Factors impacting on the retention of students from under-represented groups in initial teacher education in Ireland

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Abstract

Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in Ireland have seen continued high demand for places, reflecting high regard for the teaching profession. However, there is a dearth of diversity amongst Ireland's student teacher and teaching populations, with the vast majority of entrants to ITE being from majority ethnic groups and a high proportion from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Diversifying the teaching profession has come to be of research and policy significance in recent decades in Ireland. This paper explores issues of retention in ITE in Ireland, with a focus on supporting the engagement and completion of student teachers from under-represented groups. We draw on data collected as part of the *Access to Post-primary Teaching* (APT) project, funded under the Higher Education Authority's Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH): Strand 1 (Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education), including interviews with 'working class' student teachers and a focus group interview with teacher educators. While the paper highlights high retention rates in ITE in Ireland, it reports key barriers that particularly negatively impact student teachers from under-represented groups, in relation to identity and belonging, and finance and part-time work. The paper also observes the necessity of a high level of support by programme staff in maintaining high retention rates more generally in ITE programmes. Given the significant barriers student teachers from under-represented groups encounter in ITE, their high levels of retention merits further research, particularly the roles played by their motivation and by the specific additional supports provided by ITE staff and teacher diversity projects.

Introduction

Teaching is a well-regarded profession in Ireland attracting highly motivated, committed, and academically strong candidates (Heinz, 2013; Heinz & Keane, 2018; OECD, 2020). All initial teacher education (ITE) programmes are accredited by the Irish Teaching Council, the

regulatory and registration body of the teaching profession in Ireland (Teaching Council, 2020). ITE programmes were reconceptualised and extended in 2011; programme duration of undergraduate programmes was increased from three to four years and postgraduate programmes from one to two years, allowing more time for school placement and incorporating new modules developing student teachers' knowledge, skills and experience in conducting practitioner research.

Research has shown that teaching internationally is a homogeneous profession, comprised primarily of majority ethnic and social groups (Schleicher, 2014; Donlevy et al., 2016; Ingersoll et al., 2021). This is also the case in Ireland, with those from lower socio-economic groups, minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and males under-represented in initial teacher education (ITE) (Heinz & Keane, 2018; Keane & Heinz, 2015, 2016). The rationale for diversification has been premised on social justice grounds: Keane et al. (2023b) employ Childs et al.'s (2011) concept of 'double equity' (in and through admissions) to emphasise the importance of teacher diversity for equity outcomes for those from under-represented groups wishing to access the profession, as well as for schools, pupils, and society more generally, through measures of social cohesion (cf. Santoro, 2015). Importantly, however, as Keane et al. (2023b) argue, while representation matters, system transformation including institutional change is simultaneously required, in order to achieve a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive teaching profession (Heinz et al., 2023).

Diversifying the teaching profession became a policy focus in Ireland through the Higher Education Authority's (HEA) PATH1 initiative (2017–2023), through which six Centres for Teacher Education are currently implementing teacher diversity projects, supporting student teachers from a range of under-represented backgrounds to enter and successfully complete ITE. One of these is Access to Post-primary Teaching (APT), a joint University of Galway and St. Angela's College, Sligo project, which supports the recruitment and retention of student teachers from lower socio-economic groups into post-primary ITE. The University of Galway aspect provides bursaries and other supports to student teachers (31+ to date) from lower socio-economic groups. Through the APT participants' Practitioner Research Project, the wider APT project also supports senior cycle pupils in DEIS schools with respect to their higher education and career planning, including regarding teaching as a career.

HEA data (Piggott & Frawley, 2019) show that education programmes have the highest rate of completion (91 percent) in Irish higher education (HE), which for undergraduate programmes is argued to be attributed to relevant students entering their programmes with relatively high Leaving Certificate points (ibid.).

There are five sections in this paper. Following this introduction, we track key themes in the literature regarding retention in ITE, with a particular focus on students from under-represented groups. Section three provides information on our methodological approach and the specific datasets upon which we draw in this paper. In section four we present our findings, focusing on issues of identity and belonging, finance and part-time work, and support and resources. Finally, in section five, we discuss our findings drawing on previous research, and emphasise that given the significant barriers student teachers from under-represented groups encounter in ITE, their high levels of retention merit further research, particularly the roles played by motivation and by supports provided by ITE staff.

Literature review

Models of retention in higher education (HE) are frequently founded upon the scholarship of Tinto (1993) whose work emphasises the necessity of successfully integrating students into academic and social life on campus, and the central role of academic staff in supporting students throughout their academic journey. This is understood to be particularly important for those from under-represented groups (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008).

A significant body of literature has examined teacher retention, focusing on early career teachers (Gariglio, 2021; Ovenden-Hope et al., 2018), minority ethnic teachers (Scott et al., 2021), 'career changers' and 'second career' teachers (who often enter teaching as mature students) (Newton et al., 2020; Wilkins, 2017), and subject specialist teachers (Thebald et al., 2021; Dadley & Edwards, 2007). This research aims to understand what factors lead to attrition and how to support retention within the profession. In comparison, there is a relative dearth of research on retention and attrition in the *initial* teacher education (ITE) context, and the area is regarded as under-researched (Roberts, 2012). Like in other programmes, the "fundamental difficulty in researching retention/non-retention issues" (Wilkins, 2017, p. 185) in ITE is related to the difficulty of accessing individuals after they have withdrawn from their programmes of study. The existing research (often in the

UK context; cf. Chambers et al., 2010; Hobson et al., 2009; Wilkins, 2017; Wilkins & Lall, 2011) highlights that students' reasons for withdrawal from ITE are complex and multifaceted, and that attrition is "a process not an event" (Basit et al., 2006, p. 387). Five main reasons for the early withdrawal of student teachers from ITE can be discerned within the existing body of literature, namely, difficulties managing the workload, challenges on school placement, personal and family circumstances, financial reasons, and decisions to pursue a different career (cf. Hobson et al., 2009; Lin et al., 2016). Hobson et al. (2009, p. 327) observe that males are more likely than females, and mature students (over the age of 35) are more likely than their younger counterparts (aged under 25 years), to withdraw from ITE. In this section, we briefly explore the literature on retention and withdrawal, with a particular focus on student teachers from under-represented groups.

Lack of support & negative school placement experiences

Student teachers who withdraw from ITE commonly report that they were inadequately supported in their academic programmes of study and/or during their school placement experiences. For example, Hobson et al. (2009, p. 228) reported that the majority of student teachers who deferred, or withdrew from, their ITE programme felt "let down by support mechanisms once they encountered difficulties". In particular, research suggests that many student teachers feel particulary unsupported while on placement, and this can have a detrimental impact on their ability to complete ITE and enter the teaching profession. For example, although research strongly suggests that school placement experiences are a crucial determinant of student retention (Kyriacoyu et al., 2003), negative experiences during placement and a lack of support in the form of poor relationships with colleagues and school-based mentors can significantly increase attrition (Chambers et al., 2002). In Israel, Weinberger and Donitsa-Schmidt (2016) found that those who withdrew from ITE prior to graduating, or who left the profession shortly thereafter, cited reasons such as a lack of support from colleagues, being left "completely on my own" (2016, p. 567), and being given challenging classes, as key reasons. Similarly, in a study of 20 career-changers who transitioned to teaching, the vast majority reported at least one instance that made them consider withdrawing early from their ITE programme, and typically these examples centred around interpersonal difficulties with school-based mentors and tutors (Wilkins, 2017, p. 181). Additionally, these career-changers often felt their previous work

and life experience was undervalued in schools, particularly by their colleagues (ibid.; Lin et al., 2016).

Conversely, peer support is reported as a significant factor in promoting the retention of student teachers, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds as illustrated in Wilkins and Lall's (2011, p. 373) UK based study, where participants ranked peer support as the "most significant" and "primary" foundation upon which they relied. Such supports may also be of particular significance for those from minority ethnic groups who experience fears about or encounter racism in their placement schools (Basit et al., 2006; Wilkins & Lall, 2011). Although the literature generally suggests that the education system benefits from the expertise of minority ethnic students, and despite increased efforts at recruitment from these target groups, researchers like Basit et al. (2006, p. 390) argue that "teachers of minority ethnic origin may not always feel welcomed in the classroom", and the same may also be true of teachers from other under-represented groups.

In summary, Basit et al. (2006) suggest that higher levels of support at both the higher education institution (HEI) and placement levels may help to lessen the likelihood of withdrawal from ITE, and they suggest that within both contexts, increased support, communication, feedback, and encouragement on the part of HEI staff, tutors, and school placement colleagues would be beneficial to student teachers. Similar findings were also reached by Hobson et al. (2009, p. 331) who found that 19% of respondents who withdrew from their ITE programme of study stated that they might have been able to complete their programme if they had received more support from their HEI provider and school-based mentors.

Financial struggles and personal circumstances

Although financial difficulties are also cited as a common reason for withdrawal from ITE (cf. Lin et al., 2016), the issue is under-considered within the present body of research literature (Prendergast et al., 2021). For example, in Ireland, student teachers face significant additional financial costs well beyond tuition and fees, including those associated with school placement and travel (ibid., Hall et al., 2018; Hanley & Heinz, 2022; Union of Students of Ireland, 2018). Research suggests that such financial pressures often lead student teachers to consider withdrawing from ITE. For example, a recent report by the Union of

Students in Ireland (2018) suggests that upwards of "42% of student teachers who completed their placement in 2017 and 31% of graduates said they have considered dropping out due to financial pressures" (Union of Students in Ireland, 2018, p. 13). Such financial challenges often leave students with no choice but to spend significant amounts of time engaged in external paid employment in order to meet the costs of living and study, which inevitably lessens the amount of time available to engage with their ITE programme (Hanley & Heinz, 2022). While a lack of adequate financial resources may contribute to attrition in ITE, it should also be noted that the provision of financial supports, for example, in the form of reduced or no-cost tuition and the provision of bursaries, are conversely recognised as supporting ITE retention (Lin et al., 2016).

Beyond financial concerns, research suggests that personal circumstances commonly contribute to withdrawal before, or soon after, ITE completion. Examples typically include: family problems, pregnancies, illness and medical conditions, and the impact of ITE on relationships and family life (Basit et al., 2006, 2004; Chambers et al., 2002, 2010 ; Hobson et al., 2009, Newton et al., 2020). For example, a recent study of individuals who either withdrew from their ITE programme, or completed but did not enter the teaching profession, found that personal factors were frequently the cited reason, and married participants, participants with children, and older participants were less likely to enter teaching after ITE (Newton et al., 2020, p. 15). Similar findings were reported by Chambers et al. (2010, p. 123) who warn that older student teachers may be at increased risk of withdrawal due to responsibilities in the home. Indeed, Chambers and Roper (2000, p. 40) caution that "students who have financial, medical, personal or family problems are very much at risk of failure" thus highlighting the real impact that personal factors and circumstances can have on retention in ITE.

ITE programme characteristics

Research suggests that certain characteristics of ITE programmes may contribute to early withdrawal and attrition for student teachers. For example, the high workload associated with ITE appears to contribute significantly to attrition at programme level, which is understandable, given that these professional programmes require both University coursework and significant preparation for school placement (Basit et al., 2006). A longitudinal study by Hobson et al. (2009) reported that an inability to manage the course

workload was the top reason cited for withdrawal from ITE, and the student teachers in Chambers et al. (2010, p. 121) similarly expressed that they "were taken aback by the reality they faced: the onerous workload, the hours that had to be invested, the demands of planning, the burden of administration, the difficulty and intensity of the course"—all factors which ultimately contributed to the attrition of participants (see also Hanley & Heinz, 2022).

Additionally, difficulties with the programme content can be an issue for some students. Meens and Bakx (2019) reported that the level of difficulty can contribute to attrition in two ways, firstly if students believe the programme is too difficult and they fail aspects of the programme, or conversely, if the programme is not adequately challenging and students feel they are not learning enough. In terms of programme content, some student teachers report being disillusioned by an apparent lack of connection between course content and their experiences in schools (Hobson, 2009), while for others, the way certain topics are approached is problematic. For example, minority ethnic student teachers have reported that coverage of race and diversity issues in ITE programmes was often superficial and/or problematic (Wilkins & Lall, 2011).

While it is recognised that a reduction in overall workload may not be possible or realistic on ITE programmes, Lin et al. (2016) suggests that allowing student teachers to extend their studies over a longer period of time may be useful for helping to promote retention within ITE, especially among mature students who may be dealing with additional life circumstances which prevent them from completing their programme of study in the standard time alloted. Furthermore, Burke (2019) has observed that programme characteristics, such as flexibility in design, online, and accelerated learning options are all important factors which can promote the retention of students.

Personal expectations about the teaching profession

In research about student teachers' motivations for choosing teaching as a career, altruistic reasons such as 'wanting to give back' are commonly cited (Heinz, 2015; Meens & Bakx, 2019), especially among student teachers from under-represented groups (Heinz et al., 2017a, b; Keane et al., 2020, 2021; Keane, 2017). However, such motivations are not necessarily enough to sustain student teachers when faced with the reality of teaching,

particularly in terms of lesson planning, workload, and managing student behaviour (Chambers & Roper, 2000; Hobson et al., 2009). For example, Hobson et al. (2009, p. 223) argue that student teachers' expectations about the profession are commonly "informed by their memories (arguably rose-tinted) of their own schooldays". However, this can lead to difficulties when they encounter the reality of teaching and find it more challenging than expected. Ultimately, such discoveries may lead student teachers to decide that teaching is "not for them", which according to Harwood et al. (2000, p. 1), is a commonly cited reason for early withdrawal from ITE. The same realisation may occur for mature students and those who have commitments within home and family life, such as child-rearing. While these student teachers may have believed that the holidays and teaching calendar would suit the needs of their family, in fact, the realities of teaching and the demands of the ITE programme may clash with their home commitments and relationships (Chambers & Roper, 2000, p. 40). In research by Meens and Bakx (2019), student teachers often reached the realisation that teaching was "not for them" while on placement, when they started to feel disappointed with teaching as a job and the outlook for their future career. Indeed, Basit et al. (2006, p. 400) similarly found that participants who withdrew from ITE reported feeling "disillusioned with the teaching profession" and expressed a sense that "experienced good teachers still had no quality of life".

Methodology

The research element of the APT project is situated in the interpretive paradigm and consists of an in-depth qualitative study. This paper draws on three data sources. As part of the APT project, participants conduct two semi-structured individual interviews reflecting on their past educational experiences, their ITE experiences, and their experiences as they transition out of ITE and into the teaching profession. All APT participants had entered HE via an Access programme or Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), satisfying criteria relating to lower socio-economic status, and all were included in the research strand of the project.

In this paper, we draw on interview one with the first two cohorts of APT participants (N = 21), in which they reflected on their ongoing PME experiences. Eighteen were female and three were male. Twenty of the 21 participants were of the majority ethnic group, being White, Irish and of the settled community. The interviews were generally an hour in

duration, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. This paper also draws on data collected with the APT participants as part of an external project evaluation; an anonymous online questionnaire was employed to explore their perspectives on and experiences of the project. Finally, this paper also includes data collected during an online focus group (via webinar) conducted with ten teacher educators across nine ITE programmes, from eight institutions, throughout Ireland. An invitation was sent to teacher educators who were Directors/Co-ordinators of teacher education programmes and/or of the School Placement element of such programmes, throughout Ireland, and all who agreed to participate were included. Eight were working in post-primary ITE, and two in primary ITE. The webinar was recorded and transcribed verbatim. All aspects of the APT project's research strand received ethical approval from the University of Galway's Research Ethics Committee. Pseudonyms are employed throughout.

Data analysis for the individual interviews consisted of some grounded theory coding techniques (including line-by-line and focused coding, followed by categorising) (cf. Charmaz, 2014) by the research team individually. Data, codes and provisional categories were reviewed at team analysis meetings at various stages throughout the process before categories were finalised (cf. Keane et al., 2018, 2020, 2022). A re-analysis of the data was undertaken for this paper, focusing in particular on those factors supporting and/or hindering successful engagement and retention in ITE. The focus group interview was analysed using the same grounded theory coding procedures, but with a particular emphasis on teacher educators' views about the factors supporting and/or hindering successful engagement and retention in ITE.

Limitations of the study, in terms of threats to validity (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985), include only being able to include, on a purposive sampling basis, those teacher educator leaders who volunteered to participate; thus, it could be argued that only those with a particular interest in, and particular views about, the topic came forward for participation. On the other hand, we are confident in the level of *data trustworthiness* that we achieved, given that ten teacher educators across nine ITE programmes from eight institutions (and representing each of the six teacher education centres) were involved. A further aspect of the research design supporting validity was that of triangulation (Robson, 2002), through which significant agreement across participant sources (student teacher, teacher educator)

was observed about the specific challenges for those from under-represented groups with respect to retention in ITE.

Findings

All APT participants successfully completed ITE, but were clear that APT supports had been vital in this regard. The teacher educator participants emphasised retention rates were very high (typically 90–95%) in their institutions. While they were clear that they did not see a link between withdrawal and students from under-represented groups, they noted that factors impacting on withdrawal for students in general posed additional challenges for student teachers from under-represented groups. Further, specific challenges were reported for these student teachers in relation to a) identity and belonging, b) financial struggles and part-time work, and c) the heightened need for supports and resources.

Identity and belonging

A number of the teacher educators commented on how 'working class' student teachers reported that they did not feel they fit in well in the middle class environment of ITE and their institution more broadly. For example, Eileen explained that several 'working class' student teachers had reported that they had wanted to withdraw from their programmes due to problems fitting in socially with other students, and with the language used in lectures:

> … several of them I noticed wanted to leave the programme because they felt that they weren't suited, they weren't fitting in, that it was a very middle class environment … language - they often struggle they said in the lectures, you know, words that are being used that they don't understand, that they are often on their phones trying to Google it … they struggle fitting in socially. They feel that really it is not their territory, that they are impostors, that they have to hide who they are … (Eileen, Teacher Educator)

'Fitting in' also presented challenges for these student teachers on placement. Eileen reported that most of these 'working class' student teachers "automatically" chose a DEIS (disadvantaged) school in which to conduct their placement because "that's where they feel comfortable". She compared this to the experience of two 'working class' student teachers who did their placement in a fee-paying school and who reported feeling very uncomfortable:

… in their placement … that they will automatically go back to a DEIS school because that's where they feel comfortable, that they are not being judged that they feel like they can relate to, relating to people seems to be a big thing … there were two of these students who actually have ended up in a fee paying school … how uncomfortable they felt. One of them said to me "the only people who sound like me Eileen are the groundsmen and the canteen women". He said he had nothing in common with staff … one girl said, who is teaching English, she said "the boys in first year were using words that I didn't understand", you know, that sense of constantly being judged I think came across, yeah. (Eileen, Teacher Educator)

Margaret recounted how one of her 'working class' student teachers on placement in a DEIS school reported being asked to "tone down" his working class accent to better fit in with other teachers. This 'advice' was from another 'working class' student teacher.

… had a fairly strong working class Dublin accent. He had left school himself at about 14. He was told by a colleague in his school to … tone down his accent … came from someone who is also working class … to fit in with colleagues. I think the message was the adaptation required was to change your accent a bit … (Margaret, Teacher Educator)

This student teacher chose to ignore this advice as he felt his accent "allowed him to connect with the students … He was holding on to that identity" as his students had remarked: "you sound like my Da" (Margaret, Teacher Educator). Mark also relayed that "certain Principals … would frown upon the accent of certain students from under-represented groups" and that, understandably, this would "be a blow to them". Mark noted that one such Principal even had intimated that it had been inappropriate to send a 'working class' student teacher to their middle class school: "the Principal was kind of looking at me twice, like why are you leaving this student with a real Dublin accent to this middle class school?".

Issues of identity also presented for two student teachers from the Travelling community who greatly struggled to find school placements. Anna felt that their lack of connections to local schools, and the disclosure of their ethnic identity, "didn't do them any favours".

… an absolute nightmare, I had to intervene on both … students normally secure their own placement but they couldn't, they just weren't in the field, they were totally outside the field ... they certainly hadn't gone to school anywhere nearby, but they had declared as Traveller students and they were trying to be very upfront and very honest and it probably didn't do them any favours I'd

say at the outset … the challenges they encountered were huge, absolutely huge. (Anna, Teacher Educator)

A sense of belonging in ITE (and potentially in the profession) was challenging for the APT participants. They reported that their families "… just don't really understand it" (Michelle, APT participant, Interview), and compared to many of their peers, they were "doing this all by myself". (Elizabeth, APT participant, Interview). In this regard, participating in the APT project with other student teachers from similar backgrounds helped them to feel a sense of belonging and of mutual support:

… teachers like, even in [school] … a few of them are like, "Oh, my Mum's a teacher", or someone else belonging to them … And you're kind of like, "Oh God, I have no one like … am I out of place?" APT is nice to have … "Well, there's actually other people who decided to do this as well, that are like me ..." (Clara, APT participant, Interview).

... it's such a nice support group that you have ... it doesn't make you feel like you're on your own ... you've come from maybe a more disadvantaged background than other people in the PME group, but there still is the APT group that you can fall back on ... these people have come from the same background as me, they've done the same things, we're all doing it together ... (Sarah, APT participant, Interview)

Similarly, in the external evaluation of APT Phase 1, the participants were clear that the project had supported them in fostering a sense of belonging:

The APT project allowed me to explore my own identity as a teacher, warding off the 'imposter syndrome' like feelings that I had during some of my placements.

The APT project has helped me immensely. It gave me confidence to be a teacher and to believe in my own skills. It's hard sitting in a lecture hall feeling out of place with the others and sometimes I did feel inferior and like I shouldn't be there. The APT reminded me of my capabilities and solidified the fact in my head that no matter where I come from, I can be a teacher ...

APT for me allowed me a route into higher education and also made me feel comfortable as an under-represented member of the teaching staff in any school. It allowed me to see that my diverse route into higher education was/is ok.

Finance and part-time work

The APT participants were clear that financial challenges abounded in relation to thinking about, accessing, and completing ITE:

You mention it to your parents or your family and they're like, "where you gonna even get that?" (Aine, APT participant, Interview)

First thought was money. Fear, terrible fear. My mum and dad did not go to college. My dad had two years in primary… So the fees, and how are we going to pay for this is the biggest concern. (Brigid, APT participant, Interview)

The necessity of working in paid employment to sustain them through ITE, and the difficulties of managing this alongside a demanding programme, were strongly emphasised by participants.

... I go up home Thursday night, I have to miss some lectures … because I had to be home for Friday morning to go to work. I'd work all day Friday, babysit Friday night, work Saturday, babysit Saturday night, work Sunday, and then get off work at 4 and get the bus at 6 ... absolutely exhausted ... so I'd be like up till like 1 and 2 in the morning on my laptop getting kind of stuff done, and then going to sleep, getting up, going to lectures, doing the same thing over and over again. (Michelle, APT participant, Interview)

It's hard on every scale. You know, it's not just hard academically, it's hard financially, emotionally, physically like, having to go to college all week, come home, work the weekends and get on bus and back again ... I was always tired in college. (Rita, APT participant, Interview)

In this context, the financial support provided to APT participants was highlighted in the External Evaluation as vital in supporting their retention:

The APT project has most definitely changed my life. If I had not received the funding to complete this course, I would not have been able to afford to accept my place and survive for two years as a student. I had already big loans to pay from my undergraduate years. The fact that I don't have to take out another loan for my education has allowed me to continue to repay my current loans and know that I can enter the workplace in the near future with a lot less debt than anticipated, which will no doubt have a positive impact on my career initiation.

… without this funding I would not have been financially capable of completing the PME.

The teacher educator participants were highly cognisant of the challenges posed by financial difficulties. Gerard (Teacher Educator) felt that programme fees and related costs posed a

significant barrier for “a huge cohort of students”, emphasising that many student teachers worked “day and night” in external employment to try to meet costs, and that financial struggles played a key role in retention:

I think there is a huge cohort of students who are on the programme, or actually decide that they can’t do the programme, because they fall between those who perhaps might have the means and then those who might automatically qualify for support in terms of SUSI. We have a whole number of people in the middle for whom the PME and the fees are just not feasible, to pay €12,000, the idea they might not qualify for a SUSI grant ... looking at who is withdrawing I don’t think it is necessarily related to minority groups ... we do deal a lot with students with financial issues for whom the ask ... it’s just too much, it’s too much to juggle ... so financial issues and the reality of people’s lives in that respect have a big impact on retention. (Gerard, Teacher Educator)

Across the board, the teacher educators noted the high level of engagement in external employment by student teachers, and the difficulties this posed for adequate programme engagement:

... the pressure on finances, the pressure to have a second job ... understanding that they are, you know, full time higher education teacher education programme. It’s very hard to pack in a part-time job with that and to be fully engaged with it so that’s a huge challenge we would see ... (Francis, Teacher Educator)

... a group of students who struggle financially has a huge bearing on how well they are doing and how well they are engaging with the programme ... I’m just saying “Come and talk to me if you can’t make the lecture” .... then they come back and they are really sorry ... “I have to keep these three jobs going along with trying to do my school placement and attend college” ... so I suppose yeah it’s all down to financial struggles. (Patricia, Teacher Educator)

Supports and resources: Where do we draw the line?

The teacher educators emphasised the additional work required to support student teachers who were struggling, and particularly those from under-represented groups. They underlined the necessity of such support being adequately resourced.

… dealing with students who are in any of these under-represented groups does require a huge outlay in terms of resources in terms of the time, energy, effort that we have to give them to actually allow them to fully participate in the programme ... there is a very distinct pressure on resources, of staff in terms of time, energy, effort, commitment ... It doesn’t just happen and I

suppose if we are to be dealing with larger numbers of students in these categories that it would have to be recognised that the resourcing of that would be a critical issue ... (Gerard, Teacher Educator)

Mark (Teacher Educator) concurred, explaining that "to retain those students in the system takes a huge amount of resourcing and I don't think that has really been addressed … it is just lip service resources". Further, he noted the necessity of students "having a label" in order to qualify for certain supports and resources, and reported that there was a large cohort of students from under-represented groups "that didn't have a formal label" who were therefore "invisible and completely unsupported". Mark directly linked their institution's high retention rate for student teachers from under-represented groups to the dedicated and extensive support provided:

... we are into the third year now on the [name of PATH1 project] and the retention levels are very high but we have ... a dedicated team working with the students before they come to college for one year and then they keep a lot of contact with the students when they are on the programme. We also have freed up one staff member ... about 20% of their workload was dedicated to specifically supporting the [PATH1] student teachers when they were on the programme. That has been hugely significant in terms of retention ... we only lost one student in three years which I think is quite phenomenal.

Similarly, as well as emphasising financial supports, peer support, and the sense of belonging and purpose that the APT project fostered, ten of the APT participants highlighted the importance of support from the project leads, and their provision of "incredible professional development training and insights that I feel will prepare me very well for my professional progression" (External Evaluation).

In talking about the provision of support to student teachers from under-represented groups, several of the teacher educators asked "where do we draw the line?" For example, Patricia (Teacher Educator) highlighted the negative impact on programme engagement of students who were working long hours in external employment as a result of their financial position. She struggled with how to respond to and support these students:

… students who struggle financially has a huge bearing on … how well they are engaging … I said "Okay I'll work with you but how are we going to work this? We can't skip every lecture. Let's try and come up with a plan" … I'm fighting with myself nearly with what I can leave them get away with …

where do we draw the line? When is it too much that I have to say to them “Okay, you can’t go on with this anymore”? ... then I’m trying to catch them up ... a one on one session and I’m conscious maybe the rest of the group can see that that this person is getting more time because they are not showing up.

Anna (Teacher Educator) also reflected on where to draw the line in terms of how often students are allowed to repeat modules (including school placement) and pointed to tension between University and regulatory (Teaching Council) perspectives on the issue:

... those who fail and then fail on the repeat ... they present some kind of circumstances and the University will say - because they see fees every single time - “Oh no, they’re entitled to another opportunity”. Teaching Council will say “one school placement fail, one repeat, off you go” ... The University said “It’s not up to the Teaching Council to determine that. We say that they are entitled to another opportunity ...”. They did get another opportunity and they did pass ... there is a kind of a mismatch there in terms of the regulator and the academic institution ... somebody may be a serial failure ... and they go to defer, second attempt, they may even go to a third attempt ... so where is the line, you know?

Indeed, Eileen (Teacher Educator) felt that there was almost “an onus” on the University to get students “over the line” and expressed concern that even with significant support, some students “limped over the line”.

... a lot of the students who are more disadvantaged have often a whole lot more to juggle ... often they get through PME1 somehow. Sometimes they are struggling hugely in PME1 but they get support - see that’s the issue. Then they get into PME2 ... they may have issues but it’s almost as if once you have paid the fees in PME2 that there is almost an onus, a responsibility, on the part of the University, to almost get them over the line - where is that line? ... you can give students support ... and they fly over the line, but then there are the ones that limp over the line ... that is an issue.

In this regard, both Anna and Eileen considered the implications of these student teachers achieving a Pass (versus an honours) ITE award, arguing that these teachers would struggle to obtain posts, although Eileen wryly observed that they may still obtain employment in DEIS schools which sometimes struggle to attract staff. This was recognised as problematic given that students in DEIS schools need the best teachers:

... those students ... who come out with a D in their teaching practice. They will not be getting the jobs in the fee-paying schools or the middle class schools. They will be going back to the DEIS

schools, and that is a huge issue because those are the children who need the best teachers. (Eileen, Teacher Educator)

Indeed, Maria (Teacher Educator) noted that for those with subjects in short supply, even those student teachers with poor results would obtain a post:

… [those struggling] …. they are kind of dragging themselves through and maybe we are dragging them through. They are not performing great and they won't be maybe the best teachers … then we can think "oh they won't get on so well in the job interviews" … who wants a teacher who has a C or a D in school placement? However, some of them will actually get on quite well, particularly when they are in shortage subject areas, so if somebody like that teaches Irish or chemistry they will end up getting a job no matter … we are quite uncomfortable with that …

Discussion and conclusion

As we have shown, the APT student teachers in this study all successfully completed ITE, and the teacher educators emphasised that they did not consider retention to be a particular issue for student teachers from under-represented groups more generally. Indeed, they highlighted the very high completion rates in their ITE programmes, as has also been found in research in Ireland at a national level (Piggott & Frawley, 2019). However, specific challenges were reported for these student teachers, in relation to identity and belonging, finance and part-time work, and supports and resources, which put them at greater risk of regular absences and/or non-completion.

Challenges regarding a sense of belonging and 'fitting in' are commonly reported by 'working class' students in HE, which is unsurprising given that HEIs are "saturated with middle-class markers" (Bufton, 2003, p. 218). 'Working class' students commonly report a lack of confidence, and rarely engage in the social and extra-curricular realm in the same way or to the same extent as students from more privileged backgrounds (ibid., Christie et al., 2005; Crozier et al., 2008; Keane, 2011a, b, 2012; Reay et al., 2005). Challenges fitting in for 'working class' students are also found in relation to language, with "working class language" regarded as "not academic" (Bufton, 2003, p. 220) and these students conscious of being 'marked' by their (working class) accents and 'vocabularies' (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1996). This study contributes to the field in its identification of many of these same challenges in the specific context of teacher education, in which there has been a

dearth of research about the impact of differential social class positionality (Keane et al., 2020; Lampert et al., 2016). This is problematic given the importance of class in shaping teachers' early professional experiences and identities (Hall & Jones, 2013). In the research that exists, a sense of inferiority has been highlighted, with 'working class' teachers being highly conscious of class markers, such as dress and accent (cf. Burn, 2001; Maguire, 1999, 2001, 2005). In the current study, the teacher educators reported that these issues had led some 'working class' student teachers to seriously question whether they would continue in their ITE programmes. Importantly, a sense of belonging and confidence was fostered in the APT participants through their involvement in the APT project and the supports, including peer support from other student teachers 'like them', provided therein. Given the complex challenges to be navigated by 'working class' student teachers as 'fish out of water' in middle class campus and school placement contexts (Bourdieu, 1989), it is surprising that retention rates remain high for these students in ITE, especially where a significant proportion fall outside 'labelled categories' who receive supports.

The high cost of ITE has been well documented, and indeed, it has been suggested that it takes more time and money to become a teacher, than a doctor, in Ireland (Hyland, 2018). The cost of the two-year Professional Master in Education programme is upwards of €12,000 in fees, with significant further outlay on accommodation, subsistence, travel, and school placement-related expenses (ibid.). Indeed, it has been found that the change from a one to a two-year programme negatively impacted the representation of those from lower socio-conomic groups in ITE in Ireland (Keane & Heinz, 2015). It is not uncommon for students to completely self-fund their ITE programme (McMahon, 2019) through a variety of measures such as loans, savings, borrowing money from family, and working part-time. In both Ireland and the UK, significant proportions of ITE students report experiencing serious financial difficulties (Griffiths, 2019; Hanley & Heinz, 2022; Prendergast et al., 2021). As we have shown in the current study, financial struggles can manifest in high levels of engagement in external employment, and the APT and teacher educator participants emphasised the resultant significant negative impact on programme engagement, as has been found in other research (for example, Devlin et al. (2008) in Australia). This is particularly problematic in demanding professional programmes with high workloads (Basit et al., 2006). The APT participants in this study emphasised the importance of the additional

funding they received as part of the APT project in reducing the financial pressure they were experiencing. While the research evidence about the impact of funding is complex (Naidoo & McKay, 2018), it is reasonable to suggest that high costs and low levels of financial support for those from 'working class' and other under-represented groups in ITE is not supportive of retention (cf. Lin et al., 2016). Indeed, external ('environmental') factors such as finance, part-time work, and caring responsibilities have been found to constitute barriers to retention for those from under-represented groups (Shroyer et al., 2009).

This paper provides important new insights into *teacher educators'* perspectives, practices, and struggles in relation to retention. Many shared examples of extensive supports provided for student teachers, often involving difficult (and invisible) work which was important and necessary yet under-resourced and rarely acknowledged by their performance-driven HEIs. The teacher educator participants were acutely aware of the immense challenges facing many student teachers, and especially those from under-represented groups (Keane et al., 2023). They often struggled to reconcile tensions between programme and professional standards requirements, school culture and expectations, and their commitment to helping student teachers overcome barriers that could result in them disengaging, burning out, or underperforming (cf. Heinz & Fleming, 2019). Their accounts shine a light on the emotional labour underpinning ITE retention statistics. While clearly prepared to advocate on behalf of, support, and work closely with student teachers who struggle, they also worried about situations where very low engagement levels and/or burnout significantly impacted student teachers' development and, ultimately, performance, resulting in some students 'limping over' and/or being 'dragged over' the line. The teacher educator participants' struggle to determine where '*the line*' was (in terms of performance as well as the provision of additional support) illustrates the considerable ethical dilemmas they face in their professional decision-making when student teachers, who struggle financially and/or otherwise, and for whom they feel responsible, are at risk of failing ITE programme elements, or of withdrawing. While HEIs set targets to ensure high student numbers and retention rates, teacher educators' deliberations upon and navigations of student support on human and professional levels lead us to ask how much (and what kind of) support is appropriate or desirable? In this context, it is important to emphasise that we view systemic and institutional factors as actively disabling relevant student teachers; this is not about the

'quality' of these students or their ability to perform. Of concern here are the circumstances impacting on their capacity to engage, and what ITE (and schools) can, should, and should not do in the absence of adequate resourcing and necessary cultural change (Keane et al., 2023a; Heinz et al., 2023) in the context of diversifying the teaching profession. It is important to note that some teacher educators were concerned that student teachers who struggled significantly and 'limped over the line', getting poor results, would not be best prepared to start a teaching career. They worried that some of them, ultimately, would not become "the best teachers". These concerns demonstrate the complexity of the situation where equity goals for student teachers and for pupils are closely interconnected. Whilst recognising that the source of student teachers' poorer engagement and performance was generally wider structural barriers, rather than any innate 'deficiency' or lack of ability, from the teacher educators' perspective, the outcome was still a 'poorer quality' beginning teacher whose future development was unknown at the time of qualification. Teacher educators worried about the perceived potential negative impact on students in schools, most especially in DEIS schools in which some of the student teachers who performed 'less well' were more likely to be employed and where students needed "the best teachers". It might be that the provision of a high level of academic support and flexibility regarding requirements is not always desirable or effective even if it is provided to alleviate the impact of structural, institutional or other external barriers on the student teachers in question. It may be the case that ITE ought to delay the progression of these student teachers and allow them time to improve in core areas, while providing ongoing support, at a time that better suits them. It is not that these student teachers necessarily need longer than their peers to complete, but due to the various external structural barriers they more frequently encounter, they may need flexibility in terms of when they can complete different aspects of the programme. This would be in line with Lin et al.'s (2016) recommendations. Evidently, given their socio-demographic positionality, this would need to be done on a no-fees basis, and would require institutional flexibility.

Turning our attention back to the APT student teacher participants in our study, given the significant barriers student teachers from under-represented groups encounter in ITE, including on school placement (or the 'professional domain', emphasised by Roberts (2012) as key to retention in ITE), and the importance of integration and a sense of 'fit' between

the student and the institution in retention (cf. Tinto, 1993), these student teachers' high levels of successful completion of ITE is notable and meritorious of further research. In particular, the role of their motivation and goal commitment (ibid.) and, based on the findings presented in this paper, the specific additional supports provided by ITE staff and teacher diversity projects, require further exploration. It would also be useful to include in future research a wider variety of teacher educators across the sector.

Notes

1. *Programme for Access to Higher Education, Strand 1: Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education* (PATH1) is the HEA's teacher diversity initiative, developed after teacher diversity was highlighted as a core focus in the HEA's 2015–2019 National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (HEA, 2015). For further information about the development of this initiative, and of the PATH1 projects, see Keane, Heinz, and Mc Daid (2023c).

2. PATH1 projects address both primary and post-primary ITE, and target the dimensions of social class, ethnicity with respect to Irish Travellers (but not 'other' ethnic groups), disability in general and in terms of Deaf Irish Sign Language users, and age with regard to mature-aged students.

3. Senior Cycle refers to the period of education that follows the Junior Cycle and is generally taken by students between the ages of 15 and 18.

4. DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) (DES 2005) forms part of the Department of Education and Skills' social inclusion strategy to support children and young people experiencing educational disadvantage in Ireland. Schools included in the DEIS programme receive additional supports.

5. The Leaving Certificate is the national terminal examination taken by students at the end of second-level education, and performance in the examination is used for selection into HE. An applicant's results in six subjects in the Leaving Certificate examination are converted into 'points'. Where demand for courses exceeds places available, applicants are selected in rank order based on points achieved.

6. The Travelling community is Ireland's indigenous ethnic minority group.

7. Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) is Ireland's national awarding authority for all FE and HE grants.

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