**Coping with foundation degree study: Teaching assistants’ management of studentship, motherhood and inequality**

**Abstract**

This paper discusses an exploratory piece of research that examined the coping strategies that school-based teaching assistants (TAs) employ when undertaking vocationally-related foundation degree. In a large number of countries there has been a significant expansion in the numbers of TAs who have been required to undertake increasingly complex roles. One consequence of these changes has been that an increasing number of teaching assistants have accessed work-related vocational education and training. Data collection was primarily undertaken via semi-structured interviewing with first and second year foundation degree students. Eight group interviews were carried out with 44 participants. These were followed up with 12 individual interviews. Participant observations and documentary analysis of course-related documents were also drawn upon as contextualising sources of information. The research participants were overwhelmingly working class student-mothers. They claimed that their desire to balance studentship with established home and working lives resulted in them developing a series of strategies. They believed that these had enabled them to juggle the demands of studentship, motherhood and employment. Coping strategies were viewed as facilitating the continuance of a desire journey towards self-realisation and occupational escape. It is argued that Bourdieu’s analysis of the relationship between social class, habitus and field is useful in understanding such learners’ accounts. It is however also maintained that normative notions of motherhood that are embedded within working class cultures inform the ways that teaching assistants experience habitus and agency with the social fields of higher education, the home and the workplace.

**Key words: Student-mothers, Foundation degree, Bourdieu, Habitus, field, teaching assistants, coping strategies**

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