



PhD Studentship

Title: The role of peer relationships in the working lives of post-pandemic primary teachers

Closing date: Monday 6th March

Interview date: w/b 27th March

Supervisory team

Director of Studies: Dr Karen Blackmore

[Dr Karen Blackmore](#), School of Education, University of Worcester

Supervisors:

[Prof. Alison Kington](#), School of Education, University of Worcester

Dr Dan Owens, Windsor Academy, Halesowen.

[Research Group: Social Psychology of Education Research Group](#)

Collaborating organisations: Windsor Academy Trust

The Project

Applications are invited for a fully-funded, full-time PhD studentship for the project

The role of peer relationships in the working lives of post-pandemic primary teachers

Context

Teacher retention is in crisis and further research is needed in order to explore ways in which this level of attrition can be addressed. These concerns have resulted in an increased focus by policymakers on factors which might influence decisions to leave or remain in the profession, and it is recognised that peer relationships and collegial support can have a

positive influence in the professional development and levels of commitment for primary school teachers. However, in March 2020, schools in England were closed to all but vulnerable children and the children of key workers, as part of a national effort to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Many teachers were required to work from home as remote learning was implemented, denying them those supportive relationships that previous literature has acknowledged helps to maintain teachers' resilience and commitment during challenging periods.

Research is beginning to detail the negative effect that lockdown and subsequent disruption had on the well-being and attainment of many pupils (Young Minds, 2020; Rose et al., 2021). However, less attention has been paid to the impact on teacher peer relationships, although there have been indications that teachers sought out supportive relationships with their colleagues in order to maintain resilience during this challenging time (Kim and Asbury, 2020; Klapproth et al., 2020), and that senior leaders reorientated their attention toward relational aspects of schooling (Ferguson et al., 2021). The requirement to teach online had an impact on pedagogy (Greenhow et al., 2020; Spoel et al., 2020; Carpenter and Dunn, 2021), attainment (Ofsted, 2020; Rose et al., 2021), student motivation (Ofsted, 2020; Zaccoletti et al., 2020), and student-teacher relationships (Jones and Kessler, 2020; Moss et al., 2020; Wong, 2020). Headteachers reported that their strategies of leadership shifted becoming more closely aligned to an ethic of care, recognizing the traumatic nature of the crisis (Beauchamp et al., 2021).

This project will explore the influence of these peer relationships on primary teachers in the post-pandemic workplace. Taking a mixed methods approach, this study will advance knowledge and understanding of the educational, social and psychological influences of peer support and collective identity, and the way in which primary teachers construct and perceive their professional lives in relation to these.

Aims and Objectives

Previous research has therefore highlighted the importance of teachers' situated identity within school contexts, and the importance of social support to teachers as a coping mechanism during time of stress. This study seeks to extend previous research by specifically attending to how teachers construct their relationships with peers in the post-pandemic primary school context, as well as the association between these constructions, and how (if at all) this sense of collective identity influences their professional lives.

The broad research aims are to:

- understand the key factors associated with peer relationships and collective identity;
- explore the perceptions and experiences of primary school teachers regarding relationships with peers and how that influences their working lives;
- identify variations and commonalities in teachers' collective identity; and,
- discuss ways in which teachers can be supported at local and national levels.

In order to achieve this, the study will seek to:

- provide evidence of primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of peer relationships through a rigorous and robust research design;
- collect data relating to the perceived impact of these relationships on teachers' sense of motivation, commitment, self-efficacy and well-being using multiple data sources;
- explore the benefits and challenges of peer relationships on a sense of collective identity through in-depth case studies;
- identify ways in which the findings have implications for teacher retention.

Research questions

RQ1: How do primary school teachers in England construct their psychological experiences of teaching since the Covid-19 lockdown?

RQ2: How do they construct their relationships with other teachers since returning to the classroom, at different points in their career?

RQ3: What are the characteristics of primary school teachers' peer relationships?

RQ4: How do the constructions of social relationships in this period lead to particular responses or actions by teachers?

RQ5: How do these relationships influence, if at all, teachers' commitment and retention?

Potential academic significance and impact of research

This study will contribute to the growing field of study concerning the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on individuals and social groups. It will seek to reveal complex constructions of interpersonal peer relationships and the associations between these constructions, extending previous research on the impact of teachers' peer relationships by employing a methodological stance informed by social (and discursive) psychology. The study will explore the unknown impact of relationships shaped by the pandemic on the lives, experiences and career trajectories (including retention) of teachers within the profession.

In particular, the research will advance theoretical understanding of the way in which primary school teachers construct their collective identity, the basis on which peer relationships play a role, and the role and patterns of verbal and non-verbal collaboration/interaction between teachers. In doing so it will provide a rich and valuable basis upon which to inform policy and practice in the complex and challenging educational landscape. For these reasons, in addition to the immediate implications for teachers' classroom practice, the project will be of high interest to policymakers, advisors and think tanks, charities, Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development providers, as well as professionals linked to schools (e.g., Education Welfare Officers and Educational Psychologists).

Situating the initial design and development of data collection tools within the Windsor Academy Trust (WAT) will allow the student to become inducted into a professional community of practice. WAT consists of a family of nine schools (5 primary and 4 secondary) with 7000 pupils aged 2-18 years on role and over 1000 staff. As such this collaboration provides a significant opportunity for networking with a variety of stakeholders as well as building on the existing partnership between the School of Education and WAT.

Indicative methodology

The doctoral student will be required to consolidate their methodological approach derived from a review of existing literature, along with discussions with supervisors. However, a pragmatic-constructivist approach is proposed in order to promote the voice of participants within a clearly structured and efficient way. Aligned to this approach, it is proposed that the most effective way of addressing the research will be by adopting an integrated mixed methods design, utilizing a combination of data collection tools (e.g. questionnaire survey, critical event narrative, repertory grids, semi-structured interviews or discourse work). This approach is proposed on the basis of fitness for purpose, which allows for triangulation and provides greater mapping, analysis, interpretation and comprehension of the research area than would be gained if relying on a single paradigm or approach (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

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Details of the studentship

The studentship is offered for a 4-year period on a full-time basis. The studentship is campus based. During the period of your studentship you will receive the following:

- a tax-free bursary of £17,668 for 3 years
- a fee-waiver for 4 years (expectation that full time students complete in 3 years. If student enters year 4, bursary stops but fees waived)
- a budget to support your direct project costs including dissemination costs
- a laptop and other IT equipment and software as appropriate to the project
- use of the Research School facilities.

You will be expected to play an active role in the life of both the Research School and of your academic School. You will be given opportunities to gain experience in learning and teaching within the School of Education under the guidance of your Director of Studies.

Application Process

To begin the application process for this studentship please go to <http://www.worcester.ac.uk/researchstudentships> and click 'apply now' next to the project you wish to apply for.

It is **essential** that applicants have the following qualifications:

- **A Masters degree in the area of Education or related discipline.**
- **A First or Upper Second Honours Degree**

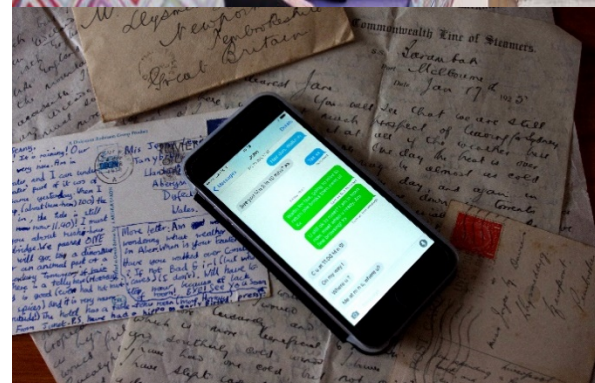
Previous applicants need not apply.

It is also expected that applicants will be able to demonstrate the following:

- A sound understanding of and interest in both the project and the field of education
- Experience of relevant research methods and skills
- Ability to contribute to the research design of the project
- Proficiency in oral and written English
- Proficiency in IT relevant to the project
- Ability to organise and meet deadlines
- Good interpersonal skills
- Ability to work independently and as part of a team
- Strong communication skills

The Interview

The interview will provisionally be held in the w/b 27th March. Shortlisted candidates will be given at least 7 day's-notice of interview. In advance of interview, shortlisted candidates will be asked to submit a sample of their written work (e.g. a publication or critique of an appropriate research article). Alongside the interview, shortlisted candidates will also be asked to give a 10 minute presentation on the studentship project.





Research at the University of Worcester

Research at the University of Worcester has grown significantly over the last 10 years. The outcomes of the Research Excellence Framework 2014 (REF 2014) showed that Worcester was the most improved University in the UK based on Research Fortnight's "Research Power" measure. The University's continued progress was shown in the outcomes of REF 2021 which demonstrated that both the scale and quality of our research has further increased, with over 40% of our research recognised as world-leading or internationally excellent.

The University has been successful in winning funding from a wide range of major funders: Research Councils such as AHRC, BBSRC, ESRC and NERC; major charities such as the Leverhulme Trust, the Alzheimer's Society and the British Academy; health-research funders such as the NIHR, the Department of Health and local NHS Trusts; European funding through Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+; and funding from local, national and global businesses.

The University is focused on research which addresses real world challenges and provides solutions to these challenges:

- [Human Health and Wellbeing](#)
- [Sustainable Futures](#)
- [Digital Innovation](#)
- [Culture, Identity and Social Exclusion](#)
- [Professional Education](#)

The University continues to provide a robust infrastructure for research. It has a well-established Research School which houses its growing research student body and which provides a comprehensive programme of researcher development for staff and students. It has a well-established Research Office, responsible for research funding, governance and strategy. The University is committed to further developing its research profile, through a strategic approach to its support for and investment in research. Its fully-funded studentships are part of this investment.

Research School

The Research School is a focal point for all our research students. It provides:

- day-to-day support for our students, both administrative and practical, through our dedicated team
- a Research Student Study Space with both PCs and laptop docking station
- a comprehensive Researcher Development Programme for students and their supervisors
- a programme of student-led conferences and seminars

School of Education

We are one of the country's major providers of education, training and research for the children's workforce.

Founded in 1946 as a teacher training college, the University of Worcester has been training inspirational teachers for over 70 years. The School of Education has built on this legacy to develop a reputation for the highest quality provision, partnership working and delivery.

We place a great value on the individual, and creating a friendly and supportive environment in which to work and learn. This approach has allowed us to develop a programme of high quality courses, school support services and research.

We are an inclusive research community and embrace diverse approaches to research and theory.

We value research that has an impact. We believe it is important to work in ways that influence changes in peoples' lives and work, theory and society.

Our research is rooted in local, regional, national and international contexts. We encourage collaborative involvement with professional groups, community projects and more.

Students benefit from cross-departmental seminar programmes and a dedicated research office. We regularly welcome research visitors from other Departments, especially where research links with our current activities can be developed.

Our staff, along with our postgraduate research student community, are involved in a wide variety of educational research areas. Research interests include assessment, evaluation and school effectiveness, science and mathematics education, arts, and music education, curriculum practice, international educational development, and critical and philosophical approaches to education.

Widening Participation

As part of its mission statement the University is committed to widening participation for its higher degrees. Although most candidates will have an undergraduate and/or a Masters degree, the University is happy to accept applications from candidates with relevant professional qualifications and work related experience.



For further information or an informal discussion on this project, please contact Dr Karen Blackmore (Director of Studies) via email at k.blackmore@worc.ac.uk

Applications can be made at:
<http://www.worcester.ac.uk/researchstudentships>