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Original Research

Lessons to be learnt? Motivations, expectations and challenges for pre-service teachers in primary initial teacher education

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Abstract: Teacher retention in England remains a critical issue, with 33% of newly qualified teachers leaving the profession within five years. Since teaching effectiveness typically improves with experience, high attrition rates – and the loss of experienced staff – have significantly impacted workforce stability. Between 2020 and 2022, teacher vacancies doubled and Primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) applications declined by an additional 10%. These trends undermine both national recruitment targets and global sustainability goals, including UNESCO's projection that 69 million new teachers will be required worldwide by 2030. Despite these challenges, some prospective teachers remain committed, particularly those with strong altruistic motivations. However, it may be that those applying to train as teachers lack a full understanding of the profession's demands. Using a mixed-methods approach, this study explores the motivations, expectations, and early challenges of Primary ITE Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs), aiming to identify how ITE programmes can better prepare candidates for the realities of teaching and promote long-term retention. The findings provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing ITE provision to support a more sustainable teaching workforce.

Keywords: Recruitment, Retention, Initial teacher education, Pre-service teachers, Motivations, Challenges, Self-efficacy, Self-determination theory

Introduction

Since the UK House of Commons' most recent report on retention in 2022, a subsequent paper highlighted that over half of teachers reported their workload was unacceptable (Adams et al., 2023). More than 60% of participants in this study disclosed poor wellbeing, with some stating they were taking antidepressants to mitigate the impact of workload on their wellbeing. In a different study involving more than 11,000 teachers, 1 in 5 teachers reportedly worked more than 60 hours per week (Nathoo, 2023), with primary school teachers working longer hours than most countries except Japan (Long & Bridges, 2022). Despite this, a study comparing the working hours of teachers to non-teachers found that over the course of a year, teachers worked only 1 hour more per week than those who did not teach (Startz, 2019). These studies suggest that it may not be the amount of work teachers undertake, but the added responsibilities beyond the classroom and greater accountability for these responsibilities that are causing teachers to leave the profession, which is also reflected in organised strike action since the COVID-19 pandemic. Although teachers recently received the largest pay increase in over 15 years (Department for Education, 2020), inflation has resulted in

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a 5% pay cut in real terms; meaning they are now doing more than ever, for less money (Sibieta & Tahir, 2023).

Regarding teacher attrition in the current climate; it is now essential to identify carefully the specific challenges driving teachers to leave the profession, as teachers ultimately shape the climate of future societal change (Bayler & Ozcan, 2014). The current conditions are not only affecting the attrition of qualified teachers but are also impacting the progression and completion rates of PSTs during their ITE. A recent analysis of PST attrition rates for postgraduate students showed that 92% of trainees completed their ITE in 2023, compared to 95% in 2018 (Whittaker, 2024). At the same time, the percentage of undergraduate PSTs who withdrew from their course doubled, from 10% to 20% (Walker, 2023). Whereas previously there was no clear parallel between ITE and teacher attrition rates, this alignment in statistics may reflect the need for ITE providers to challenge the quality requirements set by the Department for Education (DfE), to consider changes to their programmes and to revise recruitment so that procedures reflect greater consideration of applicants' motivations as those with a specific set of motives demonstrate higher levels of commitment to the profession once they begin to assume the responsibilities of a teacher (Pezzot, 2018).

Aims

By identifying and evaluating the varied and continually evolving roles associated with the challenges faced by primary school teachers, there is an opportunity to consider how this insight can be used to co-design current primary ITE courses more effectively - ensuring they better equip PSTs for the demands of the profession. The concept of the "unknown knowns" serves as a key instigator for this research (Peim, 2018, p. 7). As an initial teacher trainer with prior experience as a class teacher, middle leader, and senior leader in primary schools across three local authorities in the West Midlands, the lead author has spent the past three years as part of a Primary ITE team in the region. During this time, he has observed varying levels of self-efficacy among trainees at different stages of the course. He has also noted key patterns related to course structure, content delivery, and specific points in the academic year when trainees begin to question whether they wish to pursue a career in teaching. These critical observations have prompted him to reflect on the interplay between motivations, expectations, and challenges and how these factors may relate to increasing withdrawal rates from ITE programmes. Given the broader context of ongoing teacher retention challenges, the findings of this research could support teacher educators in refining curriculum design, with a view to enhancing future employability and contributing to a more sustainable teaching workforce.

This study draws primarily on three interconnected frameworks: Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2024), which conceptualises how autonomy, competence, and relatedness support intrinsic motivation; Social Cognitive Theory, specifically Bandura's (1982) notion of selfefficacy, which is central to trainees' confidence and persistence; and the FITChoice model (Watt & Richardson, 2007), which provides an empirically grounded structure for understanding pre-service teachers' motivations. These frameworks were selected because they align directly with the research questions and the analytic focus on motivations, expectations, and confidence development during ITE. Other theoretical contributions referenced later in the manuscript are used to contextualise or interpret specific findings, rather than forming part of the core analytical framework. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, using both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Responses were gathered from approximately 70 PSTs enrolled on a full-time, three-year undergraduate ITE programme – leading to qualified teacher status – at a provider in the West Midlands. Although postgraduate PSTs were also invited to participate, fewer than 8% of this group responded, so their data were excluded from the final analysis.

Literature review

Initial and sustained motivations for teaching

Motivation among PSTs is dynamic, influenced by both internal and external factors. Williams and Burden (1997) distinguish between the initial motivation for entering teaching and the sustained motivation required to complete training. Schunk et al. (2014) state that motivation involves both initiating a goal and persisting in its pursuit. The literature supports the idea that clear initial motivations are associated with higher retention (Watt et al., 2017). However, tracking and analysing motivation throughout an ITE journey remains complex as an individual's context, and circumstances may continually evolve during the course.

Research by Sinclair (2008) and Roness and Smith (2010) shows that PSTs often maintain their motivations throughout training, although some variation in intensity occurs. For example, enjoyment of teaching may decrease, while feelings of professional accomplishment may increase. Similarly, research following teachers from their ITE into the early years of their careers indicates that intrinsic motivations, such as enthusiasm, often remain stable across career stages, even though the strength or intensity of these motivations may fluctuate over time (Hartl & Holzberger, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of long-term research that considers context. Without qualitative insights, it is difficult to utilise research to suggest reasons for changes in motivation over time.

Understanding motivation: Frameworks and categories

Lortie (1975) introduced the terms "attractors" and "facilitators" to categorise teaching motivations. Attractors include positive school experiences, while facilitators involve familial influences (Low et al., 2011). However, while conceptually useful, these terms lack the capacity to adequately explain and explore the complexities of contemporary teacher motivation.

Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory categorises job elements into motivational factors (e.g., achievement, recognition) and hygiene factors (e.g., pay, working conditions). Though widely used, this model has been criticised for oversimplifying motivation. Nonetheless, it helps distinguish how factors such as leadership or salary can function both as motivators and as sources of dissatisfaction (Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2012). To address limitations in existing models, many scholars recommend categorising teacher motivations as altruistic, intrinsic, or extrinsic (Watt & Richardson, 2007; Heinz, 2015; Fray & Gore, 2018). Altruistic motivations involve a desire to help others; intrinsic motivations stem from personal fulfilment and interest in teaching; extrinsic motivations relate to job security, pay, or status. Kwok et al. (2022) provide a comparative framework highlighting these categories, reinforcing distinctions that are essential for accurately assessing motivations. In broad terms, true altruism is described as service at the expense of self-interest (Mulinge, 2018), while intrinsic motivations are inherently self-rewarding. Table 1 synthesises some of the key theories in this field:

Table 1. Synthesis of key theories of motivation within teaching.

Motivation Categories	Watt & Richardson (2007):	Heinz (2015):	Fray & Gore (2018):
Altruistic motivation	• Shape future of children • Enhance social equality • Make social contributions	• Contribute to society with children/ adolescents	• Service to others • Make a difference • Answer a calling
Intrinsic motivation		• Interest in their subject	• Passion for teaching and interest in the subject matter • Being suited to the career • Liking for feeling accomplished in a specific subject
Extrinsic motivation	• Job security • Salary • Social status • Job transferability • Time for fa	• Job security • Pay • Status • Hours	• Ability to balance work and family • Holidays • Job security • Reliable and good income • Job opportunities • Career prospects

Recent studies (Gul et al., 2020; Yarim et al., 2022) affirm that PSTs most frequently cite intrinsic and altruistic motivations before and during their teacher training, with extrinsic reasons being less prominent. However, some PSTs mention benefits like job stability or holidays, reflecting a less comprehensive understanding of the role. This suggests a need for clearer communication about the profession during recruitment and training.

Motivation and retention

Recognising pre-service motivations is key to improving retention. Gul et al. (2020) found links between pre-ITE motivations and the likelihood of remaining in the teaching profession. Onyefulu et al. (2023) argue that altruistic motivations are especially predictive of long-term commitment. Fokkens-Bruinsma and Canrinus (2012) and Stroetinga et al. (2021) suggest that ITE providers should assess motivations during candidate selection. However, Pillen et al. (2013) contend that no single motivational type ensures retention; rather, a balance of intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic drivers is more predictive. Geographical and cultural contexts also matter. Watt et al. (2012) show that PSTs in Western countries often prioritise intrinsic

motivations, while extrinsic concerns are more common elsewhere. This implies that global teacher recruitment and retention strategies should be culturally contingent and responsive.

Expectations and the reality of ITE

Expectations significantly influence PST experience and these expectations can be linked to their motivations to remain engaged (Sag, 2014). Bandura (1971) and Rotter (1966) suggest that expectations shape behavioural intentions and outcomes and Manuel and Hughes (2006) found that PSTs expect the profession to be both challenging and fulfilling. However, a gap often exists between these expectations and reality—what Veenman (1984) called the "reality shock." Studies show that expectations about school placements and university training often do not match actual experiences (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

Self-efficacy is believed to improve over time (Kim & Cho, 2014), but this is not universally observed. Alger (2009) argues that identity formation is largely stable during training. Beyond classroom realities, some PSTs expect teaching to fulfil broader personal ambitions—e.g., career progression or leadership (Friedman, 2016). This raises questions about how well ITE programmes support identity development in order to sustain PST motivation.

Theoretical models supporting motivation

Finally, SelfDetermination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020; 2024) provides insight into the psychological conditions required for motivation to be sustained. Self-Determination theory posits that motivation is strengthened when environments support three basic needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs map closely onto the structures of ITE programmes—opportunities for independent decisionmaking, constructive feedback that develops competence, and relational support from mentors and peers. Self-Determination theory therefore contributes to understanding how ITE contexts can either enhance or undermine PST motivation, particularly in relation to RQ4 on improving retention and support.

Methodology

Research design

This study investigates the motivations, expectations, and experiences of PSTs enrolled in their ITE programmes in England. While prior research highlights the influence of workload on teacher attrition (Barmby, 2007), there remains a lack of specific, practice-informed knowledge about how ITE providers can more effectively prepare PSTs for the profession (Peim, 2018). Understanding how PSTs perceive and navigate their training is essential for developing strategies that support teacher retention.

The analysis was interpretive and thematic, as Hall (1990) emphasised that understanding difference is essential for engaging in social transformation. More recently, Jenks (2020) demonstrated how data analysis can be applied within teacher education to uncover how classroom talk and institutional practices might challenge dominant power relations. Chen et al. (2022) show how constructivist beliefs shape teaching practices and motivation, providing empirical support for claims that knowledge and identity in teacher education are socially constructed and contextually negotiated. These critical approaches help advance equity and social justice in debates associated with ITE and lead to sustained progress in the field (Ojha et al., 2024).

Research questions

The following research questions were designed to prioritise knowledge generation over semantic precision (Mayo et al., 2013). Drawing on best practices in qualitative inquiry (Thabane et al., 2009), the questions are informed by prior literature, practitioner experience, and awareness of contemporary trends in ITE:

1. What reasons do Primary ITE students give for their motivation to teach?
2. What expectations do Primary ITE students have before starting a teacher training programme?
3. What challenges do Primary ITE students face during their training?
4. What solutions can be proposed for ITE programmes to address early-career teacher attrition?

Research instruments

Questionnaires

Data collection began with an online questionnaire distributed to PSTs. Online surveys are efficient, facilitate broad reach, and minimise interviewer bias (Regmi et al., 2016; Denscombe, 2014). Both closed and open-ended items were included to gather structured data and allow for elaboration (Bryman, 2016). Limitations of this method include potential digital exclusion and reduced interpretability due to the lack of interviewer clarification (Remillard et al., 2014; Cohen et al., 2018). To address this, access to laptops was provided, and a pilot study tested the clarity of the questionnaire items. Anonymity may encourage candour but can also result in surface-level responses (Gillham, 2008). Therefore, open responses were included to enhance contextual depth and reduce oversimplification. This design aligns with Tashakkori and Teddlie's (2003) recommendation to embed qualitative tools within surveys to enhance interpretive value.

Semi-structured interviews

A sub-sample of questionnaire respondents was invited

for follow-up semi-structured interviews, enabling deeper exploration of emergent themes (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This sub-sample was selected randomly to ensure a representative, unbiased group for the deeper analysis that semi-structured interviews provide compared to questionnaires.

This format supports participant-led dialogue, while providing the flexibility needed to explore complex, nuanced issues (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). While interviews offer rich, contextualised data, they are time-consuming and resource-intensive (Cohen et al., 2018). Potential interviewer bias, especially given the lead researcher's pre-existing relationship with participants, was a concern. The pre-existing relationships between participants and interviewer were another reason the subsample was randomised (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). Key strategies to minimise this included using consistent scripts, establishing rapport, and adopting a reflexive stance throughout the process (Kircher & Zipp, 2022). While generalisability can be limited, transferability is enhanced through thick description and contextual transparency (Mason, 2002). Together with the questionnaire, the interviews contributed to methodological triangulation (Flick, 2022).

Data analysis

Qualitative data from open-ended survey responses and interviews were analysed using manual open and axial coding to generate themes (Gall et al., 2007). A quantising step was employed, in which qualitative categories were transformed into numeric codes to facilitate pattern recognition and subgroup comparison (Sandelowski, 2009). Coding followed established protocols to enhance consistency and transparency. While inter-coder reliability checks were considered (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012), resource limitations prevented the use of multiple coders. Descriptive analysis structured the data, while exploratory analysis identified patterns relevant to the research questions (Taherdoost, 2020). This analytic process reflects the interpretive emphasis of qualitative research, where meaning is constructed contextually (Mason, 2002). Reflexivity was maintained throughout to acknowledge the researcher's interpretive role (Berger, 2015).

Validity and reliability

This study adopts Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework of trustworthiness, comprising credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Strategies to enhance trustworthiness included methodological triangulation (Flick, 2022), thick description to support contextual interpretation and reflexive practice to mitigate researcher bias (Mason, 2002).

To further support reliability, key constructs – such as motivation – were operationalised using established definitions. For instance, motivation was categorised as intrinsic, extrinsic, or altruistic (Watt & Richardson, 2007), and responses related to salary or job security were coded as extrinsic, based on Herzberg's framework (1966).

Mixed methods integration

This study employed a concurrent mixed methods design as defined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), specifically following Bryman's (2016) model of systematic integration, as shown in Figure 1:

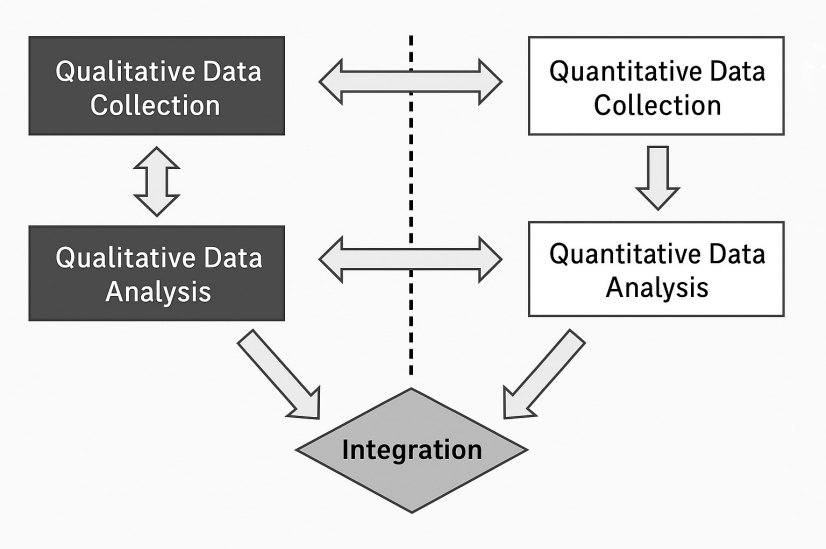

Figure 1. Bryman's (2016) systematic integration

- Integration frequency: Qualitative and quantitative approaches are integrated at all stages.
- Sequence: Qualitative tools (interviews, open-ended responses) are utilised first; quantitative coding and analysis follow.
- Prioritisation: Equal emphasis is placed on both strands.
- Integration point: During data analysis and interpretation.

This integrated approach enhances trustworthiness and provides more nuanced insights into PST experiences (Chiong et al., 2017). While time and resource constraints necessitated the use of online questionnaires as the primary tool, qualitative data were used to contextualise findings and mitigate risks such as social desirability bias (Wilkerson et al., 2002; Patten, 2017).

Findings

RQ1: What motivates primary ITE students to teach?

Findings (Figure 2) indicate that the dominant motivation for entering the teaching profession among PSTs is altruistic. Across all training years, approximately 70% of participants cited motivations such as "wanting to make a difference" or "having an impact on future generations." Interview data provided richer narratives, with some PSTs referencing both positive and negative personal school experiences as foundational influences.

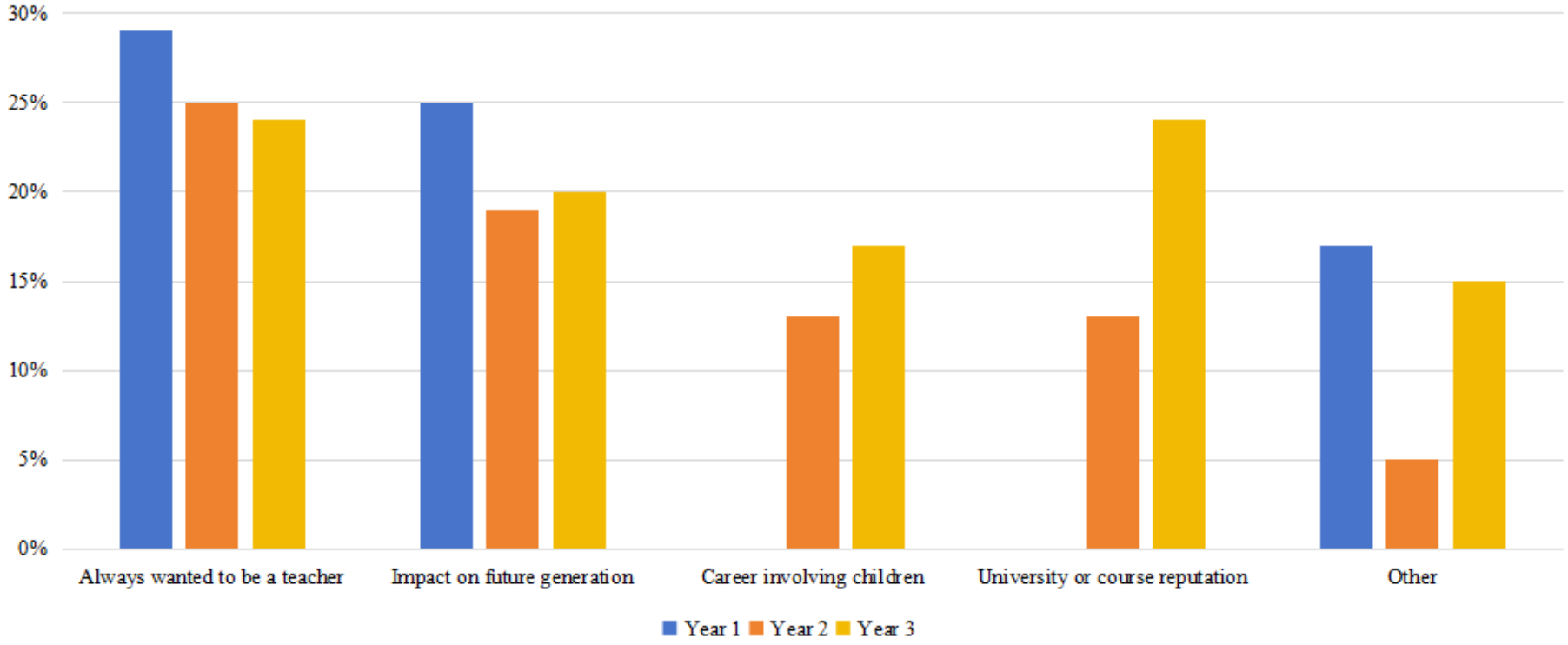

Figure 2. Motivations for choosing teaching

Motivations appeared to diversify over time. First-year PSTs predominantly referenced altruistic drivers, while second- and third-year students were more likely to include intrinsic (e.g., passion for teaching, pride in achievement) and extrinsic (e.g., job security, financial stability) reasons. Nevertheless, motivations are multifaceted and not static. Some later-stage PSTs acknowledged changing priorities due to personal circumstances.

RQ2: What expectations do PSTs have prior to training?

Workload was the most frequently mentioned expectation among participants, particularly regarding planning, marking, and time management. First-year PSTs often held vague or idealised views of the profession, with some expressing surprise at the extent of responsibility involved. More advanced trainees exhibited a clearer understanding of the role, shaped by their placement experiences. However, even second- and third-year PSTs identified discrepancies between university-based training and the practical realities of school life, especially in relation to behaviour management. The mismatch between promotional material and actual course demands emerged as a source of concern. One participant observed: "Universities could be more open about what we need to do on the course."

RQ3: What challenges do PSTs face during ITE?

Unsurprisingly, workload was the main challenge identified across all year groups (Figure 3). Over 50% of respondents reported difficulty balancing academic commitments, part-time work, and personal life. Participants also reported difficulty during assessed placements, particularly regarding the quality of mentoring and feedback. The importance of positive reinforcement was noted repeatedly.

Finance was a particular issue for second- and third-year PSTs, especially those with dependents. Many reported needing part-time jobs to supplement insufficient financial support, contributing to burnout and increasing their risk of attrition. Approximately 20% of first-year PSTs had considered withdrawing from their course, rising to 50% in the second year and dropping to 36% in the third. Nevertheless, a strong majority in each group said they would still recommend ITE to others.

RQ4: What solutions can support retention and success in ITE?

Trainees proposed a range of pragmatic and psychological supports to enhance their ITE experience.

Key suggestions included:

- Greater clarity about course demands at recruitment
- Increased one-to-one tutor support during placements
- More financial support, including paid placements
- Improved mentoring consistency and quality assurance

First-year PSTs particularly emphasised the need for regular tutor check-ins and encouragement. Second-year PSTs focused on the need for paid placements and workload adjustments. Third-year PSTs called for curriculum restructuring and greater flexibility, including improved integration between academic and school-based elements. Participants also requested more diverse placement options (e.g., SEN or EAL settings).

Mentor quality emerged as a recurring theme across all groups. While placement support was generally valued, some PSTs described inconsistent guidance or limited feedback.

Discussion

RQ1: What motivates primary ITE students to teach?

These results are consistent with findings by Watt and Richardson (2007), Heinz (2015), and Fray and Gore (2018), as well as Gul et al. (2020), though the latter reported a stronger role for extrinsic motivators than observed here. This reflects Lortie's (1975) concept of "attractors," though these were less commonly cited. This shift may be attributed to increased experience, confidence, and self-efficacy, as documented in studies by Lancaster and Bain (2010). It also aligns with the FIT-Choice model (Watt & Richardson, 2012), which identifies evolving ability beliefs and expectancies as motivational factors. This reinforces the importance of contextualising motivational theory within the lived realities of teacher training.

RQ2: What expectations do PSTs have prior to training?

This supports Weinstein's (1988) findings on early optimism and Kolb's (1984) emphasis on experiential learning as a critical developmental factor. These findings align with Manuel and Hughes (2006), who note that early teacher expectations are often challenged once immersion begins, contributing to "reality shock" (Veenman, 1984). This raises ethical considerations around informed consent and programme marketing, echoing concerns highlighted by Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. There is a clear implication that ITE providers should offer more accurate and authentic depictions of the programme to mitigate expectation gaps. Enhancing early exposure to school settings and scaffolding reflective practice could help trainees navigate the emotional and practical complexities of the profession.

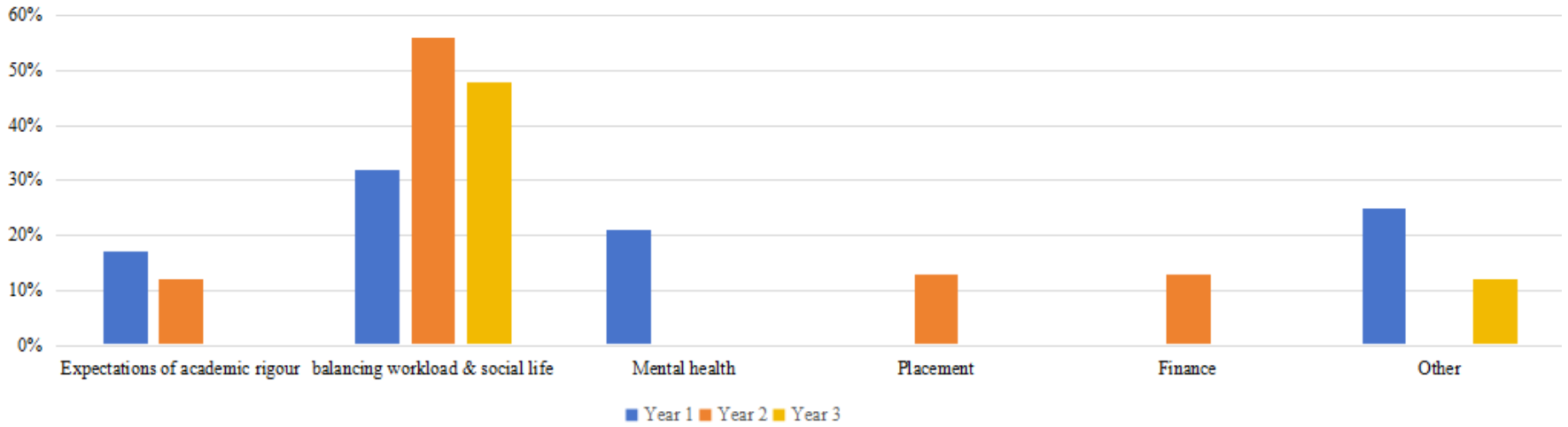

Figure 3. Challenges faced by PSTs, by undergraduate year group

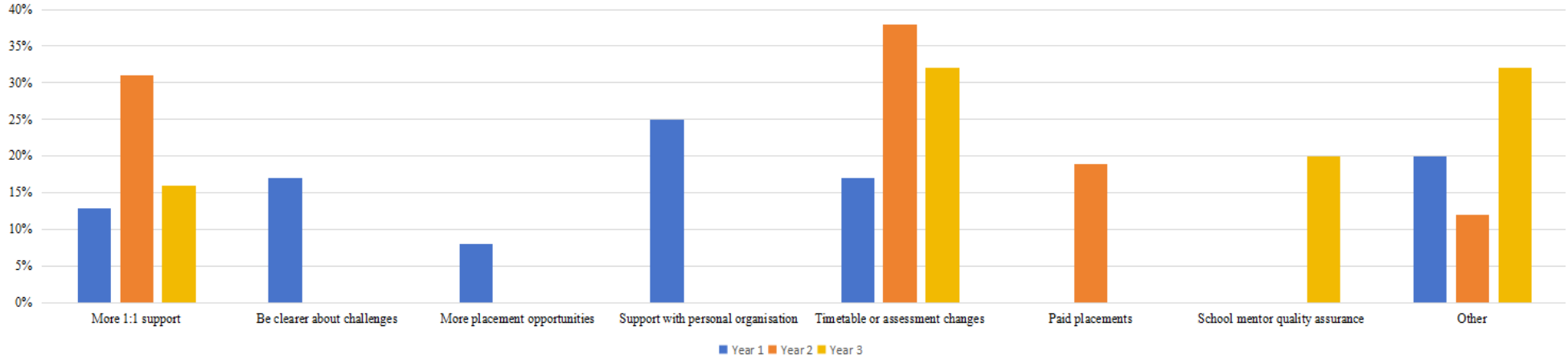

Figure 4. PST suggestions for ITE improvement

RQ3: What challenges do PSTs face during ITE?

This finding is consistent with previous literature (Howard & Dailey, 1979; Schunk & Usher, 2019), which links such imbalances to reduced self-efficacy. The importance of positive reinforcement aligns with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and Schunk and DiBenedetto's (2020) emphasis on mastery experiences and verbal encouragement. This reinforces the findings of Pfitzner-Eden (2016), who observed that prior experience and life stage significantly mediate stress during training. This resilience supports the expectancy-value framework (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), suggesting that strong belief in task value helps trainees persist through difficulty. These patterns also align with Burch's 1970s competency model, as cited in Kongsvik (2021). As PSTs progress from "unconscious incompetence" to "conscious competence," they experience emotional and psychological strain—particularly during transition periods such as placements.

RQ4: What solutions can support retention and success in ITE?

These findings echo Liu et al.'s (2016) work on transitional support and Wong and Liu's (2024) advocacy for communities of practice. While one-to-one support offers emotional reassurance, collaborative peer networks offer sustainable developmental benefits and reduce professional isolation. These issues raise concerns about equity, especially for mature students and those with dependents. From a critical theory lens, the financial burdens of ITE risk excluding candidates from diverse backgrounds, potentially exacerbating teacher shortages and reducing inclusion (Giroux, 2000; Sleeter & Carmona, 2017). This highlights the importance of rigorous mentor training and suggests a need for institutional monitoring to ensure PSTs' psychological needs are met (Burgueno et al., 2022).

Limitations

This study has several methodological and practical limitations that must be acknowledged. Although the sample size permits in-depth exploration, it restricts the generalisability of the findings and reduces statistical power for any quantitative interpretation. The research is also geographically limited, focusing solely on a single community or institution, which may not fully represent broader systemic or cultural patterns across England. The short timeframe for data collection provides only a snapshot of participant perspectives rather than capturing changes or developments over time and reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias or inaccuracies in recall. Consequently, the lead researcher's own positionality may have influenced how data were gathered and interpreted. In combination, these factors mean that the findings should be considered exploratory rather than definitive.

In addition to methodological constraints, practical and analytical considerations further limit the scope of the study. Access to participants was shaped by ethical and logistical boundaries, restricting the inclusion of a wider range of stakeholder perspectives. General limitations in capacity also affected the potential use of more advanced tools for data collection and analysis. Analytically, the study relied on a single theoretical lens, and opportunities for triangulation across methods or data sources were limited, reducing the depth and robustness of interpretations. Finally, because the sample was purposively selected and embedded within a specific context, it is not statistically representative, and transferability of findings to other educational or cultural settings may be constrained. While these limitations do not diminish the value of the insights generated, they highlight the need for caution when applying conclusions beyond the immediate study context.

Recommendation

For providers, the implications are immediate and actionable:

- **Recruitment approach:** ITE providers should refine their recruitment processes to reliably identify whether individuals' motivations are altruistic, intrinsic, or extrinsic, and consider how these motivations might impact the progression and retention of applicants. They should also offer a realistic job preview from the outset (including workload rhythms and assessment pinch-points) to align expectations ethically.
- **Transitional support:** ITE providers should implement measures to mitigate challenges faced by PSTs during transitional moments. This could include a combination of one-to-one meetings to assess current levels of self-efficacy and communities of practice where PSTs can support each other by sharing best practices and discussing challenges. Institutions should also aim to standardise mentor preparation and QA, prioritising actionable feedback and pastoral care during the known "dip" phases of placement.
- **Systematic monitoring:** ITE providers should systematically embed scheduled PST self-efficacy diagnostics at predefined milestones to identify the parts of the course that present the greatest challenges. This data could inform curriculum redesign and future amendments to the course, coupled with effective support models, such as micro-coaching on behaviour, workload etc.
- **Professional identity support:** ITE providers should guide PSTs in understanding their own levels of self-efficacy and how these may change over time based on their teaching experiences.
- **Quality assurance and mentor training:** ITE

providers should continue to develop quality assurance and mentor training. Mentors need to have the interpersonal skills and compassion to support trainees through difficult moments during teaching placements, helping PSTs sustain motivation and remain on the course.

Finally, while the sample size and single-provider focus limit generalisability, the mixed-methods design, clear temporal signal (year-on-year motivational shift and mid-programme vulnerability), and convergence with theory support the case for scaling and testing MES-aligned interventions across multiple sites. Future work could follow cohorts into the ECT years and evaluate which levers – expectation-setting, mentoring quality, or self-efficacy monitoring – deliver the largest retention gains, especially for mature and financially constrained trainees. In short: with targeted, timely, and equity-minded supports, providers can convert early altruism into enduring professional commitment.

Authors' contributions

S.H. conceived the study, designed the methodology, collected the data and performed the analysis. S.H and M.S wrote the first draft of the manuscript collaboratively and all authors reviewed and approved the final version.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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