Education in Context:
A phenomenological case study of a cohort of non-traditional entrants to the teaching profession in the United Kingdom

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Aims of the presentation

• To illustrate the process/methodology of researching student experience by drawing on a study of non-traditional students;

• Offer those students’ voice by presenting some vignettes from their stories and demonstrate how the findings informed curriculum and policy change;

• Discuss some of the findings in the light of their affect on student experience;

• Share some reflections on how I engaged students in the process and product of curriculum and strategy development and how I think this might be developed in the future to address the specific aspirations and requirements of diverse groups of students
Student Voice/Student experience

• Growing attention to ‘listening to student voice’ in the UK on issues concerned with learning and teaching, and exploring their experiences of higher education (see (Ramsden, 2003; Case, 2007; Campbell et al, 2009; Edmond, 2010; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Fuller et al., 2009).

• Students co-generating institutional teaching and learning strategy: Healey et al (2010)-co-construction of University of Gloucester’s Teaching and Learning Policy.
Context of the study

Set against a political backdrop of *Widening Participation* and *Workforce Reform*

The programme- FdA/BA Hons with QTS Education in Context

Looked at the lived experience of being a ‘non-traditional’ student on a ‘non-traditional’ teacher training programme and the influence of their personal and occupational backgrounds on the development of their professional identity.

Conceptual Framework

**Biography** (Goodson, 1985, 1992), **Greedy Institutions** (Coser, 1972)

**Sociological theory - Capital theory, gender and class theory** (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; George and Maguire, 1998, Edwards, 1993; Reay, 2002; Bowl, 2005),
Research Questions

The questions were aimed at developing understanding of these student teachers’ perceptions of:

• being a non-traditional student in Higher Education;
• being a non-traditional trainee teacher;
• how personal biography affects the HE experience;
• how the experience of higher education and the process of becoming a teacher was supported by the institution.
Phenomenology- a study of life-world

A philosophy of the personal and individual which needs to be considered against the *logos of other*, the *whole*, the *communal* or the *social* (Van Manen, 1990: 7)

Heidegger- **Mitsein** or ‘being in the world with others’

“Plurality” as the fundamental human condition
‘humans inhabit a space with others to whom they are both equal and distant’

(Arendt, The Human Condition, 1959)
Methods

• Phenomenological case study (Yin, 1989; Moustakis, 2004; Stake, 1995)
• 2 phases- Phase 1- questionnaires to establish a workable sample and interview questions and 3 pilot interviews to establish initial themes.
• Phase 2: x 2 individual interviews, 1st to gain biographical information and a sense of life history (Goodson, 1985, 1992), 2nd focusing on the experience on the course. Also- focus group and third party data (Headteachers, programme director, course tutor).
• Analysis- Phenomenological data reduction (Moustakas, 1994)
Personal biography and student experience

Situational, dispositional and institutional influences on experience…..

Two phenomena identified related to their gender and their class positioning.

1. **Women’s work is never done!**

2. **Working class or second class?**
   Lower status programme, lower status students lower status teachers? Less social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) more experiential capital!
Being a non-traditional student

There is a wide range of teaching styles that I am not used to. I am used to having a teacher stand in front of the class and teach me, not having to learn for myself (Asha).

‘Starting at 10 o’clock allows me to take my daughter to school and pick her up again, so I save on childcare which as a single parent is key’…….. I had to bargain with my ex to take a day off work to have the kids so I could do my presentation with was 40% of the coursework mark because nobody else was free to help out’ (Karen)
• I was worried when I first came to the university that people would think that I was common and stupid (Debbie)

• All those long academic words made me feel that I shouldn’t be here (Maureen)

• We feel like second class citizens as we never get the proper teaching rooms like the real teaching students (focus group)
Being a non-traditional student teacher

I need to collect evidence in other Key Stages but the school is paying me as a nursery nurse. I have to work on Thursday unpaid in the infant classrooms to get the experience. This is the only option available (Sapna)

I am torn between being a member of staff with my responsibilities – as a nursery nurse and a student in two roles which are separate. (Rebecca)

Some of the teachers think the course is ‘Mickey Mouse’ and not as rigorous as a PGCE (Julia)
She (the Head) thinks that (the HEI) has failed me in that they haven’t explained what is required well enough to her. (Maureen)

I think the organisation of the course has left a sour taste in many of our mouths and that is purely because none of us were ever told the same thing. I think it was way of putting bums on seats and money in pockets. (Debbie)
Four ‘Greedy Institutions’ which make total claims on their members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality...they seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. (Coser, 1974, p. 4)

I make sure that I do all my lesson plans and stuff for school. This means paying for after school club some days for the kids but it means that I can cook for them when I get home and help them with their homework and just be there until they go to bed- that is when I do my essays! (Sapna)

I do all my writing when the kids are in bed so I don’t feel guilty about putting myself first. Studying these days is actually the only time I get for myself (laughs) (Caroline)

I did all my Christmas shopping online- saved me hours in the queues- time I spent on my coursework (Debbie)
Everyone wants a piece of me, which would be OK if they didn’t all want it at the same time.  

(Caroline)

My husband is a traditionalist and although he has supported my decision to teach there is an expectation that my role as a wife and mother remain unchanged as this is my responsibility. For example, last week I came home after being at college all day then had to go back to school for parents’ evening. I got after eight and the place was a mess and he asked me what the kids could have for their tea? Couldn’t he bloody well look? I ended up cooking, put the kids to bed and then tried to read my college books but fell asleep. I felt like killing him!

(Ann)
Summary of findings

• (4) greedy institutions are not recognised by policy makers;
• Rigidity of curriculum and institutional structures must be challenged;
• Realistic entry requirements to cope with the demands of HE and information to all stakeholders;
• These programmes provide a locus of research into academic practices
Engaging students with process and product 1

• Research- students as co-researchers
  – Use of epoché- seeing with new and receptive eyes
  – Grounded theory approach- letting the themes emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)
  – Stratification of voice (Becker, 1977)
  – Students as a validity device
  – Giving them the opportunity to engage!
    ‘no one has ever asked me about my life before (Maureen)’
Engaging students with process and product 2

Quality assurance and enhancement

• Collaborative provision policy (CPP)- school liaison committees, involved in mentor training (alumni talking about their experiences/sharing good practice), sitting on CPP quality groups.

• Quality assurance- continued to have student representation on programme boards only heightened and more structured level of engagement.

• Re-validation
  – Focus groups, on steering committee, revised papers, on panel.
  – Looked at draft handbooks for ‘student-friendliness’
  – Research findings used to inform the rationale for the re-validation
Key influences on curriculum and policy change

• lack of pre-course and early preparation for study at this level- Diagnostic test and support materials developed, an induction week with intensive study/ICT skills, academic literacy embedded.

• the lack of information to and co-ordination between the HEI and the schools and also the question of legitimacy of this form of training- Information evening for Heads, clear documentation of requirements and expectations of schools/students, student conference for stakeholders, individual training plans.

• The ‘four greedy institutions’ of work, study, home and teacher training- Ensured HEI and school timetables corresponded, additional exam boards for these programmes (Fds), revision of assessment, revision of late submission and extension policy.
Policy failure or an implementation gap can occur when policy is imposed from the centre with no thought given to how it might be perceived or received at local level. It is not a case of bottom up approaches to policy and action being preferable to top down. Arguably, a balance between the two is necessary.
References

- UK: Higher Education Academy.