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**Crossing Boundaries: the experiences  
of mature student mothers in initial teacher education**

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## **Crossing Boundaries: the experiences of mature student mothers in initial teacher education**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a comparative study of two groups of student mothers from a teacher training course in the UK at the start and end of the 1990s, with a focus on gender issues. The study investigated the extent to which the women students could draw on their experiences as mothers to positive effect in their training, combining public and private spheres, and how far their domestic responsibilities created problems for them on the course. All the women possessed considerable skills, particularly in working with children, which were an attribute in their training. Although both groups faced similar difficulties, such as the double burden of domestic and course work, and changes in family life arising from their status transition, it was found that the more recent students could cross the boundaries between public and private roles more quickly and easily than those at the start of the 1990s. This was partly because the recent group had greater prior work experience and had already negotiated boundaries between private and public identities, and partly because some structural constraints had diminished by the end of the decade, at least at a local level. It is also argued that, although pressures on trainee teachers in general intensified during the 1990s, some effects of the changes were beneficial to student mothers. The findings are analysed within the dual frameworks of gender in higher education and initial teacher education.

Keywords: mature students, women students, student mothers, initial teacher education

### **Introduction**

This paper draws on the findings of a longitudinal study of mature student mothers on a primary postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) course in the south of England. Using case-study material, the experiences of student mothers in 1990/91 will be compared to those in 1998/99, highlighting both the problems they faced during training and the advantages they brought to teaching. The comparison reveals that the 1998/99 group were more quickly able to balance the commitments of the course with their family and domestic responsibilities than those at the start of the decade. A major reason for the differences was

the recent group's more extensive previous work experience which had given them direct, relevant preparation for teacher training and confidence in their own abilities. At a local level, some structural and attitudinal changes over the decade were evident in the placement schools, including improvements in women's position in primary teaching and a greater acceptance of student mothers, which it is suggested may also have contributed to the recent group's more rapid status transition.

All the women in both groups possessed considerable qualities and strengths from their experiences as mothers which were valuable in their development as teachers. However, the 1998/99 mothers were able to recognize and apply these skills more quickly and easily than the earlier group. It is argued that current requirements for teacher training, although more intensive now than ten years ago, provided a national framework of standards into which the more recent group could fit their prior experience in a positive way. Before turning to the research itself, it is important to contextualize it within the fields of teacher education and women in higher education, starting with a brief review of changes in teacher training over the past decade.

### **The changing profile of initial teacher education**

During the 1990s, initial teacher education (ITE) requirements in the UK intensified dramatically, with a succession of government Circulars prescribing more closely what was to be covered in the training (DfE 1993, DfEE 1997, 1998 a). The most significant changes were an increase in school-based training and the introduction of competency-based assessment. Most recently, (DfEE 1998a), a National Curriculum for Initial Teacher Training (NCITT) has been introduced and national standards for newly qualified teachers (NQTs), summarized in the form of career entry profiles.

There has been considerable criticism of the increased centralization and prescription of teacher training, with the accompanying emphasis on compliance, monitored by frequent inspections and punitive sanctions (see Griffiths and Jacklin 1999a for an overview). Specific criticism has been levelled at the 'technicist' approach (Richards *et al.* 1997) inherent in the assessment framework and the narrowing of the curriculum, particularly in the NCITT. It is argued that these changes lead to deprofessionalization of teachers and the exacerbation of inequality. Questions can also be raised about the level of 'preparedness' of trainee teachers in relation to wider questions of professional knowledge and capability (Griffiths and Jacklin 1999b).

Against this apparently negative backdrop, however, primary ITE courses in the UK continue to be over-subscribed (unlike their secondary counterparts), and the number of mature students entering teaching has increased. Just under half of all female entrants to primary teaching are now aged 25 or over (DfEE 1998b). I shall now look more closely at the experience of women in higher education and teacher training.

### **Women returning to learn: public and private identities**

Research on women in higher education during the 1990s (e.g. Karach 1992, David *et al.* 1996) frequently found evidence of a gap between rhetoric and reality: although universities wanted to encourage mature entrants, structural constraints were and still are the reality for many women students. These often take the form of lack of provision at universities, such as childcare facilities, or the timetabling of sessions at times that are difficult for students with children at school (see Edwards 1990, 1993, Morrison 1996). However, a more recent study by Merrill (1999) shows that some lecturers do value the contribution that mature students make, and attempt to organize seminars at times that fit in with women's other commitments.

Problems often arise where boundaries between public and private spheres are blurred, for example, the expectation that students can study at home. In spite of legislative changes, and an increase in women's visibility in the workplace, Morrison (1996) argues that women are still often central to domestic arrangements and the coordination of family life; therefore it cannot be assumed that women have 'private' time to study. Constraints can take a different form too, such as guilt, or external disapproval towards women undertaking new experiences which appear to threaten the stability of the family (see Leonard 1994, David *et al.* 1996). It is clear from Merrill's research (1999) that mature women students experience these pressures more strongly than their male counterparts, mainly because of their dual roles in the educational and domestic spheres.

As well as facing structural constraints, returning to study or work can be seen as a status transition for women and involves challenges to personal identity. For example, Lea (1994) found that women on access courses not only had to juggle domestic and academic commitments, but also had to find new ways of making sense of their prior experience, and to validate it within the context of new knowledge and the codes of higher education.

Stuart (1994) also found that women entering higher education as mature students lacked confidence, and did not always value or recognize the skills they brought to their courses; this was not helped by the fact that course tutors often held negative perceptions of these students. However, other studies, particularly more recent ones (e.g. David *et al.* 1993, Britton and Baxter 1999, Merrill 1999), claim that if women can find a way to redefine their identities as students by drawing on their experiences from the private, domestic sphere, the results can be transformative and empowering.

Although in many ways female trainee teachers with children are in a similar position to mature women students generally, in other respects their experiences as mothers may be easier to incorporate into their studies in this way. Unlike some of the research cited above, the relevance of the home experiences of women to teaching young children is seen in other studies (e.g. Evetts 1990, Acker 1994) as closely integrated with the role of a primary teacher and may be a positive asset in training. Certainly, research on mature entrants to teacher training programmes, (e.g. Hollis and Houston 1991, Carr 1993, Duncan 1999), shows that such students enter courses with different needs and concerns, as well as different life experiences, from younger trainees. Part-time or distance learning PGCE courses, such as the one introduced by the Open University (Bourne and Leach 1995), are often specifically planned for mature students, particularly women with children, in order to meet this kind of need. The more recent increase of different school-based routes into teaching<sup>1</sup> may also facilitate entry into the profession for mature women students. However, Duncan (1999) sounds a note of caution by suggesting that an over-close association between primary teaching and motherhood may be counterproductive to women's chances of promotion.

## **Methodology**

The study was set up in 1990/91 through the establishment of a support group for those people on the Primary PGCE course with family commitments. The success of this first support group was such that it was repeated, with minor variations, every subsequent year. Each year, all students with family responsibilities were invited but only women attended. Men were a minority on the course anyway (4-8 per cent each year), and those men who did have families tended to see the meetings as a group for women. The gendered nature of primary teaching (see Evetts 1990, Acker 1994) may have led to a partial exclusion of the male trainees.

The support groups followed a similar pattern each year. The women students and myself met once or twice a term for discussions about how the course was going and, in particular, to highlight any problems arising. At each meeting, either I or one of the women took notes on the main issues raised. Group members also met informally in smaller numbers on their own, and usually fed back to me what they had discussed. Every year, the meetings were welcomed by mothers as a valuable forum for peer support and sharing experiences, and the need for it seemed as strong in 1998/99 as it had done eight years before. For example, one of the 1990/91 group said about the group: 'Having recognition for our position on the course can only be a good thing', while the 1998/99 group wrote after their first meeting: 'We welcome these meetings as an opportunity to share our ideas and experiences.'

In setting up the groups, I stressed my own position as a mother balancing work and family responsibilities, and how this had made me aware of the difficulties they might be experiencing themselves. The intention was to enable the groups by locating myself on a more equal basis with them, a strategy I had previously used when working with young women in schools (see Griffiths 1995). In general, I had to be sensitive to concerns voiced by the women, and aware of the vulnerability of their position. However, my own position as tutor on the course and, from 1983, Course Director, inevitably created a status differential which may have affected what the women were able to express within the groups.

There were positive outcomes from the groups, as well as the immediate peer support for the women involved. Adjustments were able to be made to the course each year to meet some of the problems raised by the women. For example, where possible, school placements were made near to the students' homes and with mentors who would be sympathetic to the needs of trainees with children. More major changes were introduced in response to the meetings when I became Course Director, such as not timetabling sessions during half-term weeks or evenings.

The research grew out of the support groups in a planned but relatively informal way, as part of my wider interest in gender and education and feminist research. I sought permission from the women in the 1990/91 and 1998/99 groups to use the meetings and their experiences for research purposes, and promised anonymity in presenting the findings<sup>2</sup>. As a tutor on the course, I had information about the women's progress from their school placements and school files which the women agreed that I could use where appropriate. In 1990/91 and 1998/99, I also conducted individual interviews towards the end of the course with those

women who wanted to take part at a further level. The case studies are therefore self-selected rather than necessarily representative of the groups as a whole.

In presenting and considering the findings, the process, context and small-scale nature of the research must be taken into account. Comparisons between the two research groups are necessarily tentative, and the intention is more to illuminate some of the issues involved for these groups of women than to suggest wider generalizations. Without wanting to make any grand claims, it must also be acknowledged that some of the contextual differences between the groups may have arisen, at least in part, out of the cumulative effect of the support groups over the decade. For example, a positive climate developed on the course towards women with family responsibilities which may have affected attitudes and practice in the partnership schools.

### **The research groups**

From an investigation and comparison of the two research groups, both similarities and differences can be seen. The student mothers represented just under a quarter of the whole cohort in both years<sup>3</sup>. In the 1990/91 group, there were 13 mothers, with 11 in their 30s. In the 1998/99 group there were six mothers, with all but one in their 30s. A summary of details is presented in table 1, showing factors such as marital status. There was a higher proportion of single parents in the 1990/91 group, and the women had a slightly higher number of children overall: one woman had four children and another five, while all other women in this and the later group had between one and three children. All the women in both groups were white and two-thirds were middle class. Four women in the 1990/91 group and two in the later group were from working-class backgrounds; one of the 1998/99 group was from a travelling family. The women's class and ethnic origins clearly have to be taken into account when analysing the data; women from courses with a higher proportion of working-class and minority ethnic groups are likely to have different perspectives and experiences.

**Table 1. Comparison of two research groups 1990/91 and 1998/9**

	Total	Ages	Single parent	Divorced	Married	No. of children	Ages of children
1990/91	13	26-43	4	2	7	1-5	2-13
1998/99	6	33-41	1	1	4	1-3	2-15



There was considerable difference between the two groups in their previous work experience. While only six of the women in the 1990/91 group (3 married, 3 single parents) had worked outside the home before coming on the course, mostly part-time, all the women in the 1998/99 group had had some prior work experience. All but one of those who had worked in the 1990/91 group had been in caring professions: nursing, midwifery, social work and nursery teaching. Pat had been a nursery supervisor in Saudi Arabia, but the others had not reached managerial positions. Natalie was unusual in the 1990/91 group because she had run her own textile business in the Far East.

In the 1998/99 group, there was more variety and some evidence of career progression: three women had worked in caring professions (nurse, child-minder and play-leader); Diana, the former child-minder, had later become a Montessori nursery supervisor and then a local government trainer. Of the other three, Judy had been a dancer, moved into accounting and then run her own fitness club, while Sue had worked as a laboratory assistant and as a medical rep, and then in a management position in medical research. Carol (one of the working-class women) had a rather different profile from the other mothers in the 1998/99 group, as she had taken an Open University degree, and had worked part-time in clerical and shop work to support her studying.

The amount of time spent looking after children at home also varied both between and within the groups. In the 1990/91 group, a longer period at home had been spent by the six older women (mid to late 30s, early 40s), ranging from five to 13 years, while the seven younger women (late 20s, early 30s) had spent between two and five years at home. For example, Hazel (aged 36, with four children) had spent 13 years at home since the birth of her first child. Sheila (aged 33, with two children under 5) had spent three years full-time at home, and then worked part-time to support the family as her husband was unemployed. In the 1998/99 group, the women had started their families later, and the time spent at home was shorter for all but one of the women, ranging from six months to three years. After this, they had worked part-time before coming on the course. Only Carol (aged 34, with two children) in the later group had spent seven years as a full-time mother at home after she had her first child, but she too had worked for a year before starting the PGCE course.

These differences in work and child-care patterns reflect national changes in women's employment in the UK from the beginning to the end of the 1990s. While an increasing number of women now work outside the home, either part-time or full-time, compared to the early 1990s, discontinuity in women's working lives is still prevalent (see Edwards 1993,

Merrill 1999). A summary of the three main patterns of experience before coming on the course is shown in table 2.

**Table 2. Patterns of work and childcare, 1990/91 and 1998/99**

1990/91 (older)	Long time at home with children - no outside work
1990/91 (younger)	Shorter time at home with children - part-time work
1998/99 (all but one)	Work - short time at home with children - part-time work

There were greater similarities between the two groups in terms of motivation to train as a teacher. As well as a general desire to become more economically independent (see Merrill 1999 in relation to mature women entrants to higher education), commitment to teaching was high in both groups, and reasons for wanting to teach were often related to having children of their own, particularly for the 1990/91 group. All the women in both groups had helped voluntarily in their children's schools or nurseries; two women in each group who had been parent helpers had been actively encouraged by female headteachers to apply for the PGCE course. Most of the women in the 1990/91 group had developed an interest in teaching through this unpaid classroom work (see also Duncan 1999), apart from Pat who had paid employment in nurseries.

The 1998/99 group had a rather different profile, as four of the women were working as paid classroom assistants prior to coming on the course, having changed jobs in order to prepare for teacher training, and one was working as a paid play-leader. This demonstrated considerable forward planning which was not so evident in the 1990/91 group, as well as directly relevant professional experience. One woman in the 1990/91 group and two in the 1998/99 group were school governors; they were thus knowledgeable about and involved in the running of their children's schools.

Whatever their prior experience, all the women in both groups had become more interested in teaching through seeing their own children's development - as Duncan (1999) also found in her study of mature women primary trainees - and wanted to extend their knowledge and experience of other children's learning through teaching. Although some of the women in each group thought teaching would fit in well with their child-care commitments because of school holidays, this was by no means the prime reason for choosing to do the course. Most women were under no illusions about the amount of work and time involved; Pam in the 1990/91 group was married to a headteacher and therefore particularly well-informed.

Thus it can be seen in both groups that the women's personal experience had played a large part in their professional choice to train as a teacher, and that the links between the two arenas were likely to be close. This ties in with research showing the gendered nature of primary teaching (e.g. Acker 1989, 1994). However, unlike the 1990/91 group where only one woman had been employed in education before coming on the course, for all but one of the 1998/99 group it was clear that the boundaries between private and professional spheres had already been negotiated by their prior employment in the classroom.

## **Findings**

Comparing the experience of the two research groups, the issues raised by the women in the meetings were remarkably similar, but the framework for teacher education and women in teaching within which they were discussed had changed considerably. The most significant differences between the two research groups were the faster adjustment to teaching by the women in the 1998/99 group, evidenced particularly in the classroom, and their generally more pragmatic approach to the course. Their speedy transition compared to the 1990/91 group may have arisen, at least in part, from their previous classroom experience.

In addition, a possible benefit of the introduction of national standards for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in the UK (DfEE 1998 a) was that the 1998/99 trainees were more quickly able to relate the knowledge and skills acquired in their previous work and in their role as mothers to the professional requirements of teachers. For example, by checking their experience against the list of standards required by the end of the course, the students could see that they had at least partially achieved some of the standards before their training started. This gave the women confidence in their own capability from an early stage. The 1990/91 group made these kinds of positive connections by the end of the course, but it took far longer and, arguably, they needed the support of the research meetings to enable them to do so. At that time, there were no national standards for NQTs, so there were no formal benchmarks against which to judge the students' prior experience. These points will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

The women in the 1998/99 group may also have been helped indirectly by the national changes in women's position in teaching which took place during the 1990s. For example, at the level of promotional prospects at least, women's position in primary teaching in the UK

has improved since the start of the 1990s, when studies identified the discrimination often faced by women primary teachers (e.g. Evetts 1990, Acker 1989, 1994). While the overall percentage of women primary teachers has only increased by a small amount from 81 per cent in 1990 to 83 per cent in 1998 (Howson 1999a), the percentage of women primary headteachers has steadily risen to 57 per cent (Howson 1999b), with a parallel increase in the number of women deputies and other senior positions in primary schools. This change was reflected even more strongly in the local PGCE partnership, where three quarters of the primary schools used for placements in 1998/99 had female headteachers, many of whom had young children themselves, in comparison with under half in 1990/91. These factors could be seen as creating a more favourable climate for women students with children in the 1998/99 cohort.

The areas which were seen as major problems for the trainees will be discussed first, followed by the associated advantages or skills developed. Many of these factors are like two sides of a coin and can be viewed as both problematic and beneficial to the women's development as teachers. Case studies from both groups will be drawn on to illustrate the issues more closely. It must be borne in mind while reading the findings that the small number of women in both groups, particularly the later one, cannot necessarily be viewed as typical of mature trainee teachers at the start and end of the 1990s, although similarities with other studies are noted where these arise.

### **Problems and constraints**

Most of the problems experienced by the women in both groups appeared to relate to tensions between the private and public spheres, that is between their domestic lives and the demands of the course, as Duncan (1999) also found in her study of mature trainee teachers. Many pressures and constraints were structural - e.g. lack of child-care facilities - although others were related to attitudes and feelings. I found that, while there was much similarity between the experiences of the women in 1998/99 and those in 1990/91, there were also differences - some individual and others structural. For example, the division of labour in the later group's families was more equal than that at the start of the decade, and there was greater understanding in the local schools of the pressures on student mothers, as already mentioned. A major difference between the groups was that all the 1998/99 women had already had to face problems arising from their dual roles because of their previous work experience, while many of the 1990/91 group were facing these issues for the first time.

### *Childcare*

Childcare was the biggest and most continuous problem faced by the student mothers in both year groups, and the one which demanded the most continual juggling. Difficulties in combining teacher with motherhood are stressed in many studies (e.g. Evetts 1990, Acker 1994, Munro 1998), and these do not seem to have lessened much by the end of the decade. However, the main difference evident between the two groups was that the 1998/99 women took on the organization of childcare in a more pre-planned and matter-of-fact way, whereas the 1990/91 group's arrangements seemed more *ad hoc* and gave rise to greater emotional pressure. In general, the later group showed more acceptance of, and greater ability to cope with, childcare problems. This was partly because they were more used to combining work with domestic responsibilities, but also because they experienced less criticism from others about taking the PGCE course than the 1990/91 group.

In the 1990/91 group, childcare arrangements were mixed and, in many cases, varied from week to week. For example, Chris, a single parent in her early 30s, described how she spent every Sunday evening ringing round her friends in order to sort out childcare for the coming week. Pam, a mother of five in her mid-30s, had such a complicated system that she had to write it out on a wall-chart each week. Some mothers with pre-school children used local nurseries and child-minders. Advantages were the long hours available compared to schools, and proximity to home; the main disadvantage was financial.

Arrangements were less straightforward for women with school-aged children, mainly because of schools' early finishing time. The women in the 1990/91 group relied on friends, child-minders, their own mothers and partners (sometimes ex-partners) to take their children to and from school, and look after them until they got home. For example, Pam's husband, a headteacher, often had to take their children back to his own school; Vicky, a single parent in her late 20s with two children, relied on her ex-husband to collect the children and look after them after school. The women often drew on the informal networks they had built up during their time at home to help with childcare. The idea of reciprocal obligations was strong, but the women were aware that they might not be able to pay back favours until the holidays.

In the 1998/99 group, childcare was more highly organized, whatever the age of the children. This was partly because there was far more available childcare in the form of nurseries and nursery classes for younger children, and partly because the women had all worked before and established arrangements before starting the PGCE course. However, they too

experienced changes because of the demands of the course. For example, as a classroom assistant, Carol had been able to drop off her children at school before starting her work at 9.30 a.m., while on teaching practice she had to arrange a child-minder to have the children from 7.30 a.m. and take them to school. Sally, married, in her early 40s and a former play-leader, had been able to pick up her children from school as her playgroup work finished early; on the PGCE course she had to make other arrangements. By 1998/99, there was still a lack of after-school care; Carol felt she was lucky in being able to use an after-school club.

The 1998/99 group also benefited from more favourable attitudes towards their situation from teachers in their placement schools. For example, Diana and Judy reported that their school mentors, who also had young children, were understanding if they had to leave early after school sometimes; in Judy's case, she was even able to take her young child into school with her when he was ill. In contrast, the 1990/91 group experienced less sympathetic attitudes from mentors, and felt that their commitment to the course was questioned if childcare arrangements impinged on school time.

In many ways, the student mothers were experiencing the same difficulties over childcare as any working mother. However, they also had to fulfil the course requirements, and felt they had to 'prove' that they could do as well as any childless trainee, as other studies have found in relation to student mothers in higher education (e.g. Edwards 1993, Merrill 1999). This was less of a problem for the 1998/99 trainees because of the more favourable climate in the placement schools: in general, the 1998/99 trainees found more sympathy and understanding towards their situation from their mentors and headteachers than those at the start of the decade. However, the need to appear professional, and to fit in with the ethos of the school on placements, certainly put extra demands on the student parents in both groups.

### *Domestic commitments*

The women's domestic commitments in both groups were heavy, especially for the single parents who had no one with whom to share the burden. This situation did not seem to have lessened much by the end of the decade, although for most of the 1998/99 groups, there was a greater division of labour with partners. In general, the women in both groups found that as soon as they got home each day, the responsibilities of home life – getting tea, children's homework and bedtime, washing and cleaning - had to take over for a large part of each evening. This was before any preparation for the course could be started. The patterns

of domestic work described by the women were very similar to those recorded in diaries by mature students in Duncan's (1999) study.

Juggling these different commitments gave rise to considerable exhaustion, and put additional strain on the women. This double burden is a common problem for women at work and for mature women students in general (see Edwards 1993, Merrill 1999). In particular, the 'complex and fragmented nature of women's lives', as Morrison puts it (1996: 30), with the 'continuous overlapping [of] activities' (1996: 218), requires considerable organization and time management in order to fit in other work. As well as fulfilling course requirements, keeping time for their children was also an important priority for the women. For instance, Julie (1990/91 group) spent time each evening helping her two children with homework, and listening to reading or music practice. Diana (1998/99 group) made it a rule to keep the weekends free for the family, although she worked weekday and Sunday evenings. However, while the 1990/91 group tended to keep time with their children separate from course work, the 1998/99 group used time with their own children to get ideas for their teaching or try out topics and books.

The women's organizational skills, sharpened by their time working at home or in outside work, certainly came in useful here, and were a vital coping strategy (see also Edwards 1993, Morrison 1996). All the women felt that there were not enough hours in the day to fit everything in. The 1990/91 group used various metaphors to express this, such as 'a balancing act', 'being on a roller-coaster' and 'walking a tightrope', which contained both the feeling of difficulty and of potential danger, the danger of failing. However, the 1998/99 group, while still experiencing the same problems, talked about it in a different way, such as 'using slots of time' or 'offsetting one thing against another'; in general, they seemed to approach things more pragmatically, blurring boundaries of public and private life in a positive way.

### *Changes in family life*

For most of the women in the 1990/91 group, starting the PGCE course represented a major change in their own and their families' domestic patterns, even though the women tried to minimize those changes as far as possible. Additional stress was put on the women and their families because of these changes in roles and routines, as found in other studies (e.g. Edwards 1993, Leonard 1994, Merrill 1999). For example, Pam said her husband had to take over 'being mum' in many ways; they had worked out a system of sharing

responsibilities between them. However, as Sheridan (1992) found in her study of women returners to employment, in most cases the sexual division of labour was not radically altered. Although the 1990/91 husbands helped more with jobs at home, they - and the women themselves - still saw domestic commitments as a women's domain (see also Morrison 1996).

However, changes were less extreme for the 1998/99 group, who had all worked prior to coming on the course, and had therefore already come to terms to a large extent with altered arrangements, as had their families. Their situation was similar to some of the women in Duncan's (1999) sample, who went through a period of preparation with their families before starting their teacher training. The four married women in the 1998/99 group took it for granted that their husbands would share in the domestic duties, although more equal domestic roles may not have been typical of families in the mid to late 1990s (Morrison 1996, Duncan 1999).

Most of the married women in the 1990/91 group reported other kinds of pressures too, which seemed to arise directly out of their own change of role. They expressed resentment that their husbands, though generally supportive to their taking the course, demanded more attention when they were at home. For instance, Sheila said it felt 'like having another child'. Morrison (1996) argues that often those who give most support are also the most demanding. The picture was mixed for the 1998/99 group, with only one of the four married women, Carol, reporting relationship problems during the year. Although she stressed that this was triggered by a number of factors, and had been 'brewing for some time' and had nothing to do with the course, it did cause her some additional pressure at the time. There is evidence from other studies (e.g. Leonard 1994, David *et al.* 1996) that the division of emotional labour is more unequal and gives rise to more problems in such circumstances than the division of domestic labour.

For the 1990/91 group, extra demands were also made by many of the younger children, who found it hard to cope with their mothers' increased absence from home. This did nothing to alleviate the women's already strong feelings of guilt (see also Leonard 1994, David *et al.* 1996, Morrison 1996); for example, Vicky wrote, 'I am being a bad mother'. Overall, these problems were experienced less severely by the 1998/99 group, perhaps because the children were already accustomed to their mothers working outside the home (see also Duncan 1999). For example, Sally, who had worked as a play-leader, said that her children 'were used to me working and doing bits and pieces in the evening'. Carol's children, aged 7



and 10 were also already used to her going out to work, and were 'quite adult' about her course commitments. In both groups, older children were generally supportive and interested in what their mothers were doing.

Spending less time with their children was something which the mothers and their children in both groups experienced. Two women in the 1990/91 group went through legal battles for custody of their children while doing the course; one woman in each group was going through a divorce. Women often have to embark on employment or training, where they would benefit from support and stability, at just the time when they are least secure emotionally and financially (David *et al.* 1993, Merrill 1999). They may feel pushed into this out of necessity, to support themselves and their children, and from a need for longer-term security. The pressures on them while doing a course or starting a job are therefore particularly severe during this status transition, although there may also be liberating effects from gaining independence (Britton and Baxter 1999, Merrill 1999). This was certainly experienced by Carol (1998/99 group), who left her husband as soon as she had obtained her first teaching post.

### *Finance*

Money was a major problem for the women in both groups, most of whom had had to take out a loan in order to do the course, even in 1990/91 before student loans were commonplace. This put pressure on them to find a job at the end of the course in order to repay the loan. Husbands of two of the married women (one in each group) were unemployed, and women with working partners were not immune. Boundaries between financial dependence and independence are reported in other studies of mature students (e.g. David *et al.* 1993, Merrill 1999).

Financial worries were not just immediate, but extended to the future. The women in both groups were aware that they would be more expensive to employ than younger newly qualified teachers, because of their age and experience. In spite of worries, those in the 1990/91 group who obtained full-time work after the end of the course were all awarded a salary commensurate with their age and experience. By 1998/99, most of the mothers assumed that they would have to start on a low salary. This reflects one of the ways in which the situation had actually worsened for mature entrants to teaching by the end of the decade.

The parents on the course were not the only trainees to suffer financial hardships, but in both groups the student mothers' difficulties were particularly severe, because they had dependents to support, and because they had invested so much, emotionally and financially, in taking the course. However, there is contradictory evidence about the financial position of mature students: for example, Kirkman (1996) argued that mature NQTs experienced particular financial hardship, while Bird (1999) found that graduates from the OU PGCE course were not disadvantaged compared to their younger colleagues. The introduction of bursaries for students on PGCE courses from September 2000 could make a considerable difference to all trainee teachers.

### **Advantages**

The skills and experience the women in both groups had accumulated in their role as mother, not counting skills derived from other previous work, were considerable. In the 1990/91 group, the women were able to perceive these strengths only as they grew in confidence later in the year; some perhaps never fully acknowledged them. In contrast, the women in the 1998/99 group were able quite quickly to recognize their knowledge and skills, to relate them to the national standards for NQTs, and build them into their teaching. I found that the ability to connect private and public knowledge and experience was stronger in the recent group, perhaps partly because there were more positive attitudes towards working mothers in the UK by 1998, but more specifically, because the national framework of standards for NQTs gave them an explicit reference point against which to measure themselves. In addition, as mentioned earlier, the 1998/99 group all had prior work experience and came to the course with a stronger sense of their self-worth and a clearer idea of the skills they possessed.

#### *Skills working with children*

The skills which the women brought with them fell into two main areas: those directly associated with children, and those indirectly related. All the women in both groups mentioned that their experience with children helped them in the classroom and on the course generally, although the 1990/91 mother acknowledged this quite late in the course compared to the 1998/99 group. As earlier studies of women teachers have found (e.g. Evetts 1990, Acker 1994), positive links could be made between personal and professional roles. The women in both groups felt that because they were used to dealing with children, they were able to relate easily to the children in their classes. Some women in

both groups were teaching children the same age as their own, and they felt that this was mutually beneficial.

Within their general experience with children, particular skills and understanding were identified. The women felt that they knew how to talk to children, at the right level, and use appropriate vocabulary. This is sometimes an area of difficulty for younger or less experienced trainees. They also felt that their first-hand experience of children's development gave them an insight into children's learning and emotional needs; they could anticipate children's moods and responses, for example, and choose their own approach or strategy accordingly. This was invaluable for both the content of their teaching and classroom management. As Carol (1998/99 group) said, 'You use what you do with your own children. It helps a great deal - you use it constantly'. Pam (1990/91 group) and others in both groups mentioned the equally important understanding of children's sense of humour, and the ability to have a laugh with them.

Apart from their day-to-day classroom experience, the trainees felt that they were able to draw on these positive attributes in their course assignments. For example, Kate (1990/91 group) incorporated a case study of her son's language development into her English special study; Fiona (1998/99) used miscue analyses of her daughter's early reading in an essay on the assessment of literacy. In the later group, the women often actively involved their children in their preparation for teaching, trying out ideas with them first, as Duncan (1999) also found. This was a particularly successful strategy for those with older children such as Sally (1998/99 group), and an example of how boundaries were blurred in a positive way.

While these skills remained at a fairly general level for the 1990/91 cohort, the 1998/99 cohort were able to make more specific and explicit links with professional requirements via the national standards. At the start of the course, all the trainees had to audit their subject knowledge in English and mathematics (DfEE 1998 a). This helped the mothers to identify and record their prior knowledge and skills relevant to the standards, and to build up evidence for their developmental profile over the year. For example, early in the course, Diana (1998/99) made a list of all the books she read to her children at bedtime, and realized that she had a wide range of knowledge about children's literature which provided a sound basis for the teaching of literacy (DfEE 1998a, Annex C). Knowledge about child development and how to relate to children contributed towards standards in subject knowledge, teaching and assessment.

### *Ability to relate to adults*

As well as an understanding of the children they were teaching, the women in both groups felt that their experience as parents and working mothers enabled them to relate more easily to other teachers and to parents than the younger trainees. As Duncan (1999) also reports, the women students were highly sensitive in dealing with mentors and negotiating relationships in the classroom. For the 1998/99 group, these skills were important in meeting the professional standards, as well as in specific aspects of their role such as reporting to parents (DfEE 1998a).

In particular, the women's parental role gave them a good understanding of pupils' parents, which was not always shared by other teachers. I heard of several instances which infuriated the student mothers, when teachers made derogatory comments about a child's home background. Some of the women in the 1990/91 group were angry and hurt by comments about 'working mums who neglect their children'. They not only felt personally slighted, but concerned about the kinds of judgement being made about children and their families. This kind of occurrence was less frequent in 1998/99, when attitudes to working mothers, at least in the placement schools, were generally more positive.

From their own experience of juggling numerous responsibilities, the women felt sympathetic towards working parents, and perhaps had a greater understanding of the difficulties and tensions they might face than some teachers without children, as other studies have found (e.g. David *et al.* 1993, 1996, Biklen 1995). It helped the trainees to reach a realistic assessment of how much a school should ask of a parent. Often the student mothers were able to form good relationships with the parents, because of this level of understanding and insight. This also helped when they had parent helpers in their classes.

### *Organizational and other skills*

Organizational ability was cited by most of the women in both groups as an important skill which they had learnt at home or in previous work. This had a twofold advantage. It enabled the women to plan and organize their teaching activities effectively and to create well-ordered classrooms; it also enabled them to organize their own lives in an efficient way, and to make the most of what little time they had (see also Edwards 1993, Duncan 1999). For the 1998/99 group, these skills were directly relevant to standards in planning, teaching and class management (DfEE 1998a).

Many of the women said that time management and the prioritization of commitments were things they automatically used, out of necessity and from past experience. Because of their prior work experience, the women in the 1998/99 group were highly adept at making the most of limited time. Duncan (1999: 58) calls this 'strategic pragmatism' and found much evidence of it among the women students in her study. The 1998/99 group were particularly good at anticipating demands on their time as the course went on, so planned work and completed assignments well in advance to keep ahead. Morrison (1996) argues that efficient organization of time is one way in which women can transform a constraint in their private lives into an advantage in the public domain.

The women in both groups brought a variety of other skills from their previous life and work experience. The ability to deal with stress was strong, particularly among those who had worked in occupations such as nursing, midwifery and social work. These women also brought knowledge of first aid, health and issues such as child abuse, which were extremely useful in school and in dealing with social services. Some women in both groups had lived and worked abroad; they had knowledge of other languages and cultures which they could use in the classroom. Most of the women were good at working with other people, either in the school context or more informally among social networks at the university. Again, it was easier for the 1998/99 group to see the relevance of these skills, as they related directly to specific standards such as health and safety and the Code of Practice, and English as an additional language, as well as more generally to professional standards such as links to the community and working with other agencies (DfEE 1998a).

## **Conclusions**

Since starting a support group for women students with children in the early 1990s, the national context for initial teacher training in the UK has changed, and is changing, considerably. Pressures on trainee teachers are now stronger than ever, both financially, and in the amount and level of work which has to be covered on training courses (Griffiths and Jacklin 1999b).

Within this overall context, the small-scale nature of the research has been acknowledged, and the tentative nature of the conclusions. It must be stressed that the experiences of these student mothers on this particular PGCE course in the south of England may differ from those on other courses, for example, with a different class or ethnic intake, or in other parts of the UK. Nevertheless, the issues raised clearly have resonances with other studies in this

area, and it is hoped that the findings help to illuminate the position of trainee teachers with children, and the positive contribution they make to primary teaching.

With these points in mind, in considering the findings of this study, it can be seen that, although there were many similarities between the two groups of women at the start and end of the decade, there were also some overall differences. For example, whilst both groups faced many similar problems, such as balancing childcare with course commitments, the mothers in the 1998/9 group generally anticipated these problems better and had a more pragmatic approach to them. In this way, additional pressures owing to their dual role appeared in many ways to have diminished for the later group compared to the women at the start of the decade. Some structural constraints did not seem to have changed much since the early 1990s; for example, childcare and many domestic responsibilities still fell heavily on women at the end of the 1990s. However, the status transition from mother to teacher posed fewer problems of adjustment for the women and their families in 1998/99 than for the earlier group.

I have suggested that several factors gave rise to these differences. First, there had been an increase in women working outside the home in the UK, and the position of women primary teachers had improved by the end of the decade. This was particularly true in the local area where there was a large number of women headteachers, and there was evidence in the placement schools of more favourable attitudes towards working mothers. Perhaps because of these changes, the profile of the women in the 1998/99 group was very different from that at the start of the decade, with all the women in the later group having substantial work experience, and all but one of the women having spent shorter periods at home after having children. I have argued that this was a major reason why the mothers in the 1998/99 group were able to cross the boundaries from personal to public/professional identity more easily than those in 1990/91.

It was clear that the student mothers in both groups possessed a range of skills, often developed directly from their domestic and parental roles, that could usefully be transferred to teaching. However, I found that this process of positive transformation was generally more difficult for the women students in the early 1990s, most of whom took longer to recognize their strengths than the mothers at the end of the decade. This was particularly true for those older women in the 1990/91 group who had never worked outside the home.

Although the standards for NQTs (DfEE 1998a) have many negative aspects, and have been particularly criticized for being too numerous, narrow, prescriptive and technical (Griffiths and Jacklin 1999b, Richards 1999), they can also be seen as providing an entitlement for trainee teachers. It became clear when analysing the experiences of the mothers on the 1998/99 PGCE course that the standards provided a valuable benchmark by which the women could assess their skills and make positive links with teaching. This helped them make a more speedy status transition than their counterparts at the start of the decade. In terms of equality, this positive aspect of the new teacher education requirements should not be overlooked.

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### **Notes**

1. Higher education institutions in the UK now have to provide initial teacher education in partnership with schools. One-year primary and secondary postgraduate teacher training courses must include a minimum of 90 and 120 days' school-based training respectively (DfEE 1998a). There is also an increasing range of school-based provision, including school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT), and graduate or registered training programmes (GRIP) in which the trainee is employed by the school as an unqualified teacher.
2. In presenting the findings, the women's names have been changed to protect their identity.
3. The total numbers on the course were 57 in 1990/91 and 25 in 1998/99. The decrease in numbers was due to national government reductions in primary teacher training in the UK and OFSTED/TTA measures (Griffiths and Jacklin 1999a).

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