

# Chapter 8

## Sustaining the System: Non-Catholic Teachers in Catholic Secondary Schools



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**Abstract** This chapter gives voice to teachers in Catholic secondary schools who are not Catholics, drawing on the findings of a qualitative study that employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Although the majority of teachers in English Catholic secondary schools are non-Catholics, their experience and contribution have not been attended to by the Church or research. Through in-depth interviews, participants articulated their commitment to Catholic education and desire to support the school ethos, a strong sense of belonging to the school community, an appreciation of the school's prayer life and celebrations and of the unique role of the chaplain. They also emphasised the support they received both pastorally and spiritually and the importance of their induction into the school. Some participants expressed concern about the reservation of headteacher and deputy headteacher posts to Catholics' experience and discomfort with aspects of Catholic spirituality. The participants' experiences of Catholic education challenge the Church to recognise the essential contribution of non-Catholic teachers to Catholic secondary schools and the importance of providing for their formation and pastoral support. Catholic school leaders are challenged to recognise the presence and experience of non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools and to be attentive to their experiences and needs.

**Keywords** Non-Catholic teacher · Catholic school · Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

### Introduction

The shortage of Catholic teachers in England has long been of concern to school leaders and the Church. As the proportion of Catholic teachers in Catholic schools diminishes, 'the relatively small size of the potential and actual number of Catholic teachers in comparison to the size of the sector' means that 'the difficulties facing the dioceses and governors are more acute than for the nation generally' (Morris 2008,

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p. 164). According to the *Catholic Education Service (CES) Annual Census for 2019*, 59.5% of the 23,184 teachers in state funded English Catholic primary schools and 40% of the 25,156 teachers in state funded English Catholic secondary schools identify as Catholic. Overall ‘49% of teachers in Catholic state funded schools are Catholic’ (CES 2019, p. 3), thus without the 51% that are not Catholic the current system is unsustainable. Yet, surprisingly, their experience and its implications for Catholic schools is an under-researched area.

Despite a wealth of Church teaching on the Catholic School and the vocation of the teacher, the specific role of Catholic school teacher who does not identify as Catholic has received scant attention from both the Church and researchers. This chapter argues for the presence of non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools to be attended to and for the implications of this for the teachers themselves, their schools and the system to be explored. I will firstly consider the place of non-Catholic teachers within Church teaching and research before discussing the first phase of research into this phenomenon, which focuses on Catholic maintained secondary schools. Finally, I will suggest ways forward.

## The Contemporary Situation

The tables below show the increase in the percentage of non-Catholic teachers in the primary phase from 34.3% to 40.5% and in the secondary phase from 56.55% to 60% within six years. The trajectory is one of declining numbers of Catholic teachers within the Catholic system. The first CES Annual Census which received a 100% response rate was that taken in 2014. However, earlier censuses, though not representing all Catholic schools, recorded a similar pattern; in 2011, 55.1% secondary Catholic schoolteachers and 31.4% primary teachers were reported as non-Catholic (CES 2011).

*‘[T]he shortage of younger, practising Catholic teachers’* [sic] is a significant fragility which needs to be attended to if the future of Catholic education is to be secure (Holman 2017, p. 187). This does not only have an immediate effect on the leadership and staffing of Catholic schools but also long-term implications for the sustainability of the Catholic school system.

## Terminology

**Catholic Teacher:** Within this chapter, the term Catholic refers to Christians belonging to the Roman Catholic Church or particular Churches in communion with it (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1993 par. 834, 836–837). At the point of application for a post in a Catholic school teachers are asked to give their religious affiliation (CES 2019). This is not a statement of their religious commitment or participation in

the Church. The numbers of teachers who self-identify as Catholic does not indicate whether they are Church attending.

Non-Catholic Teacher: Here, the term non-Catholic refers to all teachers who do not self-identify as Catholic. It includes those who belong to other Christian denominations or religions or hold other life stances. The term itself is problematic and can be understood as pejorative by defining a teacher as *other* in this negative way. Having given the terminology a great deal of thought, I have been unable to find an unambiguous adjective for a Catholic school teacher who is not a Catholic. I have, therefore, chosen to use negative language sparingly and only for the purpose of concision.

## The Role of the Non-Catholic Teacher in the Catholic School

The Catholic School Teacher: Church documents on Catholic education promulgated by the *Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education* (SCCE) are based on an assumption that teachers in Catholic schools are Catholics, religious or lay, and as such ‘witnesses’ to faith (SCCE 2007 par. 38). Teachers are expected ‘by their lives and their teaching as much as by their instruction [to] bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher’ (*Gravissimum Educationis* 1965 par. 28) with an ‘evangelical identity’ (SCCE 2014 par. 1.j). The portrayal of the teacher’s role as a ‘witness to the Gospel’, and ‘model of the ideal person’ (SCCE 1982 par. 9 & 32) assumes a shared understanding of, and commitment to, a ‘specific Christian vocation’ participating ‘in the mission of the Church’ (SCCE 1997 par. 19). This is made clear in Pope John Paul II’s address to Canadian Catholic educators, ‘[t]o teach means not only to impart what we know, but also to reveal who we are by living what we believe’ (1984 par. 3).

Such statements are common (SCCE 1977 and 1997) and typified by John Paul II who, when speaking to Australian Catholic educators, described the profession of teachers in Catholic schools as involving ‘tasks that are linked to your baptism and to your own commitment in faith ... you share in the mission of the Church. No matter what subject you teach, it is part of your responsibility to lead your pupils more fully into the mystery of Christ and the living tradition of the Church’ (1986 par. 3).

By proclaiming that in a Catholic school ‘[t]he nobility of the task to which teachers are called demands that, in imitation of Christ, the only Teacher, they reveal the Christian message not only by word but also by every gesture of their behaviour’ (SCCE 1977 par. 43) the Church fails to address the experience and needs of teachers who are not Catholics. Neither does it address their vital contribution to the viability of the Catholic school system.

## The Catholic School Teacher who is not a Catholic

‘The absence of the Catholic school is portrayed as a great loss for civilisation and for the natural and supernatural destiny of [humanity]’ (SCCE 1977 par. 15) and the Church recognises the problem of the ‘provision of adequate staff’ (SCCE 1977 par. 23). Yet, the lack of attention to the substantial proportion of non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools in England is perplexing. SCCE (1977 par. 91) acknowledging ‘the value of the witness and work of the many Catholics who teach in State schools throughout the world’ ignores non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools. They are for the most part invisible.

The understanding of the Catholic school teacher explored above is in direct contrast to the Pope John Paul II’s understanding that not all teachers in Catholic universities are Catholics ‘Christians among the teachers are called to be witnesses and educators of authentic Christian life, which evidences attained integration between faith and life, and between professional competence and Christian wisdom’ (1990 par. 22).

However, the risks of employing non-Catholic teachers are recognised. ‘In order not to endanger the Catholic identity of the University ..., the number of non-Catholic teachers should not be allowed to constitute a majority within the Institution, which is and must remain Catholic’. (John Paul II 1990 par 4.4)

Recognising that ‘it is the lay teachers ... believers or not, who will substantially determine whether or not a school realizes its aims and accomplishes its objectives’ SCCE (1982 par.1) is exceptional. Disappointingly, there is no subsequent discussion of the implications for recruitment and professional development. More recently, SCCE (2013) acknowledged the presence of non-Catholic teachers without addressing their particular experience and needs.

On the occasion of the Bishops of England and Wales’ 1988 *ad limina* visit to Rome, as ‘a radical revision of the educational system [was] under consideration’, John Paul II stated, ‘the *Catholic school* is of outstanding importance to the Church’s mission’ (1988 par. 2). He went on to emphasise that because Catholic teachers ‘need their Bishops’ support and encouragement ... a relationship must be fostered which promotes the teachers’ understanding of Catholic education, ensures their appropriate pastoral care, and perfects their knowledge of the faith’ (John Paul II 1988 par. 4). Whilst the first two priorities clearly have relevance to all teachers in Catholic schools, the third demonstrates the lacuna in papal understanding in assuming that all Catholic school teachers share this faith.

More recently, the Archdiocese of Westminster recognising that ‘[t]he success of the Catholic school depends on the quality and dedication of the staff ... whatever their role’ sees them as ‘witnesses to the vision and philosophy of Catholic education’ (2010 p. 18). Whilst acknowledging that ‘the appointment of Catholic staff is paramount to the development of the shared experience of living the faith in the school context’ it welcomes ‘staff from other Christian denominations and other faiths who are able and willing to accept responsibility for supporting the Catholic life of the school’. Despite celebrating their ‘tremendous witness in our pluralistic

and richly diverse society' (Ibid) this fails to recognise those Catholic school teachers who have no religious affiliation, contradicting the affirmative statement that '[a]ll who value and respect a faith orientated life are welcome' (Ibid). Similarly, in arguing that 'the contribution of faculty and staff who are not Catholic, but are still religious, is often equal, and even, in some cases, superior to that of the Catholic faculty'; Heft (2011, p. 213) fails to acknowledge the presence and contribution of teachers of no religious faith. In contrast, Stuart-Buttle (2017, p. 87) drawing attention to the diverse 'academic, cultural and faith backgrounds' from which teachers who are not Catholic come, more accurately reflects the contemporary situation.

## Absent from the Research

There are numerous studies focussing on various aspects of teachers' professional identity (Mantei and Kervin 2011; Coleman 2012; Jenlink 2014; Beijaard and Meijer 2017; Beijaard 2019); however, there is very limited research into the professional identity and experience of Catholic school teachers who are not Catholic (Convey 2014). If a teacher's sense of identity (professional and personal) is key to their motivation (Palmer 2007; Day et al. 2007; Day and Gu 2014) then an exploration of how non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools make sense of their experience is overdue.

As has been argued, the Church's teaching about Catholic teachers' professional life draws heavily on the language of vocation and much of the research in Catholic education echoes this (Grace 2016; Buijjs 2005; Lydon 2011). Such literature pays very limited attention to non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools, usually in relation to teacher recruitment and school leadership (Glackin and Lydon 2018). Acknowledging the contribution of non-Catholic teachers to the mission of Catholic schools, Morris (2008) recognises the difficulties in recruiting sufficient staff to the evangelistic and catechetical vocation of teaching. The presence of a significant proportion of teachers who are not Catholic in Catholic schools in countries such as Hong Kong (Ching Mok 2007) and Ethiopia where 'in almost all primary and secondary schools the majority of the staff is made up of non-Catholic teachers'. Chernet (2007, p. 647) highlights the need for research into the impact and implications of this reality beyond England.

## The Experience of Catholic School Teachers Who Are not Catholic

I will now turn to the experiences of non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools drawing on empirical research. The teachers' experience cannot be observed or quantified but accessed only through their articulation of, and reflection on, it, therefore

this study employed *interpretative phenomenological analysis* (IPA). As an ‘idiographic qualitative methodology’ (Osborn and Smith 1998, p. 67), it allows for an exploration of the participants’ ‘personal lived experiences’ alongside ‘a close examination of how [they] make sense of them’ (Smith and Eatough 2012, p. 442). Although ‘[t]he truth claims of an IPA analysis are always tentative and analysis is subjective’ (Smith et al. 2009, p. 80), its use has enabled me to explore the unique experiences of Catholic school teachers who are not Catholic from their own perspectives whilst recognising my interpretive influence on the findings.

## Interviews

In-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with 15 non-Catholic teachers in six Catholic secondary schools in the southeast of England. Access to the teachers was facilitated by the headteachers who shared my invitation with non-Catholic teachers who had taught in a Catholic school for at least three years. The teachers had 3-18 years of experience and included classroom teachers, middle leaders, academic and pastoral, and three assistant headteachers. Their specialisms included Arts, English, history, mathematics, PE, science, SEND and sociology. In terms of religious faith they self-identified as agnostic, Anglican, atheist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Muslim and Pentecostal; two-thirds were actively involved in their religion.<sup>1</sup>

## Findings

The following themes emerged from the teachers’ articulation of their ideographic experiences:

### 1. Being at ‘home’

The teachers articulated a strong sense of being welcome and at home in their Catholic school (Alex and Pat), ‘part of the fabric’ (Jo and Hilary) appreciating a sense of family (Alex). Val further developed this, ‘the school sits so well with my soul, I can be unapologetically the teacher that I want to’. Charlie claims, ‘I don’t feel different’; in a similar vein, Jo comments ‘I don’t think I’ve ever been in a situation where I don’t feel comfortable’. Alex links this to ‘there [being] a different feeling here—unity between staff’ whilst Sam points out ‘good relationships with SLT, respect and we work together’.

Although all the teachers voiced an alignment between their values and the school’s, only Chris used the language of vocation to a particular school ‘The Lord brought me here. From a strict Christian background I felt comfortable. I realised how people who follow Christ work with each other, values are explicitly shared’. In the

two schools founded, but no longer staffed, by religious orders, two thirds of the interviewees demonstrated familiarity with the founder and their charism. Commenting on what they found attractive about the founder Sam focused on ‘encouraging teachers to show affection and love for pupils’ whilst Mel prized the ‘continuity’ of the founder’s mission. Others mentioned their role in promoting the Founder’s values, which were integral to lessons and extracurricular activities.

## **2. The Teachers and Religion**

The teachers’ relationship to religion varied substantially describing themselves as being on the threshold: ‘an outsider looking in’ (Val) to one teacher wanting ‘to become a Catholic’ because of the welcome (Alex). The majority had a connection with a religion but were not necessarily active within a faith community. Some, like Mel, committed to their own tradition appreciate being in a religiously affiliated school: ‘It’s nice to be a Christian in a Christian school not having to apologise about sharing a message’. Charlie commented that they were ‘able to be authentically Hindu here’. Asked whether they felt their own religion was respected, Sam stated that it was ‘not just respected but we are encouraged to talk about common ground’. Fran is clear that ‘the general ethos is accepting and happy not just tolerant’. Hilary enjoys ‘being in a Catholic school, calmness, not pushing Catholicism’. For Pat ‘the ethos runs through the school ... no pressure on non-Catholics’.

Alex ‘knew nothing about religion—it was not present at home ... when applied I thought “I need to learn about Catholicism quickly” ... it’s not forced upon me’. With hindsight they see how ‘It’s opened my eyes to what being a Catholic is ... not just about belief in God but everything that goes with it’ (Alex). For Chris the ‘freedom to be a Christian is respected, encouraging faith, all religions accepted [is] what keep me here’. Others appreciate the freedom not necessarily to be religious, yet ‘we go to mass, we pray, use assembly/mass theme in class ... ‘I’m not a Catholic don’t do the cross’ (Charlie). As with others, Chris appreciates denominational differences, ‘I take part in all religious activities but don’t take communion’.

## **3. Chaplaincy**

The majority of teachers saw school chaplaincy as significant for both staff and students. This is typified by Jo’s comment that ‘when so and so has a bad day they need to go to the chaplain ... because they’re not a member of staff they can go anywhere and talk to a student’. A Head of Year talking about the death of a parent reflected that ‘religion plays a big part [at times of bereavement] and they would ‘set up meetings with the chaplain’ (Sam). Chris’ statement, ‘any questions I go to the chaplain’ was echoed by several interviewees in relation to the Catholic tradition or dealing with difficult issues.

## **4. Prior experience knowledge of Catholic schools**

The majority of the teachers had no previous experience of or knowledge about Catholic schools although four had spent part of their training in one. In two cases they had been appointed to the placement school and remained for 18 years and 6 years respectively: ‘I’d had nothing to do with a Catholic school until PGCE placement in

a Catholic school ... got on really well, confident to apply, I'd already experienced mass' (Nik). Only one teacher had experienced Catholic education personally as a student and only one had any theoretical knowledge of Catholicism explaining that 'I studied the reformation so knew before coming here mass would be important' (Sam). However, Mel recognised there are similar values [here] to those I grew up with'. Val and others 'didn't appreciate the difference at the point of application' yet now sees 'crosses, chapel, assembly at the heart of what school does [and] prayer as a normal part of the day.

### **5. Prayer and Liturgy**

Prayer and liturgy presented challenges for all the teachers as Nik commented '[i]f you've never experienced mass before it's quite an eye-opener', aware that: the strangeness of liturgy and ceremony were not explained: 'I went into mass and didn't know the responses, sitting down and standing ... I felt uncomfortable as the students knew what they're doing I didn't'. This teacher is now comfortable to attend liturgies and join in prayer. Similarly Ashley looking back to their 'first INSET day [which] started with mass, I thought "Oh what do we do?" I didn't know whether we were supposed to pretend to get involved', later coming to the view that you can very much be what you believe in as long as you can respect what the school is'.

Jo appreciates everyone's right to reflect but is uneasy about the choice of prayers, in particular those which express Catholic beliefs about Mary and sin. 'This year we started doing the Hail Mary but there are better prayers out there not making anyone feel their religion is less valued ... I don't like saying a prayer about punishing the sinner for their sins. Some teachers are ambivalent towards the sacrament of reconciliation, [c]onfession, I'm not sure how I sit with it, in Lourdes there was an opportunity for the students, I found it hard to justify it to them' (Alex). Despite an awareness of not always understanding aspects of Catholicism and an initial nervousness about getting it right they echoed Sam's view that 'as a non-Catholic I feel I can ask for help when it's needed' frequently referring to the chaplain, RE teachers and headteacher. Several participants described becoming familiar with the Catholic tradition as a process of osmosis, 'I picked it up by listening, I learnt it' (Jo).

### **6. Contribution**

The teachers spoke in depth about their contribution to the school and the challenge of living its mission. For Jo 'it's hard to be the smile that students need' whilst providing 'daily support for students, treating others as you would like to be treated'. Mel identified the demand on teachers to 'be able to embrace' the mission being 'willing to learn about it and push it forward for the kids'. Chris uncompromisingly understands their contribution as 'working with disadvantaged pupils, seeing them as individuals, making a difference in pupils' lives'. Others focused on 'bringing people together across the school' (Ashley); daily upholding values, being a role model (Hilary) 'fostering the ethos as Head of Year (Sam). Similarly, a Head of Department described their contribution as teaching a subject 'in a way that understands other perspectives' (Val). Jo has a different perspective on this 'connecting religion with



life is my contribution: ‘it doesn’t matter whether you’re religious, Jesus is a good person’.

### **7. The Aspects of a Catholic School that the Teachers valued most**

Teachers’ comments on what they valued most about the school fell into three categories. Firstly, they appreciated the school’s response to crises. Jo commented ‘things happen in the world [such as the bombing in Sri Lanka] here it doesn’t matter were or who is afflicted we take a moment to think about it’. Others reflected on occasions when members of the community had been bereaved. Hilary described the death of a 15 year old student by suicide and the importance of ‘telling the whole school, prayer and bereavement counselling as well as a memorial garden’. One school provides ‘funeral representatives ... a guard of honour for past students and staff’ (Alex). This concern for the bereaved, and readiness to talk about death and mark such times with prayer and liturgy were valued.

Secondly, the interviewees highlighted the schools ‘charity work, nurturing giving’ (Charlie), and ‘campaigns for justice’ (Hilary) both within the formal curriculum and fundraising summed up by Val as highlighting a distinct ‘perspective [lending] itself beautifully to social justice. Thirdly, care for disadvantaged students was emphasised. Reflecting on the school’s support for children with challenging behaviour, Jo commented, ‘here it’s a lot more caring ... when we talk things through we get to know what’s going on in [their] lives. ‘I tell students I really enjoy teaching you or you’re an amazing human being’ (Sam).

## **Career Progression**

Nine of the 12 teachers had been promoted internally to pastoral or academic posts. Sam, speaking of her appreciation of the school and relationship with the Senior Leadership Team, expressed a hope to join it, seemingly unaware that posts beyond Assistant Headteacher are reserved posts requiring the appointee to be a practising Catholic. The three Assistant Headteachers all commented on the impact of this policy on themselves ‘I knew the rules when I was appointed but I don’t want to leave—would like to be Deputy Headteacher here’ (Pat) whilst Hilary described themselves as ‘16 years here and stuck as an Assistant Headteacher’.

## **Implications**

If ‘an equally important role belongs to the teachers [as to parents] in safeguarding and developing the distinctive mission of the Catholic school’, (SCCE 1977 par. 73) the implications of the fact that the majority of teachers in English Catholic secondary schools are not Catholic must be attended to. The teaching of the Church

with regard to teachers in Catholic schools and the reality in English Catholic maintained Secondary Schools appear to be unaligned. This raises a series of issues in relation to their employment that are yet to be fully explored.

### **1. The recruitment and selection of teachers**

Ensuring a strategic approach to the appointment of teachers ‘who are not Catholic but who support and contribute to the mission of a Catholic school’ (Heft 2011, p. 132) is vital. Thus ‘Catholic schools require people not only to know how to teach or direct an organisation; they also require them, using the skills of their profession, to know how to bear authentic witness to the school’s values, as well as to their own continuing efforts to live out ever more deeply, in thought and deed, the ideals that are stated publicly in words (SCCE 2013 par. 80).

### **2. The induction and continuing support and professional development of teachers**

This priority is echoed in SCCE, ‘the presence both of students and of teachers from different cultural and religious backgrounds requires an increased commitment of discernment and accompaniment’ (2007 par. 5). ‘[I]f adequate professional preparation is required in order to transmit knowledge, then adequate professional preparation is even more necessary in order to fulfil the role of a genuine teacher [in a Catholic school]’ (SCCE 1982 par. 16). Resources must be made available to enable all teachers to understand and appreciate this distinctive mission, which they carry out on behalf of the Church, including ‘sound induction processes, on-going opportunities for reflection and study of the Catholic vision of education and professional development ... opportunities for retreat days and reflection on their own spiritual journey’ (Westminster 2010, p. 18).

### **3. Career progression of non-Catholic teachers**

The career progression of non-Catholic teachers within senior leadership is often the elephant in the room in discussions about the difficulties in appointing Catholic school leaders. Teachers with a longstanding commitment to a Catholic school whose mission they clearly articulate and try to live understandably find it hard to accept that they will not be promoted to Deputy Headteacher or Headteacher posts. ‘[S]chool leadership succession is a growing problem in Catholic schools internationally’ (Gleeson et al. 2018, p. 102) and the data (see Tables 1 and 2) indicate it is set to become increasingly more problematic in England. Church teaching and research present a vision of Catholic school headteachers being subject to more numerous and complex expectations than their counterparts in secular schools including the ‘religious purpose and mission and ... the quality of the school’s overall participation in the educational mission of the Catholic Church’ (Nuzzi and Frabutt 2013, p. 2). The ‘*formation of future Catholic school leaders*’ [sic] is pivotal to the future of Catholic schools (Holman 2017, p. 192). Notwithstanding the desirability of appointing Catholic school leaders in good standing with the Church, the reality of the situation suggests than an examination of alternatives that would ensure the Catholicity of the school is unavoidable.

**Table 1** Catholic teachers in english state funded catholic primary schools (Annual Survey, CES 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019)

Year	Catholic Teachers (%)	Non-Catholic Teachers (%)
2014	65.7	34.3
2015	63.9	36.1
2016	62.3	37.7
2017	61.4	38.6
2018	60.6	39.4
2019	59.5	40.5

**Table 2** Catholic teachers in english state funded catholic secondary schools (Annual Survey, CES 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019)

Year	Catholic Teachers (%)	Non-Catholic Teachers (%)
2014	43.5	56.5
2015	43.1	56.9
2016	41.9	58.1
2017	41.4	58.6
2018	40.7	59.3
2019	40	60

## Conclusion

This exploration of the experiences of Catholic school teachers who are not Catholic is best summed up by their responses to being asked what advice they would give to a non-Catholic interested in teaching in a Catholic school. The interviewees were agreed that preparation was necessary, reading up on the mission statement, ethos or founder. A teacher belonging to another world religion should ‘go with an open mind it’s not a militant religion’ (Charlie) whilst Chris would encourage them ‘because it is a school where you know where you stand what we believe in is so clear ... freedom to be what you are’. ‘You’d be very welcome in a Catholic school’. Thus the challenge for Catholic schools is to respond to the SCCE’s question, ‘what does it mean to be a teacher ... in a Catholic school?’ (2013 par. 81) in their particular context in a way that includes all their teachers be they Catholic or not.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of anonymity the teachers are referred to by non-gender specific pseudonyms and the plural is used.

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