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# Agency and aspiration
# in career narratives of men
# becoming teaching assistants

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# Abstract

Concerns about gendered attainment-gaps and the scarcity of men teaching in England's primary schools underlie a popular and political assumption that recruiting more men to the sector will help to counter perceived gender inequalities in teaching and learning. Nevertheless, of nearly 390,000 Teaching Assistants (TAs) recruited since 2003 fewer than 10% are men. To better understand the barriers and affordances to men becoming TAs this study investigates what motivates men to become TAs. It seeks to understand their experiences, and how becoming a TA might aid their career aspirations.

The narrative study utilised life-grid interviews to capture the career narratives of nine men who have become TAs. Graphic timelines illustrated and interpreted the narratives by plotting past events, present experiences and future aspirations which motivate and drive the careers of men becoming TAs. An iterative approach to analysis enabled investigation of the forces that influence careers, and the nature of self-directed, agential career-crafting.

The findings suggest that whilst the primary education work-sector is gender-concentrated, the TA role itself is not inevitably gendered. Frequently, participants were motivated by a sense of vocation and wanting to make a positive contribution, whilst seeking a sustainable, viable career. The study found a significant relationship between aspirational career-thinking and agential career-crafting. Together, these offer fertile ground for an ambitious career trajectory. This study argues that when combined with lifelong learning, TA work can encourage aspirational career-thinking and strengthen individuals' agency to craft a self-directed career with increasingly ambitious goals. This is an important finding in the context of attracting men into primary education and nurturing their ambitions, to encourage them to remain in the sector.

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# Prologue

<u>The road not taken</u>

Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveller, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;


Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,


And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.


I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less travelled by,

And that has made all the difference.

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# List of abbreviations

| A Level | Advanced level certificate of education, usually taken at age 18 after two years post-compulsory education at school or college. |
|---|---|
| BA(Hons) | Bachelor of Arts degree with honours. |
| BTec National | A vocational diploma awarded by the awarding body Edexcel, formerly the Business and Technology Education Council. |
| CYPWDC | Children and Young People's Workforce Development Council. |
| EYFS | Early Years Foundation Stage (the curriculum framework used in England to regulate care and education for children aged 0-5). |
| FD | Foundation degree. |
| GCSE | General Certificate of Secondary Education, usually taken at age 16 on completion of Year 11 of the National Curriculum. |
| HLTA | Higher-level teaching assistant. |
| NOS | National occupational standards |
| NQT | Newly qualified teacher. The first year of post-qualification teaching is known as the 'NQT year'. It is a period of professional formation after which the teacher is awarded Qualified Teacher Status. |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualification. |
| PGCE | Postgraduate certificate of education. A generic teaching qualification for graduates of bachelor's degrees, which can lead to Qualified Teacher Status. |
| PTS | Primary teaching studies. A Bachelor's Degree that can lead to Qualified Teacher Status. |
| QTS | Qualified teacher status. |
| STLS | Supporting teaching and learning in schools. |
| TA | Teaching assistant. |

# 1.0 Introduction to the thesis

This study will ask and address the research questions: *What motivates men to become TAs? What are their experiences and aspirations?* This chapter provides an overview of the background and rationale for my doctoral research study. It explains the context, focus, aims and intentions of the study and briefly introduces the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that underpin the research approach and methodology. This chapter locates the study and its findings in contemporary discourses about primary education. It explains how the study addresses a gap in the literature, by giving voice to a relatively unheard group of men becoming teaching assistants (TAs).

## 1.1 Background to the study, its aims and intentions

This is a study of the career paths of nine men becoming TAs in primary education settings in England. The study is located at a small University in the East of England, wherein the Foundation Degree in Education (FD Education) is a professional development programme for TAs and other school support staff. The FD Education has progression routes to Bachelors' Degrees in Education (BA(Hons.) Education) and Primary Teaching Studies (BA(Hons.) PTS), that enable students to gain degrees alongside their professional practice.

These programmes have an accustomed appeal to women working as TAs, and enrolments are habitually dominated by women. However, in 2016 I noticed that more men TAs than usual were applying for places. Recruitment and enrolment data show that whilst the proportion of men joining the programme remained small, a statistically significant increase occurred from 2012 to 2016. Men represented 7% of the enrolment to the FD Education in 2012, increasing to 15% in 2016. In the associated BA(Hons.) progression route, there was a corresponding rise in men enrolling, from 10% in 2012 to 16% in 2016. A similar shift occurred in the national TA workforce. The proportion of men TAs rose from 6.3% in 2010 to 8.5% in 2015 (National Statistics, 2011; 2016). This informal, statistical observation provided the early

inspiration for my research study into men becoming TAs, their motivations, experiences and aspirations.

As a researcher and practitioner in the field of professional development I am most interested in the qualitative stories that lie behind the statistics. The study presents an opportunity to explore the relationship between participants' lifelong learning and their careers, and ways in which the FD Education, amongst other influences, can enrich participants' career development and professional ambitions.

Evidently, growing numbers of men are becoming TAs. However, their voices remain relatively silent in contemporary discourses. My early search of relevant literature found a large corpus of published research that explores the TA role, and investigates some gendered debates surrounding the primary education workforce. The literature tends to focus on the perspectives of women TAs, and men and women teachers. The possibility of men becoming TAs is barely mentioned. This apparent gap in the literature underlies my own sense of urgency to research a growing section of the workforce whose perspectives are at risk of being marginalised in current debates. The study therefore seeks to value the perspectives of men becoming TAs, as legitimate members of the primary school workforce.

To orient the study and its participants within their surrounding social and professional contexts, it is necessary to distinguish 'primary education' from its broader terrain. In England, schooling is typically accessed through the statutory or independent sector. With some latitude between different types of provision, there is a general alignment to the National Curriculum framework (Department for Education, 2014) which is structured by the primary and secondary phase, defined as Year 1 – Year 6 (age 5-11) and Year 7 – Year 11 (age 11-16) respectively. All participants in this study work as TAs with children aged 5-11 in Years 1-6. Some also have experience of working in pre-school nursery provision and the Reception Year (a transition year for 4

and 5-year-olds entering school). These settings are regulated by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum framework for children aged 0-5 (Department for Education, 2017).

In contemporary discourses, there are two areas of contention which are significant to a study of men becoming primary phase TAs. First, changing perceptions and expectations of TAs, as part of the primary education workforce have placed the TA role under scrutiny, particularly in relation to pupils' attainment (for example, Blatchford, Russell, & Webster, 2012), and the most cost-effective way to deploy TAs (for example, Sharples, Webster, & Blatchford, 2018). These debates affect generalised perceptions of the TA role, its true value and professional status. Concurrently, there are wider political concerns that tend to make causal associations between a perceived attainment gap between boys and girls, and the female-concentrated teaching workforce in primary schools (Brownhill, 2016). This is part of a long-standing discourse that problematizes gender within education, but thus far has largely overlooked the presence of men as TAs. These issues are briefly introduced in the following paragraphs and examined in more detail in later chapters.

In the 21st century, the schools workforce in England has transformed significantly, including significant growth and qualitative change in the contribution of TAs. This aligns to an increasingly neo-liberalist shift which has been sustained in English education policy, since the Education Reform Act 1988 (MacBeath, 2009). The emergence of performativity has replaced former notions of egalitarianism, social justice and social mobility which dominated English education policy from the 1940s, with a regime of accountability and managerialism which mimic the market economy (Arnot & Miles, 2005). This demands a ready supply of para-professional, pedagogical support staff for teaching and learning (Blatchford et al, 2012), to work under the supervision of qualified teachers who are no longer the sole-agents of curriculum delivery (MacBeath, 2009). In an effort to sustain the

performance-driven culture which has emerged in response to marketization, the demand for auxiliary roles in schools has largely been met through mass recruitment of TAs. National statistical releases, 'Schools Workforce in England' reveal a three-fold increase in the number of TAs in schools from 122,300 in 2003 to 387,900 in 2016.  (National Statistics, 2003; 2017). Most recent statistics show that TAs currently represent 28% of the schools workforce (National Statistics (2021). The most recent reports that show data by gender, indicate that 90% of all TAs are women (National Statistics, 2018).

Arnot and Miles (2005) suggest that the tendency of an accountability regime is to shift blame for unequal outcomes towards 'communities, parents, pupils and teachers, rather than the state' (p.175). In keeping with this perspective, Younger and Warrington (2008, p. 442) report a 'seductive discourse of successful girls and under-achieving boys', which they explain is characterised by a discursive narrative of boys' disaffection, ineffectual lone parenthood, and the popular suggestion that curriculum delivery has become excessively feminised, especially with younger children. To explain, 'feminisation' of the curriculum is perceived as a proliferation of school routines, cultures and pedagogies that favour girls unfairly and initiate a lasting, gendered differential from an early stage in children's schooling, aided by a scarcity of men teaching in primary education (Hamilton & Jones, 2016).  Even in the absence of definitive research findings to support it, the supposed feminisation of learning and teaching endures within discourses surrounding the 'boy problem' (ibid, p. 242).

This 'boy discourse' (Lehelma, 2014, p.171) problematizes the gender-concentrated workforce in primary education, which is typified by the statistical minority of men becoming TAs.  Public and political voices have called for an operational response, such as increasing the recruitment of men as teachers (Arnot & Miles, 2005). However, as Arnot and Mac an Ghaill (2006) observe, this seems paradoxical, 'given the huge number of female

teaching assistants recruited into schools to sustain the performance culture'
(p. 6).

Normative concerns about men's relative absence from primary education
and the assumed benefits of men teachers (particularly for boys) are widely
explored, analysed and challenged in published research. For example,
Skelton (2003), Cushman (2005a; 2005b), and Francis (2008) each encounter
popular discourses which attribute boys' disaffection or low achievement to a
lack of men teachers. Francis (2008) explains the premise behind this
association as the dual assumption that men teachers behave differently to
women teachers, and that boys naturally adopt them as role models. She
argues that neither of these assumptions has a strong evidence-base. This
echoes Skelton (2003), and Cushman (2005a). The latter also notes the
contradictory perception, that men teachers pose a sexualised risk to young
children, an assumption which is disincentivising to men entering primary
education as a career (Cushman, 2005a). As a counterpoint, Francis (2008)
argues for the 'social-equity hypothesis' (p. 325). Rather than emphasising
difference, this proposes that a more gender-balanced schools workforce
might present education as a desirable and worthwhile vocation for all.
Developing this idea, Pulsford (2014) accentuates the potential value of
teaching as a caring, professional role for both men and women.

I am motivated by the notion of social equity and further inspired by the
suggestion, made by a man teacher and reported by Francis (2008), that a
way to enable greater balance in the schools workforce, pastorally and
academically might be through increasing the recruitment of men as TAs. It
therefore becomes important to understand what influences men to become
TAs, and what factors might encourage them to remain in primary education.
This doctoral study therefore asks the questions: *What motivates men to
become TAs? What are their experiences and aspirations?*

Professionally, I am committed to the principle of lifelong learning as a constant activity of self-development and self-discovery. The objectives of lifelong learning are holistic, and encompass 'active citizenship, personal fulfilment and social inclusion, as well as employment-related aspects' (European Commission, 2001, p. 9.). This study presents an opportunity to explore the role of lifelong learning, and particularly the FD Education, in the motivations, experiences and aspirations of men becoming TAs.

This study focuses on the influences and motivations of men becoming TAs within their own, surrounding career narratives. It does not contain an in-depth analysis of the way men enact the TA role, in practice. Nevertheless, it is expected to offer some foundational ideas that might be useful to further research in this area. This study, its findings and conclusion therefore present a springboard for further investigation, rather than the end point of a journey. It investigates the potential of lifelong learning to nurture aspirations and increase individuals' agency as they craft their careers, and establish themselves as viable, professional practitioners in primary education.

## 1.2. Philosophical assumptions, theoretical frameworks and boundaries.

At the outset, the study takes the ontological position that everyone has a personal story to tell, which can reveal their motivations, experiences and aspirations. This rests in the premise that people experience the workplace subjectively, and their motivations and aspirations are influenced by a range of direct and indirect social phenomena such as practical needs, personal goals and wider societal structures and expectations. Each person's career is therefore influenced and moulded by the social circumstances and structures in which they live and work. To conceptualise the multi-layered nature of participants' social worlds and the various social and structural influences upon their working lives, I utilise a theoretical model based in the socio-ecological perspective (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). The socio-ecological model (explained in Chapter 2) which I apply to my study is influenced by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) and Bourdieu's

(1977) concept of habitus.  This is balanced by the concept of human agency. The study will consider the ways in which individuals gather personal resources (Vogelsang, Shultz, & Olson, 2018) that strengthen their identities and agency (Lent, 2013). These resources underpin 'career-identity and enable agential career-crafting, which might involve overcoming structural barriers and challenging social norms.

This study focusses on men's careers in the gender-concentrated context of primary education. Therefore, it undertakes to explore and understand gendered influences on career-thinking and the ways in which men experience social and structural gendered norms, on becoming TAs. This will involve a developed understanding of social constructs of gender and the way these are constituted, embedded and perpetuated through family, education and work, as part of the study's theoretical framework (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 examines these concepts generally in relation to gender-concentrated occupations, and more specifically in the context of primary education.

The popular and political debates about gender that my research encounters are essentially binarized. Therefore, the theoretical frameworks that address my research questions reflect this perspective and adopt the language of surrounding discourse. However, I acknowledge that the past decade has seen a paradigmatic shift in popular and political thinking related to gender identities (Paechter, 2021). A complex set of alternatives has emerged, which challenges established, binarized perspectives of masculinity, femininity and gender roles. Increasingly, the relationship between physiology and gender-identity is presented as variable and spectral. Expressions such as non-binary, a-gender and gender-fluid have entered the lexicon of policy and practice (Paechter, 2021), alongside the encompassing synonym LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex). This paradigm shift has exerted pressure on taken-for-granted gender norms and boundaries. The subsequent implications for research in gendered domains present a

challenge to normative assumptions and the need to re-think ideas about gender (Paechter, 2021).

It is beyond the scope of my research study to investigate or report the plurality of gender identity which has percolated in social consciousness and political discourse in the past decade, or how these have influenced education practice. However, I do not underestimate the implications of emerging perspectives to the field of my study. A policy of LGBTQI+ inclusion, and multiple interpretations of gender and sexuality in the curriculum (Paechter, 2021) place accustomed perspectives about men and women as binarized role-models at odds with emerging practice, for example, gender nonconforming play (ibid). This suggests a potentially seismic change to the landscape of gender-related education research. It offers a further reason to challenge the rigid, binarized assumptions that prevail within contemporary debates about men and women as teachers and TAs in primary education.

Therefore, whilst my research questions adjunct an established, binarized debate, my study nevertheless acknowledges that interpretations of masculinity, femininity and gender itself are plural and variable. Accordingly, the study's attention to gender in career-identities, gender roles and gendered performance within the TA role poses a challenge to homogenous, heteronormative and hegemonic constructs of masculinity, that underpin normative assumptions about the gender-concentrated workforce in primary education.

## 1.3 Design and execution of the study

In order to capture, share and interpret the stories of men becoming TAs, the study requires a range of methodological tools that serve to generate participants' auto-biographical career narratives effectively and authentically. In the tradition of, for example Goodson and Sikes (2001) the study's epistemology takes a narrative approach to elicit storied data about participants' careers. It seeks to give voice to men becoming TAs, through the

narration of participants' own lived experiences, and offers an opportunity for participants to reflect on and interpret their career paths and their own surrounding influences, motivations and aspirations. The study is influenced by published, narrative research studies about career narratives and career-identities. It follows works, for example by Savickas (2009), Meijers and Lengelle (2012) and Saccomanno (2017) which present ideas such as careers as narrative, career-identity, negotiated ambition and lifelong learning.

The methodology (Chapter 4) supports my guiding principle that everyone has a story to tell. The study aims to capture and present participants' narratives in a way that celebrates the uniqueness of each story.  I have been inspired by Aristotelian and Celtic narrative forms (Colley, 2010) and classical literature (Bunyan, 1678, 2008). My approach draws on contemporary, creative innovations in research (e.g., Sousanis, 2015a; Carruthers-Thomas, 2018), which extend the possibilities for data capture and interpretation, by using a range of visual representations and narrative methods.  Thus inspired, an innovative, 5-stage research design is used to co-generate and record participants' career narratives and embeds an iterative approach to analysis and interpretation.

The study experiments with life-grids (Murray, Stephenson, Sharma, & Parnis, 2010) and graphic timelines to generate, capture and bring coherence and chronology to the narrative data. It undertakes an iterative, cumulative search for meaning within the narratives, to identify and discuss participants' motivations, investigate their experiences and analyse their aspirations. I utilise N-Vivo data management software to draw together the iterative stages of the research design, organise and review the data, and categorise emerging themes.

I present an overview of the study's early findings in Chapter 5. This overview will provide contextual background to each participants' narrative and show the early themes emerging across the sample. With the research questions in

mind, I will draw upon and consolidate the thematic analysis begun in Chapter 4, to develop three key areas for penetrative discussion. The subsequent three-part discussion (Chapter 6) responds to the research questions, through a detailed examination of participants' motivations on becoming TAs, their experiences of the gender-concentrated work-sector of primary education, and their future aspirations, ambitions and goals. I will offer an incisive consideration of influences on participants' careers and the dynamic relationship between agency and aspiration, in career narratives of men becoming TAs. In Chapter 7 I will close the study by evaluating the research process and its findings. I will formulate and present conclusions about participants' motivations, experiences and aspirations, on becoming TAs, in relation to the established theoretical frameworks and the study's emerging insights. I will offer a prospective view of the potential usefulness of my methodology in future research and practice, and the implications of my research findings for professional practice and future inquiry.

## 2.0 Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

The previous chapter introduced the study's context and research questions. This chapter explains the two strands of my theoretical framework namely: developing identity and agency, and sociological constructs of gender.

### 2.1 Strand 1: Developing identity and agency

My theoretical framework acknowledges careers as strongly associated with, and perhaps dependent upon personal identity and agency. This section looks at the influences upon identity and agency, which underpin careers. I conceptualise personal identity as a set of self-perceptions and expectations, constructed through individuals' experience and interactions with multiple social worlds (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). Agency is understood as 'the capacity to act independently and make one's own choices' (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019, p. 223). It is characterised by attributes such as positive self-regard, resilience and adaptability (Lent, 2013).   Hence, agency is an attribute of identity, enabling the individual to respond to social influences, and conform with or depart from social norms, to negotiate their own career path.

As a practitioner in professional development, I adopt a social-constructivist ontology, in which individuals' career-identities are informed and influenced by an interactive dynamic of social and cultural norms (Denicolo, Long & Bradley-Cole, 2016, p.29), and internal and external drivers. This perspective positions the biological individual as a social actor, who interacts with a range of influential social phenomena (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) to develop self-identity and where possible, increase personal agency.

The theoretical framework utilises a socio-ecological model to visualise the influence of social phenomena upon individual development (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). This model depicts the individual at the centre of immediate, micro level influences such as family, which inform the individual's emerging notions of self. Wider phenomena such as national policy and socio-economic forces occupy the macro level. They operate beyond the individual's immediate experience but exert influence through the

meso system of localised services, cultural expectations and social norms. Thus, the model assumes a range of interactions with proximal and more distant social phenomena, all of which influence the individual's developing identity.



**Micro-system:** the biological individual, personal dispositions, beliefs, values and immediate social structures and groups

**Meso-system:** agencies such as local services, community, and broadcast, print and social media, which mediate the individual's interaction with the macro-system

**Macro-system:** social policy, socio-economic influences, cultural norms

**Chrono-system:** the influence of the past upon the present, through reproduced social-norms

Figure 1: Socio-ecological systems model

My theoretical framework references the concept of 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977) to help make sense of the interactions between individuals and social influences. Jenkins (1992) summarises habitus as a series of human dispositions which are 'generative of practice' (p.78) within particular social contexts. This definition of practice includes beliefs and behaviours that are established as culturally characteristic and acceptable within a social community. Hence, they are value-laden in the social context where they

occur. For example, a work-sector, leisure pursuit, a family or community may drive the individual to seek out configurations of 'social capital' (Jenkins, 1992, p.85) which are valued in the given context, through interactions and relations with others. This enables the individual to identify as legitimate member of a group. As well as building individuals' social capital, these interactions are further constitutive of 'habitus' because they reify and further embed normative expectations.

Bourdieu (1977) refers to the shaping nature of habitus in perpetuating standard norms, values and expectations. Although norms might not be overtly articulated, they have the power to regulate social contexts such as education and work. Habitus is thus entrenched in social contexts, and resilient to change. Bourdieu (1977) summarises habitus, in this sense as 'the past that survives the present' (no page number).

Limiting constraints may manifest through the sociological phenomenon of 'lay normativity' (Morrison, 2014, p.646). Lay normativity is the expression of commonly held beliefs about what is morally right, and the markers or measures by which such things are determined and judged. Lay-normativity is a key concept for this study because it provides normative benchmarks to affirm, challenge or restrict agential career choices. It perpetuates assumptions about careers, by presenting certain occupations as a 'natural choice' for particular social groups. Hence, it fortifies structural barriers that affect individuals' choices in indirect, subconscious and direct, conscious ways (Sayer, 2004).

The counterbalance to structural barriers is the exercise of human agency. The theoretical framework sees agency as the ability to think and act on one's own behalf, to set one's own career goals (Lent, 2013), and pursue them with the belief that they can be reached (Packer, 2017).  Agency is therefore beholden to self-efficacy in the face of extraneous, lay-normativity. To that end, the theoretical framework conceptualises agency as the product of

'personal resources' (Vogelsang et al, 2018, p.331), which augment the individual's sense of identity and sustain agency. Personal resources include for example, self-awareness, self-regard and the reification of legitimacy, through accumulated social capital (Jenkins, 1997). Social capital is augmented by 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.20) which in its institutionalised form comprises demonstrable skills, knowledge and qualifications which can be selectively and deliberately acquired. Cultural capital is significant to habitus, by its capacity to develop 'long lasting dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.47).  Hence cultural capital may be 'embodied' (ibid) over time, by individuals and groups.

The ontology for this study incorporates the concept of lifelong learning as a catalyst in personal development, identity and agency (Saccomanno, 2017). Lifelong learning promotes these objectives by facilitating interactions with the social world. It promotes employment-related aspects of knowledge, skills and competence, but also fosters a culture of personal development (EC, 2001), underpinned by the notion of self-fulfilment, social inclusion and civic engagement, as well as formal qualifications.

Accordingly, cultural capital, whether institutionalised through formal qualifications or embodied as part of habitus has power to affect careers, consciously and unconsciously. It is therefore a component part of identity and agency. The literature review (Chapter 3) contains a fuller exploration of the connections between identity and agency in career decisions.

Whilst habitus has been criticised for the constraints it exercises on agency and social mobility, through 'latent determinism' (Reay, 2004, p.432) habitus does have some fluidity (ibid).  Jenkins (1992, p.78) argues that dispositions are 'transposable' and can help to re-structure social contexts, in circumstances where change is assumed to be necessary and appropriate. For example, changing constructs of gender and the language of sexuality (Paechter, 2021) present a pertinent example of the mutually constitutive

dynamic of socio-ecological systems and human agency (Burke & Stets, 2009). Whilst social structures dictate gender norms, social life can exert concurrent pressure against them, resulting in a widespread reconfiguration of the normative constructs of gender and their inherent, social barriers. Thus, although habitus is largely associated with entrenchment, it can, over time, facilitate incremental, societal change.

The theoretical framework recognises that to effect change, individuals and groups must have the opportunity and personal agency to depart from established habitus (Lester, 2008), and bring pressure on established norms and structures. Calls for more men in primary education suggest there is an assumed need for change, supported by emerging lay-normative assumptions about perceived gaps in children's home lives and educational provision (Younger & Warrington, 2008).  This study seeks to connect with associated discourses, by investigating the motivations and aspirations of men who are crafting a relatively unusual career path, as primary phase TAs.

## 2.2 Strand 2: Social constructs of gender

The study locates men becoming TAs as part of a gendered minority in primary education. To fully explore the experiences of men becoming TAs, the theoretical framework conceptualises gender as a significant influence on identity and careers. Here, I give a brief overview of gender as a social construct. Its influence on the social worlds of education and work are explored further in Chapter 3.

Gender is a social construct which attempts to align certain human traits and behavioural characteristics as innately 'feminine' or 'masculine' by attributing them to biological sex (Francis, 2008). The concept of gender as biological, binarized and fixed is embedded in society by lay-normativity (Morrison, 2014), and 'sedimentation of gender norms' (Butler, 2004, p.178) which underlie popular constructs of women and men. Sociologically, proponents of the post-structuralist perspective reject the notion of gender as the property

of bodies (Butler, 2004). They argue that gender characteristics manifest as a conscious or unconscious 'performance' of social norms, which are reproduced by 'socially-guided, perceptual, interactional and micro-political activities that cast particular pursuits as an expression of masculine or feminine "nature"' (West & Zimmermann, 1987, p.125). Hence, some work sectors are habitually populated by mostly men or mostly women. This further entrenches gender-norms in the social world of work and which might render such occupations unattractive to a gender minority, whatever the rewards of the work may be (Torre, 2018).

The enactment of gender in line with societal expectations is seen as a form of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), which perpetuates normative values such as gendered divisions of labour. Whilst individuals' lived experiences are more ambivalent than normative assumptions tend to suggest (Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2007), Butler (2004, p.178) cites 'compelling social fictions' which have over time produced and consolidated the biological sexes as binary opposites. Accordingly, habitus has a role in the gendering of education and work, through the perpetuation of gendered norms.

In this vein, feminist role-theory constitutes men and women's position and role in society, as having been combined with biology by normative conditions (Dillabough, 2006). This is exemplified in the social construct of primary education as essentially feminine, through its historical association with maternality, which is biologically female (Apple, 2015). Certain cultural configurations of femininity and masculinity have 'seized a hegemonic hold' (Lester, 2008, p.284), 'paralysing' individuals' agency to depart from an established norm (ibid). 'Hegemonic masculinity' denotes a normative, essentialist construct of 'the most honoured or desired' form of masculinity (Connell, 2000, p.10). It manifests as the patriarchal male adult and is held to represent and defend men's 'social and institutional power' over other forms of masculinity, and over women and children (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015, p.52). The social world of the primary school is therefore more than a mere

reflection of social structures and norms; it is one of the principal sites of construction (Tait, 2016). For men becoming TAs, the primary phase presents as a work sector which is both female-concentrated and bound by long-established configurations of gender. These give rise to the construct of primary education as a feminised domain.

'Bodily hexus' (Costello, 2005, p.21) relates to embodied performances of gender, for example enactments of appearance, posture, and physical interaction which are habitually and subconsciously embedded into identity (ibid). In a study of gender bias in the workplace, Lester (2008) cautions that rigid social structures can afford certain identities with greater social credibility. Such structures guide individuals to embody and perform socially expected gender norms. West and Zimmermann (1987, p.126) suggest that Western society evaluates the 'competence' of both men and women, based on such gender performances. Lay-normativity scrutinises and restricts any departure from the accustomed norms, further emphasising normative judgements of acceptable practice (Morrison, 2014). Thus, individuals' career choices and the ways they regulate and conduct themselves at work may be socially scrutinised by peers and others, through a gendered lens (ibid). In the feminised context of primary education, men may feel compelled to project hegemonic masculinity in order to be fully accepted as competent teachers (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012).

By definition, hegemony accepts that other versions of masculinity exist. The concept of multiple femininities and masculinities (Connell & Pearse, 2015) recognises multi-dimensional constructions, manifestations and interpretations of being female or being male, which are socially and culturally influenced and enacted (Robb, 2017). For example, Kehily (2007a) suggests that leisure pursuits which have gendered aspects enable young people to interact with 'different forms of masculinity and femininity' (p.262). This echoes Williams' (1995) comments that sports offer men a context in which to relate to other men emotionally and demonstrate closeness with

one another, in ways that do not threaten hegemonic masculinity. Personal, social and institutional constructs of masculinity are therefore plural and changeable (Warin & Wernersson, 2016), but continue to be measured and compared against hegemonic ideals (Burn & Pratt Adams, 2015).

Applying this precept to professional practice, Francis (2008) explores men's approaches to teaching and finds that men teachers enact masculinity in diverse ways. Her findings therefore reject hegemonic discourses which present a homogenous construct of the man teacher as patriarchal, dominant and authoritative. Francis (2008) argues for gendered education discourses to recognise the notion of masculinity and femininity as multiple and variable. My study of men becoming TAs presents an opportunity to add to the discourse surrounding men and masculinity in primary education.

My interpretation draws a distinction between biological, anatomical sex of 'male and female', and the socially constructed gendered descriptors of 'men and women'. However, in this thesis I do to a certain extent use male/men and female/women interchangeably. This is compatible with the language used in some of the reviewed literature, and in the participant voice.  I reject the notion of male and female as binarized opposites, and masculinity and femininity as biological or social singularities, and this study recognises that individuals perform masculinity and femininity in multiple ways. I follow Lupton (2006, p.105), by using the phrasing 'masculinity', or 'maleness' only to reflect the attribute of a person of the male sex, in its colloquial sense. This does not lessen my advocacy for multiple masculinities and femininities as plural and spectral social performances.

This chapter has established the ontological framework for the study. The following chapter explores the connections between identity, agency and careers, as they underpin this study of men becoming TAs and the influence of surrounding structures and gendered discourses on TAs' careers.

# 3.0 Literature Review

This literature review explores academic discourses around careers, identity, agency and gender, which underpin the research questions, *What motivates men to become TAs? What are their experiences and aspirations?*

I define the terms used in the study to explain ways of conceptualising people's thinking, decisions and actions in relation to their careers. This will clarify the importance of identity, agency, aspiration and motivation in people's careers. Having established the core concepts, I will apply them to the contexts of the study.  The literature review identifies gender as a powerful influence on careers and workplaces and I examine this in relation to the gendered work context of primary education, and specifically, the TA role. Given the scarcity of literature about men as TAs, this literature review draws on plentiful research about men becoming primary teachers, to discuss gendered barriers and affordances to men as educators in the primary phase of education.  I explore some of the broader discourses surrounding men working within gendered minorities, both generally and in primary education. This raises some specific tensions around the sustainability of TA work, as part of a long-term career narrative for men becoming TAs.

## 3.1 Career development perspectives

This section builds on the concept of identity introduced in Chapter 2. Here, I introduce the relationship between self-identity and career through the concept of 'career-identity'. I explain ways in which personal identity resources (Vogelsang et al, 2018) may be accrued through life's experiences and social interactions, to fund career-identity. In turn, this underpins the notion of a career narrative. I discuss some ways that career-identity may be formed and sustained, and the significance of this to reflexive career narratives.  My definition of a reflexive career narrative is one which is motivated by goals and emotional investment, interacts consciously with social structures and is involved in evaluating the past as well as anticipating the future.

### 3.1.1 Self-identity, agency and career-identity

Self-identity is seen as an on-going, developmental process in which the individual identifies themselves with the social roles and constructs that they encounter and experience (Kehily, 2007b). Interactions with the immediate social worlds of home, family, and friendship inform the individual's emerging sense of self as a social actor, through an accumulation of personal resources (Vogelsang et al, 2018). Individuals increase their personal resources through their experiences and interactions with wider social worlds (Stokes & Wyn,2007) for example, school, local community, leisure pursuits and the workplace. Personal resources include internal attributes such as health and self-confidence, and extraneous assets such as supportive, enabling relationships and social support networks (Vogelsang et al, 2018). In essence these personal resources are examples of social and cultural capital (Jenkins,1992, p.85) which fund an individual's sense of self and their capacity to interact with social worlds of education and work, with increasing independence, self-direction and agency.

The concept of self-identity within personal narratives is relevant to my study of men becoming TAs because self-identity is the means by which individuals locate, articulate and make sense of their own position in relation to the wider stories that are intertwined their own career narrative (La Pointe, 2010). This study adopts the concept of 'career-identity' (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) as a facet of self-identity. Career-identity is constructed through the individual's interactions with the social world of work (LaPointe, 2010), and consolidated by a co-dependent relationship between self-identity and career (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). It is seen as fluid, and responsive to the surrounding career narrative, its influences and priorities (LaPointe,2010).

An effective career-identity depends upon personal agency, seen as the freedom to act intentionally, set one's own goals and plan their pursuit (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019, p. 137). I therefore conceptualise the personal resources that Vogelsang et al (2018) identify as part of individual's self-

identity and agency as integral to an emerging and sustainable career-identity. I interpret personal identity resources which relate directly to work, employability and career as resources for career-identity (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). These are summarised in Figure 2. This diagram draws on Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2004); Meijers and Lengelle (2012) and Vogelsang et al (2018).
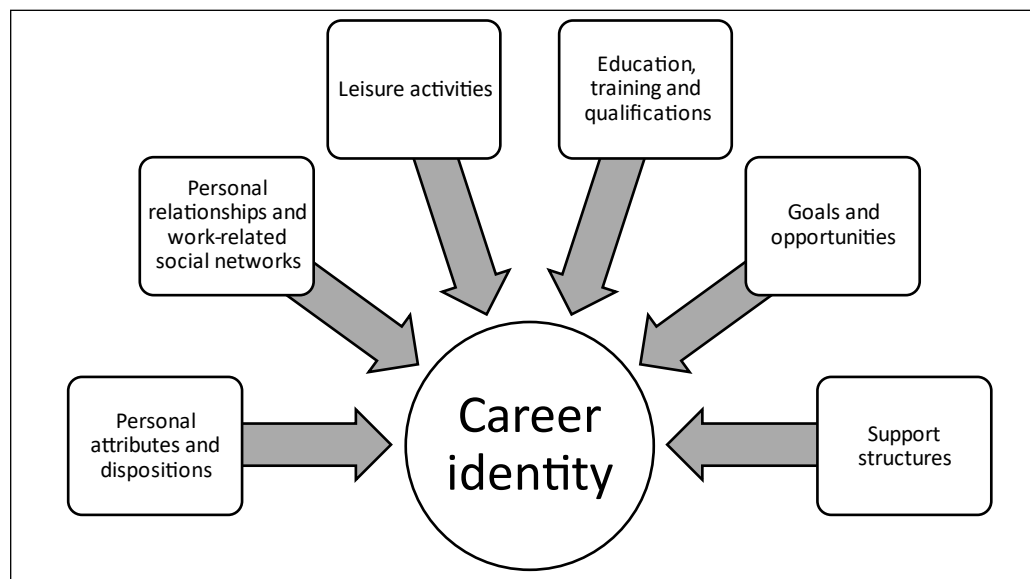


Figure 2: Resources for career-identity

Within a challenging labour market, Fugate et al (2004, p.23) cite an 'internal locus of control' as fundamental to the individual's flexibility, resilience and responsiveness. This may be termed as the need for an agential, career-identity. When applied to career-identity, the resources shown in Figure 2 furnish individuals' ability to respond to changing circumstances or unexpected opportunities, to balance risk or loss against anticipated gain. Future goals are important career-identity resources, but an agential individual must also have the self-belief that one's own goals can be accomplished (Packer, 2017). When combined, personal resources, goals and self-belief enable individuals to become self-knowing, agential, responsive to life's critical moments and able to take control of their career decisions (Lent, 2013).

Whilst personal identity resources can strengthen a career-identity, constrained or poorly defined self-efficacy can affect the accuracy of individuals' outcome expectations (Lent 2013). Negative self-perceptions can reduce individuals' capacity to formulate goals and expectations (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) may perpetuate lay-normative assumptions, for example about gendered work roles, which narrow the perceived possibilities (Morrison, 2014). When internalised, these can limit aspiration and present a barrier to agency and motivation, through the self-curtailment of available career choices and opportunities (Saccomanno, 2017).

When richly resourced, an individual's career-identity may off-set the disadvantages of adverse circumstances through 'resource substitution' (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019, p.143), whereby strengths compensate for weaknesses. Saccomanno (2017 p.558) notes that in negotiating their career goals, an individual might 'preserve' or 'convert' personal resources and previous career-identities into their emergent career narrative or reject attributes they no longer value. Hence, an individual with a sense of agency has the scope to control and re-distribute their career-identity resources, to sustain a relevant and current career narrative. This study's narrative approach seeks to capture and explore the potential of past, present and future narratives to investigate the motivations and aspirations of men becoming TAs.

Saccomanno (2017) emphasises that even in the presence of agency, career ambition cannot be easily separated from the personal and social contexts in which the individual operates. He re-iterates the socio-cultural influences on careers, arising from the 'norms and rules people are socialised into' (ibid, p.561). This is relevant where certain careers and work-domains are significantly gendered or subject to other social hierarchies and habitus.

### 3.1.2 Career narratives

The study adopts the idea of career as narrative, defined as 'a moving perspective of occupational experience' (Savickas et al, 2009, p.246). I interpret 'career narrative' as a series of negotiated interactions with the self, others and the social worlds of work and learning (Saccomanno, 2017). It supports career-identity, by its ability '…to frame and give meaning and continuity to past, present and future career related experiences' (Fugate et al, 2004, p.20). It is shaped by motives, and an imagined, future self (ibid). Essentially, therefore I interpret a career narrative as a reflexive activity that evaluates past experiences, to guide present day activities and inform future goals and aspirations.

The concept of career as narrative reflects the way that careers tend to be constructed in contemporary labour markets (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). It is becoming less easy to forge traditional, linear careers that are bound by organisations and defined by upward advancement, social status and material gain (Saccomanno, 2017). Instead, individual, self-directed 'protean' careers have emerged (Lent, 2013, p.2). Careers can no longer depend upon an organisational 'meta-narrative of stages' but have been replaced by 'individual scripts' (Savickas et al, 2009, p.240).

Individually scripted, self-directed careers can operate freely of organisational structures and have multiple symbols of success (Saccomanno, 2017). They might respond to 'vocation' (Dik, Duffy & Eldridge, 2009, p.626), or 'calling' to a specific cause or altruistic purpose from which the individual finds a means of self-expression (Savickas et al, 2009). Thereby, the individual derives meaning and a sense of personal worth (Ronkainen, Ryba, McDougall, Tod, & Tikkanen, 2020), which might not be represented by status or material reward.

Therefore, as a characteristic of agency, the capacity to consciously direct one's own career relies on the self-efficacy that comes from an effectively

resourced 'career-identity' (Fugate et al, 2004, p. 20) and sense of personal direction. Whilst they can be more versatile and adaptive to changes at micro and macro levels of the social world (Lent, 2013), self-directed careers do not occur in isolation. Career goals and their pursuit remain subject to multiple internal and external influences, and must adapt to changing priorities (Lent, 2013). For example, variable life-events and transitions might force the individual to prioritise conflicting demands, which influence the career narrative. Hence, every career encounters risk, unexpected events or pressure (Krumboltz, 2009).

In self-directed career narratives, career-identity (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, p.157) brings continuity to the career narrative, as the individual moves between employment sectors. The 'vocational self' (Savickas et al, 2009) and 'work personality' (Lent, 2013) are seen as the product of career narrative, wherein an individual identifies themselves as the protagonist within their own story. Career-identity emerges incrementally alongside a career narrative, through negotiated interactions between the world of work and one's own needs and goals.

The concept of career-identity is central to career narratives, because to exercise personal agency effectively, the individual must identify as a resourceful and self-regulating social actor. The greater the agency, the more ability the individual has, to respond to the social, structural influences on their lives with some degree of self-regulation (Lent, 2013). An agential career-identity determines whether the individual's career narrative departs from normative expectations and how they confront unexpected events and challenges. Personal identity resources (Vogelsang et al 2018) therefore emerge as fundamental to aspirational career-thinking, agential career-crafting and the maintenance of a resilient career-identity and career narrative (Fugate et al, 2004; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

The formal and informal outcomes of lifelong learning operate as enhanced resources for career-identity and employment, alongside family support systems and professional networks (Fugate et al, 2004). Certificated qualifications and demonstrable work experience provide cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that can enhance and help to shape career narratives by evidencing personal development, knowledge and competencies. Fugate et al (2004) identify such resources as 'human capital' for employability. This is relevant to the context of my own study, which is located at a university, and incorporates foundation degrees and progression routes as integrated, lifelong learning opportunities for men becoming TAs.

Chapter 4 of this thesis explains how the study's methodology enables participants to reflect upon their own career narratives, and subsequent chapters will examine the relationship between participants' career-identity, lifelong learning and their unique career narratives. In my review of the literature, I explored in general the ways that career-identity originates and develops alongside an emerging career narrative, and this is briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

### 3.1.3 Developing career-identity and beginning career narratives

Banks et al's landmark study *Career and Identities* (1992) suggests that career-identity originates in childhood and begins to take shape in adolescence through formative interactions with the workplace and communities. This is supported by more recent authors (for example, Stokes & Wyn, 2007; Thomson, 2017). I include here three examples of social interaction, which are potentially significant to emerging career narratives, and relevant to my study of men becoming TAs. These are formal work experience, leisure pursuits and vocational, community engagement.

Participants in this study are not school-leavers, but the experiences of adolescence are likely to remain relevant in the longer term. This is because young people begin to identify as working adults, during their first transition

from schooling (Stokes & Wyn, 2007, p. 508). Experiences of part-time employment can also germinate young people's career-identity as a form of social capital for employability, in the longer term (Fugate et al, 2004). The immediate benefits of school-initiated work-experience placements are not readily calculable (Hillage, Hoey, Kodz and Pike, 1996), but it is worth noting their potential influence on participants' later careers. Holman (2018) notes the value of work-experience as a site for learning and experimentation. Work-experience provides a connection with individuals and organisations in the employment sector (Holman, 2018), which might offer avenues of employment, in the short or long-term future. Enabling young people to explore employment sectors through work experience can therefore furnish young people's career-identity and employability (Fugate et al, 2004) by aiding career goals (Krumboltz, 2009), and developing networks (Holman, 2018) which might be realised later in the individual's career narrative. Hence, for some participants, reflections on their adolescent experiences might be significant in relation to their present choices and long-term goals, and constitutive of a reflexive career narrative.

Whilst schooling helps to 'shape' career-identity, Banks et al (1992, p.109) suggest that 'the foundations of identity have deeper roots in family background and peer culture.' The main site of adolescent peer culture exists not in formal education contexts, but in leisure pursuits (ibid). Similarly, Kehily (2007a) constitutes organised sport as 'serious identity work' (p.262), offering a context for risk and excitement, whilst modelling conformity with the adult world, respect for rules, fairness and regard for other people. For example, she suggests that organised sports such as football nurture attributes of social bonding, and a strong connection with the community (Kehily, 2007a). This idea is relevant to career narratives, in which the accrual of 'distinct personal attributes' (Vogelsang et al, 2018, p.331) through sports may be interpreted as personal resources, in relation to career-identity and agency.

From a gendered perspective, the male-concentrated macro-level social world of football may offer a safe-space in which men might legitimise caring about and for children, at micro-level and incorporate it into their career-identity without compromising heteronormative, hegemonic male norms (Kehily, 2007a). Thus, it serves to mediate men's diverse performances of gender within the normative boundaries of the surrounding socio-ecological systems.

Ronkainen et al (2020) note the professional, vocational ethic of community-based sports coaching, which they characterise as personal loyalty that 'transcends the self' (p. 11) through open-handed commitment to a group and its social cause. This interpretation of vocation echoes Dik et al (2009) who characterise vocation as work that satisfies an ethic of service, contributes to a community, and offers scope for self-development and self-expression. This is relevant to this study of men becoming TAs, as it suggests that a sense of vocation fortifies career-identities and adaptive career narratives, and can underpin work-life satisfaction, even in the presence of gender barriers (Dik et al, 2009). This highlights the way in which vocation is a powerful resource for career-identity, which can compensate for restraints in other areas and underpin an agential and rewarding, self-directed career narrative.

### 3.1.4. Aspirations, drivers and motivations of reflexive career narratives
In respect of my research questions, I interpret aspiration as a form of thinking, which tends to associate with a cognition of the future which the individual envisions as more fulfilling and secure than the present. By contrast, ambition is conceptualised as a 'dynamic of action' (Saccomanno, 2009, p.553), it involves goals and the steps needed, to achieve the desired future.

Aspiration presages specific career goals. It imagines generalised perspectives of a desired future, but tends to lack detail (Saccomanno, 2017).  For

example, in a study of Spanish education students' goals and motivations, Padilla-Carmona and Martínez-García (2013) report that aspiration tends to be broadly expressed and somewhat romantic. Their students' aspirations became more realistic through direct interaction with the social world of work. Accordingly, opportunities to explore and experience the reality of the work sector can help the individual to translate ethereal aspirations into a more secure vision of the future.

I define 'career-thinking' in this study as an internal, essentially future-oriented process of formulating ideas and career decisions (Savickas et al, 2009). It involves reflection, intention, and an imagined, future self (Saccomanno, 2017). It may seek to repair the past or improve a present situation, through an envisioned future (Lent, 2013). Career-thinking is usually aspirational, reflexive and planful. I understand reflexivity, in this context as the combination of self-awareness and action, 'making decisions with self-awareness and taking action with personal meaning' (Savickas, 2016, p.84). . Aspirational career thinking is a formative process, that enables the individual to investigate and explore a range of reasonable goals, which when converted to action, translate as ambition.

In my study I utilise the expression 'career-crafting' to denote the agential process of translating aspirational career-thinking into action by articulating specific goals and intentions (Schoon & Heckhausen (2019), and negotiating opportunities and barriers, to create a personal career trajectory (Savickas et al, 2009, p.246). In my interpretation, career-crafting includes processes of 'career renewal' (Lent, 2013, p.6) through updating skills to respond to drivers within the work sector or expanding interests to enrich or re-design one's vocational life. Hence it aligns to the notion of 'negotiated ambition' (Saccomanno, 2017). In this study, the concept of negotiated ambition is fitting to the analysis of participants' career narratives and their influences, which are multiple and diverse within participants' personal, professional and family lives.

Saccomanno (2017) suggests that negotiating a professional goal may enable the individual to legitimise themselves in a desired professional context. Engaging with lifelong learning can improve the viability of aspirational goals and can enable the individual to 'repair' a 'gap in the past' (ibid, p.556), as part of a negotiated ambition. Further, negotiations based in work-life balance occur when individuals re-examine and adjust their priorities and expectations (Saccomanno, 2017). This may be due to changed circumstances or identity factors, arising from key moments (Savickas et al, 2009), and aligns to the notion of 'career renewal' (Lent, 2013, p.6). Compromises might be needed in the goal itself or its pursuit, for example within spousal relationships or other commitments. Finally, Saccomanno (2017) identifies negotiations based in reticence, in which participants aspire to reduce the overall, structuring influence of work on their personal lives, for example through seasonal, casual or freelance occupations.

Reflexive career-thinking therefore responds to a need for change, a transition or key moment (Savickas et al, 2009). Hence, agency in career-crafting is seen to be energised by a stimulus, or motivation. Broadly, motivation is conceived as an influential force which operates internally and externally, as a way of satisfying internal needs and wants. It incentivises personal goals through the achievement of rewards (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Rewards may be external for example, the prospect of financial reward and status. Internal motives include the notion of vocation as a 'calling', which connects the individual to an occupation which is pro-social and carries intrinsic reward (Dik et al, 2009).

Whether it is driven by needs or goals, intrinsic or extrinsic rewards, motivation is always situational, according to the life domains, activities and time in which it occurs (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013).  This perspective is mirrored in Savickas et al's (2009) view of reflexive career-thinking operating in different life-domains, each of which vie for priority and stability, throughout an individual's career narrative.

Understanding how motivation operates in various domains of life relates well to the situation of my participant group who, as adult learners, must balance multiple demands to negotiate their career goals. Finally, in this section I wish to engage with the concept of motivation as a holistic experience (MacIntyre, MacKinnon, & Clement 2009), which is both cognitive and emotional (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). I have chosen to explore models of motivation that relate to the phenomena of identity, agency and careers, as central themes of the study.

Extrinsic goals and intrinsic needs are not necessarily exclusive. Extrinsic goals may be internalised and enmeshed within self-identity (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). For example, a sense of vocation is unlikely to be solely framed by its altruistic outcomes (Ronkainen et al, 2020), but also a quest for self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. It combines an ethic of service to others with desirable career outcomes for the imagined future self (Dik et al, 2009).

The literature conceives the future self, the person an individual expects to become (Markus & Narius, 1986), as fundamental to intrinsic models of motivation. The aspirational, future self is a necessary component of self-identity (MacIntyre et al, 2009). The possible or 'hoped-for' future self (MacIntyre et al, 2009 p.46) first operates intrinsically, as a 'conscious striving …to achieve one's innermost potential' (ibid, p.47). It then becomes an interpretive measure for present identity and self-development. Hence, the imagined future self is a reference point for evaluating one's current performance, alongside other identity markers and measures, drawn from influential relationships and interactions with social and cultural norms (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). This interests me as a practitioner in professional development and speaks to the research questions in terms of the motivations and aspirations of men becoming TAs, and their decision to undertake a foundation degree.

MacIntyre et al (2009) argue that the motivating power of the aspirational future self is essentially emotional, involving the individual in hope, happiness, fear or disappointment. They suggest there is always an uneasy gap between the current self and the future self. Thus, motivation for career development is rooted in the individual's practical and emotional investment and a commitment to reconcile the present and possible future selves. Similarly, Saccomanno (2017) suggests that ambition tends to be based within a deficit perspective, which assumes that the imagined future can be improved through self-development, in the present. Hence there is a connection between identity, aspirational ideals and self-development. This aligns to my study's core themes, and the co-dependence of identity and agency in career-crafting. It prompts questions of what the motivational drivers are, for aspirational career-thinking and agential career-crafting.

Motivation Systems Theory (Ford, 1992) embraces the characteristics of agency in which the 'person and context work together … to produce coherent, goal-directed behaviour patterns' (Ford, 1992, p.9). It rejects the notion of the individual as a 'rudderless ship' (Lent, 2013, p.6), at the mercy of environmental forces and personal needs. It conceives the individual as capable of 'self-direction, autonomous decision making and personal responsibility' (Ford, 1992, p.9). Nevertheless, the literature suggests that motivation is vulnerable to reduced agency. For example, in some circumstances 'the need to find work over-rides notions of career planning' (Lent, 2013). Schoon and Heckhausen (2019) agree that the 'horizon of perceived possibilities' (p.142) is shortened in reduced circumstances, causing people to rely more on luck or fate as a source of success, than their own, inner resources.

'Happenstance Learning Theory' acknowledges unplanned or non-agential circumstances and events as contributory influences on career trajectory (Krumboltz ,2009, p.135). It can be encapsulated as 'luck', through a set of circumstances which carry opportunities or consequences for the individual's

career narrative. This offers an interesting thread for investigation in the career narratives of men becoming TAs. It opens a range of possible motives for entering the role and their aspirational career-thinking.

## 3.2 Professional contexts
### 3.2.1 TAs' professional role and identity

In this study of men becoming TAs, it is necessary to locate the position of the TA role within the wider schools workforce. The literature reveals that the TA workforce presents as a multi-faceted and complex, contemporary issue (for example, Blatchford et al 2012). The following section gives some of the background to the development of the TA role in schools and some surrounding tensions.

The contemporary schools workforce embraces an increasingly diverse range of roles and specialisms (Blatchford et al, 2012). In the context of my study, I use the broad expression 'educator' to denote any practitioner directly involved in the professional education sector, either teaching or supporting learning and teaching. I adopt Blatchford et al's (2012) interpretation of 'teaching assistants' as para-professional practitioners who have a pedagogical role in schools, and largely work under the direction of qualified teachers. Over the past thirty years developments in education policy have forced a transformation of practice in the schools, including a burgeoning number of TAs. Concurrently, enactments of national policy have raised the expectations placed on TAs, who now operate as paraprofessionals with a widening, pedagogical role (Webster et al, 2011). This section of the literature review explores the political drivers of the contemporary TA role, and the way in which it now presents and operates, as an integral part of the schools workforce

Frequently, the literature identifies the implementation of Workforce Remodelling in 2003 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002), as the turning-point for the developing, para-professional TA role (e.g., Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011; Blatchford et al, 2012; Graves, 2014).

Workforce Remodelling aimed to reduce teacher workload and raise pupil attainment (Blatchford et al 2012). It responded to the National Agreement on teacher workload in 2003 (Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), 2003), which sought to release teachers from non-teaching tasks, and the PricewaterhouseCooper Teacher Workload Survey (2001), which recommended an extended role for school support staff.

The literature applies a critical lens to the professional dilemmas and tensions that have arisen from the practical implementation of Workforce Remodelling (e.g., Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011). It indicates that Workforce Remodelling has combined with earlier political and practical measures, such as the National Strategies for literacy and numeracy (Barkham, 2008) to transform the deployment of TAs for learning and teaching in the primary phase. However, despite an increasingly pedagogical role (Webster et al, 2011), the position of TA in the schools workforce remains a relatively low-paid, low-status occupation (Hammersley-Fletcher and Lowe, 2011), which does not benefit from a clear career development structure, standardised qualifications, national pay scale or professional status (Graves, 2012).

MacBeath (2009) contends that within the business-model of education, which has taken-hold in the 21st Century, learning must be efficiently packaged, so to satisfy targets and produce outcomes. This philosophy reduces teaching and learning to a matter of 'delivery' and drives separation between planning for teaching and learning, and its execution. This is exemplified by the introduction, under Workforce Remodelling, of the Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) role. Graves (2014) explains that this descriptor for experienced TAs is a competency-based model, formulated through a set of national occupational standards (NOS), rather than extended training. It aims to relieve pressure on teacher workload, by deployment of HLTAs in delivering whole-class lessons or other teaching duties, under the directional curriculum planning or supervision of a qualified teacher.

Although the HLTA role appears to present a professional opportunity to TAs, it also perpetuates the orthodox construct of untrained TAs, who are operationally dependent upon qualified teachers. The literature notes that TAs are often negatively constituted as 'not a teacher' (for example, Watkinson, 2002; Graves, 2012; Trent, 2014) rather than having any positive, professional identity of their own. This point appears to be reified by the published, updated professional standards for teaching assistants, which remain advisory rather than mandatory (Unison, 2016) and the lack of a national pay scale (TES, 2019). Moreover, the literature offers some cautious viewpoints about TAs' professional development, and their true worth in terms of pupils' learning. An additional problem is a sense of disquiet amongst some qualified teaching staff, about TAs managing whole classes, which in practice separates the pupils from a qualified teacher (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011). Similarly, Graves (2012) claims it is difficult to discern or evaluate HLTAs' 'contribution to school or pupil improvement' (p. 97) because their role is flawed by unclear boundaries, lack of deep subject knowledge and relatively superficial assessment of competency, against the NOS. Graves (2014) contrasts the rigorous training requirements for teachers with the relatively limited professional development and education for school support staff, who are nevertheless charged with a pedagogical role. These limitations constitute significant barriers for aspirational TAs, to achieve career advancement and professional autonomy, within the TA role itself.

According to reports in the national press and from the National Education Union, economic pressures on schools over recent years have placed TAs jobs under threat (e.g., Abrams, 2017; National Education Union, 2018). Moreover, research by Blatchford et al (2012) calls into question the demonstrable usefulness of the overall TA role when measured in direct relation to children's learning. These concerns are relevant to the study in hand because they illustrate the professional precariousness of the TA role, within a

performance-driven education sector, and the inherent barriers to TAs'
retention and career development.

### 3.2.2. Gendered occupational contexts, primary phase education and the TA role

Gender theory posits that 'professional work, like other human activities, involves gendering' (Montecinos and Nielsen, 2004, p.4). I draw the expression 'gender-concentrated' from Lupton (2006) to describe a job role or work sector which is occupied in the majority by either men or women. In seeking to understand the structures that create gender-concentrated occupations, it is also important to consider how people use work as a central pillar of their self-construct (Saccomanno, 2017) and how people 'construct their lives through their work' (Savickas, 2016). There is a sense that some occupations underscore individuals' gender-identity through the assumed masculine or feminine nature of the work, and that this may be influential in some individuals' career-thinking.

Williams' landmark text *Still a man's world: men who do "women's work"* (1995) describes the minority position in gender-concentrated occupations as a 'gender-reverse' situation (Williams, 1995). This expression usefully evokes the prohibitive or limiting socially-constructed boundaries, which cast certain occupations as essentially feminine or masculine. Accordingly, in gender-reverse situations men and women must each negotiate differentiated, gendered barriers and affordances. The following paragraphs situate the TA role within a generalised context of gender-concentrated occupations, which help to demonstrate the assumptions and practices that characterise female-concentrated occupations.

The literature shows that the uneven distribution of either men or women within certain occupations is complex, and associated with multiple social, economic and biological influences. The workplace is surrounded by normative assumptions about the nature of certain types of work, and the assumed social or biological propensities of either men or women to

undertake it (Williams, 1995). Torre (2018, p.291) defines a 'feminine' occupation as one that is normatively associated with 'feminine attributes'. For example, Apple (2015) explains that nursery education has emerged as a female-gendered occupation due to its biological association with maternity. The nature of 'care' within fields such as nursing tends to be conflated with notions of femininity, predicated on the assumption that caring is innately feminine, and naturally distanced from hegemonic notions of masculinity (Torre, 2018).

Williams (1995) theorises that sociological models, which categorise work in terms of human capital and status attainment, generally attribute less worth to women than men in the workplace. Female-concentrated occupations tend to attract lower pay and have low status (Torre, 2018). Lay-normativity subordinates femininity to masculinity and perceives women to have lower aspirations (Morrison, 2014). In a study of para-legal administrators, Seeley (2018) argues that a work role can be devalued if the duties and responsibilities that it entails are normatively constituted as 'feminine'. Seely (2018) elaborates that the legal 'admin' role is deferential to more highly qualified colleagues and based in notions of 'service' to others, which he suggests are both characteristic of feminised occupations. He views lack of progression for legal admins as both causative and symptomatic of the role being female-concentrated. Similarly, TA work, due to its association with caring, service to senior colleagues, its lesser professional status, low pay and limited opportunity for development has the markers of a 'female' occupation. Consequently, men becoming TAs experience a gender-reverse situation within a context that is socially-constructed as a female domain.

The literature therefore locates primary phase education as a gendered professional context which operates under the influence of a normative gaze. For example, in an investigation into trainee teachers' employment prospects, Morrison (2014, p.645) notes that as a context for employment, primary education is 'highly sex-segregated and is also subject to normalized gendered

stereotypes that position women as more nurturing, and thus better suited to the teaching of young children'. On the other hand, Pulsford (2014) proposes that the gendering of primary teaching is underpinned by a less benevolent view of women's ability, based in the historical, hegemonic notion of women as intellectually inferior to men, and more suited to child-rearing and other care-based roles.

Work with children outside the family is constituted as professional (Wernersson, Warin & Brownhill, 2016). It is mediated by ethical codes, occupational standards and regulatory frameworks which establish gender-neutral professional boundaries for adults working with children. Nevertheless, the conflation of primary education with parenting and therefore, maternality endures (ibid).

The literature provides examples of the gendering of the primary TA role in practice, compounded by the assumption that it is essentially a role of care rather than pedagogy. For example, Barkham's (2008) small-scale ethnographic study of the TA role noted that whilst pedagogical demands on TAs were recognised, teachers continued to emphasise TAs' capacity for caring, emotional relationships with colleagues and pupils. Barkham (2008) suggests that teachers' tendency to classify TAs as carers re-enforces the perception of the TA role as 'women's work' (p.852). Similarly, Graves (2014) research data confirms that the TA role is conflated with parenting, through its emergence from the informal parent-helper role. She argues that perceptions of TAs' work are therefore rooted in notions of maternality.

A generalised comparison of the issues men and women face in neutral and gender-concentrated work sectors suggests that men might find gender-reverse situations more advantageous than women do (Torre 2018). The literature argues that female-concentrated work contexts suffer from a vertical segregation in which a disproportionate number of men hold senior positions (Lupton, 2006). To explain this paradox, Williams (1995, p.12) posits

that enabling, organisational structures constitute a 'glass escalator' that rewards stereotyped, assumed 'masculine' qualities such as ambition, with accelerated advancement (Torre, 2018).

In keeping with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, the organisational structures which produce the 'glass escalator' metaphor are rendered invisible by their ubiquitous normality (Torre, 2018). Men's career trajectories in gender-reverse situations may therefore be escalated without conscious effort (Williams, 1995). Furthermore Lupton (2006) states that some men might consciously challenge the disadvantages of female-concentrated occupations such as low pay, by deliberately becoming 'demonstrably careerist, emphasising the career prospects, rather than the job' (p.106). Thus, an assumption is preserved that men in female-concentrated occupations both desire and merit accelerated advancement over their women peers, which perpetuates the subordination of women to men, even where men are significantly outnumbered (Williams, 1995).

Nonetheless, the literature exposes some competing discourses that surround men's legitimacy, as practitioners in primary education (Younger & Warrington, 2008). It suggests that men becoming primary phase teachers encounter some powerful gendered expectations, in terms of their performance of masculinity (Francis, 2008). Given the assumed feminisation of primary education and the TA role, men becoming primary phase TAs are also likely to encounter a gendered landscape which rests in relatively rigid expectations of men and women, and the ways in which they perform their professional roles.

Glick and Fiske (2011) consider attitudinal aspects of social and workplace sexism and sex discrimination. They suggest the central components of sexism toward both men and women are paternalism (seeing men as protective providers); gender differentiation and hetero-normative interactions between men and women. In their series of studies, Glick and Fiske (1996; 1999)

distinguished 'hostile' and 'benevolent' stereotyping, by men and women towards both sexes. Subsequently, Barreto and Ellemers (2005) explain that 'sexism does not necessarily take overtly hostile forms …expressions of sexism are often quite subtle and can even be positive in tone' (p.633). Examples include women's attitude of maternalism towards men colleagues, or complimentary gender differentiation which subscribes to men's superiority over women or vice-versa, in certain domains (Glick & Fiske, 1999).  Hence recipients do not always recognise benevolent sexism as a limiting, discriminatory behaviour.

'Tokenism' is a phenomenon in which a gendered minority tends to be set apart by the majority, perpetuating gendered stereotyping and marginalisation within gender-concentrated occupations (Kanter, 1993). Seeley (2018) explains that the conspicuous presence of 'token' males amongst a female-concentrated cohort results in increased scrutiny and heightened boundaries between men and women. This can manifest as benevolent sexist stereotyping, in which certain workplace tasks or specialisms become gender-appropriated. For example, technological competence is culturally 'coded' as 'masculine' (Seeley, 2018, p.242) so that upkeep of the computer equipment tends to be assigned to 'token males' (ibid). In primary education, teaching older children (Lupton, 2006) or Physical Education (PE) (Cushman, 2005a) may be presented as requiring a specialist, masculine approach. Participant voices from published research (Trent, 2015) reported men teachers being endowed with a disciplinarian status, a practice that Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015, p.153) attribute to a 'patriarchal script' of male discipline. This deference to men's greater control may be construed as a form of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which perpetuates a hegemonic construct of men as authoritarian.

Whilst it might enable men to legitimise their position in a gender-reverse employment sector, gendered 'role entrapment' (Kanter, 1993, no page number) carries a disadvantageous tendency to assume that men are

unsuited to other roles, such as Early Years education (Burn & Pratt Adams, 2015). Moreover, it perpetuates the stereotype of women as less competent in certain areas of teaching and learning and suggests the need for a 'superordinate male figure' (Glick & Fiske, 1999, p.494) to redress an implied deficit. As such, Kanter (1993, no page number) frames the discrimination enacted by benevolent sexism as 'a patronizing reminder of difference'. Hence the 'token' man might be artificially revered as the bringer of a particular form of human capital which is unattainable by women, and therefore highly valued and sought.

Against this backdrop, a shortfall of men applicants to primary teaching posts creates 'rarity value' (Pepperell and Smedley, 1998, p. 343), and 'hiring preference' (Cushman, 2005a, p. 232). In Morrison's (2014) research, newly qualified men and women teachers claimed that prospective employers tended to value maleness first, over men's teaching ability. Cushman (2005a) and Morrison (2014) each note that men find this unequal treatment uncomfortable, believing it de-values their academic and professional achievements. Nevertheless, in keeping with Williams' (1995) argument, and somewhat paradoxically, men in Morrison's (2014) study felt powerless to avoid their evident advantage.

To understand the social influences that underlie hiring preference, this literature review examines discourses which focus on boys' achievement in school. Lay-normativity constructs men teachers as a remedy, to a range of perceived, social ills in and outside of education, for example boys' underachievement, and separated families (Cushman, 2005a). Whilst some authors assert wide acceptance of the need for a gender-balanced workforce in primary schools (e.g., Mistry & Sood, 2014), others dispute the existence of a robust, research-informed evidence-base with which to support this notion (e.g., Francis, 2008). Competing discourses debate the issues of boys' under-achievement, alleged lack of role models in the home, and qualitative

assumptions about men and women's teaching styles (Warin & Wernersson, 2016).

Central to current debates, the 'boy discourse' focuses on 'the gender gap in achievement attainment and behaviour' (Lehelma, 2014, p.171). It is characterised by policy-makers' pre-occupation with comparing pupils' outcomes, accompanied by anxious media commentary about boys' disaffection and underachievement in school (ibid). Arnot and Mac an Ghaill (2006) suggest that any piece of education research with a gendered aspect contributes directly or indirectly to contemporary debates about boys' education and attainment. This is echoed in much of the literature that informs my own study. The education sector's pre-occupation with performance data and attainment targets has illuminated an emerging performance gap between girls and boys, in which boys' level of attainment is perceived to have been overtaken by girls, from early childhood to school leaving age (Hamilton & Jones, 2016). It is notable, as argued for example by Arnot and Miles (2005), that there has been little celebration in the public domain, of girls' accomplishments in closing a long-standing shortfall between girls' and boys' attainment in science and maths. The focus has instead been placed upon boys' perceived failings.

The boy discourse has become conflated with stereotypical assumptions about the breakdown of family life (Mills, Martino & Lingard, 2004), and claims that the school curriculum has become excessively 'feminised' by the prevalence of women teachers (Skelton, 2003, p.195). In response, the 'male repair' agenda (Younger & Warrington, 2008, p.429) rests on the premise that employing more men in schools will provide a panacea to a generation of troubled, fatherless boys who are failing at school through a lack of male role-models (Warin & Wernersson, 2016).

Bucher (1998, p.620) explains that effective role models 'can vary moral attitudes, increase moral sensibility, stimulate more moral actions, and … be

conductive to moral identity.' Critical evaluation of political commentary (summarised by Thornton & Bricheno, 2008) reveals how a somewhat ethereal notion of male role-models offers a seductive solution to perceived problems in education, society and family life. However, Browne (2004) suggests that lay-normativity oversimplifies the dynamics and subtleties of role-modelling.  Cushman (2005a) and Thornton and Bricheno (2008) agree that essentialist notions of male role-modelling tend to lack consensus about the versions of masculinity that are needed. As Bucher (1998) explains, there is a risk that dominant, hegemonic models foster an assimilation of moral identity, rather than promoting children's autonomous moral identity. Moreover, his work challenges the assumption that simply putting male educators in situ can produce effective role models:

> …there are many examples from history and the present time that models presented by parents and educators are totally inoperative … to be effective, a model must be perceived [by children] as worthy enough to be emulated; the model must be loved. (Bucher, 1998, p. 620)

Thornton and Bricheno (2008, p. 278) reflect on 'the myth that male teachers automatically instil better discipline and enhance boys' achievements' and suggest that 'this may well have served to raise perceptions about the status of male teachers, while possibly, at the same time, lowering that of women teachers' (ibid). In this sense, it may be argued that benevolent sexism towards men educators contributes to their privileged status, and the glass escalator effect. However, work by authors such as Foster and Newman (2005), Trent (2015) and Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) suggests that men becoming primary phase educators must necessarily negotiate oppositional, gendered discourses which create obstacles, as well as affordances.

The literature affirms that men in female-concentrated occupations encounter direct, negative stereotyping (Torre, 2018), which Foster and

Newman (2005, p.341) conceptualise as 'identity bruising'. Social stigma might involve the undermining of individuals' masculinity by others, through claims that they are inadequate to the task of a more 'masculine' job (Lupton, 2006). Torre (2018) speculates that this type of stigmatising towards men in female-concentrated occupations increases when the work is perceived as low-skilled and low-status. Hence, hostile sexism towards men in gender-reverse situations is rooted in hegemonic ideals of masculinity, superiority and earning-power. It targets the individual's sense of gender-identity through undermining the perceived validity of the chosen career. It includes heterosexual hostility, based in notions of sexual aggression (Glick and Fiske, 1999) and homophobia (Torre, 2018).

In primary education, tensions occur when contradictions emerge between the perceived 'need' for male practitioners and contemporary, normative discourses which harbour a climate of mistrust against men who choose to work with young children (Cushman, 2005a). Cushman (2005b) and Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) discuss sexualised stereotypes which routinely cast men who work with children as sexual deviants or predators. This may manifest in institutional 'gender regimes' which set men apart from children's care needs (Trent, 2015, p.501). Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) note the reality of sexualised suspicion about men working with children, as an ever-present threat of false accusation. They suggest that this 'silent discourse' (p.123) is rarely voiced, but nevertheless widely acknowledged in professional contexts. This is borne out within the literature, for example, Cushman's (2005b) work presents prospect of a confused professional landscape in which men practitioners are simultaneously inveigled into the male repair agenda, and the silent discourse of assumed threat.

Younger and Warrington (2008) report that there is resistance in research and academic communities to the boy discourse and the male repair agenda. For example, Francis (2008) critiques the popular notion that 'gender matching' pupils and teachers enhances learning (p.109). She argues that this practice

does not acknowledge multiple masculinities or the likelihood that men teachers perform and express their maleness in diverse ways. Gender-matching is suggestive of a hegemonic interpretation of masculinity, which misaligns to contemporary, sociological perspectives and emerging constructs of gender. Moreover, the notion of role-modelling in gender identity is contested by Connell and Pearse (2015). They suggest that this approach to sex-role socialisation ignores multi-dimensional influences and interpretations that contribute to the developing child's and young adult's gender identity. Connell and Pearse (2015) argue that applying a monolithic, hegemonic interpretation of masculinity to sex role socialisation risks mistaking a dominant, extreme version of masculinity as normative. Thus, it perpetuates rather than challenges stereotyped gender models.

Similarly, Younger and Warrington (2008, p.429) reject 'short-term, popularist approaches' to the perceived attainment gap between girls and boys. They argue that such measures over-simplify the issues, promote essentialist constructs of gender, and neglect the nuanced risks that gender inequality poses to boys' and girls' attainment. Instead, Younger and Warrington (2008) argue for greater attention to gender issues, in teacher education programmes and in schools, so to develop a 'coherent, theoretical base' (p.430) with which to inform policy and practice.

Martin and Luth (2000) reflect on their own experiences as teachers and compare the differing expectations of men and women as primary educators. They conceptualise two schools of thought: the traditionalist view of gender in which there are distinctly gendered human attributes and aptitudes, and non-traditionalist thinking which challenges norms and promotes androgyny, seeing individual human nature as a blend of traits, some of which society judges to be more feminine or more masculine. Montecinos and Nielson (2004) agree that a unitary construct of masculinity is unhelpful and that it may be more useful to consider gender in terms of a spectrum containing wide range of characteristics. Gender roles, they argue, are not fixed within a

set of standards but fluid, subject to changeable social and cultural contexts. They go on to apply some of these ideas, to explore the relationship between gendered roles and professional identity, by investigating ways in which male teachers draw upon constructs of gender to make meaning of their role. 40 male, pre-service teachers participated in Montecinos and Nielson's (2004) study. The findings suggest that changes in society have driven some of the participants' career decisions, supporting the researchers' views about fluidity of gender roles. Francis (2008), studying men teachers' gender performance agrees that fixed notions of maleness and femaleness narrow the discourse of gender and restrict the perception of a masculine teaching style. She argues that masculinity and femininity in teaching occupy a spectrum, rather than static, binary positions.

Hence, interpretations of gender are evidently shifting. Lay normativity, which focuses on difference and hegemonic social constructs is being discarded in favour of better understandings of gender relations (Pulsford, 2014). Nevertheless, there remain some compelling reasons for introducing a more diverse workforce to the primary education sector, which are based in models of social diversity, rather than male repair. For example, Martin and Luth (2000) argue that any profession, which resists equal participation in its activities through negativity and bias deprives itself and wider society of the richness of contribution by all members.

Torre's (2018) typology of men's career behaviour in female-concentrated occupations contrasts men's motivation to undertake the work with their longevity in role. Torre's (2018) findings attribute men's attrition to gender-specific pressures and interpretations. For example, she suggests that men in female-concentrated, low-status roles tend to experience gender-specific pressures, which affect men's ability tolerate a low wage indefinitely. They might exhibit a 'stopgap scenario' (p.289), by occupying a gender-reverse position temporarily and moving swiftly back to a neutral or male-concentrated occupation. Torre (2018) defines 'settlers' (p. 285) as men who

renounce gendered expectations and pressures and determine to remain in role. 'Glass escalator riders' benefit from their rarity value and advance to senior roles in the sector (Torre, 2018 p. 285). This enables them to avoid the stigmas associated with roles that are both female-concentrated and low-status. These findings are relevant to my study, which looks at men's motivations for becoming TAs, and their future aspirations.

This review of the literature has located the subject of my study within surrounding discourses. It has strengthened my ontological position in terms of identity and agency in careers, and the way careers might be influenced by gendered expectations. I have established the study's key concepts and defining terms. These combine with the ontological framework of the socio-ecological systems model (Figure 1, p.22) to scaffold and guide my methodological decisions.

# 4.0 Methodology

## 4.1. Research problem and purpose

Literature about the TA role, or about men teaching in the primary phase tends to overlook men working as TAs. I aim to add male TAs' voices to ongoing debates through the research questions: *What motivates men to become TAs? What are their experiences and aspirations?* The research questions are subjective, and not answerable in terms of a single, objective truth. Instead, they are used to guide my exploration of participants' identity, agency and careers in the gendered context of primary education.

This chapter recounts my research methodology. It draws together the research questions and my ontology. The research approach takes account of my positionality and philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and how knowledge can be gained, to answer the research questions.

This chapter justifies the study's narrative approach. It explains the research design, its ethical considerations and safeguards. It aligns my selected methodology and methods to the research questions, the study's philosophical assumptions, the type of data and means of analysis. It introduces the instruments and tools which furnish an iterative process of generating, capturing, reviewing and analysing narrative data.

## 4.2. Philosophical assumptions and positionality

The ontological framework conceives that personal and career identities are constituted through various, subjective and relative actions and interactions, depending on individual circumstances, influences and resources (Krumboltz, 2009; Savickas et al, 2009; Vogelsang et al, 2018). The study values individual participants' recollections and interpretations of their own career paths, as authentic and relevant data. Although highly personalised, individual narratives offer potential insight into wider social influences (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). The research has been constructed to allow participants to share, reflect upon and evaluate their own lived experiences (Denicolo et al,

2016), as a valid means to explore and understand individual career motivations and aspirations, and the wider, social influences which are involved.

The narrative approach acknowledges participants as meaning-makers and foregrounds their emerging sense of self-identity (Atkinson, 2007). The study adopts autobiographical storying as a process by which individuals construct, consolidate, interpret and explain the events of their lives, both to themselves and others (Bruner, 2004). This is relevant to the study's focus on agency and aspiration, as components of career-thinking and career-crafting (Savickas et al, 2009).

Given the mutual constitution of social influences, personal identity and agency (Burke and Stets, 2009), individuals' behaviour is inseparable from the surrounding, multi-layered contexts in which it occurs. For example, narratives can reveal the participants' self-positioning and self-image within the surrounding 'dominant cultural narratives' (Squire, 2013, p.53). This might include, for example, normative, gendered or other social expectations that influence careers, and negotiations around resources and relationships.

My methodology recognises the potential of my own subjective positionality to influence the study. I have reflected upon the risks my own perspectives might pose to my approach to the research questions, the conduct of the inquiry and my interpretations of the data (Cresswell, 2014). Research-generated knowledge is necessarily affected by the researcher's world view of the research problem (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2017). Inevitably, my own lived experiences in and outside of education affect my perspectives and values, regarding the research questions. I am familiar with the work sector of primary education, and the potential influence of surrounding popular and political discourses. My own career narrative affects inescapably the way in which I understand and interpret participants' narratives. For example, by reflecting on my own career narrative I have realised that the research

questions are built on the assumption, acquired within my own experience, that participants' career-thinking and career-crafting are driven by motivations and aspirations. Whilst participants' engagement in higher education might suggest their aspiration is self-evident, it remains for the research to demonstrate this.

Pilcher and Whelehan (2017) suggest that dual constructs of women in the private and public domains present women with a 'privileged vantage point' (p.157) from which to observe and interpret social relations. However, as a woman studying men's careers, I remain alert to the potential dangers of viewing the study through a feminised lens. On the other hand, my own personal and career experiences might enhance my ability to investigate and interpret participants' experiences. In keeping with the study's narrative approach, and the concept of the dialogical self (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), I evaluate my positionality by reflecting on my own autobiographical narrative (Box 1).

*As a woman in the Armed Forces during the 1980s, I experienced a male-gendered, hierarchical work culture, which was characterised by the assumed subordination of service women and men to a hegemonic model of masculinity.*

*My experience of de-enlistment was disorienting. I faced a series of critical life events on my return to civilian life which re-defined my status and self-identity, as a lone parent. I needed to re-start my career incrementally, by increasing skills and knowledge, to pursue a more acceptable future for myself and my children. I encountered social and practical barriers and some unexpected, serendipitous events which influenced and affected my career opportunities and decisions.*

*For 25 years, I have engaged with lifelong learning through vocational training and academic study alongside full-time employment. I re-trained as an early childhood practitioner and worked in various childcare and pre-school education contexts. I was a primary school TA for seven years, during which I completed a foundation degree and bachelor's degree. Subsequently, I trained as a teacher in the Further Education, Training and Skills sector. I taught and managed programmes for early childhood practitioners and TAs, whilst studying at postgraduate level.*

*Latterly, as a university lecturer I have direct, current experience of teaching TAs on foundation degree and BA(Hons) degree programmes.*

Box 1 An autobiographical, personal narrative

My reflection on my own autobiographical narrative reveals influences on my positionality, such as my experience of both minority and majority status in gender-concentrated working environments. I can identify with the minority in gender-concentrated domains, which are characterised by range of gendered assumptions, deployment decisions and professional expectations. I also acknowledge the majority perspective, having worked in female-concentrated settings with few male colleagues. I recognise the significance of serendipitous events and non-agential, enabling relationships, to my career. I note the value of my own agency in overcoming certain structural barriers and limitations that I experienced as a lone parent. I have engaged with lifelong learning, alongside employment, as part of a negotiated, reflexive and developmental career path. I have an extant, professional relationship with some of the participants, and a past relationship and generalised familiarity with their field of professional practice.

My own narrative thus provides the foundation for my new knowledge about identity, agency and careers in gendered contexts, and provides a point of reflexivity about my research intentions. Alongside the usefulness of my own lived experiences there is a danger of taking for granted an assumed knowledge of 'where the narratives live' (Squire, 2013, p.55). Grbich's (2013) model of narrative analysis suggests that to counter this, the researcher's interpretation must be underpinned by self-awareness. Recognising and challenging my own assumptions needed to become embedded as part of a habitually reflexive approach (Pillow, 2010).

To protect the integrity of the research I engaged with conscious, critical self-reflection through the media of my research journal, academic supervision and reflective dialogue about my own development as a researcher, with a critical friend. Additionally, the interview technique privileges participants' voices over my own and incorporates opportunities to generate, capture and value participants' own interpretative evaluations. These practical steps

compliment general and specific ethical measures that are explained later in this chapter.

## 4.3. Methodology: an iterative, narrative approach

The epistemology and values of this research study share a common philosophy with career counselling approaches which foreground personal and collaborative storytelling (Savickas et al, 2009). In this section, I return to the literature in the field of careers to justify my narrative research approach.

McMahon and Watson (2012) summarise the continual re-construction of identity through changing roles, negotiation, and fresh interpretation and understanding of the past. Price's (2019) exploration of identity and its influence in the related processes of career change spotlights the relationship between past career-identities, present practice and future goals. He suggests that people's understandings of their current circumstances tend to be based in previous experience. Hence, career-thinking which looks to the future is necessarily rooted in past and/or present experiences and the way in which the individual interprets them. The narrative approach which I have used seeks to capture this iterative, narrative re-crafting, by co-generating participants' stories, and capturing participants' reflections and evaluations.

As a form of self-evaluation, narratives enable individuals to make sense of their own responses to influential phenomena in their lives (Bold, 2012). Through their evaluations, participants are to make meanings from their own narratives and share them with the researcher (Goodson, 2013). This is significant to this study; reflection is an important aspect of self-directed careers. The lack of organisational anchors in self-directed careers leaves the individual needing to constantly reflect and apply their insights to their career-identity (Savickas et al, 2009). Through their career narratives, individuals are able to make meaning of their own position in relation to surrounding social structures and discourses (LaPointe, 2010). For example, vocational drivers prompt the individual to evaluate the 'moral worth' of their work by aligning it to 'broader narratives' about service and citizenship

(Ronkainen et al, 2020, p.2). Additionally, a feature of self-directed careers is awareness of risk, and the reality that contemporary work-life tends to be insecure (Savickas et al, 2009). Reflection on one's own resources helps to evaluate their usefulness in the context of career. The methodology facilitates participants' meaning-making, embedded within co-generated, narrative data and stimulates participants' reflective evaluation of their career-identity and career narratives. On an individual level, this might help participants to evaluate their career progress and options, in the light of their accumulated resources and agency.

## 4.4 Authenticity and credibility of the data

Positivist research seeks to ensure reliability and validity, which are defined by objectivity and generalisability, and the principle that similar studies produce similar, empirical outcomes. The concepts of reliability, validity and generalisability can be more problematic for interpretivist studies (Denscombe, 2010), which rely on unique data sources and means of collection (Denicolo et al, 2016). Within this paradigm, my research study does not profess either lasting truth or generalisability. It seeks only to investigate a particular social situation as it is experienced by selected individuals.

By their own exceptionality, participants' career narratives cannot easily be generalised, and their internal meanings may be esoteric in relation to other people. Nevertheless, whilst I am circumspect about the generalisability of my study, some transferability of similar experiences is likely. Study of these individual experiences can help to emphasise the fundamental issues which are common to many, and aid wider understandings of men becoming TAs, their motives, experiences and aspirations.

The subjective, personal nature of narrative accounts offers a particular type of credibility which is rooted in the authenticity of the original source (Bornat, 2008). My epistemology assumes that narratives enable complex situations to be viewed from the perspective and interpretations of the participant

(Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Nevertheless, the study must satisfy the questions of 'truth value' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278) that ask whether the narratives are credible and present an authentic example of the phenomena under research.

To clarify what may be understood as authentic and trustworthy in narrative research, Bruner (2004) maintains that the purpose of storying is not necessarily to construct logical, inductive arguments. Instead, it should enable the individual to construct and reflect upon their own subjective model of reality. Individuals' stories are not static. They might change, as the teller re-visits and re-interprets past events and surrounding conditions (Bruner, 2004) in the light of fresh experience. Participants' narratives therefore offer an 'unstable' truth which is characteristic to post-positivist enquiry (Hollingsworth and Dybdahl, 2007, p. 150). Narrative data is strongest at the point of telling (Bold, 2012), but as the future is unknown, 'there is no certainty in narrative research' (ibid, p. 19).

Thus, narrative data is acknowledged to be subjective, unstable and temporary. Nevertheless, the quest for credible, trustworthy data is woven into the research design. This is necessary to ensure on-going authenticity and rigour at each stage of the iterative approach, and to verify my understanding of participants' narratives in the transition from raw data to detailed analysis. The research design features milestone points within the study, for participant verification and interpretation at each stage of the data handling. This approach protects the authenticity of the data and safeguards the study's credibility in responding to the research questions.

## 4.5 Ethical measures, informed consent and induction to the study.
In this study, the notion of authentic and credible narrative data is inextricable from research ethics. The application of ethical measures underpins the authenticity and trustworthiness of the narrative data, as an appropriate means to investigate and respond to the research questions and yield data which is respectful and honest to the participants' intentions.

The research design considers the potential audiences for the study, 'ownership' of the research and its eventual contribution (Smythe & Murray, 2007). It upholds ethical needs relating to the recruitment strategy, participant induction and informed consent, capture and ownership of the generated data, its analysis and findings.  The research design takes account of generic ethical needs as underpinned by formal codes of ethics and the conventional research practices of informed consent, privacy and beneficence. The subjective and perhaps intimate nature of participant narratives carries specific ethical risks, which demand special attention (Elliot, 2005).

I followed the ethical processes of the awarding university and gained ethical approval for the study from the School of Education. The study incorporates an induction meeting with each participant, to introduce the study and its methodology, and facilitate informed consent. The induction meeting provided a conversation space in which to discuss the institutional, ethical demands of the University, the ethical conduct of the study, the nature of consent and the right to withdraw. This conversation included the differences between privacy and anonymity, particularly at the point of dissemination. cautioned participants that personal narratives can sometimes raise difficult emotions or an unexpected level of intimacy and candour (Elliot, 2005). This helped to appraise each participant of the ethical risks around sharing personal, narrative data about their personal lives, their professional, social and familial relationships, and subjecting these to an analytical gaze (Sikes, 2010).

The induction meeting was useful to establish early, personal contact and initiate the necessary rapport for the more structured life-grid interview, wherein personal information would be shared (McConnell-Henry, James, Chapman, & Francis, 2010). This was instrumental for both known and unknown participants. Whilst dual relationships between the researcher and the participants can accelerate rapport, they also present risks, for example if

relationship boundaries become confused (McConnell-Henry et al, 2010). Further, inconsistent relationships with participants might cause inconsistencies of data (Smith, 2012). The induction meeting aimed to counter risks by creating trust and clarifying the research intentions and boundaries, for both known and unknown participants.

The induction meeting initiated informed consent, which was obtained in writing on the day of the narrative interview. Appendix A contains examples of an information sheet and consent form. Milestone points in the research design enabled participants to review the narrative data to both verify its content and re-affirm their consent to its use (Wisker, 2001). From an ethical and practical standpoint, the research design establishes the final participant verification at Stage 5, and the last opportunity to withdraw, as the point of disengagement (McConnell-Henry et al, 2010).

## 4.6 Sampling strategy

A purposive sampling strategy sought typical examples of individuals who matched the phenomena under study (Punch, 2014). The parameters for the sample group were: men working as TAs in primary education contexts with children aged 4-11 years; all must be current students or recent graduates of either the FD Education or one of its established progression routes, either at the University, or one of its partner institutions. There were no other demographic boundaries. An invitation to participate was published on the relevant course pages of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at the participants' places of study. Students who wished to express interest in the study then contacted me directly. The sample group was therefore voluntary and self-selected, from a purposively selected field of participants.

I expected a sample of eight to 12 participants to yield enough data to promote confidence in the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1993) whist remaining manageable within the resource constraints of the study (Punch, 2014). Too large a sample, with multiple respondents tends to result in thinner data (Miles & Huberman, 1993), rather than the 'thick descriptions'

which are more typical of small scale, qualitative studies (Gray, 2014, p.30). The size of the sample needed to be manageable within the available time and resources and yield sufficient data, within which any emerging trends might be identified, and analysed. From 12 volunteers, nine went on to join the study. Their work contexts are a mix of independent and state schools, one of which is a cross-phase special education school for children aged 5-16. All participants work with children aged 4-11. To protect their privacy, I identify and refer to the participants by pseudonyms, throughout the study.

## 4.7 Planning the research design

The narrative approach recognises the agency of individuals to express themselves freely without the limitations of structured interview questions (Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), and to tell their stories in whatever way they choose.

The informal language of personal narratives can be complex (Horsdal, 2012). It contains contradictions, metaphor and idiom to reason, express emotion and interpret the self's interactions with the social world, and the ellipses of unspoken reflection. Comparing different narrative traditions shows the differences between coherent, sequential narratives and the otherwise complex, convoluted storying that tends to result from individual self-reflection (Colley, 2010). Stories in the Aristotelian tradition are linear and sequential (Cohn, 2013). This contrasts with the composite Celtic story form, in which multifarious threads radiate from a central theme (Colley, 2010).

When speaking freely, participants do not necessarily produce the linear chronology that might be thought characteristic of sequential narratives (Creswell, 2014). Their narratives align more to the Celtic, radial form, in which causal associations between experiences and actions may be implied or suggested, rather than being made explicit (Elliot 2005). Hence, there is a tension in the methodology, between the privileging of participant voices, the authenticity of their narratives and the need to capture coherent, accessible data.

The research design comprises a five-stage iterative process in which the narratives are generated, captured, plotted, visualised, re-examined and summarised (Figure *3*).

**Stage 1: Narrative interview**
Co-generated narrative using a life-grid

**Stage 2: Event plotting**
Participant verification

**Stage 3: Graphic timelining**
Participant verification

**Stage 4: Interview transcripts**
Participant verification

**Stage 5: Assembled stories**
Participant verification
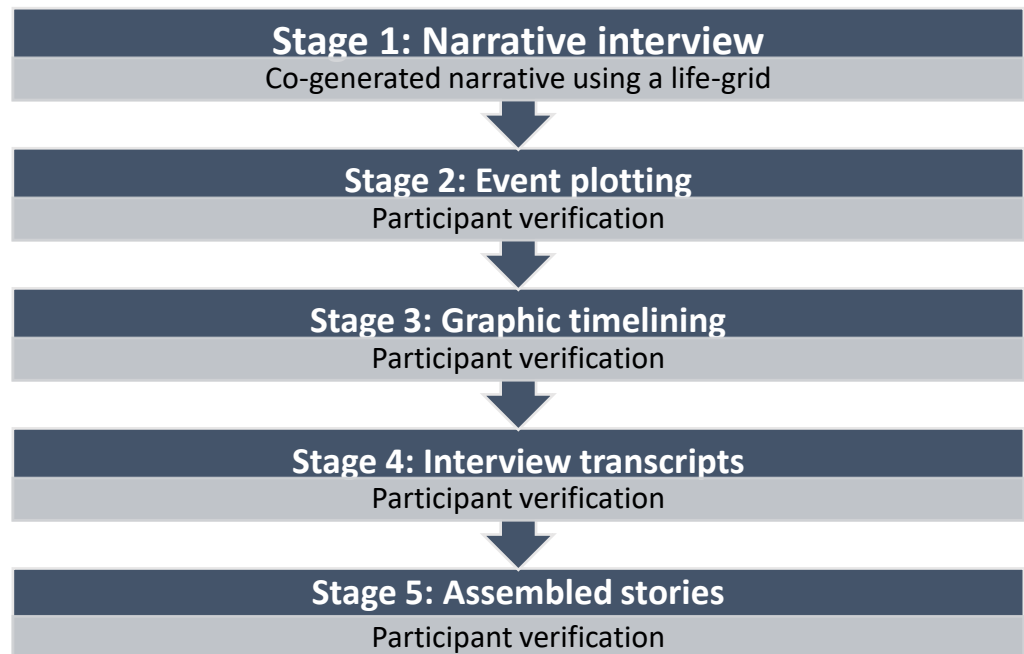
Figure 3: Five stages of the methodology

My methodology enables me to co-generate narratives with the participants, using the structured tools of life-grids and event plotting. These stimulate and scaffold the narrative. They promote chronology, identify key-moments and seek emerging themes, individually and across the sample, whilst preserving the distinctness of each narrative.

Interpretation of narrative data must attend to figurative forms and meanings in the way the speaker intended (Hordsal, 2012). When capturing narrative data, it is therefore important to attend to multiple, diverse pathways of the story, as the teller revisits and evaluates events (Bornat, 2008). My subsequent techniques of graphic-timelining and assembling summative, chronological stories focused on connections between events participants' evaluations and their causal associations.

### 4.7.1 Stage 1: The narrative interview using a life-grid.

The first stage of the study uses a life-grid interview co-generate narratives, which privilege participant voice. The life-grid is a scaffolding tool which provides structure and boundaries (Flick, 2006). As modelled by Murray et al (2010), I designed and piloted a life-grid with six column headings (Appendix B).  Its design is inspired by published studies that use life-grids that incorporate visual techniques to augment the organisation of co-operatively generated, chronological, narrative data (Murray et al, 2010). By organising the data, the life-grid it can also initiate analysis (ibid). Therefore, when determining the column headings for the grid (Figure *4*) I considered the possible characteristics of careers, such as education, work and achievements. Bearing in mind the theoretical framework of the socio-ecological systems model (Figure 1, p.22) and my ontological assumption that careers are influenced by subjectively-experienced affordances and barriers, I included headings for positive and negative influences.  In my research design the life-grid provides some scaffolding, to enable the researcher and the participant to co-generate and sequence coherent, narrative data that is helpful to the research questions. Further, it allows causal associations to be traced, between key-moments and other phenomena. This involves the participant in initial analysis, during the narrative interview.

| Age/year | Circumstances | Education/ work | Achievements | Positive influences | Negative influences |
|----------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|          |               |                 |              |                     |                     |

Figure 4: Layout of the life-grid used in this study

As recommended by Flick (2006) I opened each interview with a single, generative question (Box *2*) which echoed the conversation at the induction meeting.

> *"You're going to be telling me your story about how you started working as support staff in a school. When you're ready, start telling me about your journey, you can start in childhood or later, and you can tell me anything you like, maybe positive influences you've experienced, maybe negative ones, and any important achievements, maybe up until the present day and things you are doing now. Tell me your story in your own time, and then we'll have a point when we pause and go through it, and check that we have everything we need."*

Box 2: Narrative interview: example of a generative question as used in this study

In the career counselling context, McMahon and Watson (2012) note that some individuals tend to verbalise their narrative with just one or more brief statements. In these instances, I found that by staying alert to the 'coda' (Flick, 2006, p. 174) with which participants signalled the end of their 'thin' narrative (McMahon & Watson, 2012), I was able to intervene by asking the participant to elaborate aspects of their story. Therefore, whilst my interview technique initiates participant narratives through a single, generative question, it is sufficiently flexible to induce and develop participants' reflective evaluations through reflective dialogue, where appropriate (Elliot, 2005). This helped the participants to develop deeper, richer narratives which enabled themes and key-moments to emerge (Flick, 2006), in relation to the life-grid headings.

During the interview, as the participant constructed their spoken narrative, I populated the life-grid with data recorded on sticky-notes (Appendix C). This enabled the participant to speak freely whilst I listened and plotted the narrative onto the life-grid. The sticky notes could be moved around, which enabled them to be adjusted as needed, and supported the co-construction of coherent narratives. The interviews were audio-recorded. The raw data

that was generated by the interview comprised a life-grid, populated with sticky-notes, and an audio recording of the conversation.

### 4.7.2 Stage 2:  Event plotting

Structuring a free narrative into a life-grid helps to highlight significant influences on the individual career and identifies events and experiential episodes (McMahon and Watson, 2012). These 'boundary experiences' (Meijers & Lengelle,2012, p.158), are life-altering events or other situations that demand an adaptive response and require the individual to 're-story' their career-identity (ibid). Hence, the key-moments in a career narrative may operate either as drivers for change, motivators or stimuli for reflection and evaluation (Savickas, 2009).  The life-grid technique in this study helps to capture such key-moments in participants' narratives.

After the interview I plotted events from the life-grid into an electronic version of the life-grid template (Appendix D). Plotting these events into a chronological sequence helped me to evaluate their contribution to participants' career narratives and their influence on identity, agency and career aspirations.

In this stage I included some direct quotations from the audio recordings on the life-grids, to emphasise the participant voice. This required some detailed listening to the audio records, which further refined the chronology and highlighted the relative importance of key moments in the narratives. Key-moments are not seen merely as separate, plotted events, but as constituent parts of the surrounding narrative, with special importance and meaning for the participant (Hordsal, 2012). Event-plotting provided a skeleton framework for each narrative and its milestone points and guided the sketching of the graphic timelines. Participants reviewed and verified the sequence of plotted events by email.

### 4.7.3 Stage 3: Graphic timelines

The graphic timelines document each participant's narrative in a visual format. Typically, they comprise a pictorial sketch of each participant's

narrative, usually represented as a metaphorical journey, leading from the starting point of the narrative, up to present day (Appendix E). Each graphic timeline is an enhancement to the presentation, preservation, interpretation of an individual narrative, and its themes.  Review of the graphic timelines provided the second opportunity for participants to verify and develop the data and thereby contribute to the analysis from an early stage. The rationale and process of graphic timelining, and its value in the methodology are discussed in greater detail, later in this chapter.

### 4.7.4 Stage 4: Transcripts

Plotting and mapping events and key-moments in Stage 2 and Stage 3 emphasises milestones, but it could become too reductive if the detail surrounding and connecting the key-moments is lost (Hordsal, 2012). The process of transcription counters the risk of reducing narratives to a set of sterile moments. The transcription process spends time with the data; 'radical listening' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007, p. 25) prompted me to think critically about the narratives' long-term threads and maintain the connective tissue of experience, learning and development that lay between milestone events.  In practice, comparing the transcripts with the associated graphic timelines also prompted some refinements to the latter, within the five-stage iterative approach.

### 4.7.5 Stage 5: Assembled Stories.

Stage 5 brings the plotted events, graphic timeline and transcript together and uses them to assemble a coherent account of each participant's career. These 'assembled stories' consolidate the data into an accessible account and provide an explanatory narrative to accompany each graphic timeline (Appendix F). The objective of the assembled stories is to summarise participants' lived experiences, without losing sight of significant influences on identity, agency and careers. Assembling the stories during rather than before the coding process enabled me to produce texts that were informed by and embedded within the analysis, rather than merely descriptive.

The assembled stories therefore extend beyond plot summary (Kathard, 2009), to expose some themes more explicitly, that have been noted in the preceding stages. For example, assembling a participant's disconnected comments and remarks about football enabled me to recognise this as a significant theme in his narrative (Appendix F). Assembling participants' stories was important in the sense of consolidating my knowledge of each participant's narrative and was an integral stage of my iterative approach to analysis. Participant verification at Stage 5 enabled me to confirm that my interpretation was in keeping with participants' meanings. This was the final contact with the participants and was achieved by email.

## 4.8 Developing and managing the data

This section evaluates visual representation of narrative data and how this contributed to my study. I introduce my approach to coding and show how the emerging themes developed. The methodology generates, captures and begins to analyse data simultaneously, which is in keeping with its interpretivist approach (Richards, 2015). The five stages of life-grids, event plotting, graphic timelines, transcripts and assembled stories constitute an iterative approach to generating, verifying and interpreting participants' narratives (

Figure 5).

The research design instigates early, collaborative analysis with the participant by identifying significant influences and organising key-moments into the life-grid. This early 'theme spotting' (Smith, 2012, p.492), does not reduce data prematurely, but represents the first stage of an involved analysis. Stages 2-5 steer an interrogative and inductive review of the 'broader, interpretive frameworks that people use to make sense of everyday happenings' (Grbich,2013, p.219), within the contexts of the study.

**Early theme spotting**

**Stage 1 Life-grid structure**
**Stage 2 Event plotting**
**Stage 3 Graphic timelines**

exploring themes within individual narratives

noting themes across the sample

**First coding cycle**

**Stage 4 Transcripts**
**Stage 5 Assembled stories**

extracting the common themes from across the sample

recognising contexts

first set of coded categories

**Second coding cycle**

revisiting the research questions

drawing on the literature review

refining the coded categories

developing themes

Figure 5: Identifying and coding the emerging themes

### 4.8.1 Visual representations of narrative data

This section explains the inspiration for the graphic timelines and the way they are used in the research design to illustrate, organise and offer interpretations of participants' narratives.

Viewing a visual map, such as a graphic timeline of a participant's narrative enables a different type of thinking than is possible when viewing one small part of a story, problem or plan (Margulies, 2002). Sousanis (2015a) uses the medium of the graphic novel to argue the importance of 'visual thinking' (Sousanis, 2015b, no page number). He exhorts the limitations of textual representation alone and argues for 'other ways of seeing' (Sousanis, 2016). Carruthers-Thomas (2018, no page number) explains that 'spatial storytelling', enables 'understandings of belonging as nuanced, complex and negotiated'. She reflects that research is enriched by allowing the visual to 'speak.' My research design applies Sousanis' concept of visual thinking, to depict each narrative holistically. Whilst the graphic timelines do serve as a sequencing tool in some narratives, their primary purpose is not merely to illustrate the spoken narrative but to embody the data and augment the participant voice through visual representation.

I experimented with pictorial representation whilst investigating the literature about men as primary educators. I made a rough sketch (Figure 6), which contrasts some of the emerging, conflicting phenomena, barriers and affordances that either challenge or legitimise men's presence in the primary education sector (for example, Foster & Newman, 2005; Francis, 2008; Morrison, 2014). The rough sketch evoked memories of a children's version of John Bunyan's '*The Pilgrim's Progress'* (Bunyan, 1678, 2008) in which the protagonist Christian is weighed down by burdens and beset by challenges on his road to salvation. My rough sketch conceives the male TA as a traveller negotiating contradictory obstacles and short-cuts upon a metaphorical journey. He is burdened by normative assumptions that constitute men in education as the remedy to a range of social ills (e.g., Younger & Warrington, 2008), but exclude them from 'traditional' women's domains. His desired future is legitimate occupation of the professional community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

This rough sketch (Figure *6*), ostensibly an informal way of organising ideas, presaged the subsequent, individual graphic timelines used in Stage 2 of the research design. It unlocked my later thinking about career narratives as metaphorical journeys.   The rough sketch facilitated holistic thinking about the literature review. In a similar manner, the graphic timelines illuminated the participant narratives, and showed connections. This foregrounds the cognitive dimension of mapping ideas through drawing, for example the visual 'mind map' as a tool to facilitate 'radiant thinking' (Buzan & Buzan, 2000, p.16). The graphic timelines in this study share the principle of drawing as a generative activity that promotes free flow of ideas, and metacognitive organisation.

*"It shows you whence he comes, wither he goes. What he leaves undone; also what he does. It also shows you how he runs and runs. Till he unto the gate of glory comes"*

John Bunyan (1684, 2008) The Pilgrim's Progress. (p.8)

Figure 6: Rough sketch - issues arising from my review of the literature

In practice, drawing the timelines brought me into close contact with the interview data, and the participants' evaluations of their key moments and lasting experiences. Initially, graphic timelines were basic depictions of participants' career narratives, their journey into TA work and where relevant, beyond. As my technique and application increased the timelines became embedded in the iterative process of generating, reviewing and interpreting data.

The process of planning, drawing and reviewing the graphic timelines followed the cycle of generating and associating ideas, incubation, re-organisation and re-mapping (Margulies, 2002).

I experimented with different layouts and visual representation. Usually, the graphic timeline took on the metaphor of a journey, to illustrate the participant's career narrative. Quotations from the life-grid interview on the graphic timeline embeds the participant's voice into my drawn image, thus preserving the co-generation of the data.

Figure 7 below and Appendix E provide examples. Chapter 6 demonstrates the use of graphic timelines as tools for analysis.
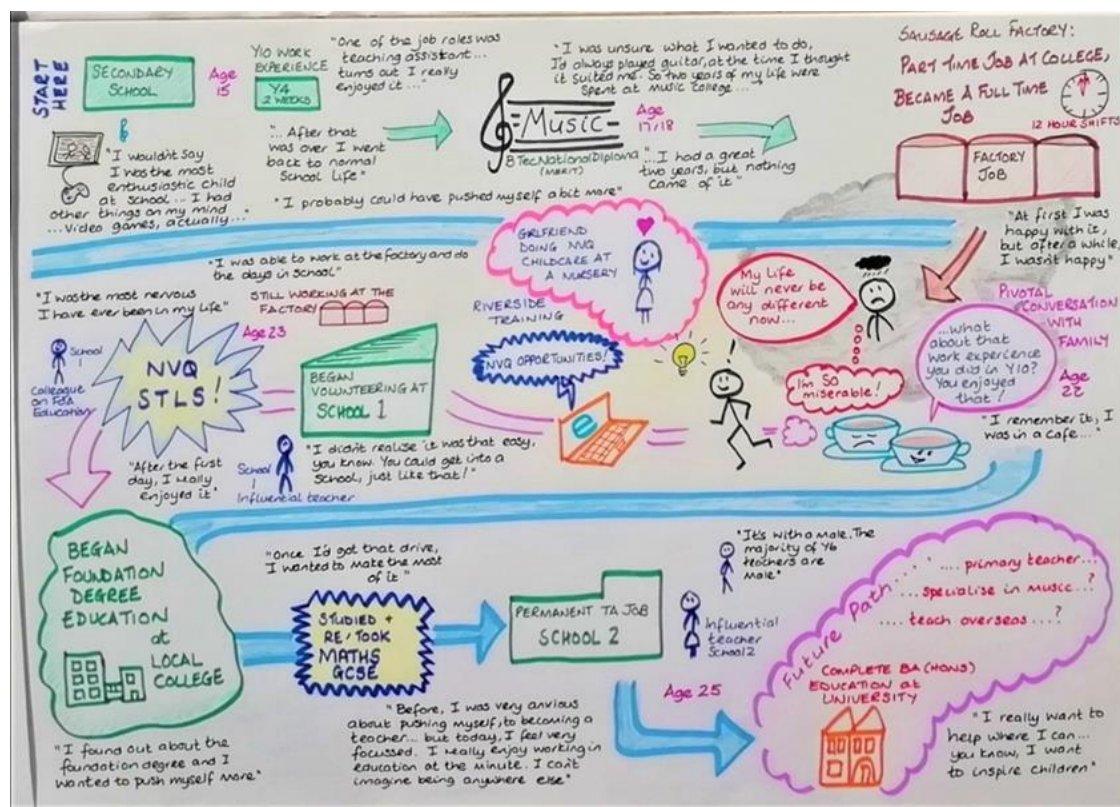


Figure 7: Example of a graphic timeline (Ben)

### 4.8.2 Coding and caring for the data

Stages 1-3 of the methodology focus on the individual. Nevertheless, similarities and differences within the sample group were noted and cross-referenced on memos. At Stage 4 (transcribing) I began some preliminary,

manual coding of interview transcripts to capture themes emerging across the sample. I used computer assisted qualitative data analysis software ('CAQDAS') to bring 'pragmatic, achievable techniques for data management, data reduction and data analysis' to the large body of narrative data (Richards 2015, p.3).

Computer technology emerged in quantitative, positivist research as a means of objectifying and separating statistical data from the social worlds in which they originated (Seale, 2000). Nonetheless, it has benefits for qualitative, interpretive research. It enables structured data organisation, handling and display, without necessarily removing data from its original context. N-Vivo project management and coding software brought a systematic, reliable approach to storing and coding the data. Transcripts were coded using the N-Vivo method of nodes and sub nodes to categorise data into themes. I utilised the 'memo' facility in the N-Vivo software to write notes alongside each transcript. These notes provided a basis for the assembled stories (Stage 5).

I undertook two cycles of coding, first to capture and categorise emerging themes and then to determine the most significant themes for deeper analysis. My final themes are categorised by their relevance to the research questions, *What motivates men to become primary school teaching assistants? What are their experiences and aspirations*? They echo themes emerging from the literature review (Richards, 2015), which illuminated the relationship between self-identity, personal agency, gender and self-directed careers (for example, Foster & Newman, 2005; Lent, 2013).

The final categories included *education, training and development*; *aspiration*; *negotiation*, which focuses on Saccomanno's (2017) dynamic of ambition and examples of negotiation; *career-crafting; events*, underpinned by the phenomenon of happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009); *relationships*, including significant role-models*,* and *gender* to capture any encounters with gendered

influences. A separate category of *participants' evaluative reflections* gave insight into their identity and motivation.

Figs 9, 10 and 11 are examples of the categorisation process under three of the categories.
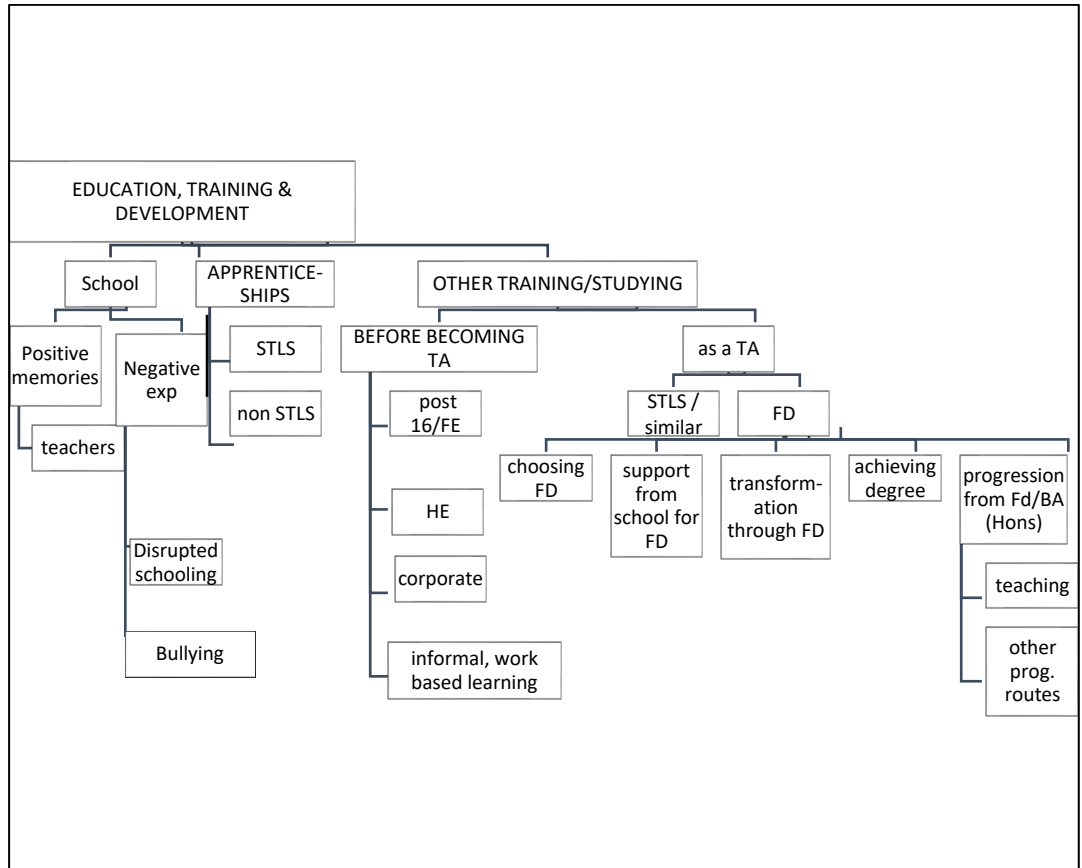


Figure 8: Coding the category of education, training and development.
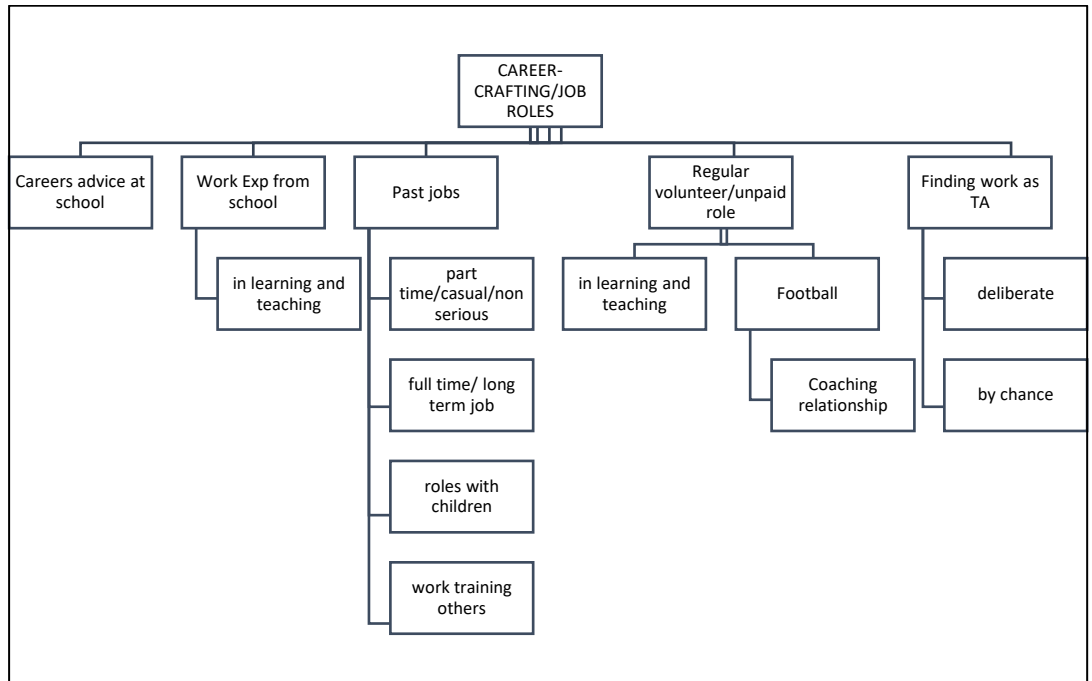
Figure 9: Coding the category of career-crafting.
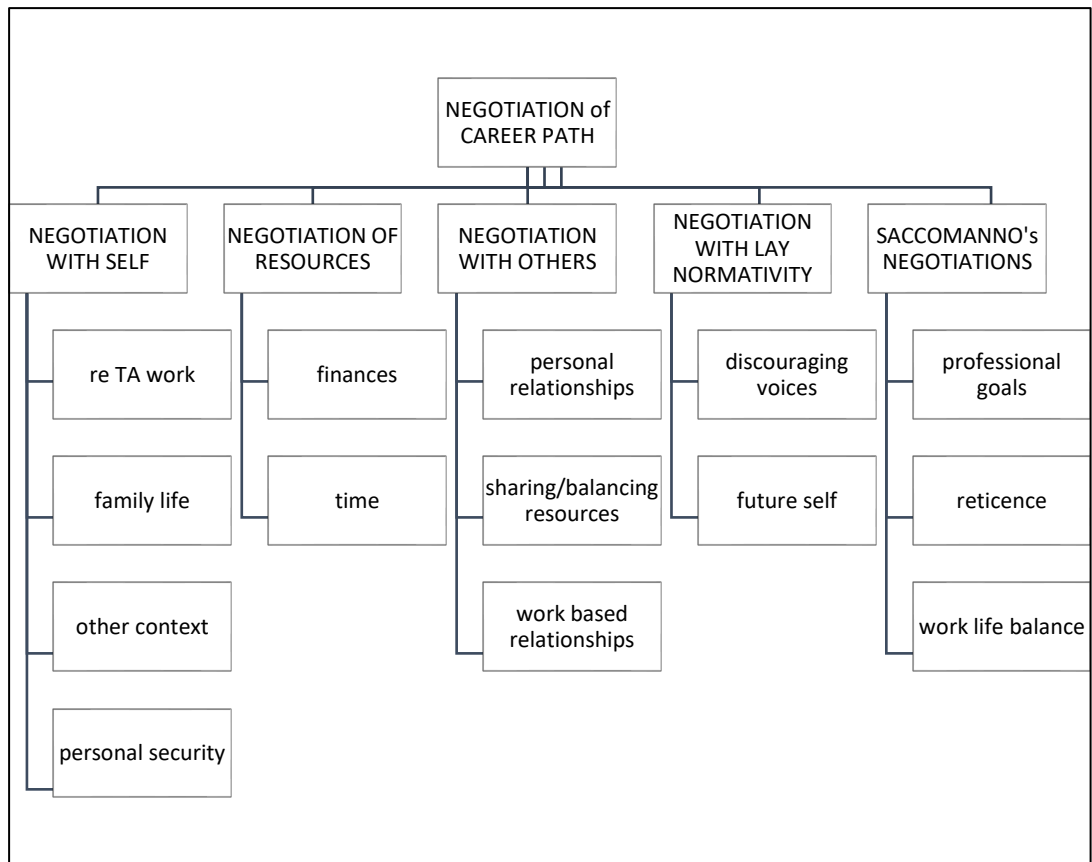


Figure 10: Coding the category of negotiations (Saccomanno, 2017).

To reassure myself that the coding process had not obliterated the essential, personal stories within the narratives, I reviewed the excerpts of narratives that had been categorised. The coded excerpts represent salient moments within a larger personal account, whilst my own detailed knowledge of the narratives remained intact. This made it possible to extract illustrative examples of concepts and phenomena from the data which, whilst separated for the purpose of analytic discussion, remained faithful to the original narratives. I found that sustained engagement with the narratives through the five stages of the research design enabled me to keep sight of individual, coded excerpts as representative elements of the whole narrative, rather than detached pieces. It protected the data from being over-fragmented or disengaged from context.

The following chapter describes the study's initial findings and begins to introduce my analysis and discussion.

## 5.0 Early findings

This section introduces the study's early findings. It evaluates the effective capture of the participants' narrative voices and presents my initial impressions of the resultant data.  These early impressions consolidate themes that emerged in the coding process.  From these emerging themes, I have isolated three topics for deeper discussion (Chapter 6). This enables me to respond to the research questions, *What motivates men to become TAs? What are their experiences and aspirations?*

### 5.1. Participants' employment, experience and qualifications

The participants' career journeys tended to fall into three broadly defined groups, early entrants who joined the education work sector early in their working lives (Will, Nate, Luke); those who experimented with other types of work first and entered education within the first five to ten years of their working lives (Ben, Mark, Aaron, James) and finally, career changers who had substantial, previous careers in other fields, before entering TA work (Roy, Tony).  Table 1 and  Table 2 show the participants' ages ranges on becoming TAs, and their previous employment status.

| Participant | Under 25 | Age 25-35 | Over 35 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron |  | ● |  |
| Ben | ● |  |  |
| James |  | ● |  |
| Luke | ● |  |  |
| Mark | ● |  |  |
| Nate | ● |  |  |
| Roy |  |  | ● |
| Tony |  |  | ● |
| Will | ● |  |  |

Table 1: Age ranges of participants on becoming TAs.

| Casual, part time or short-term work only | Steady, formal employment in one or two employment sectors | A range of job different roles in more than two employment sectors |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| 2 | 4 | 3 |

Table 2: Previous employment across the sample group..

Career narratives included a diverse range of previous occupations including, for example, uniformed services, funeral services, travel and tourism, professional football, childcare, telecommunications, logistics and haulage, hospitality, retail and unskilled factory work. Table 3 shows the participants' past employment sectors.

| Participant | *Service industries | Manual labour, logistics or factory work | Unifor-med services | Sports and leisure | Work with children (non-classroom-based roles) |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Aaron | ● | | | | ● |
| Ben | | ● | | | |
| James | ● | | | ● | ● |
| Luke | | | | ● | ● |
| Mark | | ● | ● | | |
| Nate | ● | | | | |
| Roy | | ● | ● | | |
| Tony | ● | | | ● | ● |
| Will | ● | | | ● | ● |

Table 3: Participants' previous work-sectors.

*Office work; telecommunications; hospitality; funeral services; retail and wholesale

Table 4 shows the routes that participants took, into primary education in the role of TA, these include paid employment, and regular volunteering as students or parents.

| Volunteer: parent helper | Volunteer: Unpaid student | TA apprenticeship | Direct entry to permanent TA role | Transition from another role in school (sports coach) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 |

Table 4: Routes participants took into TA work.

Table 5 shows the participants' prior experience of supporting teaching and learning, on becoming TAs.

| Participant | School-initiated work-experience in an education setting with children | Supporting children's learning in formal employment contexts | Supporting children's learning through own leisure pursuits (football) | Teaching/ training adult learners |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | ● | ● |  | ● |
| Ben | ● |  |  |  |
| James | ● | ● |  |  |
| Luke | ● | ● | ● |  |
| Mark | ● |  | ● |  |
| Nate | ● |  | ● |  |
| Roy |  |  |  | ● |
| Tony |  | ● |  | ● |
| Will | ● | ● | ● |  |

Table 5:Participants' prior experience of supporting teaching and learning, on becoming TAs.

Six participants reported having undertaken formal work-experience in an education setting between ages 15 and 16, which has introduced them to supporting children's learning in formal and informal contexts. Additionally,

four participants had experience of football coaching. In their formal employment contexts, two participants had worked with children in childcare contexts and run out of school holiday club activities in the UK and abroad. One participant had been an outdoor pursuits instructor working with children and adults. Three of the participants had experience of teaching and training adults, in work-based contexts and formal training programmes for adult learners. One of these had undergone formal training to teach adults.

| Participant | A Levels | L3 Vocational Qualification (unrelated to TA role) | L3 Vocational Qualification (related to TA role) | Professional experience working with children in another role | Sports coaching (children) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | | | ● | ● | |
| Ben | | ● | | | |
| James | | | | ● | |
| Luke | | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| Mark | ● | | | | ● |
| Nate | ● | | | | ● |
| Roy | | ● | | | |
| Tony | | | ● | ● | |
| Will | | | | ● | ● |

Table 6: Participants' qualifications/experience on entry to the TA role, or on becoming a regular volunteer in a school.

*These include, for example, the Children and Young People's Workforce Diploma (CYPWDC) Level 3; Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (STLS) at level 2 or 3.

The narratives reveal a trend of ongoing engagement in lifelong learning, as shown in Table 6. Having reached statutory school leaving age at 16, seven participants remained in formal education and attended school sixth form or another type of tertiary education. The range of qualifications they gained

includes A Levels, and vocational, work-related awards such as BTec National Diplomas and NVQs.

Five participants gained sub-degree level qualifications in Supporting Teaching and Learning in Schools (STLS) after becoming TAs, before commencing the FD Education (Table 7).

| Participant | STLS undertaken as apprentice in role | STLS undertaken in role (non-apprentice) | STLS undertaken as volunteer in role | Relevant qualification already held on entry to TA role | No STLS sub-degree qualification taken |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | | | | ● | |
| Ben | | | ● | | |
| James | | | | | ● |
| Luke | | | | ● | |
| Mark | | ● | | | |
| Nate | ● | | | | |
| Roy | | | ● | | |
| Tony | | | | | ● |
| Will | ● | | | | |

Table 7: Participants' TA qualifications undertaken in-role, when working or volunteering in a school, before commencing FD.

Only two of the participants recounted having a firm intention to train to teach to teach before becoming TAs. However, at the time of the interviews, all the participants had developed longer-term aspirations and ambitions in teaching or related fields. All participants' narratives proposed exit routes from the TA role, as part of their aspirational career-thinking. Table 8 shows the participants' student status at the time of the life-grid interviews, in relation to their foundation degrees and their intended progression routes.

| Participant | Foundation degree | BA (Hons) route | Postgraduate study |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | **Y2** | | |
| Ben | **Y2** | | |
| James | **completed** | **completed** | **application pending** |
| Luke | **Y2** | **offer secured** | |
| Mark | **Y1** | | |
| Nate | **Y2** | **offer secured** | |
| Roy | **Y2** | | |
| Tony | **Y2** | **offer secured** | |
| Will | **completed** | **completed** | **commenced** |

Table 8: Participants' status as students in relation to the foundation degree and its progression routes

## 5.2. Generating and capturing narratives

Life-grid interviews lasted from 22 minutes (Nate) to two hours (Aaron). Most were around one hour. Participants' narrative style and level of detail varied. In general, the transcripts show that participants' voices tended to dominate the start of the interview. My own voice (as the interviewer) increased towards the end, as each narrative was reviewed and checked for chronology and accuracy. Aaron and Roy each spoke freely for over an hour at a time, with very little interviewer interjection. Mark and Nate told their initial stories very briefly, and the transcripts show that I elicited more detail through questioning. This evidently scaffolded 'thin' narratives (McMahon & Watson, 2012) as Mark and Nate's short answers tended to become increasingly lengthy and complex. This resulted in rich accounts (Flick, 2006), in which the participants recounted their career narratives. They evaluated and sought meanings for some of the decisions and events of their careers.

Akin to the Celtic model of radial stories (Colley, 2010), participants' narratives were rarely linear. Participants generated diverse, narrative threads to trace significant influences, key-moments (Savickas, 2009) and

happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009) that head either enabled or hindered them. All narratives included some reflective self-evaluation (Elliot, 2005) which illuminated their career-thinking.

## 5.3. Emerging themes for discussion

Career narratives were characterised by multiple levels of negotiation with the self and with others (Saccomanno, 2017). Participants' evaluations frequently revealed some self-negotiation, resource distribution and cost-benefit analysis. They had negotiated the expectations of others and their own values about work, education and family life, suggesting that their career decisions were related to their sense of self and personal identity, and also influenced by them. All narratives included incremental stages of career-crafting and cumulative experience, learning and development, analogous to the notion of a career-identity funded by identity resources (Vogelsang et al, 2018) or human capital (Fugate et al, 2004). Each narrative negotiated personal setbacks, emotional factors and some degree of internal struggle. This justifies the category of negotiation as a significant theme for analysis.

Whilst relatively few, there were some references to gendered phenomena in the narratives that align with the literature, such as tokenism (Kanter, 1993) and role-appropriation (Lupton, 2006). Instances of direct, overt, hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1999) were few and tended to be isolated. Four narratives suggested some passing encounters with gender discrimination or a generalised sense of discomfiture about being a man in a female-dominated and how this is perceived by others. The issue of a relatively low wage (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011) and lack of career progression within the subordinate TA role (Graves, 2012) were cited by some, as reasons for moving into teaching. Others had begun to consider teaching as a career soon after entering the TA role and described their current TA position as temporary, within an aspirational career plan.

The initial impressions summarised in this chapter consolidate the themes and categories that emerged from the coding process and provide a

foundation for more detailed discussion in three areas: What motivates men to become TAs, and the influences on career-identity; gendered phenomena that participants experienced and negotiated; the relationship between aspiration and agency in negotiated careers. The subsequent chapters discuss these topics in depth.

# 6.0 Discussion of findings

This investigation and its findings indicate that men becoming TAs are motivated by a range of personal and social influences and interactions. Each participants' career path is underpinned by a unique career-identity, which is resourced and sustained by personal attributes, experience, vocation and lifelong learning. Participants' career paths negotiate a range of experiences and demands, including gendered perspectives. Aspiration and agency emerge from the narratives as significant, co-dependent features of career-thinking and career-crafting, in the negotiated career paths of men becoming TAs.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss in detail the findings emerging from participants' narratives, and address the research questions, *What motivates men to become TAs; what are their experiences and aspirations?* The discussion engages with examples from participants' individual narratives and applies the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 2 to explore emerging themes. This discussion considers the influences on career-identity and how these underpin and motivate career decisions. It investigates the experiences of men becoming TAs, as part of a gendered minority. The final section of this discussion chapter showcases the graphic timelines and uses them to explore the co-dependence of aspiration and agency in career narratives.

## 6.1. What motivates men to become TAs? Influences on career-identity.

This section explores influences on participants' career-identity and the way these motivate men in their career paths, as they enter the TA role. It revisits the concept of career-identity (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), which is enriched by personal identity resources (Vogelsang et al, 2018). It identifies various personal, social and structural influences on career-identities, and examines how these might motivate participants' career-thinking and career-crafting, on becoming TAs.

Career-identity is a self-concept which emerges from and is related to self-identity and one's own position in the social world of work (Fugate et al, 2008; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Individuals construct career-identity through their relationships, experiences, goals and motivations (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In turn, these are informed by the individual's interactions with surrounding structures, starting from the immediate micro-structure of family-life.

Career-identity depends on the accumulation of personal resources such as dispositions (personal qualities, values and behaviours) and enhanced attributes (experience, knowledge, qualifications) that can be applied to a particular occupation. A richly resourced career-identity underpins a career trajectory that enables the individual to reach a specific, ambitious goal or other desirable future, to which they aspire.

In this study, the participants' narratives and reflective evaluations enable their career-identity resources to be traced back to the people, events or experiences that have influenced and incentivised participants' emerging sense of self, their sense of purpose and aims. The socio-ecological model in Chapter 2 (Figure 1 , p.22) provides a theoretical lens, to locate the origins of each participant's career-identity that is resourced through relationships, experiences, lifelong learning and goals, which drive and motivate their career decisions. The socio-ecological model therefore provides a framework to help visualise and to locate the origins of career-identity.

Whether they left school with or without a clear career direction in mind, or moved into TA work from other careers, almost all the narratives showed retrospectively, the influences of their home lives, schooling and adolescence in their later career-identity as a TA. I therefore begin this discussion of the narrative data by examining the events and influences of childhood and adolescence on career-identity. In almost all the participants' career narratives, family relationships were cited as having established a secure

foundation and sense of belonging. Equally, the data suggests that an inconsistent family life may bear a contradictory influence on an individual's emerging sense of self (Packer, 2017). For example, the individual might seek consistency for their future self and for others. Beyond the participants' immediate micro-system, the data offers examples of family as mediator, enabling or driving the individual to interact with wider social worlds of work, leisure and lifelong learning. Ben, Will and Luke recount family members helping to identify specific career opportunities. Mark and Aaron each secured their early employment with direct help from family.  These mediated interactions facilitated participants' rich experiences with wider social worlds (Stokes & Wyn, 2007), and enabled them to embed their accumulated resources into their career-identities.

In adolescence and young adulthood, the meso-system of mediated experiences emerged in the narratives as key to career-identity. Six narratives described two-week work-experience placements at age 15 or 16, which were organised by participants' secondary schools and took place in an education setting such as a primary school. The participants' reflections affirm that the immediate benefits of work-experience are sometimes difficult to quantify (Hillage et al, 1996). At this stage, work was primarily seen as way of earning money, but the narratives do show an emerging, appreciation of the qualitative benefits of work.  Although they did not consciously incorporate their work-experience into their career-thinking, Mark and Ben each reflected that it was enjoyable. Therefore, work-experience placements appear to have contributed to the construct of work as a source of intrinsic as well as extrinsic reward. This was equally true for Tony, whose dislike of his office-based placement steered his career-thinking in another direction.

Across the narratives, other participants evaluated their work experience variously, from sparking a passing interest in teaching, through to a more concrete step towards that goal:

> I remember the feeling of all these children looking up to me and thinking… this is nice. I felt important, so that was great. I remember I thought, oh, I'm going to be a teacher, I want to be a teacher. However, I think personal issues got in the way of me having the confidence, to go on to college or whatever. (James)

> It gave me that first experience, and I was thinking that yeah, it's something I'd quite like to do, to work with kids … It gave me a lot of confidence, I quite liked working there. Once I'd left school in Year 11 [the work-experience placement] contacted me and asked me if I wanted to work for them, as a part-time learning mentor. (Will)

Thus work-experience occupies the meso-system It mediates and expands the individual's networks. Potentially, it offers resources to fledgling career-identities (Fugate et al, 2004) and can inspire aspirational career-thinking and early goals (Krumboltz, 2009).

Continuing the theme of mediated social experiences in adolescence, a significant trend seen across four narratives is the participants' involvement in playing and coaching football at local, grass-roots clubs. Participants' evaluations affirm the power of playing and coaching football, to influence career-identity and career-thinking. Ben commented that a 'taste' of coaching younger children as a teenager motivated his early interest in teaching. Similarly, Will felt motivated by his own football coach, from age 12 to 16: 'I quite liked the idea of being like him… It made me think I'd quite like to go into it'. (Will). Mark remarked that whilst his early career-thinking was not specific he knew he wanted to do something sporty '…and something worthwhile, as well'. (Mark).

These accounts concur with Banks et al's (1992) study into identity in adolescence, which identified leisure activity as a fertile layer of participants' social worlds, rich in identity resources (Vogelsang et al, 2018). All four of the footballing participants mentioned a life-long association with the sport early in their narratives, underlining its enduring, motivational significance in their career-identities. These four participants incorporated their football skills into the TA role, for example by leading sports activities at the schools where they

worked. This suggests that the resources gained through football offer more than a legacy of earlier experience. I speculate that these participants' career narratives showcase enduring, acquired dispositions of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which they acquired through prolonged engagement with the social world of football clubs.  As such, it is motivational in these participants' career-identities, before and after they became teaching assistants.

At this point it is interesting to consider the nature of vocation in sports coaching and how this aligns to wider understandings of vocation in career-identity. By applying Ronkainen et al's (2020) model of volunteer athletics coaching to the narratives in my own study, I suggest that participants found an avenue for meaningful work in football coaching. Coaching enabled participants to engage with a 'broader purpose' (Ronkainen et al, 2020, p.2) beyond the self, and provided a sense of contribution that was motivational and became embedded into their career-identity

Thus, in terms of the socio-ecological model (Figure 1, p.22) interaction with coaching yielded more than the extraneous resources of experience and coaching qualifications that promote employability (Fugate et al, 2004). Operating in the macro-system, it mediated the participants' engagement with the sport at macro level and incubated participants' altruism and vocation at the micro level of self-identity. This concurs with Ronkainen et al's view (2000) that there is a richness within sports coaching which transcends the individual, while simultaneously nurturing self-oriented motivations in the context of long-term career-identity.

Whilst football coaching provides an interesting case for this discussion, vocation also emerged through other narratives as a motivational aspect of career-identity and career-thinking. The subjective and highly personal nature of vocation might be difficult to articulate, directly (Dik et al, 2009). Will suggested it was a 'subconscious' aspect of his career narrative: 'I've only

done jobs in education with children …I've gone subconsciously down that route, I think.' Nevertheless, participants tended to evaluate TA work with a more conscious sense of 'calling': 'I really wanted to get into this kind of job because I know I can benefit somebody.' (Ben).  Vocation frequently involves recognising drawbacks such as low pay but nevertheless offers meaningful work with an opportunity to make a positive contribution to people's lives and their social worlds (Dik et al, 2009). Tony's narrative aligns to this idea:

> I thought, if I'm going sell my business, what would I get a lot of satisfaction from, and be able to give myself to, as a career? After four months [at the school] I realised I really enjoyed it, I'm really getting a lot out of this. (Tony)

Will's narrative illustrates vocational motivation through a specific example:

> The sort of big turning point in motivation for me was probably last year when the Year 6 pupils that I originally worked with when I first came as an apprentice, left in Y11. There was one child …  you know, who was on the brink of exclusion all the time, never quite knew which way it was going to go… and to see that one, leaving and getting a job… it's a big kind of push, it makes you think yeah, actually it's worthwhile doing this, and you're doing a good job. (Will)

The decision to become a TA therefore tends to be motivated by vocation, a generosity of spirit and sense of contribution. However, vocation is unlikely to be purely altruistic (Ronkainen et al, 2020). It is bound up with a quest for self-fulfilment that drives the individual to commit to the TA role, whilst accruing personal benefits such as professional development, and strengthening their career-identity.

The discussion now turns to look at participants' past employment. It seeks evidence of vocation alongside other internal and enhanced resources for career-identity, and explores the fusion of vocation, experience and employability. Career-identity resources that participants gained through the workplace include direct experience, responsibility, and inter-personal relationships, and the tangible reward of paid employment. Experientially, some participants' past occupations included facilitating learning, by teaching

and training either children or adults.  Participants reflected meaningfully on the moments in their earlier careers when they had recognised their own ability to teach, and its intrinsic reward. As an outdoor pursuits instructor, Tony reflected:

> …it was being able to help them step out of their comfort zone. It was a thrill to see somebody do that, when they have a high level of fear, just going for something, and the elation afterwards … there was huge job satisfaction in that.' (Tony)

Three participants suggested that the experience of training peers had nurtured an inner disposition for teaching. Roy, a former army instructor explained: 'I really enjoyed the teaching side of it, and the planning side of it, working out the lessons, things like that.' As a telecommunications trainer, Tony found that he had the ability to help people work through their misunderstandings, '…and that was what I really enjoyed.'  This self-belief in one's own ability to teach is a resource for career-identity. In keeping with Saccomanno (2017), participants found the opportunity to 'convert' intrinsic rewards of past teaching experience motivated them, when becoming TAs.

Similarly, participants who had worked in diverse roles with children before becoming TAs were able to convert their experiential resources from other roles. For example, Aaron brought experience in childcare and out-of-school clubs to the role. Luke's experience of coaching sports in different schools enriched his career-identity through received knowledge of diverse working practices. The participants' evaluations showed how they had internalised their experiences, embedding them into their career-identities as well as day-to-day practice:

> I had to set up the whole of the new Reception Unit at the school on my own because there was no-one to help …so I set it all up how I did in nursery, from all those years ago, being a senior, and doing holiday club. It trains you up on what you need to be looking for, what you need to be doing for that child, how we can help if they're struggling … knowing policies and procedures…  (Aaron)

> Working across two settings, you get to know the ways different teachers teach, and everything. So, you learn from them both ... I think that helped me be the TA I am at the minute, in the sense that I've known something different and I'm able to compare it. I think that set out for me, "this is probably what I want to do", from that experience of being at two schools. (Luke)

Past work roles afforded opportunities for participants to practice and develop a professional rapport with children. The macro-system of the socio-ecological model (Figure 1, p.22) constitutes care for children outside the home as professional, rather than familiar (Wernersson et al, 2016). For TAs, the ability to relate to children in a professional manner needs to be resourced, learned and reified as part of career-identity. Prior employment brought five participants into contact with children's social worlds, such as Early Years practice, children's holiday clubs and outward-bound activities. These experiences mediated the space between participants' own micro-system and the children's social worlds. In the research data, the ability to relate socially to children is a resource that funds and embeds a disposition for working with children into career-identity and benefits the TA role. James learned this from leading children's activities in holiday resorts:

> I think the way I work with children and build up a rapport with children is in part because of the experience of being a holiday rep. and working with children abroad, ... that's helped me to communicate with children on a different level than just being a teacher. (James)

The way participants reflected on the relational demands of TA work suggests that willingness to invest emotionally in the role is a significant resource for the career-identities of men becoming TAs. Will said he enjoyed being a teaching assistant, 'because you build that relationship with kids, and see them grow' (Will). James elaborated: 'The TA role really helps you to build up close, one-to-one relationships with the children. That's something I think I would miss, moving up to becoming a teacher' (James). James' distinction between teachers' and TAs' interactions with children echoes the literature. For example, Barkham, (2008) suggests a pastoral dimension in the TA role,

that assumes a relationship of care. Again, this is indicative of vocational motivation. Several narratives emphasised caring about and for children as having motivated the decision to become a TA, and the way in which they would enact care in practice, for example, by 'helping people every day' (Ben).

Vocation is not straight-forward. Whilst it may be conceptualised purely as a motivational resource (Dik et al, 2009) participants' narratives suggest that vocation also brings tensions and difficulties, as the individual seeks to balance the connection between their work activity, sense of purpose and the self, within certain cultural configurations (ibid). A key example emerging from the narratives is the notion of 'care', which will now be discussed.

At a basic level, 'care' might be assumed as an innate or dispositional resource for career-identity. In this sense, the literature both rationalises and challenges the idea of care as inherently female (Morrison, 2014; Torre, 2018). In the participant narratives, care takes various forms, not all of which are feminised. Mark and Aaron each demonstrated conscious, incremental understanding of the nature and implications of care, as an emotion that both needs to be managed, and can be channelled as a skill for work. Mark contrasted the emotional demands of police work with the less volatile social world of the school. Mark's narrative suggests that by decreasing risk to his own emotional well-being, he accommodated his desire to care more comfortably as a TA, than he had as a special constable. Aaron worked in childcare and funeral services before becoming a TA. He likened his care for the deceased and their mourners to his care for children and their families, at nursery. These evaluations show how Mark and Aaron had found ways to 'preserve' and 'convert' (Saccomanno, 2017, p.558) care as a legitimate resource for career-identity, and successfully appropriated it to their emerging career narratives.

Underpinning the emotional investment of care, the data illustrates emotional influences on career-identity, such as participants negotiating difficult personal events or inner struggle, as part of their career narratives. Emerging from these experiences are some common motivations, for example, to craft a better future for themselves, or to 'repair' the past (Saccomanno, 2017). James' reflections demonstrate the way in which an individual may apply agency to identify themselves with positive outcomes, even in the presence of negative experience. This might be a form of 'resource substitution' (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019, p.143), as James converted his own negative experience by looking for a positive alternative:

> … from a young age, I think I've always had that experience of looking after, caring for younger children. I think as the oldest [of eight children] you feel that responsibility … There were a few issues when I was young …and I know how children can be ignored as passive people or objects.  That's another driver that's keeping me in the job …it's making sure that I treat children the complete opposite way, that their voices are heard and that what they say is valued. (James)

James was able to construct a career-identity and career narrative which are motivated by a desire to promote children's well-being, and speak to a higher, vocational purpose whilst also repairing his own past (Saccomanno. 2017). The examples given in this section support the emergence of vocation as a key motivator for men becoming TAs. However, vocation needs to be complemented by other resources such as experience, qualifications and professional understanding, which together furnish agency in career-thinking and career-crafting. The final part of this section looks at lifelong learning as a resource for career-identity, and its ability to affirm, enhance and enrich the participants' internal resources and drivers through the medium of professional development, formal certification and opportunities for progression.

Lifelong learning is part of the macro-system surrounding the world of work, offering opportunities for learning and career development. It is interpreted and mediated locally by further education, vocational training and higher

education. Participants' engagement with sub-degree level qualifications on becoming TAs locates further education and training providers as agents of lifelong learning, which nourishes the growth of agency. Participants enriched their career-identities by gaining certified qualifications in relevant fields, such as childcare or STLS, which developed their employability (Fugate et al, 2004). The sub-degree level courses participants engaged in, and their entry points to the FD Education are shown in Table 7 (p.85). All participants had combined some or all their lifelong learning with full or part time employment, gaining direct experience alongside their qualifications. The systematic gathering of codified knowledge whilst concurrently interacting with day-to-day practice, appears to have consolidated participants' identity, agency and career-thinking.

Some narratives contained significant milestone points which prompted a re-evaluation of career-identity and presented opportunities to 'repair' gaps in the past (Saccomanno, 2017). Re-entering education and volunteering in schools at the same time enabled Tony, Ben, James and Roy to gain the professional and academic experience they needed to craft a future career in education. Lifelong learning may therefore be seen as an essential part of career-crafting or life-planning, which benefits participants' career narratives through its variety and flexibility.

Narratives show that participants engaged with lifelong learning at key transition points, such as leaving school or on changing careers. In these instances, engagement with lifelong learning and the progressive accumulation of qualifications enhanced participants career-identities, increased their personal agency and motivated aspirational career-thinking and incremental career-crafting through the progressive accumulation of relevant qualifications. For instance, Tony's narrative exemplifies the significance of lifelong learning in lifestyle adjustment. He changed his career direction and sought out relevant training and qualifications that would enable him to renew his career (Lent, 2013) whilst improving his work-life

balance (Saccomanno, 2017). The FD Education provided a solution to his problem.

The narratives suggest that certified qualifications are powerful resources in the socio-ecological system surrounding careers. They evidence and symbolise individual learning (at micro-level) which has been gained through interaction with the meso-system of knowledge, understanding and skills that surround the TA role. Potentially, qualifications can mediate the space between the individual and possible future employment. In so doing, lifelong learning can mediate opportunities to develop individuals' career-identity and career-thinking in the microsystem, develop their understanding of macro-influences and encourage the individual to continually seek fresh opportunities for learning, development and career progression. Motivationally, qualifications widened participants' career-thinking and developed their potential future goals. Ben's narrative explains:

> I went for NVQ 3 and I spent a while working in the school. Then I found out about a foundation degree and how I could push myself further to, you know, just learn even more …I just sort of got that drive and yeah, I just really wanted to make the most of it …and now I'm at a point where my plans for the future are you know, to get into teaching. (Ben)

The data further suggests that lifelong learning provides robust resources for career-identity when it is combined with participants' interactions with the world of work. The narratives all demonstrated the aspirational career-thinking and goal-setting that characterise richly-resourced career-identities. This is evidenced by the element of career-thinking and imagined possible future which participants included towards the end of their narratives. Without exception, participants evaluated their TA jobs as a stage on the journey into a more secure and lucrative teaching career.

At the time of the interviews, most participants' routes into teaching were either underway (Will, James), or planned (Luke, Nate, Tony, Mark, Aaron) through the University's range of progression routes. Roy and Ben were still

exploring their options, but each expressed the intention to continue studying and working in education. This underlines the ability of lifelong learning to resource career-identity through certificated qualifications and motivate progressive career goals (Saccomanno, 2017), as part of an incremental career narrative.

This section has explored influences on career-identity and discussed the way in which personal resources fund career-identity, goals and career-thinking. It highlights the influence of childhood and adolescent interactions such as work experience and sport which can inform career thinking. Also, this offers insight into the motivations of men becoming TAs, in terms of their vocation. It has exposed participants' sense of vocation and intrinsic reward as significant personal drivers. These may be drawn equally from past experience and future intentions and developed and enhanced by lifelong learning. The role of lifelong learning in enhancing aspiration and agency will be re-visited later in this chapter. The following section focuses on gendered perspectives and ways in which participants experienced and negotiated gendered influences, as men becoming TAs.

## 6.2. Gendered experiences of men becoming TAs
This section of the discussion draws out gendered aspects of the data. It discusses participants' experiences, as minority members of a gendered workforce, and the implications for their career-identity and career narratives.

In keeping with the methodological objective of foregrounding the participant voice, this discussion avoids making general assumptions about participants' experiences on the sole basis of their biological sex or socialised gender (Lupton, 2016).  It identifies some gendered experiences and discusses the participants' interpretations of these events. It considers the potential for the TA role to encompass multiple masculinities. Finally, it addresses some wider, social influences on men's career-thinking and the way participants constitute

TA work within a long-term career narrative. This section concludes by situating the research participants as planful agents, each negotiating an aspirational career path, in the presence of gendered influences.

The previous section of this discussion chapter utilised the socio-ecological model as a device to visualise interactions between the biological individual in their immediate micro-system, and the wider social world, at macro level. It examined how the intermediate layer of the meso-system such as lifelong learning supports interactions with the surrounding macro-system, to enable the individual to accrue resources for their career-identity. Here too, the socio-ecological model is a useful tool to visualise the way in which structural norms operating in the macro-system exert influence on the biological individual and can influence career-thinking and career-crafting. This part of the discussion therefore considers the way in which macro-level gendered phenomena are mediated through the work-sector and influence individuals' working lives (Tait, 2016).

To put this discussion into its wider context, I re-visit briefly my understanding of the TA role as a feminised occupation. National Statistics (2018) and the prevalence of women TAs' perspectives in published research show that proportionally, the TA workforce is female-concentrated. In practice, it displays the characteristics of a feminised occupation, such as low status and low pay (Kanter, 1993; Williams, 1995).  The role is deferential (Seeley, 2018) and subordinated to the superior status of qualified teachers (Barkham, 2008; Graves, 2012). It lacks a clear career progression structure, or professional identity of its own (Graves, 2014). As a context for employment, TA work remains insecure (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011) and vulnerable to external and internal pressures on school budgets and staff deployment needs (Abrams, 2017; National Education Union, 2018). These characteristics render TA work as precarious and in keeping with other feminised occupations, potentially risky as a primary source of family income (Torre, 2018). The conflation of TA work with caring and mothering (Barkham, 2008)

intensifies the assumed maternality of the role, alongside normative discourses and rhetorical claims about the separate and distinctive contribution that men are assumed to bring to an otherwise feminised work sector (Younger & Warrington, 2008).

The data suggests that participants' attention to and interpretation of gendered experiences varies. Nevertheless, some themes arose in the narratives that appear to resonate with previous studies about men in female-dominated occupations (for example, Williams, 1995; Lupton, 2006). These include sexist expectations placed on men (Glick & Fiske, 1999) and gender-appropriated deployment. The narratives resonate, to some extent with Torre (2018), in the way men in feminised roles express their career-thinking.

My analysis suggests that participants' personal, micro-level motivations, such as vocation and self-fulfilment act as a counterfoil to the macro-level structural barriers of low pay, subordination and precarious employment that constitute a feminised occupation (Torre, 2018). In keeping with Lupton (2006) participants' reflective evaluations tend to offset the immediate 'costs' and temporary discomfort of the TA role, against the long-term benefits. Narratives tended to neutralise the drawbacks by locating the TA role as a transitory stage in their longer career journey. The following paragraphs discuss the negotiations and compromises participants faced, on becoming and working as TAs, and the ways in which these negotiations were affected by gendered influences at micro and macro levels.

Despite their previous experience of primary school environments as pupils or parents, entering the gender-concentrated work culture of primary phase (or nursery) education can present a sharp contrast to men's normative experience of hegemonic masculinity (Foster & Newman, 2005). Most of the participants mentioned their numerical minority, in their staff teams, for example: 'There are only two male teachers. There are four female teachers

plus all the TAs … and the office staff, they're female as well.' (Luke). The narratives suggested some re-orientation by participants, on entering a reverse-gendered work context. Aaron had already made this adjustment, when he moved from an all-male warehouse environment to join a childcare setting that was staffed by 17 women. Moving into a primary school from the male-dominated social world of haulage and logistics, Roy disclosed that it felt very 'odd' to work somewhere that 'seemed so top-heavy with women …there was only one other man there. So, I struggled a bit.' (Roy).

The narratives reveal some tensions within participants' self-perceptions, as male TAs. For example, participants' vocational, altruistic motivations, to nurture and enrich children's learning, contrasted with their self-positioning as men in society. Participants' narratives suggested they performed multiple masculinities (Connell & Pearse, 2015) as they attempted to reconcile their self-identity with others' expectations of maleness. For example, Tony recounted having been warned by a teaching colleague not to be 'too Dad-like' with the children, suggesting that he needed to take a firmer, less tolerant attitude to certain behaviour, '…which I didn't agree with, of course.' (Tony). Tony's experience aligns to Burn and Pratt-Adams' (2015) suggestion that performances of masculinity in primary education tend to be compared against a hegemonic norm. It is suggestive of the macro-system's social norms being used by others to judge and exert influence on individuals' micro-level performances of masculinity.

Others' expectations are not necessarily the sole driver of gender performance. Self-perceptions are fundamental to self-identity (Burke & Stets, 2009) and Roy tended to question his own suitability for the role; 'I'm not cute and cuddly.' (Roy). He attributed this to his 'army mentality' in which codes of conduct were not negotiable. His evaluation showed some self-examination and a search for a version of masculinity, which he could both express and accept as a TA.

> I didn't want [to work at] secondary school because I thought I didn't have the temperament for it. This comes down to the army thing again. In the army, if someone is a little ****, I'm sorry, but I'll tell them they're a little ****. Obviously, that doesn't work in schools, you can't do that. But then after being in schools... I've realised, that's not me, I'm not like that. I can bite my tongue so to speak and I can step back ...And I also found out, working in schools, I actually enjoy it... I love the children, I like that interaction, and I like to watch them learn... that sounds poncey doesn't it? (Roy)

Roy's reflective evaluation illustrates some personal negotiation as he began interacting with unfamiliar social and cultural norms (Denicolo et al, 2016). These required him to reconcile his re-constructed career-identity with the type of masculinity that he associated with his former identity as a soldier.

Tony's and Roy's accounts reflect the way that models of masculinity in the school context are apt to descend into 'easy gender stereotypes' (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015, p. 160). One of the ways such stereotypes manifest is through gendered role-appropriation (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015) or 'entrapment' (Kanter, 1993, no page number). Some participants believed their deployment was gendered, for example being sent on sports tours and other residential trips 'because they need a male... but I like to think it's cause I'm good at my job, not just "he's a man, send him."' (Luke). Other participants reflected on their deployment within primary school year groups, and whether this had been influenced more by their gender than their skills and abilities. For example, Aaron and Ben cited a tendency for school managers to deploy men with the older children. There is insufficient evidence within the data to fully interrogate this suggestion. It might be questioned whether it represents hostile or benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1999), and whether it constructs men as either unsuited to Early Years classrooms, or more able than women to cope with pre-teenaged children. There is some suggestion of the latter in Aaron's narrative which recounted his having been deployed with 11-year-olds, even though he was a qualified and very experienced early childhood practitioner. Ben also experienced being placed with the older children, which he thought might be due to being

male, as 'most Year Six teachers are male'. These gendered deployments might suggest a form of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1999) or be simply expedient for the school.

It was notable that of the nine participants, only Will expressed a wish to avoid working with the youngest children. His preference was pragmatic rather than gendered. Will evaluated his own skills and abilities, and believed he lacked specialist knowledge of early childhood education. He saw this as essential to meeting the children's needs, at micro level, and being able to satisfy the regulatory, macro-level demands of the regulatory Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum framework (DfES, 2017). He did not reference his gender in this evaluation:

> Obviously in EYFS you've got to report statutory requirements and there's a lot more work involved with that, and I've not had that experience. I didn't really feel I was doing the kids justice. I felt there was a lot more that they needed, but I didn't have the experience or knowledge to give them what they needed. (Will)

The narratives do not suggest that any participant was directly influenced or inspired to enter the primary education work sector by rhetorical discourses of boys' failure or excessively feminised curricula, or to re-dress the gender-balance in the TA workforce. There were some instances in which participants alluded to such discourses retrospectively. For example, Luke commented that only three of 50 applicants attending the interview day for the BA(Hons) Primary Teaching course were men. Luke reflected that there must be a demand for men in teaching, with so few applying. Similarly, it was after becoming a TA that Tony reflected: 'I guess there's a lot of kids who could do with a positive male role model.' (Tony). The way these reflective comments are isolated in the narratives suggests that they were not at the forefront of participants' minds, on becoming TAs.

Most narratives tended not to recount direct, hostile sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1999) towards participants as TAs, but some narratives suggested some passing encounters with discriminatory behaviour. Two participants reported

having been directly questioned, by parents and children, about their sexuality. They commented on the sense of entitlement of others, to interrogate their identity in a way not experienced by women colleagues. Other participants expressed feelings of having been judged by their gender. Some had on occasion felt challenged to justify themselves, as legitimate practitioners working with children: '…it was like they were thinking, "why is he in there?" … "you're a bloke, why are you working with…?" No-one's ever said it to me, but I can feel that they are thinking like that.' (Roy). Aaron shared an incident from nursery, which alluded to the 'silent discourse' (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015, p.123) in which men's fear of false accusation is recognised, but infrequently aired: '[a parent] walked in, saw me and just walked straight back out, took the child into the office with her and complained, basically, saying, "I don't want a male in there, his presence in there, it's wrong."' (Aaron). Although this incident does not relate to TA work specifically, I include it here because it illustrates the sexualised tension that surrounds men who work with young children. Aaron's personal reflection suggests 'identity bruising' (Foster & Newman, 2005, p.341) as a result of this incident: 'I felt bad. … I never really thought, this is how people might see me, until that day. It put into perspective, …the 'thing' that people might see me as' (Aaron).

Whilst direct, sexualised discrimination may be quite specific to contexts with children, the narratives also suggest that participants were aware of some more generalised negative stereotyping. In his narrative, James described the way he distanced himself from his job role in social settings, to avoid attracting negative judgements. He would tell people outside work that he worked in a school, rather than his job title of TA. This exemplifies the tendency for men in female-concentrated occupations to disassociate from their job title when outside of work (Williams, 1995), and the risk of sexist commentary which as Torre (2018) notes, tends to occur outside of the workplace, towards men in female-concentrated occupations, especially

when the chosen role is further feminised by its low-status.  James elaborated:

> I think sometimes I feel a bit embarrassed about being a male teaching assistant … I've had a few people make comments … "do you sharpen the pencils?" …  Being quite paranoid, and worrying about what people think, I'm thinking... I can't be a teaching assistant because people will be looking and thinking, "what, you're a male, and you're a teaching assistant?" (James)

This evaluation reflects a wider social influence on men who enter work-sectors that are both female-concentrated by population and feminised by their status and value in society, becoming internalised by the individual, under the normative gaze of others. This discussion now turns to the participants' self-perception as men in wider society, and the way in which lay-normativity about men's social roles outside of the workplace can affect their career-identity.

The issue of men's status and value are crystallised in the lay-normativity surrounding family life. Some narratives alluded to gendered construct of family, which influenced their career-identity as adult breadwinners. Narratives revealed tensions for some participants who were conscious of the limited earning potential of the TA role.  They compared this with the normative construct of men as higher wage earners, capable of supporting families, and making micro-level decisions that affect other people as well as themselves. The participants tended to reference these fiscal, gendered norms directly or indirectly. Both Luke and Aaron alluded to this dynamic, and there was evidently some negotiation of resources in Tony's spousal relationship, in which he became the lower earner on becoming a TA. For Ben too, becoming a TA demanded the practical and economic support of others, raising again the centrality of family and other micro-level relationships in career-identities and career narratives.

In keeping with these ideas, social pressure (at micro and macro levels) to provide for others was arguably a strong influence in Luke's career-thinking as

he considered the drawbacks of remaining a TA, indefinitely. He suggested that socio-economic pressures hold greater significance for men than for women. He would like to contribute more, financially, to his spousal relationship, which he believed would better facilitate later-life decisions such as starting a family. He maintained that unlike a man, a woman might 'get away with being on a low wage' (Luke), for a longer period. In his evaluation, Luke interrogated his own gendered viewpoint, and he grappled, somewhat with the dilemma of expressing men's need to earn more, which he accepted as an established, social norm, and his personal support for gender equality. This brief debate resonates with Torre (2018) who concludes that men tend to leave female-concentrated occupations due to gender-specific external pressures, which are more pronounced in less prestigious or precarious occupations (Torre, 2018). Aaron's narrative re-enforces low pay as a potential problem for men in feminised occupations.  He explained that he interrupted his Early Years career temporarily to meet a specific, financial need:

> I felt a bit pressured, but thought it was the right thing to do. … I went for an interview just to see, and I got handed my contract with the wage on, and I thought, this is enough for us both to live on, and it was a lot more than [nursery] could ever offer. So, I left the nursery and took on the job as a funeral operative. (Aaron)

This underpins the dichotomous position of men in female-concentrated, feminised occupations. Men's challenge to the stereotypical, social construct of hegemonic masculinity is concomitant with the enduring, social expectation that constitutes men as the primary household earners (Torre, 2018).  Macro-level expectations suggestive of entrenched habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) emerged in the narratives as participants evaluated their current goals, which would enable them to move on from the TA role to the higher status and higher earnings of teaching.

Focussing solely on participants' planned exit routes from the TA role, the data affirms a high rate of attrition in the sample group, which is frequently

associated with limited earnings as a TA, or the opportunity to earn more as a teacher.  This supports the proposal that in female-concentrated, low-status occupations, gender-specific pressures manifest in high male exit-rates (Torre, 2018). Torre (2018) argues that men leaving female-concentrated occupations tend to return to male-dominated or gender-neutral roles. However, by becoming primary teachers, the participants in this study are seen to consciously transfer their careers to another female-dominated occupation, albeit a higher status one.

In this study, motivation was associated with aspiration to teach and the rationale, that the TA role was temporary. In some cases (for example, Tony, Nate and Mark) this was part of an ambitious career trajectory in which the TA role was considered temporary, from an early stage: 'Being a teaching assistant isn't something I'd want to do for the rest of my life. It was always a very short-term plan to get me into that position of being a teacher.' (Mark). Other participants came to see the potential of the TA role incrementally, and this tended to happen whilst they were working towards a FD (for example, Ben, James, Luke, Roy).  Whilst there is evidence in the narratives of gendered pressures such as low pay and low status, I resist defining participants as 'stop-gappers' (Torre, 2018, p. 285). Instead, participants' move into teaching situates the TA role as a distinct stage in their incremental career narratives. This suggests they have secure, well-resourced career-identities which are buoyed by aspirational career-thinking and deliberate, incremental and agential career-crafting.  The following section considers the ways in which participants negotiated barriers and affordances in their individual career narratives, and the relationship between aspiration and agency in careers.

### 6.3. The aspirations of men becoming TAs.

So far in this chapter I have considered the research questions in relation to participants' career-identities, their personal resources and goals, and how these have motivated participants to become TAs. I have explored their experiences as minority members of a gender-concentrated workforce and

the possibility of gendered influences on their career-identity and career-thinking. The discussion has been scaffolded by the socio-ecological model to highlight the social structures around people's careers, the way in which these affect career-identity and career-thinking. The discussion now moves to the research question in relation to aspirations of men becoming TAs. It engages with the idea of agential career-crafting, to successfully negotiate multiple, competing influences and structures.

In their narratives, all participants spoke about completing their studies, what steps they intended to take next and how they saw their imagined future career in education. The continuity of the participants' career narratives and the way they merged into an imagined future suggests that participants embraced 'the task of career construction and identity formation' as a 'continuing responsibility' Savickas (2016, p.242). Indeed, in self-directed careers, the aspirational 'future self' becomes a resource for career-identity, motivating and guiding the individual and their self-set goals and career decisions (Fugate et al, 2004).

To interrogate this concept, this section focusses on individual stories in the data, and the ways in which participants articulate and are driven by their aspirations. Moreover, having identified an apparent co-dependency between agency and aspiration, I wanted to understand the nature of aspiration in careers. This required me to focus closely on the individual narratives, to explore what nourishes aspiration, how it functions in careers, what happens when it is absent, how it might be restored and how it transforms into ambition. This section of the discussion analyses the interplay of agency and aspiration, for men becoming TAs.  It explores ways in which participants' career narratives have been strengthened by aspiration and agency, to establish and negotiate incremental or ambitious career goals.

Given its vital role in career-crafting (Lent, 2013; Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019), the enactment of personal agency within surrounding social structures

is integral to the career narratives in this study. It relates directly to the examination of men's motivations, experiences and aspirations, as TAs within the female-concentrated world of primary phase education. Accordingly, my theoretical framework acknowledges the concept of agency as closely associated with career-identity, goal setting and career-crafting. Moreover, the conceptual relationship between agency, aspiration and ambition emerges from the study as a key dynamic in the career-thinking and career-crafting of men becoming TAs.

This final part of the discussion introduces the conceptual model of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix (Figure 11, p.113). The matrix is a conceptual framework that I have designed myself. It emerged from my examination of the data and offers an interrogative tool to help explain and interrogate the reciprocal relationship between agency and aspiration in participants' career narratives. When applied retrospectively to participants' narratives, the matrix illuminates the co-dependence of agency and aspiration in enabling an individual to steer and negotiate their own career path. The Agency and Aspiration Matrix provides a theoretical lens through which to examine the motivational strength of aspiration, in relation to agential career-crafting and the effect of reduced agency, as a curtailment to aspirational career-thinking.

I drafted the Agency and Aspiration Matrix to interpret the barriers to successful career-crafting, when participants' agency was subject to external or internal limiting factors and influences. However, I found that using the matrix as a lens is equally useful when used to illuminate enabling influences. The Agency and Aspiration Matrix is comprised of four quadrants, each characterised by a combination of high or low aspiration and agency. Using these quadrants, I propose a basic typology of career-identity, each defined by the interaction of aspiration and agency, within their respective quadrants. The four typologies that I propose are described in Table 9 below the model.
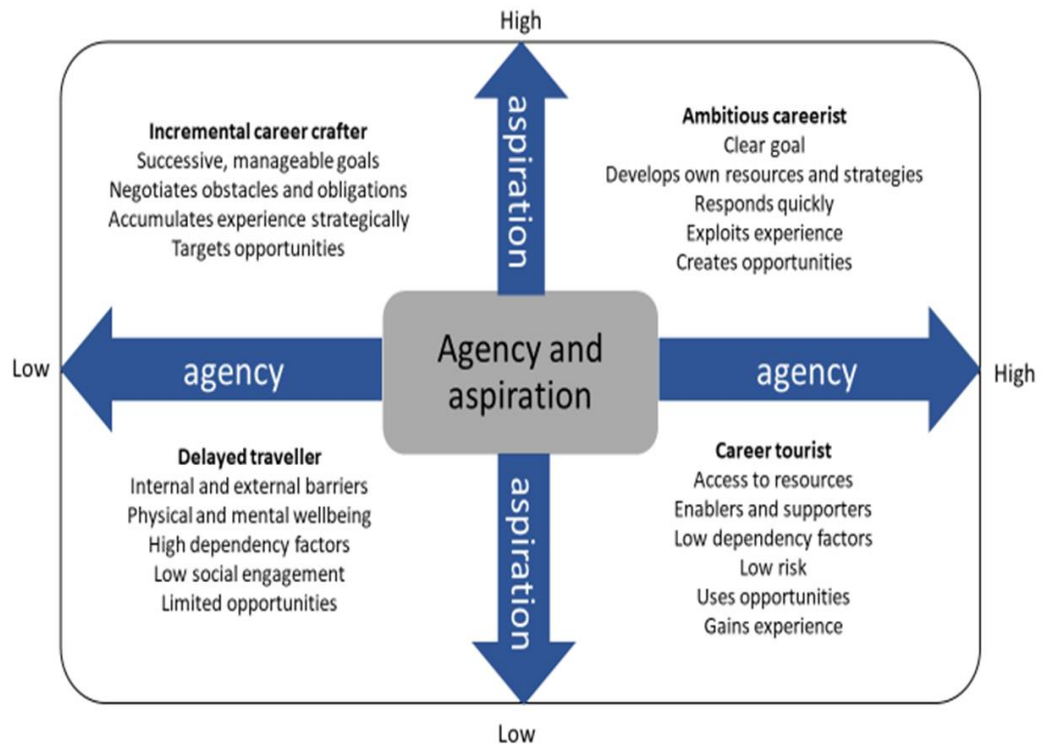
Figure 11: Agency and Aspiration Matrix

| **Upper right quadrant: ambitious careerist** |
|---|
| The data suggests that when aspiration and agency are high, the individual can envisage and plan a clear, purposeful career course, which recognises and negotiates obstacles. I describe this as an 'ambitious' career trajectory in which the balance of agency and aspiration is optimised to allow the individual freedom to conceive, pursue and achieve a career objective. The ambitious careerist takes deliberative, concrete steps towards a clearly articulated goal. |
| **Lower right quadrant: career tourist** |
| When aspiration is low or undetermined, but agency is relatively high, individuals may utilise their personal resources to enter a period of 'career tourism', during which they may explore and interact with a range of career possibilities or short-term occupations. The career tourist gathers resources for career-identity and so becomes better equipped for aspirational career-thinking. |
| **Upper left quadrant: incremental career-crafter** |
| Although their agency might be restricted intermittently, incremental career-crafters are motivated by their high aspiration. Their career-identities are formed gradually, by the accumulation of experience and advancing levels of qualification. Incremental career-crafting is therefore characterised by a series of manageable short-term goals. |

| **Lower left quadrant: delayed traveller** |
|---|
| The 'delayed traveller' occupies the lower left quadrant of the matrix. The data suggests that when both agency and aspiration are limited, the individual does not easily envisage a career trajectory for themselves. Such periods of career disengagement might be characterised by limited options and lack of goals. |

Table 9: Agency and aspiration matrix descriptors

I do not claim that each of the participants' narratives fits neatly into one of four typologies. Analysis of the participants' narratives suggests fluidity in the matrix. Most participants changed their career path at least once, and each iteration brought fresh challenges and opportunities. Career narratives therefore tended to move between the four quadrants. Across the sample, this mobility was enabled by internal and external influences at micro and macro level, as individuals utilised and developed their personal resources, to craft their careers with an increasing sense of career-identity and agency. In this discussion, relevant examples from the data have been selected to demonstrate both the characteristics of each quadrant of the matrix, and its fluidity.

The following paragraphs discuss the participants' negotiated careers through the lens of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix. I approach each quadrant in turn and support my analysis with relevant examples from the narratives. In this discussion, Lent (2013) is the primary reference for definitions, descriptions and characteristics of agency, and the ways in which agency relates to career planning and adjustment. My review of the research data noted the influence on career-thinking of unplanned situations and opportunities, which suggests 'happenstance' (Krumboltz, 2009) or serendipity, and the way in which agential individuals might take advantage of unplanned opportunities. Furthermore, this section discusses participants' negotiated career paths, with reference to Saccomanno's (2017) concept of negotiated ambition. It relates participants' aspirations and ambitions to professional goals, work-life balance or reticence (ibid). It discusses the

limiting and/or enabling socio-ecological, external influences and internal factors surrounding participants' aspirations, as they crafted their careers and identified personal goals.

### 6.3.1 Upper right quadrant: the ambitious careerist (Examples: Tony, Nate)



Figure 12: Ambitious Careerist (high agency, high aspiration).

I propose that the career narratives of ambitious careerists are characterised by continuity, responsiveness to immediate opportunities and alertness to future possibilities, all of which depend on high levels of agency and aspiration. The narratives of Nate and Tony provide examples of ambitious careerists becoming TAs. They demonstrate different ways this type of career-identity emerges and drives the individuals' career decisions, in two different contexts of early career-crafting and mid-life career change, respectively.

Nate is the only participant in this study who left school with a clear aspiration to teach, and he embarked almost immediately upon his chosen path, to realise his goal. Although Nate rejected the option of full-time University on leaving school, the Agency and Aspiration Matrix situates him as an ambitious careerist, based on his clear goals and his readiness to respond quickly to opportunities. Analysis of Nate's narrative suggested that his self-identity was deeply rooted in his hometown and family. Nate capitalised on local opportunities for lifelong learning and professional development, which provided an alternative but deliberate route into teaching. The graphic timeline (Figure 13) shows Nate's accrued resources for career-identity which

enabled him to make agential decisions and take concrete steps towards a clearly articulated, ambitious, professional goal, whilst remaining anchored by his attachment to his hometown and family.  The graphic timeline roots Nate's career-identity securely in his local, social world through the device of a tree, with his career narrative branching out from the centre.



Figure 13: Graphic timeline (Nate). The ambitious, home-based careerist.

Having completed an apprenticeship, which provided a sub-degree STLS qualification Nate acquired a TA post at a new primary school which was opening one year group at a time, over the next three years. By happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009) this placed Nate in a set of circumstances that enabled him to negotiate his professional goals (Saccomanno, 2017). First, the head teacher directed Nate towards the FD Education. This stimulated Nate to become agile and responsive in his career-thinking. Hence, the active influence of the head teacher suggests a micro-level interaction that nourished Nate's career-identity, with a sense of ambition and the opportunity and ability to fulfil it. With the support of his head teacher, Nate

became a planful agent (Lent, 2013) in his career-thinking and career-crafting. At the time of the interview, Nate had aligned his ambition to teach with future teaching vacancies that he predicted would arise at the school over the next few years: 'I've just got onto the QTS course at University… by the time I've finished it'll be the intake for the final year.' (Nate). The Agency and Aspiration Matrix classes Nate's agency and aspiration as high, and mutually constituted. As Nate's agency increased, it stimulated his aspiration further, and motivated him to pursue his goal, whilst remaining securely rooted to his foundations of home and family. Rather than being a limitation, Nate's desire to remain local appears to have resourced his career-identity and strengthened his agency.
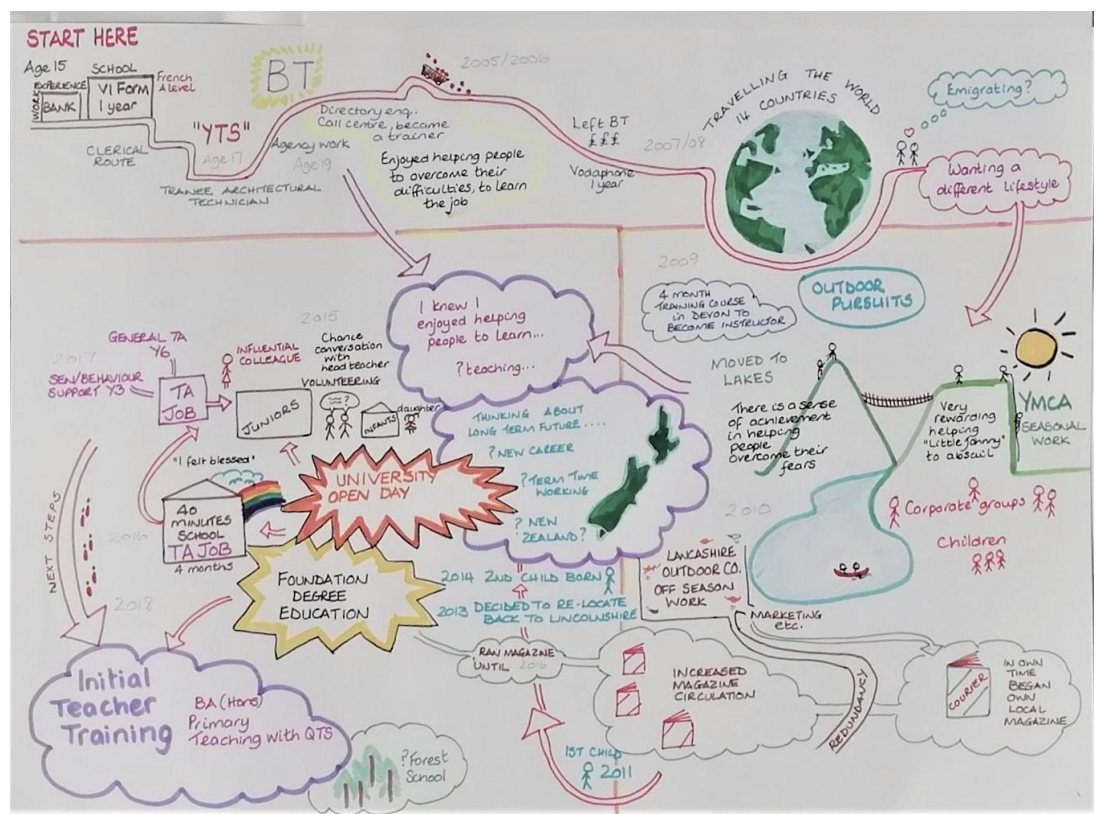


Figure 14: Graphic timeline (Tony) The ambitious careerist

At a personal and financial transition point, Tony and his partner re-evaluated their family life and future aspirations for themselves and their children: 'We thought ideally, least one of us would need a term time only job.' (Tony). Following a serendipitous conversation with a head teacher, Tony enquired at

the University about avenues into teaching. The graphic timeline (Figure 14) illustrates an explosion of activity, once Tony understood that a foundation degree would be a feasible route towards his desired future.

Tony's narrative alludes to negotiations based on reticence and work-life balance (Saccomanno, 2017). The former is characterised by a critical relationship with organisational forms of work. In negotiations based in work-life balance there is conciliation between the self-as-project (Lent, 2013) and work, as a means of financing the project. In keeping with Lent's (2013) description of protean careers, which are not bound by organisations, Tony's narrative suggested a desire to depart from employment that places boundaries on personal life. Before becoming a TA, Tony practiced this philosophy by balancing work and home life through short-term contracts and self-employment as an instructor of outdoor pursuits.  Tony's narrative therefore gives an example of self-negotiation. As his parenting responsibilities increased, Tony was less free to operate personal agency, but he continued to negotiate and find ways to satisfy work-life balance: 'The only route for me, was being able to earn some money while re-training, so it was great to get on the foundation degree course.' (Tony).

Tony's decision to become a TA was therefore motivated by his aspiration for a job that would provide work-life balance and high job satisfaction. Tony entered the FD Education as part of an ambitious plan to become a qualified teacher, at a key transition point in his life. The analysis of Tony's narrative suggests that his agential career-thinking was enabled by his accrued personal resources, having previously instructed adults and children in outdoor pursuits. Moreover, Tony did not see qualifying as a teacher as an end in itself. Characteristic of the ambitious careerist, Tony remained aspirational and self-aware of his career-identity. He aspired to combine his teaching qualification and his outdoor pursuits experience in the future, by establishing a Forest School. Tony believed this would continue to support his need for career autonomy, work-life balance and agency.

### 6.3.2 Lower right quadrant: the career tourist. (Examples: Mark, Luke, Aaron.)



Figure 13: Career tourist (high agency, limited aspiration).

I define the career tourist as an agential individual whose aspirations are not clearly known. Career tourists use their agency to sample possible career contexts, or lifelong learning activities. In this study career tourism is characterised by a relatively high level of agency. It is enabled by a range of factors such as family, locality, the absence of personal obligations or relative financial freedom. Aspiration may be present but might not be clearly articulated. Characteristically therefore, the career tourist's agency is not always related to negotiated ambition but responsive to serendipity and happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009) which serve to crystallise aspiration and thereby create motivation. In this study, career tourism was common in early adulthood, characterised by experimentation with different work sectors. For the purposes of this discussion, I have chosen three illustrative examples which suggest participants have become TAs through career tourism.

Mark became a TA through 'happenstance' (Krumboltz, 2009), when a chance meeting with a former teacher directed him to a TA vacancy. Luke decided to make an early change of direction in his football career, and it was his exploration of the schools sector for coaching opportunities that led to his becoming a TA. Aaron's career tourism is more deliberative, as his aspiration is somewhat clearer. His narrative exhibits the characteristics of gathering

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experience, management of resources and happenstance which enabled him to use career tourism strategically.

Within the socio-ecological systems model (Figure 1, p.22), career tourism may expose the individual to multiple social interactions and networks in a range of fields, which (either by themselves or in combination) may furnish a stronger sense of identity, self-awareness and more deliberative, aspirational career-thinking and agential career-crafting. Career-tourism enables the individual to eliminate possible routes and explore alternatives. Mark's narrative typifies the career tourist, and the graphic timeline (Figure 15) illustrates this.
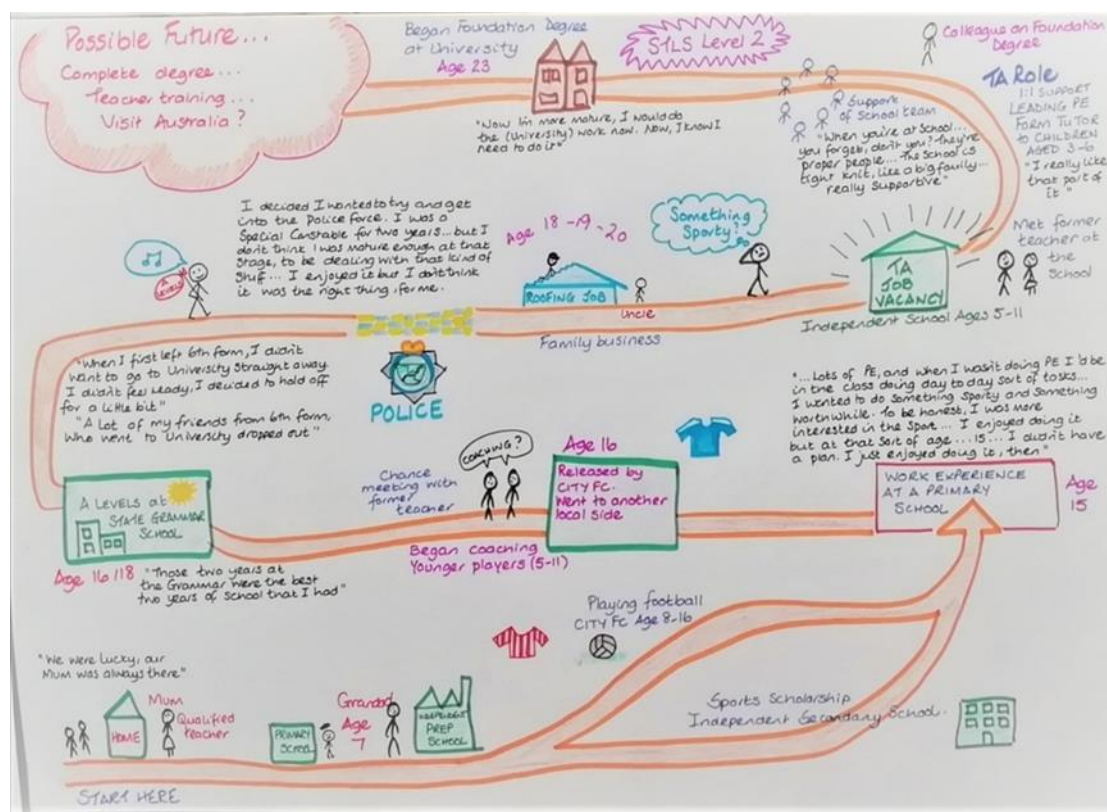


Figure 15: Graphic timeline (Mark).  The career tourist.

Having rejected the option to go straight to University, Mark resourced his career-identity through interactions with essentially 'masculine' social worlds of football, uniformed services and construction.   He explored police work as a special constable and began labouring for his uncle's roofing company. Mark's agency appears to have been relatively high during this period,

fortified by the personal resources of his completed schooling, a supportive family, and the financial freedom afforded by the opportunity to earn money roofing, whist still pondering longer-term career options. Mark's narrative reveals his growing self-awareness and reflexivity, as a career tourist. He evaluated his reasons for leaving police work, in terms of personal maturity: 'With [police work], it's pretty serious … [at age] 21, I don't think I was mature enough to be dealing with that sort of stuff' (Mark).

When Mark encountered an unexpected opportunity to become a TA, following a chance meeting with one of his former teachers, he responded with agility and a prospective point of view, which are characteristic of high agency (Lent, 2013). Once in the TA role, he capitalised on his sports ability and coaching experience. Immediately, he began to crystallise an ambition to teach. Aided by lifelong learning, Mark's career-identity moved into the upper left quadrant, as he became an ambitious careerist. Mark reflected, in retrospect that a shift in aspiration and ambition had occurred almost immediately, on his becoming a TA. He recognised at once, his path to qualified teacher status, and this became the key motivator for him, as a TA. This demonstrates that an agential career tourist may quickly exploit the fluidity of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix, when their latent or under-stated aspiration is crystallised by serendipitous events and positive interaction with relevant social worlds. In keeping with the ambitious careerist typology, at the time of the interview Mark's aspirations extended beyond his goal of achieving QTS, to potential opportunities in Australia.

Luke's narrative echoes Lent (2013), who suggests that agency is characterised by the ability to re-direct one's own path, when a relationship with a chosen career cannot be sustained. His narrative conveys a reasoned decision to discontinue a career in football, which he found unsustainable, logistically and financially: 'I loved it… but toward the end of two years I considered that professional football probably wasn't for me. I was like, right, I need something else to do.' (Luke).
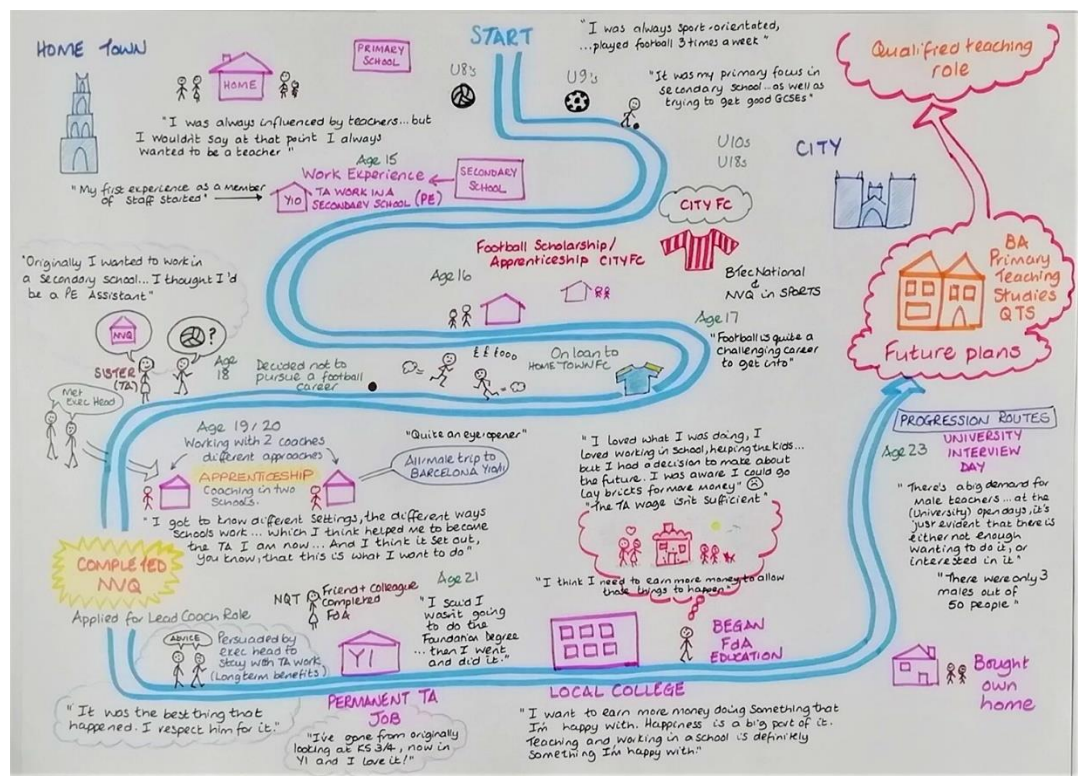
Figure 16: Graphic timeline (Luke). Career tourist.

Luke's narrative exhibits career tourism as a strategy, during his transition from football to a planful career in education, and the value of happenstance: 'Luckily, my sister worked in the school where I work now … she asked around, and I got a job as an apprentice, coaching and supporting PE in primary schools' (Luke). Pragmatically, undertaking the apprenticeship was time-consuming and kept Luke on a low income, but this was offset by the qualification he would gain. As Saccomanno (2017) suggests, self-negotiation in careers can involve conservation of existing identity markers, which can be re-established in fresh contexts. Supporting PE and coaching sports in schools enabled Luke to preserve and apply his personal resources and identity markers of sports excellence in a new role, whilst exploring other career possibilities within the work sector.

Calling to mind the socio-ecological systems model (Figure 1, p.22), Luke's interactions with colleagues and managers at the school proved instrumental in his becoming a more ambitious careerist, particularly the intervention of

the executive head, who encouraged Luke to move out of coaching into a classroom-based TA position.

> He said, "Wanting the best for you, I'm going to put you in a classroom. That's what's going to be best for you." It was quite a turning point … So, my decision was, become a classroom TA, go and do a foundation degree at college and progress the career, to primary school teacher. (Luke)

The analysis of Luke's narrative suggests that at this 'turning point', he ceased being a career tourist to become an incremental career-crafter. This was demonstrated in the narrative, in which Luke spoke about the series of steps he would continue to take to reach his goal. The conversation with the executive head helped Luke to clarify his career-thinking around his aspirations and his long-term potential. By moving from sports coaching into the classroom, Luke re-positioned himself, to pursue his new goal of becoming a primary teacher.

Luke's narrative evaluation focussed on the limited longevity of TA work, which he saw as unsustainable, financially and therefore obstructive to later life decisions. This demonstrates fore-thought, which Lent (2013) argues is characteristic of agency and makes it possible to 'envision, forge, pursue and adjust career plans' (p.6).  At the time of the interview, Luke was nearing completion of his foundation degree and about to commence a progression route to qualify as a teacher.

Luke's narrative evaluation suggested a long-term aspiration and commitment to economic independence and support for a family. The graphic timeline (Figure 16) contrasts the pressure Luke described, when commuting between two football clubs while 'on loan' as an apprentice player, and the comparative calm of his imagined, domestic future.  These personal aspirations are bound up in normative, gendered expectations of men's working lives and Luke's self-positioning as the primary provider for his future dependants.  By taking this long-term perspective on career stability, Luke's narrative also resonates with Saccomanno (2017, p.151) who suggests that

personal goals 'shift through a person's life-course', reflecting individuals' self-concept and negotiation of ambition in terms of economic, cultural and social contexts.

Nevertheless, Luke emphasised that earnings-potential was not the only driver of his career-thinking. He aspired to remain in a work context that he enjoyed and found fulfilling. Moving from TA work into a better paid teaching role was strategic towards realising that future, both in terms of financial security and personal happiness. In his own words, Luke's narrative demonstrates that alongside financial security, the achievement of personal happiness is his key motivator and aspiration:

> I love what I'm doing now, it's what I want to do and that's why I've chosen to do teaching. I could earn more money doing something else … go and lay bricks in rain and snow … and earn good money, but not be happy.  I want to earn my money doing something that I'm happy with. (Luke).

Aspiration to create a balance between work, income and personal happiness is exemplified further in Aarons' career narrative.  Whilst he moved between three employment sectors before becoming a TA, Aaron's narrative suggests his career tourism was strategic rather than exploratory.  For example, his move from nursery to funeral services was due to a re-negotiation of financial resources. This type of negotiation frequently involves compromise, between the career goal itself and the means by which it is made achievable (Saccomanno, 2017).

I propose that Aaron's narrative exhibits a negotiated, strategic form of career tourism which suspends but does not lose sight of his aspiration. In effect, planned detours from Aaron's preferred path funded his long-term career goals. The graphic timeline (Figure 17), is centred on Aaron's 'home school'. Aaron grew up in a house adjacent to the 'home school' site and eventually worked at there as a TA. The timeline shows Aaron's career diversifying into different areas and then returning to the 'home school' and his aspirational
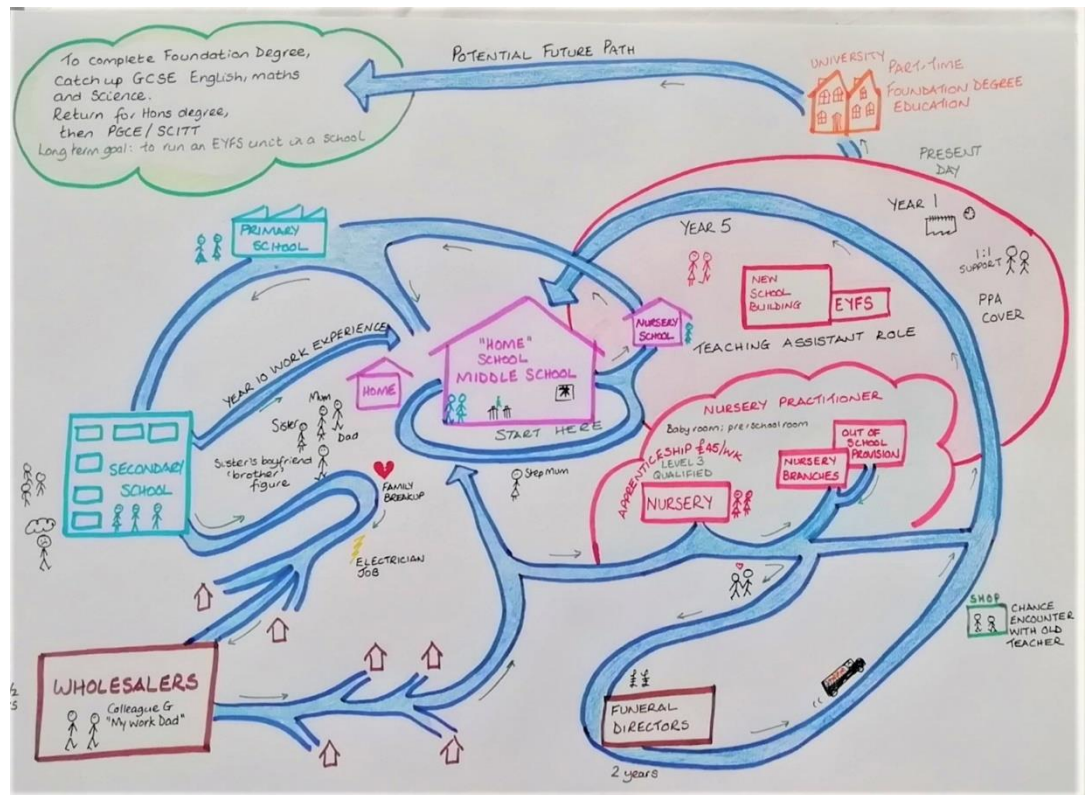
future in education.



Figure 17: Graphic timeline (Aaron). Negotiated, strategic career tourism.

The graphic timeline (Figure 18) brings out the way in which Aaron's career tourism enabled him to cross between and negotiate gender barriers. His career narrative alternates between feminised spaces of nursery and primary education, and more male-concentrated environments. Aaron treated the latter as necessary, temporary diversions from his long-term aspiration to become an educator. Notwithstanding macro-influences which situate childcare as a feminised, low-status occupation in the national socio-economic structure (Apple, 2015) Aaron's strategic move from the warehouse to an apprenticeship at a nursery enabled him to develop his skills and develop his career-identity with professional experience and qualifications which would benefit his nascent aspiration to teach. However, the limited earnings potential of childcare remained problematic for Aaron in the longer term and prompted his move into funeral services.

Characteristic of career tourism, Aaron's narrative contains a serendipitous moment. A chance encounter with an influential figure from Aaron's childhood prompted him to re-evaluate and re-negotiate his goals. As a deliberate, agential step, Aaron left funeral services to take a TA post at his childhood school. Although an Early Childhood specialist, Aaron had to negotiate a move to the Reception Class after being placed first in Year 6. His narrative reflects his determination to resist normative, gendered discourses and retain his Early Childhood specialism as fundamental to his career-identity, through his long-term aspiration to lead an Early Years unit in a school.

At the time of the interview, the narrative indicated that Aaron's agency was augmented by high aspiration, to craft his education career, incrementally. This typology occupies the upper left quadrant of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix and is discussed in the following paragraphs. Aaron's example corroborates the fluidity of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix. His narrative and graphic timeline therefore support the argument that whilst the matrix helps to analyse the interplay between aspiration and agency in career narratives, the suggested typologies within the matrix are fluid, and have the capacity to support one another.

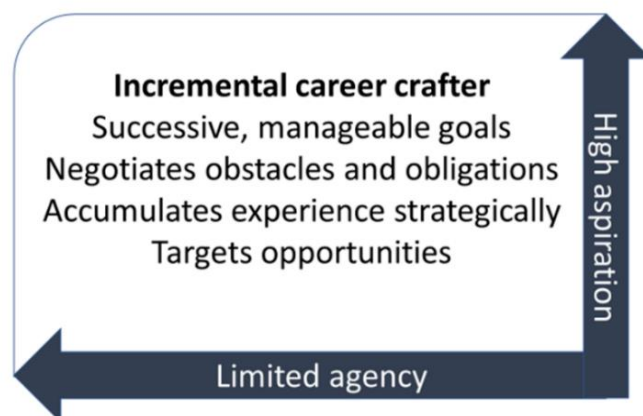### 6.3.3 Upper left quadrant: the incremental career-crafter. (Examples: Ben, Will.)



Figure 18: Incremental career-crafter (high aspiration, limited agency).

I propose that the incremental career-crafter builds a career through a series of manageable steps. Whilst their long-term ambition may be distant or held in reserve, incremental career-crafters are driven by a strong, generalised aspiration for personal growth. Agency is usually present, but the individual's agential career-identity might be under-resourced by lack of qualifications or limited by extraneous factors such as family obligations. Incremental career-crafters accumulate experience and qualifications gradually, by focussing on one or two short or medium-term goals at a time. This enables their agential career-identity to develop, progressively. Their narratives are characterised by increasingly ambitious goals, as they progress through measured stages of experience, learning and achievement. The FD Education and other forms of lifelong learning emerge from the data as significant in this quadrant, as accrued qualifications stimulated participants' motivation and converted a generalised sense of aspiration to concrete, achievable ambitions.

Participants' narratives suggest that this incremental strategy of career-crafting functions even when continuity is disrupted, and agency is restricted. Agency might be temporarily curtailed, but high levels of aspiration enabled incremental career-crafters such as Ben to progress their career, by seeking out and focussing on the next, short-term goal. The following paragraphs draw upon the narrative data to illustrate the significance of aspiration to incremental career-crafting and its ability to harness diminished agency, to overcome barriers and drive career progression.

Ben's narrative illustrates the interaction of aspiration and agency in the upper left quadrant, and the capacity for an aspirational individual to use whatever resources they have, to craft their career incrementally, in the face of limited agency. Factory worker Ben was motivated to become a TA to improve his job-satisfaction and sense of self-worth. He lacked relevant qualifications, which restricted his agency to change careers. An unpaid position in a school would enable Ben to work towards an NVQ (STLS) but his agency was further limited by the need to support himself, financially. Seeing

this as a short-term barrier, Ben overcame the obstacle of unpaid work by continuing to work late shifts at the factory: '…that's what I'm grateful for. The factory… I'm grateful that I was able to do that because of the shift pattern.' (Ben). This echoes Lent's (2013) notion of agency in which paid work provides funding for the self-as-project. Ben entered a project of incremental career-crafting in which he focused on one short-term goal at a time.
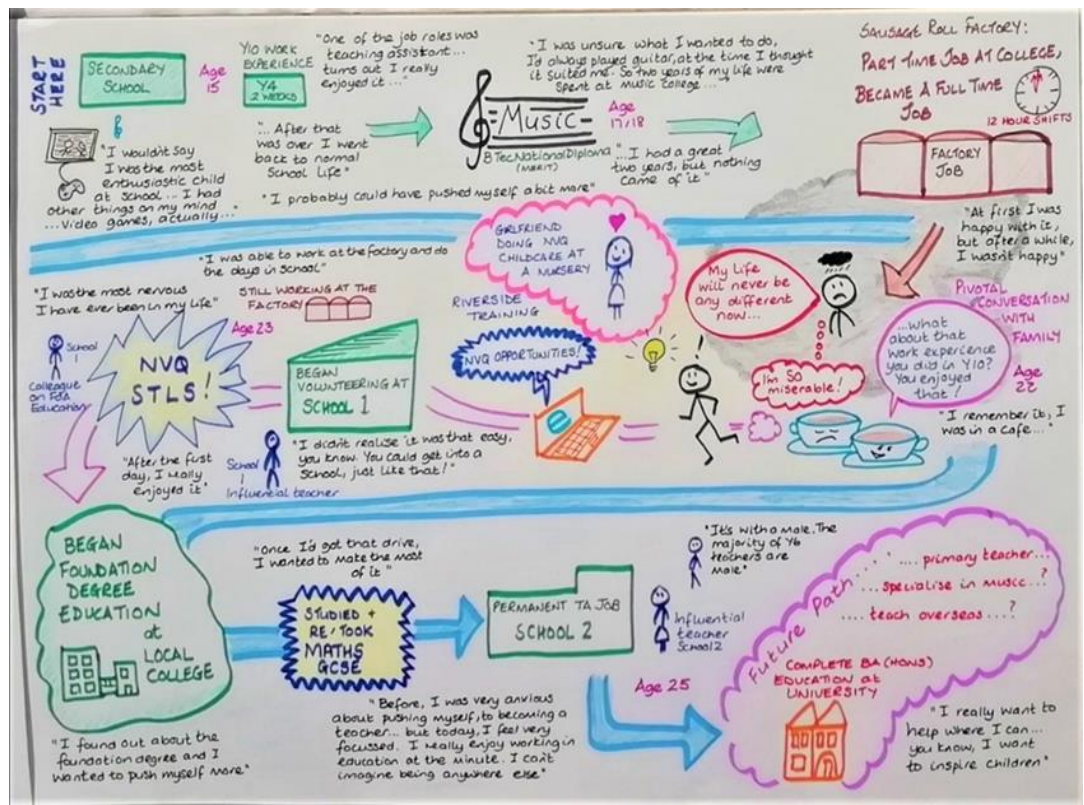


Figure 19: Graphic timeline (Ben). Incremental career-crafter

Thus, Ben demonstrated, as discussed by Lent (2013) the ability to work within existing social and economic structures, whilst effecting change in his own life. Re-taking GCSE Maths enabled Ben to repair a gap in the past (Saccomanno, 2017) and continue crafting his career, incrementally. The graphic timeline (Figure 19) shows the impetus of Ben's career-identity and career trajectory, as he came out of a depressed period of low engagement into a fresh paradigm of incremental career-crafting. Ben's aspirations drove him to negotiate and adapt his circumstances, as he negotiated the successive challenges of STLS, GCSE, finding a paid TA role, undertaking the FD Education

and submitting his application for a BA (Hons) progression route. His career-thinking maintained its momentum and as his plans became increasingly curious, aspirational and ambitious:

> My plans are now, obviously to get my honours. I might go into teacher training … or the more extreme route in a sense I guess, is to go abroad and teach … I have thought about being a music teacher as well. It might come up somewhere in the future. At the minute, my mind-set is just being a primary school teacher or being a teacher abroad. (Ben).

Will's narrative demonstrates how a temporary interruption to agency led him to an incremental career paradigm, which he chose to continue as his agency was restored. Will encountered an early set back in his career-thinking: 'I didn't pass my A levels. I had a vague idea that I originally wanted to be a PE teacher, but when the A levels didn't come to fruition it kind of shut me down.' (Will). Will became a TA while still a teenager through an apprenticeship at a cross-phase special needs school. He explained his incremental approach to career-crafting in his own words:

> I went in there as an apprentice, not really sure what I wanted to do, then I looked into the routes into teaching and saw the offer at [University] of the foundation degree. I thought that would be a way in, and it would give me time to decide, because you have to have the two years' experience in a school before you apply. So, I did my two years' experience as an apprentice, and enjoyed it. The school seemed to think I was doing quite well; they took me on as a TA the year after. I applied to [University] and got onto the course. … I got taken on as HLTA as well. I went for that role, thinking that it would give me an idea whether I enjoyed the responsibility of being a teacher and doing planning, the assessing and everything. (Will)

This graphic timeline (Figure 20) shows Will's incremental career progress, from his early work-experience and football coaching activities through to his future career-thinking. Will's negotiated steps included apprenticeship, TA/HLTA role, FD Education, BA(Hons) Education and PGCE.
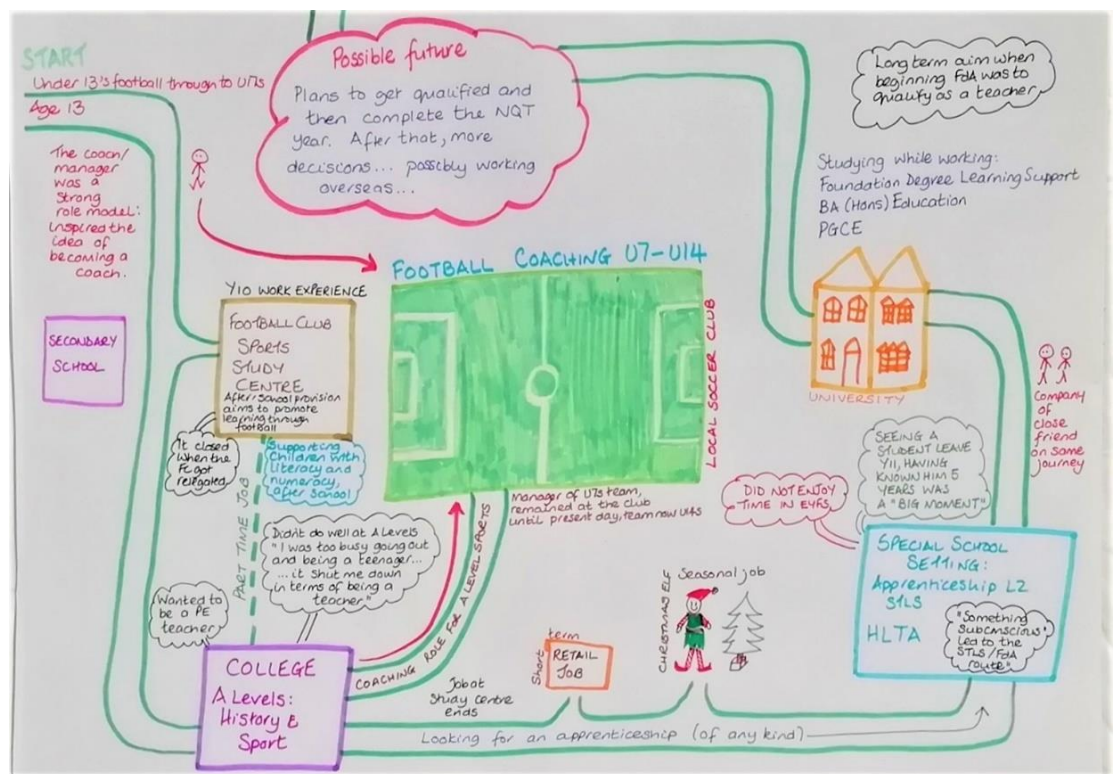
Figure 20: Graphic timeline (Will). Incremental career-crafter

My analysis of Will's narrative suggests that incremental career-crafting provided him with time to think about, plan and develop insight into the work sector whilst accumulating personal resources and evaluating his progress at each step. By the time Will was in his final year of the FD Education, he was negotiating an incremental route to teacher training. At the time of the interview, Will had recently completed BA(Hons) Education and just commenced a full-time PGCE programme.

> Once I'd got that degree, PGCE was the next progression; it was the kind of next step … get fully qualified, and get my NQT year under my belt, and after that I can decide whether I want to experience other things or do something completely different for a bit, and then I can come back to it.  (Will).

This evaluation suggests that Will was still an incremental career-crafter, even though his agency had vastly increased alongside his professional growth. As a TA, Will was evidently motivated by the potential career development he believed the job offered, which re-awakened and nurtured his ambition to

teach. With that ambition now almost realised, he retained his generalised aspiration to explore multiple possible futures and continue his personal growth. This was demonstrated by Will's strategic career-thinking and alertness to potential opportunities.

In summary, whilst individual career-identities might exhibit lowered or interrupted agency the upper left quadrant of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix suggests that when agency is buoyed by aspiration it can be harnessed in incremental activities. Cumulatively, these activities enable agency to grow and consolidate into successfully achieved ambitions. Hence this quadrant is potentially the most transformational in the Agency and Aspiration Matrix.

### 6.3.4 Lower left quadrant: the delayed traveller. (Examples: Ben, Roy, James.)



Figure 21: Delayed traveller (Limited agency, limited aspiration).

The lower left quadrant of the ma

Figure 21) represents episodes in career narratives which are characterised by limited career-thinking and lack of goal setting. My analysis of the narratives found that when agency and aspiration are both lowered the individual does not easily envisage a career trajectory for themselves and may enter a period of withdrawal. This was suggested in three of the narratives in this study (Ben, James and Roy). In each case, lowered agency and aspiration imposed a temporary pause in career-thinking, rather than arresting participants'

careers permanently. I therefore term this paradigm the 'delayed traveller'. This section of the discussion offers examples from the narratives, which illustrate a nullifying effect of internal and external influences on career-identity and career engagement. This section also celebrates participants' recovery from this phase, the way in which they overcame their limitations to become TAs, and the renewed aspiration and agency they demonstrated, to reach their goals and find personal fulfilment as educators.

Unlike the upper left quadrant in which a high level of aspiration compensates for temporary limitations on agency, 'delayed travellers' experience a diminished sense of both aspiration and agency, which makes it difficult for them to depart from this paradigm. James referred to this as being 'in a rut' (James). For example, Ben explained that after studying music for two years, 'nothing came of it.' (Ben). His unhappiness and sense of lost opportunity soon undermined his sense of agency and aspiration:

> I ended up getting into factory work and I just wasn't happy in what I was doing. I know it sounds ridiculous, because I was like, 21, 22, but I just had this mind-set that it's too late to do anything, and I couldn't really do much anyway … Yeah, if you'd met me then, I was probably one of the most miserable people you'd ever meet. (Ben)

This dark period in Ben's career narrative is shown in the graphic timeline before he moved into incremental career-crafting (Figure 19, p. 128).

Participants' accounts of how they re-engaged with their career-thinking and recovered their agency suggest that renewed aspiration enabled them to recover their self-worth and a motivational sense of making a positive contribution. Triggers for this might be quite sudden and unexpected. James and Ben each experienced awakening moments, when they suddenly took stock of their situation, and determined to improve things. For Ben, this was mediated by his family and a local opportunity to train as a TA. James explained how his own, independent 'waking-up' experience took him far from home:

Things went a bit wrong. There were problems at home, and I think I had a few problems of my own. I left school, I didn't do 'A' levels and I didn't go to college. I was stuck in a dead-end job in a call centre … you just get into a rut and routine. I didn't have many friends, I wasn't really going out, socialising. Then one day I just woke up and thought, this is stupid. I'm only young, why am I doing these boring jobs? And then a job for [holiday company] came up. I had never looked at that sort of job before. But I think I thought, you know, I just need to get up, move away from home for a bit. And I did… I got the job and moved down south to work for [holiday company]. (James).

This aligns to some extent, to Saccomanno's (2017) negotiation based on a desire to adjust work-life balance, James re-prioritised work as a source of intrinsic reward, rather than merely extrinsic remuneration. However, individuals do not transform themselves 'on a whim', there needs to be a concept of a 'possible self' Lent (2013, p.4). At this time, James' long-term future remained undetermined. Negotiation of professional goals came later, once he had strengthened his career-identity, grown in aspiration and established his agency, through interaction with the social world of work.
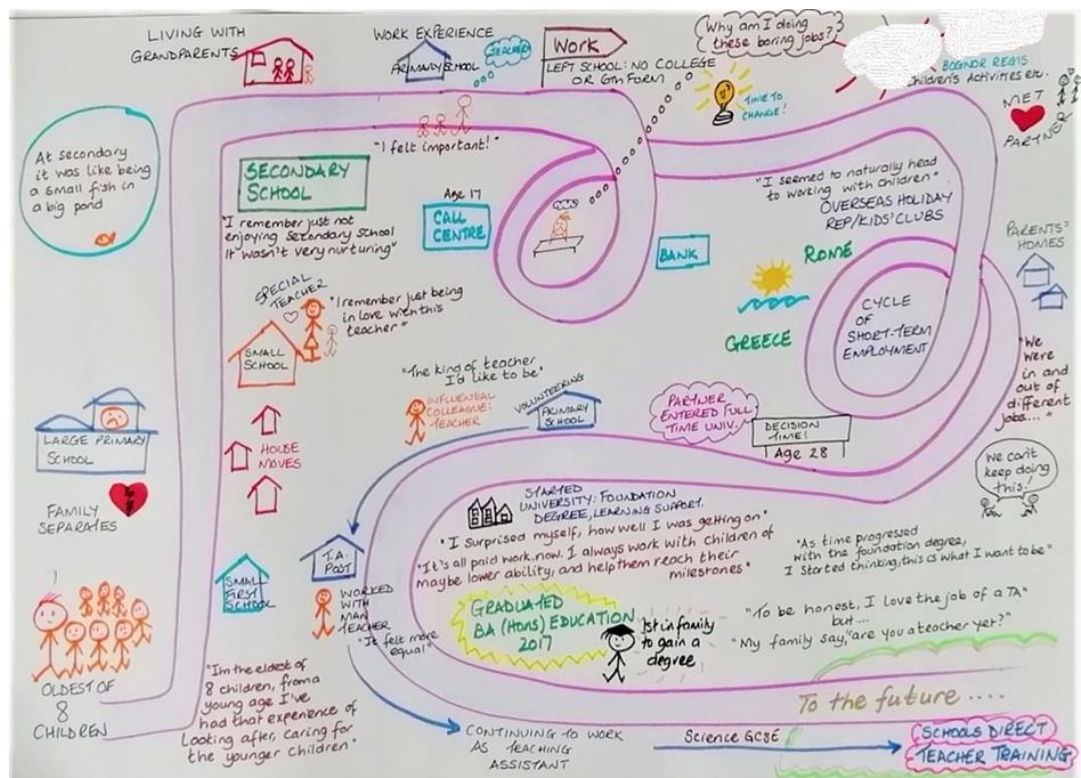


Figure 22: Graphic timeline (James). Delayed traveller and career tourist.

James entered a period of career tourism in which he gathered skills and confidence with adults and children, working in children's holiday clubs in the UK and abroad. The graphic timeline (Figure 22) shows this cycle of short-term contracts, which eventually became unsustainable. James re-negotiated his goals in relation to work-life balance and his new, spousal relationship: 'At that point I felt that we needed to get some qualifications under our belts' (James). The timeline shows this as a milestone, decision point in James' career narrative.

James had a latent, unexpressed aspiration to teach, from childhood, but this aspiration was 'jeopardised by gaps in the past' (Saccomanno, 2017, p.556). James' lack of 'A' levels prevented him from entering a traditional degree. He began a FD in Childhood and Youth, taking account of his practical experience working with children in the holiday industry. Serendipitously, the only practical placement James could find, to support his studies was volunteering in a school, which after a few months led to a permanent TA job. With agential agility, as described by Lent (2013), James negotiated a transfer to the FD Education, and set himself the long-term goal of becoming a qualified teacher. His narrative evaluation demonstrates his changing career-identity, as a competent educator, through his interaction with the FD and the work sector. Thus, through a combination of serendipity and agency, James utilised the FD education and his opportunity to become a TA, to repair gaps in his past. At the time of the life-grid interview James' narrative occupied the upper left quadrant of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix. As an incremental career-crafter, James had recently completed the BA(Hons) Education and was in the application process for a school-centred teacher training programme.

In the final example related to this quadrant, Roy's narrative demonstrates the impact of a critical life event, which can rob the individual of identity markers, resources and agency. Having left the army, Roy sustained a life-changing injury which prevented him from pursuing his work as a professional

driver. This demanded a thorough re-evaluation of his long-term future. Loss

of agency robbed Roy of aspirational career-thinking. He gave up his partially-

completed Open University degree, and his narrative describes a period of

low social engagement which, through the lens of the Agency and Aspiration

Matrix, typifies the delayed traveller.

> The doctor said, "You've got to stop working". That led to everything
> going tits-up, I lost my job, my career and we lost our house. We
> moved in with my wife's family who were running a pub. In a sense I
> became a househusband.  I felt I had nothing to talk to people about.
> So, I would find I was sitting upstairs on my own, wondering what to
> do. (Roy)



Figure 23: Graphic Timeline (Roy). Delayed traveller to incremental career-
thinking.

The graphic timeline (

Figure 23) shows that whilst in the army, Roy developed a habit of lifelong

learning, and gathered enhanced resources for his     career-identity, by

attending in-service courses and accumulating licences and taking GCSEs by distance learning. The timeline illustrates the way Roy's agency was gradually restored after his injury, by coming to terms with his new situation and finding some unexpected opportunities at his daughter's school, which helped him to re-construct his career-identity and renew his career-thinking. When combined with his accrued experience as an army instructor, becoming a volunteer TA stimulated Roy to re-imagine his future and ways to convert his existing resources to a new career (Saccomanno, 2017). With his commitment to lifelong-learning re-awakened, Roy found that the local college became a pivotal influence in his career-renewal (Lent, 2013). He attended numerous short and medium-term courses, eventually leading to the FD Education. Therefore, Roy's interactions with the social world of education at micro level (the primary school) and macro level (the college) furnished the gradual recovery and re-construction of his agency and aspiration.

Roy's narrative reveals an inner-negotiation of his own construct of masculinity and those of others. He found the adjustment to the female-concentrated social world of primary school challenging. His long-term, future self continued to be influenced and perhaps restricted by Roy's self-construct as a 'middle-aged bloke' (Roy) working in primary education. This might be due to an essentialist version of masculinity becoming deeply embedded in Roy's career-identity, via the hegemonic expectations that were familiar in his army career. This suggests that personal constructs of gender have potential to be limiting influence upon, as well enabling aspirational career-thinking.

At the time of the interview Roy was nearing completion of his FD and had applied for a progression route. He was aspirational in his desire to learn, but his career goal remained under review: 'I'll finish the degree, and I'm looking at PGCE. But, if I got a job in the pastoral side of it, then I might not do the PGCE. But then I look at it and think, well I've done this much...' (Roy).

Therefore, the analysis sees Roy, at this time, as an 'incremental career-thinker' as well as incremental career-crafter.

This part of the discussion has demonstrated the power of the graphic timelines to capture and convey unique career narratives, not simply as illustration but as a way of unifying 'radial' narrative data into structured and coherent career narratives that reveal connections between milestone events and experiences. The discussion highlights the uniqueness of each participant's story. Undertaking this process has emphasised to me, the uniquely human nature of each participant's story, in keeping with my original guiding principle that everyone has a story to tell.

I have applied the Agency and Aspiration Matrix to the data and demonstrated its potential as an interpretive lens. Thus, I have tested my own model as an analytical tool. Other potential applications of the graphic timeline methodology and the Agency and Aspiration Matrix are proposed in Chapter 7.

# 7.0 Conclusion

This study and its findings offer a contribution to ongoing debates about men working in primary education by giving voice to a relatively unseen and unheard group of men who are working as TAs. The study sought to generate, capture and share the hidden stories of men becoming teaching assistants, and asked: *What motivates men to become teaching assistants? What are their experiences and aspirations?*

The literature constructs TA work as a low status, feminised occupation (Barkham, 2008, Graves 2012). Opportunities for advancement within the TA role are characteristically few, the 'ceiling' for progression is relatively low (Kanter, 1993; Williams, 1995) and contracts are precariously dependent upon funding streams, school cohort size and staff deployment decisions (Blatchford et al, 2012). Combined, these factors present the TA role as a job with relatively limited scope or reward.

Against this unappealing backdrop, the question of what motivates men to become TAs emphasises the low material benefits and status of the role. It is unlikely that men becoming TAs are motivated singularly by the wage. The literature affirms that even in the presence of vocational rewards (Dik et al. 2009), such a scenario might not be tolerable for extended periods, to men who encounter gendered, social and financial pressures (Torre, 2018). The TA role as a context for employment needs to offer something else that is of sufficient value, intrinsic reward or future promise to be worthy of individuals' investment of time, emotional engagement and personal effort. To understand this better, I wanted to investigate what had motivated some of the men who are already working as TAs, what had attracted them to the role, their experiences of becoming TAs, and their aspirations.

This study posits that the motivations, experiences and aspirations of men becoming TAs are interwoven and holistic. Vocation is a factor in attracting men to the TA role, but it is augmented by the opportunity for professional

development within a self-directed, negotiated career narrative. In combination, these factors have the potential to retain men who become TAs, in the primary education sector if not in the TA role itself.

Potentially, men becoming TAs offer some solution to the on-going challenge of male recruitment in primary education. However, given the variety of participants' previous roles and experiences, I concur with the literature, that out-reaching to men as a homogenous group is unrealistic (Francis, 2008). I argue instead that men become TAs as part of their longer-term self-directed career narratives, which are motivated by their inner drivers and aspirations, rather than grand narratives about the TA role or the primary education sector as a whole.

The study concludes that men in this study were motivated to become TAs in three ways: a sense of vocation and wanting to make a positive contribution; a quest for self-fulfilment which for some involved repairing past, personal setbacks or failings; a means of crafting a legitimate, organic and self-directed career which would yield financial security and widen the horizons of their imagined future. Participants' experiences within the TA role were evidently enriching to their career-identities and offered challenge, enjoyment and professional development.

This concluding chapter offers an overview of the research outcomes. It draws together the factual and conceptual research findings in relation to the research questions. It establishes the study's usefulness in terms of a scholarly contribution to relevant discourses, and its application to professional and research practice. This chapter includes a critical reflection on my professional, academic development and suggests an agenda for future research activity. First, I review the study's ontological position, the nature of career as a narrative activity and the validity of the methodology and methods as legitimate means of studying careers.

## 7.1 Careers as narrative journeys: the synthesis of theory and method

This section explains how the study sustained its philosophical assumptions and values through its methodology. The study occupies the interpretive paradigm. The study's conceptual framework situates each participant as an agential individual at the centre of a socio-ecological system It illuminates the way in which the biological individual is influenced by, responds to and acts upon structural and social norms and boundaries, through interaction with social worlds (Burke & Stets, 2009) in the concurrent domains of home and family, work and lifelong learning. Its methodology comprised a narrative approach which enabled the participants' unique, lived experiences to be shared, analysed, understood and evaluated in the context of their career narratives. Throughout, the analysis considered the socio-ecological influences upon participants' career-identity and agency.

The theoretical framework of the socio-ecological systems model (Figure 1, p.22) was useful to the study, from research design to final analysis. It directed the choice of research approach and instruments, which were selected for their ability to promote participants' agency within the study, to generate, construct and evaluate their career narratives. This approach exposed the multiple, social and personal influences on participants' career-identity, agency and career decisions and enabled their exploration. The subsequent analysis of participants' career narratives constitutes career-crafting as a reflexive, on-going act of self-discovery, as well as a quest for one's own potential and security, within surrounding social structures. Hence, the concept of career-as-narrative is integral to each participant's autobiographical story.

The narrative approach in this study offers a meaningful and personalised layer of reflective evaluation and interpretation, inviting participants to review life-spanning motivations as well as immediate, goal-orientated factors. The five-stage methodology revealed the past, present and future

influences on participants' career-identities and illuminated the essential connections that underpin their career narratives.

A semi-structured, narrative interview supported by a life-grid enabled participants to review their earlier motivations and evaluate, in the light of later experience, whether their motivations were still valid or had since been discarded and replaced. The life-grid interview technique allowed themes to emerge across a life-spanning narrative within one interview encounter. At this stage it was evident that whilst career narratives may be assumed to be linear, the participants' narrative style emulated the Celtic storytelling form, with integrated and tangential threads, radiating around a central plot (Colley, 2010). Plotting key-moments and drawing graphic timelines respected the radial narrative form, whilst also allowing it to be visualised and interpreted as a coherent whole. The stage of assembled stories retold the radial narratives chronologically, drawing together causative connections and setting out the imagined future. The N-Vivo coding process highlighted unusual features and enabled the central tendencies of the data to emerge, across the entire sample (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). By looking at the detail in the narratives through the lens of the socio-ecological model (Figure 1, p.22), I was able to trace relationships between the individual, their social worlds, and the ways in which their lived experiences resourced (or limited) participants' career-identity and agency (Vogelsang et al, 2018).

Throughout this study, career narratives are entwined with the metaphor of journeys. Participants themselves used phrases such as 'progress', 'moving up', 'route', 'the next step', and 'turning point', suggesting that a career narrative is conceived as a personal journey. The graphic timelines appropriated this interpretation of career as a journey, inspired by the imagery of *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan 1768, 2000). The resultant images are a way of interpreting as well as recording career narratives. For example, the graphic timelines show periods of movement and pause, changes of direction and possible future destinations, interspersed with obstacles and

barriers, which convey the sense of a convoluted journey. The Agency and Aspiration Matrix (Figure 11) continues this symbolism through the expressions, 'delayed traveller' and 'career tourist'. The analysis shows that the TA role opened fresh and sometimes unexpected possibilities (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019), for participants upon their career journeys. This compounds the sense of research participants as travellers, seeking an imagined, possible future and exploring new horizons.

It is significant to the conclusions of the study, that the emerging themes were not as anticipated at the onset of the study. There was a shift in emphasis from gendered perspectives, towards creating a better understanding of aspiration and the way in which people develop their career-identities for agential career-crafting. This shifting emphasis shows how the research design responded to the themes that emerged inductively from the data. This aligns to my original aim, to capture and empower unheard, authentic voices within the discourse, and add fresh perspectives to a habitual debate about men in primary education. These fresh perspectives revealed participants' integration of TA work into their self-directed careers, and the way in which their career-identity led them to this path.

The narratives illuminated some gendered influences participants encountered once in the role, and their negotiations with wider, gendered social norms. The study highlights the motivational opportunities provided by the FD Education to act as an incentive for men to become TAs and remain in the sector long-term, by becoming teachers. In sum, this study has generated new knowledge of what motivates men to become TAs, their experiences and aspirations, and enabled fresh understandings of the FD Education as integral to their experience and aspiration.

I argue, therefore that the narrative approach was an appropriate choice for the study. It granted participants the freedom to craft their narratives, as they wished. The near absence of direct, reductive questioning created an open-

ended opportunity for participants to speak freely about any aspect of their career narratives, their motivations and experiences on becoming TAs, and their future aspirations. Thus, the participants' narratives influenced the direction of the findings. Participants selected their own points of interest and emphasis, according to their personal priorities, rather than those of the researcher, and this drove the analysis and conclusions.

The narratives concur that TAs' material rewards are generally perceived to be low and of limited motivational value, by themselves. However, the longitudinal connections and threads within participants' career narratives enabled me to conceptualise motivation as a process that develops over the life span, rather than an immediate promise of reward. I interpret this sustained type of motivation as intrinsic, vocational and frequently rooted in past experiences. At the same time, it is visionary and future-focussed, and promotes aspirational, reflexive career-thinking.

The study and its findings exemplify career-thinking as something more than a one-time set of decisions and goals (Savickas et al, 2009). Instead, it is an ongoing narrative activity that is embedded within the individual's personal biography and sense of self. Participants' retrospective evaluations of their own narratives gave insight into the attributes and personal resources they had gathered in various personal, work and leisure contexts, which they later conserved, converted and applied to the TA role. Analysis suggests that participants were motivated internally, through these personal experiences and attributes, to seek work which they felt would make the most of the accumulated skills and personal qualities which form their career-identities.

A self-directed career operates outside of organisational structures (Lent 2013) and its path is in the hands of the individual. In this study, becoming a TA was part of each participants' self-directed career, either as an intentional step within a long-term plan, or 'accidental' career tourism. This study concurs with Lent (2013) that agency, buoyed by aspiration is an essential

element of career-identity that individuals need, to direct their own careers and either conform to surrounding social structures and norms or depart from them. This study found examples of agential individuals crafting self-directed careers, taking advantage of certain structures, moving between social worlds and capitalising on affordances, whilst at the same time negotiating barriers and challenging gendered norms. Even so, in keeping with Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus' the study exposes the enduring influence of certain social constructs of gender and normative expectations of men and women, and their lasting power to influence longer-term career-thinking and participants' imagined futures.

As career narratives run concurrently with personal biographies, they are susceptible to the demands, affordances, interactions and structures of the surrounding social world. The study shows that participants experienced such influences subjectively, in accordance with their own circumstances, self-concept and sense of agency. Motivation and aspiration are embedded within career narratives and the efforts participants make to reach their goals. I argue that participants' motivations on becoming TAs are underpinned by their career-identity, agency and aspirations. In this study, the connection between participants' intrinsic motivation and aspiration intensified as they progressed in their lifelong learning, experience and qualifications, and began to see a more desirable future ahead. Hence there was evidence of longitudinal, intrinsic motivation developing over time, into goal-orientated, reflexive and increasingly ambitious career-thinking.

## 7.2 Gendered career decisions and experiences: rhetoric and reality

At the inception of this doctoral study, I adopted a position which credited the power of the socio-ecological system to influence individuals' career-identity. I anticipated that the data might expose the pressure of gendered expectations on men becoming TAs. However, despite the inevitable influences of habitual social norms and expectations, it remains important to acknowledge that socio-ecological systems, structures and socially-

constructed patterns of behaviour are mutually constitutive (Schoon & Heckhausen, 2019). The interactive dynamic of the socio-ecological model (Figure 1, p.22)enables individual behaviours to exert reciprocal influence and effect change, as they challenge the habitus of established norms (Jenkins, 1997; Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, whilst normative discourses assume an unfilled role in schools, which can only be resolved by men practitioners (Thornton & Briceno, 2008) the data emerging from this study about the participants' motivations for becoming TAs do not resonate directly with normative discourses around boys' failure, or a need for male role-models or father-figures in primary education (Warin & Wernersson, 2016).

The 'male repair' agenda (Younger & Warrington, 2008, p.429) argues that feminisation of the curriculum undermines educational outcomes for children, especially boys. These assumptions give rise to calls for more men in the primary education sector and cast men teachers as a panacea to a range of social ills, from boys' poor attainment in school to unemployment and family struggles. In practice, this attempt to counter gendered stereotypes further entrenches lay-normative, gendered constructs of men and women by suggesting that certain challenges can only be overcome by men. Some of the literature argues that hiring-preference (Cushman, 2005a, p. 232) and accelerated routes to senior management for men teachers devalues their potential skills in the classroom (Morrison, 2014), and further embeds an assumed patriarchy.  Moreover, the debate is further complicated by a socially-mediated and subjectively experienced climate of mistrust against men who work with young children (Burn & Pratt-Adams 2015). These contradictory discourses present a confused landscape for men practitioners, who are expected to perform as role models (Warin & Wernersson, 2016) and rescue the primary education sector from its own feminisation (Skelton, 2003), whilst on the other hand being constituted as a threat to women teachers' career progression or even to children's wellbeing. Moreover, if primary education is discursively gendered as 'female', juxtaposing male

practitioners as both a saviour and a threat may generate barriers to equal participation and unsettle the very gender-balance which the discourses demand.

Men becoming TAs ought to be a cause for celebration, but amid the confusion of competing discourses their contribution is overlooked in published research and might also be marginalised in practice. For example, there is some evidence in the study of gendered role-appropriation which implies stereotyped assumptions about a homogenous construct of masculinity, which is valued over other forms of social and cultural capital such as experience and qualifications.

From this doctoral research I argue that there is a disparity between the gendered discourses of men in primary education and the research participants' own motivations to become TAs. Some participants' longer-term career-thinking was influenced by wider, gendered expectations of men's working lives and the tendency of some, to identify with the normative construct of the patriarchal, male breadwinner. However, the decision to become a TA did not tend to be motivated by the rhetorical claims around men in primary education. Participants' narratives did not reference contemporary discourses about men's absence from primary education, as having had any bearing on their becoming a TA. Participants who alluded to these discourses reflected on them only after becoming TAs and having already made the decision to enter teacher training.

The reserved and reflective way that research participants recalled gendered issues in their narratives is significant in the context of research findings. It implies that whilst present to a degree, gender stereotyping is not the most prominent concern, for men becoming TAs. This suggests that whilst it operates in a female-concentrated social world and displays the defining social and economic characteristics of a feminised occupation, the content of TA role itself, and its techniques and responsibilities are not inevitably

gendered. The participants made a personal connection with the TA role, as a medium through which to express themselves as caring and nurturing adults. This offers a counterfoil to the 'patriarchal scripts' (Burn & Pratt-Adams, 2015, p.153) which cast men as authoritative and disciplinarian educators (Thornton & Bricheno, 2008). The presence of men TAs enacting care is a potential challenge to the perception of the TA role as inevitably maternal and accentuates the concept of multiple masculinities and femininities (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

Men becoming TAs who decided to transfer from one female-concentrated occupation to another by becoming primary teachers might be seen uncritically, as 'settlers' who have chosen to 'renounce gendered career expectations and commit to their given career' (Torre, 2018 p.285). However, when viewed through the lens of the Agency and Aspiration Matrix, there is something more planful within the participants' career-thinking, than merely settling within a given set of circumstances. On the contrary, participants exercised agency, to mobilise themselves and negotiate their ambitions. My analysis therefore resists the notion of 'settling', when applied to the study's sample group. The descriptions of glass-escalator rider (Williams, 1995, p.12) and 'stop-gapper' (Torre, 2018, p.285) also seem to misrepresent the participants in this study. This has prompted me to find another way of conceptualising the participants' career trajectories in relation to Torre's (2018) constructs of men in female-concentrated occupations.

I propose that the men who participated in this study are 'seekers' rather than settlers. My characterisation of 'seekers' reaffirms the metaphor of the career narrative as an auto-biographical journey, whose protagonists are intrinsically motivated and sufficiently agential to follow their own aspirations and find new horizons. They cultivate ambition through experiencing the TA role and engaging with lifelong learning. Their career paths are subject to and responsive to gender-specific pressures and influences, both positive and negative at micro and macro levels and participants must negotiate their

chosen route with themselves and with others. As seekers, the men in this study were motivated to become TAs by intrinsic drivers such as a vocation to help people, to listen to and inspire children, and a desire for meaningful work that offers variety and job satisfaction whilst making a positive difference to other people's lives. Simultaneously, TA work provided a context for participants' own self-directed careers. Accordingly, they tended not to view TA work as permanent, but they embraced it fully, as a stage in the journey towards a more sustainable career.

I argue that men becoming TAs ought to be able to experience an equitable position in the sector, which consolidates and defends men's status and contribution as legitimate practitioners across the entire primary phase. I argue that the tendency of contemporary discourse to focus on the assumed damage and deficit of men's absence from primary education is unhelpful to men becoming TAs. Instead, it might emphasise the potential rewards for men who become TAs, celebrate their presence in the classroom and the opportunities this might afford to children and adults, to perform, witness and interact with multiple masculinities and femininities. Hence, the ambiguous, homogenous concept of 'male role models' might be best replaced by opportunities for nurturing and caring relationships which are mutually enriching to the emerging self-concept and long-term career-identity of children and adults alike.

To understand more about what drives men's entry into the TA role, there is a potential avenue of future study, to investigate men's enactment of care as TAs. This might help to define the broader construct of TA work as androgynous emotional labour, rather than pure maternalism. Similarly, trends in the data suggest a latent connection between the vocationalism of football coaching and participants' calling to teach. This invites further research to explore the social and cultural capital of sports coaching and its connectivity with supporting children's learning in school. For example, this might explore how sports coaching could share some of its values, technical

and social mores with the TA role, and how these might be applied consciously, in practice.

## 7.3 Agency and aspiration: a necessary alliance

My enquiry into the aspirations of men becoming teaching assistants is an essential part of the analysis of participants' career narratives. The open-ended life-grid interview technique enabled the essence of participants' aspirations to come to the surface, from the deep pool of their narratives. Participants' aspirations were perceptible in the way they spoke about their long-term future, and throughout the body of their career narratives. I believe that this method gave participants' aspirations greater authenticity and deeper meaning, as part of their longitudinal career narratives, than if I had questioned participants about them, directly. Through analysis of the narratives, I came to recognise aspirational career-thinking as an essential underpinning to participants' self-directed career narratives and agential career-crafting.

The analysis revealed the tensions that can frustrate aspirational career-thinking, to delay or interrupt career journeys. Career-thinking was enmeshed with self-concept and the way in which participants constituted themselves through their work. For example, the absence of intrinsic reward, or absence of work itself tended to lower participants' self-regard, which appeared to limit their capacity for aspirational career-thinking. In a similar manner, financial, emotional and practical pressures may curtail personal agency and delay agential career-crafting. Nevertheless, the narratives showed the mutual, compensatory effect of aspiration and agency. Aspirational thinking enabled participants to maintain engagement with their careers even when their agency was limited. Similarly, agency enabled them to explore and enrich their career-identity even when their personal aspirations were still unclear. This analysis suggested a reciprocal balance between aspiration and agency in career-thinking and career-crafting, which inspired me to design the Agency and Aspiration Matrix.

As a doctoral candidate, I found the process of creating the Agency and Aspiration Matrix (Figure 11) one of the most challenging and enlightening aspects of the process. It developed my ability to abstract a central thesis from a generalised intuition about agency and aspiration, that emerged from my interpretation of the data. I evaluated the matrix as an interpretive tool by using it as a lens to review the data. This developed my understanding of the nature of aspiration and its relationship with agency. Subsequently, I have proposed four typologies in the career journeys of men becoming TAs. They are characterised by the relative interaction of aspiration and agency, at key moments in each career narrative.

This exercise was useful when interpreting the factors that can exert a driving or halting influence on a career narrative.  It enabled me to recognise and interrogate the motivations of men becoming TAs, and the ways in which the structures and expectations of socio-ecological systems affect career narratives in positive and negative ways.  From this, I argue that the Agency and Aspiration Matrix which I have formulated presents a useful conceptual and analytical tool with which to explore, interpret and help people engage with their career-identity, aspirations and agency, and the barriers and affordances to ambitious career trajectories. The fluidity within the matrix emphasises the changeability of surrounding conditions and the way these affect career narratives. From this analysis, I propose that periods of stagnation and loss of goals in career narratives can be overcome. This is frequently aided by 'happenstance' (Krumboltz, 2009), mediation by other people and the ability of the individual to capitalise on agency and aspiration, each to the benefit of the other.

Further, I argue that agency is most effectively applied to career-crafting when it is augmented by aspirational career-thinking. When agency and aspiration work together, they allow a conscious ambition to emerge. Moreover, aspiration tends to be a necessitous stage in the formation of concrete ambitions. Aspiration and agency may be fragile but can

compensate for one another, and in the right conditions, each can be enriched by the other.

There are implications for practice when supporting students whose studies are affected by outside pressures, and those who experience a downturn in agency, aspiration or both. I am conscious of the challenge of how to recognise and help students work through these phenomena, so that they might continue to gain the most from their studies and fortify their agency and aspiration. This implication leaves me questioning my own skills and authority in this area, as a non-specialist in careers counselling. Therefore, it is an area in which I would like to undertake further development and potentially broaden my professional role.

## 7.4 The distinctive, motivational value of the Foundation Degree Education in career journeys of men becoming TAs.

Whilst, in a practical sense, lifelong learning tends to focus on skills and qualifications (EC, 2001), there is a sub-text in which lifelong learning aims to develop individuals' personal agency and reflexivity (Saccomanno, 2017). As a practitioner and researcher, I became interested in the sub-text relating to men becoming TAs, and how the FD Education might contribute to and profit their career-identity and career narratives. The outcomes of this study acknowledge participants' engagement with lifelong learning before, during and after the FD Education, and emphasise the significance of lifelong learning in reflexive career-crafting.

The outcomes of this study acknowledge participants' motivational engagement with lifelong learning, before and during and after the FD Education. The findings endorse the FD Education as a viable professional development route for aspirational TAs, which is a worthwhile undertaking for the University, the student participants and the primary education sector in which they work. Moreover, for participants in this study, I argue that the TA role forms part of an incremental, professional development route to teacher training, which is augmented by an effective interface between

professional practice and lifelong learning. I do not claim that this route is exclusive to men becoming TAs. Indeed, the prevalence of women students undertaking the FD Education suggests the reverse.

The FD Education and its progression routes constitute a series of incremental, concrete steps and self-directed achievement which offer extrinsic, motivational goals that run concurrently with the accumulation of experience within the TA role. This aligns to the concept of qualifications as enhanced resources for career-identity, the accumulation of which increases people's self-expectations and drives them to become more ambitious in their careers (Saccomanno, 2009). Thus, lifelong learning has both motivated and facilitated the participants' incremental career-crafting. Additionally, participants' engagement with the TA role enabled them to ground their aspirational career-thinking in reality (Padilla-Carmona & Martínez-García, 2013), and develop achievable goals. This combination of lifelong learning and immersion in the work-context can provide fruitful conditions, to enhance TAs' career-identities and career narratives as they look towards their imagined futures.

Whilst the glass escalator premise (Williams, 1995) does not apply directly to the TA role, in which there is no established 'career ladder', the FD Education facilitates opportunities for TAs to depart from their subordinate, assistant roles, to become qualified teachers. The TA/FD Education route to teacher training has flexibility, enabling participants to maintain the multiple domains of their lives. Men in this study who chose the TA/FD Education route into teacher training acknowledged that it was a negotiated decision, which frequently demanded a higher financial stake, on behalf of family members, to support the individual working as a TA. This suggests that the FD Education might have practical advantages over full-time teacher training, but its dependency upon concurrent, low-paid or unpaid professional practice also renders it a somewhat high-risk option. This study suggests that this is a relatively short-term risk that participants were prepared to take, and that

they were frequently enabled by others to pursue this path, as a crucial step into Higher Education and its potential future outcomes.

I therefore argue that the FD Education is part of a continuum of lifelong learning, which builds agency and helps people to find their own path in self-directed career narratives. Hence it is a lead contributor of career-identity, aspiration and agency for the participants in this study and represents a significant part of their motivation. As a practitioner in professional development, I have gained fuller understanding of the target market for the FD Education, and the resources that students carry into the programme. The implication for my professional practice behoves me to consider how I might apply this greater awareness and respect for FD students' metaphorical journeys more consciously in my practice. This might be through direct engagement with students and colleagues to reach a shared understanding of the FD Education as a significant step in incremental career-crafting or ambitious career trajectories, depending on the surrounding conditions.

## 7.5 Telling hidden stories: reflective evaluation of my methodology

The narrative approach related effectively to the research aims and questions. The iterative research design of life-grid interviews, event plotting, graphic timelines and thematic analysis fostered an increasingly intimate knowledge of the narratives which enabled connections to be made between and within narratives. The data-tools effectively exposed connections between key moments (Savickas et al, 2009), participants' interactions with social worlds (Stokes & Wyn, 2007), and the ways in which these influenced participants' career-thinking and decisions.

The study's aims, philosophical assumptions, design and execution were intended to produce an iterative research experience.  I engaged with a range of techniques which are new to me and adapted them to my own research intentions. The process of research design incorporated the development of the co-constructed life-grid method, coupled with the graphic timeline as tool

which is both generative and interpretive. My early decision to avoid direct questioning and seek a continuous narrative enabled the life-grid interview to generate thick, storied data.

Graphic timelining is a feature of the research which emerged gradually and progressively. My practical skill and my understanding of its value as a research instrument have grown throughout the study. In practice, the graphic timelines proved to have multiple, unexpected benefits beyond the initial objective, of creating a bridge between the life-grid, key-moments and a coherent narrative. On reflection, the graphic timelines themselves formed part of a broader approach to organisation, and incubation and review of ideas (Margulies, 2002), which had already been generated in the life-grid interview and summarised through event plotting.

As I gained understanding of career-crafting through wider reading of research in the field of careers (e.g., Krumboltz, 2009; Savickas et al 2009; Lent, 2013) the graphic timelines provided a reference point for me, to illustrate and comprehend some characteristics of career narratives. Thus, as well as being a form of data, the graphic timelines became a visual learning tool, that both complements and enhances textual, essayist forms of learning (Sousanis, 2015b). The combination of oral narrative and visual representation offer a prospective contribution to future research. I would welcome opportunities to develop this further, possibly through working more directly with research participants on co-constructed graphic narratives.

I envision opportunities to develop the methodology in a range of research contexts, such as later-life career transitions in other areas of education. With some adaptation, the combination of graphic timelining and the Agency and Aspiration Matrix offer transferability to student engagement work at the University. Possible applications of the model include widening-participation activity or support for student wellbeing. It could provide a scaffold to help

students review their aspirations, career-identity and goals, potentially renewing motivation and helping to reduce risk of attrition.

Through the iterative processes of the research design, the data offered up its own thematic largesse. My responsibility as a researcher was to acknowledge and respect the emerging themes and give them due attention in the study's review of findings, analysis and conclusion.  On reflection, I believe that my research approach presented me with data and themes which are authentic to the participant voice and their priorities and enabled me to address the research questions. Significantly, the methods revealed aspects of participants' lives, motivations and aspirations and raised some unexpected theses. The research outcomes therefore illustrate the effective relationship between the underpinning, philosophical assumptions, the methodology, practical research techniques and new knowledge and understanding.   They give voice to an unheard group, and offer a contribution to an ongoing discourse, whilst suggesting methodological innovation, practical application and avenues for further enquiry.

## 7.6 Final reflections: we all have a story to tell

*'"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller, knocking on the moonlit door…*
*"Tell them that I came, and no one answered.  That I kept my word."'*
Walter de la Mare *'The Listeners'*

When starting this study, I felt a sense of obligation to a group of people whose stories have not been heard. Figuratively, amid intense, published and political debates about the TA role, gender-bias and men's place in primary education, it seemed that men becoming TAs were obscured, standing in the darkness, knocking on a moonlit door. I have endeavoured to generate, capture and tell the participants' hidden stories, and be faithful to their meaning-making and intentions. I trust that my study does justice to these stories, adds new voices to the conversation and aids understandings of the career journeys being undertaken by men becoming TAs.

At each stage of the research and within each participants' journey, I found that I gained fresh understanding about the potency of autobiographical story-telling in careers, and as a path to holistic self-knowledge and self-determination. From the design stage, when I first asked my parents and colleagues to share their narratives with me, I witnessed the lasting power of autobiographical stories to preserve the moment and emotion of experience, which continue to affect present day lives. The narrative act of connecting events together, making causative associations and finding lessons learned has had a personal outcome for me, in the way I view every student, every colleague and every family member. Each of us is a traveller with a powerful, hidden story that endures internally, even as we stand at the moonlit door.

This experience has changed the way that I listen to other people, and I continue to be inspired by people's resourcefulness, humbled by their fortitude and grateful for their candour. However, perhaps the biggest revelation to me has been my own hidden story. As I reflected on participants' narratives and the hinderances they had overcome in their agency and aspirations, I saw many parallels with my own life story. This was sometimes gratifying, and sometimes painful. It was always illuminating. I have challenged my long-held belief that my career narrative has largely been dependant on luck and other people's generosity of spirit, rather than my own design.  This was an opportunity to review my life's journey in detail and to better understand how events and happenstance have cultivated my ability to capture opportunity, even in the most challenging times. I have come to understand the resonating effects of experience and to celebrate my own self-reliance, inner strength and resilience. The lasting impression I take away from my doctoral journey is therefore as personal as it is academic. My own hidden story is one of being faithful to myself, confronting life's barriers one at a time, grasping unexpected opportunities with faith, and facing the uncertain future with the promise that I will always do my best. I have the

resources, I know how to commit to a challenge, and all I must be is brave enough.

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# Table of Appendices

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## Appendix A: Ethics documentation

## Participant information sheet

Researcher: Caroline Meredith

This research study forms part of my studies for the Professional Doctorate in Education

This research study is being supervised by: Dr Lindsey Smethem and Dr Carmen Mohamed at the University of Nottingham

You are being invited to participate in this research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what your participation will involve. Please read the following information, and do contact me if anything is unclear, or you would like further details. Take time to decide whether or not you would like to participate.

Thank you for reading this.

Aims: The research aims to gather information about men's experiences of working as teaching assistants in England. This is to enable better understanding of masculinity in primary education, from the perspective of men working as school support staff. The research aims to engage with men teaching assistants to allow them to share their experiences and perceptions, through narrative description in the style of life-story research. It sets out to provide evidence with which to deconstruct and challenge tensions, to promote better understanding of men in the primary workforce.

Requirements: Participation will involve at least two and up to four meetings with the researcher, between July 2017 and January 2019.

Anonymity/participation: As part of the presentation of the results, your words may be used in text form. These will be anonymised to protect your identity from readers of the research, employers or colleagues. All research data will be stored in a secure manner. Digital recordings and transcripts will be saved in a password-protected file, accessible only by the researcher.

Your identity will be anonymised and protected throughout. At each of the four meetings, you will have the opportunity to comment on your data and have the option to withdraw any part of the data or from the study entirely (up to meeting four). Should you choose to withdraw, all data relating to you will be withdrawn and destroyed.

Personal or sensitive information: Should sensitive information emerge during the interview (for example, your personal feelings towards a particular colleague; details about your own children) these will not be included as part of the research data.

Please note that your confidentiality and anonymity cannot be assured if, during the research, it comes to light you are involved in illegal or harmful behaviours which I may disclose to the appropriate authorities.

Informed, on-going consent: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form. The researcher will continue to review with you, your continuing consent at each of the four meetings.

Once the thesis arising from this research has been completed, a brief summary of the findings will be made available by the researcher upon application. It is also possible that the results will be shared, for example at academic conferences and in published journals. The data will be maintained for seven years, following publication.

If the study has harmed you in any way, or if you have any other questions about this research, you may contact my research supervisors at the University of Nottingham using the details below for further advice and information:

Supervisors:     Lindsey Smethem

         Email: lindsey.smethem@nottingham.ac.uk

             Carmen Mohamed

         Email: carmen.mohamed@nottingham.ac.uk

The contact for the Research Ethics Co-ordinator, should the participant wish to make a complaint on ethical grounds are:

educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

University of Nottingham, Professional Doctorate in Education Research Study:

## Consent form for semi-structured interviews

Researcher: Caroline Meredith

Research Supervisors: Dr Lindsey Smethem and Dr Carmen Mohamed

• I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.

• I understand the purpose of the research and my involvement in it

• I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that that this will not affect my status, now or in the future

• I understand that the interviews will be video-recorded using a digital device. Still photographs of the research instruments (life-grids/storyboards) may be taken. These may be utilised in future dissemination, e.g., research poster/conference presentations. (There will be no still photography of the participants.)

• I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, as part of a thesis submission or by other means, such as conference presentation materials (e.g., posters, electronic presentations) and articles in academic journals, I will not be identified, and my personal details will remain confidential.

• I understand that storage of electronic data will be password-protected, stored securely and only accessible by the researcher. The data will be retained by the researcher for a period of up to seven years after publication.

• I understand that I may contact the researcher or the research supervisor(s) if I require any further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in this research.

Signed…………………………………………………………. (research participant)

PRINT NAME…………………………………………………………………………………....
Date……………………..…………….

Contact details:

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The contact for the Research Ethics Co-ordinator, should the participant wish to make a complaint on ethical grounds are:

educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix B: Layout of life-grid

**Appendix A: Life-grid layout**

| | YEARS/ SCHOOL STAGES | CIRCUMSTANCES | EDUCATION / WORK | ACHIEVEMENTS | INFLUENCES (POSITIVE) | INFLUENCES (NEGATIVE) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SCHOOL & WORKING LIFE | | | | | | |

Appendix C: Life-grid in use

Appendix C: Life-grid in use (Mark)

# Appendix D: Event plotting

Appendix B: Event plotting

| Age | Circumstances | Education/work | Achievements/ activities | Influences (positive) | Influences (Negative) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Up to 7<br><br><br><br><br><br>Age 7+ | One of 2 children (sister)<br><br>Mum had part time job in evenings<br>Was qualified teacher but did not teach while children were young<br>*We were lucky, our mum was always there* | XXX primary school. M said he struggled in school<br><br>*Grandad put me through, paid for me to go to private school* | <br><br><br><br><br>Playing football at XXX FA Club from age 8-16 | Grandad's intervention in education | |
| Age 11 | | Independent secondary school – sports scholarship | | | |
| Age 15<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>Age 16 | Mum went back into teaching when M was in Y9<br><br><br><br><br><br>GCSEs | | Work experience at a school<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>Achieved GCSEs | Work exp: *Lots of PE, and when I wasn't doing PE I'd be in the class doing day to day sort of tasks.*<br>*I wanted to do something sporty and something worthwhile.* | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Moved to a different school for 6thy form/A levels | | 'Released' from football club | *To be honest I was more interested in sport. I didn't have a plan I was just doing things that I enjoyed doing.*<br>*I enjoyed doing it but at that sort of age… 15… I didn't know what I was going to do, I just enjoyed doing it then* | |
| 16-18 | School had an expectation that 6th formers would go to University | | English and PE A levels | *Those two years were the best two years of school that I had.* | |
| 18-19 | *When I first left 6th form I didn't want to go to Univ. straight away, I didn't feel I was ready for it. I decided to hold off for a little bit* | Left 6th form with no long-term plan I | | | *A lot of my friends (6th form) who went to university dropped out early* |
| 19 | Interested in police force so about 8 mth-1 yr after leaving | *I decided I wanted to try and get into the police force, I was a* | | | *Decided it wasn't for me… (police)* |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | school became a special constable. | *special constable for about two years* | | | *I'd go home and I be thinking about… for instance missing people* (more on the tape)<br><br>*I don't think I was mature enough at that stage, to be dealing with that sort of stuff*<br><br>*I enjoyed it but I don't think it was the right thing* |
| 19- 20 | Went to work in family business for a while (cross -over with police) | *Roofing, mixing concrete, putting tiles on rooves* | | After deciding against police and spending more time in the roofing business, saw applied for TA job at XXX school | |
| 20-21 | Not actively seeking work in a school but came across the opportunity to work in a school and thought he would give it a try. (Still thinking | independent sector prep school. Ages 4-11, from nursery to Y6 | Successfully applied for job as TA/PE asst | His old English teacher was now school head, which was helpful when he went for the job | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | about the opportunity to do something 'sporty') | | | | |
| 21-22 | | Working with pupil in Y3, shadowing the PE teacher on Monday and Wednesday. Has now taken on the role of leading PE but working in classes as well. Class size is about 10 children. He is now classed as a form tutor for class of pupils Age 3-6 | Achieved STLS 2<br><br>(Not classed as apprenticeship.)<br><br>Working full time, an assessor from college would come in and see how we're getting on.  (Paraphrased) | *I really like that part of it (form tutor).*<br>*I think it is that responsibility of having them…* | |
| Age 22-23 | Applied for FD Education at University | | Gained place at university | *Someone at work had done the course, finished last year. We were in a very similar position, she's a teaching assistant.* | |
| Age 23 | Began FD course at University | | *I'm learning loads of different things* (FD) | *Now I'm more mature, I would do my work now.*<br>*Now, I know I need to do it. Whereas when I was at 6th form… I* | |

|  |  |  |  | Now about to complete first year of FD | *would do anything rather than do my work* |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Possible future | *I will try and do my teacher training, you know, in that third year* | Thinking about travelling, once qualified as teacher… *I wouldn't go there forever, I am a real family person, but I've always lived in XXX or around the area… so for one year or two years… It just depends on what happens… my girlfriend… I don't know if she would want to do that…* |  |  | Visited friend in Australia, was very inspired by this and is thinking about his possible future, maybe going to Australia to work or travel some more after completing his degree | From talking to others, about how teachers have spoken to TAs, mentioned that he thinks TAs are sometimes treated with less respect (by teachers). (did not give an example of experiencing this himself. ) |

*I've been very lucky, I've been extremely lucky, my mum and dad have been very supportive, and my sister… Nothing that I would class as bad has happened… I've been very lucky.*

*I've always* not *wanted to be a teaching assistant… if that makes sense, that was just a way of getting into teaching. It was never something I wanted to do, be a Teaching Assistant for the rest of my life… it was always a very short-term plan… to get me into that position of being a teacher. I don't ever regret becoming a teaching assistant at all. It makes you realise… you understand their job (teachers) and what sort of positions they can be in*

Appendix E: Graphic time-line
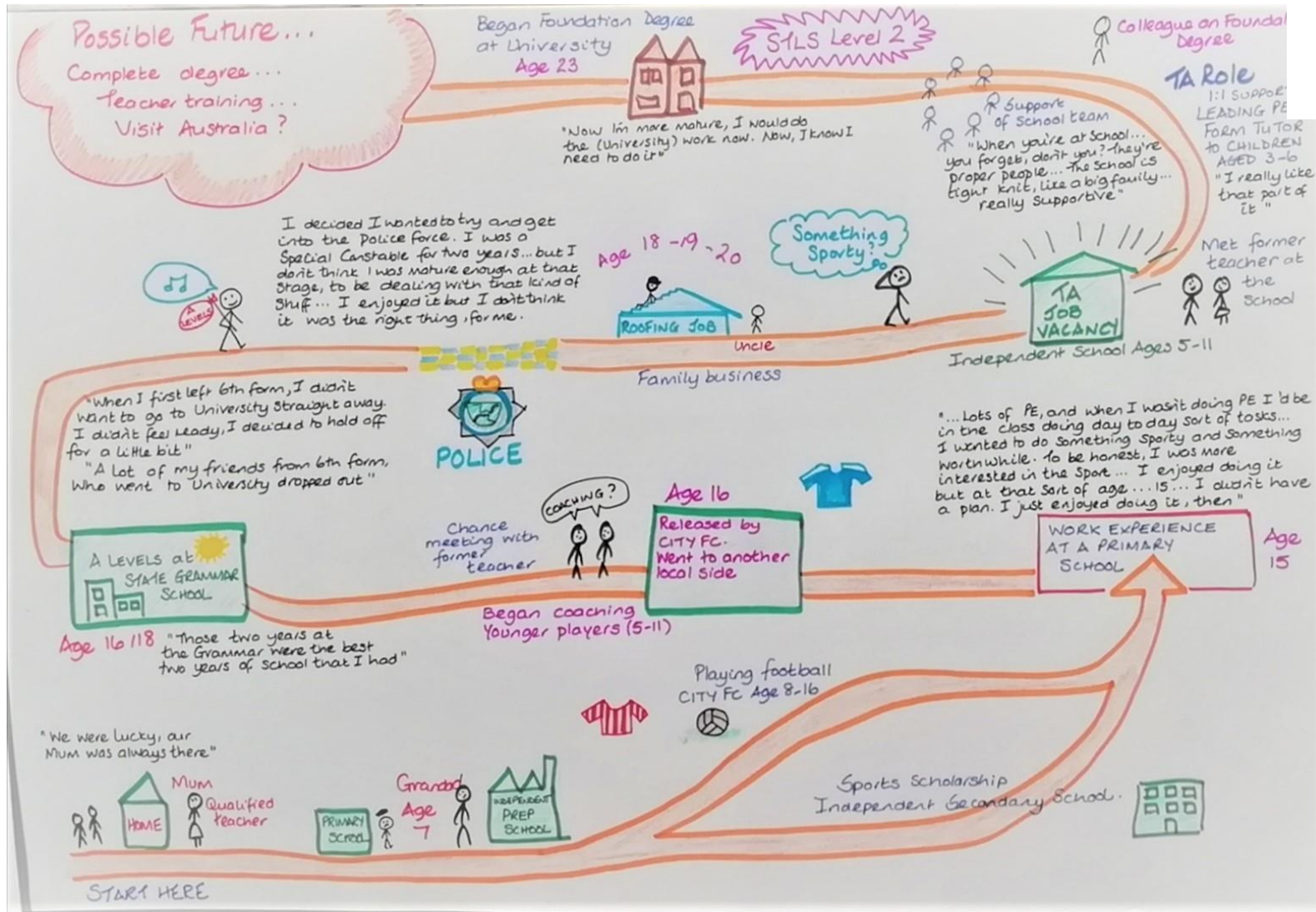
Appendix F: Assembled story

**"Mark" Assembled Story**

Mark is one of two children. Whilst he was small, his mother, a qualified teacher, worked part time in a pub, to enable her to be at home with the children in the daytime. Mark's father worked full time. His grandfather, who owns a building and roofing company came through Mark's story as quite an important influence.

Mark said that initially, his family were concerned about his progress at the local state school. When Mark was about seven, his grandfather provided the financial support to enable Mark to move to an independent prep school.

Throughout his school life Mark enjoyed and excelled in sports, which he described as 'my main thing'. At eight, Mark began playing football for City FC. When the time came for Mark to move up to secondary school, he gained a sports scholarship and was able to continue at the same independent school. This worked well in that the school was close to the City FC, which enabled him to keep playing there.

During his teens, Mark did not have a plan for his future, he was merely pursuing his own interests. He undertook work experience, in which he went back into the prep school to work with younger children in sports activities. He chose this because it enabled him to follow his sports interest, rather than any particular thoughts, at that time, of education as a career. When the work experience week was over, he didn't think about it again.

At 16, Mark was 'released' by City FC. For the next couple of years, he played for a local, grass-roots club, until he was 18. Through this club, Mark was approached by one of his former primary school teachers who asked Mark to help out with some coaching, with children aged between five and 11, which he did.

By this time Mark had finished GCSEs and he moved to another school for his A levels in English Literature and PE. Mark described these two years as the best two years of his school life, he made good friends and achieved his A levels. The school generally promoted the idea of going to University after school, and many of Mark's contemporaries followed that route. However, Mark rejected what he termed the 'programmed' route. He wanted to spend some time thinking about he really wanted to do rather than head off to University, possibly on the wrong path. He commented that he has not regretted this as he has seen some of his friends fall out of University prematurely, because they had changed their minds.

Over the next couple of years, Mark continued to coach the children's football team. He did some labouring in the family business but had no aspiration to

join the business long-term. He thought about police work and became a special constable.

Mark enjoyed police work but found some aspects uncomfortable. For example, certain incidents he dealt with as a special, such a missing person case, would play on his mind when off-shift. Mark reflected that things might seem difficult sometimes, in a routinely challenging day at school, but they are mild compared to police work, where things are 'pretty serious'. Mark reflected that in hindsight, he had simply not been mature enough for police work, so he left the force. However, he had no desire to remain in the family business, doing roof work. At the point of leaving the police, Mark still felt he had no clear path.

Through contact with another former teacher, Mark became aware of a vacancy for a sports and PE TA post at an independent prep school. Mark felt this was perhaps something he could do which would enable him to continue his interest in sports. Mark applied and then began working at the school as a TA, spending some time supporting a named pupil in class, and some time working more generally, with the PE teacher.

Mark immediately investigated qualifications and undertook an NVQ (STLS). Mark reflected that by the age of 22, Mark had experienced a range of work situations, and gained a qualification in a field he enjoyed.

After his NVQ, Mark heard from a colleague about the FD. She had followed the FD route and suggested Mark should, too. Mark remarked how he felt well-guided by colleagues. He enrolled on the FD about a year after finishing his NVQ. Reflecting on himself as a learner, Mark suggested that he feels more 'ready' for university now than he would have at eighteen, and it has taken him time to reach the right level of maturity. At the time of the life-grid interview Mark was still in his first year of his FD. He said he was enjoying the course but did not want to be a TA permanently. Once in the role he knew straight away he wanted to train to be a teacher, eventually. However, he does not regret becoming a TA, as he has learned much, and it has helped him to grow and mature.

Mark now has responsibility for leading sport and PE. This year, he is also a form tutor. Mark enjoys this aspect of his job, his relationship with the children and the responsibility. He enjoys belonging to a close-knit school team.

Mark summarised his future plans around his intention to qualify as a teacher. He remarked that a close friend now lives in Australia, he has visited and would like to go back, although the viability of moving long-term, even just for a couple of years, would depend on other factors. Some negotiation would

evidently be needed. He would like to teach in the state sector, which he believes would be more challenging compared to the 'comfortable' world of the independent school.

Mark reflected that he has been 'lucky', he has not faced any serious difficulties and always had the strong support of his family.