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The unspoken power of collage? Using an innovative arts-based research method to explore the experience of struggling as a teacher

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Abstract

This article reports on the methodological approach taken in a doctoral study that explores what it means to be struggling as a teacher. Participants were established and experienced teachers and leaders in the secondary school system in England. A particular form of collage – where materials are placed rather than stuck – was used within the context of a research interview. Arts-based methods such as collage are gaining in popularity as they stimulate visual rather than linguistic thinking and offer the opportunity to express experiences as holistic, non-linear metaphors. Collage also has revelatory potential as it helps uncover that which participants cannot necessarily express in words alone. The author presents the analytical challenges of intermingling the verbal and visual data in her study by discussing the collages created by two participants. An analysis of those collages shows that factors influencing struggling can be both internal and external. Struggling was found to be experienced as a temporary fractured state. Struggling was expressed by participants as heightened bodily tensions with a predominantly negative emotional tone; it can also involve a damaged self-view and a reduced sense of controllability, and may lead to impaired performance.

Keywords: collage, arts-based, visual, metaphors, intermingling

What struggling as a teacher might mean

Struggling is a term used regularly in the world of research and elsewhere. What is missing, however, is any real consensus around how it is defined, let alone understood. Despite the regularity of its use in journal articles, for example, struggling appears to have become a taken-for-granted term, with research focusing on the solution or object of the struggle rather than the experience of struggling itself. The voices of teachers who experience struggling have been left mostly unheard. Existing conceptualizations of struggling equate it with poor or under-performance, and struggling is seen as a problem to be dealt with. The study offers a new way of theorizing struggling.

This article presents the methodological approach adopted in a doctoral study to address the question of what it means to be struggling as a teacher. I outline the innovative research design I adopted and discuss in particular the approach taken when analysing the visual data created via collage-making. I present two teachers' stories of struggling, including their collages, to illustrate dimensions of struggling.

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Methodology to explore struggling

This study was designed to address a gap in understanding the experience of struggling. The research questions asked were:

- What is the experience of struggling as a teacher?
- What factors influence the experience of struggling?
- What does movement between struggling and not-struggling look like?

I needed a research design that would allow me to engage deeply with participants' experiences and to collect rich and highly qualitative data. I was looking to interpret participants' narratives and offer a plausible new conceptualization of what it means to be struggling. It was important for me to try to understand which elements of the experience of struggling are meaningful to the participants and how they construct their understandings of that experience (Basit, 2010). I adopted an ontological position of constructivism, which means that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being constructed and revised (Bryman, 2004, in Woods, 2012). I acknowledge that participants were presenting me with a specific version of their social experience of struggling rather than a definitive one (Woods, 2012).

Clearly, direct interaction with participants was essential to access their personal perceptions and subjective knowledge about the experience of struggling. While not taking a fixed epistemological position (drawing on Woods, 2012), the study is situated within the broader interpretivist and critical paradigms, given the concern with understanding the experience of struggling and the tentative nature of any knowledge claims made (Pring, 2000: 96, in Woods, 2012).

Participants were encouraged to reflect deeply about the meaning they ascribe to the experience of struggling. I came to the research process with a sense of *Einfühlung* (empathy) to try to understand how struggling was experienced by teachers (Keeves, 1997). My positionality is important too, as a former teacher who identifies as having struggled and as a practising Buddhist. This influences the nature of my ethical practice as a researcher, especially in terms of how I communicate with and respond to others. As a fluent German speaker, too, *Einfühlung* implies for me perhaps even more than empathy, as it embodies a real sense of feeling into the experience at a much deeper level.

Exploring struggling: The research design

To explore and reveal what it means to be struggling as a teacher, I needed research methods that would allow individual participants both the time and space to unravel their experience of struggling (Webb and Kevern, 2001, in Dowling, 2007). Mason posits that 'language is the creator of experience' (Mason, 2002: 240), and as such any attempt to capture experience should perhaps involve the interpretation of spoken or written language. However, I also wanted participants to have the opportunity to engage *beyond* the spoken word. I therefore explored alternative, unfamiliar ways of allowing teachers to represent their experiences to counterbalance the view that for some teachers 'words are our most effective medium' (Burge *et al.*, 2016: 734).

I rejected the use of collective methods, such as group interviews or focus groups; whilst allowing perhaps for the discussion of a universal experience of struggling, they would not allow for the deep, reflective engagement with individual experience I was seeking.

The research design I chose involved one-to-one loosely structured interviews and an arts-based method, collage. The main focus of this article is on the use of collage creation within research interviews.

Interviews as verbal data

Interviews are a common and popular research instrument in educational research, especially for researchers working within an interpretive paradigm using a qualitative methodology (Basit, 2010). I chose face-to-face interviews as one method to access participants' highly personalized portrayals of the social phenomenon of struggling. The interviews I conducted were active (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) and empathetic (Fontana and Frey, 2005). I wanted the interview process to be fluid rather than rigid (Ribbins, 2007), and hence I term the interviews I conducted loosely-structured; arguably they cannot be entirely *without* structure (Kushner, 2017; my emphasis).

Careful decisions about the tenor of the opening gambit of the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995) and the choice of what (not) to discuss (Talmy, 2010) had to be made, as they could significantly influence the researcher–participant relationship. Strong emotions may arise from 'storytelling' of this kind (Alterio, 2002: 2); it can cause 'discomfort or anxiety, hope, insight or a sense of liberation' (Van Manen, 1997: 162). Therefore, extreme care and attention were paid to ethical sensitivities throughout this study.

Collages as visual data

In addition to the spoken interview, I used collage, an arts-based approach that is gaining stature as a research methodology in many disciplines, including education (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Woods and Roberts, 2013). Arts-based and visual methods are increasingly positioned as 'effective ways to address complex questions in social science' (Kara, 2015: 3). Such methods can allow participants to slow down and honour the process of meaning-making of their unique experiences (Loads, 2009; Roberts and Woods, 2018). Collage has the capacity to act as a means to help conceptualize ideas (Roberts and Woods, 2018). It also has the ability to both 'shock and surprise' (Burge *et al.*, 2016: 735).

One of the arguments for using such a visual method is that we live in an increasingly 'ocularcentric' culture (Mitchell, 2011), where images form a vital part of our everyday worlds and influence both how we see ourselves and how others see us (Mannay *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, arts-based research offers an alternative way of representing the subtleties of experience, profound feelings and understandings (Roberts and Woods, 2018) in creative, non-linear ways (for example, Loads, 2009; Roberts and Woods, 2018). The teachers in this study are 'only too familiar with speaking and writing' (Burge *et al.*, 2016: 735), and so an unfamiliar arts-based method of representation can offer the opportunity to pause for thought, ponder, hesitate and examine assumptions 'instead of repeating familiar viewpoints or quickly coming to settled conclusions' (ibid.: 734).

Collage creation allows the participant to engage physically and have agency in the process (Roberts and Woods, 2018), both of which I see as advantages for this exploration of experience. Participants make the collage independently, at their own pace, and they are able to reflect, move pieces and rearrange as their thinking develops (ibid.). Creative methods such as collage provide participants with the means to explore elements of their experience in a different way from, say, a purely

spoken interview, as collage creation can tap into a deeper, more subconscious level of awareness. The process of creating a collage can reveal pleasant and not-so-pleasant memories. While not the most important aspect of the process, allowing the surfacing of painful memories (Mannay *et al.*, 2017) can also provide a cathartic opportunity for participants' feelings to be acknowledged and heard. As part of my duty of care to my participants, I provided details of the Education Support Partnership to them at each interview.

One of the main advantages of using collage to explore the experience of struggling was to allow participants to engage in a process of de- and refamiliarization. Engaging in art can force us to slow down, to linger and to notice (Gurevitch, 1988; Mannay, 2010; Mannay *et al.*, 2017). Burge *et al.* (2016: 733) also suggest that alternative approaches such as collage can upset our assumptions, 'making the familiar seem uncomfortably strange'. So collage creation allows a reflection on and the visual reconstruction of an experience to make that experience more familiar and, hopefully, understandable.

Collage creation also allows participants to engage in visual thinking rather than linguistic thinking (Arnheim, 1969; Marshall, 2007); it takes place in different mediums, rather than in words and sentences with grammar rules (Gardner, 1983 in Marshall, 2007; Weber *et al.*, 1995). Mavers (2003) posits that arts-based methods can enable new things to be communicated or the same things to be expressed in a different way. Others argue that there are times where words are inadequate (Frosh, 2002; Leitch, 2006; Roberts and Woods, 2018); I argue that the process of creating a collage allows participants to access words via a different route.

Some proponents argue that an arts-based approach can be powerful in eliciting points for subsequent discussion from participants (Bessette, 2008; Haney *et al.*, 2004). Others highlight the non-linguistic, non-linearity of collage-making as a key feature of the method, but concede the need to subsequently ask participants to explain their completed collage in words (Roberts and Woods, 2018). The collages made by my participants were created as a separate element of a research interview. Time was allocated for the process and all participants had the opportunity to discuss, reflect on and explicate the collage after completion. A range of arts and crafts materials were provided, and participants were also encouraged to add items of their own should they wish.

Collages can be tin-openers for talk (MacBeath, 2002) or conveyors of meaning in their own right (Roberts and Woods, 2018). Alternatively, they can be secondary illustrations of text (Prosser, 1998). Whatever role collage plays, participants are usually encouraged to explain the analogies and visual metaphors in their collages using their own subjectively contingent schemas (Mannay *et al.*, 2017).

Metaphors emerge through the creation of collage and can help reveal how we construct reality (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Patchen and Crawford, 2011). They can therefore be a useful entrance point to understanding an experience (for example, Bailey and Van Harken, 2014). Struggling is an intricate phenomenon, and so the collage-making process allowed such visual metaphors to emerge. They can then serve as a means to enable participants to articulate their perceptions and feelings in ways that verbal language might not have allowed (Marshall, 2007).

It is, of course, also important to consider the limitations or disadvantages of any method. Not all approaches are appropriate to use with some participants, nor will they suit everyone's preferences (Johnson *et al.*, 2012). I was prepared to have one or more participants refuse to engage with the collage; in practice, this only happened once during the pilot study. I was also mindful that participants would only 'put forward

the images and meanings … they most want to communicate' rather than providing a 'comprehensive picture' of their experience of struggling (Woods and Roberts, 2013: 3). Furthermore, prior experience of art or being asked to draw can evoke strong, sometimes negative, emotions in people. It is important to remain mindful of the possibility of discomfort when introducing new methods; Burge *et al*. report that some participants felt 'put out or alienated' by methods that had the potential to 'trouble settled worldviews and values' (Burge *et al*., 2016: 732). This discomfort can arise from 'buried feelings of shame and vulnerability' or participants feeling that their 'status as adults and as experts is at risk' when asked to express themselves in unfamiliar ways (ibid.: 734). All of this, of course, had not only the potential to affect the quality and perhaps the quantity of the data collected but also the potential to cause ethical dilemmas. Some participants found the process emotional, while others reported finding it therapeutic.

Ultimately, my decision to use collage was motivated primarily by the freedom it offers participants. It frees them from the challenge of drawing and allows them to express themselves in a way that does not rely on perceived artistic ability (Woods and Roberts, 2013).

An intermingling of methods

It is important to see the interviews and collages as a mix – an intermingling (Grbich, 2007) – of methods; creative productions are 'part of the whole picture and cannot be separated from the talk' (Eldén, 2013: 76). The collages signify concepts and phenomena that can then be read (Barrett, 1997; Marshall, 2007; Weber *et al*., 1995), and exploring their collage can help participants better express their stories (Woods and Roberts, 2013). They arrive at understandings they may otherwise have missed (for example, Bailey and Van Harken, 2014; Bessette, 2008; Jewitt and Kress, 2003; Marshall, 2007).

Recruitment and data collection

The recruitment of participants involved creating a YouTube video in which I talked about the study, which was shared on Twitter. The video received approximately 100 views and generated interest from at least ten potential participants. I also approached schools via email. Eventually, I recruited 14 teachers who were willing to share their experience of struggling with me. Participants included classroom teachers, middle leaders and two headteachers. Three were overseas-trained teachers. All considered themselves 'established and experienced' teachers, as per the recruitment criteria. The decision was made to meet in participants' homes to ensure an appropriate level of privacy; meeting in their school, the potential site of struggling, did not feel appropriate. I only had email contact with participants prior to the first interview. Thirteen participants welcomed me into their homes; I met one in an office during the school holidays. On my supervisors' advice and as part of their duty of care towards me, I left details of participants' addresses in an enclosed envelope at my home, to be opened in the case of an emergency. In practice, I felt entirely safe with and was made to feel very welcome by all participants. They were all offered the chance to be interviewed on two separate occasions and were informed that the first interview would involve creating a collage.

Interviews opened with an opportunity to talk about when, why and how the participants became teachers, with the aim of establishing a trustful rapport. After that, and with prior notice by email, participants were asked to talk about 'a time when you knew you were struggling', an open question that allowed them to direct and control their narrative. When these accounts seemed to come to an end, I suggested setting up the collage-making activity. All had been informed in advance that this would be part of the first interview and I had reassured them that it was not about their artistic ability. All 14 participants created a collage using the materials I provided; some added various personal items from their home to their collages. For example, one participant used a body board as the underlay for his collage. Another participant wanted toothpicks, so got some from his kitchen.

Figure 1: The collage box

Most of the collages were created relatively quickly, within about 10–15 minutes; more than one participant checked with me whether there was a time limit. Some asked whether they could stick items down; the particular method of collage I used is one in which items from the collage box (see Figure 1) are placed rather than stuck, on sugar paper, thus allowing the movement of materials as the participant creates the collage. Most participants focused exclusively on the collage-creation process, not talking throughout. Others chatted with me; one chose to have music on in the background. I took some notes while participants created their collages, capturing anything I wanted to follow up on or noting if they moved certain items around during the process. I photographed the collages when they were complete; some participants also took photos of their collages to keep. Nearly all participants offered to explain their collages straightaway. Several told me that they had quite enjoyed the process; others admitted to finding it quite emotional. In the second interview, participants had another opportunity to view and reflect on their collage using the photo taken.

All participants were assigned a pseudonym by me and potentially identifying details were omitted in their stories. All email communication was via private rather than work email addresses; all participant data was password-protected and stored securely. Participants were offered the chance to withdraw from the study at any stage,

without explanation, including withdrawing consent to use their data. In practice, none did.

Embracing the visual data

The collages created by all participants are the visual data described here. My analytical approach draws on a review of the literature in the fields of visual and arts-based research methods; until recently there was very little on the analysis of collage (for example, Roberts and Woods, 2018; Rose, 2007). Visual images 'cry out to us to imbue them with meaning;' they 'encode an enormous amount of information in a single representation' and it is possible for an image to store 'complexly layered meanings' and 'to sustain multiple interpretations;' visual images are said to be able to 'convey emotional tone' and have the capacity to reveal 'what is hidden … the taken-for-granted' reaching' beyond and beneath common understanding' (Grady, 2004: 7, 8, 18, 20). This is one of the key reasons for the choice of collage creation as a research method.

Mitchell (2011) maintains that the power of images can exceed our ability to interpret them, thus presenting the researcher with a challenge of how to approach the interpretive process of such images. Some suggest that the meaning of an image lies within the image itself; others argue that it is the meaning assigned to those images that is of significance. Given that I am interested in how the participants assigned meaning to their collages, the study of the images alone would have been a 'mistaken method' (Banks, 2001; Mannay, 2010: 99). Ultimately, my approach was influenced by Rose (2007) and Mannay (2010), who argue that in order to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, it is imperative to acknowledge the image-maker and be alert to what the creator intended to show.

A number of participants were concerned about the perceived quality of their collage, but this was of lesser importance to me as the researcher, as I was less interested in the 'status of the image itself' and more in 'its conceptual, analytical and theoretical possibilities' (Grady, 2004: 6). In terms of the meaning of a collage, or the elements within it, it is not helpful to debate the 'right' or 'wrong' meaning of an image but rather to talk in terms of 'equally plausible – though sometimes competing and contesting – meanings and interpretations' (Rose, 2007: xiii). Indeed, ambiguity in a collage provides a 'way of expressing the said and unsaid' and can reveal both 'the intended and the unintended' (Butler-Kisber, 2008, 2010). Rather than it being perceived as a problem (Grady, 2004), ambiguity in visual data is perhaps to be embraced.

Rose (2007) argues that there are three sites at which meanings of images are made: how an image is made; what it looks like and how it is seen. Indeed, a detailed scrutiny of the image lies at the foundation of analysis. This involves paying attention to both the compositionality and the production of the image. Such steps were integral to my approach. Yet Rose (ibid.: 98) also suggests that there is 'no stable point that can provide an entrance into the meaning-making process', and so it is only through revisiting the data and engaging with it in different ways at different times that we can tentatively enter that realm of meaning-making. The literature offers a variety of approaches to undertaking the analysis of images; the models I have reviewed all consist of three levels. Table 1 summarizes the various approaches and their constituent levels. In short, the approaches discussed in the literature focus on structure, layers and/or semiotics.

Table 1: Approaches to image analysis

Approach	Levels of analysis		
Structural (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001)	**Conceptual** structure • Spatial distribution of concepts • More descriptive level of analysis	**Symbolic** structure • How meaning is carried in an image • More interpretive realm of analysis	**Analytical** structure • Way in which parts of the image (elements of the collage) relate to each other and the whole • More intensely interpretive level of analysis
Three-layered (Collier, 2001: 100) (Rose, 2007: 41–7, 57) (Panofsky, 1974, in Grbich, 2007: 160) (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 141; 147–52)	**Primary** level • Descriptive – visual impact • Focus on factual and expressional representations (denotation) • Content and colour	**Secondary** level • Representational – more abstract and conceptual • Focus on compositional context and spatial relationships • 'Visual syntax' and 'visual lexis' • Significance of content and colour, placement of items • Iconographical	**Tertiary** level • Interpretation of that which the image-maker may not have been aware • The 'more-than-visual meaning' • Iconological
Semiotic (Barthes, 1964, in Grbich, 2007: 155)	**Context & content** • Focus on what the image is of • Context of production • How image conveys meaning	**Links** • Finer look at how the image reflects or departs from dominant cultural values	**Interpretation** • The most obvious reading of the image • Followed by alternative readings

These approaches all allow the researcher to move from a more descriptive approach towards analysis through to a more interpretive level or layer. The elements of the image are considered in terms of their actual appearance – colour, position and so on – as well as their symbolic placement. The tertiary level of the three-layered approach moves beyond the meaning-making of the image creator to include the notion of meaning beyond the visual. The links level of the semiotic approach advocates an analysis of the wider context and culture within which the image is created; the interpretation level proposes contrasting an obvious reading of the image with alternative readings.

Synthesizing the literature in this way helped me identify my own approach towards analysing the collages created by my participants. This approach is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: My approach to image analysis

Approach	*Levels of analysis*		
Structural	Conceptual	Symbolic	Analytical
Three-layered	Primary	Secondary	
Semiotic	Context & content		Interpretation

Intermingling the visual and the verbal data

Realistically, the two sets of data – visual and verbal – could not and should not be kept separate, as they are inextricably linked. Together they form how the participants presented and narrated their experience of struggling. Therefore, intermingling (Grbich, 2007) the visual and verbal data was integral to the process of meaning-making. Indeed, Rose argues (2007: 39 and 11) that 'visual images do not exist in a vacuum', suggesting it is unusual to 'encounter a visual image unaccompanied' either by text or narration. Mindful that 'images can contradict and work against spoken or written messages' (Jewitt and Oyama, 2001: 155), a particular challenge was how to 'intermingle' (Grbich, 2007: 195) the visual and verbal data to ensure they were each given due consideration. Things emerged in some collages that were not spoken about in the interview. For example, James introduced in his collage the idea of a boundary around the chaos of his struggling, yet this did not feature in his spoken interview at all. Conversely, some participants spoke of things in the interview that did appear in their collage. Jonathan spoke about drowning in the interview and water was definitely one feature of his collage. Finally, some participants duplicated the spoken into the collage, for example Kathryn whom we meet later. Collage creation seems to have offered most participants a language through which to make sense of their experience and feelings (Bailey and Van Harken, 2014).

Teachers' stories of struggling

I present here two teachers' stories of struggling to illustrate and exemplify the process of collage creation and the analytical approach taken.

Veronica's collage (see Figure 2) is made up of exclusively blue elements, with a blue background. There are only five elements on the collage, evenly distributed across the page, with a clear central feature, a gem. Kathryn's collage uses more colours. It features a person in a cage in the middle and a number of items around the sides and top of the collage.

Next I present extracts from their analytic summaries that focus on how these collages were created and what meaning participants brought to them. I also highlight the elements of the analytical model that I applied when interpreting the collages.

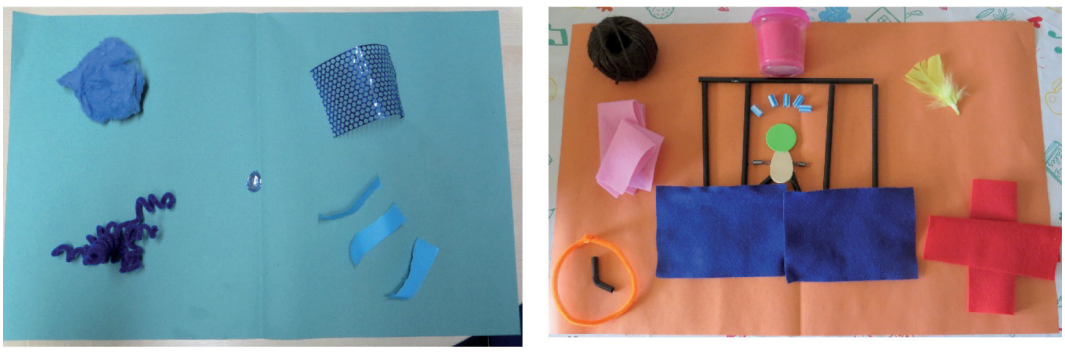

Figure 2: Examples of collage (left: Veronica; right: Kathryn)

Veronica

Veronica is a relatively newly appointed headteacher in a small secondary school, where she has worked since qualifying as a teacher. Her experience of struggling is

metaphorically expressed in her collage as distinct elements that are overwhelmingly physical and emotional (*conceptual; symbolic; primary*). She chose the colour blue as a 'filter' through which to consider the experience of struggling because 'struggling looks like a colour … struggling means sad' (*primary; secondary*). The uniform use of blue as the theme of the collage was a deliberate choice by Veronica once she had resisted the temptation, on seeing the collage box, to just 'tip it all onto the page'.

She also referred to freezing as a sign of struggling, which could further explain her choice of colour. She then chose other blue items to place on the collage (*secondary*). The central item is a gem, which symbolizes crying (*symbolic; context and colour*). She told me that placing the gem in the centre was intentional (*analytical; secondary*). 'Crying [was] a big thing for me as a leader, feeling I shouldn't cry, then reaching a stage of being strong enough to cry openly in front of people.' She felt that it is a 'pretty little teardrop, I don't think that's a bad thing'. She explained that the gem could be interchanged with a heart (*interpretation*). Veronica told me that her husband said: 'if you didn't cry, you wouldn't be you' and she admitted to 'crying a lot, whether happy, sad or frustrated' or 'just watching ads on TV'. She reflected: 'I used to worry about crying' but that she has since learned to self-regulate and sees herself as 'strong, not weak and wet … but that's taken time … if I'd cried a couple of years ago I would've thought – you silly cow – but now, no, it's just human … Maybe 12 months before I would've been defensive, I would've cried…'

Top left of the collage is blue cotton wool, which she placed first (*conceptual; primary*). This illustrates what Veronica termed head fog (*context and colour; conceptual*). Elsewhere in the interview, which took place at the beginning of the summer holiday, she explained that 'these first few days ... are spent in a bit of a fog'. She used the term fog another time when talking about feeling stuck. Fogginess seems then to be suggesting that her ability to think clearly is impeded by the experience of struggling. In the top right corner, she placed a piece of blue coloured mesh to symbolize the idea of 'picking holes in myself … being my own worst critic' (*symbolic; secondary*). Bottom right are pieces of blue paper that Veronica tore up purposefully in front of me, to illustrate 'feeling torn' (*symbolic; secondary*). She felt that there were three different aspects of feeling torn: tearing oneself apart emotionally; feeling physically torn, what she termed 'can't do wrong for doing right'; and being torn between priorities, the fact that when you are struggling at work it overtakes everything else.

The coiled springs at the bottom of the page on the left, which are made of blue pipe cleaners wrapped around a pen, are 'the stress element' of struggling (*symbolic; secondary; interpretation*). She explained that the coils represent the knots in her tummy (*symbolic*). Veronica talked elsewhere about feeling completely overwhelmed and doubting whether she could 'do this'; her confidence levels fall, her self-doubt creeps in and she can physically feel it in her stomach and elsewhere in her body in the form of headaches or as sleeplessness. She admitted: 'when I'm sleeping well, I know I'm coping OK.'

Having created her collage, she reflected: 'it's very organized, considering my first instinct was to throw everything…' She also considered adding in a sunrise, to indicate that 'it's all going to be OK'. This seems to imply that Veronica felt it is possible to move out of struggling to sunnier times.

Looking at the layers of analysis used for Veronica's collage, the predominant forms used were those on a more abstract, conceptual level. Colour and placement appear key. The individual elements of her collage carry an individual meaning and are symbolic in terms of her experience of struggling. However, it is not immediately

clear how the meaning of the collage alone relates holistically to that experience. By interweaving Veronica's verbal data into the analysis of her collage, themes such as heightened embodied tensions and the negative emotional tone of her experience of struggling started to become more apparent. There is also the sense of a damaged self-view. Finally, she presented the idea of feeling stuck or frozen: what I term the stasis of struggling.

Kathryn

Kathryn is a part-time secondary school teacher and middle leader. Her collage is, in her own words, 'not abstract'. Rather it is a literal representation of the experience of struggling and depicts a number of factors that influence struggling. Kathryn placed herself in the centre, in what she called a cage, which she constructed out of black drinking straws (*conceptual; primary; context and colour; interpretation*). She explained that she saw no way out of the cage, which is both a physical and mental space. Kathryn explained that the cage could be her classroom: 'your classroom can be your safe space … it can also be your prison'. She talked of a feeling of 'hemmed-in-ness'. When your classroom door is shut, she told me, it is a sign that 'you're not coping'. She added that the cage is also transportable, which suggests that your struggling might be with you wherever you go.

The plastic beads coming out of the top of her head illustrate a 'mental explosion' (*symbolic; secondary*) although she added that 'struggling can't be seen'. She explained further what this mental explosion is like: 'the mental to-do list hits a critical mass, the straw that breaks the camel's back and I think – that's it, I'm done.' This was not the only time she talked about 'being done' with teaching, leading, the job generally.

Above the cage is a pot of playdough, which symbolized for Kathryn the pressures she felt from above (*symbolic; secondary; context and colour*), by which she meant the leadership team and the headteacher in particular: 'it weighs you down … [then] you explode'. I asked whether the choice of pink was intentional, as she had already explained that her headteacher was female; she was keen to emphasize that the colour choice was coincidental, and added that most of the pressure she experienced actually came from her male line manager. This highlights the possible danger of my overinterpreting the role of colour – in this case pink as a 'female' colour – in her collage.

Beneath her, she used a piece of blue felt to illustrate what she called the 'shark-infested waters' she is operating in (*symbolic; primary; secondary*). During the process of creating her collage, I observed her moving this piece of blue felt up a number of times until the level had almost reached her waist. She had not realized she had done this until I pointed it out after she had finished her collage. When talking about the symbolism of the blue felt she returned to the imagery of water, telling me that the movement of the blue felt represented the 'swelling waves of accountability' (*symbolic; context and colour*). It is here that she raised the idea of buoyancy, which she described as being able to cope when the conditions are right. At other times, however, she felt as if she was floundering. She finished by adding that 'anyone can go under at any time'.

The collage shows clearly that Kathryn felt there were pressures coming both from above and below her (*interpretation; analytical*). She also talked about how the school 'squeezes people … to make every person work as hard as they can … and to get value for money'. She felt she was operating in a 'dog eat dog' environment where

market forces prevailed; a system in which there was a recruitment crisis and where teachers were not staying in the profession long term.

Around the edges of the collage, there are various items that help express Kathryn's experience of struggling or symbolize factors that influence her experience (*conceptual; secondary*). Starting from top left, she used a ball of dark coloured twine to represent a hamster wheel (*symbolic; conceptual*). She explained that she felt as if she was on this wheel (*analytical*); she was constantly tired and did not feel able to get off. She was so busy, she told me, that she sometimes worked at school from 8 a.m. through to 5.30 p.m. without eating or stopping to go to the toilet. She also added that it was hard enough being on that hamster wheel, but things were also being thrown into that wheel that get in her way. She cited new policies as an example. The overwhelming feeling of exhaustion was clear as she told me that you just get 'tireder and tireder' on this wheel and there was a risk of burning out. When she heard herself say burnout she stopped and reflected: 'earlier in my career, I saw others at risk of burnout, but it didn't resonate then'.

In the top right-hand corner, Kathryn placed a yellow feather (*symbolic; primary; context and colour*), but she made it clear that it should be viewed as white (there were no white feathers in the collage box). 'I put it on the right-hand side because … you look automatically top right, don't you, so that's ultimately where I think this issue of struggling is … all about being judged and … I guess that's why I put it there because it is the most important thing, the difficulties that you face…' (*symbolic; secondary; context and colour*). She explained that the feather symbolized 'some sort of failure … you're not capable, you're shirking responsibilities … soldiers in World War One were given feathers because they were considered … well someone like you, you're a failure' (*symbolic; interpretation; analytical*).

Kathryn used two pieces of red felt to create a red cross in the bottom left corner of her collage (*conceptual; primary; context and colour; symbolic*). The symbolism is clear, the Red Cross being an organization that 'helps people in crisis, whoever and wherever they are'. She admitted being desperate for help, while also stating elsewhere in the interview that she was fearful of asking: 'I don't feel I can ask … and it's out of reach. My arms aren't bendy enough.' Her arms are made of springs but clearly she cannot stretch far enough to reach the help (*symbolic; analytical*). She raised an important point here about her perception that help is available but not accessible.

In the bottom left of the collage, Kathryn created a clock out of a pipe cleaner and a piece of a drinking straw (*primary; conceptual; context and colour*). She told me that the actual time indicated on the clock was not significant (*symbolic; secondary*). However, time was a definite theme throughout both interviews, and Kathryn was clear that it had to be included on the collage. More precisely, it was the lack of time or the pressure of time that influenced Kathryn's experience of struggling. She talked at some length about how people's 'last-minute-ism' can become 'someone else's stress factor'.

Looking at the layers of analysis used for Kathryn's collage, the predominant level used was the symbolic level. Colour and context also played a key role. However, despite her saying her collage was not abstract, there was a range of abstract concepts embedded in her collage. However, the interpretation level, which looks at the most obvious reading of an image, was the least used in the analysis of Kathryn's collage. By interweaving Kathryn's verbal data into the analysis of her collage, themes such as the invisibility of struggling and the role of context on the experience of struggling start to emerge. Kathryn's experience of struggling has a negative emotional tone and also seems linked to the sense of a damaged self-view.

Summary of themes from the sample collages

Whilst Veronica and Kathryn expressed their experience of struggling in very different ways, there are themes in both collages that help theorize the nature of struggling. Both collages express a heightened awareness of embodied tensions, such as feeling physically torn, knots in the tummy and headaches (Veronica) or feeling squeezed and tired (Kathryn). There is also a predominantly negative tone to the emotions associated with struggling. Veronica used blue to express sadness and the central feature of her collage is a teardrop. By describing it as a 'pretty little teardrop', she added an extra layer of meaning to the sadness of her struggling. Kathryn expressed a fear of floundering in ever deepening waters, which she illustrated by the use of blue felt.

There are factors that influence the experience of struggling and both Veronica and Kathryn illustrated these in their collages. Kathryn presented a range of factors, such as support that feels inaccessible, and the conditions she felt she was operating in. The use of the term 'shark-infested waters' adds to the sense of fear expressed by Kathryn. The process of collage creation itself allowed Kathryn to express that those water levels were rising; she kept on moving the felt up and up.

Time is a further factor that contributed to Kathryn's sense of struggling. She also felt pressured from above. To an extent, the factors expressed in her collage seem to be mostly external, although how she experienced struggling was clearly internal. For Veronica, however, factors that influenced her experience of struggling seem to have been more internal. For example, she voiced feelings of self-doubt and admitted to being a self-critic. She mentioned feeling torn between priorities, which were dictated externally, but the overriding sense from her collage is that her experience of struggling was coming from within her. Kathryn, on the other hand, seemed to perceive her experience of struggling as more externally influenced.

A new theorization of struggling

The stories of struggling as presented to me verbally and visually helped me theorize struggling as a complex phenomenon situated in the individual but experienced within a social context. Struggling is a set of complex interactions – with other people and objects – in perpetual motion.

This study set out to place teachers at the heart of the experience of struggling. From Kathryn's and Veronica's stories alone it is possible to suggest that struggling is experienced as a heightened embodied tension with an emotionally negative tone. Struggling can also involve the sense of a damaged self-view. The analysis of other participants' stories has resulted in other theoretical suggestions, such as struggling involving a reduced sense of controllability and resulting in impaired performance. Finally, I argue that struggling is a temporary fractured state.

The power of collage

A study that sets out to explore the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of teachers who identify as 'having struggled' was always going to require a particularly sensitive research design. Getting teachers to reflect deeply about their experience of struggling required the use of methods with which participants would feel comfortable on the one hand whilst being challenged and supported to go beyond a taken-for-granted understanding of struggling.

Whilst arts-based methods are becoming more commonplace in research settings, using a method such as collage was initially new to me; it was certainly new

to all my participants. The idea caused some uncertainty in them as they were keen to 'do it right'. Presenting the task and materials required both a clarity of communication and a reassurance that whatever they did would be 'right'. Doing my own collage before the pilot study and reflecting on the collage-making process during the pilot study interviews allowed me to be flexible to participants' approaches to that process. Conducting interviews in participants' homes – which is also where the collages were created – also afforded a vital level of privacy and a sense of comfort.

Such a combination of methods – loosely-structured interviews and collage – led to the collection of very rich verbal and visual data. By creating a particular analytical model to adopt for the analysis of the collages, I was able to uncover and unpack the visual metaphors contained within and intermingle them with the verbal data, the spoken stories.

The use of collage as a research instrument has allowed me to gain a rich understanding into what it feels like and means, for these participants, to be struggling as a teacher. I have learned about the context in which struggling occurs and factors that influence struggling. Teachers shared stories of procedures applied in school to deal with struggling and relayed the reactions and responses of leaders. All of this will have implications for policy and practice.

Finally, I have seen that collage creation can evoke powerful emotions; the process can also help with the expression of experience in ways beyond the spoken word. Therein lies perhaps literally the unspoken power of collage. Yet all participants chose – indeed, were encouraged – to speak about their collages, to verbalize the visual metaphors they had created. The unspoken power of this arts-based method currently lies then in its relative obscurity as a research method. I hope that this article can help speak up for the power of collage.

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Notes on the contributor

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