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Moving forward and giving back: Making the change to teaching

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Abstract

Recent trends in teacher recruitment have seen an emphasis placed upon the recruitment of professionals from other fields or new graduates from disciplines other than education (Teach for Australia, Teach First UK). There appears to be little Australian educational research about the perceived qualities these candidates might bring to the teaching profession, coupled with limited understanding of the characteristics of the current pre-service population. Much of the current research evidence about the characteristics of teachers is based on international evidence or US indices of occupational status, with fewer examples detailing the Australian context. This research suggests that for teacher education programs to be sustainable, the changing demographic of pre-service teachers and the motivations of students enrolling in teaching programs must be understood in order to effectively engage students and prepare them for teaching. Unlike previous research on career change teachers, this research is informed by the ANU4 rankings of occupations: an Australian socioeconomic index that links education, occupation and income. This study analyzed the responses of 87 pre-service teachers enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs at a Sydney university. Self-reported motivation for teaching as a career path revealed that while some pre-service teachers saw teaching as an opportunity to 'give something back to the community' others considered themselves to be moving into an occupation of a higher status: higher than the occupations of their previous employment although not always higher than the occupations of their parents. While this the sample size is relatively small it showed that the proportion of women entering increased with age. The occupational status (ANU4 rankings) of students and their parents was also cross-referenced with the age groups of the students revealing that, in both cases, the older the student the higher the status was likely to be and the more highly motivated than their peers to teach.

Introduction

This research commenced amid publicly expressed concerns for looming teacher shortages and poor teacher quality. The solutions put forward to address both these concerns included fast track programs of teacher education, offering recent graduates without teaching qualifications an opportunity to sample teaching under supervision and the suggestion that people might be attracted into teaching from other professions and careers. The last of these suggestions is the primary focus of this paper.

Research into attracting career changers into teaching has often expressed optimism at the prospect of having teachers with other professional experience in a school environment and imagining the talents that they would bring. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant provide an example of this when they suggest "it is undeniable that this group of career changers [will] clearly play an important part in bolstering the profession" and "they also bring with them a variety of skills, including management or organizational expertise" (2003, p. 95). This work is an example of British research conducted while the teaching profession was under sustained attack from the tabloid press, and educators were keen to find a way of improving the overall standing of teachers. However the findings of their research also suggests another story, that the 'parents', 'successful careerists', 'freelancers', 'late starters', 'serial careerists' and 'young career changers', participant groupings discerned by Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, could also be seen to be the restless, dissatisfied opportunists for whom teaching was potentially just another job in their working lives.

Teach First UK, a charitable organization established in 2002 to recruit and support teachers to work in 'challenging' or hard-to-staff schools, makes a point of encouraging career changers to join this teacher training and leadership development program (Teach First UK, 2009). Teach First is based on Teach for America which has been running since 1990, but "[u]nlike its American counterpart, the training and professional support" (Ofsted, 2008, p. 18) is provided by a university, in this instance one based in London. The UK Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) uses the recruitment slogan 'turn your talent to teaching' (TDA, n.d.) and promotes teaching largely as a stable career choice with attractive lifestyle options.

In Australia, the Victorian State government has adopted a similar approach with the 'Teach for Australia' program and in a speech recognizing the first graduates the then federal Minister for Education Julia Gillard enthused that "[t]he power of Teach for Australia is its ability to recruit high-achieving graduates who may otherwise not have considered a career in teaching" (Gillard, 2010). Even more specifically related to employees in other fields the Victorian government has developed the 'Career Change Program' (DEECD, 2007), describing teaching as a rewarding career. Earlier, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) had commissioned research into Australian career change programs. The report by PhillipsKPA (2007), analyzed participation data for students undertaking teacher education programs in 2004 and reported on consultations it had conducted with stakeholders. The authors of this study found that the participants were motivated to change career to teaching for altruistic reasons, that they found their previous work poorly paid and unrewarding, and that teaching allowed them to spend more time with their families.

Concerns about the recruitment and retention of teachers have been experienced globally (McKenzie, Santiago, Sliwka, & Hiroyuki, 2005) and have encouraged government authorities to adopt strategies like those mentioned above. Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) have noted that in many studies on the attractions of teaching as a career, the reasons given for choosing to teach fall into three main areas: altruistic, intrinsic and extrinsic reasons. Altruistic reasons would include wanting to make a difference to society or individual children through teaching. Intrinsic reasons include believing oneself to be good at the job or having an interest in the subject matter, while extrinsic reasons include holidays, salary and social status. However, they have also noted that the participants in the majority of these studies have been students who

have already enrolled in teacher education programs and thus have already made some sort of commitment to this occupation. We argue here that to address this situation it is necessary to better understand more about the occupational backgrounds of those people who change career to become teachers than simply assume that altruism, intrinsic, extrinsic and/or lifestyle factors are the determinants of change.

Method

The findings reported here are drawn from a study designed as a multi-phase, longitudinal research project, conducted at a Sydney university. Eighty-seven students enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate diploma programs of teacher education participated in the research at an early point while studying their first unit of the program. Approval from the University's human research ethics committee was gained and using SurveyMonkey (http://www.surveymonkey.com) software an online survey was designed. The survey contained ten sections: information and consent; personal details; family background; employment history; current employment; popular culture influences; motivations to teach; beliefs about teaching; expectations about teaching and; career intentions about teaching. The inclusion of questions about employment was to provide data that might address speculations made by various staff members, and subsequently became the focus of this paper. The questions on the motivations to teach, belief and expectations about teaching were drawn from the Motivational Orientations to Teach Survey (MOT-S III) (see Sinclair, 2008). This instrument was chosen because it had been developed for Australian conditions and had been refined using Confirmatory Factor Analysis making it a robust measurement tool. A fuller account is provided in Sinclair, Dowson and McInerney (2006). What became clear when attempting to analyze the collected data was that the notion of career changer would have to be clarified and that a means for understanding occupational change needed to be found. These issues are discussed below.

Who are the career changers?

What defines people who come into teaching after experience in other areas of the labour force varies from study to study, as does the terminology. For Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant's UK study "career changers ([are] defined as anyone who is not a fresh graduate starting with teaching as his/her first job in life) into secondary school teaching" (2003, p. 95). Anthony and Ord (2008), in their New Zealand study, used a broad definition that included: interrupting work to have children; returning from overseas work or travel; returning to finish degrees interrupted by work (late starters). In their study the authors depended on participants self-reporting previous employment status then modified this, if necessary, after interview. Richardson and Watt's study, that included participants from three Australian States, considered career switchers to be any who stated "that they had previously pursued another career" (2006, p. 38). A difficulty that this approach presents is that it is likely to exclude students who have worked but did not consider their work a career, and will generally exclude women coming into teaching after raising children. More precise definitions were used too. In the Australian study by Williams and Forgasz the authors stated that "[t]he definition adopted for the present study was 'a student who has worked for at least three years in a career other than teaching, including full or part time, paid or unpaid work, and/or parenting, prior to enrolling in their current

teacher education course'. This definition was used to allow for a wider range of potential participants, and to enable people with various non-teaching backgrounds, including parenting and volunteer work, to be included" (2009, p. 97).

The DEST research (PhillipsKPA, 2007) defined a career change teacher as including a combination of age, qualification and work experience factors. To be considered a career changer students enrolled in programs had to be over the age of 25 years, have recognized academic or trade qualifications and have had work experiences in a field or fields that reflected those qualifications. However, defining career change as such is problematic. To assume career changers will be 25 and over, dismisses the accumulated work experience of younger entrants, where much of the work lacks decision-making and problem solving opportunities or work where the credit for successful outcomes is often accepted by a supervisor. The justification provided by the report's author for this is that anyone under 25 would not have had the opportunity to develop a career that required qualifications. Assuming that only formal qualifications are acceptable overlooks informal learning, rejects the value of skills that are self-taught, and largely restricts qualifications to professional qualifications. Consequently, home duties would be dismissed as irrelevant. This definition also assumes a linear model of movement from education and employment and would generally overlook the transferability of many skill sets.

In this study participants were asked 'Which statement best describes your situation?' (Question 4) with the answer options:
- I completed secondary school (within the last 12 months)
- Changed to Education after starting in another course
- Recently completed a degree before starting a Grad Dip or BEd
- Started in Education after employment in an occupation other than school teaching
- Started in Education after a period of unemployment, domestic or carer duties
- Other (please specify)

Table 1. Question 4 options by response

Question	Percent	n.
Recently completed school	24.1%	21
Changed to Education after another course	9.2%	8
Recently complete degree	11.5%	10
Started after employment	43.7%	38
Started after unemployment, domestic or carer duties	11.5%	10
Totals	100%	87

Using the DEST definition it is likely that only 43.7% of the participants would be considered career changers. However, considering the responses to the question 'What was your most recent, main employment before this period of study?' (Question 24) six participants (7.6%) indicated that they had no recent main employment and two (2.5%) indicated domestic duties was their main employment. On the most inclusive definition this means that 92.4% of participants in the study had some experience of employment.

ANU4 and occupational status

In the study by Richardson and Watt the occupational statuses of respondents were classified "using O*NET – a comprehensive database of occupational information provided by the US Department of Labor". This classificatory tool has five broad categories

> derived from such factors as average salary and amount of educational preparation and training required. Teaching was classified as '4' on the five-point scale, along with careers including academia, accountancy, banking, clinical psychology, computer programming, engineering, graphic design, journalism, marketing, nursing, pharmacy and publishing (2006, p. 38).

In the Richardson and Watt study this information was used to gauge movement in occupational status for career changers. In this study an Australian occupational scale and ranking, the ANU4 (F. L. Jones & McMillan, 2001), has been used.

Research into occupational prestige has a long history and since 1965 researchers at the Australian National University (ANU) have been publishing occupational status scales designed specifically to take account of Australian conditions (McMillan, Beavis, & Jones, 2009). The ANU4 is a "socioeconomic index based on a scaling of occupations that maximises the indirect effect of educational attainment on income, while minimising its direct effect" (F. L. Jones & McMillan, 2001, p. 547). This scale was created using a variety of inputs drawn from census data including age, sex, education, hours worked, labour force status (employed; independent; unemployed), income and occupation to create occupational groups. The particular refinements introduced for the ANU4 considered how gender and self-employment affected occupational scores.

From the ANU4 a ranking of occupations can be derived that does not require "recourse to normative justification in terms of social judgments about the relative prestige, or desirability, of different occupations. They simply reflect the actual stratification processes in the labour market …" (F. L. Jones & McMillan, 2001, p. 557). The ranking was devised by ordering the occupational scores and assigning a rank of 1 to the highest score of 100 (medical practitioner), and a rank of 117 to the lowest score 0 (agricultural and related labourers). The top ten ranked occupations are as follows in table 2.

Table 2. Top ten ANU4 ranked occupations

Occupation	Rank	Score
Medical practitioner	1	100
Legal professionals	2	96.03
University teachers	3	95.66
Other health professionals (a)	4	94.49
Secondary teachers	5	89.72
Natural science professionals	6	86.15
Primary teachers	7	84.52
Other education professionals (a)	8	84.31
Engineers	9	83.77
Architects and related professionals	10	83.63

Source: http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip02_4/appendix_02.htm#1

Interestingly, the ANU4 ranks education professionals very highly, in contrast to the negative perceptions often provided by the media about teaching. A full listing of ANU4 occupational rankings can be found at http://ipumsi.anu.edu.au/index.php.

In December 2001 Roger Jones proposed to the Department of Education, Science and Training that the ANU4 would be an effective tool to use in determining potential higher education students of low socioeconomic status so that equity measures could be applied (2001). In this case he suggested that ANU4 could be used to code parental occupation and establish disadvantaged status.

Findings and discussion

The most striking observation to be made about the results from this study is the evidence of people using teaching to move into a higher status career: in the ANU4 teaching has rankings of five (secondary) and seven (primary). Six of the 87 participants were employed in occupations above ten, five were from the 30-39 years age group and one in the over 50 years age group. Of these respondents, two were lawyers, two casual academics, one an archeologist, one an aeronautical engineer. Four of this group considered they were 'highly motivated' to teach, one 'quite motivated' and one 'a little motivated'.

Figure 1. Student occupations by occupational group rankings and age
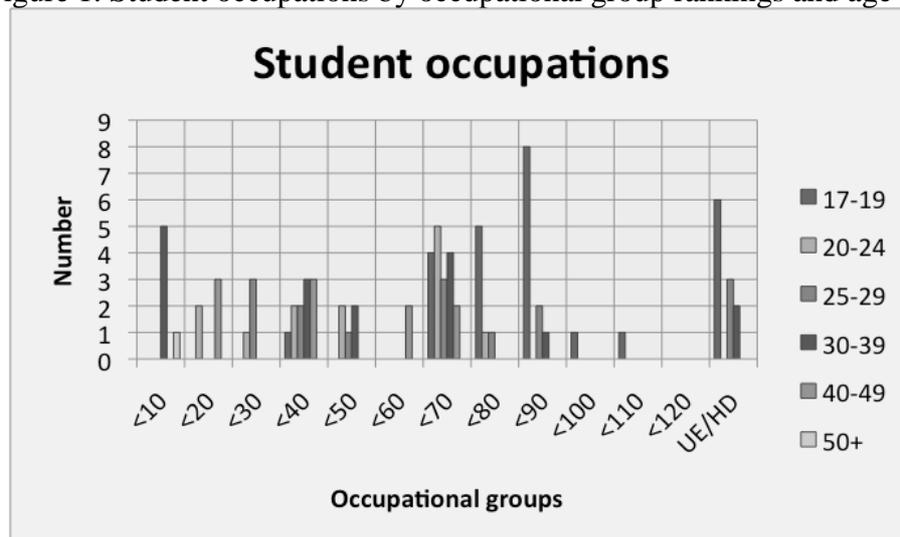
These findings are quite different to those in the Richardson and Watt (2006) study which found that more than 50% of their respondents switched from a career of similar occupational status and few (21%, University of Sydney; 15%, Monash University; 28%, University of Western Sydney) moved upwardly to teaching from lower status occupations.

Figure 2. Student occupations by age and occupational group rankings
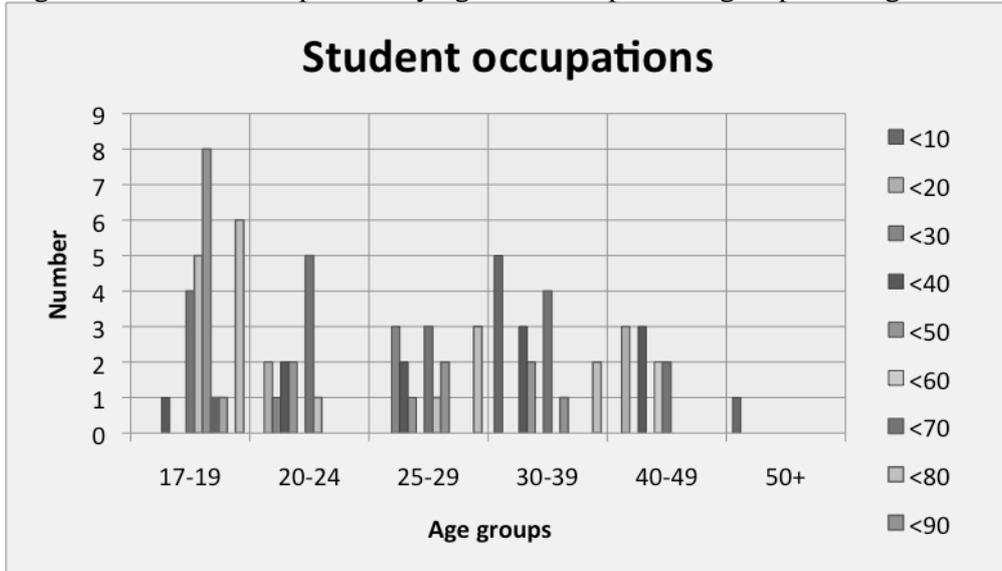
The definition used in the DEST study suggests that those under 25 cannot be considered to have developed careers, and these findings tend to support this view. While the 17–24 years age group has experience of employment it is predominantly in occupations ranked between 70 and 97 (mostly retail and food service).

Highest parental occupation

The study by Roger Jones (2001) argues that parental occupation is a good means of determining disadvantage. In developing the ANU4 rankings it was shown that the highest ranked parental occupation was a stable measure for this purpose. It is instructive for this study too.

Figure 3. Highest parental occupation by occupational group and student's age
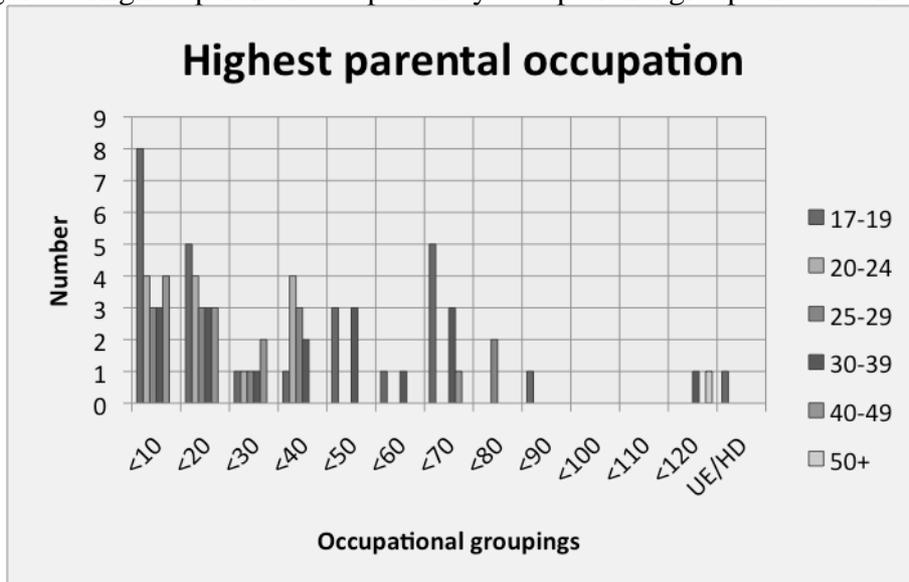
The parents of the 17-19 year olds are the numerically largest (8) in the 1-10 of occupational rank category, but there were also four from the 20-24 years age group, three from the 25-29 year olds and four from the 30-39 year age group. The parents of

17-19 year olds also had five in the 11-19 occupational grouping. There were also five in the 60-69 occupational grouping. In spite of this strong showing (see figure 3), there appears to be little pattern to the distribution.

Motivation to teach

The research participants were asked to indicate how motivated they were to teach with the question, 'At this stage I would say my motivation to teach is …'. The answer options were: Not motivated at all, Neutral motivation, A little motivated, Quite motivated, and Very motivated. No participants indicated that they were not motivated at all increasing to 34.2% saying they were 'quite motivated' and 51.9% contributing that they were 'very motivated'. Clearly, it would be unlikely to find that people who have recently enrolled in a program, and volunteer to participate in a study, would doubt their own judgment early in the course. However, the findings do not suggest that the responses were the result of youthful enthusiasm, but the contrary (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage motivation by age group
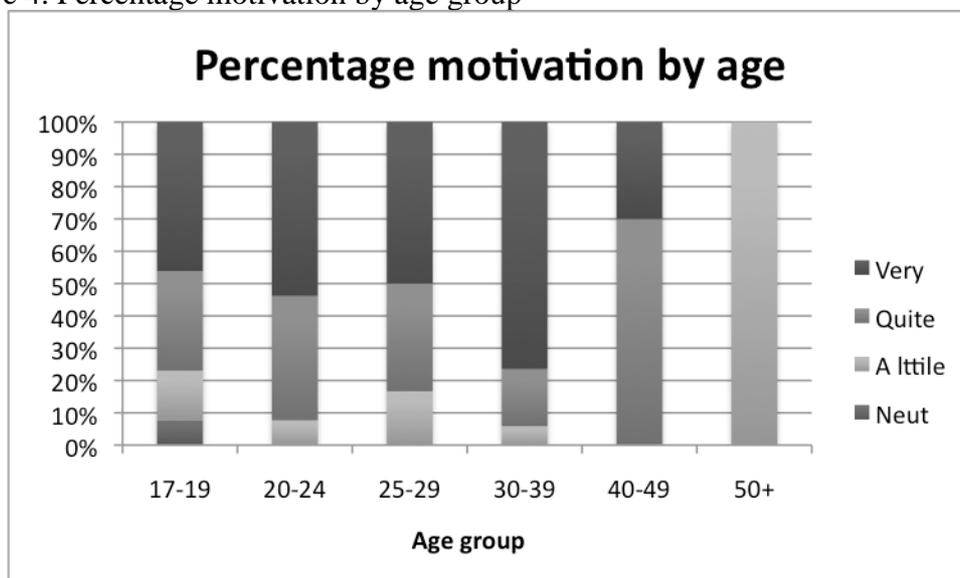
The group that had the second lowest percentage (45%) of candidates who considered themselves 'very motivated' was the 17-19 year olds. However, the oldest participant in the study, a retired aeronautical engineer, considered himself only 'a little motivated' and in the 40-49 year old group only 30% were 'very motivated'. The most highly motivated age grouping was 30-39 years old with 75% being 'very motivated'. Figure 5 shows the size of the participant age groupings.

Figure 5. Motivation by age group
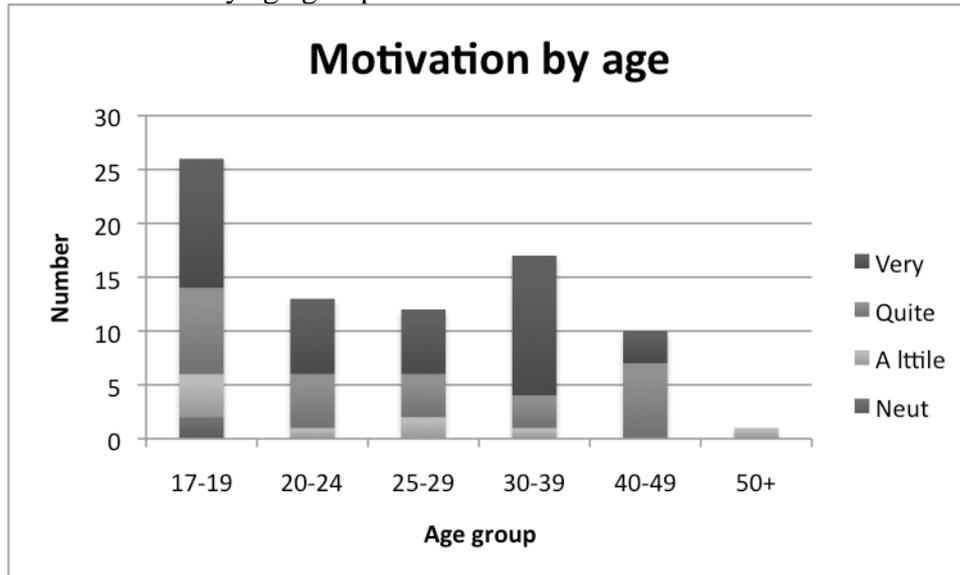
Considering the argument made in the DEST study, that students below 25 years were unlikely to have commenced a career, the participants could be divided into two groups, those under 25 years and those 25 years and older. While the numbers in study are small, it would seem that in each group motivation to teach increases with age. This pattern also has a gendered aspect with 75.9% of the participants being female in the following age groups and percentages: 17-19, 65.4%; 20-24, 84.4%; 25-29, 75%; 30-39, 88%; 40-49, 90%; 50 and over, 0%. Teaching has, since the Second World War, been a highly feminized occupation, but this sample suggests that women who enroll to be teachers are not evenly distributed across age groupings becomes a more attractive option with age.

Sustainable teacher education

A better understanding of pre-service, career change teachers is essential to creating sustainable teacher education programs. If these programs are intended to qualify teachers to fill vacancies in schools then their value is minimized if the students do not complete the program, do not take up positions in schools or stay as teachers for only a brief period. The expectations of program providers, therefore, must be based on a realistic understanding of the aspirations, expectations and motivations of these students. Career change students may become a problem cohort if attracted to teaching by promises that higher education institutions are unwilling, unlikely or unable to fulfill. We refer here to suggestions that career changers' skills, management and organizational expertise will be utilized if they are being told otherwise. The findings of this study make it is clear that extolling the virtues of being a teacher is likely to strike a chord with more than 50% in the 30-39 and the 20-24 years age groups, but is unlikely to be effective with other age groupings. Stephen Ball has noted "[e]ducation as a field of distinctions and identities is crucial in high modern society in changing and reproducing the borderlines of class and distributing unevenly and unequally forms of social and cultural capital" (2003, p. 8). If this statement is true for schools it is likely to be true for teacher education as well.

The findings of this study also suggest that many students in teacher education programs have worked and see teaching as a way of securing a higher status employment than the work they have experienced. For others in the 17-19 year age group they have seen parents in high status jobs and wish to take on something similar. Teacher education programs would do well to consider the implications of this too. Gender is also an issue. While women continue to enroll to become teachers, the younger members appear less excited by the prospect of teaching.

In discussions of people changing career to take up teaching it is imperative to clarify just who are the career changers. We suggest that it is not only mature age workers who fall into this category and that younger people with workforce experience be considered too. It is also clear that much of the research addressing career change into teaching speculates about the occupational backgrounds of pre-service teachers. Here we suggest a refined measure of occupational status, like the ANU4, be used. This study has shown that for these participants a move into teaching was a move that would yield greater social status. For some it is a 'sideways' move in occupational status terms, but rarely a move down the social status ladder, in spite of suggestions by the media to the contrary. For many younger people qualifying as a teacher will give an occupational status similar to that of their parents. Finally, while the emphasis for many government authorities has been to attract teaching candidates from 'noble' professions, it is the motivation to teach that is likely to produce teachers who stay.

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