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Exploring the identities of pathways educators through the lens of Third Space Theory

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ABSTRACT

Pathways educators, who teach into university-based tertiary pre-paration programmes, contribute to a unique space within widen-ing participation. Conceptualisations of pathways educators' identities would benefit from further theorisation to understand the challenges and possibilities of this role, so this was the focus of the current study. Ten pathways educators on academic contracts at a regional Australian university co-constructed concept maps and wrote reflections about what it means to be a pathways edu-cator. These maps and reflections were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns, which were then examined through a Third Space Theory lens. The findings highlighted a strong sense of pathways educators dwelling at the margins of academia, in liminal or in-between locations that are complex, nuanced, hard to define and often perceived as lower in status when compared to 'traditional' academic spaces. However, the analysis also suggested that finding a home in these fluid, unbounded, spaces might present opportunities for authentic and self-fulfilling work in the ambiguity. While institutional constraints and power imbalances are acknowledged, we also highlight poten-tial implications for pathways educators, and other individuals in academic roles that occupy the margins, through a strength-based lens where agency is not lost but may thrive in unexpected ways.

Background

The worldwide massification of higher education has led to a proliferation of widening participation initiatives. For example, outreach activities into schools are often used to raise university aspirations among students who might not be aware of the higher education opportunities available to them (Raciti and Dale 2019). However, this increasing diversity in the student body also means that there is a need for interventions that support students' transitions into higher education (De Clercq, Parmentier, and Van Meenen 2022). This has

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become crucial, because '[t]he divide between the literacy practices of students entering higher education, and those required for success in academic and professional world contexts, has challenged traditional university pedagogies that were previously prepared for more elite cohorts' (Schneider and Daddow 2017, 157). In Australia, the provision of tertiary preparation courses as alternative pathways to higher education study has become an essential mechanism for enabling all individuals to enter an award-level university qualification (McKay et al. 2018; Pitman et al. 2016). Such preparatory, or enabling, courses and programmes are taught in universities and take the form of certificates, diplomas, and non-award qualifications in study management, academic literacies, communication, numeracy, and English language proficiency (Agosti and Bernat 2018; Syme, Davis, and Cook 2021). Pathway models for preparation courses differ across nations, but international examples include access courses (UK), community college access programmes (USA), and bridging courses (New Zealand) (Baker et al. 2022). A diverse and 'non-traditional' student population often enrols in tertiary preparation courses (Hogg 2021; Hopkins 2021). Therefore, these courses encourage equitable access to higher education, and support students' success throughout university (Syme et al. 2021).

University staff who teach into tertiary preparation courses are often academics, and are usually known as pathways or enabling educators. Educators teaching within this domain tend to make use of a reflexive dialogic approach that values students' pre-existing strengths and knowledge to create an inclusive and supportive environment, sometimes referred to as enabling pedagogies (A. Bennett et al. 2016). However, although a distinct academic role with a long history in widening participation has emerged (Baker et al. 2022), research on how pathways educators frame their identities is still in its infancy. Traditionally, academic identity has been 'defined as the meaning one attaches to roles and tasks required within a particular institutional context, [so] it is often seen as disciplinary identity' (Simmons et al. 2013, 10). This, therefore, poses an interesting question about how academics sitting outside of the disciplines, as is the case with pathways educators, conceptualise their academic identity. Previous research indicates that the pathways educator is a multifaceted role, but there is no defined notion of what it means to be a pathways educator, and the literature largely focuses on the challenges faced by these academics. The role would also benefit from further theorisation to understand what opportunities can be opened up in this space. Therefore, the current study drew on Third Space Theory (explicated below) to further unpack the hybridity, ambiguity and richness of the role.

The pathways educator role

Pathways education occupies a unique interdisciplinary space within widening participation. Tertiary preparation programmes and courses provide students with opportunities for entry into almost all undergraduate study areas. Consequently, pathways educators come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This places pathways educators within a distinct space compared to academics who teach within the disciplines (Johnston et al. 2021), and they are therefore likely to face different challenges. Indeed, Hattam, Weiler, and King (2019) found that staff transitioning from teaching undergraduates to enabling students experienced difficulties adjusting to the use of enabling pedagogies. Such pedagogies encompass a fusion of approaches involving

transition pedagogy, inclusive practices, and critical pedagogy (Stokes 2014). Pastoral care is also positioned as a central component (A. Bennett et al. 2016), meaning that there are pronounced emotional labour demands (Crawford et al. 2018). The role can thus be defined as 'a reconceptualization of a solely academic role to one that incorporates and acknowledges the practice of care and support of students . . . to meet the holistic needs of students' (Bunn 2019, 152). In this sense, teaching within this space is representative of a more holistic and humanist conception of student-centred pedagogies in which emotional support and embedded pastoral care complements cognitive aspects of learning (Tangney 2014).

A recent collection of autoethnographic studies by enabling educators highlights the expansive nature of this role, including the need to integrate multiple personal and professional identities (Mann 2021); the emotional labour of the educators' investment in students' personal development (Henderson-Brooks 2021); the need to teach with self-compassion and build students' self-efficacy (James 2021); the burden of being a confidant for students (McDougall 2021); the pressure that the emotional work/labour places on work-life balance (Johnston et al. 2021); and the risk of burnout (Hogg 2021). These accounts depict a rewarding but demanding role, with workload expectations thought to go beyond the teaching, research and service functions of a 'traditional' academic job: 'We propose that an enabling educator is akin to a juggler, holding many roles in the air. We are simultaneously educators, social workers, and university employees subject to politics and policy' (Crawford et al. 2018, 25).

Other challenges may be due to the 'peripheral position' (Baker et al. 2022, 323) of the pathways educator role within the university, since it 'occup[ies] a somewhat ambiguous space on the fringes of higher education' (Johnston et al. 2021, 45). Jones and Thomas (2005) noted that widening participation professionals are often placed in centres on the periphery of university business, which can lead to feelings of marginalisation among staff (Burke 2013). Although research on the experiences of widening participation practitioners (e.g., Burke 2012) has largely focused on professional staff (i.e., higher education workers on non-academic contracts) involved in institutional widening participation initiatives (e.g., outreach activities), other research has found that academics teaching into foundation studies programmes may also become marginalised, just like their students (Strauss 2020; Strauss and Hunter 2018). Academics whose roles do not fit neatly into preconceived traditional academic structures and disciplines may have similar perspectives to these university staff. Indeed, marginalisation can present in emerging and vocationally-oriented disciplines in which academics perceive a lack of clarity or negative perception of their academic identities (Dashper and Fletcher 2019). Some educators even sit outside of the disciplines altogether to provide generic support for learners across fields (Carter and Laurs 2014). R. Bennett et al. (2016) conveyed the experiences of Academic Language and Literacy educators, not positioned within a single discipline, as 'one of marginalised identity, of being *fringe dwellers*, in an *academic wasteland*, in *academic limbo*, in an *academic ghetto* and of paradoxically feeling *trapped* and yet *adrift* in the university' (224, emphasis in original).

Yet, the diversification of academic roles can also open up opportunities, since occupying an academic role at the margins is not always indicative of marginalisation. For example, Little and Green (2012) contended that academic developers who sit outside of the disciplines and support academics' educational and professional development of

learning and teaching, can actively decide whether to occupy the margins or not. Similarly, a recent investigation of the professional identities of pracademics[1] suggested that embracing a fluidity of movement between roles supports adaptation across contexts (Dickinson, Fowler, and Griffiths 2022). Therefore, it is useful to continue to explore how individuals who occupy less easily defined academic roles that do not fit into neat and traditional academic categories might also make the most of having a multiplicity of identities. This is where the lens of Third Space Theory may help us to further understand the pathways educator role. As outlined by Whitchurch (2008a, 2013), characteristics of inhabiting Third Spaces within institutions include a lack of understanding and recognition of what people do in these spaces; tension in navigating and negotiating the demands of operating in-between domains; ambiguity in the definition of professional identities; blurred senses of belonging to groups and locations; and the possibility of pushing the boundaries of conventional institutional categories and structures. Accordingly, we shall now turn our attention to the application of this theory to other educational research and then elucidate how we applied it to the current research context.

Third Space Theory

Before delving into how Third Space Theory is relevant to educational research, and more specifically to professional identities in higher education, it is important to first introduce its initial development in postcolonial studies. Acknowledging and unpacking Third Space as a postcolonial theoretical concept provides the foundations for a well-informed translation of the concept and thus avoids simplistic appropriation of ideas developed for other purposes and contexts.

Third Space, a key concept in postcolonial studies, originates from a critique of colonial discourses that construct colonisers and colonised in an oversimplified mutually exclusive hierarchical binary opposition (Andreotti 2011; Bhabha 2004). Instead, Bhabha (2004) argues that identities are relational with the coloniser and colonised influencing each other's identity formation. This mutual influence, however, takes place in a realm of unequal power dynamics where the coloniser, justifying itself by its claims to superiority, imposes its norms through and with institutions onto the colonised (Bhabha 2021). The Third Space, an ambiguous and hybrid space in-between 'home culture' and imposed colonial norms, then, surfaces as a location where colonised peoples construct their identities (Bhabha 2004). Dwelling in the Third Space entails identities that are not pure or static but hybrid, ambiguous, and in a constant state of flux, thus subverting the colonial claim to fixed hierarchical categorical distinctions. In this space, categories blend, not in an unproblematic and smooth fusion, but in a way that stresses the discursive limits of dichotomies (Bhabha 2021). Furthermore, Bhabha (2011) argues that the tensions, and contradictions inherent to the Third Space enable the creation of new meanings that can be used to mediate different perspectives and open up possibilities for new ways of looking at reality.

As Bhabha's concept has been translated into various fields of thought and research, Third Space has often come to simply signify dwelling in liminal or in-between spaces between categories/groups/cultures. In higher education research, Third Space has been applied to an array of studies that explore experiences and professional identities in

liminal and marginal areas of institutions: staff working in roles that blur non-academic and academic realms (McIntosh and Nutt 2022; Whitchurch 2008a, 2013); staff and students based in schools and universities creating hybrid spaces within teacher education programmes (Sjølie, Francisco, and Langelotz 2019; Zeichner 2010); Scholarship of Teaching and Learning academics, who provide academic support to students (R. Bennett et al. 2016); and English for Academic Purposes teachers, who support students from non-English speaking backgrounds to develop the language skills required for further study (MacDonald 2016). A common thread in these studies is their conceptualisation of the margins in higher education as a Third Space. In doing so, this body of research tends to argue that in these marginal locations, traditional definitions of roles are blurred while professional identities are often ambiguous. As MacDonald (2016) states, '[t]he nature of work in the third space seems to be less bound by definitions and categories that exist in the traditional academic or administrative domains' (111).

Whitchurch (2008a, 2013) corroborates this understanding of Third Space. Whitchurch employs Third Space to conceptualise the roles of professionals who carry out functions that sit in-between academic and non-academic domains, not fitting neatly into traditional institutional structures and binary career descriptors. Some examples of these positions include learning support, outreach and community partnerships, academic quality enhancement, academic literacy programme developers, and institutional research and policy teaching (Whitchurch 2013). Whitchurch (2013) argues that Third Space professionals blur the apparent academic–non-academic binary division and thus challenge taken-for-granted rigid divisions between these two categories. For example, Whitchurch (2008a, 2008b) categorised professional staff who work in widening participation and student transitions as Third Space professionals who tend to be *unbounded professionals*, 'display[ing] a disregard for boundaries' (Whitchurch 2008a, 383). The author explains further: '*Third Space*, therefore, offers a way of problematising binary approaches to higher education communities, and a lens through which to view the roles, identities and working practices of staff who find themselves dealing with the tensions, discontinuities and practical accommodations that arise in contemporary institutions' (Whitchurch 2013, 44, emphasis in original). Despite tensions and challenges, Third Space brings to light the potential that shifting institutional boundaries and professional identities may offer. More fluid identities and blurred boundaries not only represent 'a site of resistance to conventional understandings, norms and binaries' (Solomon, Boud, and Rooney 2006, 6), but may enable new perspectives to emerge that can be harnessed to support innovation and growth.

As suggested by previous research, ambiguity and hybridity appear to be inherent aspects of pathways educators' experiences of their role. This suggests that Third Space Theory could further illuminate our understanding of identities in this space. In adopting the theory, Whitchurch (2008a, 2008b) has already defined non-academic staff undertaking institutional projects related to widening participation as Third Space professionals. However, the pathways space itself constitutes more than an institutional project, and many pathways educators hold academic contracts. Therefore, moving beyond the notion of a Third Space professional in the current context, this study engages concepts from Third Space Theory to specifically explore the identities of this unique academic role within widening participation.

Method

Participants

Ten pathways educators on academic contracts, based in a pathways college[2] at a regional university in Australia, participated in concept map-mediated interviews (Kandiko and Kinchin 2013). Participants taught into pathways programmes that included foundation diplomas, non-award enabling education courses, and English language proficiency courses. This single context was chosen as a representation of a 'research microcosm' (Heron, Gravett, and Yakovchuk 2021, 542): all of the participants contributed to the goal of providing students entry into a university degree, so they were expected to share a common set of values (Kinchin et al. 2018). It was therefore anticipated that this would make this group a valuable case study for understanding common identities in this space. We began from a location of knowledge co-construction and a desire to democratise knowledge construction by listening to and engaging with the data collected to unpack the professional identities of pathways educators. Therefore, all participants were also involved in designing and writing up the research, so they are co-authors of this article. This creation of knowledge democracies can empower practitioners, closing the gap between practice and research (Rowell 2019). Institutional ethics committee approval was obtained prior to data collection and all participants provided informed consent.

Concept map-mediated interviews

During an unstructured interview, each participant (the co-authors) co-constructed a concept map with the interviewer (the lead author). Concept maps consist of nodes (with concept labels) joined together by statements explaining how those concepts are connected (Kinchin et al. 2017; Heron, Kinchin, and Medland 2018). Concept maps are expected to represent an interviewee's individual perceptions about a domain and are 'analogous to collecting a rich interview transcript' (Kinchin et al. 2018, 341). Therefore, the interview itself does not need to be audio-recorded and transcribed. It is also beneficial to augment the maps with a reflective narrative by the participants to provide further explanation and context about the key concepts in their map (Gravett et al. 2020; Kinchin et al. 2018).

At the start of each map-mediated interview, a single broad question was asked: *What does it mean to be a pathways educator?* To help participants interrogate their responses more fully, and to prompt further discussion, follow-up questions were also used at certain points during the interview. Following the process set out by Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone (2020), during the open discussion, the interviewer noted down brief salient concepts (i.e., notable terms and short sentences) on post-it notes. Once 12–15 concept labels had been obtained, the interviewee was asked to organise these post-it notes on an A3 piece of paper, and then make and explain links between the concepts, using arrows and short descriptions of each link. Further probes were used by the interviewer to encourage the interviewee to think about the best placement for each concept on the map and how they were connected. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. After each interview, the interviewer visualised the draft concept map on PowerPoint, then sent it back to the interviewee for a member check (Impellizzeri et al.

2017). Interviewees were able to edit their map until they were satisfied it represented their perspective. None of the participants viewed other participants' maps until after their own had been finalised (see Appendix for final concept maps). Finally, each interviewee wrote a short reflective narrative explaining further meaning behind their maps, as well as the wider context of their educator identities. The format of these reflections was left open to participants, so some reflected on the positioning of their roles in the wider literature and included citations, whereas others simply focused on their personal perspectives.

Analytical approach

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). Beginning with an inductive (i.e., data-led/bottom-up) reading of all concept labels and connecting statements, and text in the written reflections, coding was performed at a semantic level. This meant that explicit patterns were searched for across all the data sources leading to the generation of initial themes and sub-themes. After reviewing and organising these initial themes, a more deductive approach (i.e., theory-led/top-down) was then used to hone the more salient themes at a latent level using Third Space Theory to support our interpretations.

Reflexivity

As all authors of this study are current or former pathways educators, we acknowledge that our interpretations will have been influenced and reflexively shaped by our own experiences. We adopted this emic perspective of our own practice to avoid the potential for further marginalising a role that already appears to be placed in a 'peripheral position' (Baker et al. 2022, 323). That is, this study positions the pathways educator role as having a unique identity, so if it had been conducted by researchers not working in the pathways space, this outsider perspective could have inadvertently reinforced this marginalisation by 'making a person feel different or as an outsider because of their identity' (Gravett et al. 2020, 654). We therefore approached this research with the same pedagogical ethos that we apply to our teaching practices: as an act of co-construction of knowledge. Furthermore, Veles and Danaher (2022) argue that research collaboration, as part of an equal partnership, can itself be considered as Third Space through the 'circle of cross-boundary perspective-taking and sense-making' (9) that takes place between collaborators, 'without any one party holding assumptions of the superiority of knowledge claims' (13). One of the challenges was therefore to ensure that all authors felt empowered to contribute to all aspects of the research. Thus, all authors had input into the research design, choice of methods and data collection approaches, and write-up. Similarly, the open-ended nature of the concept map-mediated interview allowed this to function as a conversation in which the lead author merely took on the role of interviewer to act as a conduit to help other authors express their perspectives. This was particularly effective for alleviating the researcher–participant dichotomy.

Findings

The final set of themes presented below highlights a number of tensions and contradictions that are constantly at play for the pathways educators who were part of this study. These tensions have been organised into themes, although there are areas of overlap that demonstrate the richness of a role that cannot be neatly defined. Quotes from participants' concept maps (concept labels and, if applicable, the accompanying connecting statements) and written reflections have been used to illustrate our interpretations (quotes from maps have been italicised and placed within quotation marks, whereas quotes from reflections use quotation marks alone).

Transversing marginalities

When portraying what it means to be a pathways educator, many participants used terms that conveyed a sense of being at the margins of higher education. Indeed, since pathways educators' main task is to provide '*significant support*' (P10) to students, so that they can get the 'prerequisites to gain entrance into their undergraduate degree of choice' (P6), the nature of the pathways educator role necessitates it sitting outside of usual university business. Pathways educators '*take students on an apprentice journey*' (P4) to move out of the margins in which preparatory programmes sit, and into mainstream award-level higher education study. Although one participant noted that there is '*no clear term for this student group*' (P6), pathways students were described in terms of holding marginalised identities, such as '*non-traditional students*' (P8) with '*diverse needs*' (P10) / '*specialised needs*' (P8). Some participants highlighted this marginalisation in terms of common demographic and background characteristics of students (e.g., '*low SES students*' [P2, P5], '*mature students*' [P4], '*first-in-family students*' [P4], and students '*who may have financial constraints*' [P8]). A range of terms for external factors (e.g., '*multiple commitments*' [P10], '*mental health and wellbeing issues*' [P10], and '*students who have experienced trauma*' [P2]) and internal factors (e.g., '*students who have phobias about learning*' [P2], '*lacking in stability and agency*' [P6], '*unsure of themselves*' [P6], '*nervous or anxious*' [P6], '*baggage*' [P5], '*fragile*' [P6], and '*failure mindset[s]*' [P7]) were also used to describe students undertaking pathways courses. These vulnerabilities appeared to be expressed not to denigrate students, but instead to frame the complexity of their '*busy lives*' (P6, P7). As Participant 6 noted, '[pathways] students are perfectly capable and functioning adults' (P6).

In sitting outside of mainstream university business, participants spoke of occupying '*a space that is a border area of the academy*' (P8), '*on the periphery*' (P3, P4), and positioned '*in a sub-academic space*' (P2) or '*sub-unit of higher education*' (P4). Thus, there was the perception that programmes are not viewed as being as prestigious as those in other areas of higher education: 'widening participation programmes [are] generally situated at the periphery of universities and not accorded the same status as degree programmes (Porter-Szucs 2017). Like the students we serve, TESOL [Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages] centres and professionals are often marginalised by institutions (Whiting 2016).' (P1; citations in quote are taken from the participant's written reflection). Therefore, some participants also felt there was the perception that the pathways educator role sits at the margins of a 'traditional' academic role, leading to it '*not [being] understood by others*' (P1) and '*not [being] clear what we do*' (P6). Participant 6 highlighted that these problems could be

caused by there being 'no clear terminology for tertiary preparation' (P6): '[It] is a complex title and confuses both academics and non-academics. It involves explaining the job title to anyone who asks what I do when they find out I work with tertiary preparation or enabling education at a university. Non academics sometimes think I teach pre-schoolers or. . .. work in administration.' (P6). To Participant 5, being in this space means having '*no coherent discipline*' (P5) and a '*lack of specialisation*' (P5): 'The [pathways] college is like a conglomerate of researchers with few having research connections with each other' (P5). Another participant referred to the space as a '*non-discipline-specific environment*' (P7).

The sense of being separate from the usual university business and a traditional academic role meant that some participants displayed a desire to maintain an identity outside, as well as within, the pathways space. For example, some participants defined themselves more by their '*subject matter expertise*' (P1) and teaching specialism (e.g., '*ESL teacher*' [P1], '*teacher of language of mathematics*' [P7], '*language learning expert*' [P3]), than as a pathways educator specifically: 'As a pathways educator who teaches and researches primarily within the discipline of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), my principal identity is that of TESOL "pracademic"' (P1). Undertaking research related to their subject-matter expertise (e.g., *research in second language development* [P3] and *applied mathematics research* [P7]) was also one way to maintain this identity. However, some participants noted that doing '*applied research*' (P1) and '*action research*' (P5) could be a way to seek out a '*deeper understanding of students' learning*' (P5). For some, the balance between undertaking disciplinary research and '*research on students as our discipline*' (P4) appeared to lead to a push and pull between embracing an identity within the margins versus a desire to be viewed as an expert outside of the margins and within the disciplines: 'This I feel encourages action research to meet the research requirements of the role rather than nurturing the research of my interest. This is where my conflict lies – this is the place where I can make a difference to my students, but it is not the place to support my research interests.' (P5). In summary, the pathways educator role can be a place of challenge, particularly in terms of not being understood by others, as well as a place of opportunity. Some participants did not appear to have a desire to be neatly defined, and instead embraced the prospect of being able to transverse the margins by adopting another chosen identity when this was valuable to them.

Blurring the boundaries between a multiplicity of job roles

With students sitting in the margins, on the boundary of higher education, pathways educators act as '*gatekeeper[s] to undergraduate study*' (P8) – a form of '*sorting machine*' (P8) who needs to '*maintain standards*' (P8). However, maintaining participation for this '*distinct cohort*' (P5) of students also appeared to be important to participants. Therefore, participants expressed a desire to blur the boundaries between pre-tertiary and tertiary level study by using student-centred approaches to aid with '*keeping the door open*' (P9): 'This means that, rather than being a gate-keeper to the stratified academic world, I can do my best teaching as someone who meets students where they are, who can hold the tertiary doors open and who, to mix metaphors, can also walk for a short time with them along a difficult road' (P9). In contrast to the perceived view of a traditional academic role in cognate disciplines, it was suggested that pathways education is '*not just about*

transmission of content knowledge' (P2), so students are firmly at the centre of pedagogic approaches. Instead, teaching is discussed in terms of being about managing '*uncertainty*' (P3) and '*translating complexities*' (P9) into a '*language students understand*' (P9). There was the view that students '*are not tabulae rasae*' (P9) (i.e., blank slates), so educators need to recognise students' '*pre-existing knowledge*' (P6) / '*prior knowledge and experience*' (P9) / '*varied knowledge and experience*' (P7). Since students are yet to enter mainstream higher education, pathways educators act as '*enculturation and socialisation agent[s]*' (P8) to provide students with the '*social and cultural capital to succeed in undergraduate [study]*' (P6) (e.g., by helping them to '*learn how to negotiate time*' [P6], develop '*confidence*' [P6], '*a sense of belonging*' [P6], '*English proficiency*' [P3], '*academic communication skills*' [P3], an '*academic voice*' [P4], and to also give them a chance to '*figure out whether university is for them*' [P6]). Therefore, pathways education is as much about preparing students to meet pre-requisites (opening the door) and pass a boundary, as it is about preparing them to be successful (keeping the door open) and not adding further boundaries.

Participants highlighted that they need to work with students' complex situations by taking a holistic approach to responding to students' diverse needs: 'I identify myself as a teacher, a facilitator, a support person to guide students to be successful for what they aim for' (P7). In being a pathways educator, duties also appear to lack boundaries and job roles and identities appear to be multiple (e.g., '*motivational speaker*' [P2], '*mentor*' [P5], '*coach*' [P5], '*guide*' [P5, P7], '*mediator*' [P9], and '*problem solver*' [P9]). This was seen to be vital in preparing pathways students for university: '"life happens" much more signifi-cantly to students I work with, so I need to be able to act as an interlocutor, helping minimise obstacles when or where I can, connecting students with support to travel over these blocks' (P9). Similarly, student-centred approaches were also expressed as being multiple. Educators need to show '*a deep attentiveness to, and understanding of, students*' (P1) by '*scaffolding*' (P4) an '*accessible*' (P6) and '*flexible learning environment*' (P5), using '*role modelling*' (P10), being '*genuine and sincere*' (P10), and '*not giving up on students*' (P9). Another example of blurring boundaries was the process of '*breaking down of barriers*' (P2) by '*relating to students*' (P7), '*feel[ing] students' struggles*' (P2), '*placing yourself in students' shoes*' (P7), '*sharing one's own learning journey*' (P10), and viewing teaching '*through students' eyes*' (P9): 'It's crucial that this connection occurs because, by understanding the students' lives and selves, as they present them, I can learn to communicate in a language that we can speak together' (P9). Thus, the boundaries between the 'lan-guages' spoken by educators and students are blurred. Seeing the '*potential in students*' (P2), and building these relational connections, was viewed as requiring '*care*' (P2, P5, P8) meaning there is a need to '*manage emotional work*' (P9) (e.g., by acting as a '*counsellor*' [P9]). However, despite the '*responsibility*' (P5) to '*bring out the best in students*' (P5), it is thought that these '*emotional labour requirements*' (P8) are '*not routinely recognised or rewarded by the academy (Eaton 2013)*' (P1; citation in quote is taken from the partici-pant's written reflection). In summary, participants expressed that maintaining participa-tion requires a holistic investment in individual students. Participants appeared to embrace a multiplicity of roles beyond needing to simply teach content. Although emotional labour requirements unique to this role were noted, they did not necessarily seem insurmountable, and participants appeared to suggest that there needs to be fewer boundaries set up between teacher–student, and teacher–caregiver, as compared with a traditional academic role.

Mediating conflicts between institutional demands and desires to enact social justice

Working in the pathways space was highlighted as being 'part of humanising education' (P1) within the 'heartland of equity' (P4). The role was therefore viewed as being 'fundamental to the university's role in supporting educational access' (P3) and pathways educators were 'motivated by social justice issues' (P9). However, being in this role was not simply seen as contributing to social equity; it was described as fulfilling a vital 'community service' (P2), and serves as a 'political act' (P6), in which pathways educators need to become 'freedom fighter[s]' (P4) as part of a 'mission to increase equity' (P6). Thus, pathways educators were seen as active 'manager[s] of change' (P3) and programmes were thought to have the power to 'change [students'] lives' (P5), helping students to 'learn who they are' (P10), develop 'life skills' (P10), and lead to 'transformation' (P10): 'A number [of students] have had less than positive prior schooling experiences and participation in [pathways programmes] operates as a disruptor to their educational history' (P6). Therefore, being a pathways educator means being 'at the frontline of the democratisation of higher education' (P8), and is a 'positive and empowering experience' (P6) that offers students 'new opportunities and directions' (P10).

Yet, emancipatory efforts to contribute to widening participation were also portrayed as being in direct conflict with the perspective that contemporary higher education has become largely commodified. Being positioned at a place of transition into higher education means that pathways educators may be the first academics in the university lifecycle to experience new competing demands as universities continue to assume new business ventures. Therefore, educators 'function as a canary in the neoliberalised workspace' (P8): 'In some ways enabling educators are also the metaphorical canaries at the neoliberal academic coalface – how they cope (or burn-out) with increasing time pressures, increasing students and competing demands may hold lessons for all teachers in higher education, as entrepreneurial universities continue to capture new markets with new "efficient" economistic approaches' (P8). Despite the fundamental equity and social justice function of the role, participants felt that there is still the expectation to treat students as 'clients' (P4) in order to 'sell a product' (P9) and ensure 'value for money' (P4). The ethics of such an approach were called into question by Participant 9: 'There is something disturbing in maintaining the ethics of doing work driven by social justice, all the while promoting the promise of aspiration and elevation via education, when I also can see inside the machinations of an industry and its fabrication methods' (P9). Therefore, being able to mediate these conflicts becomes an essential part of the role, but this may not be achievable for all. For example, Participant 1 suggested that there is a 'need for advocacy [for students] which can lead to exclusion from the ivory tower' (P1). This conflict could be seen as 'position[ing] tertiary preparation practitioners at one end of the equity/excellence debate' (P4).

The 'competing often contradictory demands placed upon enabling educators in the contemporary neoliberalised university' (P8) mean that participants feel that they have to be a 'jack of all trades' (P8) and 'an expert across multiple areas' (P8). While many of the concerns raised about 'high teaching load' (P5) and 'competing time pressures' (P5) / 'pressures on time' (P7) are not unique to pathways educators, there was still the perception that the need to be both a pathways educator (with its multiplicity of unique

functions), and an academic (with its teaching, research and service expectations) at the same time, could lead to a '*conflict of roles*' (P8). One area where this conflict was identified was related to the perceived hierarchical dichotomy between research and teaching that may be particularly exacerbated for pathways educators: 'There are external empiricist forces that are now demanding that tertiary [preparation] practitioners are active researchers, and these forces are creating an internal drift in values as the student is no longer the core priority' (P4). In summary, moving out of the margins of pathways education towards a traditional disciplinary academic role, and being increasingly faced with the neoliberal demands of higher education, could mean losing some of the core social justice values of being a pathways educator.

Exploring the data through the lens of Third Space Theory

Many experiences expressed through the findings chime with those identified in previous research, including pathways students potentially being more vulnerable than other students (McDougall 2021); the particular emphasis on being student-focused in a holistic way that supports students' emotional needs, despite the time pressures this causes (Johnston et al. 2021); the benefit of role modelling one's own experiences for students from marginalised backgrounds (Johnston 2021); the need to assume multiple roles and identities simultaneously, such as being a teacher and student advocate (Mann 2021); how emotional labour becomes an implicit aspect of the role (Crawford et al. 2018; Henderson-Brooks 2021); how the pathways educator role and associated preparatory programmes are afforded a lower status within the university (Strauss 2020); and how research expectations can feel 'out of step for those working in enabling education' (McDougall 2021, 104). Nevertheless, reading the data through a Third Space lens allows for a further conceptualisation of pathways as a Third Space location in academia where ambiguous professional identities emerge.

On the one hand, the findings suggest a strong sense of pathways educators dwelling at the margins of academia, in liminal or in-between locations that are complex, nuanced, hard to define and often perceived as lower status when compared to 'traditional' academic spaces. However, Third Space, in the context of this study, emerges as multi-layered with liminality occurring in various domains of participants' identities simultaneously. For example, liminal spaces between disciplines, academic–non-academic roles, teacher–researcher roles, lecturer–pastoral care duties, pre-tertiary–tertiary education, social justice–neoliberal ideologies. Therefore, this multiplicity points to the richness of the identities that emerge in this space and starts to signpost the potential that Third Space offers to go beyond identifications with marginalisation alone. Multiplicity also serves as a reminder that Third Space is not a single space but multifaceted locations that shift and blur, continuously being shaped (Dudgeon and Fielder 2006). In turn, this allows for fluidity in the construction of identities which are evident from our findings and are consistent with Whitchurch's (2008a; 2008b) results about non-academic widening participation professionals. That is, pathways educators also appear to be *unbounded*, with boundaries being blurred, broken down, and moved between. Indeed, one participant's usage of the term 'pracademic' to describe their identity explicitly emphasises their perception that pathways educators sit between roles, without this necessarily being a limitation for them. As boundaries are blurred, it also becomes clear that the Third Space

is 'likely to be invisible in that [it is] not written into organisation charts or job descriptions' and thus tends to bring 'into view disparities between formal structures and lived experience' in academic contexts (Whitchurch 2013, 21–23).

In addition, Third Space facilitates the understanding that location and identity formation are intimately related and influence each other simultaneously (Bhabha 2004). Participants described the location from where they operate, with its specific conditions and demands as strongly influencing their sense of identity. This liminal location creates possibilities to go beyond rigid categories within academia, but it is not a comfortable space to dwell (Whitchurch 2013). As Dudgeon and Fielder (2006) put it, '[t]hey're often risky, unsettling spaces—where the security and familiarity of our own place of belonging has to be left behind' (407). A consequence of dwelling in these spaces, as evident from the findings, is a constant search for an identity that is not given, not well defined. This search can produce confusion but also a determination to self-define and create a sense of belonging. In this way, the participants in this study, like Third Space professionals, push the boundaries of traditional definitions of higher education workers and expose the limitations of fixed reductionist categories that are often hierarchical and dichotomous (Whitchurch 2013). For example, mainstream academics who operate within a discipline in a typical research and teaching role are usually constructed in binary opposition to other positions in higher education and perceived through a hierarchical lens of higher status or prestige.

According to Whitchurch (2013), these traditional binary perceptions ought to be challenged because they tend to polarise various positions in higher education as if they were in tension with one another. The examples from our study demonstrate that this polarising tension does exist, but from a Third Space perspective, this type of dichotomy can be seen as an imposed construction that is perpetuated in favour of maintaining a perceived order in the status quo (Bhabha 2004). Accordingly, Third Space proposes that this imposition can be challenged by hybridity in identity formation where 'differences can be explored without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (McIntosh and Nutt 2022, 2).

Conclusions and implications

In starting to think through the potentials that Third Space offers as a space of resistance within challenging environments, it is possible to see the emergence of pathways educator identities that go beyond a helpless state of marginalisation. The findings highlight the value of not simply identifying challenges within pathways education, but in opening up the conversation to the opportunities that dwelling in this *third* or *in-between* space might offer. There is a sense that unique viewpoints and ways of operating are developed when working within the various intersections inherent to the work of pathways educators. Finding a home in these fluid, unbounded, spaces might represent opportunities to work with ambiguity in enabling rearticulations of taken for granted meanings (Andreotti 2011). This pushes the boundaries of narrowly defined roles in academia while offering the possibility to envision the fringes as a place where innovation and creative problem solving may emerge (Whitchurch 2013). In this way, liminal spaces are read through a strength-based lens where agency is not lost but may thrive in unexpected ways.

There is also the potential for pathways educators being able to stimulate change in pedagogical and cultural practices across higher education. The realities of pathways education require an everyday engagement with the tensions inherent to the pedagogical foundations of pathways practice and broader socioeconomic discourses, including vocational, political, and labour-market influences. This creates an uncomfortable meeting space, within which the educational institution, educators and learners must exist and 'progress', and results in what participants identified as a form of necessary destabilisation so they can function within the framework of their roles, both personal and professional. As one participant in this study noted, pathways educators are 'the metaphorical canaries at the neoliberal academic coalface', meaning that how they respond to new 'demands may hold lessons for all teachers in higher education'. Indeed, pathways educators work with the 'non-traditional' demographic that will soon become the 'traditional' demographic – offering a preview of the future – which offers practice insights into the value of holistic student-centred pedagogies. Pathways educators, from their Third Space identities and experiences in teaching this incoming demographic on the margins, are therefore uniquely positioned to advocate for higher education pedagogies that are informed by approaches that reflect inclusivity and care. Amplifying voices from this space may therefore act as a pivoting point for other academics and educational professionals, where consideration of the simultaneous power of identities and their potential for empowerment is possible.

It is, however, vital that in recognising the potentials that dwelling in the Third Space may offer to pathways educators, prevalent institutional constraints and power imbalances evident from this study and other research in this area are not ignored or downplayed. Without recognition and support, the possibilities of this space may remain unfulfilled and overtaken by everyday struggles inherent to this role. On the other hand, institutions as a whole may benefit by recognising, and providing better support for, the work done by pathways educators. From their unique positionalities, they offer a wealth of knowledge that could be harnessed and supported by universities as valuable resources of inclusive, caring, and holistic student-centred pedagogies, not bound by the constraints of specific disciplines. The implications of these findings are that pathways educators, as well as other individuals in academic roles that occupy the margins, should be supported to approach what they do with flexibility and openness by embracing the diverse perspectives and experiences that form their multi-layered identities.

Notes

1. Pracademic is a portmanteau of practitioner and academic (Lohmann, Van Til, and Ford 2011)
2. Pathways colleges are professional or academic units based within a higher education institution that offer courses/programmes to prepare students for further study.

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Appendix

Figure A1. Participant 1's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

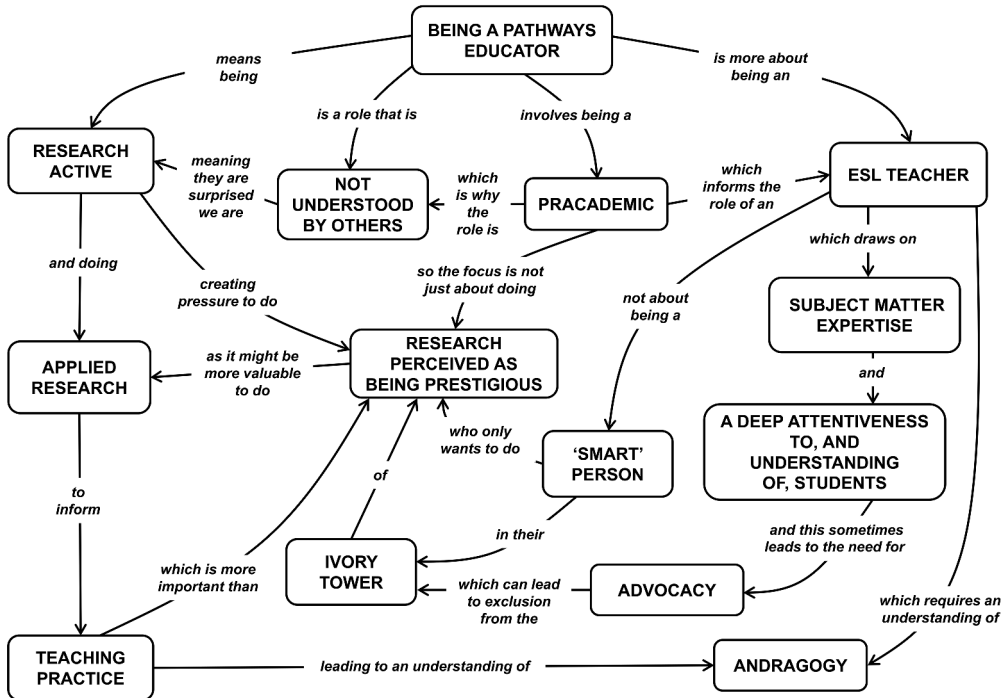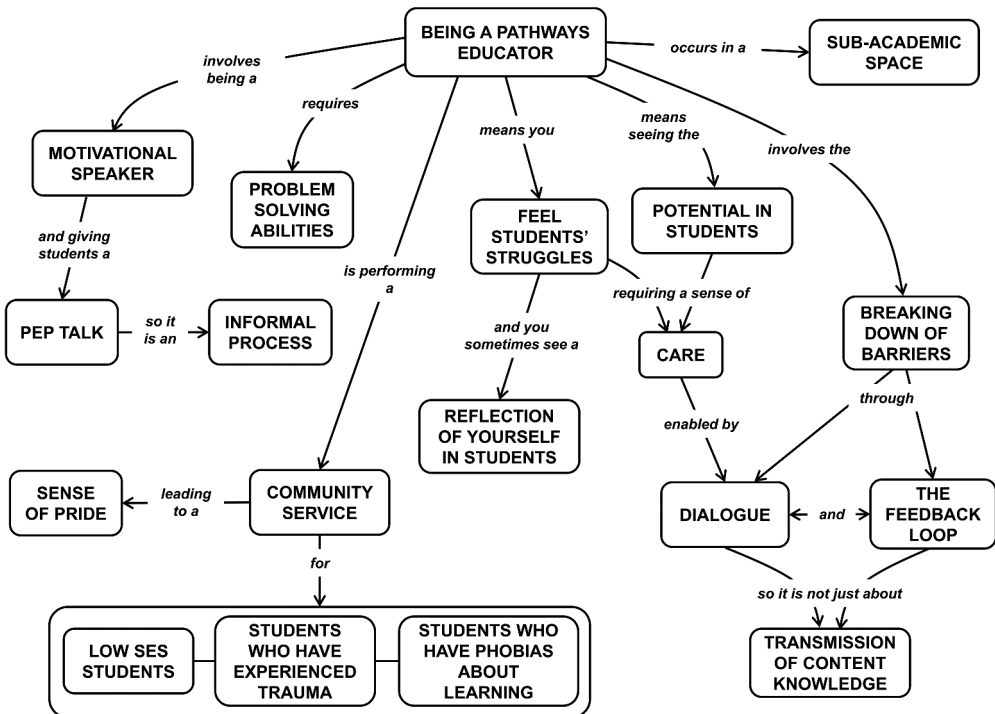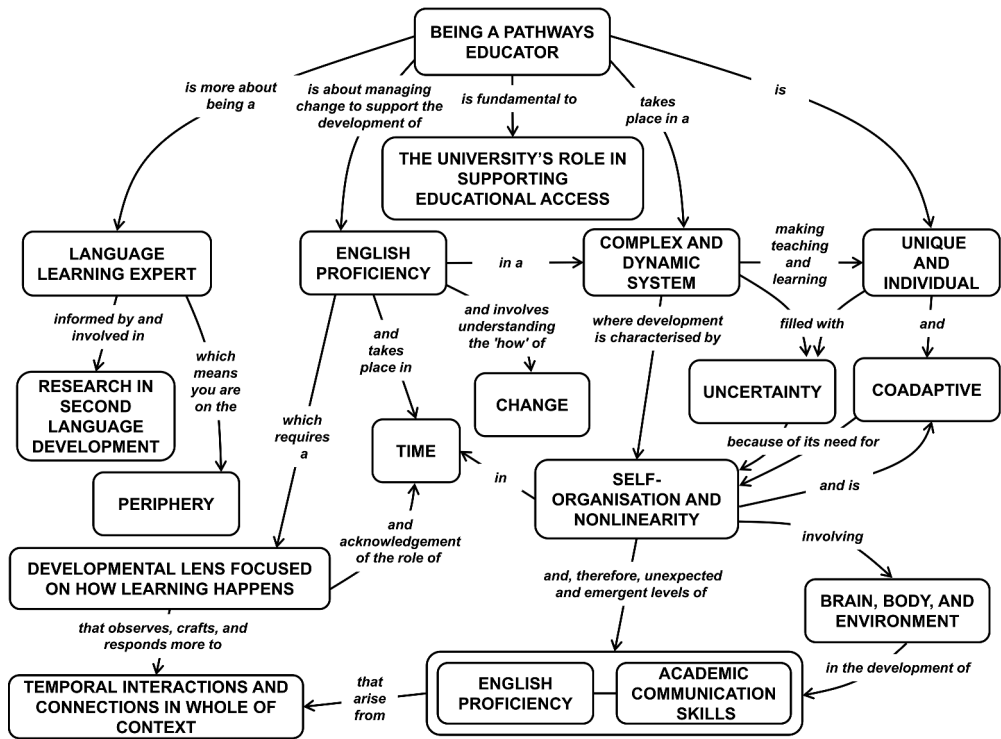**Figure A2.** Participant 2's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

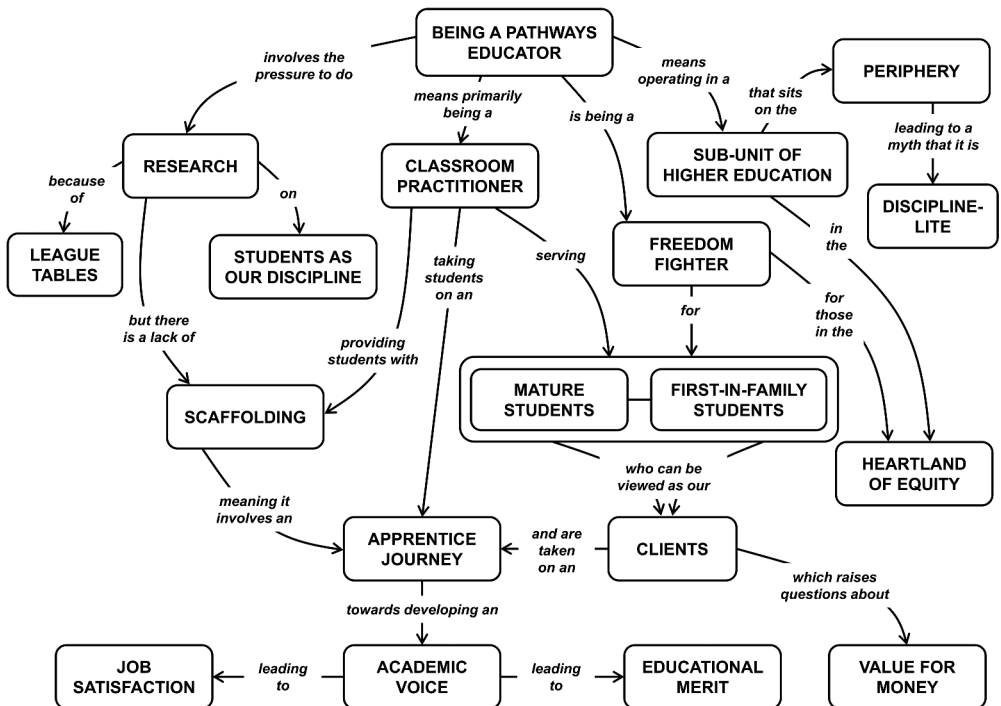Figure A3. Participant 3's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

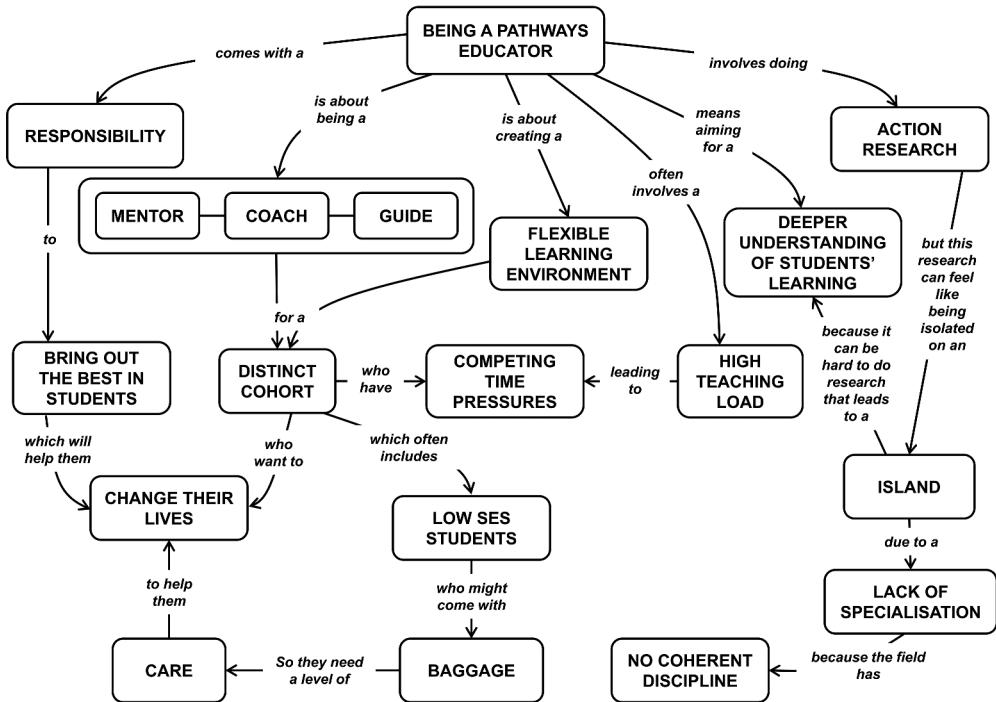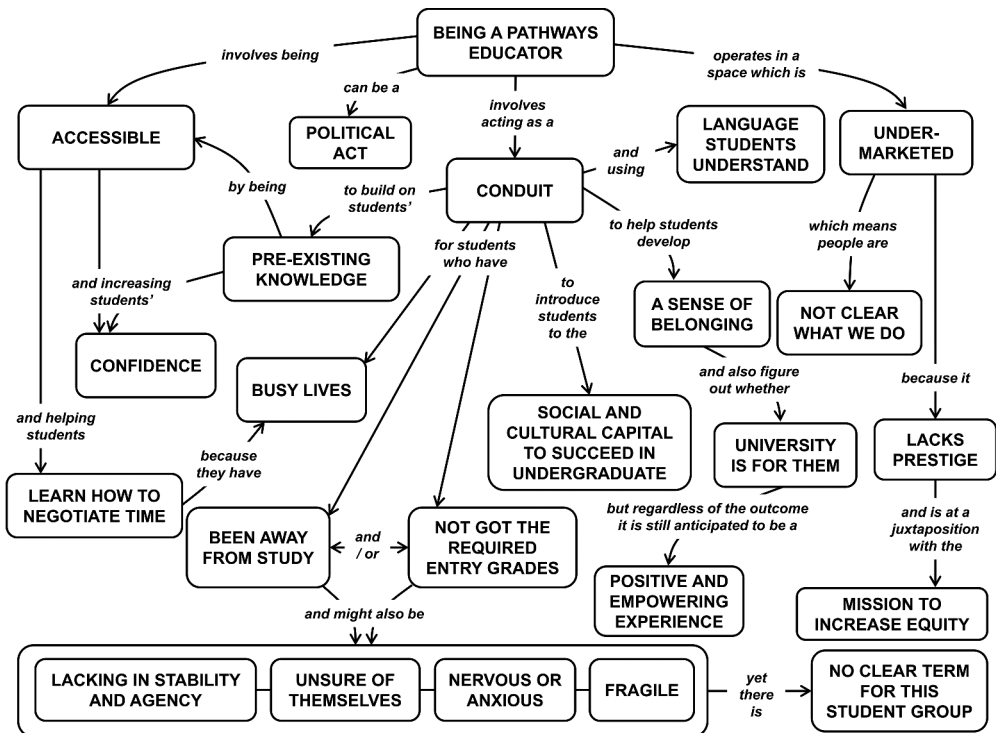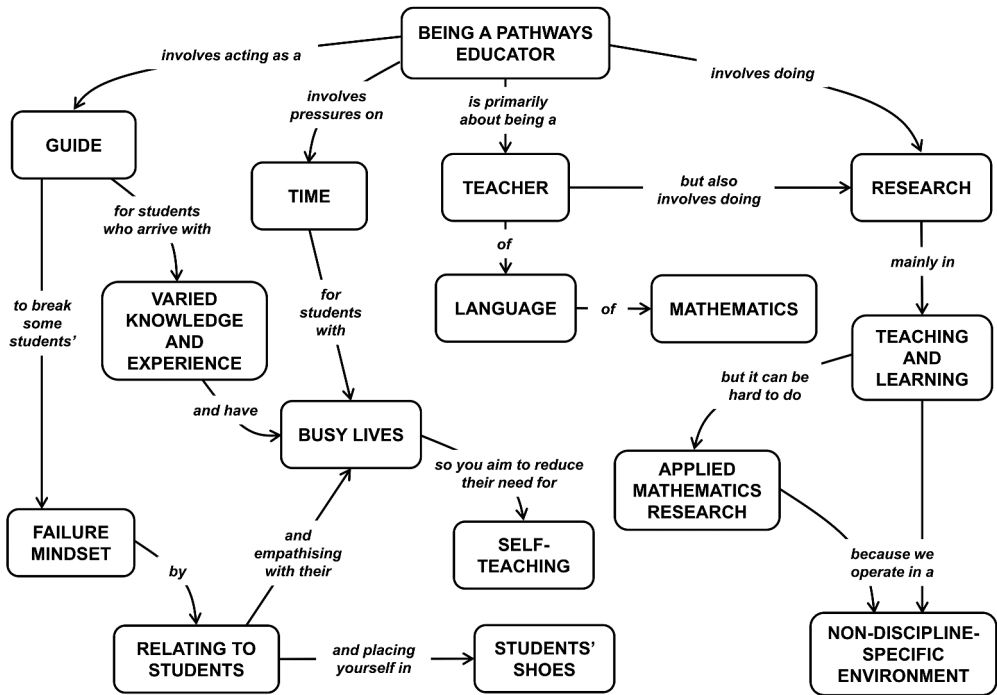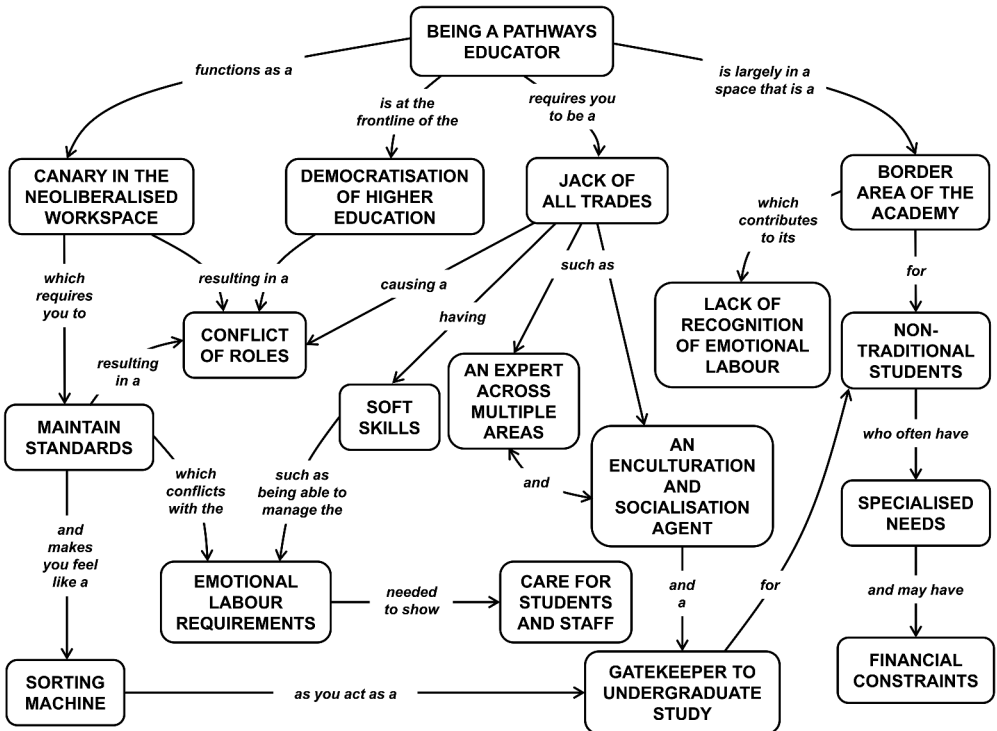Figure A4. Participant 4's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

Figure A5. Participant 5's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

Figure A6. Participant 6's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

Figure A7. Participant 7's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.

Figure A8. Participant 8's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.
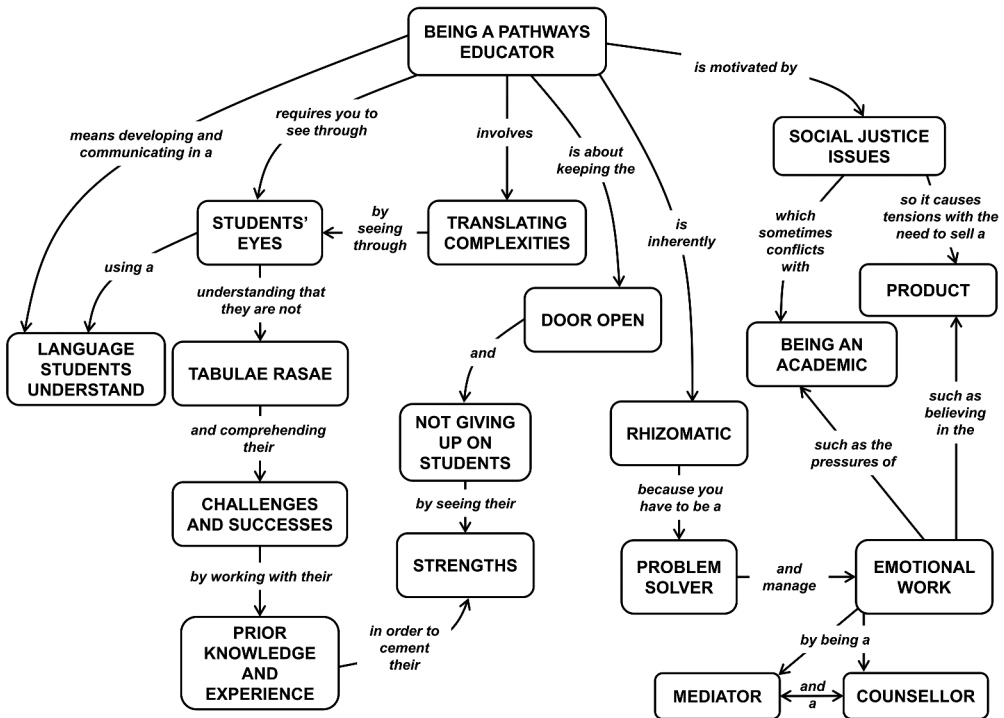
Figure A9. Participant 9's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.
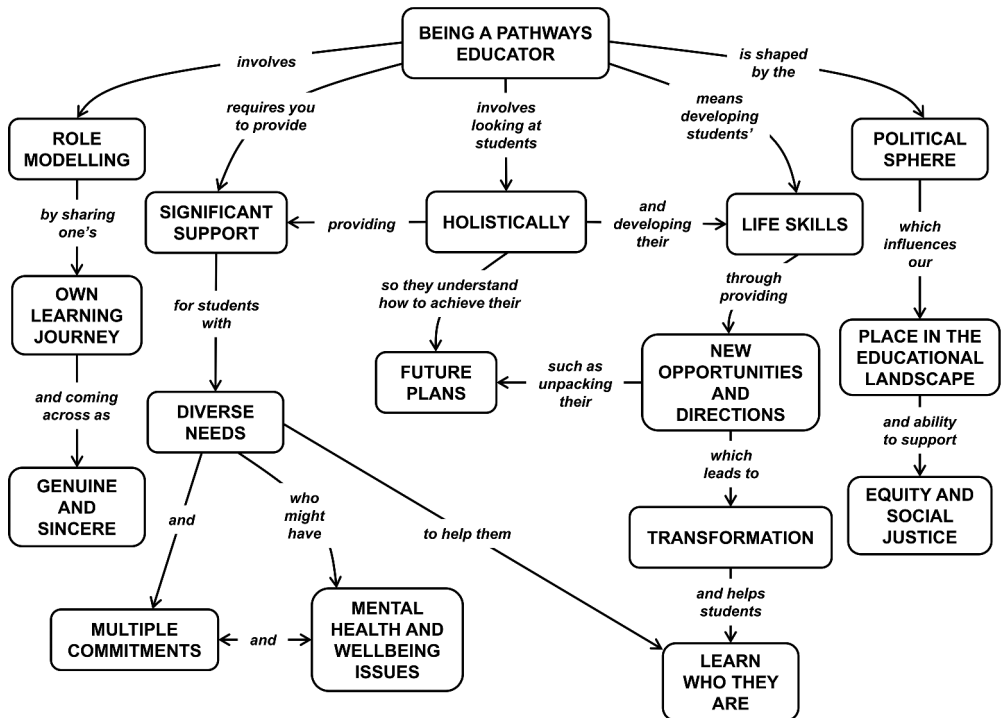

Figure A10. Participant 10's concept map representing what it means to be a pathways educator.