The next generation of teachers: an investigation of second-level student teachers' backgrounds in the Republic of Ireland

Manuela Heinz

The next generation of teachers: an investigation of second-level student teachers' backgrounds in the Republic of Ireland

Manuela Heinz*

School of Education, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

This paper presents and discusses the demographic, educational and career backgrounds of second-level student teachers in the Republic of Ireland. Its findings confirm that student teachers from the lower social classes are under-represented, and that there is little variety in terms of Postgraduate Diploma in Education students' second-level educational experiences. At the same time, the diversification of student teachers' experiences in terms of their personal and professional lives is illustrated. The student teacher profile presented in this study will inform discussions and planning of teacher education policy and pedagogy, especially as regards the recruitment and selection of student teachers from diverse backgrounds who are supported in their development as critical and reflective practitioners and who enact teaching that benefits all learners.

Keywords: student teachers' backgrounds; demographic backgrounds; socio-economic backgrounds; religious backgrounds; professional backgrounds; school experience; selection

Introduction

Relevance of this study in the context of teacher education research, policy and programme design

This study of student teachers' backgrounds contributes to research constructing teacher education as a policy problem as well as a learning problem (Cochran-Smith and Fries 2005). While the first strand of research assumes that policy-makers can contribute to meeting the challenges involved in providing a high-quality teaching body by 'manipulating those broad aspects of teacher preparation most likely to affect pupil learning' (Ibid. 92), the second research perspective understands teachers' work from a 'deliberative orientation' (Zumwalt 1982), and teacher learning as inextricably linked with the experiences, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs that prospective teachers bring with them when they begin formal teacher preparation programmes (Cochran-Smith and Fries 2005, 84).

As regards this study's contribution to teacher-education policy, the description of student teachers' backgrounds will support analyses and policy actions designed to plan future needs as well as recruitment and selection strategies. The focus on teacher candidates' backgrounds is timely since contemporary school contexts in the Republic of Ireland have, over the past decade, been drawing attention to and ignited

*Email: Manuela.heinz@nuigalway.ie

concerns about the mismatch between the social, ethnic, cultural and language backgrounds of pupil and teacher populations. Even though the impact of ethnically as well as socio-economically homogeneous teaching bodies on student learning and/ or achievement has not been studied to date (Zumwalt and Craig 2008), and even though recent international reviews of research on gender and education demonstrate that the sex of teachers has little, if any, effect on the achievement of pupils (Sabbe and Aelterman 2007), an increasing understanding as to the desirability of a more representative teaching force can be observed among educational researchers, teacher educators and policy-makers in Ireland and internationally (Conway et al. 2009; Department of Education and Science 2002; Lynch and Lodge 2004; Moran 2008; Teaching Council 2008; Zumwalt and Craig 2008).

Arguments for increasing the diversity of the teaching force to reflect that of the student population are connected to theories of educational and social reproduction and based on the belief that a diverse and representative teaching force can best prepare all children for life in a democratic and multicultural society where knowledge is not seen as the special privilege of Whites and/or the middle class (Collins 2009; Zumwalt and Craig 2008). Numerous empirical studies demonstrating strong relationships between social class and academic attainment illustrate the persisting social inequalities in education (Clancy 1995; Drudy et al. 2005; Smyth 1999). A number of studies have highlighted how important it is for children from disadvantaged and ethnic minority backgrounds to have teachers of their own background as role models who can instil positive attitudes towards school and learning and provide culturally relevant pedagogy (Dee 2001; Devine 2011; King 1993b; Ladson-Billings 1992). While structuralist accounts and reproduction analyses relating persisting social inequalities and reproduction to teacher backgrounds, beliefs, language use and classroom practices have been largely abandoned as conceptual research frameworks since the 1990s (Collins 2009), they remain highly relevant as they continue to have a strong influence on teacher-education policy contexts in Ireland and internationally.

In its recent policy document on the Continuum of Teacher Education, the Teaching Council states that entry procedures for teacher education courses should be reviewed to 'explore ways of facilitating entry to the profession by under-represented groups' (2011, 12). A thorough analysis of current compositions of student teacher bodies is a crucial precondition for further evidence-based discussions and policy actions aimed at ensuring a greater representativeness of future teaching bodies in Ireland.

As regards this study's contribution to teacher education at programme level, its empirical findings will contribute to the design of more learner-centred teacher preparation courses that, first, reflect and respond to the diverse backgrounds and needs of teacher candidates, and, second, build on and extend student teachers' experiences, beliefs and attitudes which are regarded as crucial ingredients in student teacher and subsequent teacher development (Conway et al. 2009; Department of Education and Science 2002, 59, 61; Drudy 2006; Goodson 2003; Minor et al. 2002; Richardson and Watt 2006; Sugrue 1997, 2004; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, and Moon 1998).

As early as in 1975, Lortie argued that teachers emerge from their induction with a strongly biographical orientation to pedagogical decision-making (Lortie 1975, 81). As far as the nature of student teachers' and experienced teachers' school biographies

and experiences are concerned, they are likely highly correlated with their socio-economic background (Popkewitz, Tabachnick, and Wehlage 1982). A better knowledge of student teachers' backgrounds and educational experiences provides teacher educators with the opportunity to adapt the content and teaching strategies in their programmes to encourage and support student teachers to, first, appreciate the experiences of pupils whose backgrounds and/or experiences might differ from their own and, second, enact teaching that goes beyond that which they have experienced themselves and that supports the academic and personal development and achievement of students from diverse backgrounds. From a theoretical perspective, this learner-centred approach to teacher education and development which aims to engage with, broaden, and possibly change student teachers' individual perspectives and understandings of education and schools through an emphasis on critical analysis and inquiry is inspired by more recent and multifaceted accounts of race, class and gender in relation to schooling which emphasise the importance of identity formation and agency (Collins 2009). Last but not least, a better understanding of students' occupational backgrounds will, hopefully, enlighten teacher educators as to the immense potential for self-directed and peer learning that a course which is attracting growing numbers of mature applicants with extensive professional experience in a great variety of occupational fields offers.

Overview of findings from studies exploring student teachers' backgrounds in Ireland and internationally

A variety of demographic background factors of applicants and entrants to second-level teacher education programmes in the Republic of Ireland have already been investigated and discussed in a previous longitudinal analysis of Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) admission data (Heinz 2008). It was identified that the student teacher cohort remains homogeneously Irish with regard to nationality, that a large majority of applicants and entrants are female and that the number of mature applicants and entrants to the PGDE programmes has significantly increased between 1999 and 2006. It was also reported that more than half of all 2006 entrants had gained teaching experience before embarking the PGDE programme. The high academic calibre of PGDE students has been illustrated by the high proportion of entrants with honours-level primary degrees (86.6%) which has also been shown to have increased over the years under consideration (Heinz 2008).

The relative overrepresentation of female applicants and entrants to teacher education is a widespread phenomenon in Europe and worldwide, especially in the developed countries (Aksu et al. 2010; Brookhart and Freeman 1992; Clarke 2009; Drudy et al. 2005; Dunn and Morgan 1979; Heinz 2008; Killeavy 1993; Moran 2008; Moran et al. 2001; OECD 2005; Richardson and Watt 2006; Thornton, Bricheno, and Reid 2002). Student teacher bodies have also been found to be homogeneous as regards their ethnicity in the USA, Australia and Northern Ireland, with the majority of them being White and from the dominant culture (Brookhart and Freeman 1992; Moran 2008; Richardson and Watt 2006; Su 1997). The trend towards a more diverse student teacher body as regards student teachers' ages has also been observed in the USA, Australia and Northern Ireland (Johnson and Kardos 2008; Moran 2008; Richardson and Watt 2006) while research from China

and Turkey reports that student teachers are mainly in their early 20s and/or younger (Aksu et al. 2010; Su et al. 2001).

The PGDE admission data do not include data on the social class, family background, professional background, disability, religious background and/or second-level educational background of applicants since neither of these factors is currently perceived as relevant to the selection process (Heinz 2008). Very little information is available on these background variables for second-level student teachers and teachers in Ireland.

As regards social class backgrounds, teaching has, historically, been viewed as an upwardly mobile career choice for students from working and lower middle classes (King 1993a; Lanier and Little 1986; Lortie 1975; Smith and Pratt 1996; Zumwalt and Craig 2008). Studies conducted in the USA, Australia, China, Turkey and Canada found that student teachers typically come from homes where socio-economic status is not as high as that of college students in general (Aksu et al. 2010; Brookhart and Freeman 1992; Richardson and Watt 2006; Smith and Pratt 1996; Su et al. 2001). Studies conducted with student teachers in the Republic of Ireland showed that primary student teachers come mainly from farming and middle-class backgrounds (Drudy et al. 2005; Greaney, Burke, and McCann 1987; Killeavy 1993).

Only one recent publication (Clarke 2009) describes a multi-institutional empirical study exploring second-level student teachers' socio-economic backgrounds, gender, age, teaching backgrounds and their reasons for choosing a teaching career. Data explored in this study have been garnered from a larger collaborative multi-institutional study entitled 'The Future of Consecutive Post-Primary Teacher Education: An Assessment of the needs of pre-service and newly qualified teachers and the needs of the post-primary sector (2002–2007)'. The population identified in this study included all students who participated in post-primary teacher education at the NUI[1] education departments and Trinity College Dublin between 2002 and 2006. The study achieved an overall response rate of 60% and 38% of respondents answered the question concerning parental occupations (N = 846, 23% of the total population identified in the research study).

As regards the social class backgrounds of second-level student teachers, Clarke (2009) found that the category of respondents' fathers with the highest representation (17%) was that of 'Other in receipt of social welfare, loans or dependent'. Clarke's results furthermore confirmed that the overrepresentation of students from rural and farming backgrounds observed in primary student teacher cohorts applies to second-level student teacher cohorts as well. As Clarke notes, it is difficult to interpret the findings related to second-level student teachers' social class backgrounds 'due to the varied forms that social welfare payments may take and they contain many financial supports apart from unemployment payments and assistance' (Clarke 2009, 173–4). Furthermore, the design of the survey and the relevant question (Clarke, Lodge, and Shevlin 2012) may have influenced the response rate as well as the representativeness of the results in terms of student teachers' socio-economic backgrounds. Firstly, the relevant question appears to request this data only from respondents who 'are dependent upon their parent(s)/guardian(s)'. It, secondly, requests information about parental occupation and economic status (support payment) within the same question. One may tentatively presume that the (previous) occupations of some of the fathers included in the 'Other in receipt of social welfare, loans or dependent' category remain unknown.

Background, focus and contribution of this study

The investigation reported in this paper forms part of a larger PhD study initiated and supported by the Professional Diploma in Education Applications Centre (PDEAC) and focusing on the *Selection, Backgrounds and Motivations of Second-level Student Teachers in the Republic of Ireland* (Heinz 2011). It will provide new insights into a number of background variables that have not been explored previously: the professional and family backgrounds, religious backgrounds and practices as well as second-level educational experiences of entrants to second-level teacher education in Ireland. The lack of knowledge in relation to the first two variables is particularly surprising as the increase in numbers of mature students to second-level teacher education programmes has been commented on for quite a while (Coolahan 2003).

As regards student teachers' social class backgrounds, this study will complement and extend the picture provided by Clarke (2009). Its findings represent, with a response rate of 52% to the relevant question, the most robust findings in this area available to date. The use of recent Central Statistics Offices classifications of parental professions (current and previous) allows, for the first time in the Irish context, for comparisons of its results with distributions found in the whole population in Ireland as well as in cohorts of entrants to primary teaching.

Methodology

Results presented in this paper have been gained from a cross-sectional online questionnaire which was sent (via email) to all 2006 National University of Ireland (NUI) PGDE[2] entrants (University College Cork [UCC], University College Dublin [UCD], National University of Ireland [NUIG], National University of Ireland, Maynooth [NUIM]) for whom email addresses were available in August 2006. In terms of percentages of the total 2006/2007 student cohort, 44% ($n = 345$) of the 781 NUI PGDE students participated in the survey.[3] Kent (2001) found that for postal surveys, typical response rates are 20–30%. This survey received, therefore, a very acceptable response rate. In order to address the issue of survey non-response bias, a 'wave analysis' where 'the researcher examines returns on selected items week by week to determine if average responses change' was undertaken (Leslie 1972). Accordingly, responses to selected demographic, factual and attitudinal items were monitored at weekly and later shorter intervals. The general stability of real-time results thereby observed suggests an insignificant non-response bias. To further investigate the representativeness of the sample, the respondents' distribution in terms of their demographic characteristics (age, sex, nationality and primary degree subject) was compared with those of the total population of 2006 NUI PGDE entrants available from the 2006 PDEAC[4] data-set. Results of this analysis, which showed only minor insignificant differences, confirmed the survey sample's representativeness.

To determine students' socio-economic backgrounds, the survey included several questions asking students to describe their parents' current or, where parents had retired, their last occupation. Two items asked students to give their parents' precise job titles. Respondents were asked to 'Please state principal present occupation, giving precise job title. If not in paid employment, please record LAST occupation held by a) FATHER/GUARDIAN; and b) MOTHER/GUARDIAN'. Parents'

occupations were coded according to the social class and socio-economic group categories of the 2006 census classification (Central Statistics Office 2007a, Appendixes 6, 7 and 8).

Following the pre-testing strategy developed by Dillman (2000), the survey was piloted in four stages. SurveyMonkey results were downloaded into an Excel format and then imported into and analysed using SPSS. Responses to open-ended, qualitative questions were analysed thematically using NVIVO's 'free node' and 'tree node' functions. Besides student teachers' demographic, socio-economic, professional and educational backgrounds described in this paper, the survey also explored student teachers' motivations for teaching and perceptions of second-level education in Ireland.

Limitations of this study

Some of the difficulties encountered when collecting and classifying data on social class and other sensitive information in other research (Clancy 2001; Clarke 2009; Drudy et al. 2005) have to be highlighted as limitations of this study as well. First, this study relies on parental occupation as indicator of student teachers' social class, even though, from a theoretical perspective, social class position describes a more complex sociological concept including a variety of other factors such as relations to property, the ability to command resources, educational background, income, wealth and 'life chances' – i.e. access to factors such as good health, housing and educational opportunities for one's children (Drudy and Lynch 1993, 138). Second, in some cases, insufficient or imprecise information given on occupations impeded totally accurate classification. In most cases of ambiguous job titles, social class position and socio-economic group were estimated. While these estimates contributed to a more comprehensive data-set, they also introduce a higher degree of error to the same. Third, low response rates to the questions on participants' parental occupation (52% of survey respondents, 23% of all 2006 NUI entrants, $n = 180$) and religion (62% of survey respondents, 27% of all 2006 NUI entrants, $n = 213$) have to be considered when interpreting the results.

Presentation and discussion of results

Social background

Survey results indicate that 20% of entrants' fathers were farmers. Entrants from farm families further specified the acreage of their families' farms, with 60.7% of them coming from families who owned 100 acres or more, indicating that their families belonged to the higher-income farming sector. In comparison with figures provided by the Central Statistics Office (2007a) (5% in 2006) relating to the distribution of the whole population across different employment sectors, the representation of fathers who were farmers within the total student body is disproportionately large.[5] Overall, 59.6% of respondents described the area where they grew up as rural.

As regards student teachers' social class backgrounds, responses from the sample of second-level teacher education entrants indicated that 69.8% of their fathers and 56.8% of their mothers were professional, managerial and technical or non-manual workers (social class 1, 2 and 3). Fathers belonging to these social classes were

overrepresented when compared to the whole population where the proportion of males within these categories is 45.1%.

In relation to parents' socio-economic groups (see Table 1), information received from respondents indicates that the percentage of entrants' mothers and fathers who are employers and managers (8.3 and 12.9%, respectively) is slightly lower than the corresponding percentage of all female and male workers in this socio-economic group (14.2 and 16.5, respectively).

Interestingly, the share of parents within the lower professional socio-economic group (C), which includes primary and post-primary teachers, is significantly higher than the equivalent proportion of all workers in this category. Twelve per cent ($n = 20$) of all respondents had at least one parent who was a schoolteacher, with mothers who were teachers accounting for 9.1% ($n = 16$) within the maternal occupational category.

The figures relating to parents' social class show that slightly less than half of all entrants to teacher education represented in this sample came from a social class background on par with or higher than teaching (46.2% of fathers and 36.1% of mothers within social class categories 1 and 2). The remaining 53.8% of respondents, whose fathers' occupations were categorised as social classes 3–7, could be considered to be moving upward on the social class ladder when entering the teaching profession. This distribution between second-level teacher education entrants who remain at the same level and those who ascend socially differs from previous research findings for primary student teachers' social class backgrounds (Drudy et al. 2005) (for details see Table 2).

Family background

The mean number of siblings for the 218 respondents to the relevant question was 3.73, indicating an average family size of 4.73 children. In accordance with respondents' mean age of 26.6 years in August 2006 (the time when the survey

Table 1. Distributions of all male and female workers and teacher education entrants' fathers and mothers across socio-economic groups.

Socio-economic group	All males %[a]	Entrants' fathers %	All females %[a]	Entrants' mothers %
A – employers and managers	16.5	12.9	14.2	8.3
B – higher professionals	6.4	8.8	5.2	3.6
C – lower professionals	8.3	12.9	13.0	23.2
D – non-manual	13.3	12.4	25.4	24.4
E – manual skilled	14.9	22.4	5.4	1.2
F – semi-skilled	9.1	3.5	7.6	10.7
G – unskilled	4.4	1.8	3.1	
H – own account workers	5.4	5.3	3.1	0.6
I – farmers	5.2	20.0	2.7	
J – agricultural workers	0.8		0.4	
Z – other (homemaker)	15.7		19.9	28.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	2,121,171	170	2,118,677	168

[a]Total numbers given in the Central Statistics Office Report (2007a, 60, 61) converted into percentages.

Table 2. Social class of school leavers', primary student teachers' and second-level student teachers' parents.

Social class	School leavers' fathers %[a]	Primary student teachers' fathers %[a]	Second-level student teachers' fathers %	School leavers' mothers %[ab]	Primary student teachers' mothers %[ac]	Second-level student teachers' mothers %
1 and 2	49.1	57.9	46.2	42.1	59.3	36.1
3 and 4	43.5	32.8	49.1	45.1	25.7	25.4
5 and 6	7.4	9.3	4.7	12.8	15.0	10.7
Home makers						27.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
n	819	192	169	539	113	169

Note: This table has been adapted from Drudy et al. (2005, 70) – results from this study have been added to the table presented in Drudy et al. (2005, 70).
[a]Source: Drudy et al. (2005, 70).
[b]The largest group of mothers (42%) fell into the 'other' category, mainly housewives, but this group is not included in the table (Drudy et al. 2005, 69).
[c]28.9 per cent of mothers worked full-time in the home. They are not included in this table (Drudy et al. 2005, 69).

was administered), one could compare respondents' average family size with the fertility statistics available for their 'mean birth year' 1980. The difference between the two figures (mean family size = 4.73; total fertility rate in 1980 = 3.24) would indicate that student teachers' average family size is bigger than the national average.

Due to recent demographic developments in Ireland future second-level teachers' family backgrounds, as regards family size, differ in an even more striking way from that of their future pupils. The pupils who are/will be taught by the 2006 student teacher cohort were born after 1995 when the total fertility rate was 1.84. On average, pupils are therefore growing up with less than half the number of siblings their teachers grew up with.

The analysis of respondents' answers to the question about their marital status shows that the great majority of entrants to teacher education (86.2% of 219 respondents) are single. About every eighth respondent (7.8%) indicated that s/he was married. As regards respondents' childrearing responsibilities, one in seven (13.8%) entrants indicated that they had one child or more. Overall, 10 respondents (4.6%) specified that they had 1 child, 11 (5%) confirmed that they had 2 children and 4 (1.8%) and 5 (2.3%) respondents were parents of 3 and 4 children, respectively.

Religion

The survey explored the questions of whether student teachers belonged to any religion and how often they practised their religion. While teaching bodies in second-level schools are nowadays predominantly composed of lay teachers, most secondary schools, which continue to provide second-level education for the majority of pupils between the age of 12 and 18 (55% of all pupils) (Department of Education and Skills 2008), have preserved their denominational nature and continue to subscribe to a catholic school ethos.

From a list of eight given religions, including Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, only three were chosen by the sample of 2006 NUI entrants. As was to be expected, the great majority of respondents (88.2%) declared that they were Roman Catholic. This figure compares to 86.8% of the total population belonging to the Roman Catholic faith in 2006 (Central Statistics Office 2007b). Three students (1.4% of all respondents) chose the Church of Ireland when asked about their religious affiliation and two students were Methodist (0.9% of all respondents). In comparison to the figures collected by the Central Statistics Office in the 2006 National Census, entrants subscribing to the Church of Ireland are underrepresented in the sample while those of Methodist faith are overrepresented. Their participation rates compare to 3.0 and 0.3% in the total population, respectively. The sample size might, however, be too small to ascertain reliable participation ratios for both religious groups.

An interesting feature of this analysis is the large number of entrants indicating that they did not belong to any religious group. Twenty respondents (9.5% of all respondents) stated that they were not religious, representing twice the proportion of individuals without religious affiliations recorded for the total population (4.4%) by the Central Statistics Office in 2006 (2007b). A significantly higher percentage of male (13.8%, $N = 9$) than female (7.7%, $N = 11$) student teachers fell into this category. Two respondents ticked the box 'other', specifying that they were Atheist and Anglican.

The succeeding survey question required students to specify how often they practised their religion. Out of an overall of 206 respondents to this question, 8.3% stated that they practised their religion every day, 29.6% once a week, 15.5% every month, 29.1% more than once a year and 17.5% declared that they did not practise their religion at all ('never'). Figure 1 illustrates differences between male and female
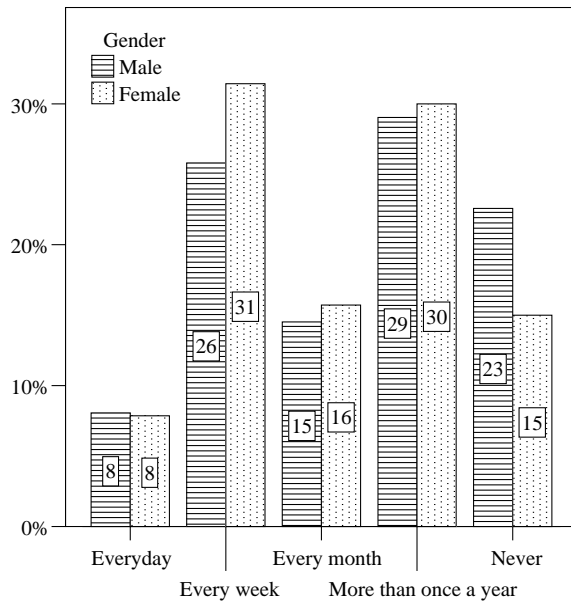

Figure 1. Percentage of male ($n = 63$) and female ($n = 140$) respondents practising their religion with different frequencies (bar chart).

respondents as regards the frequencies with which they practised their religions. It shows that female entrants in this sample practised their religion more frequently than their male counterparts. The difference between both is most pronounced in the composition of the group that never practised their religion, which is composed of 22.6% of male and 15.0% of female respondents.

Professional backgrounds of mature entrants

Past activities and length of work experience

All respondents were required to answer the question: 'What have you been doing for the past year?' As shown in Figure 2, nearly half (44.2%) of all entrants represented in the survey sample had been working full-time before embarking on their teacher training programme. In addition, 22.3% of respondents had gained work experience in part-time employment. Only about every fifth entrant progressed from undergraduate studies directly to teacher education; 4.7% of respondents were enrolled in postgraduate study programmes the year before entering PGDE, and the remaining 7.8% of entrants indicated that they had been on a career break, unemployed, travelling or working in the home. Interestingly, the last three activities (unemployed, travelling and homemaker) were only chosen by female respondents.

More than two-thirds of entrants who had worked before entering PGDE ($n = 180$) indicated that they had been in employment for more than 1 year. As much as 38.3% of entrants with a working history had been working for more than 3 years. About every fifth respondent within this category had a working history that spanned over more than 5 years and as much as 12.2% specified that they had been working for more than a decade.
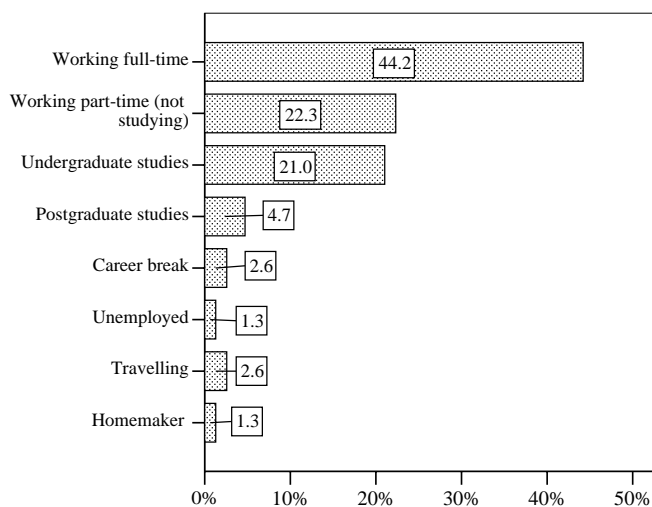

Figure 2. Past activities of respondents ($n = 229$) (bar chart).

Previous occupation types

Previous careers spanned a diverse range of occupations. The most common career background, with more than half of all respondents (56.9%) fitting into this category, was in Education. The majority of respondents who chose Education as their previous sector of employment specified that they had been working as teachers before entering PGDE courses (43.1% ($N = 78$) of all respondents with work experience had worked as teachers – substitute, part-time, TEFL, Special Needs). Among the other occupational sectors supplying entrants to teacher education, sales/marketing/customer service, secretarial/administrative, manufacturing/production, science and research, IT, banking and insurance and retail were the most widespread, accounting for 5–10% of respondents.

Second-level education

Second-level school type attended by student teachers

The greatest proportion of respondents (72.5%) were former pupils of secondary schools. Fourteen per cent of entrants had completed their second-level education in community and comprehensive schools, and 13.3% had obtained their second-level qualifications from vocational schools. Table 3 illustrates that NUI entrants with a secondary school background are overrepresented in the student teacher body in comparison to the proportion of all Irish full-time students attending the same school type. Fifty-two per cent ($N = 181$) of respondents indicated that they had attended single sex schools, while 48% ($N = 165$) came from co-educational schools.

Second-level school experiences

The results of the analysis of the open question addressing entrants' second-level school experiences (depicted in Table 4) show that for the great majority of respondents (80.8%), second-level education was a positive experience. As much as 66.3% of respondents used adjectives like 'enjoyable', 'happy' and/or 'great' to describe their times at school. Where positive descriptions were explored in more detail, they were often connected to memories of good and/or inspirational teachers,

Table 3. Proportion of all full-time students and student teachers (2006/2007) completing their second-level education in different school types.

	All second-level pupils %[a]	Student teachers second level school %
Secondary	55	72.5
Community and comprehensive	15.7	13.9
Vocational	29.3	13.3
Other		0.3
N/n	333,718	345

[a]Source: DES (2008), Key Statistics about the Department's Customers, http://www.education.ie/home/home.jsp?pcategory=17216andecategory=17241andlanguage=EN, Number of full-time students in institutions aided by the Department of Education, 2006/2007)

Table 4. Student teachers' second-level school experiences. Qualitative themes.

Please give a brief account of your experiences at your second-level school!

Category	Number	% of respondents
Generally positive description	211	80.8
Balanced, neutral	33	15.3
Generally negative/critical description	17	6.5

Recurrent themes in respondents' descriptions of their second-level experiences

Themes	Number	% of respondents
Good teachers ($N = 58$), inspirational teachers ($N = 12$)	70	24.0
Extracurricular activities (positive: $N = 60$, limited: $N = 7$)	67	22.9
Good relationship with teachers	39	13.4
Friends	37	12.7
Critical of teachers and/or teaching approaches	25	8.6
Description of self as good student	24	8.2
Discipline (good: $N = 9$, bad: $N = 2$, strict: $N = 10$)	21	7.2
Good learning atmosphere, school supportive	20	6.8
Range of subjects (good: $N = 11$, restricted: $N = 7$)	18	6.2
Personal development	12	4.1
Facilities (positive: $N = 7$, poor: $N = 5$)	12	4.1
Single-sex vs. co-educational schools (co-ed positive: $N = 5$, criticising single-sex model: $N = 3$, single-sex positive: $N = 1$)	9	3.1
Lack of guidance/support	7	2.4
Enjoyed learning	7	2.4
Students' socio-economic background and/or abilities	5	1.7
Bullying (general: $N = 3$, experience being bullied: $N = 2$)	5	1.7
Streaming	3	1.0
Critical of school as institution	3	1.0

a good relationship with teachers, participation in extra-curricular activities as well as good and often lifelong friends.

Fifteen per cent of the sample gave balanced or neutral assessments of their times at their second-level schools. Statements describing school experiences as 'fine', 'o.k.' and/or 'enjoyable, but . . .' as well as neutral descriptions of schools, or assessments which seemed to balance positive and negative attributes were categorised as 'balanced/neutral'. Only 6.5% of respondents gave an overall negative and/or critical account of their second-level school experience. Their criticism addressed teaching approaches, lack of commitment and support by teachers who 'were just going through the motions', poor facilities as well as institutional practices.

As regards recurring themes in respondents' descriptions, 24% of entrants mentioned that they had had good and/or inspirational teachers who were 'supportive, helpful, just, motivated, enthusiastic and approachable, and who made an effort and delivered a high standard of education'. Many students (13.4%) furthermore stated that they 'got on well with' or had 'a good relationship with' their teachers.

The next most popular theme present in 22.9% of all descriptions related to extra-curricular activities. The great majority of references to this topic (89.6%) were very positive, describing respondents' enjoyable and successful participation in such activities, or the wide variety of different activities on offer.

Further positive memories of entrants included their descriptions of themselves as good students (8.2%) and of a supportive school and generally good learning atmosphere (6.8%). Interestingly, few students (4.1%) considered their personal development during their school times important enough to mention it in their account, and even fewer (2.4%) specifically stated that they had enjoyed learning at their second-level school.

Three recurrent themes, which were described from favourable as well as critical perspectives, were the topics of 'discipline', the 'range of subjects on offer' and the quality of the schools' 'facilities'. The most frequently recurring critical theme addressed 'teachers and teaching approaches'. References to 'bad' and/or 'unsupportive' teachers, 'teachers who were clocking up the hours' or 'poor teaching standards', featured in 8.6% of all responses. Often, such negative descriptions stood alongside more positive assessments. Overall, the examination of entrants' responses proved that references to 'good' and/or 'inspiring teachers' by far outnumbered negative and/or critical assessments of teaching abilities and/or approaches.

A small number of students ($n = 7$) commented on the 'lack of guidance/support' available in their second-level school, mostly in the area of career guidance. Only five respondents referred to the problem of 'bullying' in their descriptions, with three of them portraying a general critical attitude towards the problem and the way it was dealt with by school personnel while two entrants testified that they had experienced bullying themselves as pupils. Very few respondents viewed schools and education from a sociological perspective, voicing criticism against the 'power structure of school' ($n = 3$), addressing disadvantage and teachers who 'pigeon-holed pupils according to perceived socio-economic backgrounds' ($n = 5$) and/or streaming ($n = 3$).

Summary and conclusion

The results of this study have shown that the objective of diversifying the Irish second-level student teacher bodies remains highly relevant. They have shown that student teachers from working-class backgrounds are underrepresented, and that there is little variety in terms of PGDE students' second-level educational experiences.

Despite the reported underrepresentation of students from the lower social classes in the PGDE student body, the data describe a broader socio-economic profile among entrants to post-primary teacher education than has been reported for entrants to primary teaching. This is a significant finding since it was often assumed that social backgrounds of second-level teacher education candidates would not differ greatly from those of primary student teachers (Drudy and Lynch 1993). Nevertheless, while entrants to primary teaching have been found to come mainly from middle-class backgrounds, over half of the second-level entrants, whose social backgrounds were recorded in this study, would be moving upward on the social class ladder when entering the teaching profession. One possible explanation for these differences might be that the level of social selection is higher at entry to primary teacher education than at entry to postgraduate second-level teacher education.

Accordingly, while the former requires candidates to score high points in their Leaving Certificates, the PGDE programme intakes students from a great variety of primary degree backgrounds, many of which require much lower points at the point of entry to third-level education. The opportunity to gain up to eight extra points for prior teaching experience in the PGDE selection process up to 2009 might have further improved chances for applicants from non-manual and skilled-manual (social class 3 and 4) social backgrounds.

These findings in relation to student teachers' social backgrounds are important for teacher education programmes which can benefit from and should reflect the experiences of a more diverse group of entrants. It will be important to monitor how the recently changed experiential selection criterion which, since 2010, offers no points for teaching experience gained in Irish schools and fewer points for considerably more professional experience in other fields might impact the composition of student teacher cohorts.[6]

With reference to student teachers' places of origin, the study confirms that the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of children from farming backgrounds and/ or from rural areas among primary student teachers applies to Irish second-level student teacher cohorts as well. Further similarities have been established between primary- and second-level student teachers' family backgrounds with both groups coming from bigger families than the national norm (Killeavy 1998).

With regard to student teachers' religious affiliations, survey results might forecast a further decline of the historically important influence of the Catholic Church on the Irish education system as these newly qualified teachers, many of whom are less closely connected to the Roman Catholic faith than their predecessors, are entering schools. While a detailed comparative analysis of religious identity and practices of student teachers and the whole population poses considerable challenges on methodological and data levels and is beyond the scope of this study, it can be said that the observed decline in religious practice among pre-service teachers mirrors general trends of religious change that have been traced over time in Ireland and linked to rapid economic and social change. A comparison of the percentage of student teachers with religious affiliations who, in this survey, stated that they never practised their religion (17.5%) with the percentage of Catholics who never attend religious services (apart from weddings, funerals and christenings) (8%) recorded by the European Values Survey in 2008 (O'Mahony 2010) might even forecast lower practice levels among student teachers than is the case for the general population.

This paper also illustrated the diversification of student teachers' experiences in terms of their personal and professional lives. One can assume that the high percentage of mid-career entrants (66%) will bring different skills and experiences than their younger counterparts to their new careers that can enrich teacher education programmes and thus the educational experience of all student teachers. At the same time, they will, most certainly, enter their teacher education with a different set of expectations which teacher educators need to understand and respond to in order to ensure that all student teachers reap the maximum benefits in terms of their development as teachers from their preparatory courses.

In terms of student teachers' second-level school backgrounds, the overrepresentation of students from secondary schools, which have traditionally had a very academic approach to education, is not surprising considering that those schools prepare their pupils for the higher ability levels of the final Leaving Certificate

Examination and are, thus, the main providers of students to third-level education. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of teacher candidates lack first-hand experience of the more technical and vocational education as well as of the alternative Leaving Certificate Programmes (LC Vocational Programme, LC Applied Programme) provided and catered for by vocational and comprehensive schools needs to be taken into account by teacher educators when preparing teacher training programmes which aim to prepare student teachers for future teaching careers in a variety of school contexts.

In light of the findings describing student teachers' overwhelmingly positive second-level school experiences, teacher educators need to assess what instructional strategies might be most effective to extend entrants' understandings of schooling to include an appreciation of a range of sociological perspectives including concepts of disadvantage and inclusive education. Teacher educators need to address the question of how they can, first, support student teachers to develop empathy for pupils who struggle in school and whose educational experiences are not as positive as their own and, second, prepare them to enact context-appropriate teaching methodologies that many of them have not experienced themselves in the academically oriented secondary schools they visited as pupils.

Notes

1. The constituent universities of the National University of Ireland (NUI) are UCC – University College Cork, UCD – University College Dublin, NUIG – National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIM – National University of Ireland, Maynooth.
2. The title of this consecutive second-level teacher education programme has since changed to the Professional Diploma in Education (PDE).
3. The researcher negotiated access to student teachers' application forms with PDEAC. The total response rate for completed questionnaires from those contacted was 51%. For more details in relation to sampling strategy, response rate and representativeness of data please refer to a more detailed description of this survey in Heinz, M. (2011).
4. The Professional Diploma in Education Applications Centre administers application and selection process for all NUI colleges centrally.
5. The share of the agricultural sector has been declining drastically since 1926 when it accounted for 50% of total employment to 14.9% in 1997 and further to only 5% in 2006 (Central Statistics Office 2007a, 5).
6. For a detailed description of the PGDE selection system see Heinz, M. (2011).

Notes on contributor

Manuela Heinz works with Undergraduate and Postgraduate students teachers as lecturer and Director of Teaching Practice at the School of Education, National University of Ireland Galway.

References

Aksu, M., C.E. Demir, A. Daloglu, S. Yildirim, and E. Kiraz. 2010. Who are the future teachers in turkey? Characteristics of entering student teachers. *International Journal of Educational Development* 30: 91–101.

Brookhart, S.M., and D.J. Freeman. 1992. Characteristics of entering teacher candidates. *Review of Educational Research* 62: 37–60.

Central Statistics Office. 2007a. *Census 2006 principal socio-economic results.* Dublin: Stationery Office.

154   *M. Heinz*

Central Statistics Office. 2007b. *Census 2006*. Vol. 5, *Ethnic or cultural background* (including the Irish Traveller Community). Dublin: Stationary Office.

Clancy, P. 1995. *Access to college: Patterns of continuity and change*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clancy, P. 2001. *College entry in focus: A fourth national survey of access to Higher Education*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clarke, M. 2009. Choosing post-primary teaching as a career: Perspectives from the Republic of Ireland. In *Education in Ireland: Challenge and change*, ed. S. Drudy, 168–92. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Clarke, M., A. Lodge, and M. Shevlin. 2012. Evaluating initial teacher education programmes: Perspectives from the Republic of Ireland. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 28, no. 2: 141–53.

Cochran-Smith, M., and K. Fries. 2005. Researching teacher education in changing times: Politics and paradigms. In *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education*, ed. M. Cochran-Smith and K.M. Zeichner, 69–109. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Collins, J. 2009. Social reproduction in classrooms and schools. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38: 33–48.

Conway, P.F., R. Murphy, A. Rath, and K. Hall. 2009. Learning to teach and its implications for the Continuum of Teacher Education: A nine-country cross national study. Report commissioned by the Teaching Council.

Coolahan, J. 2003. *Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers: Country background report for Ireland*. Dublin: DES, Paris: OECD.

Dee, T.S. 2001. *Teachers, race and student achievement in a randomized experiment*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Department of Education and Science. 2002. *Advisory group on post-primary teacher education*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science. 2008. *Education Statistics 2007/2008* [online]. http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/stat_2007_2008.pdf (accessed February 2, 2010).

Devine, D. 2011. *Immigration and schooling in the Republic of Ireland – Making a difference*. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press.

Dillman, D.A. 2000. *Mail and web-based survey: The tailored design method*. New York: Wiley.

Drudy, S. 2006. Gender differences in entrance patterns and awards in initial teacher education. *Irish Educational Studies* 25: 259–73.

Drudy, S., and K. Lynch. 1993. *Schools and society in Ireland*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Drudy, S., M. Martin, M. Woods, and J. O'Fynn. 2005. *Men and the classroom: Gender imbalances in teaching*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dunn, S., and V. Morgan. 1979. A comparative demographic study of student teachers from the North and South of Ireland. *Comparative Education* 15: 143–57.

Goodson, I. 2003. *Professional knowledge, professional lives: Studies in education and change*. Maidenhead and Buckingham, PA: Open Univ. Press.

Greaney, V., A. Burke, and J. McCann. 1987. Entrants to primary teacher education in Ireland. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 10: 127–40.

Heinz, M. 2008. The composition of applicants and entrants to teacher education programmes in Ireland: Trends and patterns. *Irish Educational Studies* 27: 223–40.

Heinz, M. 2011. The next generation of teachers: Selection, backgrounds and motivations of second-level student teachers in the Republic of Ireland. PhD, National Univ. of Ireland.

Johnson, S.M., and S.M. Kardos. 2008. The next generation of teachers: Who enters, who stays, and why. In *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts*, 3rd ed., ed. M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D.J. McIntyre, and K.E. Demsers, 445–67. New York: Routledge/ Taylor Francis and the Association of Teacher Educators.

Kent, R. 2001. *Data construction and data analysis for survey research*. Hampshire New York: Palgrave.

Killeavy, M. 1993. A profile of entrants to primary teaching in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies* 12: 269–84.

Killeavy, M. 1998. *The professional development of primary teachers*. PhD, Trinity College Dublin.

King, S.H. 1993a. Why did we choose teaching careers and what will enable us to stay?: Insights from one cohort of the African American teaching pool. *The Journal of Negro Education* 62: 475–92.

King, S.H. 1993b. The limited presence of African-American teachers. *Review of Educational Research* 63, no. 2: 115–49.

Ladson-Billings, G. 1992. Liberatory consequences of literacy: A case of culturally relevant instruction for African-American students. *Journal of Negro Education* 61, no. 3: 378–91.

Lanier, J., and J. Little. 1986. Research on teacher education. In *Handbook of research on teaching*, 3rd ed., ed. M.C. Wittrock, 527–69. New York: Macmillan.

Leslie, L.L. 1972. Are high response rates essential to valid surveys? *Social Science Research* 1: 323–34.

Lodge, A. 2012. Dr. Anne Lodge personal website, Department of Education, National Univ. of Ireland, Maynooth. http://www.nuim.ie/academic/education/al.shtml (accessed March 28, 2012).

Lortie, D. 1975. *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*, 2nd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Lynch, K, and A. Lodge. 2004. *Diversity in school*. Dublin: IPA.

Minor, L.C., A.J. Onwuegbuzie, A.E. Witcher, and T.L. James. 2002. Preservice teachers' educational beliefs and their perceptions of characteristics of effective teachers. *Journal of Educational Research* 96: 116–27.

Moran, A., R. Kilpatric, L. Abbott, J. Dallat, and B. McClune. 2001. Training to teach: Motivating factors and implications for recruitment. *Evaluation and Research in Education* 15: 17–32.

Moran, A. 2008. Challenges surrounding widening participation and fair access to initial teacher education: Can it be achieved? *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* 34: 63–77.

OECD. 2005. *Teachers matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*. Paris: OECD.

O'Mahony, E. 2010. Religious practice and values in Ireland: A summary of European Values Study 4th wave data. Irish Catholic Bishops Conference, September 27–28 2010 [online]. http://www.catholicbishops.ie/wp-content/uploads/images/stories/cco_publications/research anddevelopment/evs_4th_wave_report.pdf (accessed June 12, 2011).

Popkewitz, T.S., B.R. Tabachnick, and C. Wehlage. 1982. *The myth of educational reform: A study of school responses to a program of change*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press.

Richardson, P.W., and H.M.G. Watt. 2006. Who chooses teaching and why? Profiling characteristics and motivations across three Australian Universities. *Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education* 34: 27–56.

Sabbe, E., and A. Aelterman. 2007. Gender in teaching: A literature review. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* 13, no. 5: 521–38.

Smith, H.A., and D. Pratt. 1996. The use of biodata in admissions to teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education* 47: 43–52.

Smyth, E. 1999. *Do schools differ? Academic and personal development among pupils in the second-level sector*. Dublin: ESRI.

Su, Z. 1997. Teaching as a profession and as a career: Minority candidates' perspectives. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 13: 325–40.

Su, Z., J.N. Hawkins, T. Huang, and Z. Zhao. 2001. Choices and commitment: A comparison of teacher candidates' profiles and perspectives in China and the United States. *International Review of Education* 47: 611–35.

Sugrue, C. 1997. *Complexities of teaching: Child-centred perspective*. London: Falmer Press.

Sugrue, C. 2004. Revisiting teaching archetypes: Identifying dominant shaping influences on student teacher's identities. *European Educational Research Journal* 3: 583–98.

The Teaching Council. 2008. *Strategic Plan 2008–2011*. The Teaching Council.

The Teaching Council. 2011. *Policy on the continuum of teacher education*. The Teaching Council.

Thornton, M., P. Bricheno, and I. Reid. 2002. Students' reasons for wanting to teach in primary school. *Research in Education* 67: 33–43.

Wideen, M., J. Mayer-Smith, and B. Moon. 1998. A critical analysis of the research on learning to teach: Making the case for an ecological perspective on inquiry. *Review of Educational Research* 68: 130–78.

Zumwalt, K.K. 1982. Research on teaching: Policy implications for teacher education. In *Policy making in education: 81st yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. A. Lieberman and M. MacLaughlin, 215–48. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Zumwalt, K., and E. Craig. 2008. Who is teaching? Does it matter? In *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts*, 3rd ed., ed. M. Cochran-Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D.J. McIntyre, and K.E. Demers, 404–23. New York: Routledge.