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Resilience, resistance and 'giving back': teachers from working class backgrounds and their journeys to teaching

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ABSTRACT

Precipitated by a recent policy focus on diversifying Ireland's homogeneous teaching profession, there is an emerging research base focused on the experiences of teachers from under-represented groups. However, the life stories of teachers from lower socio-economic groups remain underexplored. Responsive to the mostly atheoretical nature of research on initial teacher motivation and employing a narrative life history methodology grounded in phenomenology, interviews were conducted with six teachers from working class backgrounds. Consistent with the generative capacity of habitus, the participants' stories of becoming a teacher are ones of resilience, resistance, and aspiration to make a difference in their local communities. Their experiences of schooling and initial teacher education and the various challenges they encountered, highlights the systemic and cultural change required to ensure not only a more diverse and representative teaching profession, but one that is also critically conscious and culturally responsive.

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Introduction

Despite significant growth in the diversity of the general population (Devine 2011; Smyth et al. 2009), the Irish teaching population has remained almost exclusively homogeneous, being overwhelmingly white, female and of majority-group social class and ethnicity (Heinz and Keane 2018; Keane and Heinz 2015, 2016; Keane, Heinz, and Eaton 2018). This lack of diversity is consistent with the international context (Donlevy, Meierkord, and Rajania 2016; Schleicher 2014). A well-established research base, primarily focused on ethnic minorities, has articulated the 'benefits' of a more diverse teaching population (e.g. King 1993; Santoro 2009; Su 1997; Villegas and Clewell 1998; Villegas and Irvine 2010). More recent research into the Irish government funded initiatives to diversify the teaching profession in Ireland reports on the strong altruistic motives of (student) teachers from diverse backgrounds (see McDaid, Keane, and Heinz 2023). In recent years, and partially sparked by the aforementioned research, there has been an intensification of policy initiatives aimed at supporting greater teacher diversity in Ireland and across Europe (see Donlevy, Meierkord, and Rajania 2016).

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In the Irish context, there is an emerging research base focused on the experiences of student teachers from working class backgrounds (Keane 2023; Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2018, 2023a, 2023b) and the Irish Traveller community (Burns, Colum, and O'Neill 2023), and also student teachers with disabilities (Keane, Heinz, and Eaton 2018). While this Irish research base has largely examined the experiences of student teachers on bespoke programmes and pathways designed to increase teacher diversity, internationally little is known about those from lower socio-economic groups that have succeeded in becoming teachers through traditional pathways. An exception is the small body of English research (Burn 2001; Maguire 1999, 2001, 2005a, 2005b) which found that teachers from lower socio-economic backgrounds often defy the odds by navigating a pathway to teaching that is blighted by structural barriers and inequalities. The significant psychosocial discontinuities experienced by these cohorts (as student teachers and teachers) as they are assimilated into a profession that is almost exclusively culturally homogeneous, is also illuminated in this body of research. There is also emerging research that indicates that (student) teachers from working class backgrounds have more social justice-oriented teaching motivations than others (Burns 2018; Burns and O'Sullivan 2023; Heinz, Keane, and Foley 2017), often expressed in their desire to 'give back' to their communities.

In response to the mostly atheoretical nature of the research in the field of initial teacher motivation (Heinz 2015), this study articulates a group of teachers from working class backgrounds and their stories of becoming a teacher through a Bourdieusian lens. The findings section follows a temporal line of development, focusing on the influence family, schooling, and experiences of university and initial teacher education (ITE) had on the growth and development of participants' teaching aspirations and journeys to teaching in designated disadvantaged schools. Informed and motivated by the writings of Diane Reay (e.g. 2009, 2018), and in response to the increasingly populist view, socially promulgated by political elites, that we are now living in a classless society, we place class at the heart of this paper's focus and analysis because in the words of Reay (2018) 'it enables a clear and unadulterated focus on the obscene and growing economic inequalities scarring English society' (p. 454). Similar levels of inequality are an unfortunate marker of Irish society, where ideas of classlessness have their origins in its post-colonial status (Breen and Whelan 1996). The authors also take the view that class is simultaneously raced and gendered (Reay 2009, 2018, 454) and the need to avoid reductionist, essentialist, and fixed notions of class, race, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability and sexuality that uncritically dismisses differences between people in politically and socially damaging ways (Blackmore 2006, 191; Heinz, Keane, and McDaid 2023). Therefore, the analysis tries to reflect this by illuminating the idiosyncrasies and particularities of participants' biographies. In order to achieve this and deconstruct the key relation between teachers from working class backgrounds and their socio-cultural biographies and journeys into and through ITE, Bourdieu's (1972) *habitus* is employed. Habitus provides a lens through which the participants' world is ordered by demonstrating a link between practice (agency) and capital and field (structure) (Reay 2004, 432), and in the process enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between participants' journeys to teaching and their current roles working in designated disadvantaged schools.

More specifically, exploring participants' engagement with ITE's culturally homogeneous student and teacher educator populations can help to illuminate the influence of ITE in the development of student teachers' cultural understanding and responsiveness. The

unprecedented increase in ethnic diversity amongst student numbers in Irish designated disadvantaged schools (Smyth et al. 2009) heightens the need to explore ITE's role in developing and supporting pedagogies and practices that are imbued with inclusive values. This need is intensified considering that the majority of those teaching in urban Irish designated disadvantaged schools have been teaching for less than five years (McCoy, Quail, and Smyth 2014), and that working with diverse student populations is one of the areas where teachers feel the least prepared (EC 2017; Inspectorate of DES 2005; Tormey, Ryan, and Dooley 2003).

Teaching aspirations and motivation, and the role of biographical factors

Identity plays a key role in the kind of educators new teachers become (Flores and Day 2006). Consequently, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of exploring the role 'biographical factors such as teachers' own schooling experiences, their motivations for entering teacher education programmes, their ITE experiences, and contexts of professional practice' (Heinz 2015, 259) have on the development of teachers' professional identities. Heinz exposes the tendency of research into student teachers' career motivations to treat student teachers as a homogeneous whole, and the associated absence of analysis on the role socio-cultural and biographical factors play in the development and realisation of teaching aspirations. While research has highlighted the important influence of family members on student teachers' career choices, it has not broken its analysis down along socio-cultural lines (Book and Freeman 1986; Drudy et al. 2005). Similarly, previous research into the influence of teachers on teacher candidates' decisions to become teachers treated participants as a social and cultural homogeneous whole, revealing the largely negligible to negative influence teachers have had in teacher candidates' decision making processes (Richardson and Watt 2006; Yaakub 1990). However, recent research in the Irish context has sought to address this knowledge gap by focusing on the influence of biographical factors on initial teacher motivation and found that student teachers from the Irish Traveller community (Burns, Colum, and O'Neill 2023) and working class backgrounds (Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2018) had an ambiguous perception of the role teachers played in the development of teaching aspirations. Many of the participants in these studies managed to maintain their desire to become teachers partially because of the actions of 'one good teacher', but often in spite of, rather than because of, school based career guidance.

Class identity and initial teacher education

Students' experiences of ITE programmes along class lines also merits exploration. There is evidence to suggest that working class students experience class based discontinuities in ITE (Burn 2001; Keane 2017, 2023; Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2023b; Maguire 1999, 2005a, 2005b). Maguire and Burn's research in England shows that working class student teachers lack confidence and experience a sense of inferiority in ITE, including in relation to embodied markers of their class habitus such as accent and dress. Research has shown that class identity and position impacts on how student teachers engage with themes of equality and social justice in ITE. Feelings of discontinuity and discomfort have been accentuated by the school placement elements of ITE programmes, with a number of studies

reporting on the disillusionment that working class student teachers experienced upon witnessing negative 'teacher talk' about students attending designated disadvantaged schools (Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2023b; Lampert, Burnett, and Lebhers 2016). These discourses contrasted sharply with their idealised teacher identities and practices which were focused on inclusive and relatable practices (Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2023a, 2023b).

The need to create critically reflexive spaces in ITE where student teachers can acknowledge and reflect on their own experiences of privilege and inequality is intensified considering the tendency of teachers to have lower expectations and deficit perspectives of students from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds (Boaler 2000; Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt 2013; Hoadley and Ensor 2009; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Lyons et al. 2003). In contrast, studies that broke their analysis down across socio-cultural lines found that teachers and student teachers from minority ethnic backgrounds demonstrate higher expectations of students from marginalised backgrounds than their peers from middle class backgrounds (Villegas and Irvine 2010). Similarly, Burns (2014) and Burns and O'Sullivan (2023) reported that working class teachers used their greater knowledge of the local communities they work in to 'connect' with parents on a personal level, thus resisting to a large extent the professional protectionism that governed the majority of the middle class participants' relations with parents. Cumulatively, these findings highlight the importance of creating critically reflexive spaces for (student) teachers to explore culturally conceived views and assumptions along the continuum of teacher education. This need is accentuated considering the socio-cultural homogeneity of student teacher populations (Donlevy, Meierkord, and Rajania 2016; Heinz and Keane 2018; Schleicher 2014), the exponential increase in ethnic diversity amongst student numbers in Irish designated disadvantaged schools (Smyth et al. 2009), and the limited cross-cultural knowledge and experience student teachers have when entering ITE (Leavy 2005; Valli 1995; Wiggins and Follo 1999; Zimpher 1989). The majority of teachers working in urban Irish designated disadvantaged schools have less than five years teaching experience (McCoy, Quail, and Smyth 2014), which adds further legitimacy to calls for student teachers to gain experience working in diverse communities that experience social and economic challenges (EDC 2004; Teaching Council of Ireland 2013). Limited contact with people from diverse backgrounds has the knock-on effect of making newly qualified teachers (NQTs) vulnerable to complicity with dominant school cultures that tend to assimilate children from diverse backgrounds into the existing local culture (De Freitas and McAuley 2008; Lingard and Keddie 2013).

'Habitus' - providing a lens through which the world is ordered

Bourdieu's (1972) concept of habitus characterises the recurring patterns of social class outlook and orientation embodied in one's values, beliefs, speech, dress, and social dispositions that are inculcated by everyday engagement with the family, peers and school (Mills 2008). Operating below the level of consciousness, it implies 'an unthinking-ness in actions' (Mills 2008, 80) by providing individuals with a sense of how to negotiate the travails of daily life 'without consciously obeying rules explicitly posed as such' (Bourdieu 1990a, 76). In response to the mostly atheoretical nature of the research in the field of initial teacher motivation (Heinz 2015), habitus and its capacity to provide a lens through which the world is ordered enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and context. In order to deconstruct the key relation between working class teachers and

their socio-cultural biographies and journeys into and through ITE, Bourdieu's (1984) definition of 'taste' as a manifestation and articulation of one's habitus is insightful. Bourdieu (1984) outlines how social class tends to determine a person's likes and interests, and how distinctions based on social class get reinforced in daily life. If taste functions as a story of social orientation guiding individuals towards the social positions adjusted to their given position in social space, then it also engenders a dislike towards other behaviours that are not part of one's 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu 1984, 466). It is the dominant classes that define aesthetic concepts. As a consequence, the subordinate classes are often left with forced choices or 'choices of destiny' (Bourdieu 1984, 178) which reaffirm the principle of conformity to the dominant classes' explicit norm of popular taste. This critique of 'taste' as a classification system emphasises the need to challenge the climate of conformity and consensualism in our educational system that has consistently failed to recognise the legitimacy of working class culture and the impact this continues to have on the socio-cultural diversity of teaching populations.

Habitus is a concept that has the potential to generate a wide range of possible actions enabling the individual to embark on transformative and/or limiting courses of action (Bourdieu 1990b). The socio-cultural homogeneity of entrants to teaching (Donlevy, Meierkord, and Rajania 2016; Heinz and Keane 2018; Schleicher 2014) could be viewed as a product of middle class entrants' acquiescence to the leanings of their socio-cultural habitus that directs them towards an occupation 'which is entirely "them"' (Bourdieu 1984, 223). However, if we accept Bourdieu's assertion that the schemes of the habitus function 'beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will' (Bourdieu 1984, 466) and that our 'ultimate values are never anything other than the primary, primitive dispositions, "visceral" tastes and distastes, in which the group's most vital interests are embedded' (474), then its ability to act as a transformative force in terms of teacher agency and transformative change appears limited. However, such an analysis fails to account for one of the central tenets of habitus, that it is not to be viewed as a concept that accounts for predictable modes of behaviours and actions, but rather its practical logic is 'that of vagueness, of the more-or-less, which defines one's ordinary relation to the world' (Bourdieu 1990a, 78). Its capacity to be simultaneously 'generative' (of perceptions and practice) and structuring (imposing limits upon what is conceivable as perception and practice) (Codd 1990, 139) is useful in illuminating the teacher participants' journeys to teaching as they navigated a pathway (often below the level of inculcation) through schooling and ITE systems that have been traditionally biased towards valued forms of middle class social and cultural capital.

Methodology

In order to shine light on the journey of a group of teachers from working class backgrounds and their stories of becoming a teacher, a narrative life history methodology grounded in phenomenology was adopted. Crotty (2003) states what he perceives to be the two clear characteristics of phenomenology. First of all, it has a note of objectivity about it. It is in search of objects of experience rather than being content with a description of the experiencing subject. Second, it is an exercise in critique. It calls into question what we take for granted (82-3). Both these characteristics are in harmony with the focus and aims of this study.

Phenomenological research typically frames the topic of interest as being 'processual – being, becoming, understanding and knowing' (Marshall and Rossman 2011, 20). These constituents of phenomenological research are very much a feature of this study's methodology. In order to investigate the role socio-cultural factors and processes play in shaping the teaching aspirations and emerging identities of participants, a narrative life history approach was adopted. By guiding participants through a biographical account of their journey of becoming a teacher, the language, beliefs, relationships, and values that interact and combine to constitute an individual's habitus are surfaced (Mills 2008).

Using non-probability purposive sampling, participants were teachers from working class backgrounds working in designated disadvantaged schools, or what are known colloquially as 'DEIS' schools. Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) (DES 2017) is the Irish State's action plan for educational inclusion and co-ordinates the services, supports and resources that are deployed to target educational inequality in Irish education. It should be noted that 'working class' was not a term participants used, and this coupled with their move into the professional classes by virtue of being teachers, means that we refer to participants as being from working class backgrounds as opposed to using the term uncritically. The biographical details of the study's six participants are presented in Table 1. The relatively small sample size obviously places limitations on the generalisability of findings.

An 'ethical protocol' was drawn up to guide the different phases of the research project, which gained the subsequent approval of the research ethics committee of Maynooth University (approval number: SRESC-2018-131). Interviews with participants were conducted over the course of 2019 and 2020. The interviews lasted an average of one hour and were transcribed verbatim. In the interest of protecting their anonymity, participants were given pseudonyms.

Congruent with phenomenological research, the research process returned to the starting point, i.e. individual participant's stories of becoming a teacher, at many junctures (Crotty 2003). However, this did not preclude engagement with the theoretical, conceptual, policy and research discourses, which were also instrumental in informing the trajectory and organisational framework of the analysis process (Dey 1993). Consequently, the constant comparative method of data analysis was employed, a method which combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The text of the individual stories of participants was deconstructed into more manageable units, which involved identifying 'meaning units' with a focus on the phenomenon (Giorgi 1985, 11). Through a process of reflection and engagement with the intellectual discourse, participants' own expressions and language were

Table 1. Participants' biographical information.

Name	Primary/Post Primary	Years Teaching
1. Tony	Primary	5
2. Orla	Post-Primary	9
3. Amy	Post-Primary	7
4. Sarah	Primary	3
5. John	Post-Primary	11
6. Lauren	Post-Primary	7

transformed into academic language, which placed the emphasis on the phenomenon being investigated. Each unit of these transformed meanings were grouped, categorised, and coded with similar units of meaning. In this way, new categories pertaining to the individual stories and experiences of participants were formed. The second and key stage of the analysis involved looking across the sample as a whole. In so doing, it became possible to identify patterns of shared and contrasting interpretations amongst participants.

Findings

The findings section, which is in three parts, focuses exclusively on the pre-service experiences of participants on their journey to becoming a teacher. The interconnected factors that contributed to the growth and development of teaching aspirations amongst participants is the focus of part one. In part two, participants reflect on their experiences of ITE and the various psychosocial, emotional, financial, and structural challenges they experienced along the way, and how it prepared them for their current roles as teachers working in communities experiencing intense social and economic disadvantage. The final part considers the factors that influenced the journey of participants to becoming teachers in urban designated disadvantaged schools.

Teaching aspirations and the influence of significant adults

While each participant's journey to teaching has its own idiosyncrasies and specificities, a feature of their collective stories was the presence of at least one parent who articulated a strong desire to see their children achieve what they were inhibited from accomplishing due to limited educational opportunities and attainment.

> …my mam is very supportive. She knew that she didn't want me to have the kind of life she had, she was working at twelve. (Lauren, post-primary)

However, it is challenging to decipher the specific influence parents had on participants' teaching aspirations, as participants largely associated parental support with general educational experiences.

Many parents' attitudes toward education were influenced by the 'meritocratic myth' (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009, 1108) and identified personal characteristics such as determination and working hard as being important to academic success.

> My mam and dad were very influential with education, they were always like 'you know you can be what you want to be, but you need to go to school and you need to work hard'. (Sarah, primary)

The desire of some parents to give their children the best opportunity to succeed in education motivated them to make strategic decisions that advanced their chances of gaining social mobility, embodied in the decision of Tony's (primary) parents to move out of their local community, 'because they just felt that it was too… disadvantaged'. Similarly, John (post-primary) speaks of the influence of his parents, which manifested itself in him consciously moving away from friends who were not similarly focused on academics, and instead he cultivated friendship groups with peers from an adjacent middle class community who shared his strong aspirations to go to college.

> I knew they weren't the right people to be hanging out with… …. On a Monday night, 'do you want to go sit on a wall and drink a few bottles?' … And when I was over in [more affluent community], they were a nicer bunch of lads… Then when I went to [name of university], it was more my [name of more affluent community] mates who were coming. They were like, well we're going to college. So they kind of shaped that. I kind of felt more at home over there.

In contrast to many working class families whose expectations of social mobility through education are often low and conditioned by their often negative experiences of schooling (Lareau 2003, Lupton 2004), this future-oriented, planning-ahead approach is founded upon incompleteness and becoming, and making something of yourself, all ideas that are rooted in conceptions of liberal individualism (Ball 2003, 163; Golden and Erdreich 2014), and a consciousness associated with middle class habitus.

However, John's (post-primary) evolving personal and familial habitus generated internal conflict, ambivalence and tensions in his family, reflected in his father's initial resistance towards his ambitions to dedicate himself to his studies and forego more immediate opportunities to engage in paid employment.

> My dad… he is working class … 'Why are you ducking out of it [employment]?' Well I [John] want to go to college. He says for what? 'Sure, there's jobs out there already', but I think in time he actually saw the benefits of having a third level qualification.

According to Reay (2009), the habitus of different class groupings condition them to have very different relationships with the future and the local. John's journey to teaching embodied a confidence for the futurity which his father's working class habitus did not afford him. It also entailed moving beyond the local and into unfamiliar spaces and possibilities, with this more cosmopolitan orientation associated more strongly with middle class habitus (Moore 2004; Reay 2009).

While the emotional support of their parents was critical in sustaining many participants' journeys to teaching, the low levels of educational attainment achieved by some of their parents meant that they were not in a position to help them academically. They also did not have the financial resources to provide the private tuition and enriching cultural activities that many middle class parents invest in for their children (Lareau 2000), and which are increasingly utilised by the middle classes in order to ensure their social advantage (Lareau 2003; Reay 1998).

> My parents would've been amazing at, you know, encouraging us, but they wouldn't have had the education to help with the Junior Cert, Leaving Cert [Irish second level exams]. (Sarah, primary)

Instead, participants displayed strong self-regulation in learning, which was tested by the pressures of balancing their studies and holding down part-time jobs which provided valuable income to their families. Similar to John (post-primary), and supported by her father's future orientation, Amy (post-primary) eschewed a future of school failure and early moves into highly classed and gendered full-time jobs common in her area, and instead prioritised academic work.

> My friends were like, 'aw it's great now, I'm working in a crèche, this is what I'm going to do now'… they went on to college for a year and they were working straight away, and I was the broke student for so long but now like it's completely reversed around… I'm so glad I wasn't led by that, because there were times when I thought, I'll just do like a PLC [Post-Leaving

> Certificate] course and I'll leave it at that and I remember my dad just being like, 'don't do it, you're well able to go to college'.

Here we see the lack of fit between the field of the working class habitus where movement into (low) paid employment is both normal, necessary and encouraged, and participants' evolving habitus, which supports academic growth but also required participants to move away from groups in their area that were perceived to be less committed to learning.

The influence of 'one good teacher'

While parents played a critical role in providing emotional support to participants along their educational journey, their experiences of schooling played an ambiguous role in developing their initial motivation to become a teacher. Similar to other research into working class students' experiences in elite universities (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009), the institutional habitus of their respective schools played a relatively minor role in encouraging teaching aspirations. Rather, it was often the support and effort of one individual teacher that participants identified as being a significant influence. They attended DEIS schools and the impression most of the participants convey is that their schooling did not provide them with access to forms of dominant cultural capital sanctioned and recognised by the educational system.

> I was the only student from my school to go to university. If you decide to go to university, it was like, why do you want to go there? …. They [her classmates] went and did PLCs [Post-Leaving Certificate Courses] and which was right, but they just had no interest in going to university. (Lauren, post-primary)

However, they did reflect on the influential role some of their former teachers played in sparking their teaching ambitions. It is also significant that the teachers that were referenced as most influential were those that taught in the sector/subject(s) that participants now teach. The ability to relate to individual students on a personal level in ways that nurtured students' self-esteem and confidence was also a valued teacher characteristic.

The high value participants placed on 'caring' teachers is mirrored in previous research which found that teachers working in DEIS schools defined their professional roles and responsibilities predominantly through an ethic of care (Burns 2014, 2016). John (post-primary) connected with his former teacher on a personal level, and his teacher's open and trusting disposition meant John sought out his advice on matters that were not just confined to the academic realm. John's reference to the contrast between 'negative teachers' and those focused on relationship building, illuminates the complex way in which participants' experiences of schooling impacted on the development of their teaching aspirations. Positive experiences with teachers seemed to insulate participants from the negative impact of the more controlling approaches adopted by other teachers, which previous research has indicated is prevalent in schools with DEIS status (Burns 2016) and has been shown to contribute to early school leaving (Fagan 1995).

Many of the participants highlighted the mentoring and guidance role former teachers played in supporting their teaching aspirations. Sarah's (primary) primary school teachers helped to nourish her aspiration to pursue primary teaching as a career. More specifically, they encouraged her to focus on developing her competency in the Irish language, an academic requirement for entry to primary ITE.

> One of my teachers in fifth class, she encouraged me to go to the Gaeltacht [Irish speaking community], so I always kept the Irish up. She was always like 'you can do whatever you want' but she encouraged the Irish the most, and I never understood why but I guess I know I needed it now.

Sarah's reference to 'I guess I know I needed it [Irish] now' is an insight into the structural and cultural barriers that continue to inhibit widening participation in ITE, as she and the majority of other participants relied on school-based guidance on how to become a teacher, as their families and wider social networks, and their cumulative habitus, had limited knowledge of the academic requirements and pathways to ITE. Like the students from diverse and under-represented groups in Irish based research (Burns, Colum, and O'Neill 2023; Kelly-Blakeney and Kennedy 2023; Ryan 2023), teaching had not been presented as a possible option by career guidance teachers to some participants. The family or community role models, like the teachers referenced here, played a critical role in 'demystifying' the process of going to college by providing 'insider' information about how best to navigate the pathway to higher education (O'Sullivan et al. 2019).

Some participants cited negative experiences of former teachers which inspired rather than suppressed their motivation to enter the profession. Reflective of the generative quality of their habitus, and as a marker of resistance to what they interpreted as class bias, the strong desire to prove former teachers wrong and exceed the contemptibly low expectations some former teachers had for them is evident in Orla's (post-primary) following contribution:

> My physics teacher was brutal … telling me all the time that I was bad at it. You know, trying to encourage me to do ordinary level … I was determined to prove her wrong.

In line with Tony's (primary) negative experience with Irish in primary school, Amy (post-primary) recalls her Leaving Certificate (final exam of the Irish secondary school system) Irish language teacher saying that the whole class was 'probably going to fail it, the way you are going on'. These stories are consistent with a body of research which highlights the tendency of teachers, the majority of whom are from middle class backgrounds, to have lower expectations and deficit perspectives of students from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds (Boaler 2000; Glock and Krolak-Schwerdt 2013; Hoadley and Ensor 2009; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Lyons et al. 2003), and the role normative, institutional habitus, which is embedded within and supportive of middle class values and practices, continues to play in educational experiences and outcomes.

Initial teacher education: moderating its failures and moving between two worlds

Participants' motivation to become a teacher was very durable and tenacious, and their progression through ITE was governed by expediency and 'the logic of necessity' (Bourdieu 1990c) embodied in their need to work in order to support their educational journey. Within the context of packed ITE programmes that make exacting demands on students' time, this posed an obvious threat to their academic ambitions. The psychosocial strains and academic costs of juggling ITE, family and work were highlighted in Tony's (primary) story of becoming more financially secure when his dad received a redundancy payment. Sarah (primary) identified personal qualities such as 'stubbornness' and 'determination', as well as the unconditional support of her family, as critical

to her remaining committed to her goal of becoming a teacher when facing adversity in the form of failed exams. According to Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009, 1107), these qualities 'are far more associated with working rather than middle classness but in working-class contexts are taken for granted and often read as stoicism, "making the best of a bad situation"'.

These qualities became valuable resources for the participants in the middle class dominated university settings they moved into and helped them cope with the various psychosocial discomforts and discontinuities they experienced there. The majority of participants, to varying degrees, experienced a sense of not belonging, and spoke emotively about instances when their local communities and markers of their class habitus (speech, accent) were negatively commented upon.

> When I went to do my HDip [post-primary ITE programme], people didn't speak to me …. they were afraid; they didn't want anyone that wasn't from their area, going in…. They probably looked at me and heard my accent and said no, not for us (John, post-primary).

Mirroring experiences in schooling, these instances only made participants more determined to achieve their teaching dreams, so they could challenge such negative stereotypes as teachers.

As discussed in Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010 p. 116), previous research has argued that working class students often have to break from class practices and distance themselves from their families and communities in order to achieve academic success (Desmarchelier 1999; Kaufman 2003; McDonald 1999). The participants in this study challenged this view, and a defining feature of their stories was their ability to successfully move across and between two different worlds, combining strong connections and loyalties to their local communities with a parallel capacity to occupy an emerging identity as a teacher in a profession that has traditionally positioned the working classes as 'other'.

> I would always say to my kids [whom she teaches], I'd be very proud of where I come from… I hate seeing things on the news about [local community]…. I've dealt with that crap my whole life, like going into college, into university with these people from Leitrim [rural Irish county] who'll ask you was anybody stopped [by the police] over the weekend … Like, ridiculous. And so for me, like it would never be something that I'd hide. Orla (post-primary)

John's commitment to 'keeping his own friends' and not becoming 'snooty' when he went to college, is an important marker of his loyalty to his working class habitus. However, for some, this loyalty to their childhood friends created some challenges for them and often left them isolated on the margins of university life, as evidenced in Amy's (post-primary) story of social isolation during her undergraduate degree.

As participants were giving a retrospective account of their experiences of ITE as experienced, qualified teachers, their opinions on the quality of their ITE programmes were often communicated through the lens of their temporal stories of 'being a teacher'. Considering their deep commitment to working in their local communities (see next section), it is not surprising that participants focused strongly on ITE and its efficacy in terms of preparing students teachers to work in DEIS schools. In line with a number of other Irish studies (Inspectorate of DES 2005; Tormey, Ryan, and Dooley 2003), the majority of participants were critical of the preparation they received during ITE to teach in a DEIS school, and to deal with the range of social challenges faced by their students. Indicative of their

class habitus, their personal, lived experiences of communities experiencing intense socio-cultural inequality moderated the failures of ITE in this regard.

> It didn't really prepare you for the responsibilities that you have as a class teacher where you are in charge of every child in your care, problems that happen between students, stuff that happens outside of school, the problems that families face in areas like this.
>
> I've family members myself, like cousins who were homeless with young children. I have cousins who have gone down that drug addiction route … I've family with alcohol issues and stuff like that, not in my immediate family but in my wider family …. I can see the impact it can have on studies, so I am very empathetic to that and it helps a lot in working through that. (Tony, primary)

Consistent with Irish research (Burns 2014; Tormey, Ryan, and Dooley 2003), many of the participants felt that ITE programmes focused too much on theory and created few opportunities for students to reflect upon the systemic structures in place to address educational inequality. Owing to the accelerated nature of the learning which they felt occurred during school placement, a number of participants advocated strongly that ITE should be inclusive of compulsory modules and placement(s) that are focused exclusively on teaching in DEIS schools, something that has been recommended in Irish research and policy discourses over the past two decades (EDC 2004; Burns 2018; Teaching Council of Ireland 2013).

> In an ideal world, when you get your Dip [post primary teaching qualification], you try and find the best [middle class] school to go to…You are more likely going to end up in a school that isn't like that, and you have done all your teaching placements there and then you're thrown into somewhere like here and it's like a rabbit in headlights. (Amy, post-primary)

Some participants felt that ITE left them ill prepared to deal with the challenging behaviours that are more prevalent in DEIS schools (Banks, Shevlin, and McCoy 2012) and is evident in Lauren's (post-primary) call for ITE providers 'to run more workshops for practical stuff, as in behaviour management'.

Consistent with previous Irish based research on early career teachers (ECTs), Sarah (primary) and Lauren (post-primary) expressed concerns about being ill prepared to engage with parents (Killeavy and Murphy 2006). Sarah felt that ITE 'did prepare me for the actual classroom stuff. I don't think it prepares you for outside of the classroom' and elaborated by stating 'you get a little bit on how to deal with parents', largely through scenario-based learning, which she felt has limited impact. Again, the generative quality of their habitus provided them with the confidence and capacity to engage with 'risky', democratic and reciprocal relationships with (working class) parents (see Burns and O'Sullivan 2023 for more on participants' attitudes towards, and engagement with, parents). However, they also felt that their enhanced capacity to connect with students meant that they, as a cohort, had few personal concerns about classroom management. Amy (post-primary) considers the high value she places in the relational is an antidote to the more controlling and hierarchical approaches adopted by student teachers she has supported.

Wanting to 'give something back'

All six participants attended DEIS schools, and they spoke of the pride they had in their local schools and communities and the latent desire to return to work there upon qualification.

> So, I'm originally from [local community], …. I felt a big connection with this school and that was one of the reasons why I applied for the job. (Tony, primary)

Participants expressed a strong sense of wanting to 'give something back' to their local schools, which in some cases was constructed in highly classed ways. This is reflected in John's (post-primary) account of the source of his motivation to teach in his local community, and while it never mentions class, it is infused with class symbolism and illustrative of the different aspects of identity which exists within class (Reay 2009).

> There's one or two kind of areas in the place…new houses, newer areas that grew up. There were a few people who …. didn't appreciate the area, the community that was already there. So it kind of went a bit rogue for a while. But it's settled down now…. but yeah, that was one of the main reasons of going back to [local community]. I thought, let's try and help out these kids … I was always into like, well what's going on in the community and what can help. (John, post-primary)

John's motivation to teach in his local community is oriented around a desire to help it return to its roots and community values. In contrast, his criticism of some of those in the 'new' houses whom he views as responsible for the area going 'a bit rogue' is an articulation of his 'old' working class habitus and his dislike towards behaviours that are not part of his 'sense of one's place' (Bourdieu 1984, 466).

Sarah (primary) was drawn to working in the primary school she attended, and she describes the critical role her school principal and wider school community played in supporting her teaching aspirations. There is a seamlessness in her transition into a teaching role in her local school, which is indicative of an acquiescence to the leanings of her socio-cultural habitus that has been shaped by her longitudinal involvement in the life of the school community as a special needs assistant and student teacher and 'which is entirely her' (Bourdieu 1984, 223). This is something that is also echoed by Amy (post-primary) in her move away from the middle class schools she worked in during the early stages of her career and in which she felt 'out of place' and 'back' to a DEIS school, where she felt an ethic of care was strongly valued and enacted. Crucially, this ethic of care was strongly aligned with her own pedagogical vision. However, there was an embodied as well as cerebral dimension to this mismatch, evident in her account of some students 'slagging' her working-class accent.

> I remember getting up in front of the kids and …. I said 'motorway'. And the way I said it, I saw one of them going like, [whispered] 'motorway', like mimicking what I said. And I was like, 'either you ignore it or own it' like, and I was like, 'you slagging the way I talk?' And I kind of felt- I was like oh god I'm very out of place here.

Tony (primary) was similarly motived by altruistic motives, and his decision to return to teach in his local community also contained a gendered dimension, and was oriented around the positive influence he felt he could have on boys in his area.

> I think boys, from my own experience, boys will behave better and try harder for boy teachers… They [boys] love talking about things like [football], I've similar interests so….you'd be talking about matches and stuff like that and they just love that.

In some instances, participants' habitus provided them with capital that was valued by their schools. Similar to Sarah's experience, Orla's (post-primary) previous experience of working in schools with DEIS status, and her perceived 'ability to cope with it' was a significant factor in her gaining a permanent position in her current school. However, other

participants (Amy and Orla) did face challenges securing permanent employment, something they attribute to the onset of a recession rather than any challenges related to their classed identity and habitus.

Consistent with the stories told by the ECTs in Burns (2014, 2018), these contributions clearly indicate the positive effect participants' class habitus had on their motivation to teach in DEIS schools. Significantly, these findings contrast sharply with those of an Irish study that highlighted that many pre-service teachers, the majority of whom are white, rural, middle class and Catholic, prefer to teach in schools where children are from backgrounds similar to themselves (Leavy 2005).

Discussion and conclusion

Just as habitus provides a navigational path through the comfortable journey that the middle classes make with market ideology (Ball 2003), it also illuminates the intensity of this group of teachers' commitment to realising their teaching ambitions. Supported by familial habitus that was oriented around a collective desire to achieve upward social mobility, the participants' stories reflect those of earlier studies (Burn 2001; Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2018; Maguire 1999, 2001, 2005a, 2005b) in terms of their inner resolve to 'battle' their way through schooling and ITE and into the teaching profession. In line with the experiences of the working class students in an elite university (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009), and linked to Bourdieu's (1990c) argument around the capacity of habitus to be transformed when an individual encounters an unfamiliar field, participants won this metaphorical 'battle' largely through their capacity to change and yet, stay the same. The capacity of habitus to 'change' is reflected in the way they incorporated a propensity for self-awareness and self-direction into their habitus which allowed them to mitigate against the 'disadvantage' of having limited access to forms of dominant cultural capital sanctioned and recognised by the educational system (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Consistent with a wealth of research that speaks to the strength of altruistic and social-justice oriented motivation amongst (student) teachers from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Burns 2018; Burns and O'Sullivan 2023, Heinz, Keane, and Foley 2017; Keane 2017), the strong desire to 'stay the same' is clearly articulated through participants' enduring and morally infused desire to 'make a difference' in social justice terms and embodied in their expressed commitment to 'give something back' to their local communities. The 'versatility' of their habitus (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009) allowed them to successfully move across and between two different worlds, combining strong loyalties to their family and local communities in university with a parallel capacity to occupy an emerging teacher identity in a profession that has traditionally positioned the working classes as 'other', if they have been seen at all.

However, these adaptions of the habitus did not insulate participants entirely from the various psychosocial discomforts and discontinuities often experienced by working class students when their habitus confronts the starkly unfamiliar fields of ITE (Burn 2001; Keane 2023; Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2023b; Maguire 1999, 2005a, 2005b). In particular, and in line with research that indicates that class has an impact on the extent to which students feel like they 'fit in' (Aries and Seider 2005, 2007; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010; Thomas and Quinn 2007), the majority of participants, to varying degrees, experienced a sense of not

belonging. These feelings were exacerbated by exposure to various forms and incidences of 'othering' through commentary on various markers of their (embodied) class habitus. In line with a significant body of research (Boaler 2000; Hoadley and Ensor 2009; Keane, Heinz, and Lynch 2018; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Lyons et al. 2003), some participants' lived experiences of their schooling was also problematic and blighted by the deeply damaging impact of low academic expectations articulated by some teachers around what was 'realistic' for students from working class backgrounds to achieve. The resilience and marked resistance to these culturally deterministic narratives which was a defining characteristic of their habitus, should not mask the damaging psychosocial and emotional impact of discontinuities experienced in school and ITE as a result of being considered the socio-cultural 'other'.

Cumulatively, the problematic aspects of participants' experiences of schooling and ITE raise questions about teacher education and its current commitment and capacity to develop social and political criticality amongst student teachers and teachers. The growing nationalism and increasing polarisation of, and within, society, strengthens the need for the continuum of teacher education to support teachers to identify and address processes that lead to discrimination and racism. The socio-cultural homogeneity of those entering ITE (Donlevy, Meierkord, and Rajania 2016; Heinz and Keane 2018; Schleicher 2014), and the limited cross-cultural knowledge and experience student teachers bring with them on entry to ITE (Leavy 2005; Valli 1995; Wiggins and Follo 1999; Zimpher 1989), accentuates the need to create critically infused spaces in ITE. While concerted efforts to incorporate equality and social justice principles have been a consistent feature of policy (Mills and Ballantyne 2016, 263), the findings of this study and others (EC 2017; Inspectorate of DES 2005; Tormey, Ryan, and Dooley 2003) indicate that working with diverse student populations is one of the areas where teachers feel the least prepared. Cumulatively, these findings point to the need for ITE programmes to move away from the peripheralization of social justice issues in the form of a single module or elective (EC 2017) and move towards a more integrated response that feeds into the broader, core curricula.

In conclusion, the stories of the teacher participants are ones of resilience and resistance, as they navigated their way through a hegemonic schooling and ITE system biased towards 'legitimate' and valued forms of middle class social and cultural capital. They are also stories of agency and aspiration, expressed through participants' strong desire to 'give something back' and return to teach in their local communities. However, their success, which was largely a product of their own intrinsic motivation and fortitude, should not mask the obvious structural and cultural barriers that continue to inhibit widening participation in ITE. The policy and research discourse has largely focused on ways of attracting and supporting a diverse student teacher population and the positive impact that teachers from under-represented groups have on the profession. The findings of this study suggest that such an exclusive focus forecloses the necessary systemic and cultural change required to ensure not only a more representative teaching profession, but one that is also inclusive, critically conscious, and culturally responsive.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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