

What Kind of School Would You Really Like to Work In?

Schools with high numbers of students eligible for free school meals (FSM) often struggle to attract and retain teachers. These schools face higher turnover, more non-specialist staff, and fewer experienced teachers. But why?

Would you be reluctant to work in a school with a more disadvantaged intake? And, more importantly, would you admit it if someone asked?

As survey researchers, we often deal with a challenge called social desirability bias. People tend to give answers that reflect how they want to be perceived, rather than how they truly feel. Even though Teacher Tapp surveys are fully anonymised, we wanted to find out whether this bias affects responses about working in high-FSM schools.

Last week, we ran a small experiment to explore this. When we asked teachers directly if they would prefer not to work in a high-FSM school, 25% admitted this was true. But can we be sure that the other 75% would happily apply for jobs in these schools?

How Does the Unmatched Count Technique Work?

To explore this question, we used the Unmatched Count Technique (UCT), a method for uncovering truthful responses to sensitive topics while preserving anonymity.

Here's how it worked. We split teachers into groups and showed them different lists of statements. Each teacher was asked to count how many statements they agreed with—without revealing which ones. Some lists included a sensitive statement about high-FSM schools, such as: "I would prefer not to work in a school with high FSM levels." Other lists omitted this sensitive statement entirely.

By comparing how many statements teachers agreed with on average, we could estimate how many teachers agreed with the sensitive statement - without asking them directly.

Here's an example of the types of questions teachers saw:

Direct Question:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "I would prefer not to work in a school with high FSM levels."

Indirect Question Using UCT (with sensitive statement):

Count how many of the following statements you agree with:

- I enjoy running extracurricular activities
- I would prefer not to work in a school with high FSM levels
- A collaborative staff team is essential for my job satisfaction
- I value opportunities to interact with parents and guardians

Indirect Question Using UCT (no sensitive statement):

Count how many of the following statements you agree with:

- I enjoy running extracurricular activities
- A collaborative staff team is essential for my job satisfaction
- I value opportunities to interact with parents and guardians

By comparing the results across these groups, we can estimate how many teachers agree with the sensitive statement indirectly, avoiding the influence of social desirability bias.

What Did We Find?

Our experiment revealed that teachers are more likely to admit reluctance to work in high-FSM schools when asked indirectly.

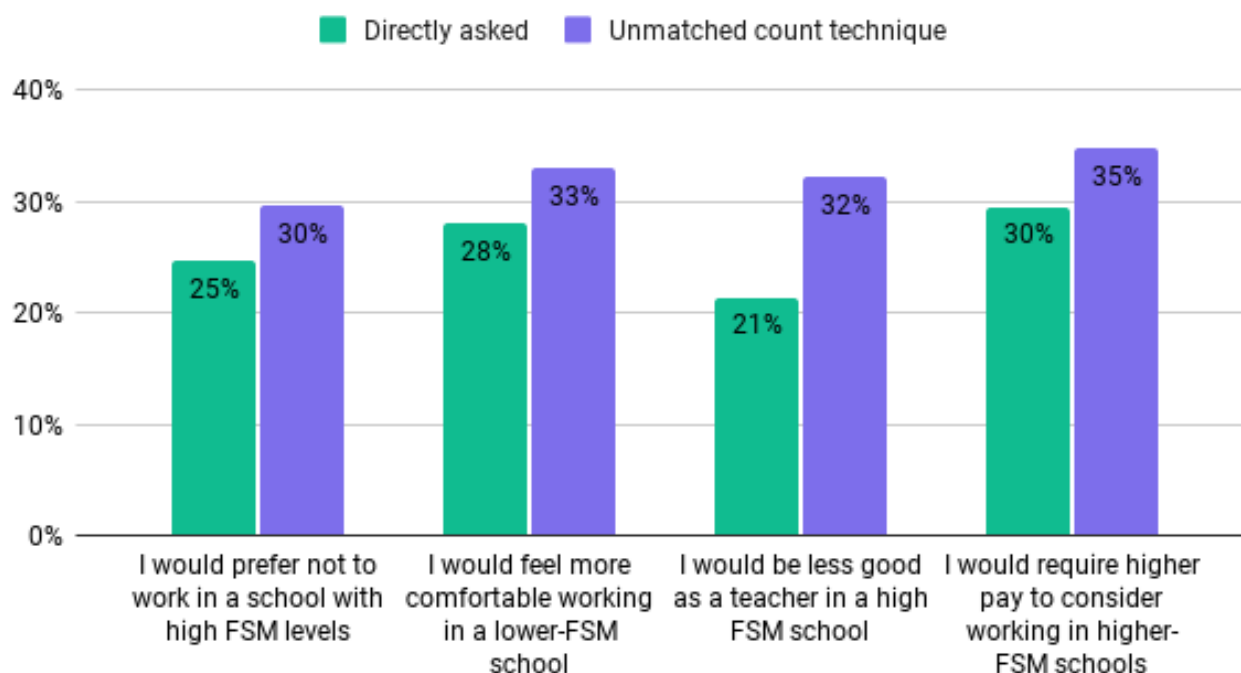
For most sensitive statements, 5% more teachers disclosed their true feelings using UCT compared to direct questioning.

One striking result stood out:

When asked directly, only 21% of teachers admitted they would be less effective in high-FSM schools. However, 32% of teachers admitted this when the question was posed indirectly.

These differences were statistically significant, showing that direct questions can underreport true attitudes on sensitive issues.

Teacher views on higher-FSM schools



What Does This Mean?

The findings suggest that social desirability bias influences how teachers respond to questions about high-FSM schools, even in anonymised surveys. Using methods like UCT allows us to uncover these hidden attitudes and better understand the challenges these schools face in recruitment and retention.

What's next?

This experiment was a small-scale test, and we couldn't explore how responses vary by teacher type, experience, or location due to sample size limitations. Future research could examine these patterns in more detail or explore other settings to uncover additional biases.

For example, further studies could use different contexts to see whether attitudes vary by job role, training, or professional support. Additionally, UCT might reveal hidden concerns about other school factors, such as classroom management, teaching SEND students and work-life balance.

Over the next year, we'll be digging deeper into this issue as part of our work on tackling teacher shortages in high-FSM schools. Keep an eye out for future questions—your insights are essential as we work to build a fuller picture of teacher preferences and challenges.

By revealing these hidden attitudes, we hope to spark a broader conversation about how to support teachers in disadvantaged schools and ensure every student has access to great teaching.

What do you think about these findings? Are there other sensitive topics we should explore?

Let us know!