Exploring student learning approaches on an initial teacher education programme: A comparison of mature learners and direct entry third-level students

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HIGHLIGHTS

- A Comparison of mature learner and direct entry student learning approaches.
- The impact of prior educational experiences on learning approach.
- Need for greater co-learning opportunities for mature learners and direct entry students.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article compares the learning approaches of students on an initial teacher education programme. Using a mixed method approach, the study examines differences between mature learners and direct entry students, across the domains of deep, strategic and surface learning approaches. Following the quantitative phase, group interviews were conducted to gain additional insights into the factors, which impacted learning approach. Significant differences were evident between both cohorts. The key categories that contributed to learning approach included; motivation to learn, collaborative and competitive learning, prior educational experiences and school placement. The findings provide insights into the diversity of student cohorts.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the learning approaches of a cohort of direct entry (DEs) and mature learners (MLs) on an undergraduate primary teaching degree programme, in a university level college in Ireland. Mature students have been categorised in different ways (See Kaldi, 2009). In this study, MLs are those that have completed their second-level education more than one year previous to beginning their undergraduate degree programme. In comparison, the DE cohort include all students who have entered Initial Teacher Education (ITE) directly from second-level education. These cohorts have been formally referred to as 'non-traditional' and 'traditional' (Griffiths, 2011; McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & Tett, 2011).

Participants were researched at the end of their first of four years of the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) programme. The research identified their learning approaches and explored the mediating factors related to learning approach. The researchers used a mixed methods approach to identify whether differences were evident in the learning approaches employed by both cohorts. The researchers were also interested in exploring whether prior formal and/or informal learning experiences influenced the learning approach.

Much of the literature exploring ITE focuses on pre-service teachers' experiences on school placement (SP), their learning of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Harlen, 1997; Murphy & Smith, 2012; Murphy, Neil, & Beggs, 2007; Shulman, 1986). SP is learning, which is structured outside of the formal college environment, where pre-service teachers complete a placement in a school to access and engage in actual teaching experience with pupils. This article focuses specifically on the nuanced learning approaches and influences within a diverse cohort of pre-service primary teachers. Therefore, this study is

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interested in the categories of learner in ITE and how they approach learning. This article is important because a teacher educator's ability to differentiate when teaching on the ITE programme, relies on a knowledge and appreciation of the varied experiences and challenges of the learners (Kaldi, 2009; Ross et al., 2002). This article argues the importance of teacher educators' need to pay attention to the developmental diversity of student teachers, so that early intervention might positively impact on levels of self-efficacy and student retention (Wilson & Deaney, 2010). Therefore, ITE and relevant institutional student supports could be informed by more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the discrete learning groups (DE and ML), within a large ITE programme (Wilson & Deaney, 2010). In addition, the co-learning opportunities between MLs and DEs is worthy of consideration, in particular, the cultural knowledge which is acquired within a diverse student population, whilst learning together. This is important because it enables all students to develop an appreciation of the importance of cultural pedagogies (Gause, 2011) when teaching in the primary classroom.

1.1. The Irish educational system

In the Irish education system the majority of students follow a similar pathway. The second-level system comprises of a three-year junior cycle programme, at the end of which students are awarded a *Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement* (DES, 2015). The senior cycle programme terminates with the nationally standardised Leaving Certificate (LC) state examination (see Iannelli, Smyth, & Klein, 2016; Smyth & Banks, 2012a) when learners are approximately 18 years old. The high-stakes LC terminal written examination awards students a grade based on their content knowledge across a range of subject areas (Banks & Smyth, 2015). The LC grades are converted to points, in a system where students compete (Banks & Smyth, 2015) for places on third-level programmes (CAO, 2017).

1.2. Theoretical background

This research is informed by theories of diversity and inequality (Drudy & Lynch, 1993; Lynch, 1999; Lynch & Lodge, 2002, 2004; Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2009) In Ireland, there is an educational ideology that claims a position of power for the 'intelligentsia' as theorised by Gramsci (1973). Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith (1971) explain how educational institutions can become sites of hegemony, which foster inequality. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) highlight how diversity introduces the relational discontinuities critical to learner identity construction and its subsequent role in developing cognitive growth. Therefore, student diversity within colleges and universities can act to facilitate *all* students' academic and social growth. When institutions facilitate engagement between diverse peers (such as MLs and DEs) inside and outside the formal curriculum, there are benefits associated with student learning and educational experience (Maruyama, Moreno, Gudeman, & Marin, 2002). Higher-level faculties should exploit diverse student backgrounds to promote democratic (Giroux, 2004) intellectual engagement. This diversity is important as it enables students to perceive differences both within groups and between groups (Gurin et al., 2002). This is increasingly important for ITE programmes where graduates will teach diverse pupils in a range of school types (Lynch & Lodge, 2004). Gause (2011) refers to a cultural pedagogy, which centralises education outside of formal schooling and similarly Maruyama et al. (2002) cite relationships discrepant from a student's own culture as having importance in enhancing cognitive growth. The MLs and DEs in this study provide insights into the cognitive, cultural and experiential differences existent between the cohorts,

highlighting the need for differentiated student supports. Importantly, this research unveils prospective benefits for peer collaboration, and greater integration of the diverse cohorts, during their ITE programme.

Dolan (2013) highlights the specific factors affecting the mature students' experience in full-time undergraduate degree programmes. These include the '*burden of finance*' (p.355), the pressure of childcare and home-based duties, and the fact that the higher education system in Ireland is designed to cater for DEs in full-time undergraduate degrees. Structural and cultural dimensions of educational experience are mediated in part by economics, but addressing financial difficulty for students will not ensure success or failure, as there are many factors, which influence success (Lynch, 1999). In this research, the MLs discussed balancing academic life with part-time work, necessary to fund their studies. Similarly, Uusimaki (2011) claims that mature students are severely under-serviced on existing ITE programmes. Higher education institutes and teacher educators need to further consider the support services for mature students (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009; Wilson & Deaney, 2010), and specifically for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Tones et al., 2009). There has been a continued focus in the literature on mature-age students returning to learning (Tones et al., 2009; Wilson & Deaney, 2010) and specifically to ITE (Dolan, 2013). Much existing research acknowledges that different characteristics, constraints, needs, motivations and expectations exist between mature students and those who enter directly from second-level education (Tones et al., 2009). A study conducted in Ireland (Sheridan & Dunne, 2012) focused on first year undergraduates and their challenges in successful transition to third-level education, following the Irish LC examination. They cited difficulties ranging from the social to the academic; they expressed particular difficulty with group work, making friends and knowing what information to take from lectures. Similarly, this article explores the varied transitions of two groups of learners (DEs and MLs) in their first year of an ITE programme.

There has been an increase in research into undergraduates' learning approaches over the past five decades (Haggis, 2009). In Richardson's (1994) literature review, he synthesised mature students' learning approaches and found that they had a deep learning approach, which was attributed to their prior experiences. Richardson (1994) recognised three explanations for this: that mature students were more motivated by intrinsic goals; that younger students acquire a surface approach to learning in the final years of secondary education; and that the prior life experience of mature students promotes a deep approach towards studying in higher education. This research identifies significant similarities with Richardson's (1994) conclusions.

Brown, White, Wakeling, and Naiker (2015) highlighted the importance of learning approach, because it impacts students' learning outcomes. Previous research in Ireland (Cowman, 1998) and elsewhere (Mansouri et al., 2006) has found that adapting a deep or strategic approach to learning is associated with better learning outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that both of these studies (Cowman, 1998; Mansouri et al., 2006) involved undergraduate nurses and medical students, rather than ITE students. In addition, Brown et al. (2015) emphasise the importance of lecturer awareness of their students' learning approaches so that they can effectively enhance their students' learning habits. However, much of the previous research has focused on the individual students' cognitive learning approaches (Marton & Säljö, 1976) without due heed to the importance of the learning context. This article is unveiling more insight to into the 'hows' and 'whys' of learning approach in an ITE programme. Significantly, Uusimaki (2011) highlights the importance of life experience, and a deep altruistic desire for pre-service teachers to enhance the learning of