



Smith, P. H. (2018). Enhancement and constraint: Student-mothers' experiences of higher vocational education, emotion and time. *Cambridge Journal of Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2018.1483483>

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Licence
Other

Copyright information
This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

Takedown policy
Any individual, whether within or external to the University, has the right to request the removal of content from the Leeds Trinity University Repository, on the grounds that it breaches copyright, is in any other way unlawful, or represents research misconduct.

Complaints can be submitted via the Repository Complaints Form at
<https://www.leedstrinity.ac.uk/media/site-assets/documents/key-documents/pdfs/repository-complaints-form.pdf>

Enhancement and constraint: Student-mothers' experiences of higher vocational education, emotion and time

Paul H Smith

School of Social and Health Sciences, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, England

School of Social and Health Sciences, Leeds Trinity University, Leeds, England, LS18 5HD

Pa.Smith@leedstrinity.ac.uk

ORCID identifier 0000-0001-9798-7152

Student-mothers who study vocationally-related higher education programmes are a relatively under-researched group. Specifically, there is a paucity of research into the emotions that these learners experience. This article discusses a qualitative investigation that examined the emotional narratives that a group of vocational student-mothers offered. They were studying for a foundation degree for teaching assistants at a university in the North of England. The student-mothers were largely found to have experienced positive emotions, however familial and workplace guilt had also been encountered. These emotions emanated from notions about how family and workplace time should be used. Student-mothers managed this cognitive dissonance by stressing the reciprocal relationships that existed between their studies, family lives and school work. However, for many of these learners familial and workplace guilt was a strong and continuing emotion.

Keywords: educational guilt, higher vocational education, student-mothers, integrated lives, teaching assistants, foundation degree

Introduction

Research that has specifically analysed student-mothers is relatively sparse in the literature that explores the experiences of higher education students (Lyonette, Atfield, Behle & Gambin, 2015). Unfortunately, these learners are often only discussed as part of broader discussions about mature students' interactions with university level study (Pascall & Cox, 1993; Stone, 2008; Shafi & Rose, 2014; White, 2008). This lack of focus is a significant weakness in the literature. There is however a developing body of academic work which has primarily concentrated upon student-mothers (Beeler, 2016; Longhurst, Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012; Pinilla

& Muñoz, 2005). Yet, in common with more general research into mature and part-time higher education students, these investigations have largely concentrated upon learners studying for traditional non-vocational related degrees. One notable exception to this is Brooks (2012; 2014) whose sample included student-parents who were studying for work-related and more traditional academic degrees. Regrettably though, even this scholarship offers no specific analysis of the vocational learners that she sampled.

The following article discusses a piece of research which focused upon student-parent experiences of a higher vocational education (HiVE) programme offered by one English university. HiVE qualifications focus on preparing their learners for specified occupations. Foundation, work-related Bachelors and professionally-orientated Masters degrees have been the main ways that UK higher education providers have offered this form of provision. The findings outlined in this article were gained from a piece of largely qualitative research, which aimed to examine the understandings that a group of English school-based teaching assistants had of their experiences of studying for a vocationally-related foundation degree. These learners were either employed or volunteered as educational support workers in schools. The qualification that they were studying for had originally been validated as a response to their changing and expanded workplace roles.

As the investigation progressed, it was noted that the course's learners were overwhelmingly mothers and that membership of this group had produced a distinct set of experiences. Student-mothers' narratives portrayed their studies as having been a highly emotional experience that was comparable to, as well as distinct from, that which has previously been documented amongst female mature students on traditional academic degrees (O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Poulson, 2003; Shafi & Rose, 2014). This situation led to a decision to make their accounts a primary focus of analysis.

The following article documents how for many of the student-mothers whose views were captured, their studies had resulted in positive emotions connected to increased personal confidence and self-esteem. Interestingly, such emotional positivity was associated with the productive outcomes for not only themselves but also their families and workplace colleagues. In some respects, these findings reflected those presented by Wright (2011; 2012; 2013) in her study of mature female students studying childcare at a further education college. Despite fulfilling a variety of challenging roles, Wright (2013) found that these learners were contented with their social circumstances. She maintained that these learners achieved this outcome by cognitively integrating key parts of their lives and through an emphasis on how their experiences in each of these were beneficial to the others. Dissonance was reduced via the creation of links between parenting, their employment with children and childcare learning. Whilst such narratives were evident in the accounts of the student-mothers that are discussed in the in the following article, they also stressed that emotional positivity had been tempered by feelings of familial and workplace guilt. These feelings persisted even when students had attempted to manage these through rationalisations which accentuated the advantages that study had for others in their lives. Notions of the appropriate use of others' time were linked to strong feelings of guilt. This emotional state reflected gendered notions of time and the pressures that many women face to achieve 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997) through public displays of a caring disposition.

The expansion of higher vocational education and the emergence of foundation degrees for teaching assistants

Over the past half century, the dramatic expansion of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with an explicit vocational focus has been a feature of university provision across the globe (Fleckenstein & Lee, 2016). This can be partially explained in terms of the ways that higher education has become increasingly coupled with employability and the acquisition of

work-related skills (Simmons, 2010). Neo-liberal discourses that have promoted this educational purpose however have been criticised for solely defining education as a ‘simply another market commodity’ (Lynch, 2006, p. 6) which is to be acquired to obtain future economic return. In this increasingly dominant policy discourse, the non-economic and social benefits of education are given limited status or omitted all together. Certainly, higher education’s capacities to promote emotional well-being have been increasingly overlooked.

In the UK, large numbers of students from low-participation groups have accessed higher education via vocationally-related foundation degrees (Nelson, 2006; Smith, 2012). Foundation degrees involve studying for 240-degree level credits. This credit is equally spread across levels four and five. In many respects, foundation degrees are comparable to associate sub-degrees that have emerged in Hong Kong, the United States and elsewhere. Foundation degrees aimed at educational support workers, particularly those targeted at the overwhelmingly female teaching assistant workforce, have expanded significantly and attracted large numbers of student-mothers (Leach, 2009; Smith, 2017).

These qualifications are required to have a clear occupational focus and oblige students to undertake a substantial part of their learning within the workplace (Chipperfield, 2013). Such learning can be regarded as a form of ‘asynchronous’ (Leaton Gray, 2017) educational time, in that it does not require formally responsible educators and their students to be in the same space or adhere to a closely defined schedule. Foundation degree providers must provide their students with an opportunity to access further 120 credits at level 6, which on completion will allow learners to achieve a full honours degree (Penketh & Goddard, 2008).

Foundation degree programmes have recruited disproportionately high numbers of mature students from low income backgrounds (Craig, 2009; Harvey, 2009). Some variants of these qualifications, especially those linked to childcare occupations, have also been remarkably successful in their recruitment of economically-deprived mature female learners

(HEFCE, 2010). Whilst such qualifications have opened access to academic life for some excluded groups, they have been criticised. Research has revealed that employers do not always value foundation degrees (Wareing, 2008) and it has also been suggested that these programmes are designed to produce uncritical malleable workforces (Gibbs, 2002). This proposition would though seem to be unsubstantiated. For example, foundation degree students have been found to be evaluative learners; particularly in terms of the place that their qualification has in the elitist hierarchy that is UK higher education (Robinson, 2012).

The emotional complexities of foundation degree study and mature studentship

Scholars who have specifically analysed the experiences of teaching assistants, who study for foundation degrees, have offered accounts that implicitly highlight the emotional nature of their experiences. Unfortunately, these accounts provide little detailed and explicit consideration of the issue. It has been revealed that female mature learners can experience increased levels of personal confidence from pursuing foundation degree study (Woolhouse et al., 2009). This outcome has also been documented amongst mature female students studying for non-vocational degrees (Brooks, 2015; Quinn 2003; Stone, 2008). Importantly, many of these learners are motivated by a desire to address an unhappiness with aspects of the self (Merrill, 2015; Shafi & Rose, 2014; Walters, 2000). Edwards (1993) has further argued that discontentment with domestic circumstances and their familial self is a key motivator for study amongst mature females who decide to enter higher education.

In contrast to the generation of positive emotions, researchers who have specifically studied teaching assistants on foundation degrees have noted that their engagement with these qualifications can promote feelings of maternal guilt, albeit again with little detailed analysis offered (Dunne, Goddard, & Woolhouse, 2008b). In more general analysis of mature female university students, Brooks (2015, p. 516) has fruitfully revealed that familial guilt is not

experienced to the same extent by all student-mothers. Crucially, she maintains that social class differentiates these feelings. Her comparative analysis of student-parents studying at older and new universities, in Denmark and the United Kingdom, discovered that guilt was more prevalent amongst socio-economically deprived student-mothers who attended UK post-1992 universities. Limited access to state funded high quality childcare and dominant discourses of ‘intensive mothering’, which accentuated an expectation that copious amounts of time would be spent on maternal obligations, are identified as being connected to elevated levels of guilt amongst these students.

Scholars have claimed that student-mothers studying for foundation degrees encounter guilt as they struggle to reconcile notions of being a ‘good’ mother with their academic commitments (Woolhouse et al., 2009). To prioritise their mothering roles, some of these student-mothers had endeavoured to confine their studies to times and spaces that did not overtly impact on their mothering roles. This analysis portrays these learners as actively separating various parts of their lives to try to create a sense of positive self and by implication emotional well-being. These findings echo those outlined in earlier classic research into women’s experiences of higher education (Edwards, 1993). Here it was suggested that tensions existed as these learners attempted to manage the differing demands that study and family life placed upon them.

Elsewhere however, Wright’s (2011, 2012, 2013) work into the experiences of female mature students studying for a childcare diploma at a further education college found that such learners gained contentment by reflecting upon and cognitively connecting study, work and family life. Via these interconnections and linkages, they construct an integration between each of these key parts of their lives and generate a triad of reciprocal relations. These connections are viewed as enabling them to evade cognitive discomfort or dissonance as they engage in family life, studying and employment. For Wright (2011, 2012, 2014) the demands of each of

these areas of life are regarded as being met by the students' involvement in the other. Potential conflicts are mediated as these students utilise their knowledge in differing contexts to create positive outcomes, in what is depicted as a give and take framework (Wright, 2013, p. 96).

Sen's (1999) 'Capability Approach' is drawn upon to analyse the narratives that the students offered. Key to this approach is 'the ability to act' (Wright, 2012, p. 409) and that individuals can make decisions from the set of choices that they have. It is maintained that the childcare students had chosen to 'compromise'. They had actively decided to pursue part-time study and employment alongside the performance of their familial roles. In contrast to structural feminist accounts (Walby 1997; 1999), it is suggested that such learners' decisions are relatively free. This position however seems to underestimate the ways that choices are constrained by gender, class and racial inequalities.

Yet, Wright's (2010, 2011, 2013) model of 'integrated lives' offers an interesting challenge to the dominant assumption that balancing multiple challenges inevitably promotes cognitive dissonance and unhappiness amongst student-mothers. Her work is also instructive in that it illustrates how the educational decisions that student-mothers make can be structured by aspirations to support their existing lives. They may not be exclusively driven by a desire to achieve changes to their lives. This possibility is underappreciated within the literature on this group's experiences (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; 2015; Pascall & Cox, 1993).

Research methods

As already mentioned, this article discusses the findings from a study of teaching assistants' engagement with a vocationally-related foundation degree. This programme was taught at a relatively small post-1992 University in the North of England. By UK standards, the University's overall population was modest. Just above 6,500 full-time students were enrolled at the University and over two-thirds were female. There was also an under-representation of

black and ethnic minority students at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The research principally focused upon the experiences of four cohorts of students who were mainly taught in twilight sessions. The following research question was investigated: How do teaching assistants interpret their experiences of studying on a foundation degree that is directly related to their workplace roles?

The investigation was carried out at a time when the researcher was employed as one of the university's academics. The term insider research could therefore be applied to the study (Wellington 2015), although it has been suggested that using a simple dichotomy of being an insider or outsider does not always adequately describe a researcher's positionality as 'the researcher experience[s] moments of being both insider and outsider' (Merriam et al., 2001 pp. 214-215). This was certainly the case for the study that is discussed in this article. At some points of the investigation but not others, the researcher was a tutor and head of programme for the course that was central to the study. To reduce the biases that potentially flowed from the insider aspect of this situation, all communications with research participants stressed that open, honest and critical opinions were welcomed and valued. Where practical, interview responses were also cross-checked against data from university documentation and classroom observations.

The research was undertaken and written up over several years, between 2008 and 2015. Techniques that are commonly associated with the ethnographic tradition (Aggleton, 1987; Ball, 1981; Bhatti, 2012) were drawn upon to collect a range of data. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with foundation degree students between September 2009 and July 2011. As part of their studies, these students were involved in work-based learning. To demonstrate such activity, they were required to complete a series of work-based tasks. Fifty-six students participated in these interviews. Initially eight group interviews were conducted with forty-four students. First and second years were questioned in this phase of data collection.

Twelve one-to-one interviews with second year students were subsequently carried out to test emerging themes and theorisation. The length of interviews varied, 50 minutes being the shortest and the longest taking over two hours.

While semi-structured interviewing constituted the central method of data collection, participant observation and analysis of programme documentation were also utilised to gain contextualising and supporting data. Initial contextualising observations and documentary analysis commenced in November 2008 and ended in July 2009. Between 2008 and 2012, 14 first and second year modules were observed. This involved observation of students engaged in classroom activities. The initial period of observations in 2008 concentrated upon documenting potential issues that might be focused upon in subsequent group interviews. Later observations were carried out in order to gather supplementary contextualising information that was utilised to review support for, and challenge to, themes that emerged from group and individual interviews. Observations were recorded briefly during suitable gaps in classes and written up in greater detail after sessions had finished.

Records of interviews between course applicants and the course's Head of Programme, demographic data, National Student Survey results, validation documents and student timetables were analysed to gain further information. In common with the observational findings that were generated, analysis of programme-related documents was not utilised as a primary method of data collection. Instead, as with observational data it was intended to be a supporting and contextualising source of information that could boost the research's "trustworthiness" (Shenton, 2004). Information from these sources provided valuable information on the research setting and students' qualifications on entry to their programme. These subsidiary sources were utilised as supporting data to cross-check emerging themes and codes throughout the time when interview data was analysed and theorised from.

At all points in the research process, the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004; 2011) were followed. Volunteers were sought after all on the foundation degree students had received an initial communication about the nature and intentions of the research. Students who volunteered as participants were advised that their honest views were required and that they would be non-identifiable in the final research findings. Moreover, participants were offered the opportunity to veto any information that they were uncomfortable with.

Purposive sampling (Richie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant, & Rahim, 2014) was conducted to select potential volunteers for group and individual interviews. Volunteers were targeted in a mix of first and second year cohorts. Higher level, general and volunteer teachings assistants were all encouraged to take part in the research (see Table 1). As teaching assistants; they were involved in specialist intervention roles for children with additional needs, pastoral activities, behavioural support and small group teaching. Alongside these activities, they also carried out photocopying teachers' resources, display making and playground supervision. This sample included 47 student-mothers, 2 student-fathers and 7 individuals with no children. Many of those who were sampled were therefore mothers and their relatively distinctive experiences led to a decision to focus upon how this group interpreted their studentship. The small number of non-mothers in the sample were utilised to explore the relatively particularity of student-mothers' accounts. In addition to interviewing, foundation degree classes were observed via purposive sampling. Course documentation was selected for analysis using the same technique.

Insert Table 1

The study utilised thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to make sense of interview transcripts, records of observations and course-related documentary material. As part of this process, emerging codes were tested and reduced. Codes were subsequently grouped together to

generate core themes. For example, codes were identified around: 1) enhanced personal confidence, self-belief and happiness, 2) learning, increased belief in workplace abilities and positive emotions and 3) familial and workplace guilt. These were indicative of a more general theme of learning as emotional enhancement and constraint. All the coding was carried out by myself. Data analysis was not confined to a distinct stage of the research process and was continuous. It consequently took place over several years to allow substantial amounts of qualitative material to be analysed. Data analysis of data from interviews, observations and selected documents was mainly carried out throughout June and July in 2010-2012. First level analysis however also occurred in 2008. The key stages of analysis of interview data were: 1) listening to audio recordings, 2) transcription and first readings, 3) initial coding, 4) code refinement and reduction, 5) identification of themes and 6) theorisation.

To improve the trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004) of the study's findings and theorisation, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was carried out. Emerging codes, themes and theorisation were commented upon by a small group of foundation degree students outside of the formal interview process. In addition to this scrutiny, during the 12 individual semi-structured interviews students were asked to comment upon the research's emergent findings and developing theories.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) conception of peer debriefing was also employed to enhance the research's trustworthiness. They recommended that qualitative researchers should seek to assure their research by subjecting it 'to a disinterested peer[s] in a manner paralleling an analytical session' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 30). The mechanism that was adopted to achieve such critique involved presenting embryonic analysis at an international education conference, which had a generalised theme of educational research. As part of this process, peer comments were utilised to evaluate initial interpretations and theorisations.

Research findings

The second part of this article considers a series of findings that were primarily gained from the interview aspect of the study's data collection process. Student-mothers' accounts of the positive and negative emotions that they associated with their studies are primarily concentrated upon in the analysis that follows. They illustrate how the emotional narratives that students constructed about their studies were predominantly framed by the notion that achieving an effective integration of being a student, mother and worker was a key to emotional well-being. Aspects of Wright's (2011, 2012, 2013) model of integrated lives were therefore evident in the accounts that the student-mothers had provided. The findings however indicated that emotional contentment was frequently jeopardised by familial and workplace guilt. The construction of narratives which stressed the important contribution that their studies made to their family and working lives was found to dampen such feelings. However, guilt was a continuing and durable emotional pressure.

Familial happiness, an improved sense of self and guilt management

Nearly all the foundation degree students expressed the view that their studies had generated positive emotions. Yet student-mothers spoke at the greatest length and more passionately about these experiences. Ten of the 12 students who were individually interviewed signified that they had experienced improved self-esteem which had brought them happiness and joy. This outcome was also regularly cited in group interviews. Dawn, for example, outlined how: 'The FD has helped me improve my confidence. It makes me happy to know I have abilities to achieve things'. Davina likewise commented:

I've got confidence out of it. It's kinda given me that self-belief back that I think I'd lost a little bit. For me, it stops me having my nerves about some bits of my lives. For me, this has brought me being happier in myself. (Individual interview response).

Anna also linked increased level of self-confidence to enhanced self-esteem and pride.

Anna: It's boosted my confidence so much as well. I'm such a different person now than I was even a year and a half ago just for doing this. Like a year and a half ago I would have never gone into a room of adults and had the courage to stand there and speak and actually feel OK about it. I'd have done it but would have been a bit of a nervous wreck about it.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Anna: Proud, like I can do things that I wouldn't have previously. Happy in being me.

(Group interview response)

These findings are in keeping with previous investigations which have also claimed that foundation degree students can gain 'improved self-orientated norms' (Dunne, Goddard, & Woolhouse, 2008a, p. 242), chiefly around growing self-assurance (Bainbridge, 2005; Morris 2010; Ooms, Burke, Marks-Maran, Webb, & Cooper, 2012). What these earlier studies do not however emphasise is how such modifications are accompanied by positive emotions. Consequently, their impact on the experiences of such students is a significant omission in this literature. Student-mothers who presented accounts which stressed the development of constructive emotions often connected these to the benefits that their immediate families,

particularly their children, had gained from their studies. Emily offered this type of account: ‘I think they’ve [children] got lots out of me doing this, as well as me. School work. The education system and how it works has been good. I can advise them better on their futures’. These productive familial outcomes were also evident in the narratives that the learners offered about how they had attempted to manage feelings of familial guilt.

Student-mothers identified feelings of guilt connected to how their studies had impinged on family members’ time. This emotional response was only described by these students. The following accounts were typical of these narratives:

Guilt is one of the biggest things for me. I find it really hard to deal with. Not always being available to do things [*for the family*] when I have an assignment. You get used to it in some ways. I try not let things get in the way. Deadlines make this difficult for me. Sometimes we as a family have to make sacrifices. I feel like people will think I’m a bad mum. (Individual interview with Julia)

I feel frustrated and sometimes guilty You don’t always control things the way you should and they [*children*] lose out. It’s regrettable. (Individual interview with Dawn)

To manage familial guilt, student-mothers claimed that they had endeavoured to confine their academic studies to times of the day when they would have the least impact on their children and partners. Primarily, this involved attempts to study in the early hours of the morning or late at night. Many of the student-mothers however indicated that while they had attempted to conduct their studies on the peripheries of family life, such separation had not always been possible. When this situation had occurred, they explained how they sometimes coped by rationalising their studies in terms of the benefits that their families had and would eventually

receive for their sacrifices. Liz, for instance, outlined: 'At times I think it's about not seeing it as being something for yourself. It helps you justify it to yourself in some ways as being for your family and children'. In the longer-term enhanced economic capital was regarded as likely to be gained from achieving graduate status, which would be beneficial to their families. In the short-term, cultural advantage was also portrayed as having been passed on to their offspring.

My expectations of myself are rubbing off on my children. In fact, my son Matt came to uni the other week because he was ill. I had to take him to A&E because he'd been ill at school and Suzi let him sit in the afternoon [*Christina's scheduled Foundation degree class*] and he was colouring at the back and, but he goes you know when I go to university, so you know he's already got that expectation that's what he'll do. And that's what I didn't have you see as a child and for me that's a really important step for me to move my family on as well as for myself erm and that they see that I'm doing that, and they see that I'll be able to do that if my mum's doing that. So, that's now become a big motivation for me and it helps. It helps in your mind knowing you are doing your best for them when you don't always have the time that they want. I genuinely feel less guilty knowing I am also doing something for them. (Christina's individual interview response)

Julia offered a comparable narrative in the following piece of dialogue:

Julia: My kids are so proud of me. We do our homework together round the table. They tell everyone 'mum's doing a degree'. It's embarrassing sometimes but I get a feeling that they are proud of me. It's good for them to see this [*university level study*], as a future choice. Something they can do when they're older.

Interviewer: Does that help you when you have to take time out for study?

Julia: I suppose it helps you come to terms with not always taking them out to say the park or some other activities, even though I try not to let it interfere.

For some, defining study as a part of productive mothering and family life therefore seemed to allow guilt to be partially alleviated and managed. Indeed, the accounts that were gained from these learners, provided support for the argument that student-mothers can lessen guilt related to studying by regarding it as part of being a ‘good mother’ (Woolhouse et al., 2009, p. 771). Such narratives can help student-mothers to manage the pressures that study can engender for established patterns of family life, which can foster cognitive disturbance. However, most of the student-mothers indicated that feelings of familial guilt could not be fully alleviated and had been a constant throughout their studies. It was a recurrent and powerful emotional experience.

Nevertheless, the student-mothers’ accounts illustrate the worth of Wright’s (2011, 2012, 2013) proposition that these learners can gain emotional positivity through the construction of narratives which emphasise the complementary relations between study and family life. The demands of differing parts of student-mothers’ lives are not, as some scholars have portrayed them, always diametrically opposed and in conflict.

Enhanced workplace contentment and the navigation of remorse

Intriguingly, despite not being an initial motivation for the foundation degree students’ studies, there was a relatively common belief that learning had also generated feelings of workplace confidence, empowerment and therefore happiness.

Jan: I think it makes you more confident to be able to handle [things] because you are able to reflect on your practice all the time so erm certainly after probably like the behaviour management module you come away and think I could change that, I could change that. I could handle that a lot better. There are certain individuals who push the buttons so to speak and I find that I'm handling them better and also, it's dealing with the higher achievers by just coming at things from a different angle even from the teacher.

Interviewer: How does it make you feel when you feel that you could change that?

Jan: It's empowering. You know that you can't go back and change things, but you know next time something like that happens, if some individual is playing up you'll just go at it from a different angle which is something that I might not have done before. I feel more in control and happier that I know how to improve things for the better. (Individual interview response)

These accounts to some extent corroborate Morris' (2010) and Smoothy's (2006) findings that enhancements in work-related knowledge can lead to an improved sense of self within workplaces. The accounts presented in this article however also highlighted that enhanced workplace identities can also lead to emotional positivity. Like family life, there was also an emphasis upon the value of viewing their lives in an integrated way. The work-based learning aspect of their studies was however represented as having the potential to generate a second wave of guilt, that in many respects reflected the familial form that has been described earlier in this article. This is because accounts of workplace guilt also emphasised time as a resource

that should be primarily spent on others. For several students, workplace guilt was linked to the time pressures that teachers and head teachers were under. Such feelings were exemplified in the following group interview exchange:

Interviewer: Do you experience any problems when you're asked to do work-based tasks? You know the work-based learning?

Jamie: Time.

Petra: Time yeah. Time to sit down if you need to talk to any of the teachers. It's time and you feel so guilty asking them to give up their time because it is so precious. And erm it is a guilt thing. I always feel so horrible when I have to say please can I have a bit of time to go through it and they will go through it, but it's always snatched time.

Emily: You see I struggled with the SEN module in that our head teacher is the SENCO so catching her was a nightmare. I did put in my assignment that all of this is just my thoughts, as I couldn't get to our SENCO. I just didn't get chance to sit down with her and say I need this, and this and can you talk to me about this cause catching her was just a nightmare.

Petra: I think maybe do yeah know when we start the course and the letter goes out to school it might be useful in that saying they will require time to talk to you.

Emily: It does say that they will support you. It just needs a bit more say what support you need, but it wouldn't stop you feeling guilty like people have said.

Wherever possible, students avoided undertaking work-based tasks in their official worktime. They tried to undertake work-related learning at the start and end of the school day. Workplace learning was conducted in the 'shadows' (Smith, 2018) and mirrored learning practices that were undertaken to limit the impact of academic study on family life. Maintaining existing patterns of time usage were also part of this scenario. Interestingly, they also rationalised their requests for staff time in terms of how their employers and the children that they worked with would be advantaged as they applied newly acquired skills and knowledge in their workplaces. When asked how she felt about asking teachers to give up their time, to support her completion of work-based learning tasks, Dawn outlined: 'I'm now in a position to help them [the teachers] help the children learn in a more effective way because I've ended up better understanding what they need from doing this [the foundation degree]'. Workplace guilt was however a recurrent concern for several students.

Discussion

The findings that have been presented in this article suggest that student-mothers' engagement with higher vocational education can be an extremely emotional process. Consequently, the fleeting discussions of this aspect of these students experience that exists in the research literature on female foundation degree students and student-mothers in higher education more generally is problematic. It is also suggested that Wright's (2011, 2012, 2013) analysis of student-mothers studying on further education courses can be usefully drawn upon to explore this group's experiences of vocational higher education programmes. Contentment can be fostered from the cognitive integration studentship, family life and work.

The accounts discussed in this article also illustrate that guilt and its management can be an important part of student-mothers' experiences of higher education. Hochschild (1979)

has productively argued that when emotional well-being is endangered, emotional work is often carried out and this involves ‘the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling’ (Hothschild, 1978, p. 561). The student-mothers’ accounts of guilt management can certainly be viewed as a form of this activity.

It is interesting to note that student-mothers’ conceptions of guilt were framed in terms of the potential threat that their learning activities posed to established patterns of time use within their families and workplaces. Scholars have sometimes ignored or underplayed the worth that student-mothers assign to lifestyle stability and indeed these researchers may have over emphasised their desire for life changes (Edwards, 1993; Pascall & Cox, 1993; Merrill, 2015; Shafi & Rose, 2014). In these studies, modification to identities and roles is exclusively presented to be a positive outcome of studentship.

Guilt seemed to be intimately intertwined with being evaluated and an evaluator of how time was used in each of these spaces. Within the student-mothers’ accounts there was a belief that time was a resource that should be utilised first and foremost to meet the needs of others. The ways that women’s time is socially constructed and experienced can be drawn upon to explain the guilt that the student-mothers encountered. O’Shea and Stone’s (2013) study of parental learners in the Australian higher education system has productively highlighted how the differing experiences of student-mothers and fathers can be usefully understood in terms of the ways that time is inequitably gendered. They explain:

Gendered expectations place a different value on ‘men’s time’ and ‘women’s time’, with women’s time being given up to the demands and needs of others while men’s time is regarded as more valuable and productive. (O’Shea & Stone, 2013, p. 100)

Others have also recognised that in patriarchal societies, males and females experience time differentially. Male time has been classified as typically being ‘linear, clock-time, standardised, continuous, disciplined, commodified, employment-related, career, patriarchal, being-in time,

progressive, measurable, decontextualized, singular and unidirectional' (Colley, 2007, p. 434). In contrast, female time is characterised as being 'circular, driven by others' needs, processual, broken, unpredictable, reproductive, family-related, career breaks, maternalistic, giving time, expressive, flexible, embedded, multiple/overlapping and reversible' (Colley, 2007, p. 434). Many of these gendered time characteristics were evident in the student-mothers' accounts of foundation degree study, feelings of guilt, time and its management. These dominant and powerful discourses of time are constraints on the 'choices' student-mothers sometimes make.

Colley (2007) drawing upon her analysis of Kurdish women's learning experiences, has argued that the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu can offer a valuable theoretical frame that can be employed to provide understandings of the gendered and inequitable nature of educational time. Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) model is certainly useful in explaining the double guilt scenario that vocational student-mothers can encounter. These negative emotional experiences can be interpreted as reflecting the pressures that women are under to acquire the symbolic capital via public displays of a being a 'caring' mother and worker. For Bourdieu (1993, p. 7) this form of social reward is the 'degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*)'.

In many societies, women are frequently pressurised to publicly present caring dispositions and practices (Huppertz, 2009). Threats to the accomplishment of a respectable caring self (Skeggs, 1997), through the perceived 'misappropriation' of others' time can be considered as producing feelings of familial and workplace guilt amongst student-mothers. When these feelings occur, defining study as an act of familial and workplace care can aid their management. In this way symbolic capital can be aspired to, even when family and working lives are disrupted.

The findings that are discussed in this article have implications for educational researchers, those involved in the course delivery of vocational education and policy-makers. How varying constructions of time influence differing types of students' experiences is certainly an under-researched area that is worthy of further investigation. Course designers and teachers also need to be acutely aware that learning activities which require substantial amounts of time outside the classroom are likely to present student-mothers with emotional as well as logistical challenges. One consequence of this situation is that the emotional gains that study provides can be undermined. Moreover, work-based learning should routinely involve student reflection on their own practice as opposed to capturing workplace colleagues' viewpoints and assessments. This strategy might reduce workplace guilt. It may also be useful to provide learning opportunities that allow student-mothers to explore their emotions, particularly feelings of guilt. Policy makers should also consider providing financial incentives to employers which would allow them to allow student-mothers to have 'time off the job' to undertake study-related activity. Such space would lessen the impact on family time and reduce negative emotional pressures.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the complex emotional experiences that student-mothers, who study for occupationally-related higher education qualifications, can be subjected to. These emotions are comparable to, and importantly distinct from, those that other academics have documented amongst their non-vocational peers (O'Shea & Stone 2011; Shanahan 2000). Like their academic counterparts, vocational mothers can gain an improved sense of self and consequently a positive emotional state. Yet, contentment was not exclusively structured by the transformation of the academic self. It had also been influenced by increased workplace confidence and an enhanced workplace identity. In addition to these results, the findings that

are presented illuminate the ways that student-mothers can experience emotional positivity if they believe that their studies have limited impact on how time is spent in their families and workplaces.

It is argued that where established aspects and versions of self are jeopardised by changes in how time are utilised, cognitive dissonance can occur. This in turn can however be partially resolved by reflecting on the assistance that their studies can provide to meeting the needs of families and workplaces. The research that is presented therefore demonstrates how Wright's (2011, 2012, 2013) model of integrated lives can be usefully employed beyond student-mothers in further education. However, guilt is highlighted as being a powerful risk to emotional well-being, even when such integration is attempted. It is consequently suggested that educational guilt is a potent and resistant emotion that is worthy of greater study.

References

- Aggleton, P. (1987). *Rebels without a cause*. London: Falmer Press.
- Bainbridge, A. (2005, July). *Investigating the gender discourse for mature women on a foundation degree programme*. Article presented at the 35th Annual SCUTREA Conference, The University of Sussex, England.
- Ball, S. (1981). *Beechside Comprehensive*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhatti, G. (2012). Ethnographic and representational styles. In J. Arthur, M. Waring, R. Coe, & L. V. Hedges (Eds.), *Research methods & methodologies in education* (pp. 80–83). London: Sage.
- Beeler, S. (2016). Undergraduate single mothers' experiences in postsecondary education. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 176, 69-80.
- British Educational Research Association (BERA). 2004. *Revised Guidelines for Educational Research*. Retrieved 30 October 2008, from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ethica1.pdf?noredirect=1>
- British Educational Research Association (BERA). 2011. *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Retrieved 3 January 2012, from <https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf?noredirect=1>
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Columbia, SC: Columbia University Press.
- Boyatzis, R.E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. London: Sage.
- Brooks, R. (2012). Negotiating time and space for study: Student-parents and familial relationships. *Sociology*, 47, 443-459.
- Brooks, R. (2015). Social and spatial disparities in emotional responses to education: Feelings of 'guilt' among student-parents. *British Educational Research Journal*, 41, 505-519.
- Chipperfield, S. R. (2013). Self-preservation and the individualisation of risk in university-based foundation course students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37, 623-642.
- Colley, H. (2007). Understanding time in learning transitions through the lifecourse. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 17, 427-443.
- Craig, J. (2009). New ways of being public: The experience of foundation degrees. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 33, 23-31.
- Dunne, L., Goddard, G., & Woolhouse, C. (2008a). Teaching assistants' perceptions of their professional role and their experiences of doing a Foundation Degree. *Improving Schools*, 11, 239-249.
- Dunne, L., Goddard, G., & Woolhouse, C. (200b). Mapping the changes: A critical exploration into the career trajectories of teaching assistants who undertake a Foundation degree. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 60, 49-59.
- Edwards, R. (1993). *Mature women students: Separating or connecting family and education*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Epstein, C. F., Seron, C., Oglensky, B., & Saute, R. (2014). *The part-time paradox: Time norms, professional life, family and gender*. Routledge.
- Fenge, L. A. (2011). A second chance at learning but it's not quite higher education: Experience of a foundation degree. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 35, 375-390.
- Fleckenstein, T., & Lee, S. C. (2016, July). *Youth Unemployment, Post-Industrialisation, and Economic Crisis: Comparing Vocational Education and Training Policy in England, Germany, and South Korea*. Third ISA Forum of Sociology, Vienna Austria.
- Gibbs, P. (2002). Who deserves foundation degrees? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 26, 197-206.
- Harvey, L. (2009). *Review of research literature focussed on foundation degrees*. Lichfield: Foundation Degree Forward.
- HEFCE (2010, June). *Foundation degrees: Key statistics 2001-2 to 2009-10*. London: HEFCE. Retrieved from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/201012/10_12.pdf

- Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American journal of sociology*, 85, 551-575.
- Huppertz, K. (2009). Reworking Bourdieu's Capital: Feminine and female capitals in the field of paid caring work. *Sociology*, 43, 45-66.
- Jenkins, R. (1982). Pierre Bourdieu and the reproduction of determinism." *Sociology*, 16, 270-281. doi:10.1177/0038038582016002008
- Leach, T. (2009). Maybe I can fly: Nurturing personal and collective learning in professional learning communities. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 313-323.
- Leaton Gray, S. (2017). The social construction of time in contemporary education: implications for technology, equality and Bernstein's 'conditions for democracy'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38, 60-71.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Longhurst, R., Hodgetts, D., & Stolte, O. (2012). Placing guilt and shame: lone mothers' experiences of higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 13, 295-312.
- Lynch, K. (2006) Neo-liberalism and marketisation: the implications for higher education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 5, 1-17.
- Lyonette, C., G. Atfield, H. Behle, & L. Gambin, L. (2015). *Tracking student mothers' higher education participation and early career outcomes over time: Initial choices and aspirations, HE experiences and career destinations*. London: Nuffield Foundation.
- Merrill, B. (2015). Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40, 1859–1871. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.914918.
- Morris, T.M. (2010). Is it worth it? An examination of how teaching assistants experience and perceive their Foundation degree study. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 62, 481-494.
- Nelson, A. (2006). Provision and participation: Using quantitative research to explore foundation degree provision. In P. Beeney (Ed.), *Researching foundation degrees: Linking research and practice* (pp.45-73). London: Foundation Degree Forward.
- O'Shea, S., & Stone, C. (2011). Transformations and self-discovery: mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33, 273-288.
- Ooms, A., Burke, L. M., Marks-Maran, D. J., Webb, M., & Cooper, D. (2012). Students' perceptions of foundation degrees. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 36, 403-421.
- Pascall, G., & R. Cox. 1993. *Women returning to higher education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Penketh, Claire, & Goddard, G. (2008). Students in transition: mature women students moving from Foundation Degree to Honours level 6. *Research in Post- Compulsory Education*, 13, 315-327.
- Pinilla, B., & Muñoz, S. (2005). Educational opportunities and academic performance: A case study of university student mothers in Venezuela. *Higher Education*, 50, 299-322.
- Pratt, J. (1997). *The polytechnic experiment: 1965-1992*. Bristol: Taylor & Francis.
- Quinn, J. (2003). The dynamics of the protected space: Spatial concepts and women students. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24, 449-61.
- Reay, D. (2004). Gendering Bourdieu's concept of capitals? Emotional capital, women and social class. In L. Adkins and B. Skeggs (Eds). *Feminism after Bourdieu* (pp. 57-74). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Richie, J., Lewis, J., Elam, G., Tennant, R., & Rahim, N. (2014). Designing and selecting samples. In J. Richie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls and R. Ormston (Eds.). *Qualitative Search Practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (pp. 111-146). London: SAGE.
- Robinson, D. (2012). Higher education in further education: Student perceptions of the value of foundation degree qualifications. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 17, 453-469.
- Shafi, A.A., & Rose, J. (2014). Restrictions into opportunities: How boundaries in the life course can shape educational pathways. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 19, 212-229.
- Shanahan, M. (2000). Being that bit older: Mature students' experience of university and healthcare education. *Occupational Therapy International*, 7, 153-162.
- Skeggs, B. (1997). *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable*. London: SAGE.
- Simmons, R. (2010). Globalisation, neo-liberalism and vocational learning: The case of English further education colleges. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 15, 363-376.
- Smith, P.H. (2012). Troops to Teaching: lessons from English teaching assistants' experiences of foundation degree study. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 38, 525-537.
- Smith, P.H. (2017). The triple shift: tudent-mothers, identity work and engagement with low-status vocationally related higher education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 22(1), 107-127.
- Smith, P.H. (2018). The paradox of higher vocational education: The teaching assistant game, the pursuit of capital and the self. *Educational Review*, 70, 188-207.
- Smoothy, L. (2006). Cutting edge: The student experience. *Forward*, 8, 26-28.
- Stone, C. (2008). Listening to individual voices and stories: The mature-age student experience. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48, 263-290.

- UK Universities (2016). *Record numbers of 18-year-olds accepted to university in 2016*. Retrieved from <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/Record-numbers-of.aspx>
- Wareing, M. (2008). Foundation degree students as work-based learners: The mentor's role. *British Journal of Nursing*, 17, 532-37.
- Wellington, J. (2015). *Educational research: Contemporary issues and practical approaches*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd.
- White, S. (2008). Mothers who are student teachers: Navigating their dual roles in pre-service teacher education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30, 159–172.
doi:10.1080/01580370802102064
- Woolhouse, C., Dunne, L., & Goddard, G. (2009). Lifelong learning: Teaching assistants' experiences of economic, social and cultural change following completion of a foundation degree. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 28, 763-776.
- Wright, H.R. (2011). *Women Studying Childcare: Integrating Lives through Adult Education*. Staffordshire: Trentham Books Ltd
- Wright, H.R. (2012). Childcare, children and capability. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 42, 409-424.
- Wright, H. R. (2013). In search of stability: women studying childcare in an English further education college. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37, 89-108.