

Becoming a mature-aged teacher: Career change into teaching

Introduction

At a time when we are witnessing a drive to improve the quality and professionalism of the teaching force in Australia many teachers are already middle-aged. As teachers retire and take advantage of early retirement options, the shortage of suitably qualified and experienced teachers promises to worsen. However, salaries and employment conditions continue to make teaching a less than attractive career option for the most gifted university graduates. For some time State Ministries and Departments of Education in Australia have been advertising in an effort to attract people into teaching from other careers. As well as temporarily reducing the acknowledged teacher shortages in each of the States and Territories these mature-aged teachers may contribute positively to changing the culture of schools.

This study provides a profile of people who have decided to make a career change and identifies those factors which prompted them to undertake teacher education. We are reporting here preliminary findings from an initial investigation into what is to be a more extensive program of research. The participants in this study were asked to indicate their reasons and motives for deciding on a career change at a particular time in their life and to give their reasons for choosing teaching as a new career path.

The study focused on the two cohorts of students: one enrolled in the first year of the two year part-time Graduate Diploma of Education on the Gippsland Campus of Monash University (Year 2001, N = 119) and a small cohort of mature aged students from a mid-year intake into the one year full-time program on the Clayton campus of Monash University (Year 2001, N = 33). Graduates entering these programs gained their qualifications from institutions in Australia and overseas. The Gippsland program is offered by distance education mode only and attracts students from all States and Territories. Three of the students were located in overseas countries. The course has been operating for at least two decades and has each year attracted far more applicants than can be accommodated.

During their enrolment many students concurrently work in other occupations while completing the course. These students juggle their current employment and part-time study as they prepare themselves to qualify as teachers. The program regularly attracts applicants who are qualified and practising solicitors, veterinarians, medical doctors, petroleum engineers, designers as well as a host of other occupations, including women who are seeking to return to work after having interrupted their previous career by having a family. Currently, teaching is not looked upon as a high status career and does not attract a high salary. Hence the question 'why do some of the people who currently occupy more high status careers (eg law, scientific research, business, engineering and medicine) want to swap them for a career in teaching?'

Procedure

Data collection

A survey instrument was devised and piloted with a small group of academics. The instrument sought to collect:

- biographical and demographic data about the students (age category, gender, qualifications, number of children, past and present occupations),
- attitudinal data towards agreement or disagreement with a number of propositions (covering issues such as career satisfaction, salary, social standing, and the demands of teaching), and
- qualitative data through open-ended questions on timing and influences on their decision to become a teacher.

The survey was mailed together with a self-addressed return envelope to all students enrolled in the first year of the program. The distribution of the survey was timed to coincide with the end of the first teaching practicum. This was done to ensure that the cohort of teacher education students had had very recent experiences in secondary schools. It was hoped that this experience would test the decision to take on teacher education, either confirming or disconfirming that decision. The survey was distributed to 119 students (90 females and 29 males) enrolled from the Gippsland campus and to 20 volunteers from the 33 students (24 females and 9 males) in the mid-year intake on the Clayton campus (N = 152).

The data provided by the questionnaires were analysed for those factors influencing decision-making processes accompanying career change, the reasons for choosing teaching as a new career path, the career path expectations of those entering the teaching profession, and it also enabled individuals to be identified for further in-depth telephone interviews.

Some 74 surveys (63 females and 11 males) were completed and returned, representing a 49 % return rate. Such a high level of return suggested that the respondents were keen to have their views and experiences noted. The surveys were numbered in order of arrival on return. Since both researchers are responsible for the design, teaching and assessment of some subjects in the Graduate Diploma in Education course ethical considerations required that the research assistant for the project received and coded the surveys. As part of the survey participants were asked to provide their name and telephone number if they were willing to take part in a further open-ended telephone interview. Altogether 49 respondents agreed to an interview (56 % of all those who responded to the survey) and of these 42 were female and 7 male.

The sample of interviews

Results of the questionnaire indicated that more detailed information in a number of areas might prove beneficial. Ten respondents were identified as candidates for a more detailed telephone interview. These interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. Depending on the results consideration would be given to expanding this number further.

The 'Case Summaries' function of SPSS was used to determine the candidates for the telephone interviews. Respondents were sorted for:

- Agreement or otherwise to 'I always wanted to be a teacher'
- Gender
- Age
- Whether family duties were currently a significant consideration
- Whether they had indicated an advisory or teaching role in their current or previous career
- Agreement for further interview

The 10 respondents selected through this process covered a range of options in each of these categories (with the obvious exception that they all had agreed to a further interview).

Seven of these respondents were interviewed in more detail, while two respondents could not be contacted and one was overseas for an extended period. The interviews were taped with the agreement of the interviewees.

While the interviews were free-flowing, specific questions generally covered:

- Tell me a bit more about why you decided to go into teaching?
- What is it that is attractive about teaching?
- How do you see your career developing?
- Did placement alter your views on teaching as a career?
- Do you feel that as a teacher you will make a difference with your students?

The results of the interviews indicated that there was not a lot of variation between the replies of the respondents, regardless of selection criteria. Consequently it was decided not to pursue further interviews at this stage of the research.

Common across most interviews was that respondents revealed previous experience in working with adolescents and previous experience in a training, instructing or teaching capacity. The experience with adolescents was generally gained informally through sports coaching or other involvement with youth groups, or more formally through youth work and counselling. Similarly the teaching/instructing experience was informal through coaching sports and cultural activities or formally through work based training roles.

Variations in the interviews mainly centred around respondents' career choices and expectations, and their potential to make an impact on students. Several of the respondents volunteered that their broader experience in life and the workplace would drive their efforts to make teaching more relevant to young people.

As the telephone interviews indicated that there was a high level of prior experience with both adolescents and work in some training/teaching/caring/instructing role, it was decided to contact more respondents to test whether these aspects of their background was indeed more common across our sample. Altogether an additional 20 of the 49 participants who agreed to further contact were contacted and results confirmed a general background of youth contact and training/instructing experience. Of the twenty additional respondents contacted 70% indicated prior experience in dealing with adolescents and 85% reported prior experience in a training, instructing or teaching capacity.

Results

Introduction – results summary

Frequency of response provided an initial analysis of the data. The 74 questionnaire responses to the first twenty questions of the survey were subjected to normal SPSS analysis and produced both expected and unexpected outcomes and suggested to the authors where possible relationships might exist. The response frequencies themselves were often revealing, indicating that respondents considered their decision at length before initiating their career change into teaching. The frequencies (see Table 1) were examined under five categories - strongly disagree, disagree, unsure, agree and strongly agree. For analysis these categories were converted to a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 corresponding to

strongly disagree and 5 to strongly agree. This enabled means to be determined for each of the twenty items.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation for Issues

Covered in Questions 1-20. (n=74)

Issue	Mean	SD
(1-Strongly Disagree, 5-Strongly Agree)		
Dissatisfied with previous career	3.00	1.38
Provide better career path	3.64	1.00
Will contribute to economic wellbeing	3.41	1.19
Make a greater contribution to society	3.92	0.90
Expect to be a satisfying occupation	4.18	0.69
Experienced with adolescents and expect to enjoy working with them	3.81	0.87
Not experienced with adolescents but expect to enjoy working with them	2.18	1.48
Family supportive of decision to become a teacher	4.43	0.64
Thought carefully before deciding to become a teacher	4.39	0.81
I always wanted to be a teacher	3.20	1.34
Teaching will enable me to teach overseas	3.64	1.03
Certain to take up teaching	3.88	0.98
Teaching will enhance social status	2.58	0.95
Teaching will enhance my level of respect in the community	2.74	0.95
Teaching will be psychologically and socially demanding	4.31	0.66
Teaching requires greater range of social skills than my current occupation	3.23	1.31
Teaching offers a good salary	2.93	1.01
Teaching allows more family time	3.43	0.97
Teaching allows a more fulfilling life	3.72	0.82
I already have knowledge and understanding of my discipline to meet demands of teaching	3.64	1.11

Dissatisfaction with existing career

The expectation that respondents would report high levels of dissatisfaction with their current or previous occupation as a key reason for career change was not realised. The responses yielded a mean of 3.0 though the outcomes were bimodal (see Table 2), showing a tendency by respondents to like or dislike their previous occupation rather than have a neutral opinion (SD = 1.38).

Prior considerations

In response to the statement " I always wanted to be a teacher" the respondents showed only modest agreement (see Table 3). This group of intending teachers is clearly not carrying the torch for teaching as a career ($M = 3.20$) though there was a wide and fairly even spread of responses ($SD = 1.34$).

One outstanding factor directing career change into teaching is the importance of family support for each individual's decision to take up teaching as a new career path. The mean for responses was 4.43 and no respondent strongly disagreed with this proposition.

An outcome which did not surprise was that most of those answering the questionnaire had thought seriously ($M = 4.39$) before embarking upon teacher education. Furthermore, there was a general level of confidence ($M = 3.64$) that they already possessed the necessary subject knowledge to meet the demands of teaching.

Table 2

Dissatisfied with previous career

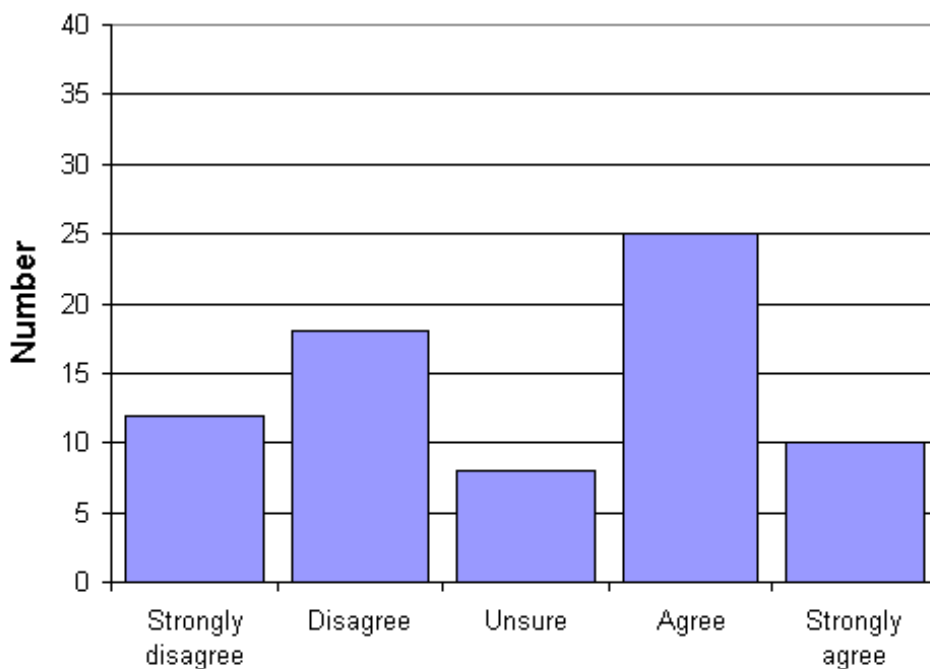


Table 3

I always wanted to be a teacher

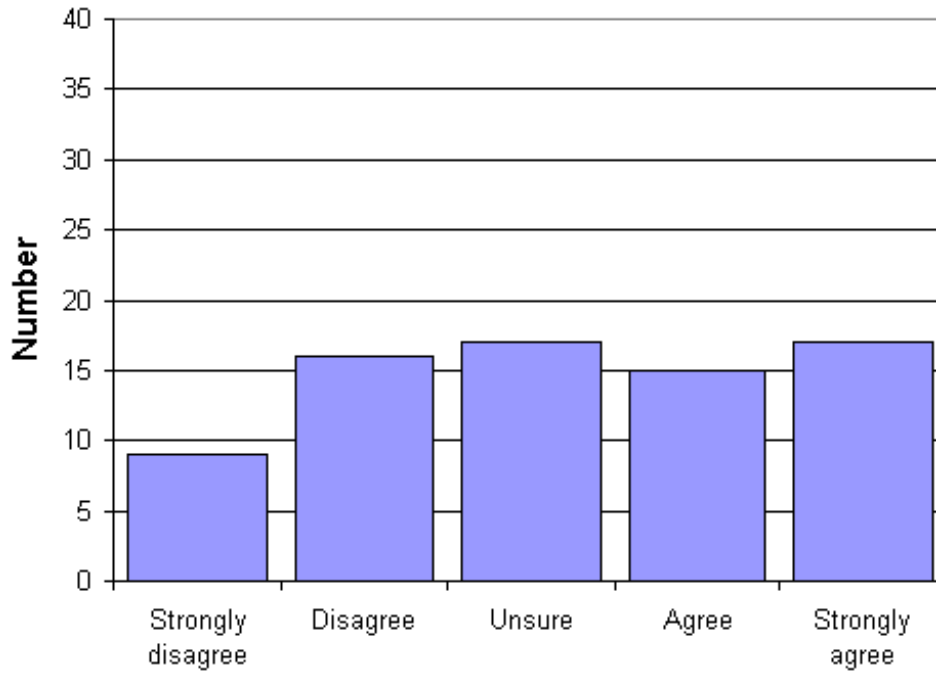
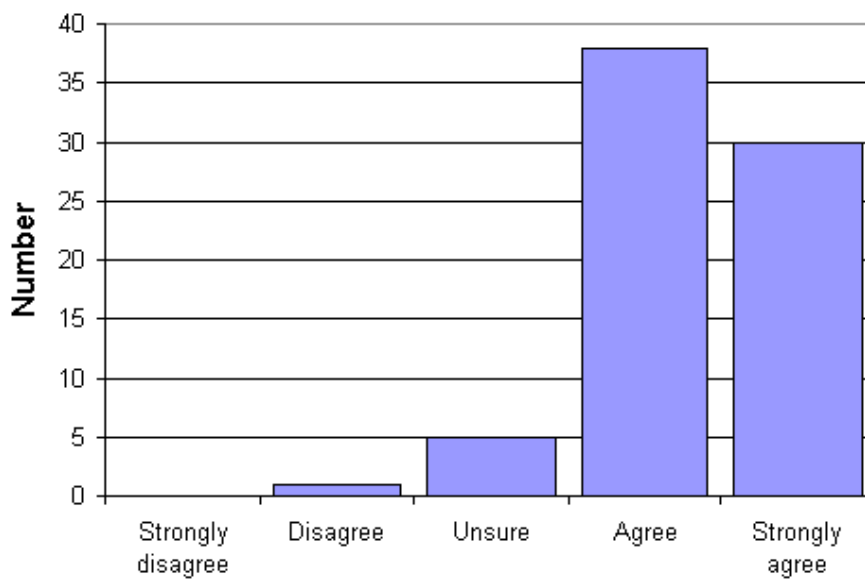


Table 4

Teaching can be psychologically and socially demanding



Perceived demands of teaching

Respondents demonstrated that they are well aware that teaching will be a psychologically and socially demanding profession (Table 4). The small spread amongst responses (Table 4) showed the high level of agreement (M = 4.31; SD = 0.66). They were not nearly so receptive to the proposition that teaching would require of them a greater range of social skills than their current occupation (M = 3.23; SD = 1.31), though a wide spread existed in the responses (Table 5).

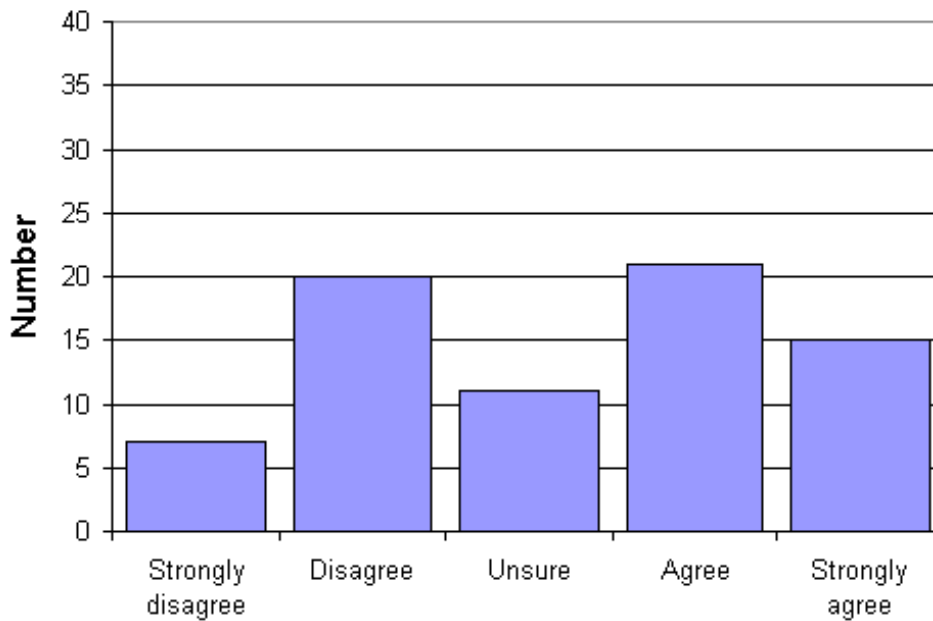
Personal and community benefits

Six of the questionnaire items were directed to determining what personal and/or family benefits from a career change into teaching were identified by the group. One further item was specifically targeted at the contribution respondents saw they could make to the community in their new profession.

Whilst the group overall was ambivalent about dissatisfaction with their existing or previous career, they do consider that teaching will provide them with a better career path (M = 3.64) and they were strongly of the view that they expect teaching to be a satisfying occupation (M = 4.18). They did not, however, believe that teaching will enhance their social status (M = 2.58) or their level of respect in the community (M = 2.74).

Table 5

Teaching requires greater range of social skills



An issue of importance for the researchers was to find out the extent to which prospective mature age teachers were seeking greater remuneration as a motivating factor. Participants were generally not of the view that teaching will offer them a good salary ($M = 2.93$) but they were mildly supportive of the proposition that a teaching career will contribute to their economic wellbeing ($M = 3.41$). The speculation that many of the respondents are seeking security of tenure rather than a high salary was borne out by the responses to the open ended items and by the telephone interviews.

In terms of service to the community, participants supported the notion that teaching will enable them to make a greater contribution to society ($M = 3.92$).

Intention to be a teacher

In general, respondents intend to become secondary teachers ($M = 3.88$). However, there is a possibility that some of them will take advantage of the strong overseas demand for Australian teaching staff. In response to our proposition that teacher education will enable them to teach overseas, respondents tended to agree ($M = 3.64$). The age group 20-29 is more inclined to see teaching abroad as a viable option than the 30-39 age group where family responsibilities are more evident in the data.

Discussion

As noted earlier, the study has thrown up both predictable and unexpected outcomes. The factors that influenced career change and an accompanying decision to enter teaching as a career are intriguingly complex with some being personal and related to immediate family circumstances, while others are more global and concern employment stability and quality of life issues. Comments from the survey data and the telephone interviews provided insights into what participants meant by 'economic wellbeing'. For instance, even though they were of the view that teaching was not going to provide a good salary, respondents were still motivated to take on teaching. The two questions: 'what most influenced your decision to pursue a teaching career?' and 'what has been most influential in your decision to leave your current occupation / career?' provoked a range of responses, some very strongly articulated. Security of employment in an occupation that makes a difference seems to be motivation for many respondents, particularly if it allows them to provide more time for their family and a better quality of family life.

Family life, quality of life and career change.

In seeking to change careers 26% of the respondents indicated that their family situation was of importance in their decision making process. Some 23% cited a lack of job satisfaction in their previous or current career while another 19% were motivated by a need for career development and a need for greater challenge. Taken together these figures (42%) suggest that a lack of job satisfaction and career development in current or previous career is of importance in promoting career change aspirations. Clearly 58% of the respondents were not unhappy with their previous career but are now undertaking teacher education. The pull into teaching as a career may not be the result of a burning need to leave a previous occupation. Family circumstances and responsibilities play an important role for many of these respondents. In all 67% of respondents were seeking a career in teaching either because of their family situation or a lack of job satisfaction. Sample comments from the survey include the following reasons for career change:

2.	Ability to work part-time and ability to fit career around family commitments.
6.	Fits in with having a family. Good salary.
39.	Living in the country. Teaching offers the potential for a secure occupation. Suitable to having a young family. Relief teaching offers part-time flexibility.
44.	Teaching will provide me with more family time than my previous career.
31.	Being a single mum - the hours would suit.
21.	The most influential reason to change careers to teaching is the opportunities to have more quality time with family.
25.	Family - working hours.
27.	Constant long hours - 3 children in creche 12 hours/day. Husband has long hours too so I needed to be primary carer. Once in a lifetime voluntary redundancy package offered meant I could study for 2 years and remain without financially disadvantaging the family.
54.	Family. More local job opportunities (country based). No need to commute to Melbourne.

For three of the telephone interviewees the benefit to their family was clearly a factor in their decision to move to a new career. In particular having young children influenced the move.

At this stage I would have to say one of the main things is it being flexible with having a family.

...in the country I think probably the best work for a ...mum ...is teaching or nursing. It's nice and flexible, you can get some relief work, you can make a bit of money.....The holidays are attractive because they're obviously when your kids have got holidays.

Oh, probably the other thing that my wife and I are very conscious of is that we've got young children ourselves and the ability to have somebody who doesn't have to work during the school holidays, you know, is a real issue for us.

Employment security

Security of employment and being able to fit employment around family life were two significant factors influencing participants' decisions to take up teaching as a career. Given that there were 6 times the number of females enrolled in the program of teacher education than there were males and that the sample of respondents also reflected this bias (63

females and 11 males), it is perhaps not surprising that women are wanting to find careers that allow time to be with their families during the school holiday periods. However, gender was not an issue. Males were motivated by security of employment, family and quality of life issues in circumstances similar to females in this sample. Comments from the questionnaire on the issue of security include:

5.	The ability to develop a more sustainable career in Outdoor Education in terms of earning a better (though still a low wage) income. Secure work and plenty of jobs around.
33.	Security of employment. School holidays.
12.	Looking towards fulltime employment again - a return to previous insurance industry would mean return to city. Involvement with school & children in sport. Seemed to spend much time being a volunteer 'teacher'. Stability & employment opportunities.
15.	I wanted the option of a job which promised a regular income, rather than having to always rely on freelance work.
57.	Experience with youth work. Desire to live in areas of Aust with decent employment. (Income & job satisfaction).
60.	Stability of employment. School holidays.
74.	Probability of job security (in the foreseeable future).
20.	Lack of security, little interaction with people. Need to self-actualisation. Want a more challenging career.
28.	There now appears to be more support and recognition of teachers now and greater financial incentive. The government and community appear to respect the role of teachers. I feel it will be a valuable and rewarding occupation with a number of benefits, eg strong employment, both nationally and overseas.
31.	Nursing has bad hours and is physically demanding.
35.	I.T. Changes (technology & development) have meant most executives can now type their own letters, produce their own presentations, just as effectively as I could. The fact that I can type at 80+wpm is becoming increasingly irrelevant (although highly useful for quick formatting lesson hand-outs!). Since moving from Melbourne to Latrobe Valley 10 years ago, less job opportunities here for secretaries/PA's
41.	My career as a research scientist was abruptly terminated with research money ran out. Company asked for me to work 1 or 2 days per week until something new came along. However this would not have been cost effective with child-care and travelling.
73.	The nature of the work is mainly contract based and offers little job security. I

	rather hope that teaching will provide me greater job security. Also having assisted youngsters in re-entering study, I feel I can assist and work well in motivating young people.
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An instrumental music teacher and musician who was interviewed reflected on the insecurity that accompanies this form of employment. This was not the case for the other interviewees:

...as you get a bit older, you know, getting a more secure form of employment. 'Cause when you're an instrumental music teacher it depends very much on how many students you've got at any particular time and you've got to chase the money up yourself and that sort of thing. So it was also moving to a more secure form of employment.

Teaching is a satisfying career

There was strong consensus that teaching will provide a satisfying and family friendly career. The respondents had thought very carefully before taking up teacher education and indicated that they were more than aware that teaching would be psychologically and socially demanding. However, prior positive experiences with training/instructing role and positive experiences with adolescents/young people militated against the anticipated difficulties:

48.	Having worked in the community/welfare for nearly 10 years I felt that I need(ed) to have a break from my work. Teaching is always in my mind.
16.	Enjoyment in teaching as work. I enjoy the feeling of being able to make and see my students learn and earning money at the same time.
17.	Love working with students. Love teaching & trying to find the key to encouraging student learning. Feel I can influence the future.
23.	My desire to work directly with young people and my realisation that would I would be comfortable communicating with teenagers.

Only 11% of the sample indicated that they enjoyed teaching. This may be explained by the fact that only 11% of the sample has had any experience with teaching. However, all of those interviewed expected teaching to be satisfying. Every one had experience in teaching children, unemployed youth or adults (by selection) and considered that teaching would be satisfying and, for some, challenging.

Wanting to make a difference

Responses to the statement, 'I believe I will be able to make a greater contribution to society as a teacher' revealed that, for many respondents, wanting to make a difference and to influence adolescents was an important factor in their decision to take up teaching. The

following comments reflect the views and opinions of respondents. The desire to influence young people for the better and to create a better future seems to be also associated with having children of their own and wanting to ensure a secure future for the family. Respondents wrote of 'making a difference', 'influenc[ing] the future', 'serv[ing] the community/Society', having a 'positive influence on adolescent lives', 'to make a socially useful contribution':

20.	Feels right. The belief that I would make a difference and be able to influence the young generation to grow internally as well as externally. Making a difference.
17.	Love working with students. Love teaching & trying to find the key to encouraging student learning. Feel I can influence the future.
35.	Desire to serve the community/Society in more meaningful ways. Consider my other career (Secretary/PA) has seen its peak.
38.	I have always been fascinated with the adolescent period. I have thought about going into counselling, but preferred the practical approach of teaching music (something I am passionate about) as a direct path to having a positive influence on adolescent lives.
23.	My desire to work directly with young people and my realisation that I would be comfortable communicating with teenagers.
49.	No academic jobs and need to earn a living in some reliable manner. Positive experience with teaching and facilitation with different age groups. Desire to make socially useful contribution - see education as opportunity for this.

The interviewees were uniform in their hope that their teaching would make a difference. Indeed, one participant could see little value in the enterprise otherwise. A positive commitment was evident in responses to this issue. There was one volunteer who conceded that success was not possible with all students.

Oh, I think you have got to, you've got to think you're going to otherwise there's no point in doing it. Yeah, certainly.

I think it's realistic to say that you'll make a difference with some students but you won't make a difference with all students.

Positive experiences as a learner at school

Some 67% of respondents indicated that they themselves had had positive or very positive experiences as learners in schools.

Intriguingly, 11% of respondents registered that they had had negative experiences at school. We can only speculate on why they would want to be a teacher if their experiences of schooling had been so adverse. Perhaps their negative experiences will provide a suitable benchmark against which to measure more positive ones in their own classrooms in the future.

Previous career and occupational experiences

We were struck by the richly diverse occupational backgrounds and previous career experiences our respondents have brought with them into teacher education and their future teaching careers. We asked the respondents about their previous occupation/careers and their current occupation. Taken together the responses to these questions reveal both diversity and versatility of careers. These graduates will take with them into schools a range of skills, experiences, abilities and interests that can only enhance the quality and effectiveness of secondary schooling. Some illustrative examples follow:

What is your present career?

7.	German Teacher/Instructor (Primary School). Information Technology Tutor at CNC & TAFE.
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What other occupations/careers have you pursued?

7.	Civil Engineer (Supervisor Engineer). German Translator/Interpreter. Running own Comp. Business.
12.	Home Duties. Swim Instructor and Gymnastics Coach.
12.	Insurance Broker – Insurance Loss Assessor, Insurance Risk Manager, Claims Clerk. Seamstress – Dressmaking – Design.
18.	Linguist/Reporter – Dept of Defence.
18.	Travel Consultant. Teaching English in Japan. Six years in Royal Australian Air Force. Japanese teacher at Business College.
31.	Mother
31.	Medicine (4 years). Nursing (10 years). Administrative (3 years).
24.	Meteorologist.
24.	Store Manager - Retail.
27.	Chartered Accountant.
27.	Auditor. Information Systems Auditor. Quality Systems Implementation & Management. Office Management. Finance.
36.	Business Manager.
36.	Research Scientist. Scientist - Field Officer. Environment Management Planning. Strategic Planning - Biological Resources.

As noted earlier, all the interviewees had prior experience so that the practice of teaching will not be entirely new to them.

A gendered profession

The bias of 6 to 1 of females to males foregrounds the question of why males are not looking to teaching as a career pathway. While our survey was asking why participants are going into teaching, it would be equally important in future research to be asking why people are not going into teaching? If schools are going to continue to offer co-educational opportunities, the number of males being attracted into teaching will surely need to increase.

Economic wellbeing

While the respondents were mildly supportive of the proposition that a teaching career will contribute to their economic wellbeing (M = 3.41), they did not agree that teaching will offer them a good salary (M = 2.93). The number of children in a respondent's family influenced their level of agreement with the proposition that teaching as a career would influence economic well being. Respondents without children registered a mean of 3.14. The mean for those with 1 child was 3.43, 2 children 3.59 and 3 children 3.64.

Effect of teaching practice

One issue that was explored in the interviews was the effect the first encounter with practice teaching had on the decision to change career into teaching. The timing of the survey was deliberately chosen so that this experience was fresh in the minds of the diploma students. Four of the group confessed to being initially shocked or stressed by their return to the secondary classroom but their desire was undiminished, all surviving the round in a positive frame of mind.

Oh, it was a bit of a shock but no it didn't, it didn't make me change my...no, it didn't make any change overall, no.

Stressful at times but positive. I mean it's difficult, you know. You have to deal with new things.

No it didn't alter my views on teaching as a career. I suppose I hadn't really been in the secondary school system for 10 years or 12 years or something. I suppose a bit of a shock seeing the level of discipline and the I suppose what kids can get away with at this stage. I don't reckon I could get away with that when I was at school. But no.

Conclusion

The sample size of the study causes us to be cautious in our claims. While we would restrain a tendency to make generalisations from a sample of mature-aged people in one university teacher education program, the study has thrown up a number of indicators that we believe will sustain further research attention. Moreover, we believe that more late entry teachers with their rich diversity of backgrounds and experiences will potentially enrich and

diversify the profession and that by better understanding their needs and values we may be able to encourage them to consider making the transition into the teaching profession.

The study has provided us with an interesting profile of the talents, abilities, interests, intentions and aspirations of a group of people who have decided to become teachers after pursuing a range of other careers and occupations. Their decision to enrol in a teacher education program has been made at a time when the mass media and the general public have increasingly looked upon teaching as a very poor career choice and yet it is a feature of the study that family support in making such a decision was critical. Indeed, the decision is often made in the interests of family and the quality of life the family can enjoy whether from increased income, better job security and satisfaction or more suitable working hours that accommodates child rearing and nurturing. The 30-39 year old age group is most likely to stay in Australia and to seek employment in teaching while the 20-29 year old age group see a teaching qualification as a way of travelling with better employment prospects overseas.

Our results highlight that dissatisfaction with previous career was not an important factor in drawing people into teaching. Some of the respondents had left their previous career because of dissatisfaction, while others had been forced out by structural change and economic downturns. For others it had been the experience of working with adolescents in some capacity that had triggered a desire to teach or it was a realisation of a long held aspiration to become a teacher. There was also a group of people who rather pragmatically looked upon teaching as a career that suited their personal circumstances and needs for employment.