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Mature Student Experiences in
Teacher Education:
Widening Participation in Greece and England

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Abstract

In the context of a growing number of mature students entering higher education in Europe, this study breaks new ground in comparing the personal and professional identities of mature student teachers in Greece and England. Using an analytical model of student success by Zepke and Leach (2008), the research sought to identify the factors affecting the progress and development of 30 mature student teachers (15 in each country). It was found that individual motivation and prior experience were assets in the development of the beginning teachers, while peer and family support were vital success factors. In the English context, institutional support by university and school-based tutors was also strong. Barriers included financial difficulties and domestic responsibilities, which impacted in particular on mature women students. Some recommendations to improve institutional support for mature student teachers are made in conclusion.

Key words:

Mature student; higher education; teacher education; student teacher; trainee teacher.

Introduction

The focus of this enquiry is to investigate the personal and professional identities of mature student teachers returning to higher education in England and Greece, to highlight their learning needs and identify key factors affecting their progress in both academic and social spheres. Studies of mature students have explored the impact of returning to study on students' lives, self-confidence and identity, the negotiation of risk and change, and the inter-relationship of age, gender and academic context, but few studies have focused on the comparative experiences of mature student teachers in European countries (Griffiths et al., 2008) and no comparative research in this area between England and Greece

has been carried out before; indeed, there is little previous research on teacher education in Greece (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011). This study therefore is important in breaking new ground and findings will be useful in deepening our understanding of the influences on mature student teachers' personal and professional identities. Throughout the study we will highlight similarities and differences between the two different country contexts.

For the purpose of this study, we will use the term mature student to refer to anyone aged 22 or above, as this is likely to be the minimum age of graduation in both countries (Kaldi, 2009); in fact, the minimum age in our sample was 26. We will start by setting the wider context of mature students in higher education, before turning to teacher education and the specific contexts in Greece and England in which the research was carried out.

Widening participation in higher education in Greece and England

There has been a rapid expansion of higher education in Europe over the last 15 years. This has been encouraged by government policies in individual countries (e.g. DfES, 2003), as well as by European policy directives, such as the Bologna process (EC, 2010). In Greece, numbers entering higher education have more than doubled since the 1990s (Psacharopoulos and Tassoulas, 2004), with particular increases in technological higher education institutes; numbers of higher education entrants rose from 43,000 in 1994 to 87,000 in 2008-9 (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011). In the UK, total enrolment in higher education has increased from 1,856,330 in 1999-2000 to 2,396,050 in 2008-9 (Ramsden, 2010). This represents a 28 per cent increase for undergraduates since 2000 (Ramsden, 2010), and a 39 per cent increase for part-time courses, with increasing diversity in the student body. This includes a dramatic rise in the number of mature students, representing 54 per cent of all undergraduates (22% FT, 92% PT) by 2009-10 (HESA, 2011). Thus it can be seen that, while total numbers of higher education entrants are far lower in Greece than in the UK, the percentage increase over the last ten years is far greater.

However, these trends have not been universal across Europe; for example, while the numbers entering higher education have almost doubled in Albania and Romania, they have decreased in Spain (EC, 2010:

15). A recent levelling out of numbers has been reported (ibid.), as well as negative consequences to widening participation such as increased stratification between universities and continuing inequities for mature students (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011; Jamieson et al., 2009; Brown, 2007). Moreover, the recent, severe economic recession across a number of European countries poses a further threat to the expansion of higher education, especially among under-represented groups.

Mature students in higher and teacher education

Returning to higher education as a mature student has therefore become a major issue in higher education institutions. Recent studies (e.g. Hoare and Johnston, 2011; Burton et al., 2011) have shown that mature students may face particular barriers in entering and completing higher education courses: for example, educational disadvantage, such as type of school attended and academic attainment; and family circumstances, including socio-economic background as well as current family responsibilities. Major related factors affecting mature students have been identified (e.g. in the UK by Reay et al., 2005; Quinn, 2004; and in Greece by Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011), including social class, gender and ethnicity as well as age, interacting to result in multiple disadvantage. Particular emphasis has been paid to mature women's access, progression and experiences in higher education due to boundaries they face in private and public life and personal constraints, such as domestic responsibilities (Merrill, 1999; Winn, 2002). The combination of such factors for mature women students, in particular, can give rise to loss of confidence and feelings of exclusion, and the impact on their personal life can be considerable, in both positive and negative ways (Reay, 2003).

Research (e.g. Davies et al., 2002) has also identified particular characteristics of mature students in higher education, and found that they have different needs and expectations compared to younger students. The importance of raising aspirations in widening participation to previously under-represented groups is emphasised in a study of Australian higher education (Sellar et al., 2011). Supporting mature students in their decision to re-enter education is regarded as an influential factor in retention and course completion (Heenan, 2002; Yorke and Longden, 2004). Factors influencing academic self-concept, self-esteem and academic stress are also highlighted (Murphy and Roopchard, 2003; Thomas and Quinn,

2007). Mature students' educational commitment and persistence in a university-college environment in Canada were investigated by MacFadgen (2008), who found that the most influential contributors to these were a) goal orientation, b) perceived relevance of studies, c) student-faculty relationships and d) financial concerns.

MacFadgen's (2008) study demonstrates that retention of mature students in higher education depends importantly on institutional as well as personal factors and the interaction between these. Other studies have also shown that mature students face a range of institutional constraints, including differential patterns of access (Reay et al., 2005), institutional culture and course factors (McGivney, 2006), financial difficulties (Gorard et al., 2007) and differential patterns of employment (Jamieson et al., 2009). Margison (2011) makes a useful distinction between fairness (e.g. fair access) and inclusion (e.g. inclusive institutional practices). Funding and monetary issues are considered to be the most substantial barriers to post-secondary education in Murray et al.'s study (2010).

However, many of the studies previously cited include examples of mature student success in higher education, despite disadvantaged backgrounds and problems faced. Hoare and Johnston's (2011) study indicates that mature entrants, among other high achieving students from state schools, can succeed in an elite university context, although it is unclear how the institution supported such students beyond entry. Contrastingly, recognised barriers to learning for mature adult learners on higher education courses in a further education context were recently examined by Burton et al. (2011), who reported that the traditional barriers of accessibility of the institution, finance and family commitments did not seem to be a major issue for these students; while positive initial contact and ongoing support mechanisms were considered as the most influential factors in mature students' retention. From the above, it is evident that research findings show a complex and sometimes contradictory picture regarding mature students' constraints or retention on higher education courses; reported results come mainly from English speaking countries and the institutional factors affecting successful outcomes need further attention.

Turning to teacher education, studies of mature student teachers have focused attention upon a variety of areas such as reasons for entering teaching (e.g. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003). As with studies of mature students more generally, previous research has tended to focus on women's experiences, arguing that women face particular difficulties owing to their role and position in the family and society and the need for coping strategies across private and public spheres (Griffiths, 2002; Maguire, 2005). However, these studies also note the positive qualities which mature women bring to teaching, including good organisation and personal skills, and stress the benefits to women undertaking teacher education, including growth in confidence and other changes in identity. These skills and qualities are also evident in a study of older teachers by Wilkins et al. (2004), in which many of the case study teachers entered teaching in middle age. Although their mature entry and teacher education experiences are not focussed on explicitly in their study, it is clear from the accounts that these teachers entered the profession with a wide range of prior experience, skills and personal qualities which may have helped them to remain in the profession, despite many challenges faced over the years.

Only a few studies report findings about the experiences of both men and women mature student teachers (e.g. Quintrell and Maguire, 2000). Therefore, this study aims to fill a further gap by providing insights into the experiences of both male and female mature student teachers in the Greek and English contexts. In order to understand the nature of mature student teachers in both countries, some further contextual information is needed, and it is to this that we now turn.

Mature students in teacher education in Greece and England

In teacher education, teacher recruitment and retention issues in both Greece and England in the last ten years have led to some new policy initiatives involving widening participation of entrants to initial teacher education programmes. For example, shortages of primary school teachers in Greece have led to an increase in the numbers of students who apply to enter university primary education departments (Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011; Kaldi, 2009), a limited number of whom are already graduates; most student teachers in Greece come via the route of the national examination at the age of 18. Only 11% of the total student numbers in each university department of teacher education (UDTE) - BA in Pre-

school Education and BA in Primary Education - can enter via selection processes locally in each UDTE where candidates have already obtained a first degree. Also, 3% of the total student numbers are students with special needs who have completed post-compulsory education (senior secondary school) and enter the UDTE with the grade in their post-compulsory education certificate. Mature student teachers on Greek university courses are mainly graduates from other university or polytechnic departments (vocational courses in tertiary education institutions). Therefore they have experienced higher education and have developed the necessary skills to obtain a degree. Selection processes include either candidates' degree class or written exams in three main subjects of the syllabus, which are specified independently in each pre-school or primary education department at nine Greek universities.

It is important to note that there is not an official policy in Greece for mature students entering or re-entering higher education, to select part-time or full-time studies. They all have to follow the full-time route during their studies independent of their working status. Regarding funding during undergraduate studies, it is must be emphasised that students in Greece are usually financially dependent on their families and it is rare to find cases of full-time or part-time working students; for example, in Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides' study (2011), none of the primary education students had paid work during studies; although we shall see that this was more frequent in our own sample. Family funding and support are high concerning compulsory and tertiary education, due to the high image and popularity of higher education in the contemporary Greek society (see Stamoulas, 2006; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011). As the teaching profession, especially the primary sector, has been very popular during the last decade for employment reasons - a shortage of primary school teachers has resulted in employing all graduates who train to teach - many higher education graduates from various scientific areas with low recruitment numbers have decided to change career path and become pre-school or primary school teachers. Therefore, the numbers of graduates who apply to sit the selection exams is rather large and the competition very high (see also Griffiths et al., 2008).

In England, university departments of education offer three or four-year BAs in Education with qualified teacher status (usually primary) programmes, which normally attract students straight after completing

secondary education at aged 18. The same national application process is used by candidates as that for other degree courses. Universities select entrants by scrutinising end of school exam results (Advanced level or equivalent), as well as relevant experience working with children and young people. In addition, one year postgraduate certificate courses (PGCE) for primary or secondary teaching are available to those who are already graduates in a relevant subject, and these are increasingly attracting older entrants of at least 22 years and above. Entry is by degree result, as well as relevant experience, and all candidates have to be interviewed by university as well as school representatives. The numbers for each subject or phase are strictly regulated by government targets, set by a complex mix of inspection results, demographic needs and other factors. Currently, numbers in arts subjects at secondary level are being reduced nationally, while overall primary teacher education numbers are not currently affected (DfE, 2010).

In addition, the introduction of new routes into teaching has targeted mature entrants to the profession in order to increase recruitment. All entrants to these and traditional postgraduate routes (PGCE) have to hold a first degree and prior experience in teaching or other careers, thus bringing a range of considerable skills into teaching (Griffiths, 2007). The recent proliferation of employment-based routes, such as the Graduate Teacher Programme, has targeted adult learners in order to increase recruitment to teaching in shortage subjects such as mathematics and science (Griffiths, 2007 and 2011). Entrants can either complete a four-year course, including a three-year first degree programme, or alternatively follow a one-year programme for which they have to hold a first degree or equivalent already. Although such programmes are not usually seen as access routes, they do at least partly fulfil that role, because many of the adult entrants have gone straight from secondary education into paid employment and only later return to study for a first degree, or they have completed access programmes to enter higher education. Other mature entrants to employment-based courses hold degrees completed some years previously, having pursued a range of careers prior to training as a teacher. A further addition to alternative routes into teaching is the Teach First programme, which attracts high achieving recent graduates (usually over 22) who train to teach in schools in challenging circumstances, usually in areas of high economic deprivation, following an intensive university-based course. In England, the coalition government is

currently expanding such alternative routes into teaching; at the same time, there is a reduction in numbers entering traditional routes (DfE, 2010). Overall, this shift has increased the numbers of older entrants to teacher education, and unlike Greece, there is no restriction on mature student numbers. However, there are few part-time teacher education courses, and financial support for trainee teachers is severely limited; both these factors impact on the choices and experience of older student teachers.

In terms of teacher education courses, although there is some inevitable difference in course content because of national curricula, there is remarkable similarity in the structure and delivery of higher education-led teacher education between England and Greece. In both countries, theoretical inputs at the university are combined with substantial periods of teaching practice in schools, during which university tutors visit student teachers to observe their teaching. University-based assignments are assessed as well as school practicum. As we shall see, the role of the school-based mentor is less well developed in Greece, although schools do have a role in assessing students in both countries. This similarity in structure and delivery makes it valid to compare the two contexts.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical background of the study is drawn from models of transitions through the life course, based on adults entering or returning to higher education via teacher education programmes. Life-course research presents agency as 'the ways in which people construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take, within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance' (Ecclestone, 2007:10). Within this framework, transitions as shifts in identity and agency through the navigation of institutional pathways, or a process of 'becoming' in response to wider structural changes (ibid.), are particularly relevant to this study. We aim to move away from deficit models of mature student participation, in consideration of more fluid models of transition as the construction of multiple identities; these are particularly pertinent to a consideration of mature students navigating the dual pathways of becoming students in higher education and teachers, and developing a sense of 'belonging'. Issues around persistence (Yorke, 2004) and resilience (Hoult, 2009) will also be considered. Concerns about managing transitions are a priority in European policy (EC, 2010).

We have adapted Zepke and Leach's (2008) model of student success in post-school education in New Zealand (see Fig. 1), to apply to the students in our study. Zepke and Leach's study drew on the experiences of 'second chance' students, that is, those who left school early or did not continue after school into further study, but returned to further or higher education at a later stage, usually into some kind of vocational rather than purely academic courses. These students were therefore usually older than those who continued straight from school into further study, and could range from 20 year-olds to more mature entrants. Success factors included a range of *institutional influences*, such as support by tutors, *non-institutional influences*, such as support by family and friends (see also Zepke et al., 2011), *individual factors*, such as personal motivation and confidence (see also Zepke et al., 2010), and *collaborative factors*, such as peer networks. A combination of these factors operated in those cases where returning students stayed in further study and completed courses successfully. Where only a few factors were evident, or were concentrated in one aspect, such as individual motivation or peer support, the student was more likely to discontinue their studies. Even a small amount of institutional support was significant in student retention. We have found this conceptual model helpful and relevant when considering the experiences of mature entrants entering teacher education.
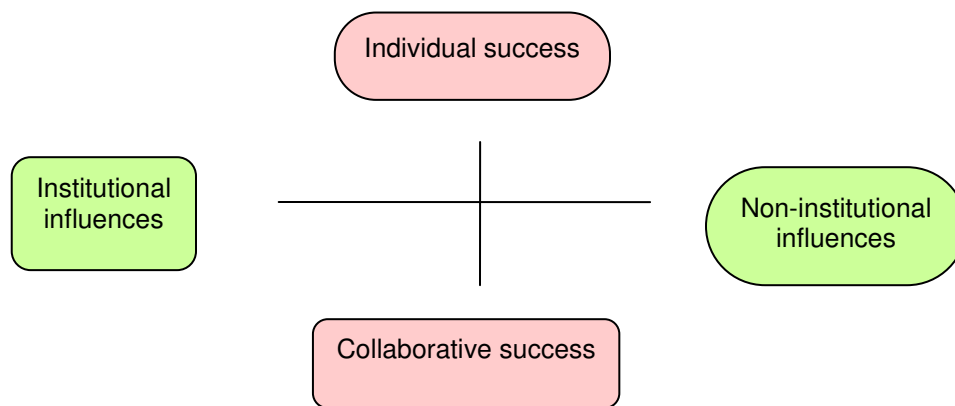

Fig. 1 Conceptual map of student success in post-school education (Zepke & Leach, 2008)

Methdological approach

Based on the above, the key questions of the study are as follows:

- What prior experience do mature entrants bring to their teacher education courses in Greece and England?

- What motivates these mature students to become primary school teachers?

- What family and/or peer support do they have during their studies?

- What institutional support do they receive in order to meet course requirements?

- How do they cope with the course demands?

- What are the implications of mature student enrolment for university teacher education departments?

Within a qualitative, interpretive framework, a life history approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) was used to explore the experiences of 30 mature student teachers (22f, 8m) during their studies to become primary teachers. This approach was particularly suitable for investigating individual experience and highlighting new insights into transition processes. The research methods used were informal discussions and in-depth, biographical interviews with the trainee teachers. (The term student teachers was used in Greece and trainee teachers was used in England, so we will use these two terms interchangeably).

A sample of 15 students in each country context was selected (11f, 4m in each), representing a range of gender, age, class, educational background and previous work experience. The age range of the mature students was between 26-42 and the average age was 32. Involvement in the study was voluntary. Once mature trainee teachers agreed to participate in the research process, anonymity was guaranteed. Informal discussions with the student teachers occurred in various circumstances such as talking at breaks and lunchtimes on the university campus and, in Greece, co-travelling as most of them commuted a long way to attend university. The interviews normally took place in the researchers' offices and lasted half an hour to an hour. In England, some interviews took place over the telephone owing to the trainee teachers' extensive school experience.

Some information was also obtained from school mentors who worked with the trainees and were able to comment on their progress in teaching, as well as from documentary evidence from the teacher education courses. This provided some triangulation of data with the student teachers' accounts. Thematic analysis

was used to examine the trainees' own accounts of their experiences, including relationships and types of support, major problems and conflicts, the day to day management of change and longer term personal, professional and academic development. The findings are analysed according to the key questions mentioned above and the themes which emerged from the data.

Findings

In both national contexts, mature students demonstrated high motivation to study and become primary teachers. Most mature student teachers had considerable prior experience, especially in the field of education, teaching or a related area. They developed a range of learning and coping strategies to help them in their studies and most were successful. However, work-life balance was difficult to maintain, with study commitments competing with family responsibilities. In the Greek context (mainly), paid work was an additional commitment: those who had outside employment had additional demands, especially in cases where the nature of the job was different from their area of study. In both countries, peer and family support were substantial and contributed to the students' self confidence as well as helping in practical ways, such as childcare. Family support was particularly strong in the Greek context, where traditional gender roles were more evident. Institutional support was not as marked in Greece, although it was strong in England, especially from school mentors.

Motivation to enter primary school teaching

There was high motivation to enter teacher education in both countries. This was most marked in relation to *individual factors* and *non-institutional influences* of success in Zepke and Leach's model (2008; see Fig. 1).

The mature students decided to become teachers based on a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. In both countries, the need for a reasonably secure career was an important extrinsic motivation; in Greece, this was strengthened further by the high employment rate of primary school teachers. In some cases, Greek students were attracted on to the teacher education course by the promise of secure employment, which Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides call 'unemployment aversion' (2011: 98), but became involved

and motivated by the nature of the work once they started the course. Some of the English trainees were attracted to teaching by the school holidays, which would enable them to spend more time with their families than other jobs: 'more hands on time with the kids,' as one put it. Intrinsic motives in both national contexts included personal interest in primary school teaching and the desire to undertake further professional and academic development. For example, Kelly, one of the Greek students said: 'I always imagined myself surrounded by young children... Also, I feel I want to develop professionally.' Several of the English trainee teachers had made a planned progression into teaching from a childcare or teaching assistant route (see Griffiths, 2007), so their motivation had been strong for several years.

Overall, most of the mature student teachers decided to enter teaching for a mixture of pragmatic and personal reasons, summed up by Alison, one of the English trainees: 'I needed to work and I wanted to teach.' Motivation was particularly strong among those English trainee teachers who had studied and worked for several years in order to achieve their goal. In contrast, some of the Greek mature students entered training for extrinsic reasons and became more involved in teaching during the course.

Prior experience

The previous educational and work experiences of most of the student teachers in both national contexts were in most cases closely linked to their chosen career and course of further study. Thus, in relation to Zepke and Leach's model (2008; see Fig. 1), *individual factors* and *institutional influences* were particularly strong and largely positive in both contexts. Prior experience and motivation to teach were also closely connected, especially in the English context where several of the mature trainees had made a planned progression into teaching. *Non-institutional influences*, such as financial needs, proved problematic in both England and Greece, but were responded to in different ways in each country.

All but one of the mature student teachers were graduates with a first degree (BA or BSc) from a university or (in Greece) a polytechnic course. Eight of the Greek student teachers had completed polytechnic courses on pre-school education and child care, whilst the others had completed degrees in subjects unrelated to teaching. One of the Greek students had entered higher education as a second

13

chance student at 38, having studied part-time at evening classes for several years before starting teacher training. In England, five of the mature entrants had completed a first degree immediately prior to entering teacher education, through access routes or distance learning degrees. Most of these had focused on education-related topics, such as early childhood studies or developmental psychology, as a preparation for their chosen profession. The others had completed first degrees in a range of subjects some years earlier, mostly in subjects unrelated to teaching.

The professional background of most of the sample in both countries was directly or indirectly linked to some form of teaching or work with children; these included social care or health work, teaching languages overseas, paid or unpaid work in youth and community groups, playgroups and nursery settings and, in the English context only, teaching assistant roles or parent helper in schools. For example, Lucy (from England), who had been a classroom assistant for several years, told us, 'I had a lot of experience, even managing behaviour in the classroom.' Because of this, she felt well prepared when she started the teacher education programme. In contrast, one of the Greek sample (male) had been in the army for ten years, while two of the English trainee teachers (also male) had worked in industry; they felt less well prepared at the start of their teacher preparation courses. There were therefore some gender differences in the prior work experience of the students in both national contexts, with implications for the relative success of these beginning teachers in their studies.

For most, prior experience from work place or previous undergraduate studies had a positive impact on the mature students' performance in essays and school teaching practice. More specifically, in the Greek context, mature student teachers claimed that the experiences they brought with them assisted in their performance during the school teaching practice (STP) component of the course. As the majority of them were previously educated to degree level and/or had had prior teaching experience, therefore the theory taught in the teacher education course could be put into practice without too much difficulty. In both countries, many of the mature trainee teachers felt confident in dealing with aspects of teaching such as planning, communicating knowledge to primary school children, classroom discipline and teacher behaviour to young children. For example, Sofocles, a BSc graduate and permanent secondary teacher,

said, 'I am used to more difficult and 'dangerous' circumstances in the secondary school'. Similarly Andrew, in the English context, who had prior experience teaching English overseas, commented, 'It was good preparation – [teaching] doesn't phase me. It prepared me for kids having strops [being difficult]!'

However, prior employment also had negative financial implications for the study sample. Financial hardship has previously been found to be a major problem for mature students (Gorard et al., 2007; Reay et al., 2005) and mature beginning teachers (Maguire, 2005; Griffiths, 2002), and this was confirmed in our study. Financial commitments were an issue for students in both countries because they often had houses or apartments to maintain and, for those with families, dependents to support as well. In England, the mature trainee teachers had to give up previous employment in order to start the teacher education programme, although two retained some part-time work unofficially. In spite of receiving a small bursary while they trained, in some cases this led to severe financial hardship, especially for the male trainees and (female) single parents. In contrast, in Greece, only five of the mature students (four females and a male) stopped working in order to follow the course, while the others kept some kind of paid employment (six part-time and four full-time), unlike the majority of younger student teachers. This sometimes led to conflict with their preparation as teachers, because their paid work clashed with their university lectures or school-based practice, and they had less time to study or complete course assignments. It therefore put a greater strain on them in terms of organisation of time and course commitments, as well as the emotional pressures of juggling different activities. For some, this was on top of family responsibilities as well; in effect, they were balancing three different roles. This finding contrasts with that of Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides (2011), who found that no primary education students undertook paid work during their course.

Learning strategies

The mature students used a range of learning strategies to succeed in their university studies and practical components of teacher preparation, and a number of factors affected them in both positive and negative ways. In terms of Zepke and Leach's model (2008; Fig.1), *collaborative factors* such as peer

15

learning were particularly beneficial in both contexts, as were *individual influences* from previous study and work experience; while *non-institutional influences* such as family circumstances proved difficult to balance with studies. In addition*, institutional influences*, such as learning from tutors and other teachers in schools, especially in the English context, provided an additional positive influence on learning and success; although institutional requirements were demanding in terms of time, and school experience could be challenging.

The university curriculum studies and academic assignments did not seem to be particularly difficult for most of the mature student teachers, because all but one had completed a degree course before, although they were unfamiliar with specific cognitive areas (such as Maths and Science for the arts' graduates), and some aspects of the primary curriculum and subject pedagogy for teaching were new. Those who had recently completed childhood studies courses were more familiar with these. It is important to note that the mature students' academic performance was generally of a very high standard; in Greece, where there were end of course exams, they received high marks in many subjects. As we shall see, however, the time demands involved in studying did create pressures on the trainee teachers.

The student teachers developed networks amongst themselves to communicate knowledge and news and sometimes collaborated in lesson planning or other assignments. More specifically, Greek mature students developed networks of exchanging news and knowledge about the course and those with no prior teaching experience applied other work and life skills to studying and teaching practice. In the English context, mature students also drew on peer information exchange from other trainee teachers to help with lesson planning and course assignments.

As previously indicated, prior work experience also contributed greatly to the mature student teachers' learning and success on the courses. For instance in Greece, Amelia, a polytechnic graduate of nursery education, told us,

I observed teachers teaching and then I could analyse their teaching...I thought that I observed like a teacher because I had the experience of previous studies and work experience with children in the nursery.

Her comment, 'I observed like a teacher', implied that in her view she was learning in a different way from that of an inexperienced student because of her previous studies and first hand nursery experience. Similarly Melpie, another polytechnic graduate of nursery education, drew on her prior experience to develop teaching strategies, such as building on children's learning and peer teaching. This transfer of skills from previous experience into teaching was also evident among the English trainees; for example, Jean's prior experience as a teaching assistant helped her to teach pupils with different needs and abilities.

In contrast, an English trainee teacher, Mike, who had come into teaching from a social work background, found it difficult to learn in the classroom at first:

So far I have not been able to demonstrate that I have suitable skills to be a teacher... I have no other experience of this sort of thing [being in the classroom] and this may well be me not able to access the help very well.

Mike put at least some of his lack of confidence in the classroom down to his unfamiliarity in this situation, and lack of knowledge about how to seek support for his learning.

In both countries, learning was enhanced by institutional inputs on the courses. For example, Andrew (England) praised his 'inspirational' lecturers, while John (England) described an 'outstanding' university tutor, who 'provided clear strategies to teach maths for all ability ranges.' Considerable help was provided by university lecturers in both countries, who made regular visits to schools to observe the student teachers and give them feedback. In the English context, there was also targeted help with learning to teach from school-based tutors, who were designated as mentors and had specific training for

this role. The trainees spoke positively about the kind of learning that this helped them develop. For instance, Suzie praised her 'brilliant' mentor, who 'models good teaching'. Jean told us that her mentor had 'in-depth knowledge and understanding so was able to appropriately guide me and set ongoing targets throughout. Consequently I was always on track and even one step ahead.'

In contrast, the most difficult course aspects cited were the paperwork, lesson planning and finding time and energy for course assignments. As Lucy (England) put it, 'Lack of time for myself and feeling tired a lot....I have to be very organised to keep on top of everything.' In Lucy's case, a single parent with two children, she had to get up earlier and go to bed later in order to fit everything in. All the student teachers certainly felt under time pressure, regardless of gender and personal circumstances. However, the amount of paperwork demanded of trainee teachers in the English context in relation to planning and assessment was a major barrier and perceived negative side of their preparation: 'relentless and huge,' as Mike put it.

In general, coping strategies to meet family (and in some cases job) commitments were more difficult for the mature trainee teachers compared to course requirements. Mature students who also had to fit in time for their children and partners often felt that they were studying to the detriment of their family, as Annie (Greece) explained: 'Hours spent at home with the kids were only a few with great difficulty.' Carol (England) described how she ended up studying late into the night because she needed to spend time with her childen when she got home, especially as her teenage daughter was taking important exams and needed help with homework. Suzie, an English trainee who was recently divorced, had to spend time catching up on chores in the evening and at weekends, although her children were now 'old enough to be fairly independent' and helped her with cooking and cleaning.

There was some evidence that women mature students were more sensitive to family needs than the men; for instance, Nil (Greece) devoted more time to his studies and work than to his family, while some women students, such as Carol, preferred to spend time with their children and/or partners at the expense of their own free time or work commitments. However, many of the women acknowledged that

18

their children had to learn to cope without them, although in some cases, like Suzie, they felt guilty that their children had to learn to become more independent. Nevertheless, most of the male and female students thought that the time spent away from their families during the course would be worth it afterwards.

Another common feeling in most of the mature student teachers was the identification of positive attitudes and images about their decision to study primary education. None of them complained about or regretted their initial decision and they developed their own survival strategies to face personal circumstances during the courses. A major way in which they coped with these was through support mechanisms, which we will discuss next.

Support during study

Looking at the type of support provided to the mature student teachers of the study in both contexts, we can claim that, based on the model of Zepke and Leach (2008), there were *collaborative* and *non-institutional* influences of success. English and Greek mature students received strong family support and friends helped, in most cases, to sustain positive attitudes and self-confidence. However, as we have already seen, both Greek and English trainee teachers had difficulties in maintaing work-life balance during their studies. Nevertheless, student teachers in both contexts demonstrated positive attitudes about their decision to study, in spite of these difficulties, therefore *individual* factors were also important. In the English context, as with learning strategies*, institutional* support was also cited as a strong success factor.

Informal support provided by family members, fellow students and/or friends seemed to be the most important for mature student teachers, whether married or single. All the mature student teachers had found some people around them who had become a source of inspiration and encouragement. Support from the student teachers' families and friends involved encouraging them in their initial decision to enter teaching and helping them during the course, particularly with family commitments. For instance, parents or relatives helped with childcare, encouraging the students to keep up with course work. Family support

is very strong in Greek society (see also Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011), especially for working mothers whose children are often looked after by grandparents: 'My parents helped a lot with my children's upbringing, they walked with them to the school, played with them, read them stories' (Melpie). This was also a factor in England, although the trainee teachers just as frequently cited support from partners and friends. For instance, Andrew described his wife as 'my prop and my main support,' who saw him through a low period on the course. He also talked about how he found time to see his friends one evening a week: 'a very good way of unwinding – a justified hour.'

In Greece, female mature student teachers had received more psychological support from parents compared to the men before entering the course; male parents of male mature students did not regard primary teaching as a high status job for their sons. As reported in other studies (e.g. Mulholland and Hansen 2003), family background may be a factor influencing the perceptions young men hold about status and conditions of teaching as a profession, especially primary teaching which has traditionally been a female domain. Nevertheless, the financial and employability incentives of training to be a teacher generally overrode gendered resistance to this choice.

Support from other students on the course was also cited as important. For instance, Alison (England) found seeing other people on the course each week very helpful, particularly when she was going through a difficult time at school: 'You could talk through problems - brilliant.' Likewise, Mike described the 'mutually supportive group' of trainees: 'when I chat to the others often they are having similar experiences which helps to keep it in perspective for me.' In Greece, mature students were also a source of strength to complete the course and helped each other during the semesters: 'I was closer to other mature students because we exchanged information about the course ...and we had developed a network of different people attending different courses' (Elliot).

Financial support in Greece was important as some mature student teachers stopped work in order to meet the course demands, while in England, the course bursary was helpful but not always sufficient and often needed supplementing by partners' income or savings. Some of the mature students in Greece and

England were financially supported by parents and partners. However, ten of the mature student teachers in Greece had to continue working part-time while studying and did not receive any financial support from their families. Financial issues have been highlighted in previous studies are particularly problematic for mature students (Gorard et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2010).

Institutionally, support by university and school-based tutors varied, depending on their sensitivity to each mature student's needs and personality, but was cited as important by most of the trainee teachers in the English context. Their interviews are filled with words like 'brilliant' and 'fantastic' to describe their school mentors, with availability and approachability mentioned as particularly important characteristics. For example, Chris described her mentor as 'brilliant – excellent, she has been so supportive. The feedback I received was always relevant.' Similarly, Andrew described the class teacher with whom he was working as 'very, very supportive.' As she was new to the school, he felt that she was 'somewhat in the same boat' as himself and therefore particularly understanding of some of the challenges he faced in school. In Greece, female student teachers who were married with children were treated more sensitively by female mentors who were in a similar position of juggling work and home life, but school support was cited less frequently overall.

In spite of difficulties faced by the student teachers during their courses, most demonstrated great individual resilience (Hoult, 2009) and remained positive about their decision to teach. For example, Suzie (England) told us she was 'feeling more competent and confident...I feel very motivated - loving it;' while Chris summed up her experience: 'I don't think I've ever worked so hard in my life, but it's been worth it – a great sense of achievement!' In the Greek context also most mature students completed course commitments in the same time as non-mature students because they strongly believed in becoming primary school teachers: 'Even though I was working part-time in Athens and had to commute eight hours in a day, I followed all course commitments on time' (Eve).

We will now draw together the main findings of our study, in relation to Zepke and Leach's model (2008; Fig.1), before making some recommendations for teacher education courses which take on mature entrants.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings regarding motivation to qualify for primary school teaching support those of previous research (e.g. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003 in the UK; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011, in Greece) which emphasised idealistic and pragmatic reasons for qualifying to teach. Mature prospective teachers in this study made their choice to enter teaching because of the professional stability and security it offers, particularly in the Greek context, as well as personal interest and passion for teaching primary school children. This largely *individual* motivation (Zepke et al., 2010) to teach became a strong factor for attending to their studies, at times to the detriment of their own personal and family lives. Prior experience in schools or other educational contexts was seen as very beneficial by student teachers and helped them to develop professionally; both *individual* and *institutional* influences were therefore important here. It was clear from talking to these beginning teachers that they brought a considerable range of skills and experiences into teaching.

Turning to *collaborative*, *non-institutional* influences, a major factor identified in the study in both contexts was the value of family and peer support, both practically and emotionally. In Greece, childcare support was particularly provided by parents to their daughters, while in England this was more usually undertaken by partners. Informal support by partners and friends on the courses, as well as collaborative, academic support by peers, helped to sustain and encourage the student teachers in both contexts. At an *institutional* level, support was given in schools by university tutors and mentors, especially in the English context in which this area was highlighted very strongly.

On the negative *non-institutional, individual* side, the difficulties of balancing study with domestic roles and responsibilities, for both male and female student teachers, was another major finding in both Greece and England. It was evident that most of the trainee teachers scaled down domestic demands to the

22

barest essentials during the courses, similar to prior research findings (Maguire, 2005), although there were some gender differences here, with men spending less time with their families than women. Financial difficulties were the other main personal problem which the mature student teachers faced; many (especially in Greece), coped with this by continuing with paid work. *Institutionally*, while academic course demands such as essays did not prove too difficult, school experience could be very challenging.

Overall, in both contexts, the mature student teachers paid remarkable attention to course demands in spite of often considerable difficulties, and succeeded academically as well as professionally. The interviews revealed the way in which they negotiated these transitions (Ecclestone, 2007), developing largely positive images of their beginning identities as prospective primary school teachers (as in Griffiths, 2007 in the UK; Sianou-Kyrgiou and Tsiplakides, 2011, in Greece).

In terms of Zepke and Leach's model (2008; Fig.1), it can be seen that *individual* and *collaborative, non-institutional* influences were the most positive success factors for mature, beginning teachers in both Greece and England. In England*, institutional* influences, such as strong support by school-based mentors, were also a key success factor; these were far less evident in Greece. These positive aspects were counter-balanced by strong, *individual, non-institutional* factors such as domestic and childcare responsibilities and financial problems. The particular ways in which each mature, student teacher navigated their particular configuration of factors to find their own work-life balance, develop and sustain multiple identities (Ecclestone, 2007), was at the heart of their success on the course.

Recommendations

University departments of teacher education need to pay attention to the skills that mature students contribute to teaching and how these can be built on and developed further. They should also consider how and what types of support are appropriate for mature student teachers; in particular, universities need to develop processes that recognise the contingencies of family life and financial pressures which mature students face and be flexible in allowing them to attend courses without placing them under unreasonable stress. It is argued that successful teaching of mature students who enter higher education,

especially through non-standard routes, involves the provision of extra time and support (Burton et al., 2011; Davies et al., 2002); in the present study extra time was not provided for the mature students, but at some personal cost. If it had not been for the support of family and friends, many of them would not have stayed the course. However, the positive contribution which mature students bring to teaching must also be acknowledged more fully, rather than seeing this group negatively as a drain on resources.

The use of Zepke and Leach's (2008) model of influences on student success has been particularly useful in highlighting key factors, both positive and negative, in the student teachers' experiences. This article makes an important contribution to studies of mature student teachers in higher education - it is one of the first studies of this group in Greece - as well as to comparative studies of teacher education in Europe.

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