'I've just got to get through it!' Student teacher-mothers negotiating the challenges of the Initial Teacher Education year

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Abstract
This paper reports on a study in which we interviewed eleven student teachers who were mothers. We wanted to understand the challenges the women faced in combining Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and motherhood, and about the factors that sustained them through the course.

Participants faced practical and emotional challenges, including financial difficulties, feelings of guilt, and time and workload pressures. They had encountered structural barriers in the Higher Education Institution, where policy and practice emerged as exclusionary and largely unhelpful in anticipating and accommodating their needs as student teacher-mothers.

Despite the difficulties they faced, the women portrayed themselves as active in shaping their own experiences at university, on school placement and at home, within the constraints of the competing demands of ITE and motherhood. They emphasised their agency in making the decision to train to become teachers, in their motivation to qualify as teachers so that they could offer their families a better life, and in strategizing to overcome the various obstacles they encountered. They described forward planning, prioritising and managing time, themselves and their families to 'get through' the ITE year, which was, essentially, viewed as a temporary stepping stone for which they needed to make short-term sacrifices.

Keywords
Initial teacher education; student-mothers; student teachers; student parents; family friendly; gendered institution.

Introduction

The increased emphasis on lifelong learning and widening participation in Higher Education (HE) in England has led to expansion and diversification in the student population (Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009). Increased diversification has prompted a focus on ensuring inclusivity in HE (see, for example, Lim, 2020), accompanied by systematic monitoring of data relating to student gender, ethnicity and disability. Yet students who are parents are missing from the equity statistics, an omission that shows that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are not, thus far, prepared to either recognise them as a group with particular support needs or to make the institutional changes required to accommodate them (Brown and Nichols, 2012).

The omission of student parents in the equity monitoring data seems to be underpinned by an assumption that students with children are just a sub-group of mature students. In 2017-18, 58.7% of students at UK HE institutions were classed as 'mature students' (Universities UK, 2019:5), a blanket term for students aged 21 or over. However, as Moreau and Kerner (2015:218) observe, not all student-parents are mature students, and not all mature students are parents. Student-parents remain a hidden statistic, their voices unheard (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010), and their concerns peripheral in discussions related to widening participation (Moreau, 2016).

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Student-parents remain peripheral too in research into students' experiences, where a relatively small number of studies focus on this otherwise overlooked group (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Murtagh, 2017). The small body of research that does exist highlights the gendered nature of the mature student-parent experience (Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009; National Union of Students, 2009). Our study builds on this work, offering an exploration of the perceptions and experiences of student teacher-mothers who were following a one-year Secondary Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course at an English university in 2019 (the PGCE is the main qualification needed to teach in the UK, leading to Qualified Teacher Status, QTS).

We wanted to investigate in this study how student teacher-mothers navigate the PGCE within the constraints of their lives and responsibilities. Specifically, we sought insights into the particular challenges they faced, and into the factors that sustained them through the challenges to successful completion of the course. The insights gleaned might help inform ITE provider policy and practice and point towards more effective strategies to support and enable this marginalised group.

We begin our discussion by reviewing the extant literature on HE students with parental responsibilities. We refer in this paper to 'student-parents' when discussing research relating to male and female students who are parents, 'student mothers' in reference to female students across a range of disciplines and 'student teacher mothers' when referring specifically to women following ITE programmes, as in the case of the participants in this study.

Literature review

There are several routes into teaching in England, including university-led ITE, school centred initial teacher training (SCITT) and School Direct training programmes (Carter, 2015). Application and admission data show that the majority of teacher training applicants in the UK are women, and that just over half of the women with a confirmed place on a teacher training course in May 2020 were over the age of 25 (UCAS, 2020). Students with responsibilities for dependent children tend to be women and mature (NUS, 2009). However, it is difficult to say with any certainty how many student teachers are mothers, as universities in England are not, at the time of writing, required to collect this information. Thus student teacher-mothers do not yet feature as a consideration in their own right, and little, if any, account is taken by HEIs of student teacher mothers' needs, although, as we discuss below, research suggests they face a number of practical and emotional challenges. These challenges include financial difficulties, time pressures and feelings of guilt. Moreover, the indications are that HE institutions are for the most part not family-friendly. Student mothers, who do not fit the mould of the young, free and single student, can experience feelings of isolation, othered by an institution that does not acknowledge them. Yet student mothers bring with them certain advantages in terms of motivation and aspiration, agency and important life skills, factors that help to sustain them in negotiating and navigating the various challenges they encounter. We explore each of these themes in the literature review below.

Practical and emotional challenges

Financial difficulties

Tuition fees in tertiary education vary significantly across countries, and those in England are the second highest in the world after the United States (OECD, 2019). Expensive outgoings such as tuition costs coupled with limited time to secure part-time employment can mean student parents run into financial difficulties (Murtagh, 2019). The National Union of Students (NUS, 2009:44) highlight the poor-quality financial information available to student parents, and the lack of effective communication between awarding bodies, benefits offices and student services. Even those student parents in receipt of a bursary, such as some of the student teachers who are the focus of this study, can be subject to financial difficulties and pressures when monies are released late (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010:797).

Childcare costs can also present significant financial challenges for student-parents. The affordability of pre-school aged childcare differs across Europe. While childcare tends to be the least costly in the Balkan and Baltic countries, locations like the UK, which rely on 'market mechanisms' to supply early childhood education and care, charge much higher fees (European Commission, 2019:57). There are also, as the NUS (2009:59-60) observe, a number of 'hidden costs' involved in using childcare providers, including deposits, holiday retainers, travel costs and penalties for picking up children late. All of the women who took part in Lynch's (2008:593) study of graduate student mothers spoke about the need to find childcare that is reliable, within budget, and flexible enough to accommodate university study. Exploring the diverse range of childcare and the coping strategies employed by individual student mothers, Lynch (2008), like others (see, for example, Wainwright and Marandet, 2010; Brown and Nichols, 2012), concludes that childcare on campus which is responsive to both course requirements and caring responsibilities is likely to reduce attrition rates among students with parental responsibilities (Lynch, 2008:595).

Time pressures

Time management is a commonly cited pressure experienced by student parents (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Those who took part in Moreau and Kerner's (2015:219) study, for example, described being 'time-poor' as they juggled family life and academic commitments. Furthermore, several studies have found that mothers retain primary responsibility for domestic and household chores while studying (Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Griffiths, 2002). This is often linked to normative constructions of motherhood and views related to a woman's role within the home (Lynch, 2008). To make everything 'work', student-parents are often required to sacrifice time spent with loved ones - partners, children, family, and friends – in order to meet course requirements (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Murtagh (2017:393) found that relationship rifts and break ups were 'frequent' among student-parents training to become teachers, as partners felt that the demands of the course impacted heavily on domestic life. The lack of 'me time' available to student-parents has also been highlighted (Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Murtagh, 2019), with some student mothers reporting that they sacrifice sleep to juggle studying with their home lives (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010:794). The pressures on women to balance home, university and school lead to feelings of guilt about their responsibilities as mothers, as we discuss below.

Feelings of guilt

Student mothers make sense of their university experience through an 'emotional' lens (Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009:106). A number of emotions are explored in the literature, ranging from empowerment to exhaustion (Griffiths, 2002; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). The most common emotion cited, however, is guilt (see, for example, Griffiths, 2002; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). Guilt is shown throughout the literature to permeate student mothers' experiences of both HE and family life. Comparing the experiences of students in the UK and Denmark, Brooks (2015) found that British student mothers were more likely to report feelings of guilt than both their Danish counterparts and the student fathers in the sample. Brooks concluded that the guilt experienced by the British mothers can be linked to discourses related to 'intensive mothering', as well as normative and pervasive expectations as to what constitutes a mother in UK society (Brooks, 2015:511).

This feelings of being torn, pressured and guilty are not helped by HEIs, which emerge overall as not particularly family-friendly, causing student mothers to feel isolated and othered, as we discuss below.

The family-unfriendly institution

The absence of university services and facilities for student parents, the lack of family-friendly spaces (NUS, 2009), and strict institutional norms and regulations regarding children on campus (Marandet and Wainwright, 2009) are indicative features of exclusive HEI policy and practices. As Moreau (2016)

notes, such institutional policies and practices, that are supposedly universal in nature, seem to be designed with the childfree and carefree in mind. Historically, the default construction of the 'ideal' learner in HE has been that of the young, carefree 'bachelor boy' (Moreau, 2016:918), thus universities continue to base provision on this notional, average, child-free student without dependents. The effect of such policies, and the unspoken assumptions that underpin them, is to convey strong messages about heteronormativity and who does and does not belong in HE. These implicit messages other student parents as misfits in a supposedly inclusive student experience. Unsurprisingly, awareness that their lifestyle does not match that of the 'traditional' student leads some student parents to express feelings of 'missing out' (Moreau and Kerner, 2015:226).

This sense of missing out - isolation and distance from an imagined 'typical' university life - is echoed elsewhere in the student-parent literature, with some authors describing a 'culture clash' between student parents and the child-free (NUS, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Murtagh, 2019). The student-mothers who took part in Lynch's (2008:595) study highlighted the need to minimise such 'clashes' by downplaying their role as a mother while at university ('maternal invisibility') and their student role at home ('academic invisibility'). Interestingly, Lynch concludes that 'although respondents privately define themselves as 'student mothers', they rarely present their blended identities, either to the academe or to the culture at large' (Lynch, 2008:599). Research conducted by Brooks (2013), however, indicates that the roles of student and parent are 'not necessarily in tension' for all student-parents, and that national and institutional factors influence student parents' identity practices.

Amongst the institutional factors that impact on the nature of student-parents' experiences are the attitudes, expectations and values of the individual university staff members they encounter (Murtagh, 2017; 2019; Lynch, 2008). It seems that tutors often feel 'ill-equipped' to signpost such students to forms of university support (Murtagh, 2017:391) and in some cases even seem to equate students' parental responsibility with a lack of academic commitment (Moreau and Kerner, 2015:227). When student parents are faced with care problems that could interfere with their studies, such as child illness, the nature of the responses they receive from tutors is seemingly determined by the benevolence (or otherwise) of individual staff members (Murtagh, 2017). If support for student parents is dependent on the empathy of individual tutors, rather than any institution-wide strategy, it would seem that institutions are failing to take on board the considerable challenges faced by this group of students and so failing to pre-empt and cater for their support needs in any systemic way.

This institutional failure becomes particularly apparent when considering the difficulties for students on vocational courses in fitting family life around the different elements of the programme. For logistical reasons, student parents are likely to choose a university based on its proximity to home (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009). However, work-based placements, a feature of many vocational courses, present geographical challenges for student-parents which, in turn, complicate childcare arrangements. Unsurprisingly, compulsory placements, like those undertaken by student teachers, have been highlighted as pressure points for students with caring responsibilities for dependent children: the NUS (2009) highlight the difficulties that students experience while trying to fit childcare around work-based placements that change throughout the year. Placements like those typically experienced by PGCE students may result in longer commutes and unforeseen commitments requiring additional, flexible forms of childcare (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Moreover, the time management pressures experienced by student parents are exacerbated by universities distributing timetables and other administrative documents with very little notice to organise childcare (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010:454; Woodhouse and Guihen, forthcoming), again characteristic of the institutional failure to recognise that student-parents face a range of potential challenges not encountered by the child-free.

Whilst it is apparent that student mothers face difficulties and challenges in combining studies and family responsibilities, there is also evidence that they bring with them certain advantages, as we now explore below.

Motivation, aspiration and agency

It is apparent that student parents have to exert their agency to strategize and negotiate the constraints they encounter, in order to take control of and shape their experiences of HE. Some agentic action is implicit in the motivations student parents cite for entering HE. These motivations include the desire to earn qualifications, fulfil career aspirations, and secure a financially stable future for their families (see, for example, NUS, 2009). Wainwright and Marandet (2010:455) found that just over half of the student parents who took part in their study were motivated to enter HE to inspire their dependent children. HE was perceived to be potentially transformative and to aid social mobility. Interestingly, women participants were much more likely to give this reason than their male counterparts. The desire to be a positive role model, demonstrate the benefits of studying hard and raise familial aspirations were found to be particularly important motivators for the single mothers in the study (Wainwright and Marandet, 2010:456). For Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2009:103), student-parents' motivations related to improving the future for their children challenge the pervasive, neo-liberal 'idea of prospective students as independent individuals mainly motivated by instrumental economic considerations'.

Some of the literature also points to the advantages student-parents bring with them to HE. For example, Murtagh (2019) reports that for the student teachers in her study, their experiences of being a parent worked to heighten their engagement with their course. Similar themes are echoed in Griffiths' (2002) study of student teacher mothers. She notes that 'the skills and experience the women … had accumulated in their role as mother, not counting skills derived from other previous work, were considerable' (Griffiths, 2002:279). It is recognised in this small body of literature that student-mothers bring a lot to their education, and are of benefit to HE institutions. Their life experiences, skills and motivation to learn are argued to make a positive contribution to the university classroom (Murtagh, 2017).

In summary, the small body of literature documenting the experiences of student-mothers points to the challenges and difficulties they face and the agency, motivation and capabilities they bring with them in navigating the obstacles. Drawing on this work, our study was therefore guided by these research questions:

Main research question: How do student teacher mothers describe their experiences of combining the ITE year and motherhood?
Subsidiary research questions:

(1) What do they perceive to be challenges they face as student teachers and mothers?
(2) What factors sustain them through the challenges?

We turn below to the process we followed in gathering and making sense of data to answer these questions.

Research Design

Participants and recruitment

The data on which this paper is based come from a qualitative, exploratory study of student teacher-mothers completing their ITE year at one English university. Institutional ethical approval from the university was obtained before participants were recruited. Information was sent to the directors of the primary and secondary PGCE courses, who advertised the study to their 2019 cohorts via email.

Inclusion criteria included women who were mothers and currently studying for a PGCE at the case study university. A total of 11 participants were interviewed (3 face-to-face, and 8 via telephone). Participants' demographic information is summarised below. Pseudonyms are used both in this table and throughout the paper. Any identifying features, including the subject specialism of the student teachers enrolled on the secondary PGCE, are omitted to protect participants' anonymity.

Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the sample.

Pseudonym	**Number of Children**	**Age of Children**	**Marital Status**	**Type of PGCE**
Jessica	1	15	Single	Secondary Schools Direct
Ashley	2	7 and 3	Married	SCITT Primary
Amanda	2	8 and 6	Married	SCITT Primary
Jennifer	2 + pregnant	4 and 19 months	Single	SCITT Secondary
Sarah	2	2 and 10	Married	SCITT Primary
Stephanie	3	14, 11 and 6	Married	PGCE Secondary
Nicole	2	13 and 10	Married	SCITT Primary
Megan	2	6 and 7	Married	SCITT Primary
Heather	2	15 and 20	Married	Secondary PGCE
Amber	2	2 and 4	Married	Secondary PGCE
Melissa	2	10 and 7	Married	Secondary Schools Direct

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed with the aim of eliciting detailed accounts of student teacher-mothers' experiences of ITE. Questions focussed on why participants had chosen to embark on teacher training at this point in their lives; the challenges and advantages of being a student mother; the support they had received throughout their PGCE, and whether they believed there were ways in which the University could better support student teachers who are mothers. Finally, participants were asked what advice they would give to a woman with children who was thinking of doing a PGCE course.

An inductive approach to thematic analysis (TA) was used to examine the student teacher-mothers' experiences of ITE (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun, 2017). We identified five themes that were common across the student-mothers' accounts, which we labelled as follows:

- Time pressures
- Challenges and clashes
- Mum guilt

- The student-mother advantage
- Eyes wide open: agency, motivation and aspiration

We report below the key findings from the study. The themes identified above have been incorporated into the discussion, organised under the headings of the research questions.

Findings

Main research question: How do student teacher-mothers describe their experiences of combining the ITE year and motherhood?

Subsidiary RQ1: What do they perceive to be the challenges they face as student teachers and mothers?

Resonating with the literature reviewed, participants identified financial difficulties, time pressures and guilt as particular challenges they faced in combining motherhood and the ITE year, and there were numerous indications of ways in which the HEI was family-unfriendly. We present evidence of these themes below.

Financial difficulties: Financial pressures were a common theme in the data we collected. There was a consensus among those participants in receipt of a teacher training bursary that this was vital in ensuring the financial well-being of their families. Jessica, for instance, noted 'there's no way I would have done the teaching degree without the bursary'. Amber described finance as 'a real, real struggle' throughout the PGCE year. She suggested that the university tutors tasked with placing students at their placement schools were often unaware of the financial strain completing a PGCE puts on student teacher-mothers:

> I was lucky that I managed to renegotiate my placements, but the placement that they did want to send me on was going to cost me nearly £70 a week to get there. [They said] 'Oh don't worry. You can claim it all back at the end of the term.' … Well that still means I need to find all that money to put into that (Amber).

Consistent with the findings of Moreau and Kerner (2015), the women clearly experienced financial pressures, compounded by time and workload pressures, as we now discuss.

Time and workload pressures: The student teacher-mothers found themselves confronted with heavy workloads and multiple time pressures from the outset of their PGCE. They reported that they were required to juggle the academic side of the PGCE, school-based placements, looking after their children and familial relationships. For some participants, these tasks, coupled with the volume of paperwork required throughout the course, were overwhelming:

> I was quite shell-shocked at the beginning [laughing], 'Wow!' Not the pace you're going at, but the volume that's expected (Jennifer).

The academic assignments, lesson planning and evidence gathering required of PGCE students took its toll on many of the participants we interviewed. Participants described the effects of the workload on their home lives as well as on their physical and mental health:

> Since September until now I hadn't had a single break, just worked straight through and working late nights to get all the work done … my wellbeing has taken a bit of a knock I think and my general relationship with my husband has also suffered quite badly (Amber).

> I never felt I was getting any down-time. The tutors [are] saying, "Oh you have to have kind of a work-life balance. You have to have time off", but if you're spending that time off worrying about the fact that you're not preparing your work … It's not relaxation to me (Heather).

Our participants' lack of time (particularly for themselves) echoes findings documented in the student-parent literature (for example, Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Murtagh, 2019). Alongside their studies and caring responsibilities, the majority of the women we interviewed also took on the main responsibility for household chores:

> I suppose it's just automatically happened. [My husband] works long hours and is often away from home. I've sort of automatically done [the domestic tasks] for however many years … so just, I suppose, fallen into a pattern … You kind of fall into a habit I suppose … you probably have a little bit of financial guilt I suppose because you're aware that you aren't bringing in any money (Nicole).

Interestingly, domestic labour is described here as being able to compensate, to some extent, for student teacher-mothers' lack of earnings in a partnered household. The division of household tasks is described as something which occurs 'automatically'. Indeed, many of the women spoke about the gendered division of work within the home, and the ways in which it was, in many ways, easier for them to just 'get on with it'. Here, Stephanie explains why she 'has to' take responsibility for the laundry in her family:

> I've just found that when I've left it, it hasn't been done or it's been done and left in the machine and then it goes smelly. I think it's partly because I had quite high standards before, even though I wasn't a massive ironer or anything (Stephanie).

Other participants, however, took a different approach. In light of the intensive nature of the course, some of the women we interviewed described dividing domestic tasks between family members, or simply attributing housework less status than before their PGCE:

> It doesn't really matter if the house isn't spotless. We can get around that. We can work through it (Nicole).

Time and workload pressures inevitably led the women to feel they were not paying due attention to home and family, with guilt being a common emotional response, as we discuss next.

Guilt: This theme speaks to the affective dimension of PGCE study or the relationship between the student teacher-mother and those around her. Like those studies that have come before ours (see, for example, Griffiths, 2002; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau and Kerner, 2015), there was a recurrent theme of guilt in the student teacher mothers' accounts. For some participants this guilt centred on the fear that they were missing out on key events in their children's lives:

> When I was training, I missed out on all the assemblies, all the plays, all the achievement assemblies or the sports days. I didn't go to anything. [My husband] did it all (Ashley).

Other participants felt guilty that they were not in a position to give everything they wanted to give to their children currently, or that other adults were taking 'centre stage' for their children in their absence:

> You can't spend the time with them that you might want to because it is quite an intensive course and you've got so much that you're doing out of school time as well, that you do feel a

> bit bad that half the time you're leaving them to entertain themselves a bit and you can't be at all the things you'd want to be at and giving them all the time you want to give them (Nicole).

There was, for many, however, a sense that the PGCE and the associated guilt were temporary. Whilst most participants described the PGCE as time consuming, all-encompassing, and difficult to combine with their family responsibilities, such descriptions were often accompanied with the realisation that the PGCE was temporary and time bound. Megan commented for example 'It won't last forever'. The women knew completing the course as a student teacher-mother would require determination and sacrifice. Generally, however, the PGCE was perceived as short-term, with a definite end point:

> So, I sort of feel like I know PGCE year is like a tough year but I just think, "Oh I've just got to get through it" (Melissa).

Many of the participants described focusing on the benefits that would eventually be derived from the PGCE for their children:

> You know that it's a means to an end and you know that it's going to change our life because we're going to have a lot more money coming in and we're going to be able to do stuff with the kids and go on nice holidays and I'm going to have a job where I'm a professional and it's a worthwhile job and it's meaningful, but then you've also got the guilt and you just don't know where to put the feelings really (Ashley).

The challenges the women faced during the ITE year were not, in general, helped by the systems and structures of the HEI, which did not seem to anticipate or cater for the support needs of student teacher-mothers, as we discuss below.

The family-unfriendly institution: Participants reported that they did not feel a sense of belonging to the university. They would have appreciated having access to a network of other student-parents:

> There's not really a support network for parents to get together and talk to each other and it does make it quite difficult. You don't really feel like you're meant to be there [at the university] (Amber).

> Maybe if there was support networks or anything that could have been accessed. I mean I suppose Student Unions and things probably have those things, but I didn't really have anything to do with that because I'm in my 40s, you know, the Student Union to me is kind of for the younger students (Nicole).

Within both of the interview extracts above there is a sense of the isolation facing student teacher-mothers. Nicole alludes to her age and parental status as a barrier to becoming involved in Student Union events. Othered, and perhaps, othering herself, Nicole suggests that she is different from younger university students. This sense of student parents not really fitting in with the university culture is echoed in the extant literature (NUS, 2009; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Many of the participants we interviewed described directly comparing themselves to younger, childfree student teachers:

> [I] didn't really fit in with those guys and they all wanted to go out drinking and doing all this crazy stuff and I'm just like, "Well like I don't want to do this because I kind of want to get home to my kids." So there's kind of that odd feeling that I'm just not really one of them (Amber).

> I sort of looked around the room and all the ones that didn't have all these responsibilities … and I'm there thinking about guitar concerts and PE kits and all the other bits and pieces that you have to sort of juggle on top of obviously the course (Nicole).

Similar to Murtagh's (2017) study, we found that the support the student teacher-mothers received from their university tutors and mentors was variable. Some of the participants spoke highly of the university and school staff they came into contact with, describing them as empathic and understanding:

> From early on I got the impression that [my tutor] understood what it was like having young children and trying to teach or to study and she was always very understanding and made it clear to me that I could email her about anything (Stephanie).

> Teachers would understand that I've got children and they would let me go home early and stuff like that if I had to, if my daughter was unwell. I think I had a lot of support that way (Sarah).

Some participants, on the other hand, described less than supportive interactions with university tutors and school-based mentors:

> I know teachers are all busy people. There is quite an attitude of, 'Well I've managed it, therefore you should' sort of thing (Heather).

Overall, there was a sense in the data that the relationship between the student teacher-mother and her school-based mentor and/or university tutor had the potential to make or break the PGCE experience.

We turn next to the ways in which student teacher-mothers overcame or navigated through the many and multiple challenges they faced.

Subsidiary RQ2: What factors sustain them through these challenges?

There were a number of ways in which the women drew on their personal experience, skills and resources to navigate the difficulties implicit in combining the ITE year with parenting responsibilities. They gathered confidence from the life experience they had gained through motherhood, and saw this an asset in their future teaching career. They viewed their planning and time management skills as beneficial both during the ITE year and beyond, and their motivation to teach was fuelled by familial aspiration and wanting to provide a better life for their children. They were highly agentic in researching the course they intended to take before starting the ITE year, taking the decision to train at the time they did, and in making the sometimes difficult pragmatic choices and sacrifices they did in order to 'get though' the year. We present evidence of these findings in this section.

The motherhood advantage: This theme refers to the value, skills and life experiences participants perceived themselves as bringing, as mothers, to HE, their placement schools and their future careers as teachers. Our findings echo those of earlier studies in which it is argued that students with parental responsibilities bring valuable skills to the university classroom (Griffiths, 2002; Murtagh, 2017). The student teacher-mothers in our study described feeling empowered by their experiences of motherhood. Organisation, time management, leadership and inter-personal skills were identified by the women as assets they were bringing to their training from both their careers before teaching and their experiences of raising children. Jessica, for instance, remarked:

> The advantage to being a parent is you have quite a lot of experience, loads of experience, a lot more patience, tolerance, experience in picking your battles, and experience in behaviour management (Jessica).

The women also perceived their abilities to identify with children and parents as being advantageous as a student teacher and future teacher:

> You just understand the children so much. You understand why the children might be thinking something in the way that they are. You understand why parents might be thinking the way they are or saying things (Amanda).

> When I was with the children [in school], I took a very maternal approach with them, you know, I just felt like if they had issues or if they needed to talk about something, especially when I was talking to parents, I could relate to them because I had children myself (Ashley).

While the women were keen to emphasise what they felt they were bringing to the PGCE course, they also recognised that the PGCE experience and becoming a teacher offered benefits to their lives as mothers and their aspirations for their family, as we discuss below.

Motivation, aspiration and agency: The participants had made agentic and conscious decisions to enter the teaching profession, and many described their entry onto the PGCE course as being at 'the right time'. Like Marandet and Wainwright (2010), we found that deciding to train to become a teacher at this point in their lives was linked to changes in their personal circumstances. The student mothers spoke about their children having reached 'the right age' to accommodate their training. They described major life events such as the death of a family member or being made redundant as a 'now or never' moment. Some participants spoke about their partner's working patterns and the ways in which they had become flexible enough to make the PGCE possible. Melissa, for instance, states:

> I started to seriously think about teaching but obviously my boys were really tiny and I sort of parked it because everyone told me it was a bit full-on. … When my husband's job changed and he got flexible working, we could accommodate childcare either end of the day, then it became possible for me to do it (Melissa).

Participants often described ITE as a route to gaining more time with their families in the future. For some of the women, teaching was their second career. The teaching profession was perceived to be more family-friendly than their previous employment:

> I believe it'll give me a better work-life balance because I'm used to working silly hours all across the UK, whereas I'll be in the village that we live and I'll be able to work around my children. So, it's for them really (Jennifer).

As discussed earlier, the women faced various practical and affective challenges in navigating the competing demands of ITE and motherhood. Yet, far from being passive recipients of the course and its consequences, they were engaged in a large degree of forward planning and prioritising before and during the PGCE course to make it work for themselves and their families. Before applying for ITE, the participants described mitigating the potential risks that PGCE study might pose to family life by acquiring as much information as possible about the various teacher training routes. As can be seen in Table 1., eight of the eleven participants who took part in this study opted to study via a school-centred route:

> I think that was one advantage of why I went to Schools Direct route rather than the uni route who could have sent me anywhere around the city … there's a bit more choice and you do have a bit of a say in it (Jessica).

> I deliberately picked School Direct where I know their schools are maximum twenty minutes away. So that's fine and I checked what time they have the teachers in, what time they want you there 'til, and made sure I could do all my childcare before I went with that. I couldn't have done normal PGCE because I could have been put anywhere in [City] and that would have been problematic (Melissa).

In this excerpt from Melissa's interview we gain a sense of the research that went into her decision to train to become a teacher. Other participants described drawing on the knowledge of teacher friends to ensure they were fully informed as to what lay in store for them as PGCE students:

> Every single person I know who's done teacher training said, "It's hell", but you just have to be organised and get your head down and expect to be working all the time, and if you can just accept that, then you'll get through it [laughing] (Jessica).

All participants gave thoughtful accounts of what they would like to do after their PGCE. Very few leadership aspirations existed among the sample. The student mothers were focused for now on becoming 'good' teachers. There was a real sense that the career that lay beyond their course was a form of motivation and was being actively drawn on to help them overcome the practical and affective challenges facing student mothers during the ITE year. There was a clear sense in which the student teacher mothers saw the benefits for themselves as mothers, and for their families, of their engagement in the teaching profession. For instance, some participants spoke about the value of modelling life-long learning and good study habits to their children. Others spoke about 'inside knowledge' of schools and the education system they had acquired as a PGCE student, and how this would benefit their own children:

> I certainly find that it has made me more aware of what my daughter's going through at school [laughing]. When she comes and tells me about her day, I recognise things, you know (Heather).

> I think also I've learnt so much on my course … Things I can do with my own children, so my children have benefited from me doing this and learning all the time. So activities that I might be teaching in class or learning about, I can then do that with them or I can help them with their homework or things like teaching phonics which I had no clue really what phonics was, about helping children learn to read and write (Amanda).

Towards the end of the interview, each participant was asked what advice they would give to a woman with children who is thinking of doing a PGCE course. A number of participants highlighted the need to make sure they had a good support network, and the need to be financially prepared. The majority focussed on the need to have 'realistic expectations' of ITE. Jessica, for instance, stated:

> Just be aware of how many hours you will be working, the reality of it, and go and find some teachers and talk to them, people similar to you with kids of a similar age. Just find out before you sign up really. Get as good a picture as you can.

The most common response to the 'advice' question, however, centred around remaining 'very focussed on the end goal' (Amber). A number of participants referenced the relatively short nature of the course and the need to 'get through it'.

Despite the pressures, our findings bear witness to an agentic group of women who 'get through it' largely by drawing on their personal resources and capabilities – planning, balancing responsibilities, staying focussed on the end-goal, and so forth. Structural factors present challenges and it is clear that, in the women's experience, the HEI is not prepared to support student teacher-mothers and not conducive to balancing family life with vocational training. The findings raise a number of issues for consideration, which we discuss in the next section below.

Discussion and concluding comments

This is a small-scale, exploratory study undertaken in one HEI during the summer term of 2019. We do not claim that our findings are generalisable but think they might offer some insights that could inform larger-scale research and prompt some institutional reflection.

Our findings suggest that student teacher-mothers can face considerable challenges in negotiating ITE, and have to draw on their personal strengths and resources to get through the course. Despite discourses of inclusivity and gender equity in HE, the experiences of the women in this study point to a relatively family-unfriendly HEI, with echoes of what Acker (1992:565) termed the 'gendered institution'. There are evidently pools of good practice and positive support from individual tutors, but this support is not systematic or organisation wide. Rather it seems that provision is based on an unspoken assumption about the average student, who is child-free, solvent and mobile. Student teacher-mothers are not, as yet, recognised as a group. The pressures and challenges they face are not yet institutionally acknowledged, and so provision for them is not built into the plan.

The evidence from our study indicates that the difficulties student teacher-mothers face in the family-unfriendly institution create a sense of isolation and alienation for the women, who are frequently reminded that they do not belong in the HEI. Moreover, student bonding through alcohol and other forms of socialising that are seemingly woven into the student experience are generally out of reach to women with children, so that student teacher-mothers can feel even more excluded. This sense of marginalisation could be a significant threat to student wellbeing and may well discourage some women from undertaking ITE.

We have written elsewhere (Woodhouse and Guihen, forthcoming), and at greater length, about our recommendations for action by HEIs and ITE providers. Our recommendations include:

- Collecting data on student-parents for monitoring purposes, in the same way as data on gender, ethnicity and disability are collected.
- Engage in institution-wide examination of and reflection on the policies and practices of ITE, with a view to accommodating the needs of women with children.
- Seek student teacher-mothers' perspectives and feedback on suggested strategies for greater inclusivity, and engage them in planning discussions.
- Offer support with financial management. At policymaker level give consideration to offering larger student bursaries to student teacher-mothers (Adapted from Woodhouse and Guihen, forthcoming).

Beyond the institution, the women's experiences in the domestic sphere too continue to be defined by unspoken assumptions and gendered expectations. A common expectation amongst our participants was that the women should undertake housework as well as childcare, and this on top of ITE-oriented work. There were hints that this expectation was linked to their current non-contribution to family finances, but little indication that this would change once the women became qualified teachers, earners and possibly, breadwinners. The tendency for professional women to take on the majority of the housework as well as the primary child-caring role seems to be a remarkably consistent pattern, impacting women's career decisions and possibilities (see for example Howard, 2020; Smith,

2011; 2015). Hochschild (2012:14) views these tendencies as rooted in our 'gender ideologies', which are formed from our earlier experiences and undergirded by our 'beliefs about manhood and womanhood, beliefs that are forged in early childhood and usually anchored to deep emotion' (Hochschild, 2012:15). These gender ideologies are assumed, never voiced, discussed or agreed, and can become a source of tension, resentment and guilt (*ibid*.). As hinted at by some of the women in our study, the result can be disappointments and misunderstandings, causing friction with partners and leading to unhappy marriages.

The women in our study are juggling what we have called elsewhere a 'quadruple workload' (Woodhouse and Guihen, forthcoming), as students, mothers, homemakers and teachers. They are not helped greatly in this by the HEI. Yet, they are agentic in finding ways to navigate around some of the barriers to their participation, electing for example the alternative routes into teaching that afford them more choices with regard to location of schools during the ITE year. It seems that the women who 'get through' do so largely as a result of their own efforts. Whilst this is admirable, it does raise the question of how many women are lost to the profession because combining PGCE and motherhood responsibilities is viewed as just too difficult, so discouraging many from applying. With appropriate support in place, more women might be encouraged to consider ITE. Although family and home life seem to be slow to change, HEIs could make moves towards creating family-friendly cultures, policies and practices that normalise the accommodation of child-caring and housekeeping roles for student-parents, both male and female, so moving towards a more inclusive provision in which students are helpfully supported to 'get through it'.

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