

**What matters to teachers about literacy teaching:  
exploring teachers' everyday/everynight worlds through  
creative data visualization**

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# **What matters to teachers about literacy teaching: exploring teachers' everyday/everynight worlds through creative data visualization**

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on a project designed to learn from teachers about their personal experience of literacy teaching through collecting and discussing data presented as creative visualisations in postcard form. Drawing on the work of Dorothy Smith, it argues that engaging with teachers' experience of the localised activities constituting their 'everyday/everynight worlds' in such ways can generate important counterpoints to technicist accounts of teachers' professional work. The project highlighted five interwoven aspects of professional experience – personal commitments, material realities, external pressures, time/workload and professional support – which illuminate the complexity of teachers' professional lives.

**Keywords:** teacher, data, professional lives, visualisation, Dorothy Smith, literacy

## **Introduction**

Longstanding neoliberal education policies in England, as elsewhere, have coalesced into a regime of testing and school inspection that has installed attainment data at the heart of school improvement – data that are used to hold teachers and schools to account. The impacts of this are well-documented. A prevalence of testing, increased bureaucratisation, work intensification, central regulation and accountability has led to distortions in the curriculum with detrimental effects on teachers' and pupils' wellbeing (Ball, 2003; Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Moreover, neoliberal education discourses have positioned teachers as the subjects of research rather than its makers or critics. Although educational research includes different paradigms, diverse methodologies and philosophical commitments, 'research' in the everyday discourse of policy makers and educational leaders has come to mean something very specific. So-called 'scientific' or 'evidence-based' approaches reference the evaluation of educational approaches through measurable impact on attainment, using randomised control trials or other quasi-experimental approaches (Biesta, 2010). In England, this particular manifestation of research is embedded in national frameworks for preservice teacher education and continuing professional development (DFE, 2019a, 2019b; Ofsted, 2019). These developments have been criticised for: marginalising exploratory research that uncovers the complexity or situatedness of practice (Moss, 2012); sustaining a transactional or technicist discourse of education that elides broader aims and purposes (Biesta, 2016); and focusing on interventions at the expense of more holistic or locally appropriate approaches (Author1 & colleague, 2020). Nevertheless, in England, this narrowly defined and instrumental version of research – also described as 'what works' (EEF, 2020) – persists, aligning with the culture of accountability described above.

This context frames how teachers' work is represented in educational discourses. Attention is diverted from teachers' experience, the complexities of teaching (Hayes et al., 2017), and the political and ethical dimensions of educational practice (Biesta, 2010; Zembylas, 2018); and teaching is objectified and described in transactional and technical terms (Reeves, 2018). Studies of teachers' lives and work have demonstrated that teachers respond to and resist such discourses in varied ways (Alsup, 2005; Goodson, 1992; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019).

Objectification may or may not be experienced as such by individual teachers, but it can have a negative impact on teachers' relationships with knowledge about their professional lives – on their understandings about appropriate pedagogies, what happens in classrooms, and what matters to learner (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Lewis & Holloway, 2019). It also limits what can be known about teaching by those outside the profession.

In response to the rise of 'evidence-based practice' and the data-driven system, there is a need to reassert teacher agency and autonomy in relation to knowledge about education. Many existing models for doing so involve opportunities for collaborative reflection. Examples include: applications of Lave and Wenger's (1998) work on communities of practice (Lambson, 2010); using technology to reconfigure professional learning networks (Tour, 2017); 'close-to-practice' research drawing on teacher/researcher collaboration (Wyse et al., 2020); and the ongoing tradition of teacher action research – sustained by award-bearing courses, action research networks and school-based professional learning communities (Mason, 2001; Mertler, 2019; Wood et al., 2019). Such opportunities can be overshadowed by the hegemony of attainment data co-opted to serve school or national priorities (see van Gasse et al., 2017). Nevertheless they provide ways of putting research in the hands of teachers and democratising knowledge production.

With similar aims in mind, *Doing Data Differently*, the British Academy funded project described in this article, was shaped by a commitment to learning from teachers about their experience, and an interest in the professional dialogue generated through a novel approach to sharing that experience – collecting, visualising and discussing data on postcards. The approach was designed to allow teachers to decide what others need to know for authentic, rounded insights into the experience of teaching. We also hoped that the process would support participants' own reflection and review. Elsewhere we have explored the professional dialogue generated by this approach, arguing that innovative ways of generating, visualising and sharing data can unsettle the illusion of certainty projected through attainment data (Burnett, Merchant and Guest, 2021). In this article we draw on the work of Dorothy Smith to consider the *content* of teachers' postcards and discussions in order to highlight *what* they presented as mattering to them. We argue that the project generated counterpoints to technicist accounts of teachers' professional work, and that postcard making and sharing worked in particular ways to highlight them. We begin by outlining some of Smith's key ideas which inform the discussion that follows.

### **Dorothy Smith, 'everyday/everynight activities' and the workings of text**

Aligning with the wider body of work on women's standpoint theory (Harding, 2004), Smith explored how women were disenfranchised through dominant processes of knowledge production, critiquing a tendency in the social sciences to position people as objects of study rather than sources of knowledge or agents of practice, thereby marginalising their experience. Through doing so, she argued, research practices become part of the 'relations of ruling' that help to sustain inequitable realities, limiting insights into how organisations work and understandings are upheld. Similar concerns have prompted various theoretical and methodological innovations, perhaps most notably linked to post-qualitative, participatory, emancipatory and/or feminist epistemologies (Campbell et al., 2018; Coole & Frost, 2010; St Pierre et al., 2016). Through focusing on relationships between local activities, institutional context and knowledge production, Smith's ideas have particular relevance for considering how teachers' knowledge and experience are mediated and represented. Comber (2007), for example, draws on Smith's writings to explore how teachers' practices and perspectives are often represented partially and negatively in academic research, with teachers described as reproducing deficit discourses about children from low-income homes. Comber relates how

Smith's work 'complicated' her understanding of teachers' lives (p.12), prompting a consideration of how policy, media accounts and research reports sustain deficit discourses, and the material and discursive effects of poverty not just on children's learning but on the 'storylines' (p.339) teachers told about their own experience.

Influenced by Marxist ideas about the workings of power, and ethnomethodological approaches for understanding how certain kinds of realities are performed, Smith was interested in how institutions and organisations exert their hegemony through small-scale, ephemeral events in local sites – in how 'the objectified and translocal character of the ruling relations is accomplished in the local actualities of people's work and work settings.' (Smith, 2001, p.162). She advocated for a 'sociology for the people' which investigated the 'mechanisms and devices' (p.132) through which localised practices- or what she called 'everyday/everynight activities' – help to produce the 'everyday/everynight' world that people directly experience and, in turn, uphold ways of doing, being and knowing:

The project calls on sociologists to discover just how the everyday/everynight worlds we participate in are being put together in people's local activities, including, of course, our own. It conceives of the social as actually happening among people who are situated in particular places at particular times, and not as 'meaning' or 'norms.' It draws on people's own good knowledge of their everyday/everynight worlds and does not substitute the expert's 'reality' for what people know in the doing. (Smith, 2001, p.161)

Smith argued that texts play a fundamental role in this due largely to their 'material reproduction' (p.174) – they can be read in multiple localities, organising social relations. We see this in education as inspection frameworks appear in schools nationwide, working to co-ordinate activity – and construct education – in certain ways. Even though, as Smith emphasises, such texts are interpreted differently with different effects in local sites, they work as discursive objects that uphold abstractions (e.g. 'schools', 'education', 'quality') that marginalise the everyday experiences of people (e.g. teachers, children, parents) and become taken-for-granted entities.

For us, Smith's analysis of the role of texts in sustaining ways of knowing and doing provides useful explication of the effects of a data-driven system. Pupils' activities are captured as scores or attainment levels then aggregated as 'data', presented as spreadsheets and graphs that travel between policy makers, leaders and teachers, instantiating and inflecting practices as they do so (Burnett, Merchant and Guest, 2021). Distinctions are made between 'low ability' and 'high ability' pupils, 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' children and schools, and teachers are positioned as social actors who deliver, or fail to deliver, education. Consequentially attention is diverted from aspects of teachers' professional lives that could illuminate the complexity and subtlety of educational practice. As Smith underlines, experiences are subjugated as aspects of practice become objectified through text.

Smith hoped that her sociology for the people would expand knowledge of the workings of power through foregrounding aspects of experience that escape dominant discourses. This last point has been subject to poststructuralist critique for overlooking how discourses play through all human activity (Clough, 1993; Hekman, 1997), a critique subsequently resisted by Smith (Smith, 1997). Nevertheless, Smith's work prompts us to consider the kinds of texts that *could* be produced to represent, and ultimately mediate, professional practice in ways that unsettle dominant ways of knowing. This relates directly to the aims of *Doing Data Differently*, which sought to use an alternative form of data text – the hand-drawn postcard – to elicit insights into teachers' 'everyday/everynight worlds'. In what follows, we outline the project and explore what participants revealed about what mattered to them in everyday

literacy teaching. We argue that such insights provide an important counterpoint to research and data practices that objectify teachers. We also suggest that personalised, hand-drawn texts, such as postcards, can do useful work in facilitating such insights.

### **Project design and methodology**

*Doing Data Differently* was designed to allow teachers to generate their own data to articulate what mattered *to them* in their literacy provision. By ‘literacy provision’ we refer not just to what teachers do but to the resources, spaces and learning opportunities they provide or instigate. The literacy focus was chosen because in England, where we are based, literacy is a key target for accountability linked to statutory testing. Moreover, we have a broad view of the subject and relevant professional debates given our own histories and expertise. Our approach, influenced by research on teacher communities of inquiry (Lambson, 2010) and teacher narratives (Goodson, 1992), by participatory methodologies (Clark, 2017; Mallan et al., 2010), and in line with standpoint theory, sought to foreground the experiences and interests of teachers. As qualitative researchers we are committed to using a range of methods to support professional reflection. For this project, however, we were interested in alternative possibilities for *quantitative* data – for counting and measuring aspects of teachers’ practice. Given that quantification has been used predominantly in the powerful, reductive ways described above, we were interested in envisioning new foci for quantification and new ways of presenting and sharing quantified data. Influenced by the growing field of data visualisation, which has generated creative approaches to handling data that challenge traditional representations (e.g. McCandless, 2010), we hoped that combining quantification with creative data visualisation might offer teachers new ways of working with data to represent their experience – and, as such, meet Smith’s challenge to work with texts that unsettle dominant ways of knowing.

Through this small-scale project teachers chose data to collect and visualise on postcards to communicate what ‘mattered’ to them as literacy teachers to an unknown public of policy makers, school leaders, prospective teachers and interested others. They also shared their postcards with one another to stimulate professional dialogue. This approach was influenced by Lupi and Posavec’s (2016) *Dear Data*, which documents how two information designers used data drawings to represent quantifications of their everyday experience – such as incidences of swearing or smiling – which they exchanged on postcards. These personalised, informal visualisations contrast with the spreadsheets and graphs typically presented in schools and, as such, seemed to offer potential for inspiring teachers to collect and visualise data on their experience in new and creative ways. Being both compact and portable, postcards have previously been used successfully to support teacher reflection (Unrath & Nordlund, 2009; Gunn, 2010). They were suited to our purposes as the small size meant they could be passed round easily when shared and would perhaps make the visualisation task less daunting. Postcards provide rich visual images that might entice a wider public to engage with teachers’ experience. To this end the postcards were curated as a virtual exhibition (<https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/doingdatadifferently>).

Project participants were recruited through invitations distributed via teacher networks in our local region leading to a briefing meeting in July 2018. Seven teachers, with varying years of service and levels of responsibility, elected to participate. They worked in six different primary schools (with children ranging from ages 5-11). We provide no further details on the individual teachers as our ethical framework committed us to withholding details from which they could be identified unless they requested otherwise. This was important given the high stakes accountability environment in which participants worked. We are also aware that

biographical/contextual details are inevitably selective and, as such, would risk hinting at generalisations that do not do justice to the complex and varied experiences relevant to individuals' responses to this project.

Participants were invited to an introductory workshop to explore examples of data visualisation –including *Dear Data* – and to experiment with representing data in creative ways. They were asked to identify dimensions of their literacy provision that mattered to them and which they might quantify through counting or measuring. It is worth noting that the project did not aim to evaluate the impact of this process on teachers' practice. Notions of 'mattering' were left open but, to encourage them to think beyond attainment as the focus for data collection, we suggested they focused – like Lupi and Posavec – on everyday occurrences, such as: ephemeral, incidental and affective dimensions of teaching; interactions, routines, classroom equipment; as well as more permanent aspects of classroom life. In essence, we encouraged them to consider their 'everyday/everynight' activities. There was no intention here that data would be statistically significant – and indeed, as we explore later, we all became less interested in the affordances of quantification as the project progressed. However we hoped that the *process* of quantifying experience might provoke reflection. Following the initial workshop, participants were invited to six 90-minute meetings over the course of the academic year 2018-19 and shared at least one postcard per meeting. All were given a copy of *Dear Data*, a postcard template and pack of coloured pens. At one participant's suggestion, the teachers agreed to use shared prompts for data collection (see Table 1). Prompts were chosen by the group to allow diverse responses.

<b>Data sharing meeting</b>	<b>Agreed prompts for data collection</b>	<b>Example of individual's postcard produced in response to prompt</b>
1	Reactions to.....	Children's reactions to independent reading
2	Where do people/things go to?	Where do children go to access writing resources
3	Creativity and literacy	How creativity flows from a good book
4	Teachers' experience of....	Discussing literacy with colleagues
5	Time spent mapped against feelings	Time the teacher spends on different literacy activities
6	Free choice	Inspirations in and out of the classroom

**Table 1 Postcard prompts**

We encouraged participants to experiment with visualising data using *Dear Data* for inspiration and, like Lupi and Posavec, to include keys to symbols used. Most used the coloured pens provided to draw their visualisations although some used other media, such as crayon and collage. Their visualisations varied considerably, including: charts, diagrams, maps, visual metaphors and tables or combinations of these. Meetings had a common format: each teacher shared and explained their postcard, followed by unstructured discussion. As researchers we participated in discussions but tried to minimise our contributions, occasionally asking for clarification or offering comments or perspectives from our own experience. We did not attempt to direct the conversation or initiate topics of interest to us, although our comments may have encouraged the voicing of certain viewpoints. It was clear, for example, from our framing of the project that we were not supportive of the data-driven system, and at times, we made comments that echoed participants' enthusiasms or

frustrations about teaching. A review meeting was held in October 2019 for participants to reflect on the process and value of collecting, visualising and sharing data in this way.

All meetings, including the introductory and final workshops, were audio recorded and transcribed to capture the topics explored on the postcards as well as the ensuing discussions, which often drifted into other topics and themes (Burnett, Merchant and Guest, 2021). Before archiving, participants removed postcards and transcribed comments they wished to exclude from the final dataset. We also removed any that might lead to breaches of confidentiality linked to particular institutions, staff or pupils – this was necessary as the postcards were made openly available in the virtual exhibition. The final dataset included 34 postcards and 12 hours 54 minutes of audio recordings.

Strands of our analysis included a focus on: approaches to data visualisation; the nature of discussion generated; and participants' perspectives on the project's value. We have written about these aspects elsewhere (Burnett, Merchant and Guest, 2020;2021). In this article we focus on a thematic analysis of the *content* of postcards and discussions – the aspects of literacy provision that appeared to matter to them. Our analysis worked from the assumption that if a participant had chosen to focus on an aspect of practice, this must in some way matter to them. Consequently we saw 'mattering' manifest in different ways – related, for example, to values, beliefs and priorities, to feelings about particular activities or working conditions.

Our analysis began with data familiarisation – independent reading and re-reading of postcards and transcripts, followed by coding and re-coding of data to highlight aspects that appeared to matter to participants. Consistent with standpoint theory, our intention was to avoid objectifying teachers' accounts through imposing our own abstractions of their experiences. Inevitably, however, our thematic distinctions reflect our own readings of the significance of what they told us. Moreover, while we invited participants to comment on emerging themes and to review a draft of this article, the thematic analysis is our own. As such, we risk positioning participants as objects in just the way that standpoint theory resists. Greater involvement of participants in the analysis would have mitigated this to some extent, although such approaches can be difficult to render genuinely democratic (Birt et al., 2016). Given these caveats, we do not suggest that our findings provide a comprehensive account of what mattered to participants. Instead they indicate our readings of what teachers chose to foreground at a particular point in time.

As the project progressed we became less interested in the possibilities of quantification. Participants found it hard to identify things to count or measure and find time to do so. Quantification therefore often relied on estimates and sometimes was absent altogether. The invitation to count or measure, however, did appear to encourage participants to focus on what they *did* during an hour, day, week or whatever – and this we suggest facilitated insights into their 'everyday/everynight' activities. Topics for discussion ranged widely and there is not space here to explore them all in depth. We focus therefore on five themes that recurred across meetings and which we therefore judged to be particularly salient to this group. Below we draw on our analysis of the postcards and surrounding discussion to consider these in turn.

## Findings

The predominant themes suggesting what mattered to teachers in literacy provision were:

- personal commitments;

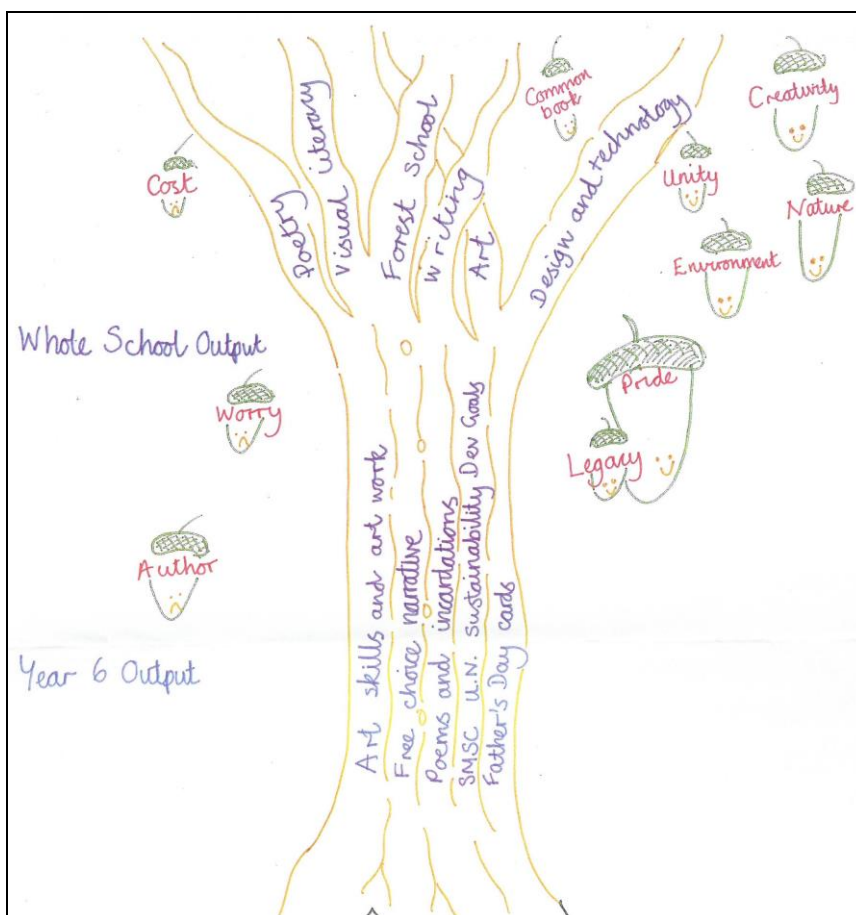
- material realities;
- external expectations - going ‘off-kilter’;
- time and workload;
- professional support.

### ***Personal commitments***

We use the term ‘personal commitments’ to refer to aspects of literacy provision that participants suggested were priorities and/or that they felt were important to learners. While some commitments were expressed explicitly, others were inferred from their stated enthusiasm for resources, activities and approaches. It was sometimes difficult for us to disentangle personal commitments from those which they might have felt obliged to subscribe to, in response, for instance, to school or national policies (which we discuss further below) or, indeed, in the interests of group cohesion. Despite these reservations, there were regular references to certain kinds of activities and we saw these as likely to reflect personal commitments. These were commitments to: literature as a stimulus; reading for pleasure; spontaneity; and learning as embodied, sensory experience. We suggest that, collectively, these reflect a commitment to ‘meaningfulness’ in literacy provision, a ‘meaningfulness’ that shaped their interpretations of curriculum requirements.

The use of **literature as a stimulus** was explored by Participant 5 who spoke at length about the use of class novels in all but one of the postcard sharing meetings. Their first postcard used a series of drawings to represent the vocabulary discussed in response to the class novel *Danny the Champion of the World* (Dahl, 1975), showing how the novel ‘sort of led us off in to new vocabulary opportunities’ linked to events, activities and characters; their third postcard presented ‘how creativity flows from a book’, using a series of annotated wavy lines to capture different activities stimulated by the book *Sky Song*: ‘basically it’s all the roads we went down from the book. [...] I think if you get a good book the creativity just flows and *Sky Song* is just one of those books.’ This theme resonated with others too: Participant 7 described using Morris and MacFarlane’s (2017) *Lost Words* as the stimulus for work across the whole school in a single week, using a tree image to encapsulate the range of activities prompted by the book – activities which led to class displays in the school library (See Figure 1). Participant 7’s perceptions of the richness of this experience is captured in a series of acorns that surround the tree to represent different effects: a unity generated by the whole school experience; opportunities for developing creativity and environmental awareness; and children’s pride in what they produced. The postcard also touched on less positive dimensions, such as the budget constraints that prevented copies of the book from being purchased for each class. In all three postcards, quantification was noticeably absent, but the images portrayed multiple facets of the ‘class novel’ experience.





**Figure 1: Lost Words**

The importance of literature featured in other postcards which focused on **reading for pleasure** and enthusing children about reading: Participants 3 and 7 produced postcards which mapped the selections children made when given a free choice of books from the school library. This led to a description of how the library area had been transformed by fairy tale displays produced by classes from all age groups and how this made the library 'inviting', 'somewhere they were proud of', and 'somewhere they would be excited to be in'.

A commitment to **spontaneity** was expressed through descriptions of responding flexibly to emergent learning opportunities linked to children's interests or unexpected occurrences. Participants described how they followed the momentum of children's enthusiasm, or took things in directions that occurred during their teaching. They spoke positively about children's responses to such opportunities and to their engagement with activities as they unfolded. Participant 5, for example, presented a postcard in map form to show how a walk around the woodland area in the school grounds had been used as a stimulus for poetry writing, explaining:

If I suddenly decided to go in to the woodland area [...] I will go in it and I will just go outside, that's just how my mind works. You're still getting the creativity off of something spontaneous which is why I think reams and reams of planning as we all know is just a waste of time because things evolve, they just do, from something. You know, like if your children hadn't latched on to myths you'd have done something else but they did so you followed that and that's what it's all about really isn't it? In a way let them lead you down that path rather than you leading them.

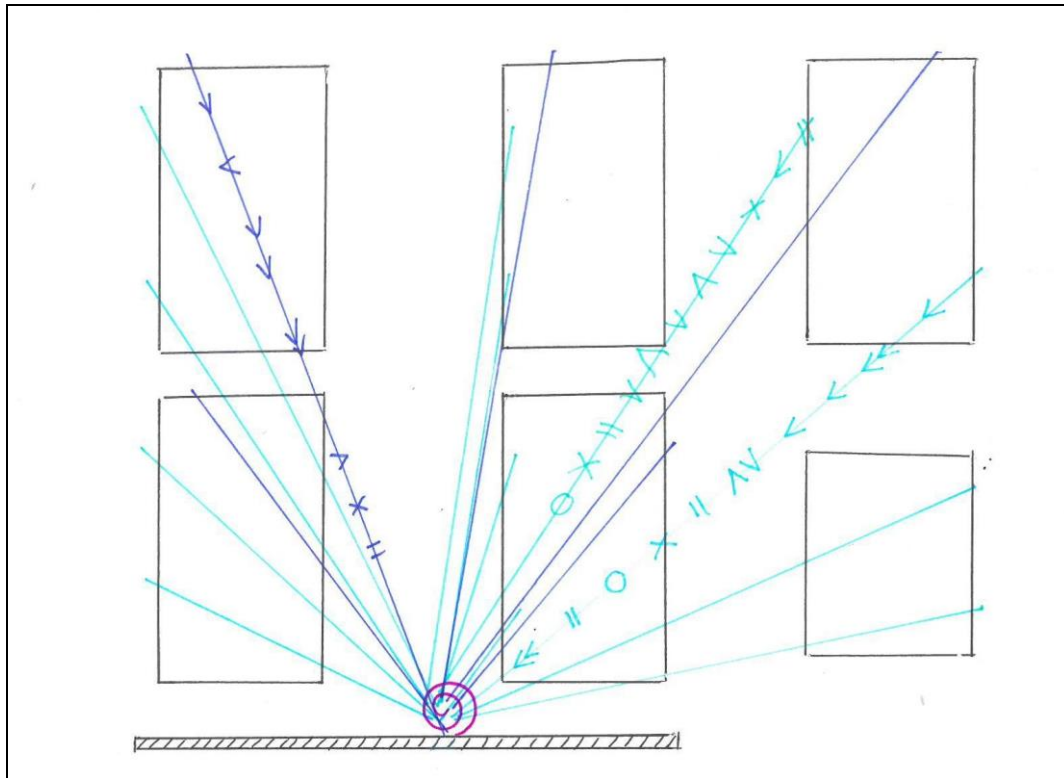
Activities that drew on **embodied, sensory dimensions of learning** were also discussed. For example, the Autumn poetry and book choices postcards (above) led to discussions about the value of feeling the texture of a conker (a horse chestnut tree seed) or holding a book. There was enthusiasm for going out into the school grounds. A sense of immediacy or togetherness seemed to be important here – going outside involved 'Leaving the classroom and moving around and we all did it together.' (Participant 5). This belief in the benefits of movement and sensory approaches to learning was not something that they felt was necessarily recognised in school. Participant 4 commented that children had this kind of freedom until Year One (age 5-6) and then 'they take it all away' and movement starts to be regarded as wasted time: 'I think it's the assumption that being still means they're concentrating.' For participants, however, physical experiences were important – for example in motivating children to write:

I think what you've done as well by making it more of a physical experience, it's more meaningful isn't it so they actually want that vocabulary, you can give the vocabulary on a sheet ...putting it in to that real context, they'll be desperate to get those words included. (Participant 1)

This conception of '**meaningfulness**' seemed to cut across each of these commitments – exemplifying an overarching commitment to nurturing children's enthusiasm and sense of purpose rather than just equipping them with the literacy skills. This is not to suggest that these teachers saw skills as unimportant. Alongside meaningfulness, they referred to the aspects of grammar and spelling that are the focus for national expectations and tests. However, they suggested that meaningfulness inflected how they interpreted and supplemented statutory requirements. Their ability to act on such commitments, however, was dependent on other aspects of their experience that played through everyday/everynight worlds – as the following sections explore.

### ***Material realities***

We use 'material realities' to capture participants' experience of the daily challenge of managing large groups of children, resources and adults in spaces that were often overcrowded and ill-equipped. Such issues surfaced during various discussions but came to prominence during the second meeting when postcards on 'XXXXXX goes where' were shared (In these postcards, participants were interested in where people or things travelled, so substituted 'XXXXXX' for the people (e.g. children) or things (e.g. artefact) that were of interest to them.). Participant 2's postcard (see Figure 2) logged where children went for help during a lesson, noting that they rarely moved to collect or refer to resources to support their learning, perhaps partly due to limited space to move around. The postcard showed that much of the help was requested from the teacher (represented by the pink spiral) – hence the many lines that run from teacher to children – but that children also drew on peer support (indicated by the 'v' symbols), sometimes in ways not predicted by Participant 2.



**Figure 2: Where children go for help**

There was some celebration of times when teachers had transformed classroom spaces through creating displays, moving furniture or redesigning the school library. Linked to the personal commitment to embodied learning discussed above, they also described times when children had been given more space – going to school libraries, using playgrounds or other outside areas – and how they had seemed 'more relaxed' in these settings, perhaps because free movement linked to free choice and more 'meaningful' activity. One postcard mapped where children went to read when offered a choice – on the floor, lying on their backs or under tables. This generated discussion about the need for quiet and private spaces for reading, linking to a commitment to reading for pleasure.

Much of participants' discussion about material realities focused on the struggle to teach with the available resources. This was often the source of humour as they shared experiences of typical classroom interactions:

5: All those things that take up time. I haven't got a pencil. I haven't got a whiteboard. Can't find my book. I always say to them, because I'm science lead, I say 'by the laws of physics it cannot disappear! It must be here somewhere!'

7: A child come up to me today with a packet of tissues, 'miss, I found a packet of tissues'. (laughter) 'What do you want me to do about it? Really?! Seriously?!' 'What do I do with them?' 'I don't know! We have a lost property basket, maybe it could go in there.'

In some cases, as happened with Figure 2, participants told us that the process of collecting and sharing data led them to re-evaluate how they organised children or prompted discussions with colleagues about re-organising classrooms to create quiet spaces for children to read (see Burnett, Merchant and Guest, 2020). Others used their visualisations to demonstrate the material constraints in which they worked. For example, they described significant ways in

which they subsidised and supplemented school resources with their own. Participant 7 told us:

My [own] kids laugh at me now because in the past when I've brought books they go, 'mum you're just going to take it in to class aren't you?' I'm like, 'yeah, when you've finished with it!' It ends up in there'. If they come in and help in my classroom in the summer holidays they're like, 'mum, we didn't know you brought this in!' They're things that they don't use any more but, yeah.

Reflecting similar experience, Participant 5 created a postcard in the form of a resource inventory which showed that 175 non-fiction books in the class library belonged to them, compared to 70 owned by the school. Participant 5 gave children direct access to this personal book collection.

For participants the affordances (and constraints) of the material environment, and the choices they made about children's movement within these environments, mattered to them not only for the smooth running of literacy lessons, but also in enacting personal commitments such as the importance of literature and reading for pleasure – commitments that they were prepared to resource themselves if their school was unwilling or unable to do so.

### ***External expectations: going 'off kilter'***

The third theme relates to participants' perceptions of expectations from outside the classroom, through national or school policies. These were highlighted in postcards produced in response to the fifth prompt (see Table 1). Participant 7, for instance, presented a postcard representing emotional reactions to the experience of teaching Year 6<sup>1</sup> children who are the focus for SATs<sup>2</sup>. This led to discussion about related uncertainties – about whether their assessments would be externally moderated, and the pressures of being in a school that 'requires improvement' (which in England is an inspection grading that places a school under considerable scrutiny). Many of these external pressures were associated with standardisation, which manifested in expectations for consistent presentation of classroom wall displays, paperwork and children's work. Standardisation was mediated by school practices and structures via such mechanisms as performance reviews that informed their pay grade. These pressures sometimes had the effect of distorting individual professional priorities, interfering with the personal commitments described above. As Participant 2 stated, such influences could make things go 'off kilter':

2: I just think sometimes the way we work seems to be a little bit off kilter and, like I say, we focus our energies on the wrong thing. I'm hoping that the new framework<sup>3</sup> will bring that back around but, like you said

6: It's because we're being measured and what we're [overtalking]

2: Exactly, it is. It's the external pressures definitely on us that make us think, oh, we've got to do this and this bit's got to be right but actually we don't always think about the impact that that then has.

These pressures intensified in Year 6 classes in which SATs, as Participant 5 stated, worked as a 'demarcation of the year' with preparation dominating until the 'post-SATs' period (the latter part of the Summer Term). In Year 6, it was therefore felt to be harder to be spontaneous or creative (see above) than in other years. As Participant 7 who was teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Year 6 is for 10-11 year olds, the oldest age group in primary schools in England.

<sup>2</sup> SATs are standard attainment tests, national tests which all Year 6 students take in May in their final year of primary schooling

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the latest framework for school inspection in England.

Year 6 for the first time commented, 'I have enjoyed it, got a lot out of it. I just feel like my wings have been clipped, that I can't be as creative as I'd like to.'

Such pressures played out in some of the 'everyday/everynight activities' that teachers described. One practice they explored was marking, prompted by Participant 4's postcard comparing time spent marking with time spent teaching – with marking time depicted as fungi growing up and around a tree. The ensuing discussion drifted into a more general discussion of the purpose and audience for marking. For Participant 4, salient audiences included parents and other adults at the school who reviewed children's workbooks. Marking therefore became a performative activity:

4. [...] as much as we would like to tell ourselves we're writing comments for the kids, you know, then what would you do because then you've got to find the time for them to read them, to interact with them. [...] What is it evidencing? It's evidencing that you've actually looked at it, it's evidencing that you're trying to do something about the mistakes that they've made. Again, I just think it's for someone outside of the room in the most part.

Such practices could generate cultures that conflicted with educational aims (and by implication the professional commitments described earlier):

4: Yeah, because once you build a culture of that in a school or even for yourself and in your own books you've got let's say a piece of writing, every child's done it, you write an extensive comment in one child's book, then you are, I don't know, I feel duty bound then to give every one child the equitable treatment in terms of the comment they get.

So then naturally that work has just – I might have written the first one for a really good reason but then it's just multiplying itself because I feel like that's what I should do.

For Participant 4, such expectations are hard to shift and could lead to time-consuming practices that contribute little to learning. Again, practices seemed to be 'off kilter', at odds with what participants felt was beneficial to children.

The gap between personal commitments and professional expectations seemed to be exacerbated when school-level decisions did not suit individuals. This surfaced in discussions about initiatives or policies that were introduced with uncertain effects. In the discussion prompted by the marking postcard, Participant 4 described an initiative which involved inviting children to respond in writing to teachers' comments on their work. This was intended to generate dialogue to support learning but in reality such exchanges were often superficial and, as Participant 4 suggested, rather contrived: 'so you'd give them time to actually write you a comment back but where does that stop?'

A similar gap emerged between teachers' views on individual children's progress and aggregations of attainment data. As Participant 2 stated,

I know I keep going back to SATs data but obviously because that's in the forefront. For an individual child a piece of data can be really good but then collectively as a group it could actually, like I say, for a school not be quite as good.

Against this background, teachers described their role in brokering the effects of external pressures in order to sustain positive, supportive classroom communities. Indeed, as well as exploring how SATs could be constraining and pressurised (see above), Participants 7 and 2 (both teaching Year 6) described what seemed to be professional pride in mitigating the effects for their classes. Through a postcard depicting the emotional journey of SATs preparation, Participant 7 stated, 'I felt content that I'd prepared the children well for this. I can see it's challenging what's there, but I didn't feel there was anything that I hadn't prepared them for with it.' While expressing reservations about being unable to teach creatively and

noting the anxiety associated with the SATs period, they described satisfaction at having prepared the class well for the tasks involved.

The postcards and discussions suggested that external expectations often meant that time and energy were devoted to tasks that conflicted with participants' personal commitments, even though – as explored earlier – personal commitments also provided ways of interpreting and supplementing those requirements. At times, required activities seemed to be recast in terms of personal commitments – as perhaps in Participant 7's positioning of SATs preparation as part of her duty of care, manifest in attempts to minimise anxiety amongst children in a system which 'reconfigures' them as data (Bradbury & Roberts Holmes, 2018).

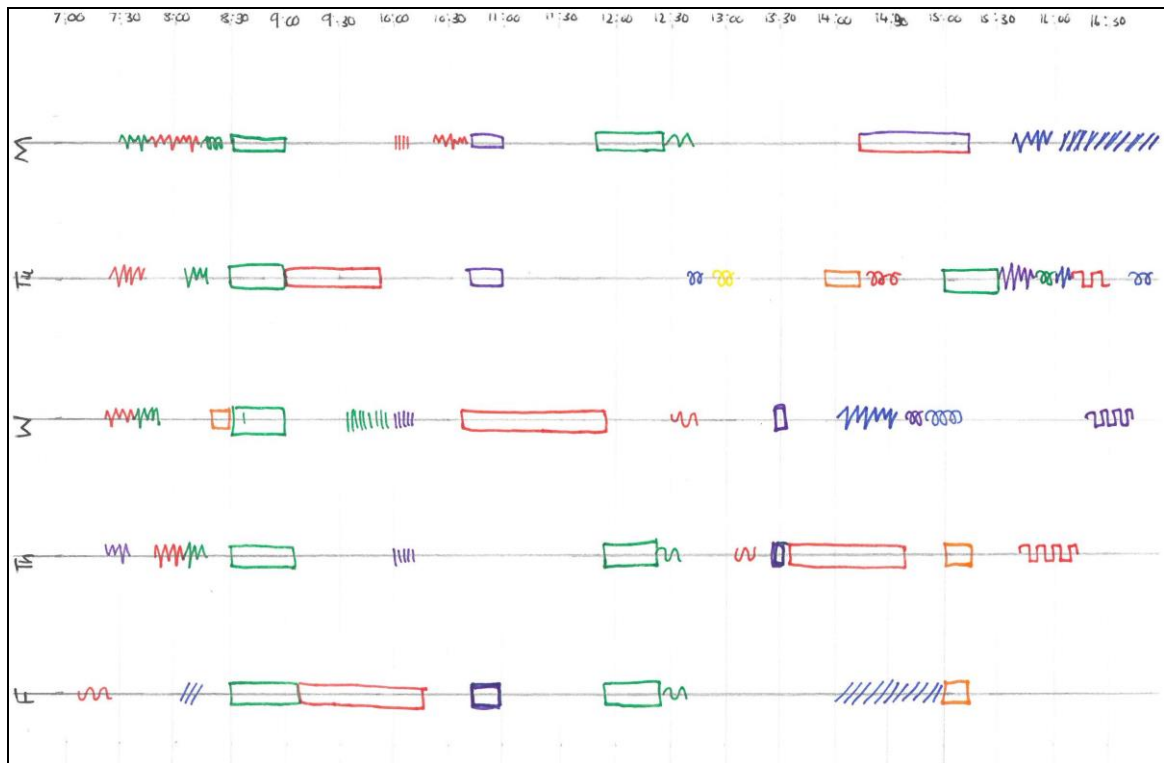
### ***Time and Workload***

Time, and its relationship to workload, was also a recurrent theme, and one chosen as a shared focus for the fifth meeting. On occasions, participants presented time as bounded, highlighting the limited time available for tasks, whereas, on others, time seemed more slippery as professional tasks blended with lives outside school (again underlining the applicability of Smith's idea of 'everyday/everynight' activities).

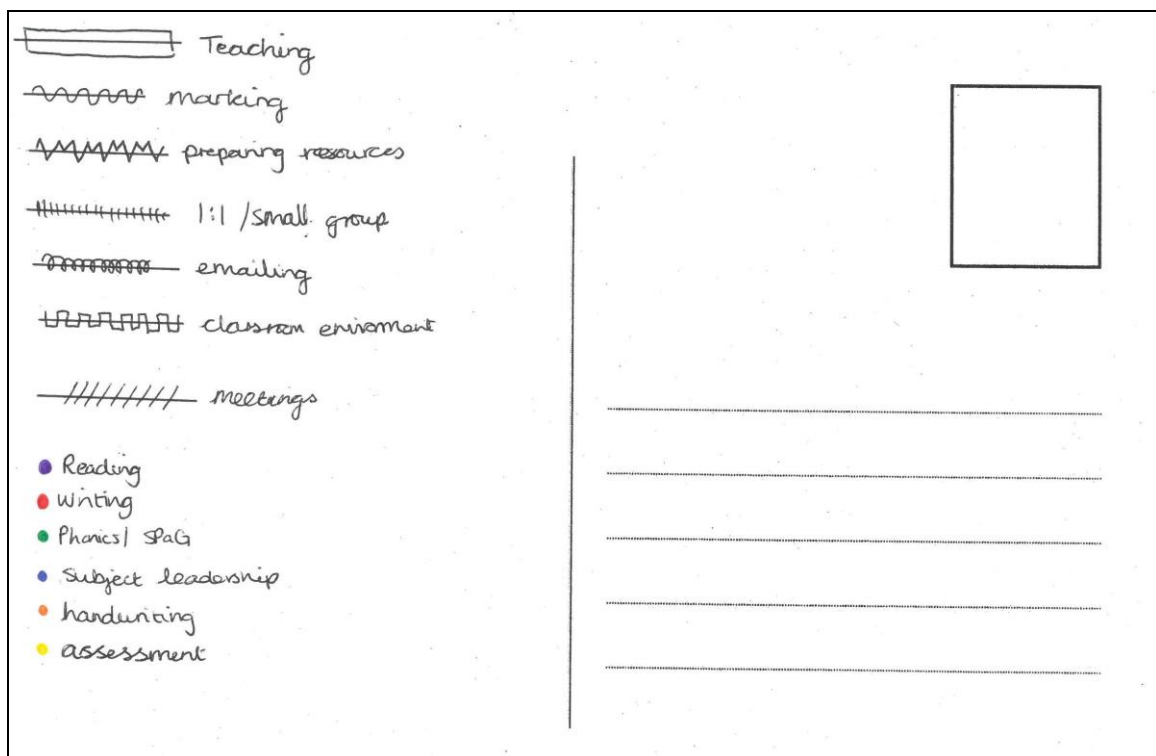
There was a sense that work time was not always well spent, as in the 97 hours marking compared to 74 hours teaching (see above). Other tasks seen as a poor use of time ranged from low-level administrative tasks, such as laminating resources or sticking work into books, through to more demanding tasks such as completing checklists of the features of children's writing. Sometimes they felt that time spent had a detrimental effect. For example, Participant 2 produced a postcard depicting 'the amount of time we spend planning compared to the output and the outcome for the child' using a series of circles, crosses and asterisks to capture the relative time spent on teaching, planning and marking, linked to a perception of what children did in response (represented as differently sized rectangles). This loose attempt at quantification not only highlighted the intensity of teachers' work, but the negative impact of overly structured lessons on children's autonomy:

2: there are some sessions that you put a load of input in, it takes hours to plan and then the kids come away and they've got two or three sentences and you think why did I waste all of my Sunday sorting this out and you've got nothing from it? I just think, again, it's something in teaching that we need to reflect on a little bit and make sure that the children are the ones that are doing the hard work, not us, if that makes sense. [...]  
But in terms of work life balance, again, I think it just opens up that sometimes we need to just allow the children the creativity potentially.

Participants also noted that, while administrative requirements had lessened in recent years and some head teachers actively encouraged a better work/life balance, considerable time was still devoted to tasks outside the school day. Participant 1, for example, depicted time spent on literacy-related activities over one week, with working days stretching from 7:30am – 5:00pm with few breaks (see Figures 3a&b).



**Figure 3a: Time spent on literacy-related activities**



**Figure 3b: Time spent on literacy-related activities (key)**

The group discussion in response to this postcard evoked a working week that often extended into evenings, weekends and holiday periods. Participant 7 described spending an extensive amount of time on social media during SATs week, trying to gauge other schools' experience

of the test papers. Other time pressures arose because participants occupied multiple roles: they were not just classroom teachers but colleagues and leaders. For example:

4. I was thinking that whilst I was filling in this paperwork someone came into my classroom to talk to me and you know when you've got that snippet of time before school and you're really trying to get something done because you know you've not got any other time to do it and this person wanted a conversation about something to do with English, I can't quite remember off the top of my head what it was now. I was a bit annoyed that they were there in my room. Then after they left I had to take a bit of a breath and say to myself that this is actually part of my job and what I'm supposed to do.

This ongoing commitment to teaching was sometimes valued – for Participant 7, it was something ‘that never switches off and I love that’. However, professional concerns also led to personal sacrifices and feeling guilty for spending too little time with families:

7: [...] as much as I love what I do it does come at a sacrifice to my family when I'm doing things on a Saturday and on a Sunday, on an evening as well. Usually there probably might be a little bit more on an evening, less social media obviously but with it being SATs week it was quite different but sacrifice, I didn't put a bottom to my bag so that's like a bottomless bag of sacrifice. It doesn't end. You give up a lot I think.

Inevitably, when something unexpected occurred – as when Participant 4 had to go home unexpectedly for personal reasons (which they logged in a postcard of an interrupted week's activities) – there was no extra capacity to cope. Participant 5 used the metaphor of a motorway pile-up to expand on what can happen:

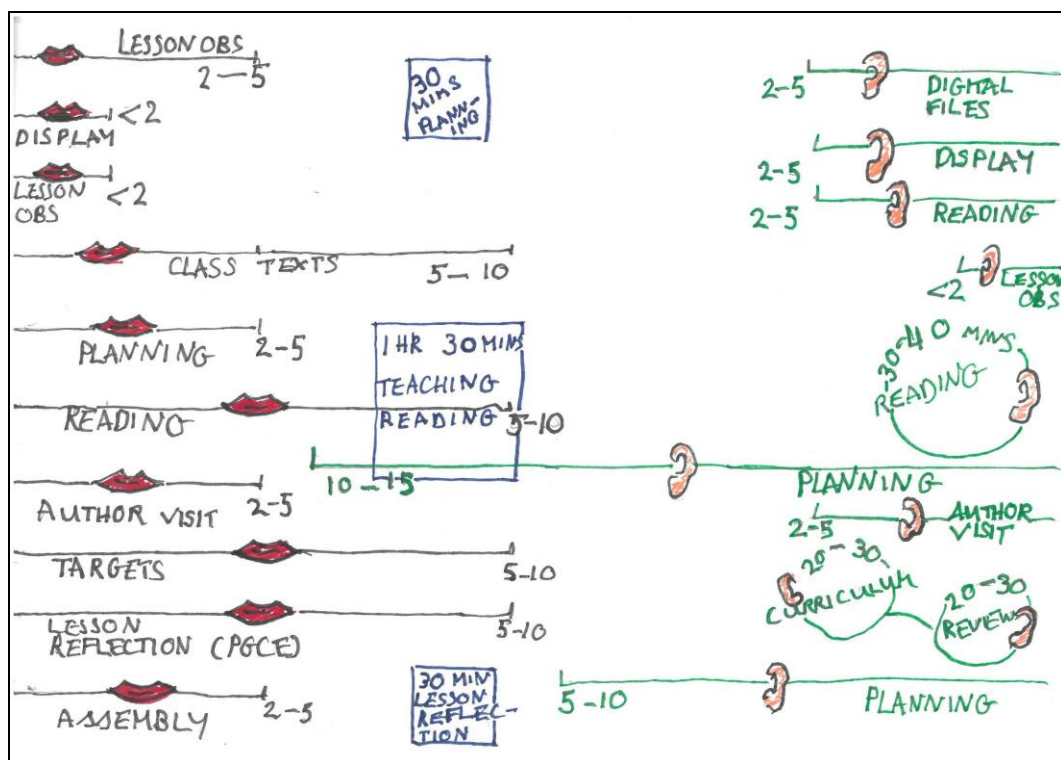
You go on the M6 or the M1 or something and it's full capacity and a broken down car brings South Yorkshire to a standstill doesn't it? [Agreement.] Anyway, literally listening to Radio Five Live, it was like the whole of South Yorkshire was just at a standstill and I feel like that in school. It's fine, all the lanes, and then something happens, there's a breakdown and that's it, everything just – [...] it crumbles in chaos because you're working at full capacity, there's no give.

This discussion highlights how time intersects with the professional commitments and external expectations described above. For some, the ‘always on’ nature of teaching was part of their professional life – something they enjoyed and valued – but an appropriate work/life balance could be fragile.

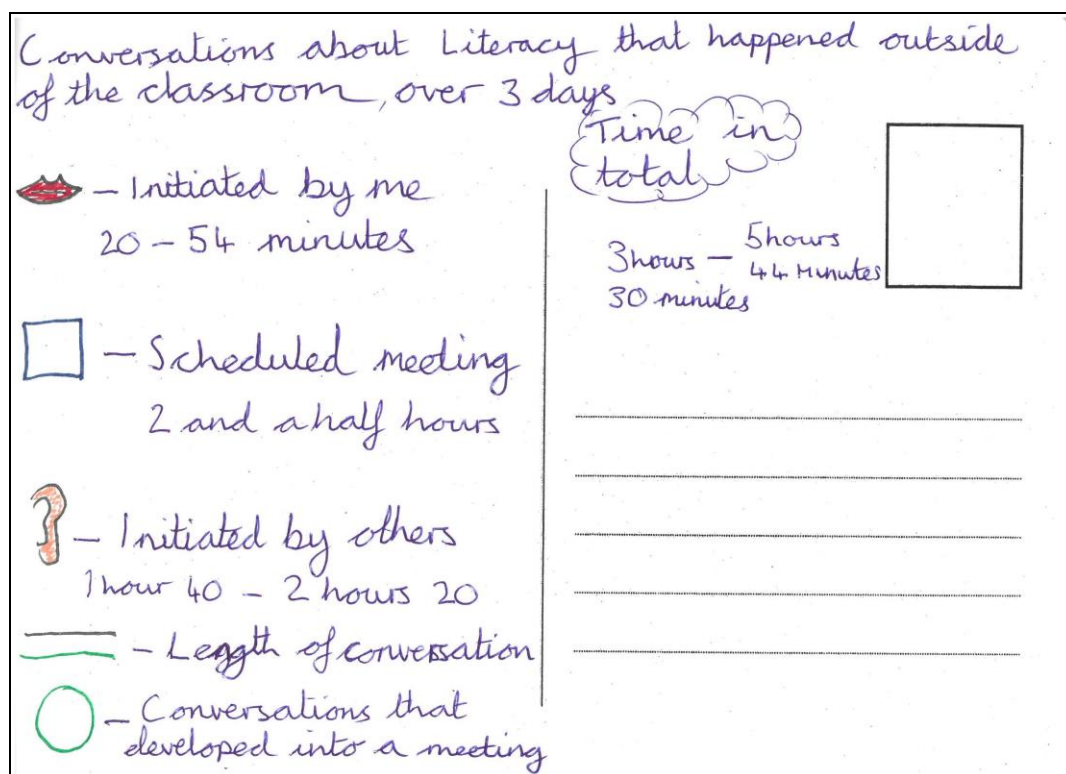
### ***Professional support***

In addition to their individual activities and experiences as teachers, participants discussed various sources and beneficiaries of professional support. Participant 4 logged daily interactions with colleagues (see Figures 4a&b) and Participant 3 counted ‘inspirations’ – occasions when they had inspired, or been inspired by, others. Both highlighted the frequency of informal interactions that involved suggesting ideas or resources or giving opinions on children's writing. Reflecting on these postcards, Participants 3 and 7 discussed the value of tightly knit teaching teams that could ‘just fire ideas off one another’, and others spoke of corridor or staffroom discussions about resources. Despite the pressures of accountability, which could undermine personal commitments and lead to standardisation (see above), such collaborations promoted a shared sense of professional creativity that participants suggested was motivating.





**Figures 4a Interactions with colleagues**



**Figures 4b Interactions with colleagues (key)**

Participants also referred to external sources for inspiration or guidance. For instance they used resources from specialist organisations such as the United Kingdom Literacy Association, and gleaned ideas from teacher acquaintances and social media. However,

reflecting on the ‘time spent’ postcards, Participants 3 and 7 noted that the availability of extensive resources via social media brought its own pressures:

7: We communicate probably more at home don't we than we see each other at school because we're constantly tagging each other on social media things that we see of ideas. As I say, it can get exhausting sometimes.

3: It can, yeah, you don't switch off, you're looking like, oh, is there something I've missed? They say switch it off in the holidays don't they, but I can't!

The teachers also told of recruiting family members to test possible activities, supporting the idea (discussed above) that they ‘never switch off’. One described how her partner and children helped to create the school library. School work even travelled on holiday – a book on the Mayans was taken on a plane to Turkey to prepare for a forthcoming unit of work, for example.

In these and other ways, the boundaries between home and work were blurred and professional networks extended well beyond other professionals. Professional life moved with the teachers as they gathered ideas, created resources, and developed background knowledge.

## Discussion

The five themes discussed above have been previously discussed in the literature on teachers’ beliefs and experiences (Craig, 2019; Goodson, 1992; Nias, 1989) and through research tracking the impact of neoliberal education policies on teachers’ lives and work (Craig, 2012; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998). They echo earlier accounts of the pressures of a target-driven culture, of too much testing at the expense of professional judgement, and of increased control and accountability (Menter et al., 1997; Osborn, 2000; Webb, 2006). However, in this project teachers postcards – and the ensuing discussions – provided some particular insights. Below we expand on these, referring back to Smith’s ideas about everyday/evernight activities and the role of texts. In doing so, we speculate on how teachers’ efforts to mitigate, supplement and adapt to externally imposed requirements and imperfect conditions may actually help sustain such conditions. At the same time we explore how reflecting on the complex, situated work of everyday practice, using methods such as those in this project, can work as a counterpoint to technicist and transactional accounts of teaching.

For Smith, institutions operate through ‘everyday/evernight activities’ in local sites, and she suggests that we can learn more about how institutions work through analysing such activities. At a time when evidence-based practice and data-led school improvement position teachers as deliverers of education, or objects of enquiry, rather than agentic professionals, it is particularly important to counterbalance this with detail about teachers’ daily work. Capturing the minutiae of their professional lives on postcards through this project (if less than systematic) brought such detail to the fore. The postcards, and the discussions they provoked, highlighted how participants’ personal commitments manifest in the things they do – planning, teaching, resourcing, using social media, marking and so on – but also how teachers must juggle various commitments with limited space, resources and time, alongside expectations for doing things in certain ways. As such, they illustrate how teachers’ work operates at the nexus of multiple sets of relations between people, places and things, upheld by complex relations with what others do. This is apparent in postcards such as the *Lost Words* postcard (Figure 1) in which a celebration of children’s responses to a text are juxtaposed with the realities of under-funding. The postcards show how education functions not just through careful adherence to policy or straightforward commitments to evidence-informed practice, but through the nuanced, contingent, situated work of teachers and the

individuals – pupils, colleagues, families and so on – they work alongside. The data-driven system shapes practices, but these practices are also inflected by other concerns, priorities and commitments. In expanding this point, and in light of the findings presented above, there are four arguments we wish to make.

Firstly, we argue for the importance of seeing readings of professional lives as provisional and partial. To this end, we emphasise that our five themes are not presented as a comprehensive account of what mattered to participants and we do not seek to generalise from them. In line with our commitment to standing with teachers, they are not designed to essentialise teachers' experience. They simply indicate some aspects that seemed evident to us in what they chose to share in conversation with us and with other participants. Had we had more time, introduced the postcard task differently, or intervened less – or more – in meeting discussions, other aspects may well have surfaced. This provisionality is important as it prompts us to see *all* representations of teachers' lives and work as provisional and partial, including those constructed through analyses of their pupils' measurable attainment.

Secondly, we note that, despite their provisionality, our themes relate to what we see as different *orders* of experience: to different ways of orientating to teaching literacy – linked variously to beliefs, materiality, power, time and sociality. Teaching is – at once – a practice shaped by personal commitments, *and* material and temporal constraints (in all likelihood linked to decisions made in other times and places), *and* current policy, *and* shifting social arrangements in and out of school. Of course, as our findings suggest, these different orders of experience are not discrete. They interface and interweave in multiple ways. External expectations and personal commitments inflect material realities, participation in diverse professional networks has implications for time and workload, and external expectations and personal commitments are not always at odds. Participant 7's use of social media in SATs week, for instance, involved professional support, but also a response to external requirements, with implications too for time and workload. Participants' accounts suggested that teachers' work involves localised compromise and problem-solving as they straddle these different orders of experience. This is important because it suggests that work to shift understandings about teaching, or to shift the practice of literacy teaching needs to recognise that teaching is experienced – and known – in different ways.

Thirdly, teachers' accounts of everyday/everynight activities provide insights into how certain educational realities are sustained. For Smith, everyday activities help us understand how the translocal character of ruling relations is accomplished. From this perspective, we might see what teachers do – as they manage multiple demands – as actions that help sustain an imperfect, underfunded and often overly politicised system through mitigating its worst effects. However, it is also possible to read our findings as exemplifying the improvisational, agentic ways in which teachers make things 'work' even when possibilities are constrained by external pressures – by providing 'meaningful' learning experiences, alleviating pressures on children, recruiting family and friends, and so on. As such, the postcards and associated discussions provide insights into how hegemonic discourses play through teachers' everyday lives, but also how such discourses can be unsettled through teachers' activities in local sites.

This leads to our final point which relates to Smith's call for 'texts that will provide for their readers a way of seeing further into the relations organizing their lives' (op cit.). Earlier we described Smith's interest in 'the architectural significance of texts' in co-ordinating human activity and considered how representations of attainment data – in spreadsheets and graphs – work to uphold ways of thinking about teaching. This project utilised a very different sort of

text – the hand-drawn postcard. With Smith’s work in mind, it is worth reflecting on how far the postcards worked as texts to surface teachers’ experiences in ways that unsettled, or generated alternative, ways of knowing. The postcards were very different from the data-texts usually produced and shared in schools – personalised, colourful, varied in style. As such they lent themselves to representing (and prompting discussions about) multiple aspects of experience. Different modalities – colour, line, shape, etc. – could be used to juxtapose multiple dimensions of experience (see Figures 1, 2, 4), and the invitation to be creative encouraged participants to draw on more complex or visually arresting forms than the bar charts and spreadsheets more familiar in schools. Moreover while these teachers were often reluctant to quantify experience or lacked the time to do so, we note that when the invitation to count and measure was combined with a focus on the ephemera and incidental moments of everyday experience, participants depicted teaching as complex, situated experience. If more familiar school-based data visualisations work to simplify educational experiences through juxtaposing limited variables (such as school year and attainment), then our approach allowed the possibility of representing multiple aspects of experience. The postcards’ hand-drawn nature may also have been significant, allowing perhaps for a draft-like quality consistent with an exploratory approach.

We are reluctant to claim too much for our postcard method based on this small scale project – not least because our final review meeting allowed only for brief discussion of participants’ thoughts about the further possibilities for creative data visualisation (see Burnett, Merchant and Guest, 2020). However we do suggest that the postcards illustrate how alternative texts – different in form from the data-texts routinely circulating in schools – can mediate discussions that bring the complexities of teachers’ everyday/everynight activities to the fore. In this project it seemed that the affordances of creative data visualisation facilitated the reflection across orders of experience – and intersectionality between these orders – that we comment on above. Such representations – and the discussions they generate – have potential to be valuable not just in highlighting the complexity of teachers’ work to others, but in providing an outlet for teachers’ critical reflection on the factors that enable and constrain their agency and autonomy. In the light of this we suggest there is potential for further research into how alternative texts can mediate, and represent, teachers’ knowledge about teaching, as a way of both providing others with insights into the detail of teachers’ lives and work, and provoking reflection amongst teachers themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The approach outlined in this article constitutes a modest attempt to work with teachers to re-insert their experience of professional life into research on literacy and education. It provides nuanced insights into teachers’ lives and teaching to those outside the classroom, insights that are important at a time when deficit evaluations of teachers’ work continue to appear. Rather than positioning them as functionaries who deliver curricula, as objects of study, or as actors who succeed or fail in delivering high standards, this project goes a small way towards disrupting the relations of ruling, through using postcard visualisations as texts that generate a counterpoint to the technicist accounts of teacher’s professional work associated with neoliberal education policy formations. The results show the complexity of teachers’ lives, highlighting intersections between commitments, possibilities and exigencies. They tell of how teachers negotiate different orders of experience amid competing and sometimes conflicting demands as they go about their daily work in ways that matter to them in different ways.

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