

‘My achievement will be their achievement’: the challenges of role modelling for student parents at UK universities

Patrick Mulrenan¹, Helen Redd¹, Jane Lewis² & Heather Allison¹

¹ School of Social Professions, London Metropolitan University

² School of Sociology and Social Policy, London Metropolitan University

Abstract

Student parents, particularly women, cite role modelling as a key reason to come to university and persist with their studies. However, this role modelling relationship remains largely unexplored. This study examines the role modelling relationship between student parents and their children. There are distinct practical and emotional challenges faced by student parents, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and these impact on the role modelling relationship with their children. Using Bandura’s notion of ‘attention’, we found that there are some potential problems with the theory and practice of student parent role modelling. The 19 students interviewed identified balancing academic study and family life as the key issue, but also identified space as a major concern for participants. Lack of access to the library and campus during COVID was particularly problematic for student parents in practical terms, and in undermining a sometimes-fragile sense of student identity. However, the students were not simply modelling a student identity or aspiration to their children, but demonstrating efficacy, that it was possible to achieve by overcoming obstacles. A key challenge in terms of role modelling was getting an appropriate balance between demonstrating determination, but concealing some of the significant stresses they faced in their studies.

Key words: student parent, COVID, Bandura, role modelling

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the Higher Education experience of students who have dependent children (‘student parents’), focussing on the role modelling relationship between student parents and their children. This role modelling relationship is a key factor in students deciding to go to university, and in successfully completing their studies, despite the particular challenges that these students face (for example, Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Visick, 2016). The research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting changes in teaching and learning at UK universities. While the pandemic has provided challenges to all university students, this paper argues that it has had a particular impact on student parents, and on the role modelling relationship between these students and their children.

It is likely that the number of student parents in UK Higher Education has increased through the process of ‘widening participation’, a policy which aims to ensure that ‘all students from all backgrounds are supported to access, succeed and progress from Higher Education’ (Office for Students (OFS), 2019). The policy has led to an expansion in university student

numbers, and drawn in applicants from more diverse backgrounds (Major and Banerjee, 2019; Secretary of State for Education (SOSE), 2019). The recruitment and performance of students with particular characteristics, in terms of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background, is collected by UK universities and is widely reported. The government has stated that having children should not be a barrier to engaging in Higher Education (Brooks, 2012), However, information on student parents is sparse, as universities are not required to collect this data (Moreau, 2016; Allison, 2017). Intermittent surveys indicate that nine per cent of full-time students live at home with their children, and that nearly half of these students are lone parents (Maher et al. 2018: 49) The National Union of Students (2009: 12) found that 89 per cent of student parents were mature, and that 87 per cent were women.

In addition to gaps in data, it is argued that student parents are rendered 'invisible' (Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016) by the broader underlying philosophy of Western university learning, which prioritises the rational and non-emotional, and which often discourages student parents from integrating the personal aspects of their lives with their studies (Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Leathwood and Hey, 2009). This 'masculinist' approach to education excludes caring experiences from learning, and children from coming onto campus (Moreau, 2016). Family life is negatively viewed when it intrudes into academic life, reinforcing the perception among academics that being a parent is a series of problems and barriers, rather than a valued and integral part of the student identity (Moreau and Kerner, 2015).

While role modelling is argued to be important in understanding the Higher Education journey of student parents, the nature of this role modelling relationship remains largely unexplored. Role models, as defined by Morgenroth et al. (2015: p.4), are 'individuals who influence aspirants' achievements, motivations and goals by acting as behavioural models, representations of the possible, and/or inspirations'. Following this definition, student parents would seem to be in an ideal position to act as role models to their children. They are 'trusted others' to their children (Wainwright and Watts, 2019), and the views of parents are pivotal in children's attitudes to Higher Education (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2014). However, there are issues with role modelling in both practical and theoretical terms, as discussed in the following section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two interlinked themes regarding student parent role modelling inform this review: the nature of the role modelling relationship in a Higher Education context, and whether the desire to be role models to their children influences the decision to come to university.

The nature of the role modelling relationship in a Higher Education context

Bandura's social cognitive learning theory remains influential across a range of disciplines, including both school education and Higher Education (Beauchamp et al. 2019; Callinan et al. 2018). It has been subject to critique, particularly in reference to the extent to which broader social environments mediate learning and role modelling, and the degree to which role modelling is influenced by performance, rather than performance by role modelling

(Williams, 2010). However, social cognitive theory is supported by a broad evidence base, and, in terms of role modelling, provides a useful way to reflect on how children can envisage 'alternative versions' of themselves (Beauchamp et al. 2019).

Bandura (1977b: p.192) argued that 'much human behaviour is developed through modelling', which is underpinned by a process of 'vicarious learning', that is, learning by observation. Four factors influence the effectiveness of role modelling: attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation (Bandura, 1977a). The modelled behaviour must be noticed, remembered, practised and desirable. This paper will focus on one particular aspect of modelling- 'attention'. Bandura (1977a: p.24) noted that 'people cannot learn by observation unless they attend to, and perceive accurately, the significant factors in modelled behaviour'. Thus, the child's understanding of what is being modelled underpins other elements of successful role modelling.

In terms of attention, there are a number of potential issues for role modelling by student parents. Firstly, the child needs to understand what a university is, and the student identity of their parent. Secondly, this identity must be such that the child would aspire to it. Thirdly, there must be sufficient interaction to reinforce this process. Finally, the child must primarily notice the student parent, rather than alternative or contradictory models of behaviour that surround them. This research finds that each of these conditions is problematic in the student parent role modelling relationship.

Role modelling as a reason to come to university

Previous research has argued that the role model relationship is key to understanding the way that student parents experience Higher Education (Brooks, 2013; Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009; Mulrenan et al. 2018; Wainwright and Watts, 2019). Student parents are primarily motivated to come to university by improved employment prospects (Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). However, for many student parents, coming to university is a response to a perception of unfulfilled potential (Butcher, 2020). Childcare responsibilities may have disrupted their education, and going to university is about 'achieving a status that was due, but was allowed to slip away by default' (Pascall and Cox, 1993: p.86).

Role modelling is cited as a close second to career development, with female students twice as likely as male students to cite role modelling as a reason to go to university (Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). In coming to university, student parents seek to develop a new role they can demonstrate to their children (Britton and Baxter, 1999: p.187; Visick, 2016). It is notable in this context that decisions by parents to go to university are often triggered by family events such as breakdown of relationships or children going to school, events which affect their sense of identity and which may release time to pursue other ambitions (Brine and Walker, 2004; Edwards, 1993).

Entering Higher Education is an inherently 'risky enterprise' for mature students, and in particular for student parents (Reay, 2003; Wainwright, 2019). There are many barriers for parents that must be weighed against longer term employment benefits, such as financial costs and a reduction in time spent with children (Davies et al. 2001). For these reasons, the

decisions of parents to go to university may be seen as an emotional decision as much as a rational one.

Part of this emotional landscape is the desire to change the life of their family and children. Student parents often express regret that they have missed opportunities for further education, and want their own children to have the opportunities they missed (Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009; Hinton-Smith, 2008). This desire is partly realised through the role modelling relationship.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research involved in-depth interviews with full-time students with children between four and eleven years old. The minimum age was chosen as very young children would not be able to understand concepts around Higher Education. The maximum age was selected in part because differences in attainment between advantaged and less advantaged pupils are embedded by the age of eleven (Andrews et al. 2017; OFS, 2019). Many children have clear ambitions to attend university by this age (UCAS, 2016), and the move to secondary school may mean that peer pressure becomes more influential than parents' role modelling (Rampiro and Taylor, 2013).

Nineteen full-time students were interviewed, seventeen of whom had attended the University 2020 Family Day, a free annual event open to all student parents and their children. Sixteen of the participants were women, and fourteen from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Just over half were final year students, and their ages ranged from 28 to 49 years old. A significant majority were the first in their immediate family to attend university. As such, the sample reasonably reflects the diverse body of students at this post-1992 London university.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Age	21-29	4
	30-39	10
	40-49	5
Gender	Female	16
	Male	3
Ethnicity	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic	14
	White	5
At least one parent attended university	Yes	2
	No	17
Number of dependent children	1	10
	2	3
	3	3
	4	2
	Unknown	1

The interviews took place remotely through Microsoft Teams, in the aftermath of the COVID lockdown. There were some advantages to this approach. For example, students were not inconvenienced by transport issues, and they may have felt more comfortable talking about personal issues in their home environment. However, there were some practical and ethical issues. There were concerns, for example, whether the students could speak openly without being overheard by other family members. Care was also taken to check that students were safe and comfortable with the questions being asked, as the interviewers could see only the participants' faces, and lacked other visual cues about their emotional state. Information was sent in advance to tell the participants about the objectives of the research and how the interviews would be carried out. Confidentiality issues were explained to participants and the results anonymised.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach with themes including: the impact of COVID, reasons to come to university, experiences at university, role modelling and availability of support. The questions were kept broad and exploratory so that the student parents could reflect on the issues that were important to them. Prompts were developed and guided by existing research on student parents and were used to ensure that all relevant areas were covered.

In terms of analysis, the process reflected the staged, thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2009). The interviews were carried out by the four members of the team and then transcribed. The team members familiarised themselves with emerging data across all the interviews. As the interviews progressed, themes were identified by repeated patterns of response by participants (Robson and MacCartan, 2016) and by the emotional resonance that these topics had for students.

Limitations include as relatively small sample size, being drawn mostly from one school at one London university. Most had previously attended the University Family Day. As such, they may represent a cohort of students who are particularly keen to involve their children with their university lives. The sample contained only three men, which reflected the attendance of the Family Day, but which may have limited the range of views from this sub-sample. By virtue of focussing on current students, the sample excludes those who had not completed their studies. It is therefore important to exercise some caution in generalising the results to universities across the UK.

The research was funded by a small research grant and participants were offered a £20 voucher to compensate for inconvenience. The research and its detailed approach were approved by the University's Ethics Review Panel in June 2020

FINDINGS

The interviews identified two broad themes: *developing a student identity for role modelling* and *challenges to student identity and role modelling*

Developing a student identity for role modelling

Reflecting previous research (Moreau and Kerner, 2015), most respondents said that entering Higher Education was primarily motivated by improving their families' circumstances in the longer term:

I'm a single mum and I'm the only breadwinner. And I want to give my child the best in life. So, I want to be able to afford whatever I need...and whatever he needs
(Female lone parent, one child)

But going to university is also part of a larger project for student parents; a project to find an identity that had perhaps been submerged in their education, working and family history. They wanted to prove something to others, to themselves and to gain respect on their own terms. The student identity was important in itself, and some students had previously felt 'robbed' of the opportunity to pursue Higher Education. This identity also formed the basis of the role modelling relationship:

I came from a very conservative family...pursuing further education was my right...I feel I was robbed of the opportunity and I was very determined to do this (Female lone parent, one child)

She [daughter] all of a sudden was the centre of my world and everything I did, I lived and breathed for her...but I like to be stimulated doing something. And I like to feel important and needed as well, not just by her, but by society (Female, one child)

I didn't want to become a statistic...they don't value single mothers (Female lone parent, one child)

I wanted to be the best role model to them...my achievement, will be their achievement (Female, two children)

The participants' responses are consistent with previous students (see Reay, 2001; Reay and Wiliam, 1999), which indicated that universities were sites of opportunities for students to 'better' themselves and gain the 'right' credentials in a meritocratic society.

However, student identities are not developed in a vacuum. Bandura (1977a: p.135) argued that the effectiveness of role modelling is affected by environments which may 'contain numerous influences which may be compatible or conflicting', and the student parent journey can be undermined by partners, children and wider family, who may resent their engagement in Higher Education (Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2009).

However, we found that students' families were supportive of their academic ambitions. Having a supportive family was seen as critical, even essential, to study and to role modelling. The support could be emotional, with families showing empathy, encouragement and respect. But it was also practical:

She (daughter) loved the fact I was going to uni and she has been my cheerleader all the way through (Female, one child)

My mom, my dad, my partner and my daughter, literally my support network, has been amazing. And they really have pushed me even when...[I'm] crying my eyelashes off. They're like, 'come on, you can get through this' (Female lone parent, one child)

There was little evidence, therefore, in the interviews that the wider family network contained contradictory role models, or undermined the student identity of the participants. In fact, the role of extended family came out strongly in interviews, and the lack of a more local extended family was keenly felt by some participants who had little or no family contact:

I don't talk to family. I don't have contact with my family [because] I came out of care, so it's literally us. So, unless I talk to my friends, I don't really discuss my life with anyone (Lone parent, female, one child)

The role of a wider support network was also important in remaining at university, and in maintaining student identity. The support of friends at university has been identified as key to success at university (Moore et al. 2013; Meehan and Howells, 2019; Hinton-Smith, 2009). Participants regarded friendship at university as a bonus, rather than as an integral part of the university experience, and few expressed a desire to develop new friendship networks at university or engage with social events:

I felt like quitting, I swear to God I did. I felt like quitting, and I said to my friend, once I handed in my assignments, if I fail I'm gonna quit and she was like 'are you mad?' (Female lone parent, two children)

My friends are I'm really happy for me and they, you know, they ended up rooting for me (Female lone parent, three children)

Maintaining the student identity is not therefore, the project of one person, but takes place within 'networks of intimacy' (Foskett and Johnson, 2010) involving partners, children, extended families and wider social networks.

Challenges to student identity and role modelling

The participants were very concerned about what their children saw and learned from their Higher Education journey. Their children were intrigued by their parents going to 'big school', but had limited understanding of what this meant or what it involved. This was not limited to children. For many of the students, their wider network of family and friends had only a vague understanding of what a university was:

A lot of people don't have a lot of insight into what goes on in uni. That's not just people's children, it's also people's family members and stuff, you know, you just go off to uni, and this is kind of like this little imaginary world that exists somewhere. If

you haven't been to university, you don't really know what goes on behind those doors (Female, one child)

I think she sees it as just a bigger version of secondary school...that's why I want her to come in. And I want her to see the university (Female, one child)

Day et al. (2020) argue that being a Higher Education student is a 'status signifier' in itself. However, successful role modelling also involves successfully completing studies (Burgess et al. 2017). The interviews indicated that there were many barriers for student parents, and many students had considered giving up. Participants identified three main factors that determined success in studies – *balancing different roles*, *space* and *emotional issues*. To some extent, these reflect existing research with student parents, but the COVID crisis has provided additional challenges.

For many interviewees, learning takes place in the context of a range of external challenges. Some participants already had significant health problems, or had family members in poor health:

[My husband] was at home...sick; I had to do most of it...I am the one who sees that the children are well supported in school. I have to make them study as I am responsible for everything to do with their education (Female, two children)

Student parents also have financial challenges such as childcare, commuting to university and the additional expense of taking children to school (Thomas and Jones 2017). While remote teaching has reduced some costs, it also involves additional costs, including IT equipment and meals for children (Reay, 2020; Montacute and Cullinane, 2021; Mates et al. 2021). The requirement for access to IT by different family members meant that student parents may have experienced more challenges than other students during lockdown:

[My] 3 children have to do online schooling as well using a website...the main problem we have is the lack of having enough laptops to go round. Sometimes they use the tablet we had to buy to assist them, or even my phone.... [we were] sharing one at the early stage of the lock down before we bought their own. At that time, they would use mine from morning till 2.00pm...because my lectures start from 2.00pm (female lone parent, one child)

The major challenge for student parents is juggling time. Universities and families have been described as 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974), demanding both time and loyalty. This involves a contradiction in the role modelling project, that students enter university to be a role model, but the demands of academic study limit the time they spend with their children:

I [get] up at four in the morning I rarely see them at evening. If they are not asleep, then they are about to sleep. So, I arrange something for tomorrow for school, maybe to make sure what they are going to eat for breakfast, their clothes...and everything. I just get half or one hour to get my stuff before I go to sleep (Female, two children)

While the kids are there, they need...attention and so it was difficult most of the time...most of the time I have to do my studies at night (Female lone parent, two children)

Some participants initially felt some relief when lockdown happened. However, they quickly found that problems in managing time were worsened by the requirements of home schooling. This was complicated by having children of different ages and academic ability, and with different attitudes to learning. The students found that being away from campus undermined their self-identity as student:

At first it was like, 'okay, we're working, working at home doing this uni thing online' and I was like 'great', but I totally forgot that I still had to home school... I'm like, hold on, I need to actually do a little home curriculum for my daughter. So that's when I started to get stressed out and I'm like, well we got into the home schooling. I was just like, 'Oh my god, this is horrible. I don't like it' (Female, one child)

At the very beginning of the COVID, I did this timetable with them so they did their RE in the morning and IT in the afternoon. In fact, my 15-year-old son put it all together for me, bless him. And I did this with all of them and made them have their...lunch break as they would [at] school and their break time outside in the garden (Female lone parent, three children)

Remote learning increased the time spent with children, and it could be argued that this increase in time and proximity would benefit the role modelling relationship. However, due to demands on their time as parent, students and/or employees, many were concerned about failing. Studying at home also served to blur the boundaries between university and home lives, and between student and parent identities, particularly for female students. Previous research has noted the gendered nature of students' domestic duties (Moreau and Kerner, 2015; O'Shea and Stone, 2011; Alsop et al. 2008; O'Shea, 2015). Although the male student interviewed helped with household tasks, female student parents felt *responsible* for domestic activities

Being a mother, you are a tutor, a mother, a teacher at the same time, the kids are sent home, they need time for them, they have got their school activities and I help support them. I have to do my activities in my assignment, to attend the lecture (Female, two children)

It might be different in some families. However, in my family, the woman does everything (Female, 3 children)

While time priorities can be changed and finances re-ordered, physical space is by its nature a finite resource. Many participants were living in overcrowded conditions- for example one student lived with his wife and two children in a one-bedroom flat:

Being in such a small space made so difficult for me to, you know, be able to focus on the assignments. This was one of the hardest parts...because the kids also stopped school, we had...to home school them (Male, two children)

The closure of university and public libraries was raised as a problem by all participants, reflecting the important role that the libraries play for student parents as a place to focus on work, to work with colleagues on group assessments, and to be a student:

If I work at home, I find other things to do 'oh look there's washing up' so I'll take myself away and I'll go and sit in the library... we all descend on the library together and I think that is what we're all missing at the moment (Female lone parent, two children)

Spending time locked down with children, combined with lack of room to study meant that students found it harder to maintain a positive student identity, and to conceal the academic pressures they were facing:

I try not expose them to my daily struggle... day by day, they didn't even realise how hard it was...Whether I will tell them in future...I don't know...if there is any point doing that, they will learn for themselves (Male, two children)

I don't like to show them when I'm so stressed... Sometimes when you have too much stress, they can see it from your face with how you look. And they come, they say 'Mommy, are you okay?' And I tell them? 'Yes. I'm okay'. This time (Female, two children)

Student parents therefore experience challenges of time and space that may not be faced by other students. This may affect their learning, but may have an impact on the extent to which they can model positive student identities and behaviours to their children.

For student parents going to, and succeeding at university is part of a project to develop a new identity, one which can be demonstrated to their children through role modelling. But this is sometimes undermined by limited self-confidence in their identity as successful students, and, to some extent, by feelings of guilt:

My biggest challenge, I would say, was just believing in myself (Female, one child)

Quite a lot of things have happened to me that kind of sucked away my confidence, kind of took away the old me...seeing the As and Bs. It gave me that that 'Oh wow. Oh, okay, I'm not...not bad. I'm not as slow as I thought I was' (Female lone parent, one child)

While the interviewees were keen to demonstrate their new student identity to their children, many spoke of feeling feelings of guilt. Guilt feature very strongly in research on student parents (Davies et al. 2001; Brooks, 2015; Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey, 2012; Webber, 2017), particularly for female student parents and for lone parents, who often feel the burden of choosing between family and university (Brooks, 2015; Allison, 2017). Some

students expressed regret at not 'being there' (Visick, 2016) for children (even when physically locked down with them) and spending extended periods of time on their computers. But they positioned this firmly within the context of the longer-term benefits of studying for their families:

So, I did feel really guilty but at the same time I reminded myself, you know I'm not just neglecting her so I can go sit in my bedroom and watch Netflix all day, and leave her to do her own thing, it was, it was for something important (Female, one child)

I feel I've actually kind of neglected him like for what I'm doing...Not neglected him in a sense of like neglect, but like, I can't give him what I would love to, my time to be with him, to spend more time with him (Female lone parent, one child)

The interviews with students, therefore, revealed some potential contradictions in the role modelling process. Participants emphasised the importance of providing a positive student identity and a role modelling to their children. However, it is not clear that their children, or their wider networks, fully understood the nature of Higher Education study. Constraints of time and space, exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic, blurred the boundaries of university and domestic life, and between academic and domestic identity. Students struggled to balance demonstrating their student identity, and concealing the struggles that they were facing in their studies.

However, this misunderstands the basis of the role modelling relationship. Some of the students undoubtedly wanted their children to also go to university. But most were demonstrating that with the right attitude, their children could *choose* whether to go to university. The students accepted their children might find other ways to achieve their ambitions, or might choose not to go:

With my kids, one of them is really academic, one's not... I don't think [going to university] is necessarily the right thing to do (Male, two children)

I hope they do go, but as I said, my 10-year-old has made it clear – 'I'm not going' (Female lone parent, three children)

The definition of role modelling is to 'represent the possible', but this is not simply about raising aspiration. Lack of aspiration has been used to explain limited engagement in Further and Higher Education in some disadvantaged communities (BIS, 2014; Kintrea et al. 2011; Millburn, 2012). However, research reports (for example, Rampiro and Taylor, 2013; Webb et al. 2017) have found that a very high proportion of parents, from all backgrounds, want their children to go to university.

Rather, the students focussed on demonstrating to their children the *journey* to achieve these aspirations. The students were not simply role modelling a general sense of aspiration or their identity as a student, but an attitude to life. This was expressed in all the interviews, albeit in different ways. Determination, not quitting, commitment, and overcoming obstacles were all mentioned. The students wanted to show their children that hard work and a sense of purpose could overcome the many barriers they would face. In effect,

students were role modelling efficacy, the 'core belief that one has the power to produce effects from one's actions' (Bandura et al. 2001: 187). This enables individuals to regard difficult tasks as challenges to be overcome rather than threats to be avoided:

[I have] been a role model for my children. Not quitting. It's never worth it to be a quitter. [And] to prove to my husband that I can do it...I'm so proud, when I hear my children say I studied all night and this encourages them too to work hard (Female, four children)

I definitely see myself as a role model. Just because I want the kids to know that, look, if I can do this with the four of you then anything can be done so please don't come to me and tell me 'Mom, I can't do this' (Female lone parent, four children)

The primary emotions expressed in relation to their studies were pride and determination and these emotions are critical to understanding the role modelling relationship.

CONCLUSION

The desire to be a role model to children is an important feature of the student parent experience. This paper reflects on the nature of this role modelling relationship, focusing on Bandura's argument that 'attention' paid to role models is key to understanding its effectiveness (Bandura, 1977a). While based on a relatively small sample, the paper contributes to existing research in identifying 'space' as a critical factor in student parents developing a positive HE identity. In addition, the interviews pointed to areas where Bandura's role modelling theories can be further developed. For example, analysis of the role modelling process should take into account what is left 'unrevealed' by the role model, and should identify issues that relate specifically to gender.

Children were proud that their parents were at university and were supportive of their university studies. However, they did not fully understand the nature of universities and their parents' engagement with 'big school', a lack of understanding shared by wider family and social networks.

Successful role modelling, therefore, requires a student identity that children would notice and pay attention to (Wainwright and Watts, 2019). However, the student identity of participants was often fragile, even when they received affirmation through high marks. The interviews supported existing research (Visick 2016; Brooks 2013), identifying time as a critical resource for student parents. Student parents have always had to juggle time, and this is even more important when home schooling children during periods of lockdown.

It has been argued that social integration in the life of the university is critical to development of a 'student' identity and therefore to successful study (Meehan and Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2020). Our interviewees had a pre-existing network of friends, close family and extended family who provided emotional and practical support. While friendships at university were valued, students did not regard engagement in social life at the university as

an integral part of an 'authentic' university identity and experience, and did not regret its absence.

In addition to lack of time, the lack of defined academic spaces also emerged as important in practical terms, and in developing a student identity. Having adequate space to study is important to both students and their children (Reay, 2020), and successive COVID lockdowns have made this a critical issue. The closure of libraries was felt particularly keenly by participants who valued them as spaces for quiet reflection and group learning. While student parents can, with difficulty, *do* student work at home, the university is a place where they can *be* students. Physically going to the campus supported student parents' identity as students, and acted as a signifier to children that this was an important activity. Studying at home has further blurred the boundaries of academic and domestic life particularly for female students, who retain primary responsibility for both childcare and domestic tasks.

An underdeveloped sense of student identity could undermine the effectiveness of the role modelling relationship. However, the participants were not simply modelling a student identity to raise the aspirations of their children. Rather, they were modelling a sense of purpose. They wanted to show their children that success involves hard work, determination and overcoming obstacles. Ultimately, they are role modelling efficacy, not simply aspiration.

To an extent, this research supports Bandura's argument that role modelling is more effective when the model copes with challenges, rather than achieves ambitions easily: observers 'benefit more from seeing models overcome their difficulties than by facile performances by adept models' (Bandura 1977b: p.197). In this case, role modelling is enhanced rather than undermined by children seeing their parents work hard to achieve their academic ambitions.

While students wanted to demonstrate how they overcame obstacles to achieve their goals, they also wanted to hide the stresses and anxieties they faced in this process. Bandura (1977a, p.19) argues that the actions of role models promote and reinforce 'appropriate' behaviours. Student parents promoted a positive image of HE learning, but also simultaneously 'screened' some of the potentially negative aspects of combining Higher Educational and family life. This further develops Bandura's model, demonstrating that role modelling is as much about what was being *hidden* as about what was being *revealed*.

This difficult balancing act could partly explain the feelings of guilt among student parents, albeit balanced by feelings of pride and determination. Feelings of guilt are more common among female students, indicating that gendered issues of role modelling should be further considered in Bandura's role modelling theory.

This raises the question of why student parents feel the need to provide a role model. Bandura et al. (2001) noted that role modelling is often unconscious in middle class families. These families do not feel the need to consciously role model because the expectation to go to university is implicit, and does not need to be articulated. Role modelling, therefore,

while an intensely personal process, is clearly linked to the wider structural inequalities that determine access to, and success in, Higher Education.

In addition to identifying possible contradictions in the role modelling relationship, the research points to actions that universities could take to support their student parents. There is a need to identify the numbers of student parents attending HE institutions, and to recognise them as a group with specific needs. These would include childcare responsibilities and timetabling issues. Universities could also promote the integration of a student parents into the life of the university by having events which celebrate the achievements of student parents, and should welcome their wider support networks and their children onto campuses. Additional learning and socialising opportunities should be integrated in core teaching hours, rather than in the evening, when student parents cannot attend.

While some impacts of COVID-19 may be temporary, some UK universities may pivot to a blended learning model. Remote learning has advantages for students with children, but also poses particular challenges in terms of providing access to IT equipment. The reduction in face-to-face teaching could, however, release teaching spaces which can be used for private study by students who lack suitable space at home. Changes in the ways that UK universities deliver teaching and learning will provide both opportunities and challenges in attracting and retaining students with children.

Funding

This work was funded by a grant from London Metropolitan University

References

Allison, H. 2017. 'But you've done well haven't you': an exploration of the educational and social experiences of lone parents in HE, Doctoral Thesis, London Metropolitan University.

Alsop R., S. Gonzalez-Arnal, and M. Kilkey. 2008. The widening participation agenda: the marginal case of care. *Gender and Education* 20 (6): 623-637.

Andrews, J., D. Robinson, and J. Hutchinson. 2017. *Closing the gap? Trends in educational attainment and disadvantage*. London: Education Policy Institute.

Bandura, A. 1977a. *Social learning theory*. London: Prentice Hall.

Bandura, A. 1977b. Self-efficacy: towards a unifying theory of behavioural change. *Psychological Review* 84: 191-215.

Bandura, A., C. Barbaranelli, G. V. Caparara, and C. Pastorelli. 2001. Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. *Child Development* 72 187-206.

- Beauchamp, M., K. Crawford, and B. Jackson. 2019. Social cognitive theory and physical activity: mechanisms of behaviour, changes, critique and legacy. *Psychology of sport and exercise* 42: 110-117.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2009. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Brine, J., and R. Walker. 2004. Working class women on an access course: risk, opportunity and (re) constructing identities. *Gender and Education* 16(1): 97-113.
- Britton, C., and A. Baxter. 1999. Becoming a mature student: gendered narrative of the self. *Gender and Education* 11(2): 179-183.
- Brooks, R. 2012. Student-parents and higher education: a cross-national comparison. *Journal of Education Policy*. 27(3), 423-439.
- Brooks, R. 2013. Negotiating time and space for study: student-parents and familial relationships. *Sociology* 47(3): 443-459.
- Brooks, R. 2015. Social and spatial disparities in emotional responses to education: feelings of 'guilt' among single parents. *British Educational Research Journal* 41(3): 505-519.
- Burgess, S., R. Chande, C. Dilnot, E. Kozman, L. Macmillan, and M. Saunders. 2017. *Role models, mentoring and university applications: evidence of a crossover randomised controlled trial in the United Kingdom*. London: UCL.
- Butcher, J. 2020. *Unheard: the voices of part-time adult learners*. London: HEPI.
- Callinan, C., E. Van der Zee, and G. Wilson. 2018. Developing essay writing skills: an evaluation of the modelling behaviour method and the influence of student self-efficacy. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 42(5): 608-622.
- Coser, L. 1974. *Greedy institutions: patterns of undivided commitment*. NY: Free Press.
- Davies, P., M. Osbourne, and J. Williams. 2001. 'For me or not for me?' Fragility and risk in mature students' decision making. *Higher Education Quarterly* 5(2): 185-203.
- Day, N., C. Husbands, and B. Kerlake. 2020. *Making universities matter: how Higher Education can help a divided Britain*. London: HEPI.
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). 2014. *National strategy for access and student success in Higher Education*. London: BIS.
- Edwards, R. 1993. *Mature women students: separating or connection family and education*. London: Taylor and Francis.

- Foskett, R. and B. Johnson. 2010. 'A uniform seemed the obvious thing' experiences of career guidance among potential HE participants. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 34(2) 223-238.
- Gonzalez-Arnal, S., and M. Kilkey. 2009. Contextualising rationality: mature student carers and HE in England. *Feminist Economics* 15(1) 85-111.
- Hinton-Smith, T. 2008. *Lone parents: addressing barriers to participating in post-compulsory education*. In: Annual Conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), 11-13 December 2007, Brighton.
- Hinton-Smith, T. 2009. *Lone parents' experiences as higher education students: a longitudinal email study*. Sussex, University of Sussex.
- Kintrea, K., R. St. Clair, and M. Houston. 2011. *The influence of parents, places and poverty on educational attitudes and aspirations*. York: JRF.
- Leathwood, C., and V. Hey. 2009. Gender/ed discourse and emotional sub-texts: theorising emotion in UK Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education* 14(4): 429-440.
- Leathwood, C. and P. O'Connell. 2003. 'It's struggle': the construction of the new student in Higher Education. *Journal of Education Policy* 18(6): 597-615.
- Maher, J., K. Rooney, M. Toomse-Smith, Z. Kiss, E. Pollard, M. Williams, J. Hillage, M. Green, C. Huxley, and W. Hunt. 2018. *Student income and expenditure survey 2014-2015: English report*. London: Department of Education.
- Major, L., and A. Banerjee. 2019. *Social mobility and elite universities*. London: HEPI.
- Marandet, E., and W. Wainwright. 2009. Discourses of integration and exclusion: equal opportunities for university students with dependent children? *Space and Polity* 13(2): 109-125.
- Mates, L., A. Millican, and E. Hanson. 2021. Coping with COVID: understanding and mitigating disadvantages experienced by first generation scholars studying online. *British Journal of Education Studies* DOI: 10.1080/00071005.2021.1966382
- Meehan, C., and K. Howells. 2019. In search of the feeling of 'belonging' in Higher Education: undergraduate students transition into Higher Education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43(10) 1376-1390.
- Millburn, A. 2012. *University Challenge: how Higher Education can advance social mobility. A progress report by the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Montacute, R. and C. Cullinane. 2021. *Learning during lockdown*. London: Sutton Trust.

- Moore, J., J. Sanders. and L. Higham. 2013. *Literature review into widening participation in Higher Education*. London: HEFCE.
- Moreau, M. 2016. Regulating the student body/ies: university policies and student parents. *British Educational Research Journal* 42(5): 906-925.
- Moreau, M., and C. Kerner. 2015. Care in academia: an exploration of student parents' experiences. *British Journal of Sociology in Education* 36(2): 215-233.
- Morgenroth, T., M. Ryan, and K. Peters. 2015. The motivational theory of role modelling: how role models influence their aspirants' goals. *Review of General Psychology*. DOI: 10.1037/gpr0000059.
- Mulrenan, P., J. Atkins, and S. Cox, S. 2018. 'I didn't know what strong was until it was required': factors that promote retention among homeless students in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 44 (2) 273-284.
- National Union of Students (NUS). 2009. *Meet the parents: the experiences of students with children in Further and Higher Education*. London: NUS.
- O'Shea, C., and C. Stone. 2011. Transformations and self-discovery: mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. *Studies in Continuing Education* 33(3): 273-288.
- O'Shea, S. 2015. First in family learners and Higher Education: negotiating the 'silences' of university transition and participation. *HERDSA Review of Education* 3: 5-23.
- Office for Students. (OFS). 2019. *England Higher Education 2019: the OFS annual review*. London: OFS.
- Pascall, C., and R. Cox. 1993. *Women returning to Higher Education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.
- Rampiro, T., and M. Taylor. 2013. *Gender differences in educational aspirations and attitudes*. Institute for Economic and Social Research.
- Reay, D. (2001). Finding or losing yourself? Working-class relationships to education. *Journal of Education Policy* 16(4): 333-346.
- Reay, D., and Wiliam, D. (1999). 'I'll be a nothing!': structure, agency and the construction of identity through assessment *British Educational Research Journal* 25(3): 343-354
- Reay, D. 2003. A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to HE. *Gender and Education* 15(3): 301-317.
- Reay, D. 2020. English education in a time of coronavirus. *Forum* 62(3): 311-321.

Robson, C., and K. MacCartan. 2016. *Real World Research*. 4th ed. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

Secretary of State for Education (SOSE). 2019. *Review of post-18 education and funding* (Augur Report). London: HMSO.

Thomas, L. 2020. Excellent outcomes for all students: a whole system approach to widening participation and student success in England. *Student Success Journal* 11(1): 1-11

Thomas, L., and R. Jones. 2017. *Student engagement in the context of commuter students*. London: Student Engagement Partnership.

Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). 2016. *Through the lens of students: how perceptions of Higher Education influence applicants' choices*. Cheltenham: UCAS.

Visick, A. 2016. *Mothering and Identity Construction in the Context of Higher Education: Interviews with Mature Student Mothers and their Children*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.

Wainwright, E. and E. Marandet. 2009. Discourses of integration and exclusion: equal opportunities for university students with dependent children? *Space and Polity* 13(2): 109-125.

Wainwright, E., and M. Watts. 2019. Social mobility in the slipstream: first-generation students' narratives of university participation and family. *Educational Review* 73(1): 111-127.

Webb, O., L. Wyness, and D. Cotton. 2017. *Enhancing access, retention, attainment and progression: a review of the literature showing demonstrable impact*. London: Higher Education Academy

Webber, L. 2017. Women, Higher Education and family capital: 'I could not have done it without my family' *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 22(3): 409-428.

Williams, D. 2010. Outcome expectancy and self-efficacy: theoretical implications of unresolved contradiction. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 20(10) 1-9.