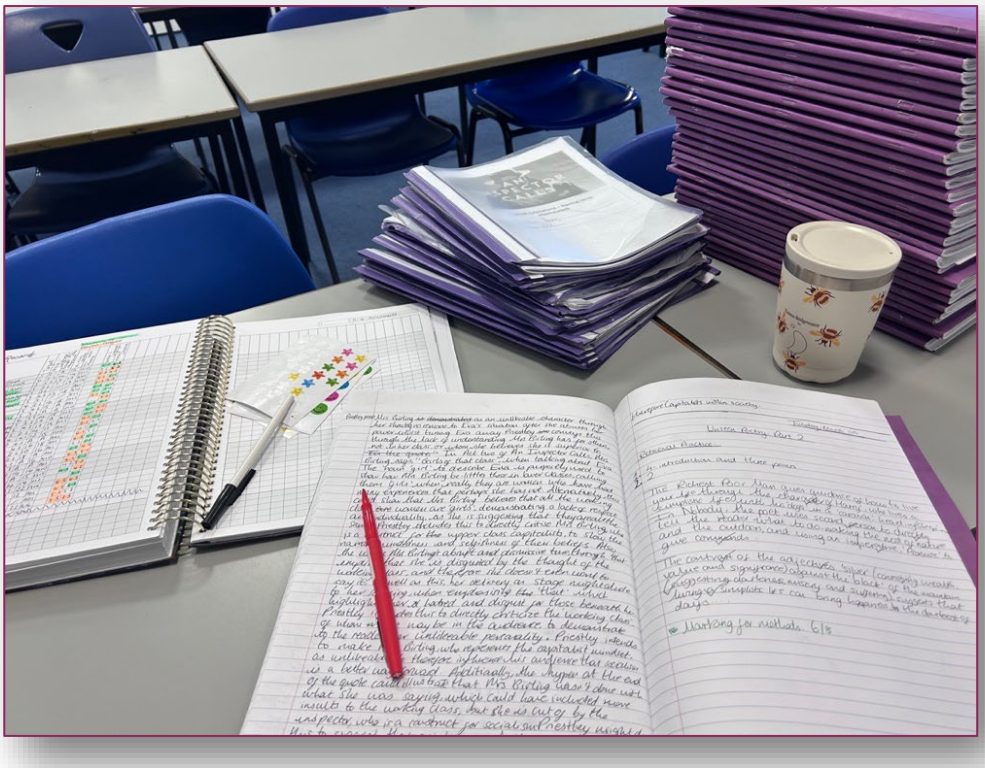
There is the general feeling that life has 'sped up': that the twenty-first century worker in the Western world is constantly rushed. An abundance of self-help resources claims to support readers in reclaiming their time by becoming more productive and therefore make time for themselves in an increasingly stressful society. Collectively, these guides have received hundreds of thousands of positive reviews online (e.g. Sharma, 2018; Clear, 2018; Covey, 2020). Does an increase in productivity make more time for the individual, though? Do more productive work hours decrease the amount of time working, and therefore free up more personal/social/family time? Or does it simply equate to being more productive, feeding into Marx's capitalism?

This is the reason why it's 6.30 am and I'm about to leave for work. There's much to do. So, I press play, buckle my seat belt and pull off the drive.

7:05 am; My classroom

So, why am I at work this early? I'm feeling pretty stressed at the moment. It's a crunch point in the year and there's a lot to do – something teachers up and down the country will sympathise with. It's the Spring term and Year 11s are frantically preparing for their final GCSE examinations, which by extension means that I am working earlier and later and longer and harder than educators are ever given the valid credit for. I'm out of routine, spinning a lot of plates and like other colleagues around me, constantly fighting against time to get things done.

I snapped a quick picture to capture the moment, using an image as a means of making meaning (Pink, 2013):



In front of me, there is a pile of books that need to be marked in the regulation red pen. My planner is open, ready for recording of data. I've got my positive stickers – my poor attempt at adding a touch of 'human' to the process. There is also a pile of homework booklets that need to be checked before I return them to students later in the day. A tea in a travel mug stands to the side. There isn't enough time to make a drink in the staff room; I need to drink on the go. It's only when I look back at this picture that I realise that the wrong marksheet is open on the planner. Although marking Year 10 books, Year 11's data is open in front of me: they are my priority until they go on study leave. Why? Because of progress and attainment data and school league tables and the impact this could have on perceptions of me as a practitioner (Ball, 2003). So why am I here this early, marking Year 10 books? Because I said I would. Because I promised my Year 10 group that I would *make time* for them.

Leigh's 'What would a rhythmanalysis of a qualitative researcher's life look like?' (2021) has been a significant reading in my doctoral journey. Using a series of non-chronological vignettes, Leigh details moments in her life that were meaningful: experiences that both fit within and stood outside of the typical rhythms of her personal life, and her life as a researcher. Inspired by this, in this piece, I have attempted to capture and describe moments typical to my day as a teacher. This idea of having a rhythm, a routine, lit up the metaphorical lightbulb: the idea of capturing a teacher's rhythms of everyday life; an exploration of what happens in a 'normal' day, whether it is routine or not, and how these experiences shape perceptions of the job. How do time, space and person affect routines and (going beyond the merely Marxist stance of Lefebvre), how do power relations influence these rhythms? This is where I found rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre, 2004).

Developed by Lefebvre, who reflected on capitalism's hold on the pace of everyday life, rhythmanalysis is a means of analysing the rhythms of society and the individuals that make it up (Lyon, 2019). These rhythms are "historically and politically configured", exist with an "expenditure of energy of time and space" and are often "mundane and predictable, passing by almost unnoticed, similar to the ticking of a clock or the beating of a human heart" (Armstrong and Everitt, 2024: 152). It is something universally experienced and accepted; it needs no explanation or discussion and passes by without second thought until something happens to through the rhythms off balance, resulting in an explosion of temporality.

I want to spend a moment here explaining why I'm writing the way that I am. In addition to being inspired by Leigh's musings, the unpretentious, accessible, enjoyable writing style of Ellis and Bochner (2000) is one that I want to replicate in my work. As the authors explain elsewhere, "since we live in much the same world as our readers, we believe our readers should not have to struggle endlessly to understand and to relate to us" (2016: 79). Academic writing does not need to be overcomplicated or filled with jargon. Doing so often makes the reader feel ostracised, and if the purpose of my research is to give a voice to people, to tell the stories of the rhythms – which is my doctoral journey's aim – then why would I do so in a way that alienates them? Language use is part of power; knowledge is constructed because of the ways that people in power have presented the knowledge to us (Foucault,

1984). I have a responsibility as a researcher to use my language carefully.

As Vostal (2016) points out, the *experience* of time and acceleration, and therefore these rhythms, is unique. Sayings such as 'today has dragged', or 'the time's flown by' or 'hasn't this year gone quickly?' are commonplace, but the same 24 hour stretch of a day can simultaneously be perceived as seemingly endless by one person and unbelievably fast by somebody else. The, say, six hours of a newly married couple's wedding reception is identical in clock time to the five-year old who is waiting for Santa Claus to arrive on Christmas Eve. But the phenomenological, temporal experience of this time couldn't be more different.

I'm interrupted by our cleaner, Noel, entering my classroom. I call it 'my' classroom despite the fact that other teachers teach in there, that others used the room for years before I arrived, that it can be booked out by any colleague at any time it's not already timetabled, as if I have a claim of ownership over the space. But the space is important to my practice, it's a place where I have set my expectations and where I have shared experiences with colleagues and students alike (Lefebvre, 1991b). It's my 'safe' space. This perception was created at my previous school, as the time that was spent in the classroom teaching was sacred; it was a protective bubble separated from those in power and their unsustainable demands, suggesting that space isn't just the location, it's the feelings we have attached to spaces (ibid.). Teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic required teachers to move to different 'bubbles' or 'zones' throughout the school building. Rather than being the adult's space where the students were invited to learn, there was a feeling created that the children owned the space – that it was their classroom, and there was a different feeling, or atmosphere, present in each of the places we moved to. I'm glad to have a 'base' again. Noel seems shocked to see me:

"You're here early!"
"I know! Lots to do today, Noel."
"The Spanish teacher was here really early, too. She was here before seven."
"Busy time!"

Seeing people in *her* working space at the time that is usually unoccupied by others, our crunch time has disrupted Noel's rhythms. My rhythm, meanwhile, is on fast-forward; I'm only half-way through the books and I need to get them finished before morning registration. I pick up my red pen and continue.

13:35; English workroom

I'm standing over the top of the photocopier in the workroom, waiting for next lesson's printing to appear, whilst scrolling on my phone and chewing a bite of my lunch. From the table, a colleague asks about weekend plans.

Anything exciting planned for the weekend?
Just catching up with family.
I need to finish painting the stairs.
I've got a meal booked with the girls – it's been ages since I last saw them.
I've still got those mock papers to mark.

In this moment, spatially, temporally and socially, I embody multiple personas, and I'm experiencing

pluritemporalism – different types of time (Nowotny, 1992: 428-429). I'm eating my lunch during my break, but I'm completing work admin simultaneously. I'm in the staffroom, a place to 'switch off' from being a teacher, but I'm still in a place of work. So, am I currently experiencing personal time, or work time? I'm also listening in to a conversation which I could easily involve myself. So, is it also social time? Are the people sitting around the table my colleagues, or my friends? We're talking about non-work topics, but we're sat in a place of work, and the theme of work creeps in, even when discussing the sacred weekend. My line-manager is present, and her line-manager, so am I an equal here, or a subordinate? Again, there is the constant reminder that we never have enough time to do what we want to, or need to, do: see family and friends, look after the home, complete work tasks. Checking my phone, I have unread messages from my husband and from my family group chat: am I a friend, colleague, teacher, wife, daughter, or sister right now? When submitting her work for feedback, and being told that it wasn't clear whose voice she was speaking, Ronai states:

"I cannot smoothly switch hats and write, 'Here is how the dancer in me feels, and here is how the researcher feels and here is how the wife feels, and so on.' It is dishonest and contrived to sort out separate influences and label them… My perception of my 'self' incorporates influences from these roles, but the end result is not compartmentalised around them" (1992: 104)

Wearing these different personas is part of my rhythm. I don't need to separate them because each of them form me as a whole and my experience of everyday life. Fascinatingly, despite experiencing the rhythm of the school together, the experience of my colleagues – friends – is also unique and the 'hats' that they wear will also be different. Their daily experiences and their habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) are different. These are the rhythms that are so interesting to explore.

I finish the last bite of my apple, log out of the photocopier and collect my printing. I need to set up the classroom in preparation for the last lesson of the day.

Have a good afternoon, everyone! Not long until home-time.

17:45; Home

My husband greets me alongside our dog as I walk through the front door, and we begin our customary, routine exchange:

Hi! How are you? How was your day? Anything interesting happen?
I'm fine, thanks – tired. Nothing interesting. Same old. Normal day. How about you?

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INDIVIDUAL ENQUIRY AND SCHOLARSHIP

Bridging The Gap: The Role of Social Class, Race, Gender, and Disability in Shaping Educational Opportunities Through an Intersectional Lens. A Critical Reflection of Shaun's Story

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Introduction

As an individual deeply committed to supporting students and advancing their success, I extensively observe the enduring impact of socioeconomic inequality on students during their transition from Further Education to Higher Education. Therefore, examining how socioeconomic inequality shapes students' academic attainment, social inclusion, and welfare within the school context is crucial. This could provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of the main challenges students face within the university and school settings, and how these challenges persist throughout their university journey. These challenges do not simply dissipate; they continue to shape students' educational engagement and wider university experience.

Different theories and frameworks, such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943), Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978) and Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy theory, will be proposed to elucidate and facilitate a deeper understanding of why such issues exist. Further, it will critically examine current government policies, legislation, school leadership, management and challenges that may act as barriers to successfully implementing them.

Shaun's Story: An Example of Dual Habitus: Blue-collar Masculinity vs Educational Ambition

Diane Reay's "Shaun's Story" (2002) introduces an ethnographic account of Shaun; a white working-class schoolboy confined between the pressures of working-class masculinity and educational aspiration. For instance, the cultural barriers that Shaun experiences in his school, such as being part of the male peer group and not experiencing inclusive pedagogy, make it difficult for Shaun to succeed.

This is what Reay describes as a "dual habitus," as he attempts to outdo in school, marked by disturbance, hostility, and instability, while presenting a "tough" masculinity respected by his peers (Reay ,2002). Shaun's commitment to both is exceptional but psychologically taxing. His narrative demonstrates the psychosomatic drain of directing conflicting social outlooks within a context of poverty and educational disadvantage. Reay utilises Shaun's story to critique prevalent educational discourses about "failing boys," revealing their neglect of systemic and emotional factors contributing to working-class underachievement.

Why Does This Story Matter?

Socioeconomic inequality is considered one of the most persistent issues in our modern-day

education system because it substantially contributes to the attainment gap between different groups, including those who experience learning differences. Unfortunately, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, like Shaun (Reay, 2010), often experience hurdles that directly impact their learning experience, personal development and equal opportunities, which are related to learning disabilities and various needs.

Indeed, there are many factors linked to educational inequality and attainment gaps. These factors include financial difficulties, disability, gender, ethnicity and whether the student has been cared for (Winchester,2022)

This article addresses and analyses how issues of inclusion, such as gender, class, and learning differences, intersect in pedagogy, principally for students from underprivileged backgrounds who face both educational and socioeconomic difficulties to succeed. Shaun's chronicle is not merely an individual case but a means of demonstrating how emotional challenges and systemic inequalities are rooted in educational systems. It urges that researchers need to potentially re-examine how masculinity, social class, psycho-social well-being, and silhouette impact students' educational journeys.

The Multifaceted Nature of Educational Disparities: A Closer Look

The causes of current inequalities are complex and may be structural, according to Tahir (2022), who further posits that the education gap is frequently an indicator of future income inequality. This suggestion confirms that education substantially forms future economic opportunities in our society, potentially leading to socioeconomic inequality. Cook (2024) acknowledges the importance of having a diagnosis to assist in obtaining the relevant support, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Nonetheless, the question is whether this is helpful due to the variability of neurodevelopmental conditions.

However, diagnosis provides the prospect of accessing specialist support (Lombardi et al.,2021). Conversely, Cook (2024) emphasises that the delay in catering to diverse students' needs in schools is because of inadequate governmental funding for support and diagnostic assessments, which can be a significant concern. It is important to note that being labelled as having a learning difference puts students in a vulnerable position of being stigmatised, which can be correlated with negative emotional, psychological and academic impacts (Daley and Rappolt-Schlichtmann, 2018).

Unpacking Educational Inequities Through Theoretical Frameworks Lens

It is imperative to draw on the theoretical framework of the intersectionality of race, class, gender and disability. Intersectionality, as coined by Crenshaw (1989), indicates how intersecting social identities, such as gender, disability, and social class, interact to create diverse forms of disadvantage (Besic, 2020). It is defined as a method of critically examining and interpreting the layers of complexities of the world, individuals, and phenomenological experience

(Hill Collins and Bilge, 2020). In educational contexts, this means that students do not experience differences in isolation, but rather through the impact of multiple, intersecting forms of marginalisation. Shaun's experiences, for example, exhibit intersectionality in practice as Shaun's social identities intersect to produce overlapping barriers to students' educational attainment (Reay, 2010; Chatzitheochari and Butler-Rees, 2022).

Intersectionality, in this context, means distinguishing how Shaun's family background, socioeconomic status, disability and gender work collectively to act as barriers to accessing his educational opportunities (Reay, 2010). Ferri (2006) argues that race and socio-economic class impact how disability is experienced (Kardashevskaya, 2022). Harwood (2006) suggests that disability diagnosis has a byzantine affiliation with socioeconomic class. For example, the likelihood that a student from a low socio-economic class is to be diagnosed with a behavioural disorder is high (Kardashevskaya, 2022), which potentially puts them at a disadvantage and perhaps is the case for many students like Shaun.

Shaun experienced difficulties fitting into both domains, underscoring the overarching issue of how some schools potentially fail to create inclusive environments for boys like Shaun who desire to thrive academically but experience the burden of conforming to societal norms of masculinity and group dynamics amongst his peers (Reay, 2010). This was articulated by Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), or observational learning, in which he explained that learning can happen by observing others, replicating, and modelling others' behaviour (Bates, 2023). In this context, this enlightens how and why Shaun fostered the views and attitudes of his peers toward education, merely to be accepted into the group.

It is significant to acknowledge Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy theory (1970); it suggests that education should be seen as a cultural forum where educators must develop their capacity to examine cultural contexts (Shih, 2018). In addition, Chiang (2010) states that this context enables students to develop critical values and independent thinking, advancing democratic notions within our society (Shih, 2018). Critical pedagogy was applied in Shaun's school, leading to withdrawal as he viewed the curriculum as unrelated to his life (Reay, 2010). This underlines the necessity of fostering an inclusive educational environment to avoid excluding specific groups and create a healthy climate for the students to learn and succeed while not neglecting their emotional, cultural, and academic needs.

Another critical aspect that requires attention is inclusive pedagogy; it is defined as a method of teaching that seeks to increase the students' attainment at all levels while maintaining the inclusion of those at risk for exclusion pedagogy and underrepresented groups (Florian, 2016). For example, reflecting on Shaun's experience, implementing a pedagogy of exclusion, where the school fails to acknowledge the undiagnosed or hidden disabilities that could be affecting his

education, meant that his safeguarding and academic needs were not being met (Reay, 2010). This led to educational disadvantage and demonstrated neglect of the school's ethical responsibilities toward its pupils.

Lombardi et al. 's (2021) study addressed the correlation between support from educators, family, and friends and profound academic engagement. In the context of Shaun's story, the absence of unswerving support from teachers and peers placed an unbalanced emotional burden on family support structures, showing how profound academic engagement can appear despite, rather than because of, supportive learning environments. Further, Shaun experienced systematic challenges that excluded him academically and socially. Therefore, the experience of school environment(s) drastically impacts academic engagement, an essential factor affecting the students' well-being (Lombardi et al.,2021).

Adolescents' safeguarding and emotional needs in schools are also critical factors shaping pupils' educational results. Essentially, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943) suggests that students need to feel psychologically and physically safe to succeed academically. This signifies the importance of ensuring that social and emotional needs are met in school contexts, alongside educational needs (Rojas et al., 2023). In Shaun's narrative, holistic support is completely absent in his school and family, which arguably created an educational deficit for him in the process.

Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978) reinforces contemporary pedagogical approaches and supports scaffolding and the use of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Castagno-Dysart et al., 2019; Bates, 2023). In considering ZPD in practice, teachers might have prevented the issues raised in Shaun's case, such as the ongoing classroom disturbance. However, it is noteworthy that substantial teachers' departures suggest critical concerns to successfully scaffolding learning (Reay, 2010). This indicates Vygotsky's hypothesis of the ZPD; the distinction between what a student can do with assistance and autonomously.

The Role of Statutory Guidelines, Legislative Frameworks and Policies: Do They Have a Real Impact?

Historically, the school system in the United Kingdom (UK) has undergone extensive reforms, where policies are discussed and implemented. Yet the key question that still needs to be debated in the literature is whether the usefulness of these policies in supporting students who experience socioeconomic inequality has been evidenced in practice. Nevertheless, policies, statutory guidelines and legislative frameworks, such as the Equality Act 2010 and the SEND Code of Practice (2015) (DfE,2015), intend to advance inclusivity in all learning environments, including lower social class and failing school areas (Stobbs, 2022; DfE, 2015). Policies intended to close the attainment gap and improve social mobility between disadvantaged students and their peers have been introduced recently (DfE, 2017).

Notably, while policy reforms are often framed as instruments for reducing social disparities, the responsibility arguably lies with organisational structures and a political will to implement a meaningful change (Bixby, 2024). Consequently, the challenge, however, is implementing these policies to close the attainment gap and support disabled learners in schools; it is subject to the efficiency of school leadership and management (Reay, 2010). For example, the Education Inspection Framework (DfE, 2023) can pressure schools to perform well during inspections, which may lead to stress and anxiety among staff and students (Penninck, 2017).

Policies and frameworks that overlook the complexities of these intersections, such as gender, class, and disabilities, will fail to assist students like Shaun. For example, as of age 26, over 70 per cent of privileged school students are university graduates; however, compared with their counterparts, only 20 per cent of underprivileged school students are graduates (Tahir,2022), reminiscent of Shaun's case.

Conclusion

Shaun's story provides valuable insights for policymakers and educators on the importance of fostering emotionally supportive, inclusive, richly endowed learning environments that address gender stereotypes. Reay's narrative resonates with Biesta's (2009) educational philosophy by explaining the practical impacts of educational theory. Both works underline the call for an inclusive and purpose-oriented approach to education that recognises the diverse lived experiences of all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This relationship highlights the significance of promoting an educational environment that supports personal development, social inclusion, pedagogy, and equitable opportunities for success.

Moreover, it emphasises the importance of eliminating the systemic inequalities that prevent successful educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, effective leadership and management are essential for the successful implementation of the government's policies.

Future Directions

In conclusion, I believe insufficient funding and resource allocation appear to be key factors in continuing inequalities between schools. Lower-class areas may not access the essential support needed, even though policies, frameworks and legislation exist on paper, suggesting little has significantly changed since Goldacre's (2013) study and recommendations for more thorough evidence-based research. Therefore, it is pivotal for the government to review their current policies and practices and invite educators to investigate and provide contemporaneous evidence for more targeted change.

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Mapping Pedagogical Journeys: Storyboarding The Impact of Scaffolding and Project-Based Learning

Louis Bernard

Introduction

In today's evolving educational landscape, scaffolding, differentiation, and project-based learning (PBL) have become crucial frameworks for promoting meaningful, student-centred learning experiences. As learners navigate increasingly complex global contexts, educators are called to design learning environments that foster autonomy, resilience, and collaborative problem-solving (Simons & Klein, 2007; Harland, 2012). In film education especially, where creative practice demands both technical mastery and emotional expression, these pedagogical strategies are not just valuable—they are essential.

When I first assumed responsibility for teaching the IBDP Film cohort, I was met with a significant challenge: my students lacked the foundational skills, confidence, and theoretical grounding necessary to succeed. Their early educational experiences had been fragmented, leaving critical gaps in both their conceptual understanding and creative practice. Students openly expressed feeling unprepared for the demands of the final IB assessments, overwhelmed by the technical, artistic, and analytical expectations of filmmaking. As Banks (2023) points out, creative disciplines like film thrive on collaborative learning environments where students can take ownership of their development; however, my students had not yet been given the scaffolding to reach that point. Recognising the urgent need for both emotional and academic support, I structured my teaching around intentional scaffolding practices—breaking complex tasks into manageable steps, offering timely feedback, and gradually transferring responsibility to students (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010; Filgona & Sakiyo, 2021). Drawing upon Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), I focused on providing targeted guidance that would enable students to transition from dependency to independence (Harland, 2012). Differentiation strategies further ensured that individual learning needs were addressed, allowing each student to progress according to their readiness and potential.

Central to this journey was the integration of project-based learning as a transformational vehicle. In line with Hodge's (2009) observations on creative collaboration in film production, my students were invited to co-construct knowledge through hands-on film projects that mirrored real-world filmmaking processes. PBL not only helped embed technical and theoretical skills but also nurtured critical soft skills such as communication, resilience, and peer collaboration (Fusco et al., 2022; Wright, 2023).

To authentically document this pedagogical journey, I employed an innovative method: storyboarding my teaching and research process. Inspired by autoethnographic practices (Livesey & Runsen, 2023; Pinner, 2021), the storyboard

served not just as a reflective tool but also as a form of data collection and interpretation. By visually mapping the phases of change—student struggles, pedagogical shifts, and eventual growth—I aimed to capture the complexity, emotion, and iterative nature of educational transformation. As Butler and Diacopoulos (2023) note, blending narrative and visual elements in self-study research provides rich, layered insights into both teaching practice and learner development.

This article presents my reflections on scaffolding, differentiation, and PBL through the lens of storyboarding. It offers an account of how creative, flexible methodologies can empower not only students but also educators to grow, adapt, and inspire.

Background and Literature Connection

Contemporary classrooms demand instructional strategies that are both responsive and transformative. Scaffolding, differentiation, and project-based learning (PBL) have emerged as pivotal practices to address diverse learner needs, foster engagement, and promote authentic skill development. In the context of my research, these strategies were essential to remediate the foundational gaps that students faced in their filmmaking education, offering a structured yet flexible pathway towards competence and creativity.

Scaffolding, rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), remains a cornerstone of effective pedagogy. Vygotsky posited that learners achieve mastery most effectively when guided through tasks slightly beyond their independent capabilities, facilitated by expert support. Harland (2012) extends this concept into higher education, illustrating that scaffolding enables students to bridge theoretical knowledge and practical application, particularly through problem-based learning environments. In my practice, scaffolding was deliberately structured through phased demonstrations, skill workshops, and feedback cycles, ensuring that students were supported at every stage of their filmmaking journey.

Fani and Ghaemi (2011) highlight the evolution of scaffolding into "self-scaffolding," where learners gradually internalise supports and assume greater autonomy. This was particularly evident as my students transitioned from teacher-directed tasks to independently managing complex filmmaking projects. Simons and Klein (2007) further underscore the impact of scaffolding on achievement levels, noting that structured support significantly enhances performance in project-based settings, particularly for learners initially lacking confidence or foundational skills. Such findings directly informed the incremental skill-building model I employed within the classroom.

Differentiation operates synergistically with scaffolding by adapting instruction to meet varied learner profiles. Alt, Naamati-Schneider, and Weishut (2022) argue that formative feedback and competency-based learning models are critical precursors to the development of soft skills, fostering both academic resilience and personal agency. Differentiation within my film classes was

multifaceted: students selected production roles aligned with their strengths, tasks were tiered in complexity, and alternative pathways were offered to ensure that all students experienced success regardless of their starting points.

Moreover, differentiated approaches aligned with the principles of self-regulated learning, which Ataii et al. (2022) identify as crucial for fostering academic resilience. By designing reflective checkpoints, individual consultations, and personalised project expectations, I sought to nurture not only technical proficiency but also self-efficacy among learners. These practices responded directly to students' earlier frustrations with traditional, one-size-fits-all instruction, re-establishing a positive learning identity that had been disrupted by previous experiences.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) served as the operational framework that integrated scaffolding and differentiation into meaningful, authentic experiences. Wright (2023) highlights that PBL environments encourage students to synthesise literacy, critical thinking, and creative production, mirroring real-world problem-solving demands. In the context of filmmaking education, where creativity and collaboration are paramount, PBL provided a natural vehicle for learning. Students were not merely completing assignments but engaging in the authentic process of film creation—ideating, scripting, shooting, and editing collaboratively.

Banks (2023) conceptualises film schools as "pre-industry" training grounds where collaboration, equity, and creative negotiation are essential. This view resonated with my classroom experience, where PBL not only facilitated technical skill acquisition but also cultivated professional behaviours such as time management, conflict resolution, and creative compromise. Similarly, Hodge (2009) argues that collaborative creative work inherently involves conflict and negotiation, reinforcing the need for teachers to scaffold both the technical and interpersonal dimensions of project work.

The integration of PBL also aligns with Vygotskian social constructivist principles, wherein learning occurs through meaningful social interaction within authentic contexts (Shabani, Khatib, & Ebadi, 2010). By situating learning within real film production projects, I provided students with a community of practice that both challenged and supported their development.

In documenting this journey, I employed storyboarding as a creative method of capturing and reflecting on the pedagogical transformation. Pinner (2021) and Livesey and Runsen (2023) argue for the value of autoethnographic and creative inquiry approaches in educational research, suggesting that such methods can illuminate nuanced aspects of professional growth often overlooked by traditional methodologies. Storyboarding offered a visual, narrative-driven means of tracing the evolution of student learning and teacher practice, enabling a richer analysis of how scaffolding, differentiation, and PBL intersected to drive positive change.

In sum, the theoretical foundations of scaffolding, differentiation, and project-based learning provided a robust framework for addressing the significant learning deficits my students faced. Yet it was through the creative integration of these strategies—adapted dynamically to context, learner needs, and emerging challenges—that transformative learning experiences could be cultivated. By positioning the storyboard as both an artefact and an analytical tool, this research captures not just what changed in the classroom, but how change was experienced, constructed, and sustained.

Research Context

The research took place within an International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) Film class. The cohort consisted of a diverse group of senior students preparing for their final external assessments. Upon assuming responsibility for the class, it became immediately evident that students had significant skill gaps. Due to prior instructional challenges, many students had limited practical filmmaking experience and demonstrated only a surface-level understanding of film theory and production techniques.

The initial diagnostic conversations revealed pervasive feelings of anxiety, frustration, and disillusionment among students. Several openly shared that they did not feel adequately prepared to meet the demanding expectations of the IBDP Film assessments. Their sense of disconnection from the subject matter stemmed from earlier experiences that had emphasised theoretical knowledge with little meaningful engagement in hands-on film production. As Banks (2023) notes, creative disciplines like filmmaking require a balance between theory and active, collaborative practice to foster student competence and confidence—an essential element that had been missing.

Facing this situation, I identified three primary challenges: rebuilding student confidence, addressing significant gaps in technical and conceptual film skills, and reigniting intrinsic motivation. Without targeted intervention, students risked not only underperforming in their final assessments but also losing valuable opportunities for creative self-expression and growth.

The overarching goal of the intervention was to create a structured yet flexible learning environment where students could develop essential filmmaking competencies through scaffolded instruction, differentiated pathways, and project-based learning experiences. Drawing on research highlighting the efficacy of scaffolding in promoting academic resilience (Ataii et al., 2022) and the motivational power of PBL frameworks (Wright, 2023), the intervention aimed to support students' cognitive, technical, and socio-emotional development. The aspiration was not merely academic success, but the cultivation of independent, self-regulated learners capable of thriving both within and beyond the classroom context.

Through this approach, I sought to transform the learning space into a dynamic studio of collaboration, reflection, and creative

experimentation—offering students the tools and confidence they needed to reclaim their identity as filmmakers.

Methodology and Approach

This project employed a reflective, practice-based research approach rooted in the traditions of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Given the deeply personal and context-specific nature of the intervention, it was essential to embrace a methodology that allowed for simultaneous teaching, reflection, and systematic documentation of change. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) highlight, autoethnography offers practitioners the means to explore and interpret lived experiences within professional contexts, making it a powerful tool for interrogating pedagogical transformations. In my study, I positioned myself as a teacher-researcher, systematically reflecting on both student experiences and my evolving teaching practices.

Central to this research was the innovative use of storyboarding as a methodological and analytical tool. I created a detailed visual storyboard composed of multiple frames, each capturing a distinct phase of the teaching and learning journey. These frames illustrated key moments: from the initial diagnostic conversations with students to the gradual building of trust, the integration of project-based learning (PBL) modules, and the eventual development of student agency. Each storyboard panel combined a visual depiction (hand-drawn sketches) with a concise narrative description, creating a hybrid artefact of reflection and data representation.

The decision to adopt storyboarding was both methodological and philosophical. Traditional textual data alone might have failed to fully capture the dynamic, emotional, and multi-layered nature of the journey. As Banks (2023) and Coffman (2022) suggest, visual ethnographic approaches enable deeper engagement with processes of collaboration, identity construction, and meaning-making—especially in creative educational contexts. The visual medium allowed for the documentation of nuances that might otherwise be lost in purely verbal accounts: shifts in classroom atmosphere, moments of breakthrough, or even the emotional weight of student frustrations.

Moreover, the use of storyboarding resonated with the artistic and cinematic nature of the discipline itself. Teaching film inherently involves thinking in visual sequences, framing narratives, and constructing meaning through images. By mirroring this mode of thinking in the research method, the storyboarding approach honoured the epistemology of the subject matter. As Livesey and Runsen (2023) argue, embracing innovative, discipline-aligned methods strengthens both the rigour and authenticity of practitioner research.

Storyboarding also served as an interpretive framework. Rather than approaching analysis through detached coding of interviews or surveys, I used the storyboard as a living document of reflection, revisiting and annotating frames as new insights emerged. This iterative engagement aligns with Schön's (1983) concept of "reflection-in-action," where practitioners continuously adapt and reframe their

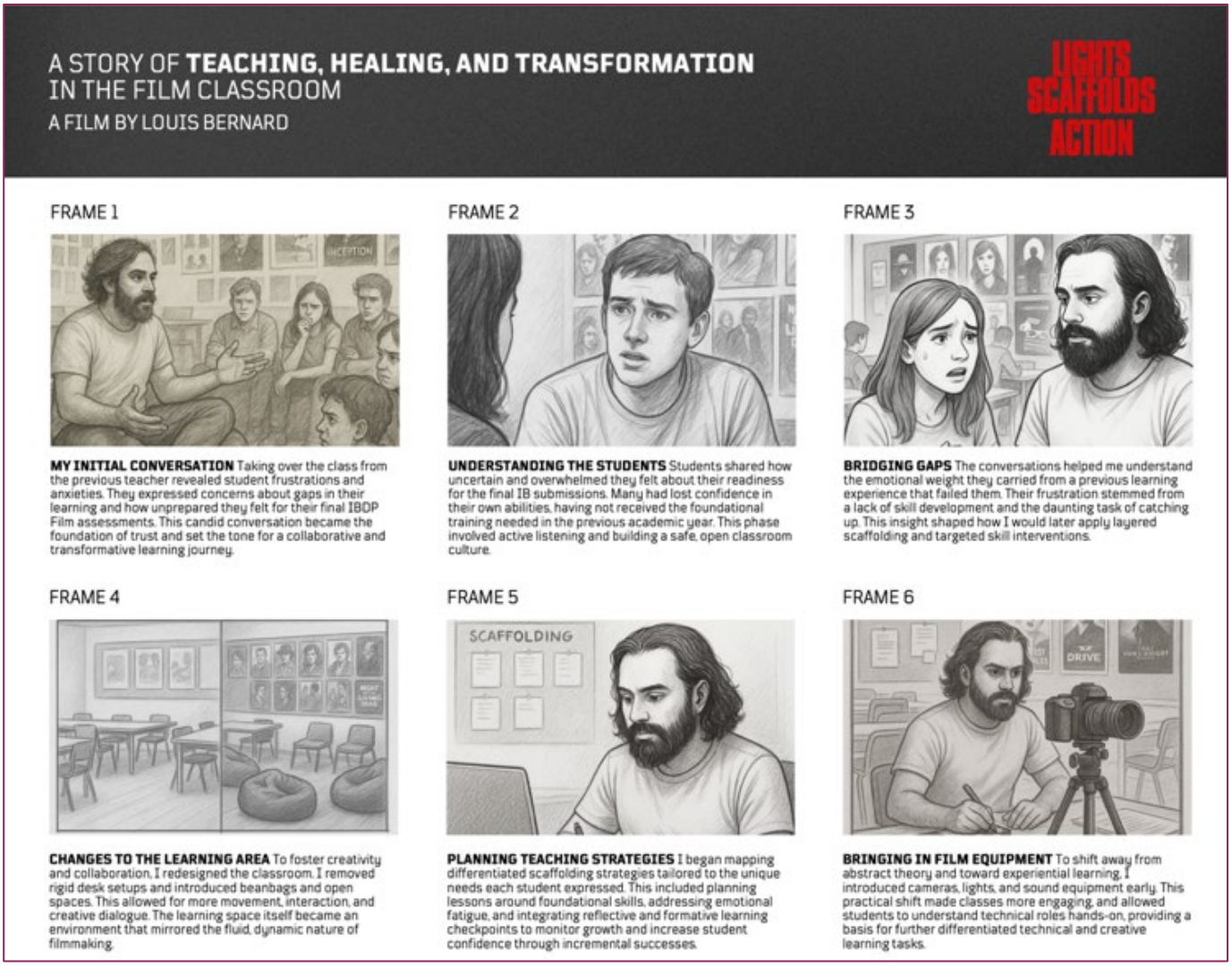
understanding during the process itself. The visual narrative thus became both an archive of experience and a site for ongoing analysis, enabling a layered understanding of how scaffolding, differentiation, and project-based learning evolved in practice.

Finally, storyboarding supported empathic validity—a concept discussed by Butler and Diacopoulos (2023)—by foregrounding the emotional realities of both students and teacher. By capturing not just actions but moods, tensions, and moments of collective joy or struggle, the storyboard provided a holistic portrayal of pedagogical change. It allowed me to humanise the research process, resisting reductive representations of teaching and learning as linear or purely cognitive.

In summary, by integrating reflective autoethnography with visual narrative methods, this methodology offered a robust, contextually sensitive, and creatively aligned way to document and interpret the evolution of teaching practice. The storyboard stands as both evidence and analysis: a bridge between experience and insight, between lived pedagogy and scholarly reflection.

Implementation and Impact

The transformation of my IBDP Film class



FRAME 7

DEMONSTRATION CLASSES Instead of long lectures, I adopted a 10-minute demonstration model followed by 50 minutes of practice and experimentation. This structure created space for student-led exploration, reduced cognitive overload, and provided immediate opportunities for application, reinforcing skill retention and increasing engagement in the classroom.

FRAME 8

STUDENTS EXPERIMENTING Students were divided into groups and given complete ownership to experiment with cameras, lights, and audio tools. This phase helped them discover interest areas and build comfort with equipment. It also offered me formative data about their learning styles and existing competencies in various production roles.

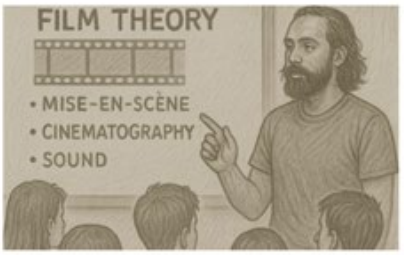
FRAME 9

FIRST FILM PROJECT To assess skill levels and establish a benchmark for future scaffolding, I assigned a silent film project. This task encouraged students to focus on visual storytelling while revealing gaps in narrative construction, cinematography, and editing—data I would use to refine teaching strategies and differentiate instruction.

FRAME 10

PRESENTING THEIR FILMS Students presented their first films to peers. The screening celebrated their initial effort, built classroom confidence, and reinforced collaborative learning. It was also a valuable feedback moment. Observing the films gave me a clearer sense of strengths and developmental needs within the group.

FRAME 11



INTRODUCTION OF FILM THEORIES With foundational gaps addressed, I introduced film theories and movements such as Film Noir, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage. I designed lessons that connected theory to practice, ensuring students saw how cinematic styles influenced storytelling, direction, and mise-en-scène in their own productions.

FRAME 12

LEARNING GETTING CHALLENGING The pace intensified. Students now juggled learning advanced theory while applying technical skills. Many expressed feeling overwhelmed. However, I used this challenge as an opportunity to scaffold learning further through chunked content delivery and the integration of collaborative learning exercises.

unfolded across multiple stages, each strategically scaffolded to meet the evolving needs of my students. Storyboarding this process offered a powerful visual and analytical tool that captured the shifts in learning, teaching strategies, and student engagement, serving as both a reflective and methodological device in this study.

When I took over the class, I was met with a cohort of students deeply concerned about their readiness for the final IB examinations. They voiced feelings of frustration, rooted in prior experiences that left them underprepared and lacking essential filmmaking skills. These conversations underscored Ellis, Adams, and Bochner's (2011) emphasis on the importance of honouring student narratives in shaping responsive pedagogies. In recognizing their lived experiences, I found my starting point: a call to reframe not just curriculum delivery but also the entire learning environment itself.

Understanding these initial gaps, I began with tangible changes to the physical classroom, transforming it from a traditional, desk-centred layout into a flexible, collaborative space designed to foster creativity and dialogue. As Watson and Ogle (2022) note, the design of learning spaces significantly affects student agency and engagement. By creating a more open environment, I invited students to feel comfortable exploring, discussing, and creating without the fear of rigid judgment—a vital move given the nature of film as a collaborative and expressive art form.

Practical intervention quickly became a priority. Informed by Simons and Klein's (2007) findings on scaffolding and student achievement, I minimized prolonged lectures, shifting instead to a model of brief, focused instruction followed by extensive hands-on exploration. Students were

introduced to industry-standard film equipment, learning through doing—an application of Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, where learners progress most effectively when tasks are within reach but still challenging with appropriate guidance.

The early diagnostic film projects allowed me to assess student skill levels in a low-stakes environment. Much like the research findings of Filgona and Sakiyo (2021) on active learning environments, this approach provided crucial formative assessment opportunities, helping identify specific areas where scaffolding needed to be intensified or differentiated. These projects also offered students a sense of accomplishment, beginning to rebuild confidence after prior negative experiences with film education.

However, the journey was not linear. As we delved deeper into complex film theories and increased the technical demands of projects, students began to experience cognitive overload—a phenomenon documented by Ataii et al. (2022) regarding academic resilience. The heavy workload and unfamiliar concepts led to frustration, even resentment toward the film course itself. Recognizing these warning signs and drawing upon Shabani et al.'s (2010) interpretation of ZPD in professional practice, I recalibrated the scaffolding structures: chunking assignments, slowing down the theoretical pace, and integrating mind maps and visual aids to support comprehension.

Importantly, trust had to be rebuilt. I organized informal coffee meetings where students were encouraged to voice concerns outside the formal classroom setting. Butler and Diacopoulos (2023) highlight the essential role of relational trust in student-centred teaching models, and these gatherings allowed us to reestablish mutual

FRAME 19

ENJOYING THE LEARNING PROCESS The classroom transformed. Students enjoyed classes and embraced learning with ease. Collaboration became natural, and film projects evolved into passion-driven exercises. They began to articulate their ideas with clarity and demonstrated pride in their growth and work.

FRAME 20

OPEN TO LEARNING MORE With regained confidence, students showed curiosity and took initiative in learning. They began independently exploring cinematic styles and experimenting with storytelling. What once felt like academic pressure now became an avenue for expression and self-discovery.

FRAME 21

OUR FIRST FILM PROJECT Recognizing their growth, the school's marketing team approached us for a project. I used this as a full-fledged PBL opportunity, allowing students to work in real roles. This bridged classroom learning with industry expectations and significantly raised student motivation.

FRAME 22

EXCITEMENT: FIRST PROJECT The announcement created a buzz. Students were excited to apply their learning in a real-world project. Roles were assigned, expectations set, and the energy in the room shifted—this was no longer just a classroom assignment, but a professional opportunity.

FRAME 23

LEARNING THROUGH THE PROJECT Students took full ownership. From scripting and pre-production to interviewing and editing, every step was student-led. They became problem-solvers, communicators, and collaborators—displaying skills far beyond technical knowledge. Learning became authentic, contextual, and deeply personal.

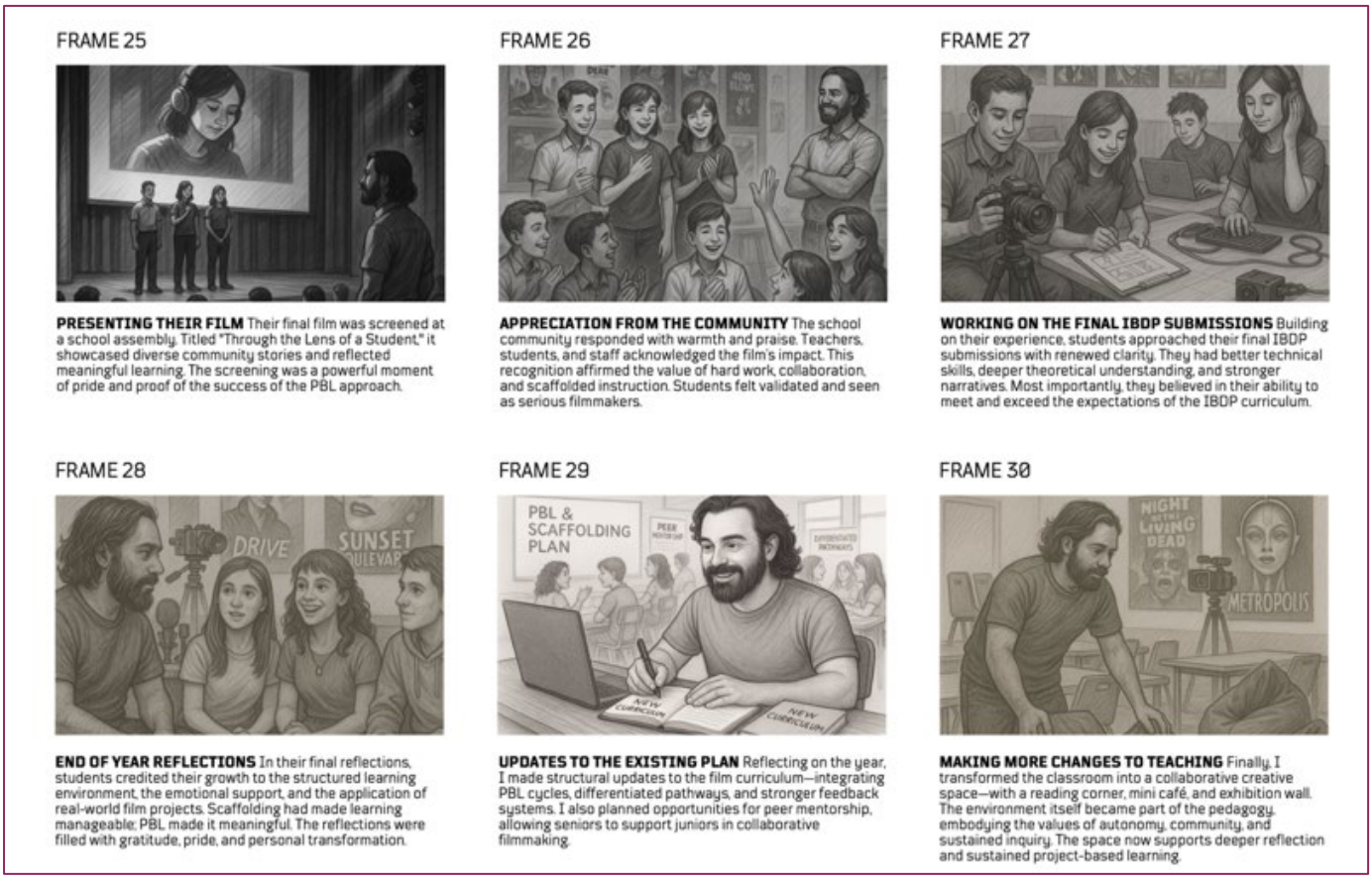
FRAME 24

PLANNING SESSIONS To match their drive, I curated workshops aligned with production needs. From advanced cinematography to ethical interviewing practices, the planning sessions became masterclasses in filmmaking. Students absorbed these sessions and applied them seamlessly to their work.

understanding. Students began to see the learning process not as an externally imposed burden but as a co-constructed journey.

Targeted interventions, such as individualized pull-out sessions, were initiated for students requiring additional support. These sessions, heavily scaffolded with personalized worksheets and focused skill-building, reflected Fani and Ghaemi's (2011) argument for differentiated scaffolding leading to greater learner autonomy. By designing responsive support structures, I witnessed students gradually shifting from dependency toward independent problem-solving in both technical filmmaking and creative storytelling.

The most significant transformation occurred with the introduction of a real-world, project-based learning opportunity. When the school's marketing team invited our class to create a documentary about the community, the students' engagement soared. Authentic projects, as Fusco et al. (2022) suggest, foster higher-order skills like collaboration, critical thinking, and initiative. The energy in the classroom shifted dramatically: students embraced leadership roles, negotiated creative differences, and took full ownership of the project outcomes. This mirrored Wright's (2023) findings that project-based learning environments amplify student motivation by linking learning to tangible, meaningful outputs. Throughout the project, my role as a facilitator became more prominent than that of a traditional instructor. Planning sessions transitioned into workshops where students identified gaps in their skills and requested specific tutorials, reinforcing Banks' (2023) model of pre-industry film programs fostering peer-led inquiry and co-construction of knowledge. Observing students voluntarily seeking advanced lessons in cinematography,



editing, and narrative structuring was a profound indicator of their growing metacognitive awareness.

Student reflections at the end of the academic year revealed the impact of these interventions. They consistently cited the scaffolding strategies, differentiated learning opportunities, and project-based experiences as transformative to both their technical proficiency and confidence. As Olney (2023) posits, making scaffolding visible empowers students to recognize the stages of their own growth, and many students acknowledged how different phases of support helped them transition from tentative beginners to independent filmmakers.

Moreover, the emotional climate of the class evolved significantly. Initially marked by anxiety and resentment, the classroom environment became one of shared ownership, creative risk-taking, and peer support. This change aligned with Hodge's (2023) exploration of how creative collaboration in film contexts can positively channel conflicts into collective achievement, enhancing the final quality of student outputs. Ultimately, the final IBDP submissions were a testament to the effectiveness of the journey. Students produced thoughtful, technically sound films that demonstrated clear critical engagement with theory and practice. Even more gratifying, students highlighted in their reflections that the learning process—rather than just the final grade—was their proudest accomplishment. This is echoed by Pinner's (2021) advocacy for autoethnographic reflection as a means of teacher and student development: learning becomes not just an academic task but a transformative personal experience.

The success of this journey also led to structural updates for future cohorts. Inspired by the insights gathered through the storyboarding process, I revised the curriculum to permanently embed project-based learning cycles, expand differentiated pathways, and build stronger peer mentorship programs, allowing future students to benefit from the evolution of this first cohort's experience.

Through the implementation of storyboarding as both a reflective and analytical tool, the project illuminated how thoughtful scaffolding, authentic differentiation, and meaningful project-based learning can catalyse significant educational growth—not just for students, but for teachers as reflective practitioners committed to continuous improvement.

Reflections and Learning

Engaging in this practice-based research journey transformed not only my students but fundamentally reshaped my identity as an educator and researcher. Moving beyond traditional delivery methods, I came to appreciate scaffolding and project-based learning (PBL) not merely as pedagogical strategies but as philosophies of education—where growth is seen as a collaborative, evolving process rather than a fixed outcome.

One of the most profound realizations was the dynamic, non-linear nature of scaffolding in the classroom. Initially, I approached scaffolding as a tool to support specific tasks. However, through the iterative cycles of observation, intervention, and reflection, I came to view it more as an evolving dialogue between teacher and learner. Drawing from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Harland, 2012; Shabani et al., 2010), I learned that scaffolding is not static. It requires continual recalibration based on emerging student needs, emotional states, and creative ambitions. At times, the scaffolding had to be highly structured with worksheets and one-on-one support sessions; at other times, stepping back and allowing for productive struggle proved essential for student ownership.

Project-based learning similarly evolved in my practice. Initially seen as a means to make lessons more engaging, it became clear that authentic projects offered something deeper: they created real-world contexts for learning, promoting intrinsic motivation and interdisciplinary thinking. The documentary project about our school community served as a catalyst for this realization. As Fusco et al. (2022) and Wright (2023) highlight, authentic projects shift the locus of control from teacher to student. In my classroom, this shift was visible not only in the quality of student work but in their attitudes toward learning. Students no longer completed tasks for grades alone; they invested personally in their work, understanding the broader impact of their storytelling.

A striking development through this journey was the growth of student autonomy. Early in the academic year, students were hesitant, seeking constant reassurance and guidance. However, as scaffolding tapered strategically—aligned with Vygotsky's concept of moving from supported to independent performance—students began making increasingly complex decisions about

their projects, roles, and learning paths. Peer mentoring naturally emerged during project phases, reinforcing Banks' (2023) observations on collaboration in creative industries. This peer-driven learning environment not only enhanced technical skills but also nurtured leadership, negotiation, and empathy among students. From a research perspective, employing storyboarding as both a methodological and reflective tool deepened my understanding of practitioner inquiry. As Ellis et al. (2011) and Pinner (2021) argue, visual and narrative methods offer powerful means to document the nuances of lived experience. The storyboard allowed me to trace turning points, struggles, and breakthroughs in ways traditional data collection might have obscured. It taught me that research, much like teaching, is an act of story-making—of honouring the messy, complex, but profoundly meaningful process of growth.

In sum, this experience illuminated the transformative potential of scaffolding, differentiation, and PBL when enacted thoughtfully and responsively. It also reinforced the notion that change begins with listening—to students, to oneself, and to the evolving context of the classroom. As I look ahead, these lessons will continue to shape my commitment to fostering learning environments that are creative, collaborative, and deeply humane.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This journey of embedding scaffolding, differentiation, and project-based learning within a filmmaking classroom reaffirmed the profound impact of intentional, responsive pedagogy. Through adapting my teaching strategies, adjusting to students' emotional and academic needs, and integrating authentic projects, I witnessed a remarkable transformation—not only in student skill acquisition but also in their confidence, ownership, and resilience.

A central takeaway for educators is the critical importance of fluid, ongoing scaffolding. True scaffolding, as research by Shabani et al. (2010) and Harland (2012) affirms, demands constant attentiveness to learners' evolving proximities to independence. When thoughtfully applied, scaffolding can empower even initially disengaged or underprepared students to thrive. Furthermore, project-based learning, particularly when linked to real-world purposes, acts as a catalyst for deep engagement and interdisciplinary growth (Wright, 2023; Fusco et al., 2022).

Another valuable insight was the power of visual narrative methods like storyboarding to document educational interventions. By mapping my journey visually, I could capture emotional shifts, pedagogical pivots, and the evolving classroom culture in ways that traditional written reflections might miss. For practitioner-researchers or educators embarking on classroom inquiry, storyboarding offers an accessible, creative method for charting complex processes over time (Ellis et al., 2011; Pinner, 2021).

I encourage other educators to consider incorporating storyboards into their reflective

practices or action research. Whether documenting the evolution of a project, tracking shifts in student engagement, or mapping instructional experiments, storyboarding can humanize the research process. It allows researchers to see both the milestones and the small, often-overlooked moments of change. Ultimately, educational change is rarely linear. It requires adaptability, compassion, and a willingness to embrace uncertainty. Through scaffolded support, authentic projects, and reflective storytelling, we can better guide our students—and ourselves—through the dynamic landscapes of learning.

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Using Educomix to Explore the Impact of Character Design and Closure

Kevin Hoffin, Senior Lecturer in Criminology

- Script & Story by Kevin Hoffin, Art by Storyboard That.
- An audio-described version of this comic for visually-impaired readers can be found here.

During my research project into 'educomix' and their use as a critical pedagogy, I have discovered many elements that have influenced my practices of both teaching and creating comics. I believe that it is important to share such findings with other academics, who may be considering using comics and comic-making themselves in their teaching. In BCU EJM 4.3, I introduced readers to my project, now I will be actively encouraging others to make comics. Jiminez & Meyer (2016) found that teachers were willing to use comics, but due to their distance from the medium, as non-readers, they felt uncomfortable in using comics-based pedagogies. It is my goal to provide opportunities to open this medium to all, so we can all contribute to an educational, sequential art community.

The following comic focuses on creating empathy in comics through the use of character design and closure from a cartoonist's (creator's) perspective. It is a twelve panel comic, consisting of four rows of three panels each. The comic takes advantage of the comic book reader's ability to use closure, without ostensibly recognising it. For 'closure' to work, a reader looks at the whole page first, before beginning the path through the panels (left-right, top-bottom). In the second panel, the audience are introduced to my avatar, however, you will notice that this panel talks about reading the comics in the *past* tense. This is a visual example of the function of closure, as this simple change of tense creates a recursive loop in the comic. The reader will have already taken notice and drawn from images they have seen *before* reading the comic., in its entirety. Consequently, they will already be aware of a number of visual cues. By the time they are ready to commence 'reading' a transactional process of meaning has already taken place. Readers are then free to work their way through the comic's panels garnering further meaning-making.

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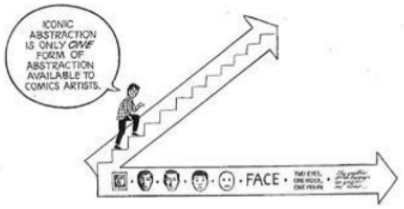
Bakis (2012: 19) describes how images that are 'less defined' or more generalised (or 'more cartoony') are useful in comics as it is easier for readers to transpose themselves into the story. Cartoon bodies can represent anyone, and levels of empathy can be increased based on how intimately a reader feels that they are connected to the story. Characters that represent too many specific features can have the effect of creating a distance from the audience.

This is undoubtedly me, my features are specific enough to represent an idealised version of myself. Over the course of this text, you have learned to associate this image with a single identity. It has in effect become 'iconic'.

So, let's see what happens when we remove these features

Nope, still ,me, let's go a bit further (for science)

Simply by removing the colour palette and neutralising the clothes and features, it's less me and could now be more 'you'.



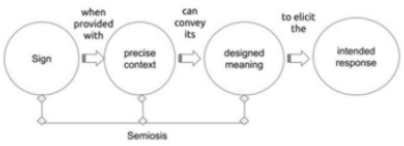
Not only can we represent neutral bodies that we recognise ourselves in, but we can deconstruct anything to return it to an iconic state that can be understood by all readers regardless of their cultural experiences or belonging.

(McCloud 1993: 50)

Comic book readers use 'closure' to 'complete the picture. By following visual cues on the page, readers can see the part (each panel) in relation to the whole (page). Hence, why it's better to show than tell.

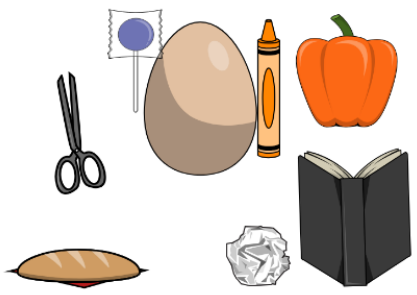
Now excuse me, while I change into something more comfortable.

Word of warning: Take too much away, and you begin to lose all the advantages of the visual medium. The relationship between image and text is paramount.



Closure, as per McCloud (1993) aligns with wider ideas on semiotic theory. If we consider items that appear in comics as signs or symbols representing objects, ideas or articles, when presented within a suitable context, meaning can be therefore drawn in order to elicit response from the readers (Riera, 2020). However, the difficulty arising in this project is ascertaining just how the link between sign and context can be made entirely unambiguous to deter from alternate readings.

In many 'literary' graphic novels (Maus, Persepolis, From Hell), the art style is purposefully unremarkable, just so readers don't get lost in the minutiae and lose the beats of the story.



As comic book readers, we accept that not all examples of the items pictured above will resemble these perfectly, but these symbols are iconic enough so that our sense of closure fills in the gaps.

But, what's really interesting about closure, is that comic book readers can also build images, and thus create meaning from carefully placed abstract elements too. This effectively completes the circle,

Echo of Humanity: Using Drama Education and Virtual Galleries to Cross Boundaries and Break Down Borders in Search of a Shared Humanity

Dr Rebecca Patterson - Senior Lecturer, Manchester Metropolitan University

Introduction

This article outlines the development and structure of 'Echo of Humanity', an innovative online collaboration between a school in the North West of England, a school in Ramallah, Palestine, and a cohort of PGCE Drama student teachers at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Facilitated by international drama educator and editor of The Journal for Drama in Education, Maggie Hulson, and supported by MMU tutor Dr Rebecca Patterson, the project engages Year 10 girls from England preparing for their GCSE devising unit, young women of a similar age in Ramallah learning English, and PGCE students designing a drama-based scheme of work using Dorothy Heathcote's "Mantle of the Expert." Using drama as both method and content, the collaboration culminates in a virtual exhibition hosted by a fictional version of Tate Liverpool, centred on questions of human dignity, global solidarity, and the ethical imperative of storytelling. This article explores the pedagogical principles, practical steps, and cross-cultural exchanges that shape this evolving educational experience.

Introduction: Education Across Borders

In an era of increasing polarisation and displacement, Echo of Humanity emerged as a creative, educational response to the need for connection, empathy, and understanding across borders. Conceived through international collaboration, the project brings together students and educators from three distinct contexts: a group of Year 10 girls from a school in the North West of England, their teacher, (ECT) Harry Dixon, a class of teenage girls in Ramallah, West Bank, led by their teacher Raja Farah, and the cohort of 2024/25 PGCE Drama student teachers at Manchester Metropolitan University. Facilitated by Maggie Hulson, this partnership models how drama education can serve as a tool for intercultural exchange, critical literacy, and mutual empowerment.

At the centre of the collaboration is the use of Mantle of the Expert, a drama pedagogy developed by Dorothy Heathcote, which frames learning through imaginative role and real-world tasks. In Echo of Humanity, students assume the roles of Gallery curators, journalists, and performers in a virtual project that culminates in a fictional exhibition for the reimagined Tate Liverpool museum.

Foundations of the Project

The project was named Echo of Humanity by the young women in Ramallah, capturing its core aim: to make visible the shared concerns and questions that unite people across cultures, especially in times of crisis. Planning began in late 2024, with online meetings between the core team—Maggie, Harry, Raja, and Rebecca—leading to the design of a virtual drama-based learning experience for students in both schools.

The core aims included:

Supporting Raja's students in practising spoken

English through meaningful interaction.
Giving Harry's students a rich, real-world scenario to apply devising and performance skills as part of their GCSE Drama curriculum.
Providing PGCE students with an opportunity to co-design an international scheme of work inspired by Heathcote's methods.
Encouraging all participants to explore humanitarian issues through the lens of storytelling, art, and activism.

Dramatic Framing: Mantle of the Expert

Central to the project was the adoption of the Mantle of the Expert approach. This approach can be characterised as a "…sequence of highly planned, active classroom tasks, that lead learners into an imaginary emotional and intellectual relationship with mandated learning contexts" (Abbott, 2018). In this case, students took on the mantle of a team of curators and journalists commissioned by a fictional version of the Tate Gallery to create a new exhibition on the theme of global solidarity and humanitarian courage. The Gallery becomes the "client", and students are "experts" tasked with designing compelling narratives that explore topics such as firefighting in Gaza, displacement, resistance, and care in crisis.

PGCE Drama student teachers developed learning sequences inspired by this frame, incorporating both dramatic conventions and research-based exploration. They supported both the GCSE and Ramallah students in understanding their roles within the fictional company and their creative responsibilities to each other.

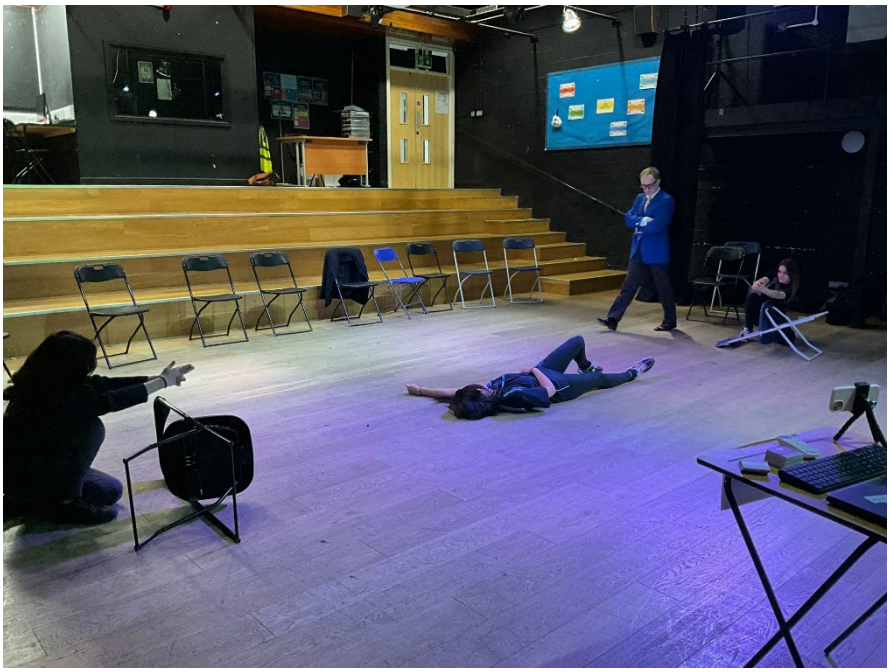
The Virtual Exhibition

It is hoped that the project will culminate in a virtual Gallery exhibition in July 2025. The museum, based on the real Tate Liverpool, is undergoing a digital transformation in this imagined world. Raja's students were invited to suggest six potential "rooms" or thematic zones for the exhibition. These included subjects such as:

- The courage of firefighters in conflict zones
- The experience of refugee families
- The voices of Palestinian youth
- Global stories of resistance and resilience
- Acts of kindness in crisis
- The diaspora and displaced identities

Harry's students, acting as curators and dramatists, have selected a three or four of these topics and are

in the process of developing short pieces of devised performance in response. Meanwhile, Raja's students, taking on the role of investigative journalists, are preparing interview questions and initial video reports on each topic.



The resulting exhibition will consist of four short films, co-created across two continents, weaving together journalistic narrative and dramatic storytelling to explore what it means to act humanely in inhumane circumstances.

Collaborative Pedagogy and Digital Exchange

A key feature of the project was the plan to schedule a video conference between the two groups of students as a simulation of a Gallery briefing. However, as the situation in Palestine and in Gazza has significantly deteriorated since we first met as a group last year, and the increasing difficulties Raja has faced in terms of seeing her students, couple with the inevitable times constraints in the UK school and university systems sadly we have been unable to make it happen.

Reflections on Pedagogy and Politics

At its heart, Echo of Humanity is a deeply pedagogical and political project. It reclaims drama as a medium for cross-cultural dialogue, empathy-building, and justice-oriented learning. For Harry's students, it offers an authentic, creative challenge linked to real-world issues. For Raja's students, it opens a rare window into English-speaking exchange and global storytelling. For the PGCE cohort, it provides a living laboratory for applying mantle principles within a volatile, interconnected world.

As the Tate Gallery—real and imagined—undergoes transformation, so too do the learners in this project. Through the shared echo of humanity, new forms of curriculum, community, and collaboration take root. The voices of young people, shaped through journalistic inquiry and dramatic interpretation, reach across borders to illuminate lived experiences too often silenced or simplified.

Conclusion

In the spirit of Heathcote, Echo of Humanity offers an example of how drama can be used not just to teach content, but to shape conscience. It weaves together art, activism, and education in a digital tapestry of voices that speak to shared suffering, mutual curiosity, and the radical potential of youth-led storytelling. At a time when the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the

West Bank continues to worsen—with restricted access to resources, education, and mobility—this project becomes more than pedagogical. It becomes a gesture of solidarity, and a space where young people's creativity and care can counter the noise of division and despair.

Through the medium of theatre and the framing device of a fictional virtual; gallery, these students are not only learning about conflict—they are responding to it with insight, compassion, and action. Echo of Humanity reminds us that drama education, when rooted in ethical partnership and critical imagination, has the power to open doors—to understanding, to transformation, and to peace.

A full account of this project, it's genesis and outcomes, including the voices of all participants, will be the subject of an article in the Journal for Drama in Education, Autumn 2025.

Keywords: drama education, Mantle of the Expert, virtual exhibition, Palestine, GCSE Drama, intercultural collaboration, youth voice, Dorothy Heathcote, virtual museum, storytelling, PGCE training, Gaza, cross-border pedagogy.

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The Overlooked Skill: Exploring Emotional Self-Awareness in Teacher Development with AI

Liz Joseph Ann - Early Years Facilitator, The School of Raya

Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, there is a strong emphasis on fostering self-awareness in students—yet the same reflective lens is seldom turned inward towards educators themselves. Professional development for teachers often centres on pedagogical strategies, curriculum design, and data-driven instruction. When emotional self-awareness is addressed, it is frequently relegated to peripheral workshops or sporadic reflective tasks, which risk being overshadowed by the immediate demands of the profession.

In the context of teaching, emotional self-awareness referred to as the ability to recognise, label, and understand one's own emotional responses, significantly shapes how educators interpret student behaviours, respond to challenges, and make pedagogical decisions in high-pressure environments. It is foundational to how teachers engage with others, regulate their own responses, and reflect meaningfully on their professional experiences.

However, emotional self-awareness is not a peripheral or 'soft' skill. It is integral to how educators connect with learners, interpret feedback, manage professional growth, and exercise critical judgement (Goleman, 2005). Teaching is inherently relational and responsive work. Emotional clarity shapes how teachers make decisions, regulate themselves in high-stakes environments, and sustain their engagement over time.

This inquiry originated from a personal tension. Despite being encouraged to model reflection and emotional regulation for students, I often found myself bypassing the meaningful processing of my own emotional responses. The most powerful insights typically emerged in the immediacy of practice—precisely when reflective space was least accessible (Schön, 1992). While collegial dialogue was supportive, accessing immediate feedback in these moments was nearly impossible.

Feedback—whether from peers or classroom interactions—was something I acknowledged but rarely paused to internalise deeply. Traditional journaling offered some structure, but the practice often lacked consistency and immediacy.

Too often, educators are reduced to instrumental roles within systems, framed as 'factors' in student outcomes rather than as professionals with agency, judgement, and emotional depth (Biesta, 2015). This reductionist view risks overlooking the human experience of teaching. It raised a key question for me: What if teacher reflection were not merely scheduled—as it often is through formal observations—but meaningfully scaffolded? Could emerging technologies offer a more responsive form of reflective space—one that adapts to the fluid and emotional realities of everyday teaching?

This line of inquiry led to an exploration of artificial intelligence—specifically ChatGPT—as a reflective partner in professional practice. Rather than using AI for lesson planning or administrative automation, this study focused on its potential to support emotional self-awareness in educators. Set within an International Baccalaureate (IB) Early Years context, the action research project involved three iterative cycles of AI-integrated journaling. The purpose was not to position AI as a substitute for human insight, but as a tool for amplifying self-understanding and supporting deeper professional reflection.

More broadly, the research invites a provocation: If education is intended to prepare learners for a complex, ever-changing world, why does so much of teachers' professional learning remain fixed and decontextualised? As we ask students to think critically, reflect deeply, and act ethically, it is worth asking: Are we, as educators, afforded the same opportunity—and responsibility—to do the same?

The Missing Piece in Teacher Development

Although emotional intelligence is an increasingly recognised theme in educational discourse, its application remains predominantly focused on student development. According to Hernández-Amorós and Urrea-Solano (2017), pre-service teachers valued emotional education but found it too theoretical and insufficiently connected to practical teaching experiences—revealing a gap in how teacher emotional development is systematically addressed. Yet professional development initiatives that explicitly target emotional self-awareness have shown considerable promise (Kempf, 2022). Research indicates that such programs can enhance resilience, emotional intelligence, and job satisfaction—particularly in high-stress professions like teaching (Perry et al., 2020).

Practical interventions such as mindfulness training, emotional intelligence workshops, and structured reflective practices offer valuable tools for professional growth. However, access to these opportunities remains uneven. Systemic barriers—ranging from time constraints and limited resources to institutional resistance—often prevent emotional learning from becoming an embedded part of professional life. Moreover, when such training is offered, it is frequently in the form of isolated workshops rather than as integrated, ongoing processes. Effective reflection is demanding: it requires rich, relevant data; interpretive insight; and a contextualised understanding of practice. Consequently, research and implementation around teacher reflection have largely been confined to pre-service training programs or short-term professional learning cycles (Phillips et al., 2023).

At the same time, the emotional landscape of teaching is shifting. Educators are navigating increasing complexity—heightened by diverse learner needs, policy pressures, and the growing integration of digital technologies, including AI, into classrooms. These evolving demands amplify the need for emotional self-awareness as a core professional capacity. Not only does it support personal wellbeing and stress management (Wang, 2023), but it also enhances professional

effectiveness and long-term engagement.

When embedded within sustained professional practice, emotional self-awareness strengthens collegial relationships, informs ethical decision-making, and serves as the basis for authentic reflection. It enables teachers to model the same social-emotional competencies that we aim to foster in students—positioning it as a capacity that is both personally sustaining and pedagogically transformative.

This study contributes to the growing recognition of emotional self-awareness as an essential dimension of teacher professionalism, particularly in its interrelationship with reflective practice. By integrating AI-driven tools such as ChatGPT into reflective journaling routines, the research investigates novel strategies for supporting educators in this often-overlooked area of development. In doing so, it seeks to address some of the limitations of traditional reflection methods—such as inconsistency, lack of immediacy, and limited feedback—and to explore how digital tools might offer more accessible, responsive, and dialogic forms of support.

The findings offer implications for teacher education, ongoing professional development, and the broader use of AI in educational contexts. Most importantly, they invite us to reimagine what it means to be a reflective practitioner in the digital age—one who is emotionally attuned, critically engaged, and continuously growing in relationship with their practice.

The Method: An Iterative, Reflective Cycle with AI

To explore how emotional self-awareness might be more meaningfully cultivated within professional practice, this study employed an action research methodology conducted over three iterative cycles. Rooted in reflective inquiry, the design was responsive to practice-based insights and informed by evolving data.

The process began with a classroom observation, which served as a catalyst for the inquiry. During the post-observation feedback, the peer highlighted the emotional tone of teacher–student interactions and suggested using Erikson's (1950) psychosocial theory as a lens through which to interpret these dynamics. This formative dialogue provided the foundation for the study's initial deductive framework—specifically, the Initiative vs. Guilt stage, which was especially relevant to the developmental characteristics of the early years learners involved.

While this peer input proved valuable, it also surfaced a key practical limitation: the feedback was a one-off event. As the study progressed, a central question emerged—how can teachers access sustained, meaningful feedback in the midst of everyday practice? In fast-paced classroom environments, regular peer observation and dialogue are rarely feasible. This constraint prompted the integration of ChatGPT as a reflective partner—not to replace human interaction, but to offer a consistent, accessible tool for ongoing emotional insight and self-inquiry when peer engagement was not

available.

Each action research cycle followed a plan–act–reflect–revise structure, incorporating the following key steps:

- Reflective journal entries were written in response to significant classroom events, structured around Erikson's psychosocial lens.
- ChatGPT was then engaged to analyse the journal entries—identifying emotional tone, surfacing implicit assumptions, and generating reflective questions.
- The AI-generated insights were used to inform shifts in practice, guiding revisions to classroom strategies and deepening emotional self-awareness.

Throughout this process, ChatGPT functioned exclusively as a tool for reflective dialogue. Its purpose was not to evaluate practice or generate instructional content, but to support introspection. In this role, it helped uncover emotional blind spots, prompted new lines of inquiry, and offered a psychologically safe space to challenge assumptions. This iterative, AI-supported model bridged the gap between sporadic peer feedback and the ongoing need for deep, emotionally informed professional reflection—offering a potentially replicable framework for teacher development.

AI's ability to process large volumes of qualitative data presents a number of benefits in this context. It can reduce cognitive bias, offer consistency, and detect patterns that might otherwise remain unnoticed (Anis and French, 2023). However, the use of AI also introduces limitations. Because it relies on algorithmic logic, ChatGPT may struggle to interpret subtle, context-dependent cues or the nuanced emotional realities of classroom life. As Feng et al. (2024) caution, this can result in false positives, superficial interpretations, or misaligned insights.

To mitigate these risks, the study employed thematic analysis as a parallel interpretive tool. This approach allowed human judgement and contextual understanding to remain central to the analysis, complementing the AI's objectivity with reflective depth. When combined, these methods enhanced the rigour and insightfulness of the reflective process, ensuring that emotional meaning was neither oversimplified nor overlooked.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis.

- Phase 1: Familiarisation involved reviewing peer feedback aligned with Erikson's psychosocial stage of Initiative vs. Guilt, highlighting themes such as classroom atmosphere, autonomy, and moments potentially inducing guilt.
- Phase 2: Initial coding and AI integration allowed ChatGPT to provide interpretive feedback on reflective journal entries, identifying both deductive and emergent inductive patterns—such as emotional contagion, modelling vulnerability, and implicit bias.
- Phase 3: Theme development included merging human and AI insights, enabling the identification of nuanced sub-themes nested

within the original deductive framework.

- Phase 4: Theme refinement involved grouping recurring insights into thematic clusters: emotional regulation, classroom structure, student autonomy, language and tone, and teacher role-modelling.
- Phase 5: Naming and defining themes helped synthesise connections between deductive and inductive insights.
- Phase 6: Final synthesis translated these clustered insights into interpretive findings that addressed the core research objective: how AI-supported reflection influenced emotional self-awareness in teaching.

Throughout, AI tools supported pattern recognition, prompted critical questioning, and offered immediate reflective feedback. However, all coding and thematic decisions were moderated by the researcher to ensure contextual fidelity, reduce algorithmic misinterpretation, and preserve the lived reality of classroom interactions.

Findings and Reflection: Cycles of Self-Awareness and Professional Growth

Each cycle offered distinct insights into how emotional awareness was enacted, challenged, and developed within the complexities of daily classroom life. While initial reflection was guided by Erikson's psychosocial framework, the process evolved—surfacing unexpected emotional patterns and prompting critical shifts in pedagogical judgement and self-understanding.

Cycle 1: Initial Awareness

This cycle highlighted reactive habits shaped by stress and emotional triggers, including humour that unintentionally induced guilt and actions like banging the table. Reflections revealed how such responses affected classroom tone and student emotional safety.

AI-supported prompts reframed these incidents through empathy-driven questions (e.g., "What might the child be experiencing in this moment?"), shifting the focus from correction to understanding. ChatGPT also recommended modelling vulnerability (e.g., "I find this tricky too sometimes") and using growth-oriented language to foster confidence. It flagged limited student autonomy as a structural issue, suggesting scaffolded choices to support independence.

Cycle 1 laid the groundwork for more emotionally attuned, student-centred practice, identifying key areas—emotional regulation, tone, and structure—for deeper exploration.

Cycle 2: Deepening Understanding

In Cycle 2, reflection focused on how emotional tone and instructional habits shaped student experiences. One entry noted, "The classroom atmosphere I create is directly influenced by my emotional state," linking stress and unclear planning to reactive behaviours. Another moment involved correcting a student's number writing, which led the child to say, "I'm just not able to get it." This revealed how directive language unintentionally affected student confidence.

AI-supported analysis prompted a shift in practice by encouraging journaling from the student's perspective and highlighting emotional

contagion: “Am I responding to their emotions or projecting my own stress?” It also flagged the risk of implicit bias, asking: “Am I unintentionally favouring certain students in ways that impact classroom dynamics?”

In response, the teacher scaffolded tasks, praised effort (e.g., “I love how you’re trying different ways”), and provided structured choices. These strategies fostered greater empathy, inclusivity, and collaboration—though occasional reliance on directive prompts indicated that deeper shifts in practice were still emerging.

Cycle 3: Integrated Development

In Cycle 3, the teacher demonstrated increased emotional awareness but faced challenges in consistently applying reflective strategies. During an incident involving a visually impaired visitor, Student B’s exclusionary comment triggered a strong emotional reaction. The teacher acknowledged, “I potentially created a tense environment the way I expressed my frustration,” highlighting a gap between intention and impact. Similarly, reprimanding a student for not sharing led to reflection that “my approach undermined Student A’s autonomy.”

AI-supported insights reframed these moments, encouraging the teacher to pause, label emotions, and shift from correction to curiosity. Prompts like “What might the child be feeling or trying to express?” helped recognise developmental expectations and the emotional roots of student behaviour.

While growth in emotional self-awareness was evident, the teacher reflected, “I need to focus on listening actively and responding thoughtfully,” revealing ongoing work in bridging reflection with consistent classroom action.

Critical Insights Emerging from the Reflective Process

Before concluding, several key insights must be highlighted to underscore the broader significance of this inquiry:

1. Emotional Self-Awareness Is Iterative, Not Immediate

Insights emerged gradually, deepening over time. Emotional self-awareness developed through recurring cycles of reflection—enabled by psychologically safe tools like AI—rather than through isolated instances of introspection.

2. Foundational Concepts Must Be Revisited Consistently

Themes such as modelling behaviour and emotional impact were prominent in early cycles but faded in later stages. This discontinuity suggests a need for intentional mechanisms (e.g., visual goal-tracking tools) to reinforce foundational ideas and support sustained reflection.

3. Emotional Triggers Are Both Internally and Contextually Shaped

The teacher’s emotional responses were often influenced not only by classroom unpredictability but also by deeply held personal values. Recognising this interplay is crucial for effective emotional regulation and sound professional judgment.

4. AI Can Enhance Reflective Practice as a Non-Judgemental Partner

ChatGPT expanded the teacher's reflective capacity—not by offering prescriptive answers, but by surfacing blind spots, prompting reframing, and maintaining emotional safety. These contributions might be more difficult to achieve in peer-based reflection due to fear of judgment.

5. Language and Tone Are Central to Inclusive Practice

Over the course of the study, there was a growing awareness of how language—particularly correction and feedback—can unintentionally alienate students. Later reflections demonstrated a stronger commitment to intentional, affirming communication that fosters emotional safety.

6. Reflective Practice Requires Emotional Safety, Flexibility, and Self-Compassion

Despite increased insight, the implementation of new strategies was sometimes disrupted by classroom dynamics. This highlights the importance of reflective environments that tolerate imperfection, support adaptability, and prioritise emotional safety for both students and educators.

Closing Reflection

This journey has affirmed that emotional self-awareness is not a fixed trait but a dynamic, developmental process—one inseparable from the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching. Through structured, AI-supported reflection, I was able to explore not only what I did, but how I felt, why I reacted, and what values informed those responses.

Although ChatGPT did not replace human interaction, it served as a non-judgemental partner—surfacing hidden assumptions, offering alternative framings, and supporting an emotionally safe space for deep self-inquiry. Such support would likely be more difficult to access in peer settings where social and professional risks may inhibit vulnerability.

Ultimately, emotional self-awareness flourishes not through isolated exercises but through sustained, intentional, and iterative reflection. Growth occurs in the repeated pause—in choosing to examine discomfort, question assumptions, and respond with empathy. That is where professional growth begins.

Conclusion

In a time of complexity and rapid educational change, emotional self-awareness is not optional. It is foundational—to teacher resilience, to meaningful student relationships, and to professional integrity. If education is to serve as a pathway for navigating complexity, it must also embody the reflective practices it promotes.

Emotional self-awareness, supported by meaningful reflection, is not peripheral to teaching—it is the work. Reimagining education begins with reimagining how we grow as educators. And in doing so, we may find that AI—not as oracle, but as mirror—offers us the pause, perspective, and safety needed to see ourselves more clearly and to grow with

intention.

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An exploration of maths curriculum access for learners with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) in KS3 and KS4. A bounded case study of one local authority

Stephen Butterfield

Introduction

I am a retired maths teacher who started teaching in 1978 and retired in 2016. I mainly taught in 11-16 state schools and was Head of Maths from 1990 to 2013. I have maintained my interest in the teaching and learning mathematics by being a member of the Mathematical Association and marking GCSE and other exams. I am currently in my first year of an EdD (Doctor of Education) at Birmingham City University (BCU).

My Area of Research is: "An exploration of maths curriculum access for learners with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) in KS3 and KS4. A bounded case study of one local authority." The purpose of writing this article is to raise awareness and publicise my research. Also, I have set up a research blog on my website and written for the Mathematical Association magazine, EQUALS, aimed at Maths SEND professionals and maths teachers (Butterfield, 2025a). I have sent an email to the Department of Education (DfE) with details of the research, aiming to identify someone in the DfE to communicate with so that the Government can recognise FASD in their policy and decision-making on SEND.

Research aims

My research, therefore, aims to explore, interpret and understand the lived experiences of 11-16-year-old pupils with FASD along with their parents, and teachers regarding their teaching and learning of mathematics. The intended outcome is to inform current practice and influence the Initial and In-Service training of mathematics teachers in the UK.

FASD is an umbrella term to describe the range of effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol (PEA) (Trathan, 2021) on children and adolescents. It has developmental and learning effects and is, therefore, one aspect of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). FASD affects part of a pupil's brain and their ability to understand and retain abstract concepts. As a result of this, traditional teaching approaches may potentially need to be rethought and redesigned. It is possible that pupils with FASD will not be in mainstream schools or achieve the same level as their peers.

FASD is a spectrum of disorders that impacts the physical, emotional, and intellectual development of the child to varying degrees. Research has shown that children with FASD encounter learning difficulties in mathematics (Lebel et al., 2010). FASD hinders mathematical development, in particular, mathematical processing involving numbers and the retention of abstract concepts. This means that many children with FASD will be functioning at a different developmental age to their

chronological age. Malbin (2017: 36) refers to this as “Developmental dysmaturity”.

Research Questions:

1 What conditions in teaching and learning, along with the classroom environment, are most suitable for children with FASD and complex learning difficulties?

2 Which teaching and learning strategies are currently regarded as effective by practitioners?

3 What is the level of knowledge among mathematics teachers, and what are the implications for training?

The local authority in which my research will take place will be Stoke-on-Trent, as it is close to my home and has an active parent support group and a teacher group. This case study is bounded to ensure it remains manageable in size and scope. I will invite the FASD parent support group via email to identify seven pupils: four at KS3 (11-14) and three at KS4 (14-16). This will enable me to find the pupils and the schools where they learn. They may not be in mainstream schools. Should I not get seven volunteers from this area I will widen my search to other parent groups using the FASD network. (FASD Network UK, 2025).

To address Research Question one, I intend to employ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and a Hermeneutics approach to engage with the seven identified pupils, observing and questioning (in the presence of parents) and examining the classroom or learning environment to assess the materials and strategies being utilised. I will conduct semi-structured interviews with the parents and the teachers of the FASD pupils to explore and understand their experiences. Linked to this, and to address Research Question two, I will observe pupils working in the classroom and look for pupils successfully learning age-appropriate topics in mathematics.

To address Research Question three, I will utilise professional networks to survey practising teachers and establish their level of knowledge, training, and experience in recognising, working with, and using effective teaching materials and approaches. I will employ convenience sampling to identify the teachers. I will email the secretary of the Maths Association group to request that they contact heads of maths at local schools, who will, in turn, reach out to their colleagues to find thirty maths teachers willing to assist.
This study also aims to contribute to the existing work in the UK, particularly that of Dr. Carolyn Blackburn and Professor Barry Carpenter (Blackburn, Carpenter & Egerton, 2009; Blackburn, 2021; Blackburn, 2017). It aims to build on the work done for early years education with younger children. I want to take that further by looking at the impact on the teaching and learning process for 11–16-year-old children within mathematics. Science tells us about the effects of alcohol on the brain’s parietal lobe, which is the centre for numeracy and mathematical computation.

Research in the USA and Canada have shown

through longitudinal studies that maths achievement is lower than would be expected, even taking into account general learning difficulties (Crocker, Riley and Mattson, 2015). They tested 56 children between the ages of 7 and 12 and concluded that spatial aspects of attention, working memory and visual memory contribute to the deficits in achievement (Crocker, Riley and Mattson, 2015: 11). They also conclude that mathematics is one of the few domains where interventions have been successful. The Mathematics Interactive Learning Experience program (MILE) in the USA (Kable et al., 2015) has used interventions with a lot of positive reinforcement and techniques to build executive functioning skills (Kennedy et al., 2022). My study intends to explore what is successful in the schools where our sample of children are learning and build on it using the techniques mentioned above.

Research methodology

The golden thread running through my research is that each pupil has unique complex needs, including FASD, which will influence their learning. Therefore, it is not feasible for my research design to follow a positivistic or a post-positivist approach, where the emphasis is on prediction and control. Cresswell and Plano Clark (2007) call for pragmatism as the best philosophical foundation for mixed methods research. This, they suggest, allows flexibility in responding to the needs and challenges presented by each of the children's needs and determines the positionality of the research.

When determining the ontological view of reality best suited to my research, I have considered how individuals potentially perceive their world. Dibley et al. (2020: 42) usefully consider the suggestions of Heidegger around notions of 'being' in that "…our understanding of Being- of how humans reveal themselves to themselves and thus understand themselves – is necessarily informed by temporality (non-chronological time) and historicity (past history and experience" Therefore, my research intends to explore and understand how pupils with FASD perceive their world in relation to themselves, those around them and how this impacts on their lived experience, particularly with regard to learning in mathematics.

Considering the axiological aspect of this research, care and relational pedagogy will align with my understanding of community and the importance of addressing others' needs. Additionally, as highlighted in the MILE programme in the USA, learners benefit from individual guidance and support (Coles, Kable and Taddeo, 2009). Therefore, in my research I am mindful that there needs to be an emphasis on fostering a nurturing and supportive environment where individuals can learn and grow whilst recognising the importance of relationships in teaching and learning. Noddings (2013: 194) summarised this 'relational pedagogy' as "…working together, which produces both joy in the relation and increasing competence in the cared-for".

Underpinning my research, in meeting the needs of the children, is a clear consideration of this relational pedagogy as it is an educational approach that emphasises the significance of

relationships in teaching and learning. It concentrates on establishing positive connections among students, teachers, and the learning environment, nurturing trust, empathy, and mutual respect. Interestingly, McNamee (2025: 14) talks about the 'how' of teaching rather than the 'what' of teaching and refers to this as a more "relational and processual perspective to learning".

Given that each pupil has their own unique set of complex needs, including FASD, which will influence their learning, it follows that each pupil will be different and need a detailed and thorough analysis of their lived experiences and access to learning mathematics. Considering that the participants in this research are the researcher (me!), the pupils, their parents, their teachers, and other maths teachers, it is acknowledged that knowledge is likely to be a dynamic process of understanding, influenced by both the researcher's and participants' perspectives and contexts. It is intended that knowledge will be gained through subjective interpretation and understanding, rather than objective observation. This is referred to as the "double hermeneutic", which means the understanding of each partner in the research. Gadamer (1975) refers to this as a 'fusion of horizons'.

Discussions about ontology, axiology, and epistemology are intertwined and lead the direction of the methodology toward an interpretative phenomenological philosophical stance, with a view to working towards a "fusion of horizons" between the researcher and the researched. Phenomenology is particularly relevant in understanding each pupil's lived experience, which will be very individualised for pupils with FASD. In moving towards this interpretative (hermeneutic) phenomenology and ethnography, I am resisting a descriptive phenomenology as it is purely descriptive, and potentially grounded in theory whereby the construction of theories is based on (grounded in) data.

Noon (2018) provides a comprehensive and detailed description of the purpose of Phenomenology, which is to uncover meaning. By focusing on participants' streams of consciousness – their thoughts, feelings, and memories – this approach seeks to access their inner life worlds. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) aims to understand lived experiences and explore how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds. Linked to this is Hermeneutics, which is the practice or art of interpretation. IPA acknowledges that analysis always involves interpretation, and it is closely linked to hermeneutics through its recognition of the investigator's central role in analysis and research. Central to this is the researcher's role in interpreting the outcomes from the interviews, discussions and observations.

Another aspect to recognise is Idiography, which emphasises individuality. IPA is idiographic in that it aims to learn from each participant's individual story through a deep, individualised analysis. Each individual case is central to IPA research; the investigator seeks to understand

each respective case as much as possible (Noon, 2018). Each individual in this research will likely have a different lived experience, and what has been outlined above aligns well with my research focus. Horrigan-Kelly et al (2016:1) usefully provide a link between Heidegger and IPA in that Heidegger's approach to phenomenology " …provides methodological guidance for qualitative researchers seeking to explicate the lived experience of study participants". From this literature, it is evident that Heidegger used the term "dasein" to represent the lived experience of "being in the world with temporality and to expose the meaning of everyday existence" (Horrigan-Kelly, Millar and Dowling, 2016: 1). Temporality in this sense refers to the ongoing situation in which pupils in my research case find themselves.

Reflexivity on the researcher's part is an important aspect and links to the insider-outsider nature of that role. Lefebvre (2004: 30) summarises it as follows "… the rhythmanalyst will not be obliged to jump from the inside to the outside of the observed bodies; he should come to listen to them as a whole and unify them by taking his own rhythm as a reference by integrating the outside with the inside and vice versa". The double hermeneutic acknowledges the dual role of the researcher and the researched. Dibley et al (2020) also discuss this duality as an ethical consideration, stating that being 'inside' and connected to the phenomena of interest can help to uncover meaning. This is how I recognised the relevance of my past experience. Conversely, being an outsider can help marginalised pupils, in my case, SEND pupils, to speak freely. Reflexivity can also mean the Hermeneutic circle. The hermeneutic circle describes a process of understanding where the interpretation and understanding of the narrative data is shaped by the interplay between the individual parts and the whole. It is a cyclical process of moving back and forth between the parts and the whole, adjusting one's understanding of each in light of the other, until a coherent interpretation emerges with Smith, Flower and Larkin (2022: 23) suggesting that "The hermeneutic circle provides a useful way of thinking about method for IPA researchers". In practical terms this can mean, in building an understanding of difficulties pupils have, one pupil's experience will inform that understanding. The next pupil's experience will add to it and may change it slightly. Eventually, an overall understanding will emerge, taking into consideration the experience of all the participants in the analysis of all the narrative comments.

Data analysis

Interpretive data analysis will be used via an IPA framework in order to analyse the outcomes with each pupil (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2022). Quantitative analysis of survey questions, reflexive thematic analysis of interviews, and other narrative forms of data collection will be employed. All observations, semi-structured interviews, and discussions will be recorded as narratives. These will then be analysed, and any emerging themes will be identified. Based on these approaches, further follow-up observations, interviews, and discussions may be conducted to verify and explore data further.

The timing during the school year will need to be negotiated with each school. Additionally, the thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2014) framework will seek to identify emerging common themes. Its reflexive nature permits these themes to change and evolve.

Conclusion

In the literature review, I have briefly focused on FASD and learning mathematics. What has emerged is the difficulty with the retention of abstract concepts, which can also be relevant in other subjects. However, concepts such as time and money, for example, appear to be lacking in mathematical learning. Despite this, it should be said that pupils with FASD can show their brilliance in lots of different ways in many other subjects. My own granddaughter has FASD and is a much more creative photographer than I am! However, every day is a new day and what was learnt yesterday may not be retained today. Safety and forming friendships may also be issues for pupils with FASD.

There is a National Organisation for FASD (National Organisation for FASD, 2025) that provides very comprehensive and useful resources for parents, teachers, and others. Additionally, there is the FASD Network UK that provides support for Parent Groups. (FASD Network UK, 2025).

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