

**Narrative Identity and the Construction of Professional Meaning Among Teachers
Experiencing Educational Change**

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Summary of Thesis Presentation

This thesis is organised into three parts: a major literature review (Part One), an empirical paper (Part Two), and a critical appraisal (Part Three).

Part One: Literature Review

The literature review comprises two sections. Part A is a narrative review that outlines the contemporary context for teachers in Wales and the challenges to their professional identities. It also introduces relevant psychological frameworks that support understanding of this phenomenon. Part B is a systematic review focusing on literature that examines how narrative processes illuminate and shape teachers' professional identity construction.

Part Two: Empirical Paper

Part Two presents an empirical study exploring teachers' narrative identity construction through semi-structured interviews. It begins with an introduction to the research focus, followed by a description of the methodology. Findings and analysis are presented together, before a final discussion.

Part Three: Critical Appraisal

Part Three provides a reflective account of the development of both the research and the researcher. It concludes by considering the implications of the study for Educational Psychologists.

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Abbreviations

ALN	Additional Learning Needs
ALNET	Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018
ALNCo	Additional Learning Needs Coordinator
BPS	British Psychological Society
CfW	Curriculum for Wales
COMOIRA	Constructionist Model of Informed and Reasoned Action
EP	Educational Psychologist
NA	Narrative Analysis
PCA	Person-Centred Approach
PCP	Personal Construct Psychology
SDT	Self-Determination Theory



Part One: Major Literature Review

Word count: 12,168

1. Introduction

The ways in which teachers construct their professional identities can have implications for their wellbeing, motivation, and decision-making. During periods of educational reform, these identities may be challenged or destabilised, making it important to understand how teachers make sense of themselves in times of change. This is especially relevant for Educational Psychologists (EPs), who are well positioned to explore the psychological processes underpinning identity construction and support teachers in maintaining coherent and resilient professional identities. Narrative perspectives and methods can provide a valuable means of accessing these processes, offering insight into how identity is shaped and how support can be targeted effectively.

1.1 Overview of the Literature

This literature review is presented in two parts, designed to explore two overarching and interconnected aims. The first is to examine how teachers construct their professional identities. The second is to consider what the content of their narrative accounts reveal about their experiences and working environments.

Part A is a narrative literature review, which provides background to the topic alongside relevant theories and research. By connecting these elements, narrative reviews aim to offer an account of how a researcher has made sense of a given topic (Paré & Kitsiou, 2017).

Part B is a systematic literature review, which focuses specifically on research that has used narrative enquiry to explore teachers' professional identities.

Through critically reviewing the literature in this area, I highlight my enduring questions and points of interest. In doing so, I aim to establish the context and rationale for this study. In line with the reflexive qualitative approach adopted in this research, I use the first person to acknowledge my role in shaping this review - this is discussed further in Section 1.3.

1.2 Lens of the Researcher

The structure and voice of this study are strongly informed by Braun and Clarke's (2025) guidelines on conducting qualitative research following the big Q Qualitative approach. It is equally influenced by Riessman's (2015) guidance on conducting narrative research reflexively.

The big Q Qualitative approach emphasises that qualitative research is necessarily partial, contextual and subjective (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Given this foundation, high quality research depends on a researcher's awareness of their influence on a project, and their transparency in owning that influence. Braun and Clarke suggest that adherence to these principles allows for congruence in a research project. This means that the researchers' values, epistemological assumptions, resultant methods of inquiry, and analysis should all align.

Riessman's (2015) guidance on reflexivity in narrative research also stresses the importance of self-awareness in producing honest research. She discusses how the researcher should be open about the producer (themselves), the process of research, and the final research product. However, she goes beyond Braun and Clarke's call for self-awareness in research to call for social awareness too. For instance, she suggests considering the power dynamic between the researcher and participants that has made the research possible in the first place, stating that this is particularly important in narrative research because the two parties are always constructing a story together. From this perspective, greater contextual reflexivity on the part of the researcher makes for more nuanced and trustworthy narratives accounts.

Given the highly contextual and subjective values at their core, neither Braun and Clarke nor Riessman are prescriptive about their approaches. This means that the researcher is essentially asked to adopt their research values, while reflexively adjusting their approach to the specifics of their topic. I make clear my own position regarding these values in the following section.

1.3 Researcher Positionality

Riessman (2015) clearly endorses researcher presence within a project but suggests that the extent to which a researcher inserts themselves into the final product should be proportional to the project. She concludes that knowledge of the researcher's biography and background should always assist the reader in better understanding the topic.

In the case of this project, section three is solely reserved for reflexive and reflective considerations, therefore I considered it imprudent to outline my changing interpretations in the main text in detail. Equally, given that this research is designed to give attention to and containment for teachers narrating their professional identities, I felt unnecessary authorial insertion would detract from this.

However, as Goundar (2025) and Riessman (2015) both emphasise, researcher positionality is useful in making sense of power dynamics and how these affect the research process. To that end, I will state my own basic relationship to the project and participants here – I am neither an insider (a teacher) or an outsider in relation to the topic – I am a final year doctorate student who works in the same settings as some of the participants.

Furthermore, my position aligns with Braun et al. (2022), who suggest that it is the role of the researcher to “make an argument” when presenting a topic (p. 434). I will therefore explain the rationale for my decisions relating to the literature review and research design as transparently and succinctly as possible. In part 3, I will attempt to summarise my beliefs and values and how these drove my research choices throughout the process.

In this study I aim to consider the role of EPs in facilitating, hearing, and containing teachers' narrative accounts. In line with this aim, I use the first person selectively throughout the thesis. This choice is informed by Braun and Clarke (2025) and Riessman (2015) and reflects a reflexive qualitative stance in which knowledge is understood as co-constructed.

The use of first person makes visible my role in shaping the research process, particularly where my contribution is analytical and interpretative, including during the interview process where my influence on the construction of narrative accounts is most direct.

Third person language is retained when discussing procedural steps, existing literature, and established theory, in order to distinguish between my analytic contributions and the work of others. This distinction is intended to support clarity and epistemological coherence throughout the thesis.

1.4 Definition of Terms

Some of the key terms that are used throughout this thesis are presented in the table below for ease of understanding.

Table 1

Definition of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Narrative	Refers to the process through which individuals organise and interpret their experiences into meaningful accounts. Within this study, narratives are understood as constructed and situated, shaped through interaction and context rather than representing objective accounts of events (Riessman, 1993).
Professional Identity	Refers to an individual's evolving sense of self in relation to their professional role. In this study, it is understood as dynamic and constructed through experience, interaction, and reflection rather than as fixed or inherent.
Agency	Refers to the capacity to act with a sense of authorship over one's experiences and identity. In this study, agency is conceptualised as relational and contextually mediated, emerging through interaction and interpretation rather than residing solely within the individual (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).
Narrative reflection	Refers to the process of reflecting on experience through the construction and interpretation of narrative, enabling individuals to make sense of events and their implications for identity.

Meaning-making	Refers to the process through which individuals interpret experiences and assign them significance, shaping their understanding of themselves and their world.
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2. Part A: Setting the Scene

This narrative review draws on a combination of seminal academic texts and theories, policy documents and peer-reviewed research in order to highlight the significance of the topic and establish why it warrants further investigation. Furthermore, by synthesising these texts, I hope to construct a coherent account of how my understanding of the topic has developed over time (Braun et al., 2022).

When looking for research central to my subject I used various combinations of search terms; some examples are, 'teacher narratives/identities', 'teacher support', 'teacher role' and 'teacher containment'. Much of the secondary reading I have included in relation to theory, policy and the role of the EP, stemmed from my interpretation of the literature generated by these initial searches. I used Google Scholar and PsycInfo®, as my primary databases to conduct these searches, as well as drawing upon reading I had done independent of this project.

This section begins by addressing the broader educational backdrop in order to illustrate how the challenges and demands of this context may influence teacher identity construction. Then consideration will be given to the psychological approaches which informed this review and the subsequent analysis of data. Finally, narrative approaches will be examined as a means of understanding how teachers construct and make sense of their professional identities, providing a foundation for the analysis of participants' narrative accounts in Part 2.

2.1 The Context for Teachers in Recent Years

In 2003 Stephen Ball (2003) wrote a concerned paper regarding the concept of performativity in schools. In his paper, performativity referred to teachers' internalisation of external measures of performance such as test scores, league tables, and inspections, and the resultant reshaping of their professional identities and practices in response to these

pressures. He attributed these changes to the increasing marketisation of education fuelled by neoliberal policy changes such as performance related funding and school ranking systems.

Ball's concerns (2003) have enduring relevance to the education system in England today. For example, his fears were somewhat realised in the increasing academisation of 'failing' English schools (Lewis & Pearce, 2022). Similarly, Brady and Wilson (2022) found that the accountability culture in English schools - closely aligned with Ball's concept of performativity - was a major factor driving teachers to leave the profession at a high rate.

Wales's education system was devolved in 1999 and has followed a slightly different path since then, though periods of more intense ranking and testing within and between schools mean that teachers have been subject to some similar pressures (Evans, 2022). However, Wales has also diverged greatly from England in some senses – with fewer external metrics of performance and greater emphasis on collaboration rather than competition (Evans, 2022; Hutt & Lewis, 2021; Welsh Government, 2023).

Although the Welsh system is arguably less structurally competitive, Skinner et al. (2021) found that teachers in both England and Wales reported similar sources of stress including role ambiguity and low self-esteem (though the participant ratios recruited from the two countries were not disclosed). Scott et al. (2024) reported that headteachers in Wales were significantly more stressed than other public sector workers. Some of the reasons for this stress were context specific, for example, the new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) code for Wales introduced in 2021, which was felt to increase pressure on the provision of support for those with additional needs (Scott et al., 2024; Welsh Government, 2021). However, the common themes of the reported stress were varied and extensive demands, limited resources and insufficient support from local authorities.

Overall, research focusing on stressors to teachers (senior leaders apart) within the Welsh system are lacking. Though the English and Welsh education systems can be perceived as sharing some components and pressures on teachers, their current forms are markedly different. Therefore, amalgamating teachers' experiences or assuming equivalent

impacts on wellbeing should not be done uncritically. That said, the speed of educational policy developments in England and Wales over recent years is notable in both contexts (Evans, 2022). For Wales's part, Evans (2022) cautions that continued change has resulted in teacher fatigue. He argues that to successfully implement new systems, no matter how well-intentioned, depends primarily on energising the workforce tasked with carrying out those changes.

2.1.1 The New Curriculum for Wales and Additional Learning Needs Act

The Curriculum for Wales (CfW) came about following a review into curriculum design and assessment conducted by Graham Donaldson on behalf of the Welsh Government (Donaldson, 2015). Donaldson's review proposed replacing a focus on discrete subjects to six general areas of learning, as well as progression steps replacing key stages and traditional assessment metrics. Central to his proposal was a curriculum founded on four key values which encouraged learners to become:

- Ambitious, capable, ready to learn throughout their lives.
- Enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work.
- Ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.
- Healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

Donaldson's proposals were accepted by the Welsh Government in full and became statutory in 2022 (Durden-Myers et al., 2025; Welsh Government, 2024). These overarching principles were intended to give school leaders the scope to shape their curriculum in response to the needs of their communities and students (Evans, 2023; Welsh Government, 2024). For teachers, the CfW was intended to empower and to give them more autonomy as curriculum designers (Evans, 2022). Some teachers and schools were selected as pioneers, who were to lead the design of the new curriculum in their schools and areas (Kneen et al., 2023).

The CfW was designed to intersect with another major alteration to the Welsh education system - The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET). The ALN Code 2021 later provided guidance for schools on how to implement the principles of the act (Welsh Government, 2018; Welsh Government, 2021). ALNET had three overarching objectives:

- A unified, legislative framework to support all children of compulsory school age or below with ALN, and young people with ALN in schools or further education (FE) from 0-25 years of age.
- An integrated, collaborative process of assessment, planning and monitoring which facilitates, early, timely and effective interventions; and
- A fair and transparent system for providing information and advice, and for resolving concerns and appeals.

This legislation meant that for students with ALN, their Additional Learning Provision (ALP) would be guaranteed through Individual Development Plans (IDPs). The majority of these plans would be maintained by the school, with only the most complex needs requiring IDPs maintained by the local authority (Marsh & Jeans, 2024). In practice, the new legislation meant that more children with ALN would be in mainstream classes, but staff would be supported to follow a graduated response to meeting need, before drafting IDPs. Firstly, classrooms would provide universal support (whole class approaches), second, they would offer targeted provision (usually in the form of small group interventions), and finally, through specialist interventions or placements (individual interventions) (Welsh Government, 2021). ALNET has been supported by funding from the Welsh Government in order to make classrooms more inclusive and person-centred and to encourage early recognition and intervention around ALN (Marsh & Jeans, 2024).

In sum, both the CfW and ALNET were designed to make classrooms more inclusive, creative, community-rooted and needs-led. To enable this change, this legislation required classroom teachers to take a more active role as curriculum designers and to adopt increasingly inclusive and person-centred approaches to practice.

2.1.2 Changing Role – The Holistic Teacher

By outlining the contextual shifts in Welsh education, I aim to convey how the demands and pressures on teachers have evolved. However, as Evans (2023) notes, individual responses to these pressures vary widely. Given the early stages of the CfW and the ALNET reforms, research into their impact on teachers remains limited. It may therefore be sensible to avoid firm conclusions until implementation is more fully realised. With this in mind, I draw on literature that reviews and anticipates the effects of legislative change on the role of the teacher in Wales. Findings are often variable and, at times, speculative. To provide clarity, I summarise a few recurring themes across the literature and provide a brief outline of how these have been seen to change the role of the teacher. While this summary cannot capture every complexity, it aims to highlight both the potential scale of change and the mixed reception it has received among practitioners.

Teachers as Assessment and Curriculum Designers

Power et al. (2020) spoke to pioneer schools using interviews and surveys shortly before the CfW became statutory. While the authors and some of their participants were concerned that a lack of centralised assessment measures would create greater disparity between learners, the study also reports that an overwhelming majority of teachers desired more flexibility in assessing children. This wish was realised in the form of the progression steps – a central feature of the CfW which offered a more bespoke and malleable way of assessing individual students' progress. Predictably, a Welsh Government funded study conducted by Thomas et al. (2023), which collected data from senior leaders about the progress of the CfW's rollout, found that designing new approaches to assessment had been challenging. However, senior leaders also said that staff were becoming increasingly confident and creative in designing these methods and were involving students in peer assessment to a greater degree too.

It should be noted that most feedback on assessment protocol so far has been funded by Welsh Government, though their findings seem to offer a balanced picture. In fact, one

Welsh Government paper from Duggan et al. (2022) surveyed senior leaders and staff just prior to the CfW's rollout, the majority of whom were unclear about what the new assessment arrangements would be. Indeed, this uncertainty is reflected in the small pool of literature collected so far about teacher assessment under the CfW. While the idea of more student-centred, formative assessments is welcomed, there is a sense of confusion and unevenness between teachers about how this is to be delivered in practice (Evans, 2023; Power et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2023).

Similarly, teachers have been asked to take a more active role in curriculum design (Duggan et al., 2022). Though most teachers are experienced lesson planners, the flexibility of the CfW calls on them to take a more active role in designing classes that meet the needs of the students in various ways. For instance, given that the CfW calls for less discrete subject teaching, more community-related content, and has a more holistic metric of assessment - a framework for implementation might be helpful. Duggan et al. (2022) and Brown et al. (2025) found that teachers who had a sense of guidance and support felt better equipped to deal with these demands. Moreover, they identified that those in contexts lacking whole-school coherence in curriculum design, who were poorly connected to pioneer schools, or who wanted more practical guidance, experienced curriculum design as difficult and confusing.

Teachers as Inclusive and Person-Centred Practitioners

As noted above, both ALNET and the CfW have called on schools and teachers to make their classrooms more person-centred and inclusive. Conn and Hutt's (2020) study concerning the intersection of these two pieces of legislation used interviews and a narrative enquiry approach to see how the legislation's impending rollout was being talked about amongst teaching staff. They found that for pioneer schools and teachers as well as ALNCos, inclusivity and person-centred practice aligned with their values and represented their idea of good teaching. Five years on and with the legislation now statutory across schools, Murphy et al. (2025) asked groups of ALNCos for their perspective on the impact of legislative reforms on teachers. Similarly to the findings in Conn and Hutt's study, the

person-centred values of the legislation made sense to the participants and were reflected in classrooms becoming more inclusive and person-centred. The result of this had been greater connectedness between staff and parents in supporting young people, notably experienced through the advent of Person-Centred Planning (PCP) meetings.

However, both studies noted that though this tendency towards more holistic practice felt intuitive to ALNCoS and pioneer teachers – this was not uniform across schools. Conn and Hutt (2020) suggested that for some teachers, they felt that it was their job to teach the “centre ground” (p.154), meaning those students who require little differentiation to be able to cope in class. For teachers who have been trained and taught within systems that remove higher level ALN students from mainstream classes, this seems an understandable perspective. The authors of this study state that teachers should be able to foster inclusive environments which cater for a wide range of student needs, though they do own that for the centre-ground teacher, ALNET requires an adjustment in their professional identity.

That said, Murphy et al. (2025) highlight that even for teachers who may intend to become more inclusive and person-centred practitioners, these two aims are not always compatible. Fundamentally, the question that is asked is how a person-centred, needs driven approach intersects with an all-encompassing, highly differentiated classroom. More directly, it is contestable whether every individual’s needs are best met within a classroom that is inclusive of children with a wide variety of needs. A lack of resolution here means that the authors found that some schools have developed a dual system, by incorporating unofficial alternative provisions for some students whilst trying to make classrooms more inclusive too.

It is not only learning needs that teachers are being asked to cater for in a more bespoke manner, as Brown et al. (2025) point out. The CfW and ALN code have been supplemented by another recent framework from the Welsh government: the Framework on Embedding a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2021). While this legislation explicitly intends to improve the wellbeing of staff as well as pupils, Brown et al. highlight multiple barriers to its implementation. For instance, poor staff wellbeing, more acute student mental health needs and a sense of overwhelm, (in part

caused by the rollout of the other legislation mentioned here), were all seen to be contributing factors to the capacity to amend wellbeing procedures. For some teachers, a more holistic approach may feel intuitive, or as Conn and Hutt (2020) suggested, may feel like entrenching the gold-standard of teaching. However, for others it requires a professional identity shift, greater sensitivity to students' emotional and learning needs and generates a feeling of paradox about how to best meet those needs.

Upskilling, Resource and Capacity

For teachers who embrace the challenge to become more holistic practitioners, a further challenge may be upskilling themselves to be able to do so. Durden-Myers et al. (2025) spoke to teachers at pioneer schools designing the health and wellbeing aspects of the new curriculum and found inconsistencies in the experiences of the staff chosen as curriculum designers. While some felt that taking charge of designing the new curriculum was a great opportunity and responsibility, others felt that making such strategic decisions sat outside of their professional experience. The degree to which curriculum design was experienced as a new and positive facet of their role was in large part reflective of the sense of continuity and guidance in messaging that teachers received. Some teachers felt there was a synergy and purpose to the curriculum design that came from senior leaders and a logical connection between the new curriculum and their local community. Evans (2023) expands on this idea, arguing that teachers require a clear and contextual vision of how they can develop into the kind of practitioners required by the new legislation, and without this, they are unlikely to be motivated to fulfil its demands.

Whilst teacher motivation to upskill or reinvent their professional practice is one challenge, providing them with the time and resources to do so is equally difficult. Across the literature, teachers cited a lack of time, resources, and emotional capacity as primary obstacles to integrating new legislative requirements and fulfilling the evolving demands of their roles (Brown et al., 2025; Conn & Hutt, 2020; Power et al., 2020). Without these needs being met, teachers risk feeling jaded, deskilled and demotivated by new requirements (Brown et al., 2025; Evans, 2023).

Conversely, Power et al. (2020) suggest that for highly resourced schools the new legislation, which encourages more autonomous and holistic teachers, will benefit many practitioners. However, their study found that participants feared that a lack of coherence in the curriculum, coupled with poorer quality teaching in socioeconomically deprived areas was likely to exacerbate inequity between schools.

Summary

Given the variability of teacher experiences in meeting the demands of ALNET and the CfW, it is difficult to say whether these changes have been welcomed or not overall. Much of the variability described is founded on the differing experiences and professional identities of teachers, the resources available to the school, and the coherence in messaging between staff, schools and their wider communities. Furthermore, many of the participants referenced here were drawn from pioneer schools, and many others were senior leaders or ALNCos. As the leaders in implementing systemic change, the alterations to the role of the teacher may seem greater as they are required to direct and embody the values of the new legislation.

Brown et al. (2025) point out that it can often take 3-4 years for evidence-led programmes to take hold in schools and years more for outcomes to be felt. If accepted, it follows that systemic alterations of this scale may also require patience. Therefore, for the individual teacher, the alterations to their roles may not feel established for quite some time. That said, the magnitude of the changes to the role of the teacher in Wales - while, at present, likely felt more acutely by some than others - are such that they may require significant emotional, intellectual and material support to be realised successfully. This realisation is arguably contingent on teachers' ability to adapt their professional identities accordingly. EPs, as professionals working to support educational environments, may be able to assist to this end.

2.2 Psychological Approaches to Supporting Teachers

In light of the shifting influences on teachers' professional identities, the discussion now turns to the role of EPs in this changing landscape. To frame this, brief consideration is given

to psychological theories concerning identity and relational change - these influenced both the choice of topic and the approach to the literature review. Furthermore, they highlight how a narrative framing can offer a meaningful lens through which to explore identity construction. A systematic review will then directly address research which has used narrative enquiry to explore this area thus far. Later, in Part 2, this discussion will be expanded to show how EPs can integrate the psychological theories and approaches, and the use of narrative research techniques to provide greater insight and support to the topic of teacher identity construction.

2.2.1 The Person-Centred Approach

Person-centred therapy, initially known as client-centred therapy, was conceived by Carl Rogers and is viewed as a strand of humanistic psychology (Joseph, 2008; Rogers, 1961). This approach prioritises and trusts in the experiences and resources of an individual to enact positive change. Rogers emphasised the importance of the therapeutic relationship in helping clients move towards a sense of autonomous fulfilment (Rogers, 1961) and later applied these ideas to relationships outside of this context.

Central to Rogers' theory is the belief that people have an innate tendency towards actualisation - a drive to become more psychologically mature and authentic. He suggested that, given the right conditions, individuals invariably move towards their authentic selves, which he conceived as acting in line with their values. These values are not externally imposed, but arise from an individual's ever-changing, embodied experience, informed by a trust in their own subjectivity, or, as he put it, the organismic self. To Rogers, acting in alignment with this self fosters autonomy and self-determination, allowing people to exercise a sense of agency over their choices (Rogers, 1961).

Rogers also outlined the essential relational attitudes that facilitate authentic expression, namely: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. Empathy involves understanding the other's perspective as-if it were one's own. Unconditional positive regard provides acceptance and warmth independent of thoughts or behaviours. Congruence refers

to the therapist modelling authenticity by aligning internal feelings with communication (Rogers, 1961). These principles foreground the role of relational conditions in supporting the construction and expression of identity.

Over time, Rogers' ideas evolved into the broader person-centred approach (PCA), which extends beyond therapy into general relational and developmental contexts (Rogers, 1980; Rodgers & Tudor, 2020). Some contemporary definitions emphasise PCA as an inclusively defined psychological posture, prioritising genuineness and relational depth, rather than strict therapeutic fidelity (Di Malta et al., 2024).

Relevance to this Study

PCA informed the selection of this topic given the importance it places on awareness of, and alignment with, one's authentic identity. This seemed particularly salient for teachers in Wales, whose professional identities are often challenged by external and systemic factors, as illustrated above. PCA's focus on autonomy, authenticity, and relational depth highlights how narrative interviewing and psychological understanding can operate in tandem to capture processes of identity construction. While the detailed application of PCA to the study itself will be discussed in Part 2, its core ideas provide a rationale for the choice of narrative approaches as a lens through which to explore teacher identity.

2.2.2 Personal Construct Psychology

George Kelly is the forefather of Personal Construct Psychology (PCP). Simply put, his theory maintains that each individual interprets the world differently, and they do so through dichotomous constructs (Kelly, 1955). This means that one's perception of the world is understood through bipolar dimensions for example 'good or bad', although the binary is not always as simple as this example suggests. This is because the constructs are subjectively conceptualised by an individual, so the opposite of 'caring' is not necessarily 'uncaring', but whatever meaning the individual defines as its contrast (Kelly, 1955). As such, although constructs are inherently dichotomous, these dimensions often remain implicit and only become evident through exploration.

As with PCA, PCP also positions the individual as the expert in understanding and altering their lived experience (Kelly, 1955; Rogers, 1961). However, individuals may not be consciously aware of the constructs through which they interpret their world. Inflexible constructs, or those which fail to accurately anticipate reality, may result in feelings of threat, uncertainty and stress (Kelly, 1955). Kelly therefore emphasised the importance of eliciting and revising constructs in order to better anticipate lived experience. This ongoing process of refinement enables individuals to adapt to changing environments and engage more freely with their experiences.

Relevance to this Study

From a PCP perspective, structural and systemic alterations to the Welsh education system will be inconsistently experienced dependent on an individual's existing constructs and their capacity for accurate anticipation. This reinforces the importance of accessing first-hand, experiential accounts of how teachers interpret and respond to change. Equally, exploring how constructs evolve in response to external challenges over time may offer insight into the contextual and temporal elements of identity construction too.

Narrative interviews provide a means of accessing these processes - offering a space for individuals to uncover, reflect upon, and potentially adapt their constructs. In this way, narrating one's identity may function as a mechanism for reducing tension between existing beliefs and changing demands, and therefore as a potential protective factor in resolving identitarian dissonance. As such, PCP provides a useful framework for understanding the variability and tension within teachers' experiences, and for framing the narrative accounts explored in the following systematic review.

2.2.3 Containment

Containment is a psychoanalytic concept conceived by Wilfred Bion (Bion, 1985). Stated simply, psychoanalysis is concerned with the unconscious mind – the aspect of experience operating outside of conscious awareness, shaped by prior relationships and experiences. Containment, for Bion, refers to a relational process through which unconscious emotional

states are received, held, and transformed into experiences that can be thought about and processed (Ruch, 2014). Originally conceptualised within the infant-caregiver relationship and later within therapeutic settings, this process enables individuals to develop the capacity to reflect on and make sense of previously unprocessed emotional experience (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021; Seligman, 2025). As with PCA and PCP, containment also conceptualises change as arising within relationships (Szykierski, 2010).

Relevance to this Study

During periods of educational reform and systemic instability, teachers may experience stress and emotional uncertainty. From a containment perspective, such experiences may remain difficult to process without opportunities for reflection.

By offering space to articulate and make sense of experience, narrative reflection can enable individuals to transform challenging experiences into meaningful accounts. This positions narrative reflection as a psychologically meaningful process through which identity can be explored while also consolidating teachers' emotional experiences into accounts that can be analysed and contextualised.

2.2.4 Narrative Approaches

Jerome Bruner conceptualised narrative as a fundamental means through which individuals organise, interpret and make meaning of their experiences. His work paid particular attention to self-narratives - the stories individuals tell about their own lives (Bruner, 2004). His perspective was a constructionist one, in that he believed lived experience cannot be understood independently of the narratives through which it is interpreted (Bruner, 2004). Rather than viewing stories as simple reflections of reality, Bruner suggested that they actively shape how experience is organised and made meaningful. From this position, narratives hold particular significance for psychological change, as experiencing and recounting one's life differently necessarily alters how that life is perceived and lived (Bruner, 2004).

This constructionist position was shared by White and Epston (1990), who developed narrative therapy. A fundamental belief of this approach is that individuals are not defined by the problems they experience, and that difficulties become limiting when they are conflated with identity. Therefore, a central process within narrative therapy is externalisation, whereby problems are positioned as separate from the person, allowing them to be examined and related to differently. In this way, narrative approaches create space for alternative meanings and identities to emerge.

White and Epston argued that self-narratives are necessarily selective and constrained, capturing only a fraction of a person's lived experience. Through reflection, clients are supported to attend to neglected aspects of their experience and to identify alternative meanings and values. In doing so, they open up possibilities for action and change (White & Epston, 1990).

Relevance to this Study

There are clear conceptual resonances between narrative theory and the approaches outlined above. Bruner's work was similarly concerned with how change in meaning arises through reflective processes that facilitate the reinterpretation of experience (Bruner, 1991). He proposed that narratives accounts, however convincing they may feel to the individual, represent interpretative perspectives rather than fixed truths, and that once articulated, these accounts become open to reconsideration and change.

In the context of teaching, this is particularly pertinent. Teachers often navigate complex and sometimes conflicting demands, which may give rise to tensions within their professional identities (Xu, 2019). Narrative approaches therefore offer a means of exploring how these identities are constructed and negotiated in response to such pressures. This reflects a view of identity as something that is shaped through the process of interpreting experience.

2.3 Summary

This section has sought to highlight the theoretical convergence of the above approaches and their shared aims and ethos. Namely, these psychological positions share an emphasis

on change as a social, meaning-based, and reflective process. Equally, the research cited here positions identity as unfixed and continuously negotiated through the interpretation of experience. Therefore, the essential commonality between these approaches is their shared constructionist epistemology - a belief that identity is authored through interaction and discourse (Burr & Dick, 2017). The role of the relational other is to facilitate the reflective process and to enable individuals to reauthor their experience of themselves.

Narrative approaches represent a conceptual meeting point for these ideas, offering a space for individuals to reconsider and organise their experiences. This is particularly salient in an educational context, where external demands have been seen to influence professional identities. Specifically, narrative approaches may: create opportunities to learn about the environments and pressures that shape teacher identity; illuminate the processes involved in identity construction; and furnish teachers with a greater sense of understanding and agency over their professional identities. The convergence of these approaches within a narrative framework and how they informed the empirical study is illustrated in Figure 2 at the beginning of Part 2.

Within this framework, agency is understood not as a fixed capacity, but as something that emerges through processes of interaction and interpretation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This aligns with the constructionist perspective outlined above, in which meaning and identity are viewed as contextually and temporally situated. From this position, narrative reflection may be understood as a process through which individuals develop a sense of authorship over their professional identities.

In light of this, the following systematic review is concerned with literature using narrative approaches to explore teacher identities. While this literature does not uniformly engage with the psychological processes underpinning narrative approaches, there is some coherence in their constructionist framing of identity development. The importance of this shared perspective is in terms of the agency given to the narrator; that they are capable of authoring their own professional identity through the process of reflecting on it. The implications of this

perspective, and the potential it offers for EPs to support teachers' identity development, will be considered in the final section of the review.

3. Part B: Systematic Review

3.1 Overview

The following review used a systematic approach to examine papers concerning teachers' professional identities using narrative research approaches. First, I will outline the steps to this process and the reasoning behind my choices, before presenting a thematic analysis from the literature selected.

3.2 Search Terms and Strategy

To conduct the systematic search, I used several databases which were selected based on their relevance to qualitative approaches, psychology and education - the fundamental bases of this study. The databases selected were PsycInfo®, Scopus and some Proquest databases including, Education Collection, Dissertations and Theses Global, and Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA). I also conducted some citation searching through Google Scholar. I chose these specific databases as I wanted to find relevant literature from both educational and psychological perspectives. Scopus was selected in order to cover literature from a broad range of disciplines. Grey literature (research material accessed through non-commercial and peer reviewed channels, including unpublished dissertations) was also sought through Dissertation and Theses Global as this literature often provides extended engagement with theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Paez, 2017). I also carried out citation searching to uncover any literature that was not retrieved through database keywords alone, one study accessed through this process was included in the final review. Searches were conducted between December 5th 2025 and January 16th 2026.

I endeavoured to use broad search terms in order to find as much relevant literature as possible – these terms can be seen in Table 2. The horizontal axis illustrates the three

search domains, whilst the vertical axis shows the alternative keywords combined using OR; the three domains were then combined using AND.

The breadth of literature returned by these initial searches meant that I read widely on teacher identity, narrative enquiry and professional identity. From this reading, it became apparent that relatively little attention had been paid to the psychological conceptualisation of narrative identity within the literature. Consequently, the review was refined to focus on the psychological conceptualisation of narrative identity and its potential role in facilitating identity change. The review therefore sought to address the following question: How has narrative identity been conceptualised within research exploring teachers' professional identity, and what does this reveal about the psychological processes involved in narrative identity work?

Table 2

Terms used for Systematic Literature Search

	Keyword 1	Keyword 2	Keyword 3
	<i>Population</i>	<i>Interest</i>	<i>Method</i>
	Teacher	Identit*	Narrative
OR			Story
			Stories
	AND		

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The initial exclusion criteria applied during the review of titles and abstracts are listed below. These criteria were subsequently refined following a more thorough review of the literature.

- Studies published before 1999.
- Studies using quantitative only designs.
- Studies focussed on teacher emotions independent of identity.
- Studies concerning student teachers or non-teaching school staff only.

A temporal boundary of 1999 was selected as appropriate for this search. Whilst this decision naturally excludes some relevant identity research, it marks a seminal contextual shift to teacher's work given the devolution of education policy to Wales (Evans, 2022). Whilst none of the final studies included here were based in Wales, this cut-off was retained because it also marked the start of a contemporary era in UK education, exemplified by performativity culture (Ball, 2003; Evans, 2022). Though this was felt and conceptualised differently in Wales and England, the emergence of this shift in the identity contexts of UK teachers represented a significant turning point and therefore suggested itself as an appropriate boundary for demarcating this search.

Limiting the sample solely to teachers was a necessary criterion given that some element of contextual and professional replicability between papers was required. This excluded a large portion of literature concerned with the identity development of student teachers. However, in the interests of retaining the most methodologically applicable papers in this group, if these studies also included qualified teachers in their samples, they were considered suitable for inclusion.

Refining the search to exclude quantitative studies was a logical step, as the research sought to explore professional identity as a holistic and contextual process of meaning-making, rather than conceptualising identity through discrete, generalisable characteristic or affective measures typical of quantitative designs. As such, following initial searches, further methodological refinement was necessary in order to identify papers which functioned similarly to this design. These searches uncovered a breadth of literature that used narrative approaches to illustrate teacher identity development, some of it based in relevant or applicable contexts.

Importantly, however, the literature that was most relevant to the present research conceptualised narration as constitutive of identity, not simply illustrative of it. That is, narrative enquiry was not used solely to describe or reveal a pre-existing, 'fixed' identity, but was understood as a process through which identity could be negotiated and changed.

Discerning between illustrative and constitutive identity work was a nuanced process which required deeper reading of the literature identified. Judging where narrative enquiry had been used solely as an investigative tool, and where it had also been perceived as a means of authoring identity, was the central task of this reading. In making these judgements, it was necessary to acknowledge a degree of interpretive subjectivity. As Carl Rogers argued, “science has its inception in a participating person... which have personal and subjective meaning for him” (1961, pp. 216–217), highlighting that even scientific inquiry is not purely objective but begins within the subjective experience of the researcher.

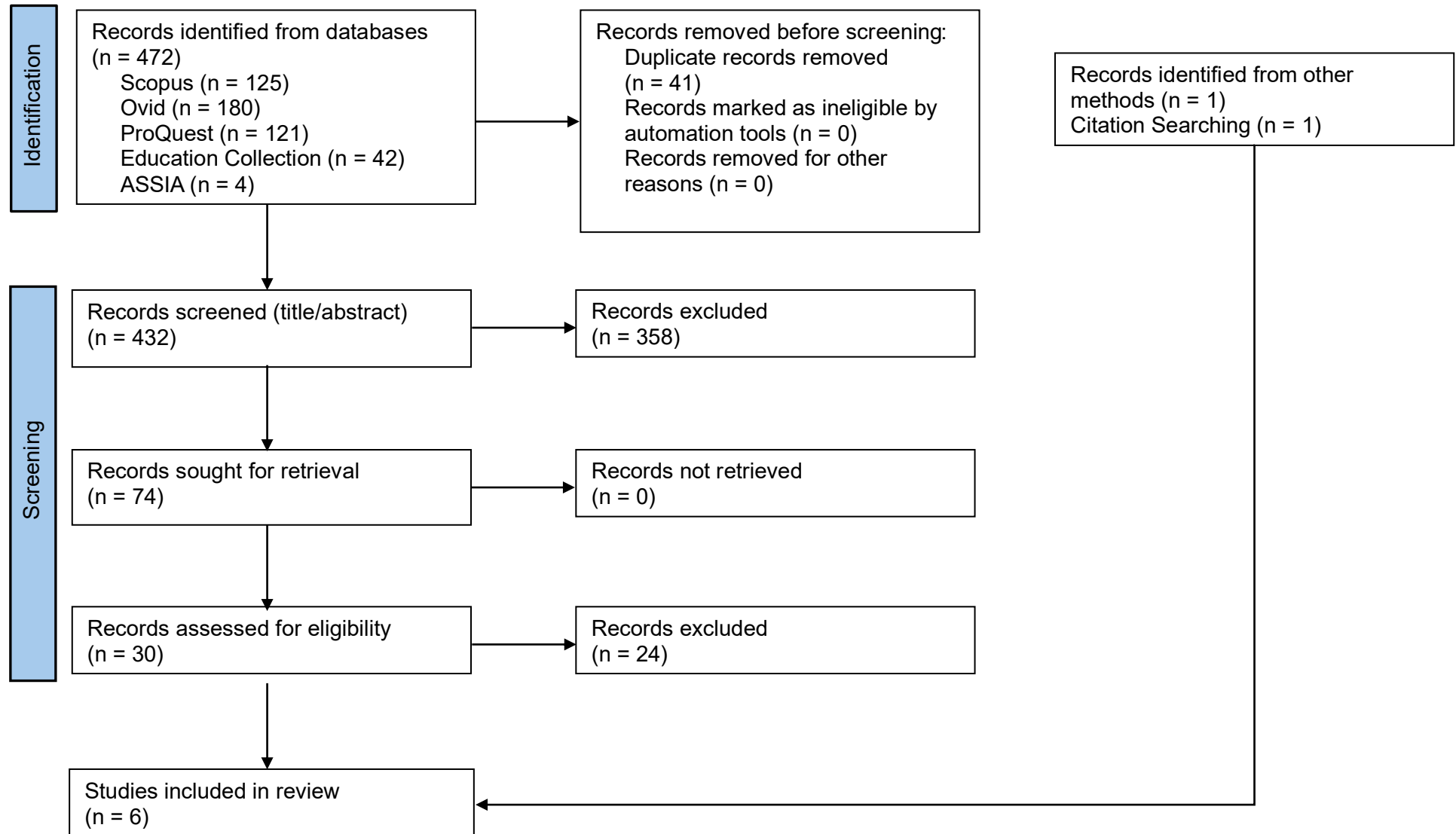
The commonality across the included papers was that they treated the telling of narratives as having some degree of shaping effect on the identity of the participants, thereby sharing an implicit constructionist belief. Delineating the mechanisms of identity construction suggested by this literature therefore provided a means of evaluating the potential of narrative reflection in supporting change. This may then offer EPs a clearer understanding of how narrative processes could be leveraged to support teachers.

Initially, filters were applied to searches in order to limit my findings to UK contexts. Given the importance of context relative to identity formation discussed elsewhere in this paper, this seemed appropriate. However, the search returned some papers based overseas, a small number of which were retained for consideration due to their methodological and conceptual relevance to this study. Only one of these was used in the final review. All research was interpreted cautiously, and contextual comparisons were used only to inform analysis of identity development processes, rather than to make direct or generalisable claims across educational systems.

A more complete appraisal of the systematic search process is presented in the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) diagram (see Figure 1) (Page et al., 2021).

Figure 1

A PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for New Systematic Reviews Which Included Searches of Databases and Other Sources



3.4 Quality Appraisal

The final six studies included in this review comprised a combination of doctoral theses and published research, all of which employed narrative methods of enquiry to explore teacher identity. While none adopted an explicitly psychological perspective, the selected papers provided insight into how teacher identity is constructed through narration, with further attention given to contextual influences. The theses were selected due to their theoretically rich and epistemologically dense perspectives, which allowed them to deal with identity, narrative and context in depth.

Initial consideration was given to the use of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) as a framework for evaluating qualitative research, the epistemological density of the included studies eventually prevented the adoption of a quality appraisal tool predominantly focussed on methodological rigour. As outlined in Section 3.3, studies were selected on the basis of their epistemological alignment and conceptualisation of narrative as a constructivist process in identity formation. Consequently, the application of particular standardised appraisal tools risked prioritising procedural criteria over epistemological coherence and interpretive depth. Instead, studies were initially appraised in a bespoke manner in relation to their theoretical alignment, methodological transparency, and contribution to understanding narrative identity construction. A summary of this appraisal process, including the basis on which studies were included or excluded, is provided in Appendix A Table A1. Following this bespoke appraisal, Yardley's (2000) principles for evaluating qualitative research were applied as a complementary quality appraisal framework. This approach enabled a more thorough appraisal of the literature whilst also prioritising flexibility and sensitivity to context, which were important values in the present research. A worked example demonstrating the application of Yardley's criteria is provided in Appendix A Table A2.

3.5 Structure

My following analysis of the six papers aims to explore how narrative reflection functions in teacher identity development, with particular attention to studies that position narrative reflection as constitutive rather than descriptive of professional identity. Through systematic examination of these papers, this analysis addresses two interrelated questions: how teachers construct their professional identities through narrative reflection, and what this reveals about the psychological mechanisms involved in this construction. It also considers why revealing these mechanisms is important in relation to teacher wellbeing, identity coherence, and professional motivation, and how EPs may contribute to further understanding and supporting narrative identity work with teachers.

While the narrative review introduced psychological frameworks which position identity construction as a reflective and meaning-laden process, the literature presented here does not explicitly engage with these psychological frameworks. Therefore, the following analysis first presents how narrative identity is conceptualised within the literature, before drawing inferentially on these psychological frameworks in the final section to interpret the individual processes underpinning narrative identity work. This approach allows the review to remain grounded in the literature while also facilitating a degree of theoretically informed interpretation.

I have chosen to present findings based on their conceptual themes following a narrative, interpretative synthesis of studies. This approach condenses the key commonalities and differences in the research into a clearly comprehensible format. The themes are also organised to gradually convey the extent to which narrative identity formation is viewed as a free and agentic process, and to highlight why this is significant for the teaching profession.

3.6 Themes Drawn from the Literature

3.6.1 *The Constitutive Power of Narrative within Social Constraints*

To some degree, all of the papers cited here conceptualise narration as a constitutive process in the formation of teacher identities. However, the power of narrative reflection in

shaping and transforming identity is neither equally attributed, nor equally considered, between papers.

Ramiz (2020), for example, conceptualises narrative reflection as a sense-making process rather than a transformational engine for identity development. In describing the pressures placed on teachers, narrative reflection is seen to distil and consolidate these pressures into identitarian inevitabilities, rather than suggesting they can transform through discussion. He finds convincing similarities between participant experiences of the education system. These parallels are made more compelling by his division of his sample into generational cohorts, thereby gaining participant-led insight into the impact and development of neoliberal education policies over time. His resultant portrayal of the English education system is similar to Ball's (2003), as defined by performance metrics, accountability and systemic rigidity, which he shows to impinge on teacher's values, autonomy, and wellbeing, suggesting the cause is "sociological rather than psychological" (Ramiz, 2020, p.197). While skilled in rendering the causes of identitarian and systemic friction, his aim of identifying these similarities more broadly potentially risks over attributing the role of contextual factors in identity development. This might be due to the study's aim to identify themes between participants, thereby limiting the analytical insight into narrative processes. Whether through an epistemological belief or a particularly sociological focus, Ramiz does not offer deep consideration of how, through discussion, his participants might change or generate new identitarian possibilities.

By contrast, Watson's (2006) study focusses on a single narrative account. This means that contextual factors are viewed solely through the participant's lens, thereby giving greater explanatory potential and agency to the account. Watson's theoretical framing of her study also deliberately emphasises the agentic potential of narration. She conceptualises all action as stemming from the stories that we form about ourselves. Despite this emphasis, she does not present self-narratives as omnipotent or wholly definitive, but as being continuously authored, both interpersonally and intra-personally.

While the other studies cited here are more epistemologically aligned with Watson, Woolhouse (2024) also recognises the power of systemic structures in limiting the agentic potential of narration. She conceives of one's identity as a tapestry of narrative threads, selected by the individual but only made available to them by their context. In this analogy the individual is given some authorial control over their own professional identity, but only within the limits defined by the systems around them. Her conceptualisation is most similar to Hooker's (2016) who views narrative-driven identity as constantly evolving and negotiated between oneself and one's context. Therefore, both authors emphasise the relational nature of narrative identity formation, positioning it as an ongoing negotiation between individual agency and contextual boundaries, with neither rendered definitive.

Arguably, it is Durrant (2013) who most effectively foregrounds the negotiation between context and narrative-driven identity. She uses a variety of methods to construct a case study of two schools and their development over time before introducing the individual 'portraits' of teachers, as generated by their narrative accounts. This approach proves insightful, as the detailed portraits of both the schools' and individuals' identities are situated as temporal, changing processes, thereby clearly rendering the paper's epistemological perspective on identity. One school in her study is described as restrictive due to the pressure imposed by the education system and the consequent processes introduced by senior leaders. Meanwhile, the other endorses teacher agency and contribution towards the school's structure. Despite this variation, context is not seen as definitive here, as Durrant provides examples of teachers finding opportunities for autonomous practice even within a controlled setting. She cites both experience and relationship building skills as affording teachers a sense of agency within their immediate environments. However, it is reflecting on professional identity that she conceptualises as most fundamental to this process:

This sense-making process enhances teachers' sense of self-efficacy and thereby agency, expanding the constructed environment and enabling them to operate more effectively within the selected environment (Durrant, 2013, p.264)

The variation across these studies has important implications for how teacher identity is understood and supported in practice. Where narrative reflection is positioned primarily as a sense-making tool, identity may appear constrained by systemic forces, potentially limiting teachers' perceived agency and contributing to reduced wellbeing and professional motivation (Ramiz, 2020). Conversely, where narrative reflection is conceptualised as more agentic, opportunities are seen to emerge for teachers to renegotiate their professional identities (Durrant, 2013; Watson, 2006). This perspective suggests that teachers may develop self-efficacy and resilience, even within constrained and challenging systemic environments.

Methodological differences across these studies naturally accentuate either contextual constraint or narrative agency to differing degrees. These variations may also reflect subtle epistemological differences between authors, as well as differences in samples, institutional settings, or the extent to which participants occupied more or less constrained professional environments. However, enhancing understanding of how individuals craft coherent professional identities within changing and demanding contexts appears to be an important protective factor for teachers working within them.

While the wider backdrop for many of these studies is a performative English education system this does not render them uninformative for a Welsh context. Rather, their shared conceptualisation of identity as a continually negotiated and evolving narrative process allows both continuity and difference across contexts to be held in view.

It is this emphasis on process, alongside sufficient overlap in systemic pressures over time, that renders these studies both comparable and generative for the present research. This is particularly relevant for exploring how teachers construct and sustain professional identities within changing educational landscapes.

3.6.2 Values and Emotions in Identity Construction

The focus on teachers' values as contributory to their professional identities and practice is a common theme in the studies selected here. These studies outline various benefits for

those who are portrayed as practicing in line with their values. Inevitably, however, the external and internal variables influencing the alignment of teachers' work and values are inconsistent.

This complexity is exemplified by Woolhouse (2024). She draws on Foucault in her illustration of narrative identity as an ethical performance - one that requires continuous awareness and modification to align with accepted societal or systemic values. This means that articulating one's professional identity is not a free act, as it requires adherence to social norms in order to be ethically intelligible, particularly within a profession such as teaching, where identity is shaped through moral discourses and regimes of professional conduct (Woolhouse, 2024).

Furthermore, the predominance of these discourses means that even discerning one's values within inherently value-laden schools is not straightforward, though reflection is seen to aid this process. It is within this discourse that Woolhouse's participants can transgress the values of their respective school systems, as illustrated by questioning the need for paperwork or processes. Though Woolhouse suggests that justification for these transgressions needs to be offered for the purpose of ethical legitimacy, and there is no guarantee that teachers will act transgressively following discussion, it is through this process that their values and identities are delineated. As such, Woolhouse suggests that teachers construct more resilient professional identities that are able to withstand increasingly challenging environments.

Watson's (2006) participant, Dan, does not frame his actions in terms of ethical performance as explicitly as Woolhouse's participants, making his attempts at professional legitimacy less obvious, but still present. This is because he deliberately positions his values as anti-institutional, refusing to adhere to aspects of school policy such as classroom-management techniques. Even here though, Dan feels the need to justify his alternative approach to dealing with behaviour. He does so through suggesting that he is placing the needs of the children first – a commonly emphasised value across the literature and arguably one of the most ethically intelligible and recognisable within the profession (Day,

2004). Equally, although Dan describes his subversion of common practice within the school, he does not wholly reject its value system, instead recognising where opportunities for inserting his own values present themselves.

Hooker's (2016) psychosocial examination of teacher's value development within schools offers further gradation to this theme. Her study looks at the emotional material in her participants' narrative accounts, and evidences this as a key part of the process of value identification. She suggests that changes in systemic demands necessarily alter the goals and values that one is expected to practice by, often causing strong emotions. To Hooker, these emotions are not innately objectionable but provide participants with a clear indication of where their own values sit relative to those being asked of them. However, positioned within the neoliberal educational policies of her participants' schools, which she strongly characterises as carrying out "surveillance and policing" of their performance, the emotional material produced is not conceptualised as sufficient to transform their practice or experience (Hooker, 2016, p.162).

That said, by analysing the emotional material of the participants, Hooker's paper takes a more psychological stance. This means that her discussion centres more than other literature here on an individual's capability to develop agency, self-esteem and emotional regulation skills in response to their feelings. This position thereby recognises teachers' potential to negotiate and retain their value systems, even when these are being continually challenged.

While this emotional dimension is present across the literature, particularly in terms of its impact on teachers' sense of morality, motivation, and identity coherence, it is the effect on wellbeing and resilience that underscores the importance of value alignment beyond professional outcomes. All studies frame narrative reflection as a process through which individuals seek to make their values cohesive and intelligible, suggesting that this is an intrinsic part of authoring one's professional identity. Where alignment is constrained, tensions between identity and reality can reduce agency and increase disengagement (Ramiz, 2020; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Woolhouse, 2024).

Conversely, narrative reflection appears to support the development of more coherent identities and sustained professional motivation (Durrant, 2013; Hooker, 2016). This highlights that supporting teachers is not solely about addressing external pressures, but can also be enabled through facilitating reflective, value-oriented dialogue. Narrative approaches therefore offer both a lens to understand teacher identity and a psychologically meaningful method to support wellbeing and professional sustainability.

3.6.3 Career Trajectories and Identity Evolution

The development of teacher values and identities is portrayed as intrinsically linked to their level of experience in all the studies here. Ruohotie-Lyhty's (2013) longitudinal design effectively traces the experiences of two early career teachers, drawing on their narrative identity stories from before and during their early years in the profession. This design was based on her adoption of narrative identity theory, which posits that identity is constructed through the stories we tell about ourselves, acting as a framework for processing experience. While one participant's narrative identity is coherent with the teaching environment she enters, thereby deepening and expanding it, the other is at odds with classroom realities. Ruohotie-Lyhty describes this experience as praxis-shock, causing the participant to adopt a 'victimic' narrative positioning where she becomes interested in avoiding negative events rather than pursuing professional goals. This response is seen to constrain her capacity for agentic identity construction.

Ramiz's sampling of different generational cohorts combined with detailed analysis of participant's narrative positioning are employed to witness the development of identity narratives over time (Ramiz, 2020). In examining the moral compromises that teachers must make due to external expectations, he finds that teachers drawn from his oldest group accept grade inflation as a necessary, systemically driven practice, which they position themselves as unwilling participants in. This contrasts with the youngest cohort who make no mention of malpractice. When viewed using Ruohotie-Lyhty's (2013) framing this may

imply that the older participants have been forced to construct complex but coherent narratives in the interest of identity preservation, whereas the younger cohort may not have been challenged to do so, or have not integrated these moral compromises into their practice as yet.

While Ramiz (2020) does not suggest all teachers need to compromise their morals as a means of retaining identity coherence, he does suggest another common challenge identified in teachers' narrative accounts here, that of rupture and repair. Again, his sociological stance puts teachers in a more passive position, seeking coherence between sometimes irreconcilable value systems in times of change.

Durrant conversely finds that teachers are often prepared for "hard moral negotiation" during crisis points (Durrant, 2013, p.221). She suggests that this process is negotiated over time and can elicit multiple responses, including passivity where necessary. She perceives one of her more experienced participants as having a more sophisticated, nuanced, and clear understanding of her professional identity and that of the school. This is seen to equip her with the tools to navigate moments of crisis effectively and to entrench her own teaching identity further, even when externally challenged. Though reflection and experience are implied as helpful in resolving value conflict, they are not portrayed as inherently sufficient in sustaining flexibility and resilience. Instead, negotiation between individuals and their environments is framed as a complex, ongoing, and individual process that resists reduction to discrete variables. This situational complexity suggests that resilience may be most keenly understood through holistic and contextualised narrative accounts.

Watson (2006) looks further back in the lifespan in order to locate the genesis of professional identity. Her participant, Dan, cites his own negative school experience as a key resource in developing his unorthodox teacher identity - something Watson describes as a powerful "creation myth" (Watson, 2006, p.521). This description, coupled with her theoretical stance of narrative as "an ongoing process of identification" (Watson, 2006, p.510), posits that Dan's own experience of education is not necessarily deterministic to his current life, but allows his actions as a teacher and personal history to cohere in a way that

gives him a sense of identity and agency. This agency is derived from the narrative he has constructed around his experience, which has stabilised as a defining feature of his professional identity. In this sense, Dan's interpretation of experience is central to his identity construction, though it remains inseparable from the events that shaped it - highlighting both the generative and constraining aspects of narrative processes.

The research cited here generally suggests that professional identity requires ongoing reauthoring in response to life events, with experience and clarity of values positioned as important in managing challenges. Narrative approaches are frequently framed as a protective mechanism in resolving identitarian dissonance, enabling teachers to make sense of and take ownership of difficult experiences. These studies also provide insight into how early experiences and narrative identities may shape teachers' responses to systemic change over time. However, the extent to which external events influence identity development remains uneven across the literature. While some accounts suggest that time and experience foster more nuanced and adaptable identities, others indicate that they may instead entrench existing positions. As such, the processes through which teachers interpret, maintain, or revise their narratives remain only partially understood.

This highlights the need for a more explicitly psychological and individually focused account of how narrative identity work operates in practice. The following section therefore applies the psychological frameworks outlined in Part A to further interpret these processes at an individual level in order to better understand their potential utility in educational settings.

3.6.4 Individual Processes in Narrative Identity Work

Here, identity is generally conceived of as being a temporal, situationally dependent and discursively produced phenomenon. The preceding themes have illustrated how identity is constructed and negotiated through narrative reflection within professional contexts. However, the psychological processes underpinning these constructions remain largely implicit within the literature. Drawing on the frameworks introduced in Part A, this section

offers an interpretive analysis of these processes, positioning narrative identity work as underpinned by identifiable psychological mechanisms.

For example, when applying the lens of PCP, one can see how its framing might be useful in sharpening our view of the identitarian conflicts experienced by some of the participants referred to in the studies cited here. The utility of this theoretical lens is in its contribution towards potential solutions. Kelly (1955) proposed that individuals are scientists, forming constructs that should help us anticipate events in a process of continuous hypothesis testing. In the case of Ruohotie-Lyhty's (2013) participant comparison it is clear that one participant has such a construct - one that helps her accurately predict the environment she is entering into, while the other does not.

Kelly distinguished core constructs from peripheral constructs, the former being concerned with our self-maintenance and identity and which, when challenged, prove emotionally destabilising. In narrative identity work, it is therefore likely that one's core constructs are under investigation. In the studies by Durrant (2013), Ramiz (2020) and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013), it could be said that it is the inability of certain participants to adapt their core constructs that may contribute to more extreme aversive outcomes, such as leaving the profession.

Equally, the older participants in Ramiz's study could be conceived as having developed more complex and adaptable constructs over time, allowing them to cope better with external uncertainty. Similarly, it could be that these participants had core constructs which had been validated over time, rendering professional instability less threatening and anxiety inducing (Kelly, 1955). Though these conclusions are somewhat speculative, the temporal aspect of narrative enquiry helps to illustrate how constructs might have developed in response to working environments. Further investigation into the stories of individuals' professional identity development, coupled with PCPs theoretical lens, will help to elucidate the mechanisms of construct development further.

Rogers' PCA (1980) further helps in examining the conditions through which participants' constructs might be elicited, accepted, and made more adaptive to the teaching

environment. Within this framework, the articulation of personal meaning is understood to depend upon particular relational conditions, such as empathy, non-directivity, and unconditional positive regard. Watson (2006) describes having an established relationship with her participant, while also allowing him to talk freely and lead the conversation. Whilst she was not explicitly informed by PCA, the material that Dan shared, and the non-directive and empathetic framing which Watson presents, suggests that she may have met some of the conditions associated with this approach. In doing so, core constructs, such as Dan's 'creation myth', appear to have been elicited and accepted as meaningful mechanisms through which he understood his teaching identity.

However, without a more explicit account of the relational conditions underpinning the research process, it is only through the data itself that we can infer the influence of this relationship on what is produced. This does not render the lens of PCA obsolete, but rather highlights a limitation within the literature. With more specific, psychologically focused consideration of the relational environment, the processes through which identity-related material is elicited may be better understood. In turn, this would allow for greater clarity regarding how narrative identity work operates, and under what conditions it may best facilitate reflective processes leading to sustainable, coherent professional identities.

The other studies cited here may also have satisfied some of the conditions of PCA, as suggested by the personal and complex findings that were produced. In particular, Hooker's (2016) focus on emotional material appears to elicit participants' values, while also allowing them to connect this material with their identities, thereby supporting coherence. This process can be understood through several psychological lenses. For example, both containment and externalisation can be seen to operate here, as Hooker appears to provide a space in which emotional material can be expressed, held, and transformed into something more identifiable and manageable (Bion, 1985; Ruch, 2014).

Hooker also stresses the need for collaborative and non-defensive dialogue in facilitating teachers to become autonomous and motivated practitioners, a sentiment echoed by her participants. Her study's design, conducted across four interviews, was intended to elicit

personal and meaning-laden responses, using a holistic analysis and extended quotations in order to centre the participant's voice and experience. The depth of reflection evident in these accounts, coupled with her intention to facilitate active processes of self-formation through dialogue, suggests that these conditions may have supported meaningful identity work. However, an explicitly psychological design and interpretation of these processes may have furthered understanding of how narrative identity work can be mobilised to support teachers' in sustaining coherent professional identities.

The literature presented here suggests the importance of narrative processes in supporting teachers' sense of agency, wellbeing, and resilience. The constructionist framing of narrative identity formation underlies its agentic potential as a protective factor in helping practitioners navigate changing and challenging educational environments. Conceptually, narrative suggests itself as a meeting point for a number of psychological theories and approaches, only some of which have been considered here. These theories can be tentatively transposed onto the research discussed and are implicitly perceptible within the designs and findings presented. While approaches such as PCP may be more readily applied to analyse the data within this literature, relational and situational perspectives such as containment and PCA are necessarily more inferential in their application.

However, across all of the psychological perspectives discussed, there remains significant scope for more explicit integration. Without clearer attention to the psychological conditions and mechanisms underpinning narrative identity work, understanding of how teachers construct, sustain, and potentially transform their professional identities remains partial. Developing this understanding is particularly important in informing how narrative approaches might be used not only to explore, but to actively support teacher identity, wellbeing, and professional agency in practice.

3.7 Summary

The literature reviewed here conceptualises professional identity as a constantly evolving phenomenon, of which narrative reflection is a constitutive part. The extent to which this

process actively shapes or transforms identity development is less consistently agreed upon, and as such, the emphasis placed upon narrative reflection as an essential mechanism varies across studies. This unevenness can reasonably be attributed to differences in epistemological positioning, methodological approach, and the nature of the evidence generated. Nevertheless, the role of narrative reflection as a negotiating factor in identity development represents a clear point of convergence.

None of the papers reviewed suggest that narrative reflection operates as a singular or definitive determinant of professional identity. Rather, all emphasise the contextual complexities teachers must navigate in establishing and sustaining their identities over time. Educational reforms are commonly portrayed as altering the values and demands of professional environments, often precipitating moments of tension or identitarian disruption. At such junctures, studies adopting a more sociological or contextual focus tend to portray teachers as having limited agency within powerful systems, whereas those with a more psychological orientation explore the possibility of reauthoring identities in response to change.

Across the literature, psychological processes are frequently implied but remain under-specified. Introducing a more explicit psychological perspective to existing in-depth narrative accounts of teacher identity may therefore offer a deeper understanding of how narrative reflection functions within identity development.

Developing this understanding is important not only for conceptual clarity, but also for practice, as it may enable more intentional and psychologically informed approaches to supporting teachers in navigating identity-related tensions. In this sense, narrative approaches hold potential not only as analytic tools, but as meaningful avenues for supporting teacher agency, wellbeing, and professional sustainability.

3.8 Rationale for the Current Research

The previous sections have shown how narrative approaches can both illuminate the processes of identity development and actively shape identity itself. Furthermore, this

literature also evidences why identity construction is a protective factor for teachers in helping them meet and negotiate systemic demands. However, the psychological processes inherent in narrative reflection remain under-specified in this literature, as does a consideration of the relational spaces in which teacher narrative accounts are generated.

The role of EPs, as professionals well-positioned to support teacher identity coherence, is also under-examined. As psychologically trained practitioners working relationally within educational systems, EPs often encounter teachers at moments of narrative disruption or value conflict. Within Wales, the guiding Constructionist Model of Informed and Reasoned Action (COMOIRA) framework explicitly prioritises reflective and collaborative practice as means of facilitating change (Gameson et al., 2003). COMOIRA is also founded on a social constructionist epistemology, which positions reality as interactionally created (Burr & Dick, 2017), and open to change through relational processes. By employing a narrative approach, this study seeks to extend and amplify COMOIRA's principles by investigating the importance and mechanisms of collaboration and reflection. In turn, this should aid EPs in Wales in operationalising the values of COMOIRA with greater intentionality and precision.

In response to the under-specification of psychological processes within narrative identity research, and the limited attention given to the relational contexts in which teacher narratives are produced, this study seeks to explore the experience and process of narrative reflection with teachers from a psychological perspective. Specifically, it examines how teachers make sense of and negotiate their professional identities within a reflective space, and what this reveals about the psychological mechanisms underpinning this process.

Rather than seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of narrative interventions, this study is concerned with understanding how narrative reflection is experienced, and how it may support teachers in articulating, sustaining, and reworking their professional identities. In doing so, it aims to address the question of how narrative processes function psychologically within relational contexts, and what this may suggest about the role of EPs in supporting teacher wellbeing, agency, and meaning-making.

By offering teachers a reflective space in which to examine their professional identities, this research seeks to extend current understanding of narrative identity work in educational contexts, aligning with the relational and constructionist ethos underpinning contemporary EP practice.

Research Questions

Drawing on the literature presented above, this study examines how teachers engage in narrative reflection and how this process may illuminate the construction of professional identity and its significance for teachers' experiences and practice. The research questions guiding this enquiry are:

Question 1: *How do teachers experience and construct their professional identities through narrative reflection, and how can the psychological processes involved in this construction be understood?*

Question 2: *What potential does narrative reflection hold for supporting teachers' sense of identity and professional meaning-making?*

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Part Two: Major Empirical Paper

Word count: 13,184

Abstract

This study explores how teachers construct and negotiate their professional identities during a period of educational reform in Wales. In the context of evolving systemic demands, understanding how teachers make sense of their professional roles is of particular relevance to Educational Psychologists seeking to support staff wellbeing and professional development.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three primary school teachers, and the data were analysed using a narrative-informed, holistic-content approach. The findings highlight the dynamic and relational nature of professional identity, demonstrating how teachers construct and negotiate their identities through ongoing interpretation of their experiences. Participants' narratives revealed tensions between personal values and systemic demands, including challenges related to authenticity, role expectations, and the uneven implementation of educational reform. Identity was seen to emerge through the interaction between individual values, professional roles, and contextual conditions.

The study also highlights the importance of reflective and relational spaces in supporting identity development. Narrative processes were found to play an active role in shaping identity, facilitating greater coherence, agency, and understanding of professional values. These findings suggest that EPs are well positioned to support teachers through approaches that enable reflection and meaning-making, particularly in contexts of change and uncertainty.

1. Introduction

The Context for Teachers in Wales

The Welsh education system is in a time of flux. The Curriculum for Wales (CfW) and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (ALNET) have shifted the emphasis placed on schools' role in meeting children's needs, increasing teacher autonomy in curriculum design and assessment, and fostering inclusive, person-centred classrooms

(Evans, 2022; Welsh Government, 2021). These changes occur within a broader UK educational landscape, historically shaped by competition, marketisation, and ranking systems (Ball, 2003; Brady & Wilson, 2022). While the Welsh system has recently become structurally distinct, a residual imprint of teachers' previous experiences and professional identities within earlier policy contexts continues to shape practice (Evans, 2023).

Teachers Changing Identities

The changes in legislation mentioned aim to enhance professional autonomy, but they also introduce new responsibilities that require teachers to navigate evolving roles and expectations (Evans, 2022; Evans, 2023). For pioneers in designing the curriculum, there are challenges in defining and enacting reforms (Power et al., 2020). For other teachers, adapting their interpretation of their roles and responsibilities within an immature new system has proved a challenge (Conn & Hutt, 2020). Understanding how teachers respond to these pressures, and how their professional identities adapt or are negotiated in this context, is therefore an important focus for research.

Narrative Identity Work with Teachers

Narrative approaches provide a useful framework for understanding how teachers construct and make sense of their professional identities. Bruner argued that lived experience cannot be understood independently of the sense making process through which it is interpreted (Bruner, 2004). Rather than simply reflecting reality, narratives actively shape how experience is organised and understood. In this sense, identity can be understood as something that is continually constructed through the stories individuals tell about themselves, with meaning emerging through the act of narration.

This perspective is extended by White and Epston (1990), who suggest that personal narrative accounts are necessarily selective and partial, capturing only certain aspects of lived experience. Through reflection and exploration, alternative meanings and values can be identified, allowing individuals to re-author their narratives in ways that open up new possibilities for action and change.

Within this study, the term ‘narrative identity work’ refers to the process through which individuals construct, reflect upon, and potentially revise their understanding of themselves through the articulation of personal and professional stories.

Fortunately, a body of research has explored narrative identity formation in the context of systemic demands, often highlighting the role of narrative reflection in helping teachers articulate and negotiate their professional values (Hooker, 2019; Ramiz, 2020; Woolhouse, 2024). This work has examined both the potential and limitations of narrative reflection and has helped to clarify the interaction between narrative agency and context in teacher identity formation. However, it has generally tended to emphasise sociocultural and discursive processes involved in narrative reflection, with the psychological mechanisms underlying identity construction often remaining underexamined. Further exploration of these psychological processes may provide greater conceptual clarity regarding how teachers make sense of their professional selves within changing educational landscapes.

The Role of EPs in Supporting Teachers

With expertise in facilitating reflective conversations, Educational Psychologists (EPs) are well positioned to observe and support narrative identity work as it naturally occurs or through targeted intervention. EPs are required to work collaboratively with colleagues and to recognise and respond to emotional and systemic factors influencing practice (HCPC, 2023). This responsibility naturally encompasses the support of teachers. In Wales, the Constructionist Model of Informed and Reasoned Action (COMOIRA) provides a collaborative, constructionist framework for this engagement (Gameson et al., 2003), aligning closely with the principles underpinning narrative identity work. By examining how psychological processes operate within these spaces, research can illuminate the value of narrative approaches in helping teachers make sense of their professional identities. In doing so, this study aims to support EPs in recognising how narrative identity work may contribute to teachers’ sense of agency, coherence, and understanding of their professional values within the evolving context of Welsh education.

Psychology Frameworks Informing This Study

There are numerous psychological theories and approaches that could be applied to narrative identity work in order to frame and communicate the mechanisms involved. The approaches selected in this study share a broadly constructionist position, in which reality is viewed as inseparable from the ways in which it is constructed through language and social interaction (Burr & Dick, 2017). From this perspective, meaning is not fixed but continually shaped through relational processes, positioning narrative reflection as a potential mechanism for perceptible change.

This assumption aligns closely with the principles of the COMOIRA framework, which emphasises reflection, collaboration, and co-construction as pathways to change within EP practice in Wales. The psychological approaches included here are therefore used to deepen understanding of how these processes may operate in supporting teachers to construct and sustain coherent professional identities.

Some discussion of how these approaches informed the rationale and delivery of the study is offered below. After which, the methodological design of the research is outlined in more detail.

The Person-Centred Approach

The Person-Centred Approach (PCA) informed both the structure of the interviews and the relational stance adopted within them. PCA, as coined by Carl Rogers (1961), posits that each individual is best placed to generate their own meaning and direction for change. A therapeutic relationship in which the therapist (or relational other) demonstrates conditions such as empathy, non-directivity and unconditional positive regard is considered central to facilitating this change. In essence, this means that the supporting person should create an understanding and benevolent space in which an individual can speak openly and reflect without judgement. This simplified framing is in line with Di Malta et al.'s (2024) contemporary assessment of the approach as more of a posture than a strictly followed set of guidelines. A more rigid adherence to PCA principles would have constrained the integration of other psychological approaches and risked shifting the interviews towards a

therapeutic model, which was not appropriate within the ethical boundaries of EP practice. However, some alignment with PCA principles was intended to facilitate participant-led reflection and enhance the potential for positive change.

Personal Construct Psychology

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) was used as a structural framework for the design of the interviews. PCP, initially conceived by Kelly (1955), argues that individuals make sense of their experience through bipolar constructs. An adapted example of this, often used in educational settings, is Moran's (2001) 'Ideal Self' activity, in which the relevant poles are 'the ideal self' and 'the non-ideal self'. Within this design, individuals are prompted to articulate each of these constructs and to position themselves in relation to them. This process supports individuals in actively construing meaning and developing a sense of agency in relation to their identity. The aim of this work is to enable more flexible and adaptive understandings of self and experience.

This rationale underpins the use of an adapted version of this activity – 'The Ideal Teacher' – within this study. Participants were invited to construct their own representations of the ideal and non-ideal teacher and to reflect on their positioning between these poles. This provided a structured entry point into discussing professional values, experiences, and identity. In doing so, it facilitated exploration of the alignment between participants' ideals and their current practice, allowing areas of tension, stability, or adaptation to emerge. As with the use of PCA, this activity functioned as a flexible framework rather than a rigid procedure, enabling participant-led reflection while supporting the integration of multiple psychological perspectives within the interviews.

Containment

The concept of containment also informed the relational stance adopted within the interviews. Containment refers to a process through which emotional experiences are received, held, and made more manageable through reflection (Bion, 1985; Ruch, 2014). Within this study, this was understood as creating a space in which participants could express and explore aspects of their professional experience that may not typically be

articulated. Rather than focusing on problem-solving, the interviews aimed to support participants in reflecting on and making sense of their experiences, allowing thoughts and feelings to become more accessible and open to reflection. By holding and attending to the emotional and relational experiences of the participants, the process of reflection itself had the potential to support the development of greater clarity and understanding of their professional identities.

Rationale for the Current Study

Across the preceding sections, the conceptual understanding of narrative has been positioned as a meeting point for the psychological approaches outlined. Each perspective emphasises the role of reflection, meaning-making, and relational processes in shaping how individuals understand themselves and their experiences. Within this framework, professional identity is not viewed as fixed, but as something that is continually constructed and open to reinterpretation through narrative.

Existing research has explored the contextual demands placed on teachers, as well as the importance and difficulty in maintaining a coherent sense of professional identity in response to these challenges. Narrative approaches have also been applied within this area and have been conceptualised as a protective factor and a means of developing professional agency. However, the psychological processes underpinning this work are often less explicitly articulated, creating space for further investigation into how such processes may operate within reflective interactions.

The present study therefore aims to explore how narrative identity work operates within a psychologically informed, relational context, and how this may support teachers in making sense of their professional identities within a changing educational landscape.

1.1 Research Aim

There is a substantial body of literature examining teacher identity formation and its centrality to professional practice and wellbeing. Within this, a growing number of studies

have explored how narrative approaches illuminate and shape processes of identity construction.

The present research extends this body of work by examining teacher identity through a psychological lens, situated within the context of the contemporary Welsh education system. Specifically, it aims to explore the psychological processes involved in teachers' narrative identity work, and how these processes are negotiated in relation to contextual demands and professional values within reflective, relational interactions.

The aims of the present research are intrinsically linked to those of Part 1. While the systematic review explored how narrative identity has been conceptualised within educational research, it also contributed to the conceptual understanding that informed the empirical study. The reviewed literature conceptualised narrative identity as a psychologically meaningful process through which teachers construct their professional identities, whilst also highlighting the limited psychological explanation of how this process functions. Consequently, Part 2 was designed not simply to apply the findings of Part 1, but to investigate and further develop that conceptual understanding through empirical exploration. The focus of this research is therefore not the evaluation of narrative approaches as an intervention, but the development of a conceptual account of the psychological processes involved in narrative identity work. The evolution of the conceptual influences underpinning the present study is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Evolution and Integration of Conceptual Framework Underpinning the Present Study

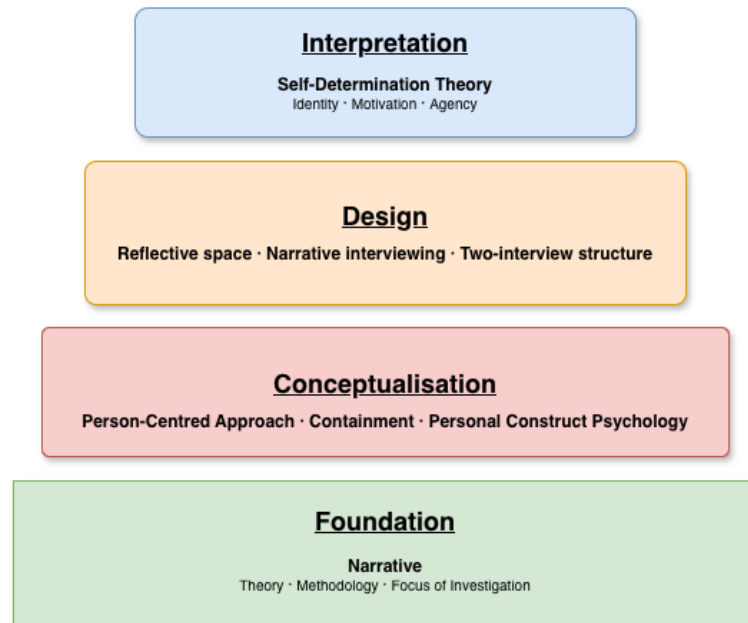


Figure 2 summarises the evolution of the conceptual framework underpinning the present study, illustrating how the understanding developed through the systematic review informed the empirical research. Narrative provided the foundational theoretical and methodological orientation of the research. Person-Centred theory, Personal Construct Psychology and containment subsequently informed the conceptualisation of narrative identity work and the design of the narrative interviews. During analysis, Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) was employed as an additional interpretative framework through which identity, motivation and agency were understood.

1.2 Research Question

This research seeks to address two exploratory questions:

- 1) How do teachers experience and construct their professional identities through narrative reflection, and how can the psychological processes involved in this construction be understood?
- 2) What potential does narrative reflection hold for supporting teachers' sense of identity and professional meaning-making?

1.3 Research Paradigms

A research paradigm is the set of beliefs or values which define a particular study or project (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Braun and Clarke suggest that it is not necessary to state a clear and overarching paradigm, but to recognise where one's beliefs and values influence the approach and understanding of the topic at hand. The ontology, epistemology and axiology form the foundational components of a research paradigm, this research's position on each is outlined below.

The ontological position of this research is critical realism, as originally developed by Bhaskar and engaged with here through Willis' (2023) contemporary interpretation. This stance asserts that there is a reality distinct from our experience of it and that experience cannot convey reality as it is. That is because our perspectives are also coloured by past experiences and our interactions with others. Therefore, the data produced by this study may contain apparent commonalities between participants, potentially concerning systemic pressures, motivations to teach and experiences of self. However, these will be understood, felt and described distinctly and therefore are unable to convey a solid picture of an external reality. That said, experiences may offer partial insight into underlying aspects of that reality, as the patterns across participant accounts may reveal some shared underlying mechanisms (Willis, 2023).

The epistemological stance of this research is social constructionism. This perspective posits that knowledge of reality is produced through discourse and social processes. This positions knowledge as contextual, relational, and temporally bound, rather than suggesting access to fixed truths (Burr & Dick, 2017). Within the study of narrative identities, social constructionism assumes that the accounts accessed are co-constructed between participant and researcher and are embedded within specific social and cultural contexts. As discussed, social constructionism is a core tenet of EP practice in Wales, underpinning COMOIRA which functions as the guiding professional framework (Gameson et al., 2003). From this epistemological position, teacher identities are understood not as fixed entities but

as emergent through experience and discourse. Consequently, the ways in which these identities are narrated and co-constructed shape how they are known and understood within the research process.

Axiology refers to the values and ethics that guide a researcher in generating their study and how these influence the final product. In my case, I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist with a particular interest in person-centred and reflective approaches to EP practice. Having been trained within the COMOIRA framework, my professional values and assumptions are shaped by social constructionist and systemic thinking. As such, these values influence how I conduct interviews, interpret research material, and construct and present my findings.

2. Methodology

2.1 Ethical Considerations

This research was granted ethical approval by the Cardiff University School of Psychology Ethics Committee in May 2025. The study is underpinned by the British Psychological Society's (BPS) guidelines on conducting research to ensure that it is as ethically sensitive as possible (Oates et al., 2021).

Participants were clearly informed of the terms of the research through the front-facing documents - the participant information sheet and participant consent form. They were also given a debrief form after the completion of their interviews (see Appendices B-D for all forms). To protect participants' confidentiality they were asked to provide pseudonyms that could be used to store their data and to use in the final write up. Equally, any personal or potentially identifying information which came from the interviews was redacted in the transcription process.

The design of the study accepted that participants were likely to reflect on their personal values and their professional self-efficacy. Given the conversational design of the interviews, it could have been the case that these topics might have caused upset in the absence of

rigorously delivered, pre-planned questions. To account for this, participants were informed of the withdrawal process prior to the interviews, and were given the contact details of mental health support should they need it.

Beyond procedural ethics, particular consideration was given to participants' psychological safety throughout the research process. A person-centred, non-directive interviewing stance was adopted to minimise judgement and support participants in determining the depth and direction of disclosure. The two-interview design also enabled rapport to develop gradually rather than requiring immediate discussion of emotionally significant material. Care was taken to ensure that participants were not encouraged to explore experiences beyond what they wished to discuss.

2.2 Participants

While there is no fixed rule for establishing sample size in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2025), smaller samples are often associated with greater depth and richness of data (Butina, 2015). Butina argues that this is particularly pertinent for narrative approaches, advocating for the use of two interviews per participant to generate “thicker” (Butina, 2015, p.192) data. Researchers also highlight the time and resource considerations inherent in conducting in-depth qualitative work (Braun & Clarke, 2025; Butina, 2015).

To balance these factors, four participants were initially recruited to support depth and a degree of comparative insight across accounts. Due to a late withdrawal, the final sample comprised three participants. However, given that the primary focus of this study was the generation of rich, in-depth narrative accounts, this sample size was considered appropriate. The use of a two-interview structure remained central to this aim, facilitating deeper reflection and elaboration over time, while still allowing for consideration of similarities and differences across participants.

2.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

Table 3

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Adults aged 21 - 65 years	Those aged younger than 21 or older than 65 years.	This age range was selected to capture a broad range of teaching experience, enabling consideration of variation in professional identity across career stages. Participants ranged from those early in their careers to those more established, while excluding individuals who were still in training or nearing retirement. These boundaries were intended to focus on teachers actively engaged in the ongoing construction of their professional identities within practice.
Primary school teachers working in mainstream schools	Secondary school teachers, non-teaching school staff, or those working in special education settings.	This criterion was chosen to maintain a degree of coherence in the professional contexts in which identity is constructed. Primary schools differ from secondary schools and special schools in terms of structure, demands and relational dynamics, all of which influence how identity is narrated. Focussing on primary school teachers therefore ensures a more consistent exploration of identity narration.
1 participant per school will be selected.	No more than 1 participant per school will be selected.	While there may be some shared influences on teacher identity, participants were recruited from different settings to mitigate the possibility of homogeneous constructions of professional identity. This could arise from shared organisational structures, expectations, leadership practices, and relational dynamics. Sampling across multiple school contexts therefore supports a broader exploration of how teacher identities are constructed and narrated in varied environments.

2.2.2 Recruitment

Recruitment for this study followed a purposive convenience sampling approach (Etikan et al., 2016), in that participants were selected because they fit a certain group - primary school

teachers meeting the criteria listed above. The study was advertised using existing relationships with primary schools, following a convenience approach. Contacts were emailed within a group of six primary schools with a request to forward the participant information sheet and a brief email of the study to all staff. Additionally, contacts were asked to raise details of the study within staff meetings, which they consented to. This resulted in sufficient interest from participants to avert the need to advertise the study more widely. In response to individual expressions of interest from potential participants, emails were exchanged to make further arrangements and to schedule interviews.

2.3 Data Collection

Stephens and Breheny (2013) and Riessman (1993) suggest that interview participants in qualitative research often give their responses in the form of a story, even when the questions do not prompt them to do so. Therefore, Riessman (1993) advocates for the researcher to adopt a facilitating role when interviewing, encouraging participants to speak at length around central themes while actively listening in order to prompt further talk. This way, researchers are led by their participants while also taking an active role in shaping the direction of conversation by drawing meaning from the participants' previous responses. This approach was aligned with the psychological influences of my research in terms of its participant-led and non-directive principles (Bion, 1985; Rogers, 1961).

Each participant took part in two semi-structured interviews. 'The Ideal Teacher' was used as the basis for the design structure of the first interview (Moran, 2001). Three central themes were used to guide the conversation: participants' construct of the ideal teacher, their non-ideal teacher, and how they felt in relation to these constructs. Participants were asked to talk around all three themes, but were freely allowed to make connections elsewhere, with prompting and questioning duly responding to their content. This enabled a degree of collaboration in their meaning-making process. Riessman (2015) suggests that this inseparability of researcher and narrative accounts is best owned and reflected on, given

that the interview process and the final transcript are all imbued with the researchers' constructs and values.

The decision to conduct a second interview was informed by the conceptual framework of the study, presented in Figure 2, and particularly its emphasis on reflection and meaning-making. It provided participants with an opportunity to revisit and further consider the constructs discussed in the first interview, allowing for potential refinement or extension of their initial accounts. This aligns with PCP, which views constructs as open to revision through reflection, and with narrative perspectives that position identity as evolving through re-telling. The second interview therefore enabled exploration not only of participants' initial constructions of professional identity, but also of how these may shift or develop over time. In terms of structure, participants were asked to reflect on the first interview and to talk freely about their experience of it, including whether any benefits or difficulties had arisen within or after the conversation, and whether they had learned anything from taking part.

Both interviews were recorded and later transcribed. This process was carried out between October and December of 2025. Interviews ranged from 33 minutes to 59 minutes in length. Cues for closing interviews took account of Stephens and Breheny's (2013) reference to a coda, which is often a participant-led ending to a story, sometimes taking the form of a lesson or a return to the present. Following the completion of each interview, a few minutes were allocated for informal, non-research-related conversation. This provided participants with an opportunity to decompress and re-centre before concluding the session.

2.4 Data Analysis

2.4.1 Narrative Analysis

Riessman (2008) cautions against universal and simplistic definitions of narrative. Regardless, she offers a broad and flexible definition as "events perceived as meaningful by the speaker as important are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" (Riessman, 2008, p.3). This definition is adopted as the understanding of narrative for this study, as it acknowledges the influence of the listener on

the direction a narrative takes and, in doing so, suggests the inseparability of story and context. Narrative Analysis (NA) is defined as the study of how a story is constructed within its context and for its audience (Riessman, 1993).

Here, NA will be conducted at a holistic level, analysing participants' narratives as complete stories whose meanings are shaped through the original telling, the research context, and their subsequent interpretation and representation in this research (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 1993).

2.4.2 Holistic-Content Analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998)

Lieblich et al. (1998) provide a structured framework for narrative analysis, distinguishing between holistic and categorial approaches, and between content and form, (see Figure 3). A holistic approach considers narratives as integrated accounts, whereas a categorial approach allows comparison across cases. Similarly, content focuses on what is said, while form attends to how it is said.

This study adopts a holistic-content approach, analysing participants' narratives as integrated accounts of professional identity. This aligns with the study's constructionist epistemology, treating identity as co-constructed within context. While some cross-participant comparisons were made, emphasis remained on analysing narratives as holistic interpretations.

Although this study was primarily weighted towards analysing content, this should not be understood as an absolute distinction. Lieblich et al. note that "many possibilities for reading a text represent middle points along these dimensions" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.12), suggesting that narrative analysis need not be confined to a single analytic position. Consequently, whilst the primary focus of this study was the content and meaning of participants' accounts, aspects of narrative form, such as coherence, shifts in emphasis, and changes between interviews, also informed interpretation where they enhanced understanding of participants' evolving professional identities.

Riessman stresses the importance of reflexivity and transparency in NA designs, therefore consideration of how the researcher may have shaped the material produced within the narrative accounts is considered throughout (Riessman, 2015).

Figure 3

Framework for Analysing Narratives (Lieblich et al., 1998)

Holistic-Content	Holistic-Form
Categorical-Content	Categorical-Form

2.4.3 Constructing the Narrative

The transcription and construction of the narratives followed the guidance of Lieblich et al. (1998) on holistic reading (see Figure 4), while also recognising Riessman's (1993) observation that there is significant and unavoidable blurring between transcription and analysis. Each participant's first interview was read and preliminary global impressions (holistic reflections on the narrative) were recorded before engaging with the second interview. This sequencing was intended to allow participants' initial reflections on their professional identities to shape the direction of interpretation. As the second interview was designed to support participants in reflecting on and developing their initial accounts, this approach enabled the analysis to follow a similar temporal process. In this way, the analytic process aimed to reflect the interval between interviews, supporting the development of meaning over time.

Listening to and reading both interviews multiple times allowed me to develop an overall integrated impression of each participant's narrative account, leading to the refinement of overarching global impressions and themes. This process also enabled closer attention to the transcription itself, highlighting which elements of the account carried particular significance and how these shifted across readings. Excerpts from the transcripts can be found in Appendix F.

Throughout, there remained a need to keep the researcher's role in shaping and interpreting the narratives transparent (Riessman, 2015). In this sense, I remained mindful of how my interpretations were formed, and direct participant quotations were included where possible.

Given the person-centred and PCP-informed backdrop to the study, I approached the data with a 'theoretical ear', recognising that my interpretations were inevitably shaped by these frameworks, while remaining attentive to participants' accounts on their own terms.

Once this process had been completed for one participant, the same analytic procedure was followed for the next, in order to treat each participant's story as a contextualised account in its own right (Lieblich et al., 1998). Once all individual accounts had been constructed a comparative reading allowed attention to be given to semantic and contextual similarities across participants' accounts.

Global impressions are presented as discrete, holistic summaries at the beginning of each participant's section, reflecting their analytic function within a holistic-content approach (Lieblich et al., 1998) and distinguishing them from the more detailed thematic analysis that follows.

Figure 4

The Process of Reading Content in a Holistic Manner (Lieblich et al., 1998)

1. Read the material several times until a pattern emerges. This will likely be a central issue of the entire story. Allow the text to "speak" to you. The significance of certain aspects of the story will depend on the entire story and its context.
2. Put initial and global impressions of the case into writing. Note exceptions, unusual features, contradictions, or unfinished descriptions. Any disturbances in the participant or issues of disharmony in the story can be quite instructive. Take note of what the participant said about harmony/disharmony, congruence/incongruence, etc.
3. Choose specific themes or topics to focus on as the story develops. Pay attention to how much focus is given to each theme, any repetition, and the level of detail shared. Also, consider cultural influences and how they affect the way the story is told and understood.
4. Change the font colour of text. Read separately and repeatedly for each.
5. Keep track of results by following each theme throughout the story; note any thoughts or conclusions. Be aware of the initial and final appearance of a theme in the text, transitions between themes, contexts for each theme. Be mindful of contradictions to theme, in terms of content, mood, or evaluation by the teller (p. 62-63).

3. Findings

3.1 Reconstructed Narratives and Themes

Analytical global impressions of participants' narratives are provided below, interspersed with their quotations. These point to some key themes drawn from each account (Lieblich et al., 2008). Throughout the reconstruction process, Riessman's (2015) guidance on reflexivity in understanding and making clear the researcher role in shaping these narratives remained paramount.

3.1.1 *Abi*

Global Impressions

Abi's bravely reflective and intellectually curious approach to exploring her professional identity was the most striking aspect of her narrative. Although she initially spoke with confidence about her conception of the ideal teacher, she was willing to revise her convictions, at one point stating she was "kind of getting confused about [her] own opinion". Moments of qualification and self-correction were frequent across both interviews, reflecting an ongoing process of sense-making.

In the first interview, Abi seemed to use my questioning to help her explore tension within her values. For example, she wrestled with the dichotomy of authenticity and performance, initially suggesting the ideal teacher should bring their personality into the classroom before suggesting that her husband - an ideal teacher in her eyes - is much more performative in the way he teaches. However, by the second interview, she returned with more clarity stating that, "you can't just bring your personality. But what I mean is being authentic, so you can't pretend to be something you're not". I did not interpret that her values had shifted here, only that she had distilled them.

Abi linked her professional growth and understanding of good teaching to experience and time, having "just got older and learnt more about children and humans". She associated systemic change with greater professional freedom: "I think the curriculum has changed so I can be a lot more myself". However, this autonomy was narrated as conditional, as she cited

leadership's role as partially definitive as "ultimately it's the headteacher that's the main influence on the school".

Abi cited the benefits of reflection across both interviews. She referenced feeling more "grounded" following the first interview which was a "conversation to get to the point" and "go back to what you know". Some elements she had previously prioritised she stated were ones she "could probably now throw out". This led to a more abstract discussion of reflection in schools which Abi suggested could be "really powerful" for teachers, though the outcomes of reflection might need to be defined to avoid competing values becoming difficult to manage. This tension remained unresolved, which I feel reflected Abi's broader narrative in which she embraced complexity rather than settling on simple conclusions.

Narrative Themes

Identity and Professional Values in Relation to Systems

Both in her references to her ideal teacher and in discussing her own professional identity there were some core traits that reoccurred throughout Abi's narrative, such as adaptability, competence and experience. The most central, which she conceptualised as both ethical and motivating, was the prioritisation of children's needs, describing it as the "only thing that keeps you going". She also positioned the non-ideal teacher accordingly, as someone whose goal is to "make [the non-ideal teacher] feel better, not just to facilitate the kids and what they need".

In discussing the ideal, non-ideal, and herself, Abi outlined how professional values were shaped by systemic demands. She felt that the new curriculum had given her increased "freedom" and had allowed her to marry the holistic needs of the child with encouraging academic progress - values she had previously seen as distinct. In other ways, she noticed how externally imposed metrics of what makes a good teacher had become interwoven with her own conception of the ideal teacher unconsciously and unwelcomely: "I think I came in [to the interview] with like a summary of those documents in my head which were indoctrinated, you know?"

For others, such as early career teachers or those trained at different times, she reflected that external metrics may shape their professional identities and create disconnection from their authentic values. As such, Abi discussed the paradoxical idea that stability and certainty of values are required within a changing landscape, stating that this clarity:

will take you a long way in a career where you're continually judged and scrutinised and there's external pressures. I think it helps you just focus on what matters and on your values. And I think anyone in life is more content when you're doing that.

Abi reflected on how she continues to establish a professional identity against the backdrop of systemic expectations. She discussed wearing ear piercings as a way of “rebellious in some way”, signalling a commitment to individuality that she traced back to an inspirational teacher she had observed as a teaching assistant, who wore normal clothes and resisted “traditional” presentation. This idea of freedom informed her ideal construct as she felt that different types of teachers were required to “get the needs of all the children”. However, when challenged about the extent of individual teacher self-expression, she presented a more nuanced ideal, noting a need for “professionalism” too. This nuance was also evident in her acceptance of the requirement of external structures and metrics, which she experienced as supportive in areas she felt less confident in, such as maths.

The complexity of defining oneself relative to systemic messaging was further evident when Abi stated, “you get told a lot in teaching what you are and what you're not. So I think you have to, as you said, be resilient and you learn yourself what's good teaching”. At the same time, she felt that the disappearance of an old system of greater external judgement had removed a metric which had provided quantifiable, positive reinforcement. Abi framed this as a partial loss, noting that “it would mean the world to me that I was still doing well, yeah”.

Becoming – Reflection, Adaptability and Growth Over Time

Abi conceptualised her professional growth as a combination of becoming more certain in her convictions but also accepting a continued need to learn and improve. Early in her career she reflected that “you just do as you're told”, which appeared to function as a way of

establishing professional self-efficacy. Over time, this became increasingly internalised – “once you’ve done all the different cycles ... you know what works”. Despite the confidence provided by experience, Abi was resistant to fixity in her ideals, continuously referencing a need to “evolve” in order to continue being a good teacher. Experience enabled her to choose selectively from new initiatives, accepting those aligned with her understanding of the “nuts and bolts” of good teaching, while allowing her to reject those she saw as “superfluous”.

Abi connected her professional evolution with events in her personal life. Some experiences, such as having a young child, were narrated as informing her professional development, while others, including the emotional impact of her husband’s illness, were described as needing to be held separately. This emotional self-awareness was extended to others and evident in her discussion of a teacher who had shouted at children, whom she later understood as requiring “nurturing” and reflection rather than correction.

When questioned about how her understanding had been informed by reflection, Abi felt that her reflective tendencies had been fundamental in reappraising her approach, preventing her from becoming a “bad teacher”. Abi felt that reflection was key to evolution and without it these ‘bad teachers’ experienced a “huge disparity” between themselves and the demands of the role. Given the chance to reflect, Abi felt they may ask themselves “‘am I still able to bring what I need to bring?’ [and they] might make a different decision in a peaceful, happy way”. However, she also questioned whether reflection alone was sufficient to bring about evolution in some teachers. She felt the readiness of the individual and the reflective conditions were important as without these variables being satisfied some teachers might always see that the “problem is with something else, not them”.

Continued reflection, adaptation, and then refinement of professional identity were central to Abi’s conception of both her ideal teacher and herself, and antithetical to her non-ideal teacher. While this pattern was partly facilitated by the interview questions and context, Abi evidenced reflective sense-making in real time during her narrative as evidenced by the increased clarity of her ideal concepts in the second interview. This clarity was not narrated

as final, however, as Abi remained committed to revisiting her values, questioning whether the criteria she had selected “just suits [her]”. Ultimately, she altered this opinion and concluded that “teaching since [the first interview] has been so much more calm because I’ve got back to what I really know is true”.

Taken together, Abi’s narrative illustrates how her professional identity, values, and conception of the ideal teacher are not discrete constructs but evolving and interrelated, continually negotiated in relation to systemic demands, professional experience, and life events.

3.1.2 Isabelle

Global Impressions

The central value that resonated throughout Isabelle’s two interviews was her commitment to building positive relationships with the children. She immediately adopted a student’s perspective to describe her ideal teacher as “someone you feel is really interested and wants to listen to you”, emphasising personal qualities such as “warmth” and “kindness”. She showed no hesitation in conceptualising the ideal teacher as someone who prioritises building relationships with every child, later extending this value to “adults as well”.

Isabelle’s professional values and her ideal teacher were essentially synonymous. She traced the development of these values back to her own school years. She described herself as “very, very quiet and lacking confidence” before a teacher spent time with her and noticed her potential, until which point her self-belief “hadn’t [been] unlocked”. It was clear that Isabelle prioritised getting to know children through giving them time and attention, which was made more evident by her non-ideal teacher, who was “just interested in outcomes, not in knowing those children”. Isabelle’s core value served as a moral anchor across the two interviews. However, increasing demands meant she was not always able to practice in line with her ideal. When asked how she could move closer to it, she suggested “everything you tick off your list” brings her nearer - not because task completion reflected her ideal, but because it created space to enact her relationship-centred values.

During the second interview, Isabelle reflected that the interview space had brought her values to the “forefront” of her mind again, having previously been submerged by workload. Though this was framed positively, she also acknowledged how her adherence to those values might be “detrimental to [her] well-being” due to the energy she invested in enacting them. She also reflected that others could take advantage of her commitment and that she could be “walked on”. In response, she considered how “prioritising well-being” and “letting go” of some responsibility might be necessary. However, these reflections were not developed further, as she continued to position managing relationships with staff, children, and families as essential to her role, illustrating the difficulty of stepping back from this commitment.

Narrative Themes

Moral Positioning

Isabelle’s professional identity and evaluation of practice were organised around a central moral question: “what’s benefitting the children by us doing this?” Her professional motivation was similarly framed, suggesting that she “would thrive off the energy of that child... seeing that they achieved”. This value also functioned as a consistent framework for decision making. When asked why she would go above her remit for other staff members who may not reciprocate, she responded, “just for the good of the children again”.

Isabelle’s sense of responsibility and child-centredness seemed deeply embedded, meaning she sometimes struggled to step back and delegate even when she felt other staff were similarly motivated. She experienced a sense of conflict when not involved in relationship-based work, stating that “I do feel like sometimes, if I was there I could add to it or I could help”. Although the cost of her position was acknowledged, this principle remained definitive.

Isabelle aligned her moral position with that of the CfW, stating that it initially removed all the “constraints of schemes of work”. However, she described how the principles of the CfW were being lost due to “prescriptive” systemic demands which she experienced as “more and

more getting added on". Despite this, her values remained non-negotiable. This was evident in her relationships with parents which she valued because "they know their children best". Later in our conversation, however, she referenced the increased communication access and monitoring role of parents as problematic describing their messaging on the school platform as "constant, it's twenty-four seven". Once messages were received, she felt a duty to respond, reinforcing rather than renegotiating her relational commitment.

This tension was further illustrated by her unique position as ALNCo. She described a rare occasion in which she relinquished responsibility of a case to a senior colleague. Isabelle disagreed with the pursuit of diagnosis and medication for the child, citing the breakdown in relationship with the family as a key factor in the mismanagement of the case. She said "that concerns me but it's been taken out of my hands", later stating that, "sometimes decisions are made above you and you might not agree with them". Conversely, she felt some more junior staff saw managing relationships with families as her responsibility, summarising their views towards her as "you get extra for doing it... you've had the training". Isabelle seemed to feel these perspectives as troubling not only due to her professional position as an ALNCo, but because of her moral vision of the role.

While Isabelle's moral framework guided her practice, it also shaped how she positioned herself in relation to colleagues. Though she framed herself as a relational practitioner, this stance, combined with her ALNCo role, shaped how others positioned her, sometimes in ways she experienced as unfair. While her moral commitment underpinned her professional identity, it also highlighted the effort required to sustain this stance within everyday school life.

Emotional Labour and Relational Mediation

Isabelle's narrative revealed multiple layers of emotional labour, which became more explicit across the interviews: initially in the time required to sustain relationships with pupils, then in the personal cost of this commitment, and finally in her role as a mediator within the school.

Isabelle began by describing her ideal teacher, then, following prompts, she outlined the relational processes required to realise this ideal. Central to this process was the repeated importance of giving all the children “time”. She rooted this view within her own experience when a teacher “took the time to explain” something to her. This approach had led to various benefits within her own practice – citing behaviour management, learning and students’ emotional wellbeing as stemming from “building those relationships first”. However, a lack of time meant her ideal approach had become “compromised” due to what she felt was an ever-increasing workload. Her initial discussion of these challenges was more pragmatic than emotional, often ending answers with the word “difficult” without immediately discussing her feelings in depth.

By the second interview, there was a shift in how Isabelle engaged with this aspect of her practice. She suggested that the first interview had “opened [her] eyes” and had made her realise more deeply that relationships were “really important” to her. However, she began to reflect that that putting others first is “not always good, is it? Sometimes it’s draining”. The deepening of her reflective process between interviews was reflected by Isabelle linking her professional and personal life – “[the interview] made me think wow, so many people and not just at school ... rely on me”. She expressed that it was important to stay emotionally “topped up” as a way of enabling herself to perform this role. However, the process of reflecting on her practice had left her “emotionally drained”, which she partly attributed to the discomfort of “just talking about myself, because I never do”. This indicated that the novelty of reflecting about herself may have been emotionally tiring for Isabelle, foregrounding her habitual role as one more supportive of others.

This role was more openly acknowledged in the second interview when stating that the help she offers isn’t “always reciprocated” which “gets to [her] a little bit”. Her non-ideal teacher was conceptualised as someone who was not relational, but her subsequent reflection on this archetype made her more even-handed in her evaluation of those who don’t practice that way, surmising that “not everybody is like that”. She empathised with those who did less emotional labour, considering that “perhaps they are right, perhaps they

are prioritising themselves and their families". This consideration implied a growing acknowledgement that her emotional availability for the needs of others had a cost to herself, though she ended by saying, "I'm happy to do it because I always have".

As the second interview progressed, this tension was further shaped by her role within the school as an intermediary between senior leaders and the staff, and as a supportive ally to both parties. I pointed this position out in our conversation, which seemed to resonate with her. This was highlighted by her repetition of the phrase "I'm the one", illustrating the singular responsibility she had for relaying messages from one group to the other. However, it was her specific position within the school that enabled her to empathise with staff as well as furnishing her with the power to help them: "I'm fixing [staff problems] because I'm on the ground living and breathing it every day" and "I feel these challenges are hard". This sense of empathy and responsibility seemed to define her role within the school, thereby increasing her emotional labour and limiting her capacity to alter it.

Across the interviews, Isabelle's narrative revealed a growing tension between her awareness of the personal cost of this commitment and her continued adherence to a relationship-centred practice. Although she increasingly recognised the demands placed on her, she did not appear to seriously consider relinquishing this responsibility. Instead, the sense of accountability she felt towards her pupils and colleagues appeared to narrow the range of professional responses she considered possible.

3.1.3 Lynn

Global Impressions

Lynn began our interaction unhesitatingly, describing her ideal teacher with confidence as someone that "cares for the children" and inspires them. Her portrayal was of a strong and moral practitioner who was "kind, caring and forgiving". She immediately stated that her ideal wasn't "necessarily an excellent practitioner", clarifying that personal qualities were more important than learnt skills, which "you can develop later". Lynn's moral and relationship-focused ideals were not revisited explicitly but remained evident throughout our

conversations, at times manifesting as assumed truths, such as “we want them to be able to develop and improve”. Lynn did not question commitment and motivation as facets of an ideal teacher because to her these were presupposed, summed up in her stating, “I want to be here”.

Lynn said that the first interview had made her “a bit more reflective”, but she did not substantially revisit her ideal and non-ideal constructs in our second interview. It seemed that the reflective process had served a purpose for Lynn in stating and clarifying an ideal that was “already there”. As a result, the second interview became more abstract and co-constructed, with less direct elaboration on her own identity. However, it also created space for Lynn to be able to consider the various merits of reflection, which she seemed to feel could have two primary benefits: evaluating practice (“what are we going to improve?”) and gaining perspective on self-induced pressures (“that time to breathe”).

When lacking reflective space, Lynn was able to recognise how non-ideal behaviours arose in herself and others, suggesting that “relationships with the kids suffer” because “[she has] been rushing them all day”. Lynn’s recognition of how non-ideal traits might arise was evident throughout, as was her repeated motivation to improve: “I can recognise when it’s going to shit ... and I will try and fix it”. Lynn consistently framed her reflections in terms of strengths and actionable improvements. This attitude characterised Lynn’s professional identity and ideal, and explained her valuation of reflective spaces.

Lynn’s account remained comparatively stable across both interviews. Rather than using reflection to revise or problematise her constructs, she appeared to use the space to confirm and regulate an already established sense of her professional values. Reflection functioned to maintain focus and reinforce what was already understood to be important rather than reshaping it.

Narrative Themes

Internal Professional Development

Lynn used the reflective space to maintain and optimise her professional identity, rather than to deeply explore its underlying foundations. Focus centred on qualities that facilitated professional development, particularly “resilience” and “determination”. She couched these in her own story which was relayed as one of survival, as she endured a first year in which she “was in tears every half term”. She seemed to feel that these strengths-based traits were both inherent to an individual and developed through exposure: “I think you need the personal attributes to put yourself in that position”.

Lynn’s determination was notable in her own education story too, admitting that she “didn’t find school easy” but told herself she was “gonna get there”. Lynn’s forward momentum extended into her teaching approach, echoing her school description: “this is really hard but we are going to keep going. We’re gonna because I want them to achieve”. Her language consistently reflected a goal-directed and future-oriented identity.

Lynn seemed to view the development of her resilience as a partial byproduct of someone “passionate” who “wants to be there massively”. Lacking this drive was viewed not only as a cap on improving, but something that “the children notice” and “will be reflected in their learning”. Lynn did not feel the need to use the space to reflect on this central motivation, when asked directly whether wanting the best for the children was at the heart of her work, she simply responded “Definitely. Yeah”. When asked how Lynn would specifically like to improve, she reflected that, “the emotional side I’m on”, adding that “developing [her] skills as a teacher”, was the next step for her. The core of her professional identity was not interrogated within the reflective space, suggesting it was either settled or unavailable for reflection.

Despite Lynn’s perceptible sense of vocation, she recognised when these traits were not always sufficient to drive professional improvement. This became more evident in our second interview when discussing the benefits of reflection. She described a working day in which, “you don’t stop”, describing this impacting her “wellbeing” and her ability to question her practice: “does it really matter if they don’t get to do that extra Christmas activity?” Lynn valued reflection as a remedy for these occurrences, though her endorsement of these

spaces was pragmatic and candid: “this is how I’m gonna get better”. Though Lynn advocated for slowing down, to her this did not mean reflecting without purpose. This was exemplified by her ideal teacher concept, to which she wanted to “add in” a few things in our second conversation, but was not interested in reconceptualising. She did not appear to experience dissonance between her identity and the demands of the role that required resolution through reflection.

Lynn’s focus on professional improvement was more deeply revisited during our second interview. I questioned her as to whether anything in the first interview had felt uncomfortable, to which she felt that naming her non-ideal traits had “felt like picking holes”. Instead, she endorsed “constructive criticism”, which always offered a sense of “this is what you could do”. This interaction seemed a microcosm of Lynn’s professional approach - a frankness and candour about areas for improvement, accompanied by action and a “positive outlook on life”.

Whether reflecting a burgeoning and protected teacher identity, or values aligned with the demands of the role, Lynn used the reflective space to look forward. Taken together, Lynn’s narrative appeared to orient toward maintaining stability at the core of her professional identity and ideal teacher construct. This was reflected in a narrative which employed difficulty only as a fertiliser for growth rather than as an indication that core values required revision.

Contextual and Relational Supports

The fortitude which characterised Lynn’s professional identity was not described as a purely internal trait. Instead, Lynn repeatedly contextualised resilience as relationally sustained. When asked what tools the ideal teacher would need, Lynn suggested they needed someone to “moan to, that they can rant at”. The importance that Lynn attributed to personal context was also evidenced by her non-ideal teacher who she said would likely have difficulties at home, leading to a drop in “resilience” and “patience”. She likened teaching to a performance, saying that “you can’t put on that show if you’ve got nothing left

in the tank". Emotional capacity was therefore fundamental to practising in line with her ideal but required relational support.

However, not all forms of support were equally valued. For her, safety and emotional investment were deemed as essential. Her mum represented these values, as an outsider who wasn't "involved" but "cares", allowing her to vent and "celebrate" with her, knowing she would be "happy as well". Lynn felt that "it has to feel safe to be able to reflect" – something she acknowledged might be more difficult for some. Though more generally, she concluded "[reflection] has to not be led by SLT". Holding this perspective did not preclude Lynn from seeing and accepting the benefits of more critical support. In fact, she endorsed the value of taking criticism "on board" and building on it, rather than "seeing it as a failure". Lynn's valuation of both evaluative feedback and reflective spaces did not seem contradictory, but rather reflected their different functions. The former she characterised as helpful for "problem solving", whereas the latter was a more important, "cathartic" space that replenished her emotional capacity.

The more generalised focus of the second interview meant that Lynn offered some consideration of how a lack of emotional nourishment could cost other teachers too. She viewed herself as a "reflective" practitioner who understood the benefits of relational support. Although she felt that all teachers would benefit from opportunities to reflect, she accepted that some less reflective practitioners would have to be shown "how to reflect". This thought intersected with her conceptualisation of her non-ideal teacher, who she said would fail to consider "the wider picture", meaning contextual influences on the children and school. This suggested an implicit belief that supportive relationships helped foreground the importance of context and connection for others. Where this was missing, she felt teachers stopped being "team players" and could become "narrow-minded".

Despite emphasising relational support, Lynn also foregrounded the importance of developing independence. She described her next professional step as trying to "fix my problem myself" and she felt reflection required individuals to assert "this is where I want to be". This did not appear to minimise or contradict relational and contextual support, rather,

independence was portrayed as a developmental step. The interview space seemed to reinforce this perspective, as Lynn used the opportunity to consolidate her professional identity and as a means of tentatively testing greater independence.

Together, Lynn's narrative positioned her professional identity as both relationally supported and increasingly self-directed.

4. Discussion

This study explored how teachers construct and negotiate professional identities through narrative reflection, and how this supports meaning-making within a changing Welsh educational context. Teachers have long faced changing demands as a result of educational reform. However, the intersecting aims of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) and the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act (ALNET) have been seen to require a more substantial reimagining of the contemporary teacher in Wales (Evans, 2022). This shift in professional identity has not been uniformly straightforward for practitioners (Brown et al., 2025; Evans, 2022; Murphy et al., 2025). Indeed, research in other contexts has illustrated the decreased motivation, emotional strain and professional disengagement instigated by identity fragmentation linked to systemic reform (Durrant, 2013; Ramiz, 2020). Narrative identity work has offered teachers an avenue of support in increasing their capacity to meet systemic demands; this possibility is further explored within the Welsh context here (Durrant, 2013; Hooker, 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013).

In the current study, narrative reflection appeared to serve different purposes for each participant. For Abi, narrative processes allowed her to expand, adapt and refine a professional identity that appeared to have some core stability, but was open to questioning. For Isabelle, narrative reflection functioned as a means of morally positioning herself while negotiating tensions produced by systemic pressures. In contrast, Lynn appeared to use the reflective space to stabilise and reinforce an already established professional identity.

Taken together, these narrative accounts suggest that reflection did not operate uniformly within this study. Rather, participants appeared to use the reflective space in different ways,

such as revising aspects of their professional identity, surfacing and exploring tensions within it, or reaffirming and consolidating their existing professional identity.

Previous research has explored both the importance of narrative identity work with teachers and its different functions - parallels to this literature will be discussed here. However, within this research the psychological processes and conditions through which narrative identity work may operate are more explicitly considered. Therefore, the discussion first uses the current findings to contemplate the specific pressures on teacher identity within the contemporary Welsh educational context. It then examines the psychological mechanisms and relational conditions that appeared to support narrative identity work within the interviews. Finally, the possibilities and limitations suggested by narrative identity work and the current study are considered, followed by implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs) seeking to support reflective processes with teachers.

4.1 Identity Development Within a Changing Welsh Educational Context

The autonomy that was promised by the CfW was cited and realised in the narratives of Abi and Isabelle, as both referenced the new system and the initial freedom it had contributed to their roles (Evans, 2022). The best hopes of the CfW, in reducing the glare of external metrics and allowing teachers to be more autonomous curriculum designers and assessors, was particularly perceptible in Abi's account (Evans, 2022; Welsh Government, 2023). In her narrative, both the performative culture described by Ball (2003), and Wales' distinctive move away from that culture were described, foregrounding the potential of systemic reform to reposition teacher identity (Evans, 2022).

For Abi, the CfW allowed her to marry her dual priorities - academic progress and holistic wellbeing - only the former of which she saw as prioritised before educational reform. However, systemic change was not narrated as the only salient factor in Abi's development. She felt her experience had facilitated a greater degree of understanding of her professional values and given her a sense of confidence. This growth had coincided with a context that had allowed these factors to fuse together coherently. As such, it was both systemic

changes, and the capacity and readiness to integrate them, that were narrated as critical to supporting an expanding professional identity. This is in keeping with the conclusion of Brown et al. (2025) in suggesting that teachers must feel emotionally and practically “prepared and equipped” for systemic changes to be realised (p. 492). However, this alignment between systemic opportunity and professional readiness was not reflected across all narratives.

Although Isabelle initially experienced the CfW as freeing, she later felt that its principles had become buried beneath an increasingly prescriptive timetable. She was unsure why some initiatives had been introduced, reflecting what Brown et al. (2025) and Duggan et al. (2022) frame as a lack of systemic coherence necessary for change to be successfully realised. Evans (2022) positions this effect as a form of emotional and motivational fatigue brought on by excessive educational reform. However, in this case, Isabelle’s motivational capacity did not appear diminished, as she actively sought to embody the person-centred and relational principles of CfW and ALNET that she felt reflected her own values.

In fact, it was Isabelle’s unique position within the school, as both a senior leader and the ALNCo, that meant she felt responsible for embodying and entrenching these values in practice. Within her school, Isabelle both positioned herself, and was positioned by others, as responsible for managing ALN and relational needs for colleagues who felt less confident in these areas. Coupled with a wave of new initiatives, some of which she deemed as superfluous, Isabelle’s capacity to practice in line with both reforms and her own professional values appeared constrained.

Murphy et al. (2025) add depth to this finding, suggesting that ALN reforms often feel more intuitive to ALNCos while being experienced more inconsistently by other teachers. This aligns with Conn and Hutt’s (2020) observation that some teachers responding to ALN reforms perceive their role primarily as teaching the “centre ground” (p.154). Isabelle therefore exemplifies how reform can be unevenly distributed across school systems. Although she appeared intellectually and morally committed to the principles of reform in

Wales, the inconsistency and lack of clarity with which these principles were integrated across her setting constrained her ability to fully express her professional identity.

By contrast, Lynn did not reference educational reform in her account. While she questioned the approach of her previous headteacher, she did not question the underlying assumptions or demands of her role. Only three years into teaching, this may be because she had not experienced a previous system. However, her reluctance to question the value commitments of her professional identity may also suggest that her practice was largely synonymous with the expectations of the role. Alternatively, understood alongside Abi's narrative, it may indicate that her professional identity had not yet become differentiated in ways that brought competing demands into tension. Ramiz (2020) and Durrant (2013) offer some support for this interpretation. Ramiz found that more experienced teachers were more accepting of morally ambiguous practices, while Durrant suggested that both experience and strong values are required for teachers to navigate the ethical demands inherent in the profession. Together, these findings suggest that professional identities may become more morally complex over time as teachers accumulate experience and encounter competing institutional pressures.

The narratives suggest that systemic reform does not directly reshape teacher identity but instead interacts with teachers' existing values, experiences and professional roles. Indeed, none of the narrative accounts strongly diverged from the principles of either CfW or ALNET in that all participants positioned themselves as person-centred and relationship-focussed practitioners. However, the degree to which they were able to enact those principles in their work was dependent on a range of contextual and personal factors. This finding is reflective of much of the literature cited; that educational reform is contingent on teachers' capacities and readiness to incorporate its aims and values into their professional identities (Evans, 2022; Evans, 2023). This suggests that where reform demands cannot be integrated into teachers' professional identities, there is a risk of disengagement or attrition (Schaefer, 2013).

Arguably, the principal aim for teachers of CfW was to enable them to drive reform and to define their working environments - for change to happen through teachers, rather than be done to them. Viewed in this way, narrative identity work becomes a key site through which the CfW in particular is interpreted and realised. Through narratively negotiating the relationship between external demands and internal professional values, teachers can make sense of reform and translate policy ambitions into everyday professional practice.

4.2 Psychological Processes in Narrative Identity Work

4.2.1 Narrative Meaning-Making and Identity Construction

This study sought to investigate the psychological mechanisms involved in narrative identity work and its potential for supporting teachers. The interview space appeared to facilitate participants' clarification of their professional identities. The ways in which narrative reflection operated varied across participants and are explored here through three psychological lenses. First, a conceptual narrative perspective informed by Bruner (2004) is used to examine how participants organised and interpreted their experiences. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) then offers insight into how participants filtered these experiences through their personal meaning systems (Kelly, 1955). Finally, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) considers why particular identitarian positions may have felt sustaining or motivating (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Together, these perspectives illuminate some of the processes involved in teacher identity construction and potential avenues for supporting it.

4.2.2 Narrative Meaning-Making

Bruner (1991) suggested that narrative construction both expresses meaning and allows it to be further developed through engagement with what is articulated. This is not a completely free act however, as narrative has conventions, both in the way it is structured, and in the positioning of both the teller and listener. These conventions are culturally bound - the narrator seeks to relay a story that is ethically and temporally intelligible, and these

judgements are culturally situated and assumed (Bruner, 1991). Methods of narrative expression are embedded over a lifetime, so not easily changed, though it is through retelling that they have the potential to be reshaped (Bruner, 1991).

For Bruner, narrating experience allows individuals to reconsider how they understand themselves and their actions. Isabelle's narrative appeared to reflect this process. When reflecting on why she continued to support others at a cost to herself, she explained that it was simply because – 'I always have'. Through recounting her experiences, the consistency with which she positioned herself as a relational practitioner appeared to become more explicit, and by the second interview she reflected that this position extended to her home life. While framing her practice intelligibly to me as the listener, she seemed to draw new meaning from her own story revealing an emotional cost she had not previously considered because she 'never' usually spoke about herself.

Teachers may prioritise the needs of others when their values are challenged (Durrant, 2013), reflecting the strong ethical orientation often present in professional narratives. Woolhouse (2024), while sharing this view, goes further in arguing that the importance of narrative reflection is that it can create space between oneself and dominant ethical discourses without feeling devalued. Isabelle's tentative reflection that her more self-focused colleagues were "maybe... right" suggests that articulating her story allowed her to consider alternative possibilities.

Abi's narrative process was the most dynamic and exploratory of the participants here. She appeared to use my responses as a way of working through her experiences in order to make her professional identity more intelligible to herself. In doing so, she repeatedly revisited and refined a flexible, but established sense of what kind of teacher she wished to be. By contrast, Lynn's account appeared to be oriented around a sense of conviction, direction and solidity on which to build a burgeoning professional identity.

These cases illustrate the different purposes narrative reflection can serve the teller, shaped by their contexts and identitarian needs (Richert, 2006). Despite these differences, all narrative accounts appeared to tend towards maintaining a sense of identity coherence.

This tendency frames narrative reflection as a key means of positioning identity relative to environment. This may support teachers in sustaining a stable sense of self within complex professional contexts (Durrant, 2013; Hooker, 2016). PCP offers a complementary lens for understanding how such coherence may be structured through the constructs individuals use to anticipate and interpret their world.

4.2.3 Personal Construct Systems

While narrative approaches provide insight into how experience is organised, Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) assists in identifying how that experience may have coalesced into an individualised construct system - a framework through which one interprets and anticipates the world (Kelly, 1955). As with narrative approaches, reflective processes informed by PCP may allow individuals to reconsider their constructs so that they better anticipate future experience and reduce negative emotional outcomes, such as anxiety. The 'Ideal Teacher' activity essentially offers a construct system template within which the participants can explore their professional identity in order to examine how well it anticipates their working environment (Moran, 2001).

Lynn's reflection that her first year in teaching was an unpleasant experience was framed by the fact that she knew she was not operating in tandem with her ideal teacher construct. Her inability to align this construct with the expectations of her environment perhaps meant she experienced something described by Ruohotie-Lyhty (2013, p.120) as "praxis shock". Though Ruohotie-Lyhty frames this experience through a narrative lens, PCP helps illustrate how the fixity of her participant's identity construct may have been problematic. It did not allow her to anticipate her professional reality, instead forcing her to protect rather than expand her professional identity.

Lynn's emotional response to this experience, though similar initially, appeared to catalyse a different process - she cited a sense of determination in helping align her professional identity with the school's demands. As such, the personal traits which helped her navigate her initial shock are narrated as the central to her ideal teacher construct.

Hooker's (2016) study offers a related perspective, suggesting that emotional material can play a significant role in shaping the construction of professional identities. Moreover, PCP suggests that constructs can consolidate and extend over time when experiences are interpreted in ways that confirm them (Kelly, 1955). For Lynn, although her ideal teacher construct appeared to be challenged, her longstanding framing of herself as resilient provided an alternative construct which she was able to utilise and extend in forging her revised ideal teacher. This consolidation was evident in her narrative, as she sought to embed these traits as the basis for her ideal teacher.

Alternately, Abi appeared to refine an ideal teacher construct that had become nuanced over time. Part of this refinement seemed to involve a return to 'what you know', suggesting that the interview process had clarified a well-validated core to her professional identity. This interpretation was supported by Abi's successful lesson observation between interviews, suggesting that this construct was fit for anticipating the particularities of her role (Kelly, 1955). Though Isabelle's ideal construct was also well defined, the interview process suggested that its capacity to anticipate the increasing demands of her role was becoming stretched, seemingly catalysing reflection on whether it required amendment.

Narrative reflection appeared to aid participants in actively engaging the personal constructs through which they interpreted their professional experiences. The extent to which these constructs were validated, revised or strained by their environments seemed to shape how their professional identities developed. This highlights both the threat of contextual pressure to identity coherence and the importance of narrative reflection in helping teachers define themselves relative to their contexts, supporting their capacity to sustain engagement within their roles.

4.2.4 Motivation and The Sustainability of Professional Identity

From the identity positions that individuals take, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a perspective for understanding why some of these positions may be more motivating and sustaining for teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT differentiates types of motivation and

proposes that more autonomous motivation is supported when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: competence (the degree to which one feels a sense of mastery), autonomy (the degree to which one's actions are congruent with one's values), and relatedness (the degree to which one feels connected to others) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When these needs are supported, individuals tend to experience greater autonomous motivation, often accompanied by increased creativity and flexibility. When they are thwarted, individuals may experience more negative emotional outcomes and engage in greater self-protection. As illustrated in Figure 2, SDT was selected as the principal interpretative framework through which the interrelationship between identity and motivation is understood.

SDT is typically examined empirically, so its application here is necessarily interpretive. However, it offers a useful lens for understanding participants' motivation. Abi, for example, appeared to demonstrate a high level of intrinsic motivation, adapting her practice and professional identity not only to meet the demands of her environment, but to express her values. This was reflected in her apparent experiences of autonomy, competence and relatedness, implied by her responses. Her account aligns with Durrant's (2013) consideration of teacher agency in which teachers are able to suitably assess their environment and act in ways that shape their role within it. Crucially, Durrant suggests that narrative reflection can mobilise this process, a dynamic that appears evident in Abi's account, where reflection serves to clarify and activate an already established professional identity. From an SDT perspective, this suggests that her psychological needs are relatively well supported, contributing to a sense of motivation and sustainability in her practice.

Isabelle's account suggests a less balanced configuration of psychological need satisfaction. While her strong orientation towards relatedness and her evident competence appear well established, her reflections indicate that her capacity to act in alignment with her own needs may be more constrained, potentially contributing to the emotional cost she described. From an SDT perspective, such imbalance in need satisfaction can be associated with poorer wellbeing and less autonomous motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This aligns with Woolhouse (2024), who suggests that the inhibition of autonomous practice can reproduce

professional identities aligned with dominant ethical discourse. In Isabelle's case, this may reflect a prioritisation of the needs of others, positioning relatedness as dominant at the expense of autonomy.

For Lynn, motivation appeared to be supported through the development and consolidation of competence, alongside an increasing alignment between her professional values and practice. From an SDT perspective, this suggests an emerging sense of autonomous motivation, as her identity becomes more coherent and better able to sustain her engagement with the demands of her role. However, it is also possible that this reflects a developmental prioritisation of competence and contextual alignment, with autonomy becoming more fully realised over time (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Taken together, these analyses suggest that narrative identity work operates through interacting processes of meaning-making, construct refinement and motivational regulation. This work may therefore support teachers in maintaining coherent identities and sustaining motivation in their practice.

4.3 Relational Conditions Enabling Narrative Identity Work

While the previous section focussed on the psychological mechanisms that were operational in participants' narratives, these mechanisms appeared to be shaped by the relational conditions that facilitated them.

4.3.1 Person-Centred Conditions in Narrative Identity Work

For individuals to begin to move towards their authentic selves, where they are able to feel, relate to and express their lived experience freely, the relational conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence have to be met by the relational other (Rogers, 1961). Though these conditions were conceived within a therapeutic setting, where an established relationship means they are more easily enacted, the two-interview structure aimed to create the familiarity necessary for participants to openly express themselves.

The extent to which the interview design and approach facilitated person-centred conditions is necessarily inferential, as participants' sense of safety and freedom cannot be

directly verified. However, the material produced, when considered alongside psychological theory, offers some indication of both the extent to which these conditions were approximated and their potential effects. For Isabelle, there was not only a notable increase in emotionality in her second interview, but also the beginnings of a recognition of tension between her lived experience and her professional identity construct. From a Rogerian vantage point, this may reflect movement towards congruence, as previously unarticulated experience becomes more closely aligned with communication. This suggests that, by the second interview, she may have felt sufficiently safe to express herself in this way, indicating that person-centred conditions were at least partially met.

Aligned with the perspectives of Bruner (1991) and Woolhouse (2024), the presence of these conditions may also help explain Isabelle's tentative questioning of her relationship-focussed professional identity. Within a less judgemental relational context, the need to render her identity ethically intelligible may have been loosened, creating greater space to consider both its possibilities and its costs.

Alternatively, Isabelle's description of the school's priorities and expectations became more conflicted and less coherent as our conversation continued. The complexities and contradictions in the school's motivations might have contributed to a sense of incongruity within her professional identity that only emerged through the developing narrative process (Rogers, 1961). This extends the work of Brown et al. (2025) concerning reform implementation, that found a lack of systemic coherence manifested in reduced clarity of purpose at the level of the individual teacher. Across assessments, the conditions of the reflective space seemed to allow Isabelle to begin to try and resolve some tension between her professional identity and context. This may be important in supporting a sustainable sense of professional self.

For Abi, the two-interview structure did not elicit increased emotionality or construct revision, as these were already evident from the outset. Instead, it revealed how the reflective process was catalysed and then extended beyond the first meeting. Abi appeared sufficiently congruent and open to use the space to advance a self-actualising professional

identity already in motion (Rogers, 1961). This may reflect her more intrinsically motivated practice affording her greater freedom in how she positioned her professional identity (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Understood in this way, Abi's capacity to both experience and express her identity congruently may have been supported by a more self-directed professional orientation, facilitating a greater degree of comfort, freedom and self-exploration within the interview space.

Though Lynn expressed comfort in reflecting and responded openly to questions, no perceptible reflective process was catalysed by our conversations. Neither did her professional identity seem open to change or excessive revision within the reflective space. For Rogers, change occurs when individuals become aware of incongruence and are able to express and explore it within a conditional environment (Rogers, 1961). By this token, it may be that Lynn did not feel a sufficient degree of incongruence between her professional identity and her environment that required revision. Equally, even if she experienced the space as safe to reflect, it may be that it allowed her an opportunity to stabilise her professional identity, which she felt was more important. This pattern resonates with Ramiz's (2020) finding that less experienced teachers expressed lower levels of critical reflexivity. Rather than reflecting a deficit, this may indicate that where professional identities are experienced as relatively coherent, there is less impetus to engage in critical re-evaluation. From a psychological perspective, reflexivity may be more likely to emerge when tensions between experience, values and context are encountered, prompting individuals to reconsider and reorganise their professional identities.

4.3.2 Emotional Containment in Reflective Space

While PCA seeks to create the conditions in which emotions can be safely expressed, containment aims to allow those feelings to be held, understood and made more tolerable (Bion, 1985). The interviews here aimed to offer participants a temporary opportunity for containment in which they could make sense of the emotional material connected to their sense of professional identity.

For Isabelle, it seems that the space initiated the sharing of emotional material, but perhaps did not offer resolution for this material. As previously discussed, Hooker (2016) did not view this as a negative, as this emotionality can signal a need for change, or from a Rogerian view, reveal incongruence requiring resolution. However, without containment, such emotional material may remain difficult to process or integrate. From Bion's perspective, the function of containment is to transform raw emotional experience into forms that can be thought about and understood (Bion, 1985). In this sense, while the interview space appeared to facilitate the expression of Isabelle's emotional experience, it may have only partially supported its transformation into something more intelligible or actionable.

In contrast, Abi's responses may reflect a greater capacity to process emotional material internally, or suggest that narrating her professional identity generated less emotional material requiring containment. Lynn, meanwhile, appeared to draw on external relational resources, particularly her relationship with her mother, which may have provided containment outside of the research context. This suggests that the extent to which reflective, narratively oriented spaces can support meaningful identity work may depend not only on the opportunity for expression, but on the availability of sufficient internal or relational containment to process what is expressed. This may influence how effectively teachers are able to engage with and integrate their professional experiences.

4.3.3 Agency and Limits of Narrative Identity Work and This Research

Narrative identity work here has been seen to contribute to meaning-making and reflective processes that can support identity coherence and professional agency. This was made particularly clear through the construct refinement evident in Abi's narrative and the emotional tensions revealed by Isabelle, where narration appeared to create space for both clarification and reconsideration of professional identity. This allowed participants the opportunity to reauthor their professional identities in order to better meet the demands of their environments, supporting their capacity to remain coherent and agentic in their roles.

However, these examples also highlight the limits of narrative identity work. While Isabelle had a clear sense of professional identity, made more apparent through the interview process, narration alone did not resolve the systemically induced tensions that constrained its realisation. Beyond these environmental and systemic limitations, the potential for narrative identity work to facilitate change also appears contingent on participants' readiness to engage with and resolve identitarian tensions.

The two-interview structure, whilst effective in supporting reflection, does not replicate an ongoing intervention which may be necessary for some teachers in identifying incongruence and providing sufficient containment for emotional material. Furthermore, the application of psychological theory within this analysis is necessarily interpretive, meaning that some of the explanations offered remain tentative.

That said, it is the convergence of the theoretical perspectives utilised here, particularly in terms of their shared constructionist principles, that constitutes the research's fundamental strength and most useful contribution. Although the findings convey an uneven and complex picture, the study moves beyond describing participants' experiences by offering a theoretically integrated framework for understanding the processes underpinning narrative identity work. As such, its conceptual contribution extends beyond the findings themselves, providing a framework through which narrative identity work may be understood and investigated. These strengths are further reflected in the study's alignment with Yardley's (2000) criteria for trustworthy qualitative research (see Appendix B).

4.3.4 Implications for Educational Psychologists

The aims of the CfW emphasise the importance of teacher agency (Evans, 2023; Welsh Government, 2024), as policy enactment is contingent on those required to implement it. Understanding the psychological conditions that elicit agency is therefore critical for systemic change. Central to this is professional identity, as teachers' agency is tied to coherence between their identities and policy values (Durrant, 2013; Ramiz, 2020; Schaefer, 2013). In this sense, identity, agency and wellbeing are interrelated, with coherent professional

identities supporting both sustained engagement and a manageable sense of practice.

Narrative identity work has been seen, both in this study and elsewhere, to foreground and refine professional values (Watson, 2013; Woolhouse, 2024). While not a panacea, it creates conditions for identities to stabilise and become more agentic, highlighting a role for EPs. For EPs thinking systemically, recognising where in a system professional identity coherence might be most consequential will be important in utilising narrative approaches effectively.

The findings also highlight the importance of creating psychologically safe conditions for this work. While opportunities for reflection may facilitate positive identity development, they may also bring difficult emotional material into awareness, as demonstrated by the variability in participants' experiences within the present study. Consequently, reflective conversations should be accompanied by responsive relational conditions that allow individuals to determine the pace and depth of disclosure, whilst requiring facilitators to recognise and appropriately respond to emotional material should it arise. As seen with the participants in this study, narrative reflection created opportunities for clarification and change for some, but for others it also exposed tensions that remained unresolved, highlighting the importance of appropriate containment and follow-up support where required.

This study highlights the importance of framing teachers as recipients of psychological support, representing an attitudinal position rather than a mandate for specific interventions. Therefore, the present study advocates a subtle but important shift in attention within EP practice. Rather than primarily viewing teachers as professionals through whom change is implemented, the findings suggest value in attending more explicitly to teachers as individuals whose professional identities, motivations and meaning-making processes shape their capacity for agency. Participants here used the reflective space differently, yet all engaged in identity work not typically afforded within everyday professional contexts. This suggests EPs may have a role in facilitating reflective practices and creating spaces in which teachers can be psychologically supported. The conceptual framework developed here helps to make more explicit why these conversations matter, how they may function psychologically, and the conditions under which they may best support professional identity

coherence and agency. This research reaffirms the distinctive contribution of EPs, not by substantively reimagining the role, but by offering a richer psychological account of reflective conversations that already form part of relational and systemic practice.

Taken together, these findings suggest reflective processes function through an interaction between meaning-making, identity construction, motivation and agency. This process shapes how teachers experience and respond to the demands of their roles, highlighting them not only as agents of reform, but as individuals working within psychologically demanding environments. Placing teachers more centrally within EP practice may therefore support not only the enactment of change, but the sustainability of professional identity and wellbeing.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how teachers construct professional identities through narrative reflection, focusing on the psychological mechanisms involved and the conditions that facilitate meaningful reflection.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted across two meetings with each participant and analysed using a holistic-content approach, with findings interpreted through selected psychological frameworks.

Systemic change has been shown to generate identity tension and dissonance in teaching staff, yet this remains underexplored within the Welsh context despite substantial reform. Without coherent professional identities, teachers may experience a diminished sense of motivation and agency, constraining their capacity to enact change and posing risks to wellbeing. The findings of this study suggest that narrative reflection offers a means through which teachers can work towards more coherent professional identities. This highlights the importance of creating reflective spaces within educational systems, enabling teachers to sustain identity coherence, support their wellbeing, and operate as agentic practitioners.

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Part Three: Major Research Reflective Account

Word count: 6,562

1. Introduction

This critical appraisal will be presented in two parts. Initially, I will outline the development of the research topic and my own approach to the task. This process was assisted by entries from my research diary, which focusses more heavily on some aspects than others. That means that although I will cover each step of the research process in this account, there is some unevenness between how much attention each part is given, which is reflective of my experience.

The second part will discuss the contribution to knowledge of this research and its utility in aiding Educational Psychologists (EPs) in their work with teachers. I will also briefly address how these findings can be disseminated.

2. Critical Account of the Development of the Research and Researcher

2.1 Development of the Research Topic

Before beginning my research, I felt that I needed to choose something that was value driven and that I was genuinely curious about. That meant finding a topic based on core principles that were not fully crystallised; I wanted to explore a moral value to see if it could also become an intellectual one. Without both a moral and exploratory element to the project, I was concerned that I might not sustain my motivation to execute the study with conviction. This felt particularly important for me at my point in the doctorate programme, as I had had multiple discussions with my supervisor about not knowing the type of practitioner I wanted to be. It took me some time to realise fully that the research process was helping me define my own professional identity.

The core value that I now feel the study was predicated on, but that I could not have cleanly explained at the beginning, is best put by Rogers:

It has been my experience that persons have a basically positive direction. In my deepest contacts with individuals in therapy, even those whose troubles are most disturbing... I find this to be true... I have come to feel the more fully the individual is

understood and accepted...the more he tends to move in a direction which is forward (Rogers, 1961, p.26).

From my experience, this value was generally embodied by EPs in their work with children - no matter how challenging or problematic the child's behaviour. When a child's story and context was successfully brought to light, the optimal outcome, it seemed to me, was an increased sense of empathy from those connected with them. This felt like ethically coherent and skilful practice, but in my limited work, I sometimes experienced teachers as impediments to this compassionate understanding, and I noticed other EPs did too. At points, I felt frustrated with teachers when they portrayed the child as a problem, and I felt doubtful that they could implement the strategies that we had generated due to a lack of emotional investment. My frustration was twofold - one, I felt I was not being understanding towards teachers, which was against my developing professional values, and two, I believed (and believe) that the best way of achieving change is through establishing the emotional investment of those involved, and I did not know how to do so.

Although the Constructionist Model of Informed and Reasoned Action (COMOIRA) emphasises collaborative work with teachers, and in eliciting solutions rather than providing them, this felt unrealistic without the teacher's emotional investment (Gameson et al., 2003). Therefore, eliciting teachers' compassion and empathy seemed fundamental to the change process, though challenging within a one-hour consultation. The image in my mind was of concentric circles of containment. Theoretically, we were supposed to provide a sense of containment for the teacher, to hold their feelings and allow them to begin to move in a positive direction – to wrap around them like an outer circle. But if the focus of our meetings was a child, then the child invariably became the centre of attention. Furthermore, I felt that positive change was likely to be limited if teachers did not feel empathised with themselves while being expected to empathise with a child. Regardless of their experience, teachers' feelings rarely took precedence, seeming to create a hole in the circle, often making containment impossible. At the start of the project, I could not conceptualise what the hole represented, though my research would help to clarify that as I progressed.

This vague, imagistic understanding of containment was coupled with the question of why some teachers may struggle to empathise or require containment. Teaching is often understood as a value-driven profession, characterised by a strong commitment to supporting the needs and development of children (Day, 2004). I imagined that for most teachers, this value felt motivating, or at least not incongruous to them at the start of their careers. It therefore seemed likely that the demands of the role might have somewhat obscured or complicated this value. If this was the case, it suggested that teachers could have undergone a shift in professional identity, which they may or may not have been aware of.

Because I am surrounded by teachers in my personal life as well as my professional life, I feel I have some insight into the multitude of demands that are placed on them. I hypothesised that for some teachers lacking the requisite support, these demands may have hampered their emotional capacity and created some value dissonance in their professional identities. Therefore, at the inception of the project, I strongly felt that my study was about extending the same empathic curiosity to teachers that I saw valued in EP work with children. This thought, and my familiarity with the ideal self-activity (Moran, 2001) evolved into the ideal teacher approach. In simple terms, it was a chance to make space for teachers to articulate and reflect on any shifts in their professional identities. This would work as a means of better understanding the pressures on them and giving them a reflective opportunity they may not otherwise have had. I was also interested in the potential benefits of providing this space and the implications for supporting teacher reflection in the future.

2.2 The Literature Review

After a couple of supervisions, I decided a narrative review followed by a systematic review would be the most effective way of presenting my research. Relatively unquestioningly, I accepted this approach as logical, pleased to have the certainty of a plan, which included a storied element and a more rigorous, defensible element. This rigour felt reassuring and containing for what seemed an unwieldy, serious project, so I was naturally

inclined to include it in my design. My main concern at the time was my enthusiasm for a narrative review, as expressed in my research diary: 'I can basically do my literature review in a fairly unsystematic way, presenting the story and justification as I find it'. A couple of weeks later, I wrote: 'my enthusiasm has dimmed... I need to start. That might be why'.

This encapsulates my early experiences of the literature review. During the exploratory reading, I felt that I was developing the story of the research, as my own understanding of the project changed and refined itself. In hindsight, the question that I wanted answered before I felt able to proceed was: how does the relational change process work? Given that my project was about offering a useful, reflective space for teachers, understanding the substrates of how a conversation could best facilitate change seemed important. Like many people, I had experienced interactions which had provided clarity, safety and a sense of calm afterwards, and on occasion I had also facilitated them. Understanding the conditions and the mechanisms of these conversations therefore gained precedence.

I had some luck in addressing this issue by inadvertently picking up *On Becoming A Person* by Carl Rogers (1961) the summer before I began writing. This book resonated deeply with me, and as with many good books and ideas, Roger's perspective blended with and clarified my own. His work remained the most fundamental to my understanding of relational change. I was aware of the degree to which I had accepted his views (or solidified my own), not only intellectually, but morally. Therefore, I read about alternative perspectives, such as containment, Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) and narrative therapy. Although I did not find complete theoretical alignment in these understandings, the synergy between them was exciting and additive. In retrospect, this felt like getting to an answer of sorts – there seemed an underlying mechanism to how relational change functioned that was being differently conceptualised, but that I was beginning to sense. At this point, I felt that the intellectual backbone of the paper was deepening rather than changing and I felt I had the capacity to begin structuring the narrative review.

When I began to outline the narrative review, I felt it needed to present a detailed, contextual picture through which my research could be better understood. I was conscious

that the literature review also had to function as the story of the research - establishing a background that culminated in the question my study sought to answer. This required structure and order so that my nebulous logic could be made accessible to the reader. It was at this point that the process started to feel laborious. The specificity and detail required to execute the literature review faithfully felt slow and I wrote in my diary that, 'I have lost my focus on the creative and ethical centre of the project'.

Looking back on my research, this seemed a theme of the narrative review - I would read and write in depth about a specific area, such as the role of the teacher, and in doing so, would lose the thread of the project temporarily. Sometimes this would last a while, and it took supervision, writing in the research diary or some form of conceptual struggle to redefine the purpose of the project. When I did regain focus, the core of the project was usually changed. In reflecting on this, the process feels consistent with PCP - the core of the project was not fixed but was being constantly refined by the material I was engaging with (Kelly, 1955). Although this seems organic when written now, at the time it felt destabilising, echoing what Kelly describes as 'threat' - the recognition that core meaning structures are under revision, suggesting the extent to which the project had become embedded in my own value system.

Once I had finished the narrative review, I was satisfied that the systematic part - which would be focussed on narrative identity work with teachers - was the natural culmination of my literature review. This was because both the contextual research I had used to discuss the Welsh education system, and the psychology I had read were all innately connected to identity processes. While systemic reform essentially asked for alterations in professional identity, PCP and Roger's (1980) Person-Centred Approach (PCA), were focussed on identity coherence and its importance to one's wellbeing and ability to manage change. Narrative reflection seemed to be a way of utilising these perspectives to negotiate external demands.

Though I had gained a sense of direction at this point, I also felt daunted by the prospect of executing my systematic review searches. The containing, and rigorously defensible idea

of the systematic review I previously held, now felt pressured and liable to being ruined by a small error in execution. I cannot pretend that I found carrying out my search straightforward, but I was painstakingly careful with it and felt satisfied to eventually uncover six papers that met my increasingly nuanced inclusion criteria. This proved slightly stressful due to my initial difficulty in naming the criteria, which turned out to be the papers unifying, constructivist understanding of identity as narratively formed and relationally situated. It was the depth of consideration of the conceptual and methodological potential of narrative that aligned with my interest in how it could be operationalised.

From that point on I quite enjoyed the systematic review work - the papers were deep and meaningful to me, as they were reflective of the core of my own intellectual curiosity. In familiarising myself with them, the main themes seemed to suggest themselves, and my understanding of the topic and the contribution of my own study substantially grew. Recognising the shared framing of narrative processes helped me to see that my research was less about promoting narrative identity work and more about investigating the psychological mechanisms through which this epistemological position might operate in practice. In doing so, I felt I would be better placed to say how narrative approaches could support teachers' reflective processes and identity construction, and where its limitations might lie. In hindsight, it was the highly structured element of the systematic review that was most rewarding. It allowed me to deepen the central grooves of the idea that had borne the project, so that the structure itself felt foundational rather than limiting.

2.3 Research Aims and Research Question

Lazard and McAvoy (2020) and Riessman (2015) emphasise the importance of reflexivity in the formulation of research questions, suggesting that researchers should critically consider their motivations for pursuing lines of inquiry. However, both caution that excessive self-insertion may detract from the focus of a study. Throughout this research, I engaged in ongoing reflection regarding my motivations and presence in the research. I found my motives were multifaceted. I wanted to be the most effective agent of change in my role as I

could be and felt understanding and supporting teachers was essential in this regard. Later on, I recognised some more personal motivations when I wrote in my diary, 'reflection on my own motivation to do NA (Narrative Analysis) - former English student who loves books, but I'm also motivated by telling my own coherent story and wanting to know other peoples'. More recently, I also feel that the presence of teachers in my personal life probably contributed to a desire to represent their experiences too.

These considerations occurred to me throughout the research process. Though I felt a vague sense of conceptual purpose quite early; my challenge came in putting words to that feeling. My initial research question was relatively straightforward to construct, as it reflected my interest in narrative processes and the literature reviewed:

Question 1

How do teachers experience and construct their professional identities through narrative reflection, and how can the psychological processes involved in this construction be understood?

My second research question came much later, requiring a more critical re-evaluation of both the study's purpose and design. This will be considered in greater detail in the 'data collection' section below. While the first question focused on understanding narrative mechanisms, further reflection led me to recognise that there was something more embedded within the study. I realised that I was not only interested in how narrative identity work operates, but also in whether the research process itself might facilitate this work. As such, the second question addresses the potential of narrative reflection as evidenced within this study. This felt riskier, which I came to understand as reflecting my investment in facilitating positive change. Acknowledging this allowed me to adopt a more exploratory stance towards the findings, which I hope is reflected in the framing of the question.

Question 2

What potential does narrative reflection hold for supporting teachers' sense of identity and professional meaning-making?

2.4 Epistemology and Ontology

Since learning about epistemology and ontology early in the doctorate, I have been fascinated by the nature of knowledge and how we access it, even while feeling it is an area in which I can never be completely literate. I find it interesting to see how studies implicitly presuppose certain assumptions about reality, whether they recognise it or not. It has led me to question my own epistemological and ontological positions and whether these are fixed or situational. Reading Burr and Dick (2017) made my own, and others' epistemological views more intelligible, and I felt their paper articulated some of my approximate beliefs. For example, since I began to think about epistemology, I have become increasingly aware of the pull of essentialist and positivist assumptions within dominant societal discourse. I think that recognising that tendency as a perspective, rather than reality, allows scope to believe there might be another way of viewing things. Although this position is difficult for me to hold in daily life, the utility of the social constructionist core of COMOIRA has definitely become my professional and intellectual position over time. Its appeal to me is its focus on change - the idea that problems, identities, and solutions can all be reformulated through relational processes. For my study, which centres on discourse and relational change, social constructionism seemed the appropriate theoretical lens.

I had a sense that the suitable ontological stance for my study was critical realism. To clarify my perspective, I researched Bhaskar as I was aware that he was viewed as the architect of contemporary critical realism. However, when I tried to read his work, I found it inaccessible. It was Willis' (2023) discussion of Bhaskar's position that made his stance comprehensible to me - that there was a layered reality beyond our observation, but the events we observe can give us some sense of the underlying influences shaping them. This position felt increasingly suitable to this research the more I read, particularly when I began to access the studies in the systematic review. Previously, I had felt that narrative processes could be emancipatory - that through discussion, a new reality could be made experientially real. I came to realise that this was quite a radical constructionist perspective, and that it

failed to acknowledge the shared pressures and limitations that many teachers experienced. Whilst I still believe that a constructionist position is instrumental in making change, to devalue an external reality felt like a disservice to some actual systemic challenges.

2.5 Methodology

2.5.1 Participants and Recruitment

Fortunately, selecting the inclusion and exclusion criteria for my participants seemed a relatively straightforward task. I can now see that the epistemological position of the paper contributed to this impression. Because I was more concerned with insight into participants' sense-making processes than I was about comparing them, I felt that whoever I recruited could contribute to that understanding. That was not a completely unbounded position though, as I did want to ensure that there were some commonalities of context between teachers, such as being from primary schools in Wales. This contextual consideration was more aligned with my ontological position. Although I can present these parallels as seemingly neat and obvious now, it is only with the benefit of hindsight that I am able to understand how the research paradigm made this part of my study feel relatively simple.

My exclusion and inclusion criteria defined a participant group, on a limited number of factors (e.g. age range and primary school context). This was intentional in order to retain some flexibility in recruitment and remain aligned with the exploratory, constructivist aims of the study. The only additional criterion I seriously considered introducing was selecting participants based on their levels of experience. This stemmed from a tentative hypothesis that teachers may become increasingly institutionalised over time and more distanced from a core sense of professional identity. Including participants from different stages of the career trajectory may therefore have helped to explore this idea. However, in hindsight, incorporating a more explicitly comparative or generational element would have diverged from the constructivist, holistic and sense-making focus of the study. Fortunately, the final sample reflected a range of experience despite the absence of this criterion.

2.5.2 Data Collection

Far less straightforward than my participant recruitment was my interview design. Braun and Clarke's (2025) guide to conducting qualitative research sets out the process of designing a study as incremental and logical. In reality, the design of the interviews felt confused and threatening to the purpose of the study because I had not managed to articulate my research aims and questions to myself beforehand. When I changed supervisor and was questioned about the process, her confusion reflected and exacerbated my own. I went into the supervision feeling that I could describe the purpose and means of the study. Afterwards, I felt that I had lost sight of the value and contribution of the research, instead writing, 'it now feels more like I am trying to cobble together something sensible'.

Eventually, this wobble was necessary in helping me clarify the goals of my research. The issue that was occupying me was that I was unable to express my intuitive sense that two interviews were necessary to achieve my aims. Both Riessman (2015) and Butina (2015) advocate for developing narratives over time for the sake of depth, but I think in reading their work and justifying my approach by that gauge, I had lost sight of my own justification for the two-interview approach.

Again, the interview design was not the core problem, it was that I had not identified the central impasse. Now I can see that what I was essentially stuck on was the following question - was I facilitating teacher reflection in order to create change, or was I trying collect data in order to analyse how narrative processes operated? While this quandary remained unresolved, I veered between the two explanations, and in the process, either interview 1 or interview 2 seemed to lose its purpose. Through supervision and discussions with others, I eventually saw that because of the constructionist understanding I was bringing to the topic, that change, to some degree, was likely, as reality was being constructed through the means of research. The design was intended to facilitate reflection and growth, which was a part of generating meaningful data.

Once this was clarified, the utility of the two interviews became clearer. The first interview had a greater focus on eliciting identity narratives, through the loose structure inspired by *The Ideal Self* (Moran, 2001). The second was a more open design, intended to deepen reflection and sense-making in the hope of more fully exploring the impact of narrative opportunities for teachers. In practice, there was substantial overlap between the content generated from each. Although the emphasis between interviews and participants was inconsistent, this felt organically led by the conversation.

Although I was confident in the aims of each interview - which were ultimately designed to answer my two research questions – executing the interviews in real time was less straightforward. The theoretical stance of my research was a consistent background consideration. For example, Rogers (1961) emphasises the importance of both authenticity and non-directive practice. However, these two goals did not always feel mutually compatible in the moment. During the interviews, I would occasionally feel an emotion or want to state an opinion but would find myself caught by the need to allow the participant to fully express themselves. At these points it was necessary to remind myself that the interviews were not interventions, and that background consideration of theory was not only sufficient, but the only ethically sound approach. Similar reflections concerning the other theories implicated in my design, such as containment and PCP, also occurred to me during the interviews. However, it was the person-centred conditions that most frequently came to mind, likely because my understanding and practice was more deeply permeated by this approach.

In retrospect, it is maybe unsurprising that although my study was concerned with containment, my unstructured design inevitably led to me feeling slightly uncontained. However, I continue to think this was necessary in allowing me to sufficiently embody my theoretical stance and be led by the participants rather than mechanically working through a set of questions. Equally, I think without pre-set questions or themes, my awareness of where I felt I was shaping the interviews was heightened. This was particularly true of the less structured second interview. Finding a balance between a non-directive, containing position and some level of structure was a challenge. Though imperfect, I think I mostly

managed to maintain balance in the interview design and delivery. However, if I were to redesign the study, I would probably add slightly more thematic structure to the second interview in the interest of facilitating sense-making and allowing myself a greater sense of containment.

2.5.3 Data Analysis

I was advised to look at the approach of Lieblich et al. (1998) to narrative analysis (NA) as they provide a loose framework for approaching a particularly unprescriptive area of qualitative research (Lieblich et al., 1998). A holistic-content approach felt appropriate in treating each participant's account as a whole. The lack of stringent guidelines allowed scope to discuss discrete themes where necessary and to present findings in a way that fitted the data.

Lieblich et al. (1998) advise immersion in the data as a way of connecting to the central theme of each interview. I found this process really interesting. One unexpected feature was the difference between reading and listening to the interviews. I would often listen when in transit, or cooking, and would find myself missing large chunks, but then acutely attending to sections that made powerful impressions on me. When reading, I felt I had a better overview of the data and was able to notice structural shifts, but the lost emphasis and tone of the conversation meant there was less semantic impact. Doing both together overwhelmed my cognitive load and I had trouble attending to the content.

I also noticed how my attention shifted over time; initially I listened quite self-consciously, hearing my own clunky questioning and the moments in which I over-directed conversation. Gradually, my attention was drawn to the overall feel of the interviews, and the central themes seemed to become obvious. Braun and Clarke's (2023) reassurance that themes do not emerge from data, but are co-constructed, gave me confidence in deciding on definitive themes. Whether because I was listening with a holistic framing in mind, or due to my familiarity with the content, or both - naming overarching themes eventually felt relatively straightforward.

Another aspect of the immersion process that fascinated me was the extent to which my listening was shaped by theory. One example was when the participant-Abi was discussing the need for freedom in order to be an authentic practitioner. She then linked this thought to a teacher's ability to allow the children space to express their authentic selves. After a few listens to her interview, I realised that I had been attending to this section particularly closely due to the theoretical fit with Roger's (1961) framing of authenticity and non-directivity. It was only through repetition that I was able to recognise the impact of theory on my attention and how the two had become fused. The repeated exposure to the data afforded me a layer of reflection I could not have accessed in the moment.

Time was an essential factor in my interpretation of the interviews too. I felt that by completely immersing myself in a participant's first interview before turning to their second really heightened my sensitivity to the change of tone. An example, which I wrote in my diary, "Abi's thinking has been refined between the interviews, but now listening to the second interview my own thinking is being refined and I am becoming clearer about her views". This is where the holistic-content approach and two-interview structure felt most useful to me. Lieblich et al. (1998) suggest that knowing one part well helps to elucidate the whole. For me, the second interview did not just extend the data, but it deepened my understanding of each participant's narrative as a developing process. Equally, it was only through employing a second interview that I was able to perceive the clarity that this process had afforded my participants.

This was not a clear and consistent finding across participants, however. In my diary I noted how one participant's interviews seemed more emotional and less contained than the others. In the diary entry I initially wrote that I thought that this was because of a need for containment coupled with an unfamiliarity with reflective processes. Although I did not completely move away from that view, I began to wonder if she was required to carry more structural and systemic stress than my other participants and therefore had less agency in engaging in discursive identity formation. Again, it was the iterative process of the analysis

that allowed me to broaden my perspective here and guard against over-attribution to a single factor.

Even once I had completed my analysis, I was uncertain about whether to conduct member checking, my hesitation stemming from a concern about misrepresenting participants' narratives. My instinct was not to, but I needed to revisit both my diary and Braun and Clarke (2023) in order to articulate why. Braun and Clarke (2023) emphasise that within a constructionist framework, interpretation is not a distortion of participants' accounts but a necessary element of qualitative analysis. I therefore understood my analysis as a situated reading rather than a set of findings requiring verification. Furthermore, the second interview already functioned, in part, as a space for consolidation and refinement of participants' thinking. I was cautious that returning summaries for further validation might encourage defensiveness or risk the loss of the contextual and relational elements that generated them.

3. Part B Contribution to Knowledge

3.1 Unique Contribution of the Research

A primary contribution of this research is its conceptual design, as illustrated in Figure 2. Teacher identity and how it is shaped are well recognised topics within the literature, and narrative approaches have also been used to explore these processes. However, the psychological frameworks drawn upon here were selected to offer a more layered understanding of the conditions, mechanisms and potential outcomes of narrative identity work. The constructionist positioning of these frameworks enabled an exploration of the interrelation between meaning-making, identity, motivation and agency. This suggests that when individuals are supported to reinterpret their experiences, shifts in professional identity may follow. For teachers, this highlights the potential for narrative reflection to contribute to greater identity coherence and more autonomous, agentic practice. This conceptual approach not only offered psychological depth to the interpretation of the data gathered, but

also to the data collection process itself. In this sense, the research examined both the phenomenon of narrative identity work and the methodological process through which it was elicited, representing a meta-level contribution to understanding narrative enquiry as both method and object of study.

A second contribution of this study is its identification of narrative identity work as a conditional process. While narrative reflection supported the refinement and stabilisation of professional identity for some participants, it did not operate uniformly, with participants using the reflective space in different ways. For example, Abi appeared able to extend an already coherent professional identity, whereas Isabelle's narrative brought greater clarity to tensions without necessarily resolving them. This suggests that the usefulness of narrative reflection is contingent upon factors such as readiness, role and systemic context, as well as the capacity of the facilitator to respond to participants' needs, including recognising when emotional containment is required (Kenneally, 2021). In this sense, the study extends existing literature by highlighting that narrative identity work does not function as a generalisable intervention, but as a process whose impact depends on the interaction between individual and contextual factors.

A further contribution of this study lies in its contextualisation within the Welsh educational reform landscape. While existing literature recognises the role of teacher identity in educational change, this study illustrates how reform is experienced unevenly across roles and contexts. The findings suggest that initiatives such as the Curriculum for Wales (CfW) and Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (ALNET) do not directly reshape professional identity, but instead interact with teachers' existing values, responsibilities and positions within the school system. However, findings also reflect the variability and uncertainty highlighted in the literature regarding early-stage reform implementation (Brown et al., 2025). Therefore, this research offers a more nuanced account of how professional identity is negotiated within reform contexts, and the conditions under which agency and identity coherence can be sustained.

3.2 Implications for Educational Psychologists

This study has particular implications for EPs in Wales, given its conceptual alignment with COMOIRA (Gameson et al., 2003). It does not reinvent COMOIRA's central principles, but rather deepens understanding of the psychological processes that underpin them. COMOIRA emphasises systemic thinking, collaboration and the co-construction of solutions through discourse. The findings here highlight the importance of coherent professional identities in supporting a motivated and agentic workforce. Narrative and reflective processes appeared to support participants in making sense of, stabilising and refining their professional identities. As such, for EPs in Wales, these findings suggest the value of attending more explicitly to how reflective spaces for teachers might be facilitated as part of systemic and relational practice.

That said, the main implication of this study is attitudinal rather than procedural. It offers a reframing of teachers as individuals whose capacity for agency and change is contingent upon the coherence of their professional identities. In this sense, teachers are not simply implementers of policy or intervention, but individuals whose lived experiences of their roles directly shape their capacity to enact change. This study conceptualised agentic practice as a layered phenomenon, emerging through the interaction of meaning-making, professional identity and motivation. While this reflects the constructivist positioning of the research, it also foregrounds the dynamic and relational nature of these processes. As such, this study highlights the importance for EPs of recognising identity coherence as central to teacher functioning, and of attending to moments where this may be challenged.

While narrative reflection was seen here to enable mechanisms supporting identity coherence, this does not necessitate that it becomes the central focus of EP work with teachers. Rather, it is the identification and facilitation of processes such as reflection, meaning-making and identity clarification that require greater attention, with the specific vehicle used to support these processes being of secondary importance. A key implication of this study is that such processes should be employed responsively, as not all teachers

require the same type or level of support. While some may benefit from structured activities such as 'The Ideal Teacher', others may find value in individual or group reflective spaces or more open professional dialogue.

Practical considerations inevitably arise in facilitating such support. However, these may be more effectively addressed through careful attention to when support is most needed and what form it might take. This may include periods of role transition, experiences of professional tension, or points of educational reform, as well as more regular opportunities for reflection. In this sense, the attitudinal shift outlined above becomes central, as attending to teachers in a person-centred and containing manner may not only create the conditions for reflection, but also indicate the type of support most appropriate to their needs.

This is an exploratory and conceptual piece of research, and the findings presented here are therefore interpretative and context dependent. This is reflected in both the variability of the findings and the differing ways in which participants engaged with the reflective space. As such, the insights gained are not intended to be generalisable, instead emphasising the importance of sensitivity to individual and contextual differences when considering narrative identity work. However, the study does offer conceptual utility for EPs in understanding how experience, identity, motivation and agency interact, and how these processes may be considered when supporting teachers and educational settings more broadly.

3.3 Considerations of Future Research

A logical extension of this research would involve more structured and repeated narrative-based work with teachers. This would allow for more systematic evaluation, while also creating opportunities to develop narratives of greater depth and nuance (Butina, 2015; Riessman, 2008). Longitudinal approaches would further extend these aims by capturing how meaning-making and professional identities evolve over time. In this sense, such research would remain faithful to the temporal and constructionist principles underpinning narrative identity work (Bruner, 2004).

Furthermore, the psychological frameworks employed here offered one lens through which to understand the mechanisms involved in narrative reflection. Future research drawing on alternative or more specialised theoretical perspectives may generate different, but complementary, conceptualisations, further refining understanding of how narrative identity work operates.

The present findings also suggest that future research should move beyond evaluating narrative reflection as an intervention, towards examining the psychological conditions under which it is most meaningful. In particular, further exploration of readiness for reflection, psychological safety, relational conditions and the provision of containment may help clarify how narrative identity work functions across different individuals and contexts. Such research would extend the conceptual framework developed here, refining understanding not only of whether narrative identity work is helpful, but under what conditions it is most likely to support professional identity coherence and agency.

3.4 Dissemination of Findings

My primary form of disseminating these findings will be through my own practice, particularly by prioritising and attending to teachers' need for reflective spaces. In this sense, dissemination is not only about sharing findings, but about embodying the principles highlighted within the research, such as person-centred practice and sensitivity to identity coherence.

For colleagues, some of whom have not been trained within the COMOIRA framework, I will share the findings through both informal discussion and more formal presentations. Initially, this will take the form of an academic poster presented at the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) annual conference in July 2026. I will also present the findings to the Educational Psychology team within my Local Authority.

To reach a wider audience, I will seek publication in a relevant academic journal, in order to contribute to the broader evidence base surrounding teacher identity, narrative processes and educational psychology practice. The conceptual contribution of the present study may

also lend itself to dissemination through a methodological or commentary paper in journals such as *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, where discussion of theory, methodology and qualitative practice is well established. Equally, the findings may contribute to discussions surrounding reflective supervision and work discussion groups by offering a psychological framework through which to understand the role of reflective conversations in supporting professional meaning-making and agency.

4. Personal Reflections

Before beginning this research, I knew that I wanted to work systemically and therapeutically, and I believed that teachers and schools could benefit from this approach. However, this study gave me the opportunity to find out how that might be enacted in practice, and to more deeply consider the origins of these assumptions. For those reasons, I began to see the research as reflective of my own narrative: beginning with the influences contributing to it, such as COMOIRA and the psychology discussed, and ending as a coherent understanding which would inform my future practice.

As the study developed, I realised that my expectation of it was also changing. At first, I wanted the research to produce a clear and transferrable conclusion that I could incorporate into my professional identity. However, the sense that I had satisfied my interests or answered all my questions never quite materialised. Instead, similarly to the narratives explored within this study, my own understanding and interest in professional identity development is continuing to evolve.

5. Summary

In this critical reflection I have described the development of the research and discussed how it might contribute to knowledge. I hope that this appraisal has emphasised the reflexive principles that underpinned this project. Writing this section has allowed me to make sense of the research process, and in doing so, has made the project feel more coherent.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Study Selection and Appraisal Summary and Example application of Yardley's (2000) principles to an included study

Table A1 *Study Selection and Appraisal Summary*

Reference	Role in Review	Methodological Approach	Relevance to Narrative Identity	Narrative Role
Durrant, J. A. (2013). <i>Portraits of teachers in landscapes of change: exploring the role of teachers in school improvement</i> . (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Canterbury Christ Church University (United Kingdom). https://www.proquest.com/docview/2493512383?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses	Included in synthesis	Mixed narrative approaches	Strong on reflection/agency, political, institutional themes.	Constitutive
Hooker, B. A. (2016). <i>The life stories of teachers in post compulsory education: A narrative exploration of teacher identity</i> (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Wolverhampton. http://hdl.handle.net/2436/611696	Included in synthesis	Narrative enquiry	Deep examination of the generative potential of narrative.	Constitutive
Watson, C. (2006). Narratives of practice and the construction of identity in teaching. <i>Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice</i> , 12(5), 509–526.	Included in synthesis	Narrative enquiry	Single participant, narrative-focussed account.	Constitutive

Reference	Role in Review	Methodological Approach	Relevance to Narrative Identity	Narrative Role
Woolhouse, C. (2024). Technologies of the self and narrating an ethical teacher identity, or how to tell stories of a life well lived. <i>International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</i> , 37(5), 1511–1527.	Included in synthesis	Narrative enquiry	Negotiation of professional position and identity through narrative. Good contextual insight.	Constitutive
Ruohotie-Lyhty, M. (2013). Struggling for a professional identity: Two newly qualified language teachers' identity narratives during the first years at work. <i>Teaching and Teacher Education</i> , 30, 120–129.	Included in synthesis	Narrative enquiry	The agentic potential of narrative.	Constitutive
Ramiz, A. (2020). <i>Significant turning points in the formation of teacher professional identities in England: A narrative inquiry</i> (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Brighton. https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/25774860/Ramiz_Thesis.pdf	Included in synthesis	Narrative enquiry	Excellent contextual consideration and participant comparison. Some constitutive elements.	Constitutive
SØreide, G. E. (2006). Narrative construction of teacher identity: Positioning and negotiation. <i>Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice</i> , 12(5), 527–547.	Conceptually relevant (not included)	Discourse enquiry	Deep consideration of identity formation in context.	Illustrative
Schaefer, L. (2013). Beginning teacher attrition: A question of identity making and identity shifting. <i>Teachers and Teaching</i> , 19(3), 260–274.	Conceptually relevant (not included)	Autobiographical narrative enquiry	Excellent for personal identity development. Single participant.	Illustrative

Reference	Role in Review	Methodological Approach	Relevance to Narrative Identity	Narrative Role
Skinner, B., Leavey, G., & Rothi, D. (2021). Managerialism and teacher professional identity: Impact on well-being among teachers in the UK. <i>Educational Review</i> , 73(1), 1–16.	Conceptually relevant (not included)	Thematic/qualitative analysis	Good for contextual pressure on teacher identity. Less methodological clarity.	Illustrative
Bleasdale, C. (2023). <i>An exploration into the development of professional teacher identity of student teachers in Wales</i> (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David). https://repository.uwtsd.ac.uk/id/eprint/2414/	Conceptually relevant (not included)	Narrative enquiry	Welsh context but narrative not deeply explored.	Illustrative
Parry, S. (2014). <i>Influences on beginning teacher construing: Beliefs, stories and trajectories</i> (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hertfordshire). http://hdl.handle.net/2299/15433	Conceptually relevant (not included)	Mixed narrative methods	Excellent focus on identity development and some use of PCP methods.	Limited/peripheral
Watkins, M. (2022). <i>Retaining primary teachers: sustaining a positive professional identity and a commitment to teaching in early-, mid-, and late career phase</i> (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Worcester). https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/12436/	Excluded (limited relevance)	Grounded theory	Excellent for identity formation in primary school teaching over time.	Limited/peripheral
Bar-Tikva, H. (2008). <i>Teachers with learning disabilities: Identifying the professional self by analysing the autobiographic story and the reflective feedback on</i>	Excluded (limited relevance)	Mixed narrative approaches	Professional vs personal identity formation is strong.	Illustrative

Reference	Role in Review	Methodological Approach	Relevance to Narrative Identity	Narrative Role
<i>practice</i> (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bath). https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.503706			Narrative used comparatively between personal and professional	
Burns, E., & Bell, S. (2011). Narrative construction of professional teacher identity of teachers with dyslexia. <i>Teaching and Teacher Education</i> , 27(5), 952–960.	Excluded (limited relevance)	Narrative enquiry	Identity formation. Different context. Use of narrative but only illustrative.	Illustrative
Liu, H., Sammons, P., & Menter, I. (2025). Exploring teacher identity tensions and coping strategies in a comparative case study of primary school teachers' narratives. <i>Teachers and Teaching</i> , 31(3), 419–452.	Excluded (limited relevance)	Thematic and narrative analysis	Identity tensions and coping strategies. Mixed methods in a Chinese context.	Illustrative
Smith, R. G. (2007). Developing professional identities and knowledge: Becoming primary teachers. <i>Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice</i> , 13(4), 377–397.	Excluded (limited relevance)	Mixed methods/content analysis	Good focus on identity and contextual similarities. Methodologically dissimilar.	Limited/peripheral

Reference	Role in Review	Methodological Approach	Relevance to Narrative Identity	Narrative Role
Sumsion, J. (2000). <i>"I'm always the unusual one": Exploring the dialogic identities of male primary teachers</i> . Gender and Education, 12(3), 329–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540250050045140	Excluded (limited relevance)	Discourse enquiry	Identity development is deeply considered. DA focussed.	Limited/peripheral

* Although all 30 studies meeting the inclusion criteria were initially critically appraised, only the 17 studies most closely aligned with the conceptual focus of the review are presented here. The remaining 13 studies were judged to extend beyond the specific conceptual aims of the final synthesis and have therefore been omitted for clarity.

Table A2 Example application of Yardley's (2000) principles to an included study

Reference	Sensitivity to Context	Commitment and Rigour	Transparency and Coherence	Impact and Importance
Ramiz, A. (2020). <i>Significant turning points in the formation of teacher professional identities in England: A narrative inquiry</i> (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Brighton. https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/25774860/Ramiz_Thesis.pdf	This research demonstrates a high degree of sensitivity to context through its consideration of the legislative and cultural backdrop of the education system, whilst also attending closely to the individual backgrounds and experiences of participants.	The research engages participants from four generational cohorts over time, providing a rich longitudinal account of identity development. Multiple analytical approaches are employed, with clear justification for their selection and application.	Whilst the analysis uses a creative approach drawn from literary techniques and is necessarily inferential, its application is clearly justified and it does not function as the sole means of analysis. Limitations are explicitly acknowledged, and interview transcripts are included within the appendices to enhance transparency.	The findings are clearly linked to teacher recruitment, retention and educational policy. The study also makes an important conceptual contribution by illustrating how professional identity develops through significant narrative turning points, making it directly relevant to the aims of the present review.

Appendix B – Application of Yardley's (2000) principles to the present research

Reference	Sensitivity to Context	Commitment and Rigour	Transparency and Coherence	Impact and Importance
Present Study	The study demonstrates sensitivity to context by situating teacher identity within the changing educational landscape of Curriculum for Wales and ALNET. The research is also attentive to participants' individual professional contexts, recognising that identity is negotiated through personal values, professional roles and systemic demands.	This is a strength of the study. The employment of a two-stage narrative interview design enabled prolonged engagement with participants' accounts, allowing the refinement of interpretations over time and enhancing the depth and credibility of the analysis.	The study maintains coherence between its constructionist epistemology, narrative methodology and interpretative analysis. Methodological decisions are explicitly justified, limitations are acknowledged, and reflexivity is central throughout the research process.	The study offers a conceptual contribution by developing a psychologically informed understanding of narrative identity work and its implications for Educational Psychologists supporting teacher identity coherence. It also demonstrates how narrative functions not only as a method of inquiry, but as the phenomenon under investigation.

Appendix C – Participation Letter

What can be learned through providing a reflective space for primary teachers to reflect on their views of what makes an ideal teacher and their stories about themselves in relationship to this ideal?

I am a researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist at Cardiff University. I am inviting teachers to take part in two interviews, the first, to reflect on their idea of the 'ideal' teacher and their own professional identities. In the second participants will discuss their perspectives on the first interview, what it was like to reflect on their role and if this had any impact on their work or wellbeing.

Invitation to participate in a research study

You are being invited to participate in a research study, but before you decide whether or not you consent to take part, it is important to understand why this research is being carried out and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information and carefully discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information.

The researcher:

My name is Owen Whittle and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologists at Cardiff University, working under the supervision of Dr. Penelope Edwards.

What is the purpose of the study?

The study has two main aims. One is for Educational Psychologists to gain an insight into how teachers conceptualise an 'ideal' teacher and how they feel relative to that ideal. It is hoped that this will give Educational Psychologists the opportunity to empathise with the pressures and motivations of teachers and will allow them to support teachers better in future.

The second aim is to explore teachers' experiences of a space for professional self-reflection. At a time when the profession is experiencing high levels of stress, it is hoped that this will be an opportunity for teachers to reconnect with their professional values and goals and show the transformative potential of providing them with a space to reflect.

Who I am looking for?

I am looking for fully qualified and practicing primary school teachers. There will be a maximum of one participant selected per school. I aim to recruit participants with varying levels of experience, so selection will consider the number of years they have been teaching. Beyond these criteria, participant selection will be random.

What the research involves?

This research involves two interviews. The first will last around 1 hour and will ask you to reflect on what you consider to be an ideal and a non-ideal teacher. You will then be asked to reflect on how you feel compared to these ideals. The second interview will last 1 hour. It will provide an opportunity to talk about your experience of the themes of the first interview, its impact on practice (if any) and how the reflective opportunity was experienced. The interview setting can be somewhere of your choosing (including online) and at a time of your choosing, though must not be in a private premises. The setting will ideally be familiar and must be confidential.

What are the risks and benefits?

In talking about an ideal and then thinking about your own reality, there could be a chance that this will cause discomfort or even upset. However, research has demonstrated that when professionals are given a reflective and empathetic space, it can positively transform their practice. It is hoped that you experience this reflective space as helpful for your own professional awareness and growth. However, due to the risk of upset, there will always be the option to stop the interview, postpone it, or withdraw from the process at any time, without having to give a reason.

Contact numbers for Samaritans are given at the bottom of this form if the participant feels they want to speak to someone anonymous about any upset caused by the research.

Contact details are given at the bottom of the form.

What will happen to my information?

You will not be made identifiable at any point and any information you give will be completely anonymised in the final research. That means your name and school will be edited out of any final product, as will any information that could make you identifiable.

All data collected by the researcher will be held confidentially – that means your name will be replaced by a pseudonym on the file name and any potentially identifiable information will be deleted from the transcript. The only instance in which your name and data will be related is if a safeguarding concern arises and has to be reported. I will inform you before any such report is made.

Your interview will be recorded on teams as audio only and then transcribed. Interviews will hopefully be conducted during September 2025. Once the audio file has been transcribed it will be deleted. Transcription will likely be completed by November 2025 at which point withdrawal may no longer be possible. Therefore, any withdrawal should be made by 31st October 2025. If participants withdraw before this time, pseudonyms linking participants with the research will be deleted at the same time as their personal data.

Once the research project is complete, names, email addresses and places of work will be kept in line with Cardiff University's Research Records Retention Schedule for a period of 5 years, at which point it will be systematically deleted. All transcript data will be kept by me in a password protected file which will be viewed by me and possibly my research supervisor, but no one else. This will be deleted upon completion of the project. Again, your personal data will not be related to the research data at any point.

What to do if I want to take part?

If you want to take part, please contact me (Owen Whittle), on the email address provided below. A consent form will be sent to you outlining what you are agreeing to. When you have signed and returned the consent form an interview date can be arranged.

If you feel you want more information before taking part please contact me or my supervisor.

If you have any complaints or concerns about the research please raise them with the Cardiff University Ethics Committee. All details are given below.

Owen Whittle (Trainee Educational Psychologist) whittleo@cardiff.ac.uk

Penelope Edwards (Supervisor) edwardsp11@cardiff.ac.uk

Ethics Committee psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

Samaritans – 116 123 (English) 0808 164 0123 (Welsh)

Appendix D – Debrief Letter

Thank you very much for taking part in this study. The research aimed to gain an understanding of your idea of the ideal teacher and your experience of participating in the research. This study was loosely based on Moran's (2001) Ideal Self activity, which is an activity used with children to elicit their 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' versions of themselves. Knowledge of this intervention was not necessary to take part in the research.

You were asked to partake in two interviews in which you were asked a number of questions about your perspectives of the ideal teacher and your own professional identity. You were asked how you felt in comparison to your ideal teacher and how you experienced participating in the research. The interview was recorded so it could be transcribed by November 2025.

All interview data will be held by the researcher in a password protected file, the audio data will be destroyed once it has been transcribed. Once transcribed, all identifiable information, such as job role, place of work and names will be removed from the data. Your names will all be replaced by pseudonyms during November 2025 for the file names in the interest of anonymity. Pseudonyms linking participants to the data will be deleted as soon as transcription has taken place (November 2025), rendering interviews untraceable.

You were reminded that you could withdraw your participation at any time before 31st October 2025 when the study will be written up. This reminder was given both before and after completion of the interview. The results of this research project will not necessarily influence Educational Psychology practice or teacher support in the future, but it will add to the literature which provides evidence related to these topics.

If you would like further information on this research project or are interested in the outcomes of this project, please feel free to contact Owen Whittle directly. For any other concerns please contact Penelope Edwards, the research supervisor, or the Ethics Committee, at the School of Psychology, Cardiff University.

For any topics raised that caused upset but that you do not want to discuss with university staff, the contact details for Samaritans (who will provide a space to discuss these topics anonymously, are given below).

Thank you very much for your time.

Owen Whittle – whittleo@cardiff.ac.uk

Penelope Edwards – Edwardsp11@cardiff.ac.uk

Ethics – psychethics@cardiff.ac.uk

Samaritans – 116 123 (English) 0808 164 0123 (Welsh)

Appendix E – Informed Consent Form

School of Psychology, Cardiff University

This research is being conducted by Owen Whittle, a Trainee Educational Psychologist, as part of a Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) degree.

Participation in this research will involve two interviews with Owen Whittle, both of around 1 hour. The first will be a conversation around your ideas of the ideal teacher, non-ideal teacher and your own professional identity. The second interview will involve you reflecting on that activity and the reflective space provided by the activity.

Your interview data will be anonymised once transcribed (ideally no later than November 2025) and will then be deleted – this will include all data. There will be no information in the final product which can be traced back to you. Pseudonyms linking participants to each interview will be deleted at the same time as personal data. All pseudonyms will be kept in a separate, password protected file by the researcher.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that you can refuse to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason. You are free to ask any questions, withdraw your participation or discuss any concerns with Owen Whittle or his research supervisor Penelope Edwards.

Contact numbers for Samaritans are given at the bottom of this form if the participant feels they want to speak to someone anonymous about any upset caused by the research. Contact details are given at the bottom of the form.

Please make sure the following are true for you before signing the consent form:

- I have read and understood the participant information sheet.
- I have had the opportunity to and have asked any questions I have about the research project.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving reason or facing any consequences. I understand that if I withdraw,

information about me which has already been collected may be retained by Cardiff University.

- I understand who has access to my data, how it will be stored and processed and what will happen to it at the end of the research project.
- I consent to being audio recorded for the purpose of this research.
- I understand how findings and results of the project will be written up and published.

_____ (NAME) consent to participate in the study
conducted by Owen Whittle, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of
Penelope Edwards.

Signed:

Date:

Owen Whittle, Trainee Educational Psychologist: whittleo@cardiff.ac.uk

Penelope Edwards, Research Supervisor: Edwardsp11@cardiff.ac.uk

Samaritans – 116 123 (English) 0808 164 0123 (Welsh)

Appendix F – Transcript Excerpts

Transcript excerpts of reading in a holistic manner. Colours indicate the individual themes that the researcher followed individually during later readings. The participant's speech is transcribed in regular font, the researcher's speech is shown in bold.

Abi

Okay. So, that actually goes quite nicely into like, your non-ideal. So you've got the ideal, what's the non-ideal?

A non-ideal is someone who cannot separate their ego from the job. They cannot possibly understand that children are reacting because they've got their stuff going on, not because you're doing something or not doing it. So some teachers...

How do you learn that?

Most people have it innately because you're are a grown up and they're children and in life... So I think it comes back to the personality, if you don't separate your personality to your profession, then you do take things personally. So I think someone who can't do that isn't a great teacher because you end up really having, like your head span with certain children.

And do you think, so is what you're saying that they're trying to fulfil some kind of need in them from the reaction of the kids? And then if the kids don't give them that then they can't take it?

Absolutely. Yeah definitely. If the job becomes your ego and your confidence and your success, then you don't... you're not good because then your motivations are to make you feel better, not just to facilitate the kids and what they need.

Emotional maturity and growth is key to being a good teacher

o owen whittle
3:57 PM Jan 7

personal vs professional identities again. Seen as necessary to separate them here

o owen whittle
3:57 PM Jan 7

Conflict between motivations in the non-ideal teacher

o owen whittle
3:59 PM Jan 7

Clear moral professional values inferred here. Listing confidently

Isabelle

No, I think that's always been at the core that, you know, that relationship, even before. Like, I started teaching in England and you know, it wasn't so much then that we were talking about health and well-being, and all of that. But I recognise from the off, like, probably drawing on that, because I was quieter and I needed that relationship with a class teacher to feel confident. So I kind of worked on that from the off with children, picked out the quieter ones, or built a relationship with the more boisterous ones so that they... if they were misbehaving, so you had that relationship to kind of, you were connecting with them first before I would correct them.

Yeah

And I found that with most children, that worked, because it was back in the day when there was no other additional adult, it was just me in front of 30 children and it was a year 4 class as well. And there were lots of ALN children, but it was almost like I afforded the others then who could work independently to get on with it because they felt confident enough with the input that I'd given. And then I would base myself then with a table of ALN children, you know, and try and bring them on a little bit. And if you did have additional help that came in, that was great because you could get to the others and but you know, nothing was guaranteed back then. You didn't have that additional adult which...

Yeah, and that was at the start of your career, was it?

o owen whittle
3:13 PM Feb 6

Core trait - based in history, stable over time

o owen whittle
3:14 PM Feb 6

Not just moral, but effective

o owen whittle
9:17 AM Feb 27

Learnt her trade within systemic limitations

Lynn

Um, I think it's somebody that is passionate and exciting, that cares massively. I don't think it's necessarily somebody that is an excellent practitioner. I think it's somebody that has those wider skills. You know that works well with parents, that cares for the children, that, you know, engages them, that excites them, gets them on their side. Um, I think it's somebody that is brave because you need to stand up for what you think, what your children need, what your class needs... and that's not always easy.

I think it's someone who is creative, and is a problem solver and goes... you know, trials different things etcetera, takes on advice. You know in teaching you get so much feedback that sometimes it feels like a negative. I think it's really important that somebody takes it on board and builds on it rather than seeing it as a failure.

Yeah.

Um I think someone that's got quite a positive outlook on life. Someone that wants to be there. Someone that tries really hard.

So for you, does it feel more like the kind of attributes of the person than their professional skills?

Yeah, I think so. I think you can develop and you can learn professional skills. You can't necessarily learn to be a kind, caring and forgiving person, you know... You can develop those skills, you can work on them, you can, you know... Whereas, I think you need the personal attributes to be able to put yourself in that position.

Yeah.

 **owen whittle**
9:06 PM Today

Resilience and will to improve

 **owen whittle**
9:06 PM Today

Work ethic and positivity

 **owen whittle**
9:06 PM Today

Personal skills lead to professional