



“I really loved HE!”: Motivations and experiences of Irish students who progressed to Home Economics initial teacher education from further education and training

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Abstract

This paper explores the motivations and experiences of pre-service home economics teacher education students in Ireland who entered their course of study via an access to higher education initiative - the Access to Post-Primary Teaching (APT) project. APT has created a direct entry route into home economics teacher education for students taking selected courses in further education and training colleges.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted at the end of their first year of study with 11 students who entered their course via APT in the years 2018-2020. The interviews explored participants' pathway through the Irish education system, their experiences of taking part in the project, motivations for becoming a home economics teacher and experiences of the initial teacher education course.

Positive experiences of home economics classes in secondary school, a strong personal interest in and love of the subject and having supportive home economics teachers were important motivational factors for students. Participants viewed both their experience of further education and taking part in the pre-entry APT activities as very beneficial in preparing them for teacher education.

This project illustrates how home economics teacher education as a field can promote equity and diversity in recruitment practices. The approach used in the APT project has potential to be applied to other situations where recruitment to home economics teacher education is a concern.

KEYWORDS: HOME ECONOMICS INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION, WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION, INFLUENCE OF HOME ECONOMICS TEACHER ON CAREER CHOICE, PROGRESSION ROUTE FROM FURTHER EDUCATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Kelly-Blakeney E., Lynch, A. & Kennedy, P. (2023). “I really loved HE!”: Motivations and experiences of Irish students who progressed to Home Economics initial teacher education from further education and training. *International Journal of Home Economics*, 16(1), 21-35.

Introduction

The IFHE position statement (IFHE, 2008) articulates a commitment to social justice by the home economics profession and highlights the importance of advocacy by home economists in achieving the goal of optimal living conditions for all. The position statement also identifies ‘future proofing the profession’ as an important component of the work of the discipline going forward, within which negative consequences would be minimised and opportunities capitalised on. Attracting individuals into the home economics profession, including home economics teaching, is a crucial aspect of its future proofing, as without a steady supply of high-quality graduates, the profession will decline (Arnett-Hartwick, 2017).

Internationally, while the matter of recruiting and retaining teachers continues to be a concern (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2020), so too is the issue of diversifying the teaching population (Santoro, 2015) as underrepresentation of several groups (related to social class, ethnicity, disability, mature-age) among entrants to teacher education courses has become apparent. This is also the case in Ireland, where teachers have traditionally come from white, Irish, and middleclass backgrounds (Keane et al., 2018). Duckworth et al. (2016) point to the potential of initial teacher education providers to address the lack of diversity in the teaching body by using a two-pronged approach: first, by recruiting more diverse cohorts to teacher education through targeted initiatives (often known as ‘access routes’); and second, by preparing teachers who are dedicated to supporting the academic and social needs of underrepresented pupils in their classrooms, and who will encourage their pupils to consider a future career in teaching.

It is against this backdrop that this paper is presented, as we illustrate how the ideal of social justice enshrined in the philosophy of home economics is played out in practice in a project which is taking concrete actions towards diversification of the profession through the provision of a ‘widening participation’ entry route to home economics teacher education in Ireland. We provide insights from an ongoing research study which examines the experiences of initial teacher education (ITE) students from lower-socioeconomic groups who have participated in a pre-entry initiative (the Access to Post-Primary Teaching (APT) project) and have entered their course of study using a further education and training (FET) qualification. All the students are taking home economics as one of two subject disciplines in their concurrent degree, alongside education over a five-year period. At the end of their course, students graduate with a Bachelor of Arts/Professional Master of Education (BA/PME) and are eligible to register with the Irish Teaching Council as post-primary teachers of home economics. In this paper, we focus specifically on the factors which prompted the participants to consider home economics teaching as a career, and how progressing to FET and participating in an access to ITE project provided an avenue for their aspirations to become a reality.

Policy context for increasing access to, and widening participation in, higher education and ITE in Ireland

Like other European countries, Ireland has experienced dramatic increases in participation in higher education over the past four decades, moving from a baseline where 20% of school-leavers in Ireland progressed to higher education in 1980, to a progression rate of 52% by 2015 (HEA, 2015). As participation by higher-socioeconomic groups had reached saturation, in order to further expand participation, the ‘widening’ of participation through targeting those groups who have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education has been a policy focus in Ireland from the beginning of this century (HEA, 2015; 2018). The policy approach employed mirrors that of other countries where increasing access to and widening participation in higher education has resulted in the establishment of interventions which target underrepresented groups including individuals from minority ethnic groups, lower-socioeconomic groups and mature entrants (Younger et al., 2019).

While the need for a diverse teaching force and more varied routes into teacher education was raised by the Irish Teaching Council over a decade ago (Teaching Council, 2011), it was not until the publication of the second *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019* (HEA, 2015) (hereafter 'national access plan') that a mechanism to address diversification of the teaching workforce was addressed at policy level. Objective 1.7 of the national access plan set as a target 'to increase access by students from target groups to initial teacher education' (HEA, 2015, p. 28); and the following year, in 2016, the Department of Education & Skills established the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), a dedicated fund to support the national access plan. The first measure to be funded (PATH 1) focused on supporting initiatives to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups entering ITE, one of which was the APT project.

The Access to Post-Primary Teaching (APT) project

The APT project is a joint initiative between two higher education institutions in Ireland, both of which provide initial teacher education courses. The aim of the overall project is to support the access and retention of lower-socioeconomic groups in/to initial teacher education. The strand reported on here is delivered by a college which provides concurrent ITE degree programmes in which home economics is taken as the core subject along with biology or Irish language or religious education. The project created an access route into ITE for FET students from underrepresented socioeconomic groups and is supported by PATH funding. Phase one of the project ran from 2017 to 2020, and phase two is ongoing. Students from FET institutions in the Border Midlands West (BMW) region of Ireland, a region in which participation in higher education is low, are invited to participate in the project and are required to take part in tailored activities during the academic year, alongside their FET course. To be eligible to participate in the project, students must be enrolled in a specific FET course (in an area allied to home economics, e.g., social studies, nutrition & health, childcare studies), they must also be first time applicants to higher education and be classified as coming from lower-socioeconomic groups (based on parental occupation and income). Encompassing pre- and post-entry (including financial) supports for students, the design of the APT access route was informed by evidence on supporting transitions to and retention in higher education by non-traditional entrants generally (Gale & Parker, 2014; Thomas et al., 2017); and from vocational and FET to higher education specifically (Hoelscher et al., 2008; Barber & Netherton, 2018).

Over the past two decades, research on the university and college experiences of students who successfully gain entry to higher education but who come from groups who have traditionally been underrepresented, suggests that students experience higher education in very different ways (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Crozier et al. (2008) found that non-traditional entrants may have much lower entry qualifications than the norm, they may feel intimidated by the higher education culture and are often unsure and unwilling to avail of supports available. Bathmaker et al. (2016) highlighted how students from underrepresented groups are more likely to drop-out during their studies or attain a lower degree qualification than students from more privileged backgrounds. Nurturing a sense of 'belonging' when they enter higher education is vital for underrepresented students to successfully negotiate the new learning environment (Thomas et al., 2017). Student engagement and belonging can be developed through the provision of information, knowledge and skills to improve pre-entry decision making, along with academic preparation to enhance transition, retention and success (Thomas, 2013).

The FET students who take part in the APT project participate in a range of 'In-reach' and 'Outreach' activities during the academic year, alongside their FET studies. 'Inreach' refers to activities which take place at the host college campus and includes FET students attending the Open Day, sitting in on undergraduate lectures, and attending practical laboratory sessions offered as part of the ITE degree. 'Outreach' refers to project activities which take place in the FET colleges from which project participants are drawn. These comprise sessions delivered

by academic and support staff from the host college, and include textile workshops, academic writing tutorials, and lectures on home economics studies. In phase one of the project, 8% of places across the three home economics ITE programmes were reserved for APT-route entrants, and students applied for places using their FET award. Post-entry, APT-route students receive a range of financial, academic, and social supports for the duration of their studies in order to support their retention and success within the BA/PME. To provide context to the APT project, it is useful to explain that demand for entry to undergraduate ITE programmes in Ireland is highly competitive (O'Donoghue et al., 2017) and places on home economics teacher education courses are much sought after. In this regard, Ireland has not experienced the decline in enrolments to home economics-related undergraduate courses in higher education reported elsewhere (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008; Lindblom et al., 2013; Pendergast et al., 2000) which has led to shortages of home economics teachers in schools.

Motivations for becoming a teacher

In response to the challenges associated with recruitment and retention of teachers generally, there is a growing body of research, both quantitative and qualitative, which investigates motivations for becoming a teacher (Fray & Gore, 2018; Heinz, 2015; Struyven et al., 2013; Watt & Richardson, 2007; Watt et al., 2012;). These motivations are typically categorised into three types: extrinsic, intrinsic, and altruistic (Richardson et al., 2014). Extrinsic motives include the status associated with the career, pay and conditions, while intrinsic motives include a strong interest in the subject area and passion for sharing that knowledge (Richardson et al., 2014). Altruistic motives are concerned with wanting to make a difference to pupils' lives and giving something back to society (Watt & Richardson, 2007). Research on motivations for becoming a teacher tends to focus on either pre-service (student) teachers' or in-career teachers' motivations, with the latter being concerned with motivation and teacher retention. Here, we will deal only with pre-service teachers as they are the focus of our research.

Recent research in the UK, Perryman & Calvert, (2020), found that making a difference and wanting to work with young people were the two main reasons cited for becoming a teacher, with the love of their subject being cited by just half of participants. In Australia, Manuel & Hughes (2006) found that intrinsic motivations dominated the reasons cited by student teachers for choosing teaching with personal fulfilment, affinity for the subject, and a desire to work with young people mentioned as the top three factors. In a Swedish study by Bergmark et al. (2018) the desire to transmit valuable knowledge emerged as an important motivator among students who were studying to become upper-secondary subject teachers, but also important was student teachers' own positive experiences of the subject in secondary school. Recently, Whiteford et al. (2021) explored motivations among science and mathematics undergraduate student teachers and found that love for their subject to be the determining factor among this cohort.

In the limited literature on motivations for becoming a home economics teacher, intrinsic motivation associated with having a strong interest in and passion for the subject emerges as a key theme, as does students' previous positive experience of the subject. Arnett-Hartwick (2017) identified interest in Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) related subjects, as well as the influence of their FCS high-school teacher as the two key factors in prompting students to pursue a home economics teaching qualification. The important role of their subject teacher in influencing students to consider home economics teaching as a career has also been highlighted by Arnett and Freeburg (2011) and by Deagon (2021) more recently. While motivations to becoming a teacher was not the main focus of their work, a recent paper by Koppel and Palojoki (2021) on emerging identities of handicraft and home economics student teachers in Estonia refers to the impact of their previous exposure to home economics on their decision to pursue a teaching qualification in the subject.

Research Methodology

All students who successfully progressed into the ITE programme for home economics with biology/Irish language/religious education via the APT route are asked to take part in a series of three interviews over the course of their studies: in years one, three and five. The purpose of these interviews is to assist the researchers (and subsequently policy makers and educators) in understanding their experiences of completing the BA/PME programme and transitioning into home economics teaching as a career, while also exploring what can be done to increase the diversity of the teaching profession in the future. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Galway's Research Ethics Committee.

A total of twelve students entered ITE degree programmes via the APT route in the academic years 2018-2020. The data reported in this paper is taken from the first interview undertaken with these students at the end of their first year of study. This interview explored participants' pathway through the Irish education system, their previous educational experiences, impact of studying in the FET sector, personal motivations for entering the teaching profession, ITE experiences, and views on how to encourage and support the diversification of the teaching sector in Ireland. Eleven out of the twelve students agreed to take part in an interview. Interviews typically lasted between 30-90 minutes and were conducted either in-person on the college campus, or via telephone following the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions. Regardless of format, all interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed by the interviewer, and checked for accuracy. Transcripts were then sent via email to participants for review. To protect participant identities, details such as places and names were removed from transcripts, their year of entry into the project is not identified, and pseudonyms are used throughout when presenting findings and discussion. The researchers were satisfied that they reached saturation point as they completed the 11 interviews. The findings are valuable in that they are exploratory and elucidate the lived experiences of students in Ireland who come from a particular socioeconomic group and heretofore are underrepresented in professional teaching education at third level.

As Denzin and Lincoln (2003) argue, a constructive paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities, and the challenge associated with qualitative analysis, is that subjectivity might creep in. There is a subjective epistemology which is co-created by the respondent and the researcher. In this case, data was analysed using a framework for thematic analysis advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors present a 6-step framework for analysis of qualitative data. They differentiate between two different levels of themes: semantic and latent content. They explain semantic as: '...within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written' (2006, 84). The latent level looks deeper, at the meaning behind what was stated: '...starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations - and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data' (2006, 84). Braun and Clarke differentiate between top-down and bottom-up analysis. In this case the analysis is in line with the latter, as the team approached the data seeking to understand the students' interpretation/analysis of their own path through the Irish education system and the factors they identified as influencing their choices and decisions.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps are as follows: become familiar with the data; generate initial codes; search for themes; review themes; define themes; and write-up. As there was a team of three researchers involved in this project, each member followed these steps, while collaborating. The first step involved reading and re-reading the data, and for the researcher who conducted and transcribed the interviews, this was a very engaging process. Two of the researchers independently generated codes and these they shared with the third researcher who then sought clarity and offered suggestions. It was an inductive thematic analysis. Some of the codes, when combined formed a theme, for example factors which influenced an

individual's decision to pursue studies in home economics. The research team continually reviewed, revised and modified themes as they, increasingly as individuals with different disciplinary expertise and experience, became more familiar with the data. They questioned if the evidence genuinely supported the themes as identified. This cyclical process enabled the researchers to clarify the themes and facilitated writing up the research findings as authentically as possible.

The findings from the 11 in-depth interviews provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of third level students in Ireland who accessed a professional teacher education course as a result of their engagement with a specific access programme at a particular time and in a particular place. While the findings of this qualitative study may not be generalisable to the larger population, they are nonetheless important in giving voice to a particular section of Irish society and there is learning there for educators and policy makers. As Walker states:

What qualitative research can offer the policy maker is a theory of social action grounded on the experiences-the world view- of those likely to be affected by a policy decision or thought to be part of the problem (Walker, 1985:19).

Findings

Role and Influence of Home Economic Teachers on Career Choices

When asked about the factors which motivated and supported them to choose a career in home economics teaching, most participants mentioned the positive influence of their home economics teacher in secondary school. This was both active where the teacher encouraged them, and passive, where teachers acted as role models, and applied both to younger participants who had recently graduated from secondary school, as well as for older participants, who may have graduated from secondary school well over fifteen or more years prior.

When queried about the strength of their bonds with their secondary school HE teachers, some participants felt the practical and unique nature of the subject area lent support to developing positive relationships between home economics teachers and their students. As Noreen explained: "Even though we still had to have the course covered, she [the home economics teacher] was always lovely, and we could take time out and just chat to her. It was lovely. It was really nice."

Other participants expressed a strong personal bond with their home economics teacher that went well beyond academics and the subject matter. For example, following the death of her mother, Maureen explained,

I did struggle, but I actually found that through the likes of my home ec. teacher...made me see a different view on teachers, other than being a teacher...being there for you emotionally and as a support, as well as teaching you.

For nearly all participants, their own home economics teachers served as positive role models for teaching and connecting with students. For example, Mary had experienced bullying during secondary school, and her home economics teacher was a support she could rely on. As Mary reflected,

A lot of the teachers that I had, especially my home economics teacher, they were like my role models. I used to go and talk to my home economics teacher about it

[bullying]...there was just something different about her, she didn't have that barrier that the rest of the teachers had...she was more grounded and down to earth.

Motivations for Choosing Teaching as a Career

The majority of participants in this study were the first in their immediate families to pursue teaching as a career. Some participants recalled aspiring to become a teacher very early on in life, even from childhood. For example, Mary stated that she "always wanted to do it [teaching]" and recalled that during her childhood, "I always, like I remember being a young kid and having all my teddies lined up in the bed and teaching them from the wardrobe." In comparison, others only considering teaching as a career during their secondary school years, often as the result of positive interactions with their home economics teachers, as previously noted.

When enquiring about the particular motivations for choosing teaching as a career more generally, participants commonly cited altruistic motivations for entering the teaching profession. Numerous students talk about their love for children and an ability to empathise with teenagers. Noreen, for example, stated "I love children and I just want to be able to give back to them and sort of let them enjoy coming to school." Some participants were attracted to teaching as a helping profession, and commonly expressed a desire to give back to others or help steer them on a positive life course. As Deirdre noted, in her teaching she desired "just to be able to help people to guide them with what they want to do, steer them on the right path."

Other participants commented on the motivation and excitement they received at seeing the growth in their pupils and a sense of achievement in fostering their future success. When asked about herself as a future teacher, Sorcha stated she hoped to "motivate them [her students] just so that they can do the best that they can do." Other students discussed the importance of being a positive role model in the lives of their pupils, and the importance of creating positive relationships with them. As Sandra explained, "When I was on my [school] placement, I felt I am not the student anymore, I am that role model now and I hope any student, especially in the future could come to me if there was an issue." For example, Rebecca felt that it was important to draw on her own experiences of learning, and help all students see they could succeed. As she explained,

I have a flair for teaching I think, I do like to help others learn just because I wouldn't be the most academic and I think it is really important, coming from a teacher who wants their students to do well and do not just look at the students who always get the answers right. If I am going into teaching, I am going into it to help students.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that for many students, their experiences in schools significantly impacted these altruistic motivations for teaching in two ways. Students wanted to replicate their own positive experiences in secondary school and work to ensure their pupils had a similar experience. For example, Sorcha explained, "I just always liked the school setting. I had a good few really nice teachers that inspired me." Similarly, a few students commented on the importance of creating a positive environment for students and helping them to enjoy school and benefit from it. For example, Maureen stated, "I want children to benefit from school...and realise how important it actually is and help them get the most out of it." Mary reflected,

You have such a profound responsibility on students...and even though you've had bad experiences...maybe you didn't start on the path that you should be going...[but] I've been able to pick up different little elements all the way along the journey, and then bring them together, and start here then.

For some students, their own family situations were motivational forces for entering the teaching profession, as they found themselves in a caring role, cooking and providing for the other family members. Caroline stated,

I think I just always had an interest in it [Home Economics teaching], and I always had a big interest in baking and cooking with such a big family. We would always be cooking and doing stuff for other people.

In comparison, another participant explained that her family was a motivational force for choosing to pursue teaching as a career, because she had watched the example of her own family members and vowed not to repeat the same mistakes. Noreen explained, "I've always set goals and like this is what I want to be in life, this is what I want to do." When asked how she learned to set goals, she explained, "just from looking at other people in the family and looking at friends and looking at their mistakes that they made, and I don't want to be like them."

In addition to the above factors, when queried about the reasons why they chose to teach home economics specifically, students confirmed they had a natural and early attraction to the subject content. For many, this was tied to positive experiences of home economics and their second teaching subject in secondary school. As Deirdre noted, teaching was "always something that I wanted to do," and she commented that "biology and home ec were my two favourite subjects [in secondary school] as well." Sorchá had a similar outlook, "I really like the two subjects I am doing [in ITE]. I really liked them in school." Numerous students commented on enjoying the creative and practical elements of home economics. Sandra noted, "I just fell in love with it [HE]...I really just fell in love with the subject and the way they taught it. It was so different from other practical subjects." Indeed, the view that home economics was "different" to other subjects was shared by the majority of participants. As Sandra noted, home economics is "such a practical subject that can be used in everyday life," and for many, the idea of teaching students a subject with everyday utility was an attractive factor in their subject choice of home economics.

Role of FET and APT Project in Facilitating Route into Home Economics Teaching

In Ireland, the standard route of entry into undergraduate degree programmes in higher education is via the Central Applications Office (CAO). An applicant's results in six subjects in the Leaving Certificate examination (taken at the end of secondary school) are translated into 'points'. Where demand for courses exceeds places available, applicants are selected in rank order based on the points which they have accumulated. Within the Irish context, the CAO points for entry into teaching courses, including Home Economics teaching, are high, and there is relatively high demand for this course and entry is competitive. Indeed, ten of the eleven participants in this study had selected home economics teaching as their first-choice programme of study when they had applied immediately after the completion of their Leaving Certificate. However, none succeeded in gaining a place, because they didn't obtain the required number of points for entry. In Sandra's case, she applied twice for the course, and neither time was she successful. She explained, "I didn't get the points...I applied for it again the second time and didn't get it, unfortunately."

As a result of this early disappointment, many participants assumed that a career in teaching would not be in their future, and they chose to pursue other avenues in further education. Indeed, many, like Sandra, believed there was no other route into home economics teaching, as she recalled, "I thought the dream of becoming a Home Ec and Biology teacher was over. I was devastated of course. I thought that there was...no other route." As Noreen explained, many students only know about the CAO-route, "A lot of students...didn't realise there was another way. A lot of people think once you don't get your points...that is it like."

As such, the APT Project was viewed by participants as a second chance opportunity to pursue home economics teaching as a career, and participants were quick to note the positive and supportive role that both the APT Project and their experience in FET played in promoting their career goals. For example, numerous students felt that both FET and the APT project supported their transition into higher education in a variety of ways, both in terms of academic development but also in terms of increasing their self-confidence. As Mary explained,

I think it's [the APT Project] an amazing opportunity, and to have that year in further education whereas you might gain a little bit more confidence in your writing and your style, and you're working towards it [entry into teaching]

Indeed, on the whole, the experience of FE for participants was very positive, and most felt they benefited from their time. As Noreen explained, "[In FET] you have to meet your deadlines and your criteria. Definitely...it definitely did help me develop." Additionally, some students, like Sorcha, felt that the APT project evened the playing field and provided equal opportunities, as she explained, "I think the APT programme is really good because it gives everyone equal opportunities to get involved." Others extolled the benefits of the approach employed in the APT project in providing an opportunity to see what the ITE course was like. Ciara explained,

I think the FE course helped me clarify what I wanted to do. I always knew HE and Irish but then when I went in and actually went through the APT and we got to go into the college and we got to sit in lectures, it was really beneficial, and I was like 'this is definitely where I want to be'.

Similarly, Anne felt that her visits to the college were useful in experiencing the different aspects of the home economics ITE course:

We went down there [to the college] twice and we were in the cookery labs for one day and then we got talks ... like when you came up, and we got a textiles talk in the college as well. It was really good because it gives you more of an idea of what the course entails.

Discussion and Implications

Many of the results reported here regarding motivations to become a teacher are consistent with previous research conducted in other settings, and for a variety of subjects. Similar to other studies which focus on students undertaking subject-specific initial teacher education (Bergmark et al., 2018; Simonz et al., 2022; Whiteford et al., 2021), intrinsic factors, including a strong interest, enjoyment and passion for home economics as a subject emerged as a key motivator among our participants. Professional passion for home economics in teachers of the subject is considered as extremely important to their teaching of the subject, and the transmission of the core values and ideology of the discipline to their students (Deagon, 2021). It is notable that the home economics teacher was cited as being the most influential factor in motivating an interest in pursuing a home economics teaching career, as was their exposure to home economics during second level schooling. It is also worth noting that in Ireland, the name 'home economics' has been maintained as the name for the school subject in second level education, as well as the discipline in higher education, thus, second level students can clearly identify progression and career opportunities between home economics in secondary school and that provided in higher education. The concurrent model of initial teacher education - combining discipline studies and education in the degree - which is employed for home economics teacher education in Ireland is also important as it provides a direct route to qualified teacher status. Both factors undoubtedly contribute to the visibility of the profession for students interested in progressing their studies in home economics from second level to

higher education, and thus issues around recruitment of students encountered elsewhere (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008; Lindblom et al., 2013) is not a concern in Ireland.

That said, it was clear from participants accounts that the highly competitive nature of entry to teacher education in Ireland is a deterrent for students who have a strong interest in pursuing the subject, but who are unable to do so due to high academic entry requirements, which sees undergraduate (concurrent) ITE programmes typically recruit from the top 30% of school-leavers (Hyland, 2012). While there was no evidence of having had negative experiences of career guidance at second level as has been reported elsewhere (Keane et al., 2018), many participants referred to the lack of knowledge among second-level career guidance teachers about alternative entry routes to teacher education. This suggests a need for greater support to be directed to career guidance teachers by ITE providers who offer alternative entry-routes onto their programmes.

For all of our participants, it was apparent that the APT access project was instrumental in providing an avenue to initial teacher education which otherwise would not have been possible. It was also clear that undertaking a FET course and taking part in the project activities alongside, was of benefit to them both academically and socially, in progressing from FET to a degree programme. This mirrors previous work (Cree et al., 2009; Denny et al., 2015; Gartland & Smith, 2018; Kelly-Blakeney & Kennedy, 2023) which found that academic skills, attitudes, and confidence gained during FET was valuable for students progressing from FET to higher education. Indeed, similar to Barber & Netherton (2018) there was also evidence that some of our participants developed positive perceptions of themselves as learners which served to counter previous negative experiences of education thus enabling them to experience a smoother transition.

Participants in this research identified their home economics teacher/s as a key influence in their decision to pursue home economics teaching as a career, and two inter-related aspects emerged from the findings: the care and support provided by the teacher in their interactions with students, and the pedagogical approaches employed by the teacher in the home economics classroom. For many participants, the home economics teacher was viewed as being different to other teachers, and exhibiting a caring, supportive and encouraging teacher presence. Caring teachers have been characterised as those who are empathetic towards and concerned about students' lives (Velasquez et al. 2013). Laletas and Reupert's (2016) investigated pre-service teachers' understanding of and attitudes to care and found that students viewed care as a core aspect of teaching and described it as central to pupil learning and personal growth. Notably, both aspects were evident in our participants' responses when they described how the care exhibited by their home economics teacher impacted positively on them. It was also apparent that the traits they themselves wished to exhibit as future teachers had been informed by their classroom experiences and interactions with their former home economics teachers. It appears that the identification of 'care' as an important quality exhibited by participants' secondary school home economics teacher illustrates how care is unconsciously enacted by the home economics teacher, and it is exactly this trait which Mc Gregor and Piscopo (2021) characterise in their recent think piece on home economics as a caring profession. The contention by Moen et al. (2020, p. 1017) that 'caring teaching can serve as an important pedagogy for social justice' would seem to be particularly relevant to home economics and is worthy of further investigation.

In recounting how their interest in becoming a home economics teacher was sparked by their positive experience of home economics in second level, the participants also provide insights into their perception of the subject as well as pedagogical approaches used by teachers. Dewhurst and Pendergast (2008) point to the requirement for second level home economics teachers to move beyond the technical approach and to also address interpretive and emancipatory concerns in their teaching of the subject. While many of participants' responses about their interest in the subject at second level focused on the technical aspects only -

typically food preparation, textiles and crafts, there was also evidence of an awareness that home economics teachers were transmitting more than just technical knowledge. Participants comments indicated that home economics as a mission-oriented field was being communicated implicitly by the home economics teacher, and similar to findings by Turkki (2005), student teachers in this study were able to articulate the core values and relevance of home economics in society. A recent study by Mc Cloat & Caraher (2020) found that Irish home economics teachers exhibited a strong understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of the subject, and communicated the applicability the subject to real life, and our findings support this by providing the perspective of former second-level students. In an era where concern has been expressed about a shift towards a technical approach to teaching of home economics in the classroom, (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008), these findings are reassuring.

Our findings highlight the importance of the home economics teacher not only as a role model initially, but as a potential provider of the type of ‘insider’ information on teaching which is often not accessible to students who come from families who have no history of teachers/higher education. Among underrepresented groups, altruistic and social justice-based reasons for becoming a teacher tend to feature prominently (Heinz et al., 2017) and such motives were also apparent in this study, and many participants referred to making a difference to the lives of their pupils. Given their awareness of the role/value of home economics in society, it would be reasonable to expect that making a social contribution as a home economics teacher *specifically*, would feature in the reasons for becoming a teacher cited by participants, however, this was not the case, at least not explicitly.

Conclusion

Recently, Posti-Ahokas and Janhonen-Abuquah (2021) made the case that diversity skills are a crucial aspect of home economics pedagogy in teacher education and underlined the importance of home economics classrooms as sites for the promotion of equity. In this paper, we extend this argument and suggest that home economics teacher education as a field of practice should also promote equity and diversity in recruitment practices, reflecting the principle set out in HE21C (IFHE, 2008) which envisions home economics as a societal area which has the capacity to influence policy development. In providing insights into how equity of opportunity can be applied to recruitment of students into higher education courses which prepare them for the home economics profession, we illustrate how one higher education provider in Ireland has responded to the call by Nieto (2000) for social justice to become central to teacher education policy and practice.


This paper shares learnings from an access to ITE initiative which provided a route to becoming a home economics teacher for students from underrepresented socioeconomic groups. The model employed, whereby exposure to the home economics teacher education course takes place over an academic year - while students are engaged in another course of study in a cognate area - affords participants an opportunity to become familiar not only with the discipline but also the students and faculty, has potential to be adapted to suit other situations where recruitment difficulties are a concern.

Acknowledgements


This research has been funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority, under the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH), Strand 1 (Equity of Access to Initial Teacher Education).

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