

WHY NOT TEACHING? SENIOR STUDENTS HAVE THEIR SAY

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In a recent collaborative study Butcher and Lewis (2000) examined the career choice decisions of Year 12 students intending to become teachers. Respondents exhibited a personal sense of efficacy and communicated socially orientated and altruistic reasons governing their decision to become teachers.

Teaching was seen as a far more attractive career choice for female students than for males. 15% of the females surveyed intended to become teachers, compared with 6% of males. The majority of female students indicated a preference for primary teaching, whereas a large majority of males intended to apply for secondary or tertiary teaching. Female students were more influenced by the notion of being able to help others, the security of employment offered by teaching and the attractive working hours and holidays. Male students were more influenced by status, salary and promotion and career opportunities. Much less attention was given by respondents in terms of issues of gender or child protection.

This paper reports on a study that uses oral enquiry to further examine the motives and reasons given by Year 11 and 12 students in considering or not considering a career in teaching. In particular the opinions of male students regarding teaching as a career are further elucidated.

Introduction

"It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education." (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.3).

Research investigating the career choice decisions of people intending to become teachers has typically focussed on beginning teachers or teachers in training. Year 11 and 12 students considering careers in education have been those least often consulted about educational policy and practice, yet they are the individuals most directly affected by it.

This paper reports on a study that uses oral inquiry as a research methodology, acknowledging the importance of hearing student voices and understanding student perspectives regarding their decisions for becoming or not becoming teachers. The affirming of student knowledge recognises unequal power relationships in education and attempts to reshape a discourse and practice dominated by those adults holding vested interests in decision-making (Cook-Sather, 2002). The authors believe that it is vital to recognise students as having the knowledge and authority to play an important role in shaping and re-informing educational policy and practice, especially in relation to the future recruitment of teachers and support of teachers in training.

In earlier research, Butcher and Lewis (2000) investigated the attitudes of Year 12 students regarding teaching as a possible career choice, as part of a joint staged research project with the Catholic Education Office, Sydney. A sample of 1413 students in 15 high schools completed a questionnaire in which they indicated if they had considered teaching as career and intended to apply; they had considered teaching but intended not applying; or, they had never considered teaching.

The findings of the study were that the Year 12 students chose careers in teaching for largely altruistic reasons, as long as they were assured that there are employment opportunities and job security. They expressed a sense of social justice in their decision to play a role in the care and education of children in the community. At the same time they expressed a personal efficacy in their confidence in their own abilities and talents in undertaking teaching as a career. These findings as to why people undertook teaching were in accord with earlier studies (Seifert 1985, 1988; Nais, 1989; Butcher and Lewis, 1999).

The results of the study also revealed the highly gendered attitudes of the Year 12 students in their choice of teaching careers, reflecting individual but also broader societal views. Teaching was seen as a far more attractive career choice for female students than for males. 15% of the females surveyed intended to become teachers, compared with 6% of males. The majority of female students indicated a preference for primary teaching, whereas a large majority of males intended to apply for secondary or tertiary teaching.

A conception of primary teaching as "women's work" governed the types of teaching for which students opted: eight out of ten women intending to teach opted for primary teaching and two out of every three males intending to teach chose secondary teaching. Males who intended to become teachers were attracted by a perceived high status, good salary, career and promotion opportunities, whereas more of the female respondents rated being able to help others, having flexible working hours and holidays and having tenure as important to them. Males and females listed the obvious advantages of teaching as secure employment and a suitable occupation for those raising families, revealing their views of the future.

There was much less attention given by all respondents in the Butcher and Lewis survey in terms of how issues of masculinity and femininity or issues of child protection directly and consciously affected their career choice. Respondents are seemingly more focussed on the returns and advantages in relation to a teaching career, rather than whether teaching was a manly occupation or carried some risks.

Approximately 50% of the survey respondents had never considered teaching. When these respondents were asked to indicate reasons why other people might choose to be a primary teacher they indicated their beliefs that:

- you needed to be a suitable role model to children;
- working with children was too demanding;
- you needed to like school and they did not;
- teaching offered limited opportunities for career growth.

These personal motives of the students who had never considered teaching were in contrast with the socially orientated and altruistic motives of the students who had considered teaching as a career and were likely to engage in it.

From the findings of the survey it is clear that respondents have the knowledge and are in the position of addressing the complexities involved in making career decisions regarding

teaching. Given the limits of the questionnaire method in revealing how the students addressed the complexities, it was resolved to use oral inquiry in order to identify their tensions and which criteria they considered in addressing these tensions. From the earlier study it was anticipated that these tensions would centre around the role of the care giver, attitudes towards gender, salary and career opportunities.

Methodology

Focus group interviews were employed in this study to identify and understand the views and opinions of Year 12 students. The sites for the study were two Catholic high schools in south-western Sydney, one co-educational and the other a boys' school. Both schools had significant multi-cultural populations with many students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds.

An initial visit to both schools was made by the principal author, during which he addressed the Year 12 students. The meetings with the students focussed initially on the importance of teaching, the nature and purpose of the research project and the need for their voices to be heard in the research.

Follow-up meetings were then held for those students who desired more information about becoming teachers. A secondary purpose of these meetings was to establish the researcher's credibility in the eyes of the potential respondents, and to encourage trust, sensitivity, honesty and integrity in the data gathering process. After these meetings the Year 12 co-ordinators of the schools called for volunteers willing to participate in focus groups with the researcher. Participants were extremely willing to come forward and express their opinions in the focus group interviews. The Year 12 co-ordinators decided the membership of the different focus group interviews.

In all 10 different focus group sessions, each of approximately 45 minutes duration, were conducted, with five to seven participants in each group. There were nine focus groups of Year 12 students and one group was held with Year 11 students. The co-ordinators grouped the participants on the basis of the three categories of students developed for the original survey (Butcher and Lewis, 2000). These groups were:

- those who intended to become teachers;
- those who had considered teaching but did not intend to become teachers; and
- those who had never considered teaching as a career.

Questions were posed to participants in order to examine:

- their views on whether teaching was appealing as a career;
- the reasons why or why not they might undertake teaching;
- the gendered nature of teaching;
- whether any person had attempted to influence them in choosing or not choosing teaching; and
- whether they were currently working with children in any capacity at present.

Sessions were recorded on audiotape and the data were categorised and coded in order to examine emerging themes. For the purposes of this paper the findings of two focus groups of the project have been analysed, involving the views of male students who had definitely decided not to undertake teaching as a career. These two groups were selected so that the researchers could obtain more insights regarding the issues which needed to be addressed if employer groups were to be able to encourage more male senior students to opt for

teaching as a career. The two transcripts were double coded first by each of the researchers and then by the two researchers jointly. The comments of the individual students are presented anonymously as follows with differentiation between students between conveyed by number identification (S 1; S 2; etc.)

Results

Six themes emerged from the analysis of the tensions identified in the students' responses. These involved:

- the range of career options;
- the culture of discouragement in their own school;
- the work demands of teachers' roles
- the issue of boundaries between teachers' work and family contexts and commitments;
- questions of longer term financial security; and
- socially accepted teacher characteristics and gender stereotypes.

Several of the students indicated their consciousness of the range of career options available to them and the preference to opt for a career which was personally satisfying and financially rewarding. One student, reflecting upon his own family in which three of his mother's five sisters were teachers, realised that he had a wide range of career choices and that he would be considering these before he would consider teaching. Another student reported that:

I think its got a lot to do with opportunity as well. I think its safe to say there's a lot more people these days doing their HSC, unlike before. And I think people just think that well, if education is so demanded now, and everyone's going to be doing the HSC, that if they do that well, there's a lot more opportunities to go for than teaching and that's got a lot to do with it. (S 2)

Another factor which inclined senior students not to consider teaching was the culture of discouragement they experienced in their schools. Teachers were seen by some of the students as being:

negative in saying it's too much work for the money we get and how much ... tax and all that, so all your left with is maybe some teachers don't like it. (S 4)

This explicit discouragement is accompanied by students' own negative images and memories of school life and the work of teachers.

I think for the fact that we've been at school for thirteen years and just the thought of coming back. I couldn't handle it. I think that would be a bit of a turn-off. (S 3)

The images of the demands of work on teachers was a central tension which was related to the nature of the work, issues of stress, students' responses or behaviour towards teachers, the work assuming too much importance in teachers' lives and the level of pay.

Stressful. We see what teachers go through most of the day. It doesn't look as easy as it looks but it gets harder. Like a

teachers job, for the pay, is not worth the pay because like, we just see they give us our exams but then they've got to go mark and it takes time. Yeah, because of that. It's stressful, some teachers can't handle it and having heart problems. (S 25)

You come in, you're first couple of years as a teacher you'd probably be a relief. Its got to be hard time with some schools. That's why I would say some teachers, students ... they've been there, they know what the teachers copped. Like I don't want to cop that. (S 4)

You know, teachers get a hard time in the classroom. And they can't really do anything about it. (S 5)

Respondents were aware of the demands of work on teachers. This consciousness in the students highlighted the issue of teachers' work assuming too much importance in people's lives and the need for teachers to have boundaries for their work, ensuring that teaching does not subsume family and personal lives.

I think maybe when teachers, when they finish University and all that, and they want to become primary school teachers, it might have interrupted their family life. For example, like you might have children or just got married, and then that's one big responsibility but then again [as teachers] they don't want to get too attached to these younger kids, so its like a big responsibility there and the family. That could interrupt each other. (S 21)

Yeah, I'm saying like, if a teacher is like 25 years old and then they've just got married and thinking about having kids and stuff and then that would make it just too much responsibility - family and school. (S 22)

The level of pay was a recurring issue for the respondents. Their critical awareness of this issue showed their knowledge of the benefits of the starting salary for beginning teachers and of the financial security of a continuing income. Teaching, however, did not provide them with an adequate basis for financially planning for a family and the future.

Because mainly the pay for teachers only gives you what you need, not extra essentials. Like if you become something like on ninety thousand dollars a year, you can at least invest in a house and family whereas a teacher you can't really do that. (S 9)

They were also conscious of the incremental levels of pay and the lack of attractive career pathways.

You don't go anywhere. You can't move up a corporate ladder or something. In business you start from the bottom and work yourself up.

Oh yeah, you can become a coordinator, but that's different. That's a lot of extra responsibility as well, looking out after a whole Year group. You get a little bit extra yeah, but still you

can't get to the top type of thing. And it takes you a long time to get there as well. (S 8)

Teachers' personal characteristics, particularly that of being patient, was also frequently mentioned by respondents. While on the one hand students were very convinced of patience being a core personal characteristic, especially for primary teachers, they were also aware that possessing patience was not one of their own qualities. Others had also recognised this factor.

Primary teaching you need a lot more patience because they're little kids, they don't know what they're doing. Whereas with a secondary teacher when you tell them, they can behave. And with primary teaching, the parents think that the kids are more vulnerable, like they need more work done when they're in second year. (S 12)

I looked into it - I had a few friends tell me that I could be a good teacher but then they told me not really, because you don't have patience with kids.... Because I had a little cousin, he had trouble with Art, so I was teaching him how to use water colour pencils and all that, but then I didn't have enough patience with him. I'd just say do it that way or else don't do it at all. (S 8)

In relation to the nature of teachers' personal care and support the students were governed by stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Yes like a woman's job and everything and really men don't have - like most of them don't have occupations with little kids because little kids they need more than senior students. Extra care and ... You have to show more feelings towards them and everything. Sometimes men they feel less of a man if they show them type of feelings towards children. (S 20)

Before, like I said females have more compassion towards children, they're more patient than everything. (S 10)

Male and female teachers were regarded as caring for students in different ways. Several of these male respondents named "hard love" (S 7) as the type of care and support that male teachers could offer.

Sort of like the mother/father figure. Like a mother would show love and affection type of thing, whereas the father would be the more strict one who shows care in a way that they don't want to get hurt, they don't want anything to happen to them. They want them to succeed in life. Sort of like steering them in the right path, whereas like, a female teacher would do that, but in a different way. Just like in a mother loving type of way. (S 8)

Discussion

The voices of these male students who had not considered teaching provides new insights into why male students are not attracted to teaching. These insights are examined here with

respect to how they both inform the critique of teaching as a career option and provide possible directions for new strategies in attracting more male students to teaching.

Critique

The students showed how teaching, today, is one career option amongst many and that it needs to be personally satisfying and financially rewarding if it is to be attractive. In the world of the teacher and classroom the shadow reality of how unfriendly this environment is for some teachers needs to be formally acknowledged, while also profiling those teachers who are finding significant enjoyment and success in their work. Students want to know if they can handle teaching "unfriendly students" and if they will be successful.

Part of this expectation means that they need to be able to succeed as teachers while also having the time needed for family and personal lives. While the time for family has been an attraction for many who have opted for teaching, it is not mentioned by those who have not considered it as a career. The latter group are also asking how they will balance their time on a more regular basis and not just on a yearly cycle.

Teaching is attractive financially for beginning teachers but they need to be assured of positive career pathways and opportunities for the longer term. What does teaching offer them for their short and longer term career plans?

An important critique the respondents offered was in the area of gender roles and the provision of nurturant environments for students. They indicated that the public discourse had been quite stereotypical rather than being constructively related to the characteristics of males and females.

As in the earlier Butcher and Lewis survey the students preferred to constructively relate the discourse to the positive characteristics of males and females.

Reform

The respondents' insights offer some priorities and strategies for reform with respect to the nature of teaching, classrooms and schools; and also to the more immediate work of advising current students regarding career options. The respondents have reinforced the importance of teachers and the school sector in general striving to make school and classrooms pedagogically rich and engaging environments for students. Classrooms and schools need to be safe, respectful and productive. If the students' own experiences are positive teaching is a more attractive career option. Students also need to be informed about how successful people have found teaching as a career, rather than having alternative careers being advocated to them as a result of teachers' own tensions and frustrations. It also highlights the importance of effective teachers as positive role models for these students.

Ensuring appropriate work environments and requirements is the joint responsibility of both employers and teachers as society, both formally and informally, increases the nature of its demands of schooling. Students will critique teaching as a career option in light of their understanding of its demands on them personally. The mentoring and time-release support currently offered by some school sectors is in line with this need.

In a society where career change is more frequent than in previous decades teaching is to be discussed both as a short as well as a longer term career option for school leavers. The students are conscious of the complexity of their career decisions for security, satisfaction

and longer term planning. What are the different ways in which teaching can be considered within these criteria?

Society today affirms the importance of opening careers to people of different genders, cultures and religions. How society does this is related to how it reshapes and defines the work, roles and responsibilities involved. Teachers have nurturant roles which vary in expression according to the level of schooling and the nature of the students. How these nurturant responsibilities are addressed needs to be reconceptualised in terms of people's gender, culture and religion. The voices of young people need to be part of the discourse which challenges and attempts to reshape current views of care and gender.

Conclusion

This report, drawing upon the voices of Year 11 and 12 students through focus group interviews, has shown why these respondents must be given "the authority" to inform the critique and reform of education. It has also shown the importance of recognising and involving those who have not considered teaching as a career option. Students are willing to participate in constructive exploration of a critical social issue - teaching as a career option - on the basis of their school and broader life experiences, their perceptions of their career options, and their beliefs about the nature of society. The issues they have presented together with their views on possible strategies need to be the focus of further research if the school sector is to constructively and effectively address teacher recruitment, especially for male teachers in primary schools.

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