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**“Teaching...I can see myself not doing that forever”:  
The Beginning Teacher Experience – A Study of the Changing Career expectations and Required  
Competencies of Beginning Teachers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Data suggests beginning teachers in the Western world, having invested their time, finances and effort into their University education, resign from their chosen profession within three to five years at a rate of 25% to 40% (Smithers & Robinson, 2003). This longitudinal investigation of the Bachelor of Teaching students enrolled at the Launceston Campus of the University of Tasmania in 2007 and 2008, gathered demographic data as well as information regarding the beliefs, perceptions and experiences, both before they commence their teaching education and after their required practicum. The study, as part of an ongoing PhD, attempts to discover what motivates these individuals to choose to teach, explore their perceptions of their place in the profession and to investigate what changes in perception may occur as a result of the classroom reality. This study employed a combination of both quantitative and qualitative strategies (Burns, 2000) utilising a variety of data collection instruments; questionnaires, interviews, journal writing and classroom observations, yielding 81 completed questionnaires, 14 interview transcripts, 26 final questionnaires, 4 interviews, 6 classroom observations and 2 journal entries from the pre-service teachers. Results indicate that although Bachelor of Teaching students come from a broad range of backgrounds and demographics, as a cohort, they do show similarities in their motivations for choosing to teach and their initial pre-conceptions of the profession.

## **Introduction**

The words *teaching* or *teacher* evoke in most people particular memories and images (Ayers, 2001) and recent research has focused on a range of related issues including, the development of teacher professional identity (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Cattley, 2007), teachers' work lives (Poppleton & Williamson, 2004; Pietsch & Williamson, 2005; Williamson & Myhill, 2008), beginning teacher retention (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011) and early career teacher resilience (Johnson et al., 2010), utilizing a range of theoretical frameworks, methodologies and teacher samples. While there are some Australian studies which have informed our understanding of teachers and their reasons for entering the profession (Richardson & Watt, 2006; White & Moss, 2003), to date there are no Tasmanian studies which follow a sample of beginning teachers from initial enrolment through to the conclusion of practicum school placement, exploring preconceptions and aspirations for themselves in their new role as professional educators. Few local studies have sought to determine if these preconceptions, beliefs and professional identity changes with classroom experience. Significantly the

participants of this study have chosen an alternative pathway to the usual Bachelor of Education undergraduate program. These individuals, in most cases have relinquished another career and transitioned to full time study from full time employment. For these pre-service teachers the decision to teach is considerable for themselves and their families and success is of paramount importance.

## **Research Questions**

This study, as part of an ongoing PhD, was conducted in 2007-2008 to explore the diverse nature of those enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching course at the University of Tasmania, Launceston campus.

The study aimed to:

1. Explore the initial perceptions of a number of Bachelor of Teaching pre-service teacher education students about what being a classroom teacher encompasses and their professional aspirations,
2. Follow these students as they progressed through their teacher preparation and ultimately when they commenced their first teaching experience to map how their perceptions may have changed, and
3. Investigate the nature of the contextual, personal and professional issues that may have lead to the changing perceptions.

## **Methodology**

The design adopted for this investigation utilised a combination of both quantitative and qualitative strategies (Burns, 2000). It necessitated the collection of data using four different data collection instruments: questionnaires, interviews, journal writing and classroom observations. The use of a variety of data collection instruments allowed for triangulation of the information obtained and validation of the participant's responses (Gall, M., Borg & Gall, J., 1996). These instruments produced corresponding sets of qualitative and quantitative data that required methods that would allow for analysis within and between data sets.

The data were collected at key specified times throughout the two-year Bachelor of Teaching course: upon commencement of studies, during practicum and at the completion of the course. The instruments required at each stage of the study included an initial and final questionnaire, interview schedules for the initial, practicum and post-practicum interviews, a classroom observation schedule and a weekly journal pro forma. This data were collected independently in keeping with the longitudinal nature of the study. However the processes involved in the organisation and analysis of the data occurred concurrently.

Questionnaires sought demographic information about the respondents as well as their perceptions and beliefs associated with a range of teaching related issues, using both Likert scales and open-ended response sections. For those students involved as case study participants there were a series of interviews using a semi-structured format of guiding statements to ensure rich and varied responses.

## **Sample**

The study used a criterion based or purposive sampling technique (Gall et al., 1996). The selection of subjects was both typical and convenient (Burns, 2000). First year Bachelor of Teaching students were invited to participate in the study during their orientation activities. Studying a particular cohort of pre-

service teachers during the completion of their course allowed for easy access to individuals whilst they attended the University of Tasmania, Launceston campus. The subjects needed to be:

- Enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching course at the University of Tasmania,
- Aiming to enter classroom teaching,
- Completing their course within the 2 year time frame allocated for data collection, and
- Undertaking Practicum school placement within Tasmania.

Opportunistically, the currently enrolled second year students of the same course also were invited to contribute, although it was not intended to re-interview these participants due to the time frame of the study.

The recruitment presentation to both first and second year students resulted in 100% of the students present, completing and returning the questionnaire resulting in a total 42 collected from the first year students and 39 from the second year students. A further 35 students indicated a desire to participate in interview stage of the study. Although these students provided contact details, only 14 were available for the initial interview. This translated to 6 participants willing to have a classroom observation, 2 completed weekly journals and 4 participated further in the practicum or post practicum interview. It was anticipated that participation rates would decline throughout the two-year duration of the project, as the intensity and workload of their own study increased for the students. It also was envisaged that the prospect of a classroom observation would add an element of stress for the pre-service teacher whilst on Practicum and may be declined. It was also anticipated that enrolment numbers would have declined by the end of 2008. The participation rate in the final stage questionnaire reflected such a decline with only 27 students in attendance, and almost all (96%) participating.

**Table 1. Participation of Bachelor of Teaching students for all stages of the study**

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Instrument</i>	<i>1<sup>st</sup> year</i>	<i>2<sup>nd</sup> year</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Questionnaire	42	39	81
2	Interview 1	10	3	13
2	Interview 2	4	-	4
2	Classroom Observation	6	-	6
2	Weekly Journal	2	-	2
3	Questionnaire	26	-	26

### **Data Gathering and Instruments**

Data gathering and analysis commenced February 2007 and concluded October 2008 and occurred concurrently throughout the research period. Four types of data collection instruments were carefully designed for the study: questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, classroom observations and a weekly journal. The study was divided into 3 clearly defined stages.

**Stage 1** - This initial contact with students was presented in the form of an information session regarding the study and an invitation to partake in one or more of the stages. During this initial session students were presented with this Stage 1 questionnaire as well as an invitation to participate in the longitudinal component of the study. Contact information from recruited Stage 2 participants was collated.

The Stage one questionnaire comprised three sections which sought to gather information on the demographics of the cohort, future teaching intentions, current perceptions of the profession and their beliefs and motivations for enrolling in the course. In addition, the questionnaire presented participants with an opportunity to nominate the three most challenging and rewarding aspects of teaching. Participants also were asked to describe how they see themselves in the teaching role providing indicators of their current professional identity.

The final and most significant question in terms of the research project was to ask the pre-service teachers to describe in their own words 'what they think being a teacher would be like'. The intention was that the variety of responses would be coded and analysed to expose commonalities and indicators of professional identity.

**Stage 2** - Participants were contacted to arrange interview times that were mutually agreeable, and subsequently an initial face-to-face interview was conducted at the University of Launceston campus during March and April 2007.

The initial face-to-face interview with the newly enrolled pre-service teacher was to set the initial benchmark by which all comparisons and later reflections upon the teaching experience for the individual was to be measured.

Participants were asked also to keep a daily log during the Practicum to assist in the collection of data which mapped their responses to the personal and professional aspects of teaching. These participants also were observed during a teaching session whilst in their practicum school and interviewed again whilst on Practicum.

**Stage 3** - A second questionnaire was administered to both the Stage 1 and 2 participants from the first year cohort who were present on the final day of formal classes for their course at its conclusion in October 2008.

This final questionnaire presented a line of questioning similar to that within the initial Stage 1 questionnaire to allow for direct comparison of data. However, the Stage 3 questionnaire also sought information regarding the effectiveness of the integration of theory to practice, and the perceived preparedness of the beginning teacher to teach.

Table 2 outlines the chronology of the development and data collection phases of the study. Colour coding highlights the times and events within they study that related to the research questions addressed by this paper.

**Table 2. Chronology of Project Development and Data Collection Phases**

Research activities	2006				2007				2008									
	J	A	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Project background and design	█																	
Ethics Application																		
Final version of all research instruments																		
Introduction of study to Bachelor of Teaching students																		
Recruitment of subjects and obtain consent																		
<b>Stage 1 Questionnaire - Distribution</b>																		
Stage 1 Questionnaire - Coding and Analysis																		
<b>Stage 2 Interviews - Pre-practicum</b>																		
Transcribe interviews																		
Stage 2 Interviews - Initial - Coding and Analysis																		
<b>Stage 2 Interviews - During practicum</b>																		
Transcribe interviews																		
Stage 2 Interviews - Practicum - Coding and Analysis																		
<b>Stage 2 Classroom observations</b>																		
Stage 2 Classroom observations - Coding and Analysis																		
<b>Stage 2 Weekly journal - Collection</b>																		
Stage 2 Weekly journal - Coding and analysis																		
<b>Stage 2 Interviews - Post-practicum</b>																		
Transcribe interviews																		
Stage 2 Interviews - Post-practicum - Coding and Analysis																		
<b>Stage 3 Questionnaire - Distribution</b>																		
Stage 3 Questionnaire - Coding and Analysis																		

█ Relate to research question 1      █ Relate to research question 2      █ Relate to research question 3

**Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from questionnaires Stages 1 and 3 were collated and responses coded with a numerical value as an identifier prior to entry into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 14.0 and later into PASW Statistics GradPack 18 software programs (SPSS, 2009). Organisation and entry of the resulting data sets was followed by the completion of preliminary descriptive statistical analysis in the form of frequency distributions and cross tabulations of the data. All analysis processes were reviewed and refined in relation to the nature of new incoming data. Coding and re-coding occurred in an ongoing and interactive manner.

In a similar fashion, the qualitative data in the form of interview recordings were transcribed to text. These electronic versions of the interviews were entered into NVivo 8 (QSR International, 2008) for qualitative analysis. Recordings of applied data labels, label descriptions and re-code details were collated using spreadsheets in Excel (Microsoft Office, 2007).

All data was thematically analysed and continually refined throughout the analysis process. The information that each instrument provided was rich and diverse demonstrating a complex interaction within and between both qualitative and quantitative aspects of the data collected. Subsequently, a need for continual recoding of qualitative data, aligned with statistical analysis of questionnaire data enabled comparison across data sets and individual cases.

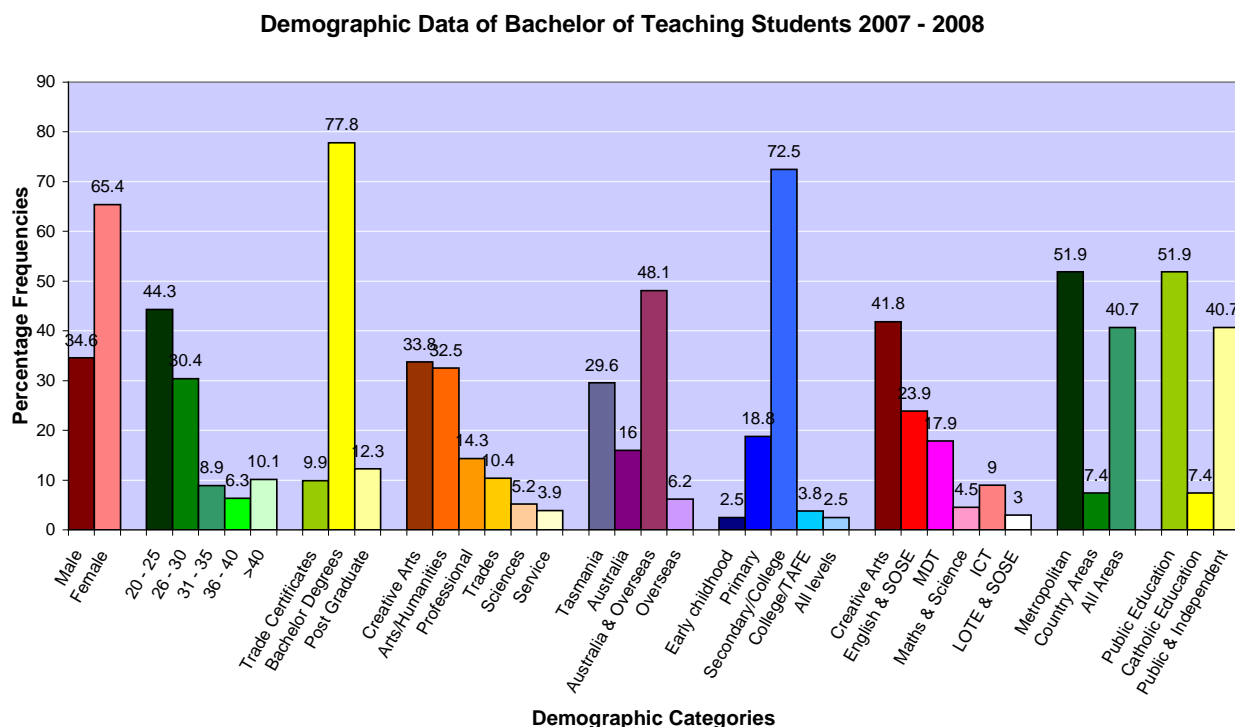
## Results

The Bachelor of Teaching Degree at the University of Tasmania allows those in possession of a bachelor degree of the University of Tasmania or of another higher education institution deemed equivalent, in a discipline other than education or who has qualifications and relevant professional experience deemed suitable, to enrol with the view to becoming a qualified teacher (UTAS, 2011). By the nature of the course a broad range of people take this pathway into becoming primary, secondary and tertiary educators.

### Demographics

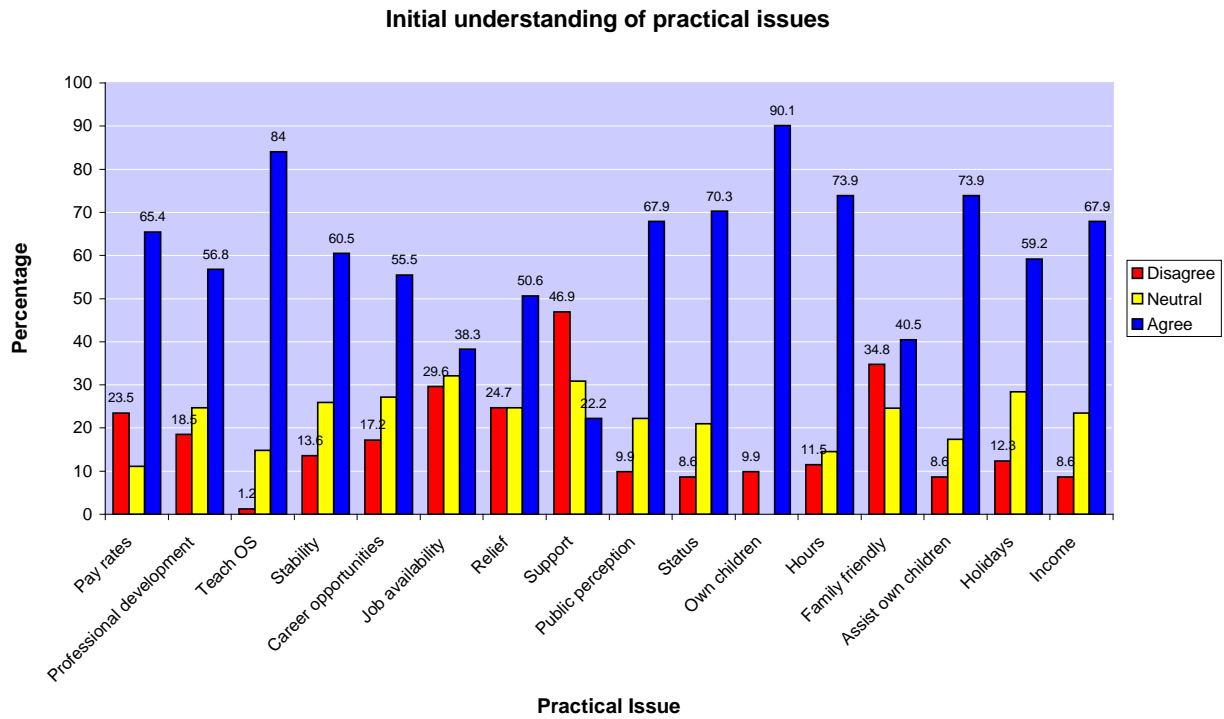
Figure 1 presents the demographic data.

**Figure 1.** Questionnaire 1: Part A demographic data.

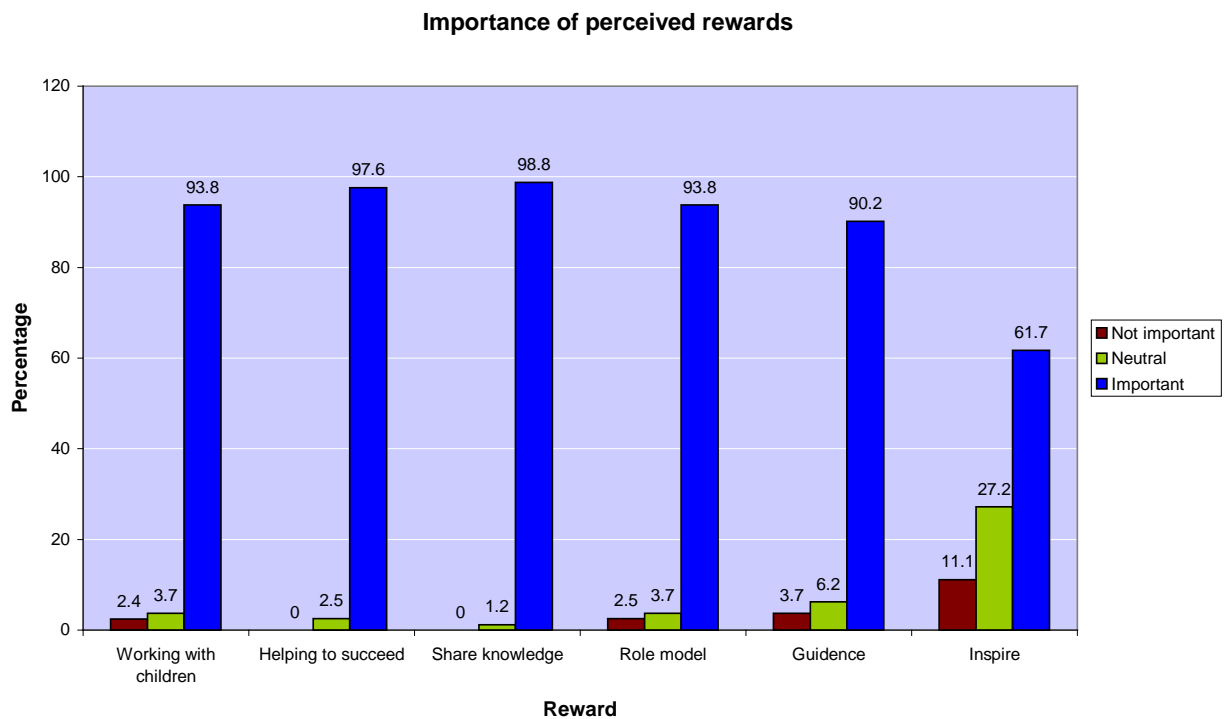


Part B of the questionnaire sought information via Likert scales on: pay rates, professional development, working overseas, perceived job stability, career advancement, employment prospects, relief teaching, availability of support for beginning teachers, public perception of the profession and the social status of teachers (Figure 2). Subsequent questions sought reflections on the intrinsic motivations of the beginning teacher and practical professional issues (Figure 3) and perceptions of challenges presented by professional issues (Figure 4).

**Figure 2. Questionnaire 1: Initial understanding of practical issues**

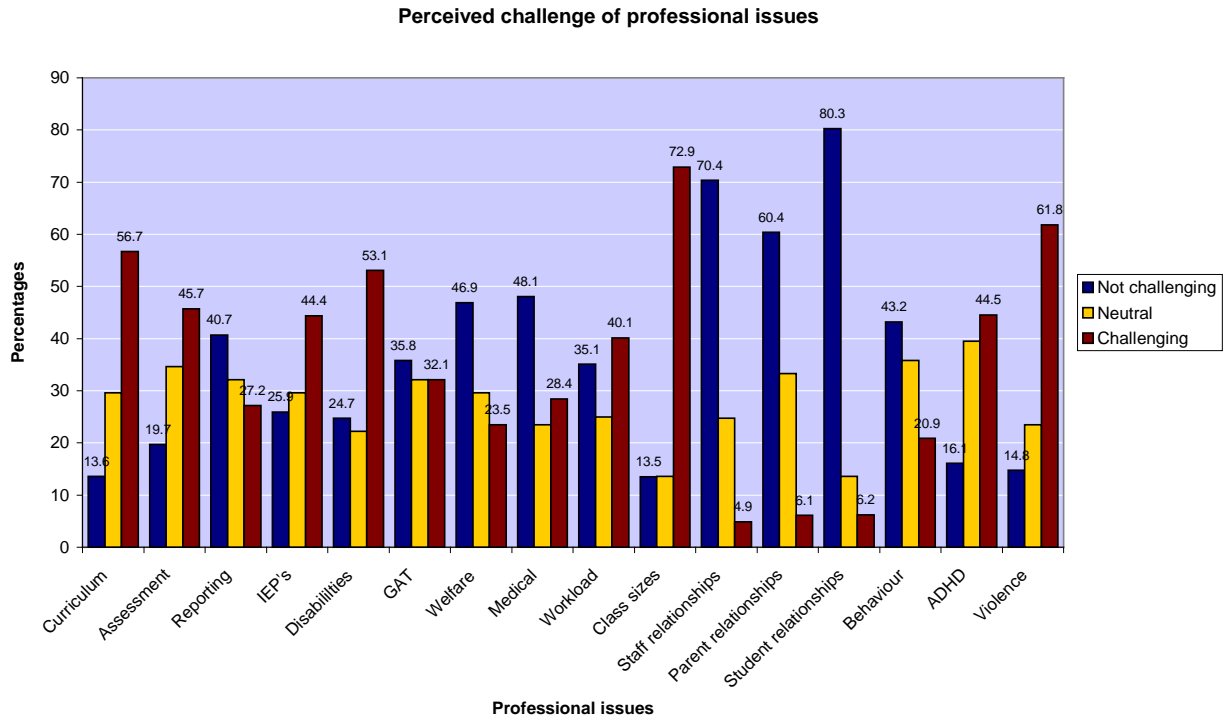


**Figure 3. Questionnaire 1: Importance of perceived rewards**



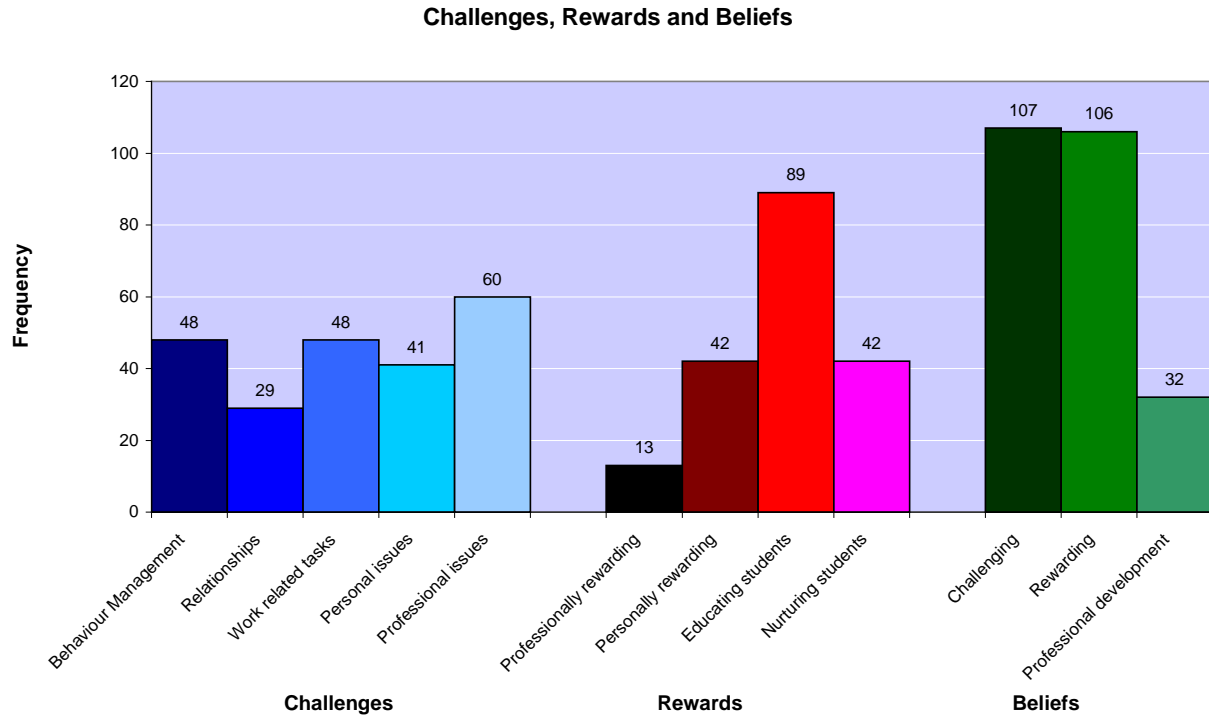


**Figure 4.** Questionnaire 1: Perceived challenge of professional issues



Part C of the Stage one questionnaire, allowed for open ended responses. Participants were asked to nominate the three most challenging and rewarding aspects of teaching, as well as that they thought being a beginning teacher would be like. The collated key terms are outlined in Figure 5.

# Questionnaire 1: Part C Challenges, rewards and beliefs



### ***The interview schedule – Initial***

The initial face-to-face interview with the newly enrolled pre-service teacher set the benchmark by which all comparisons and later reflections upon the teaching experience for the individual, was measured. Questions sought responses regarding what they perceive the greatest challenge for them will be in the classroom, as well as their perceived required competencies for successful classroom teaching.

### ***Stage 3 Questionnaire***

Stage 3 involved the administering of a follow-up questionnaire to all available Bachelor of Teaching students, including the Stage 1 and 2 participants at the conclusion of their course in October 2008. The responses were to be directly compared to those provided initially by the same cohort in Stage 1. The questionnaire invited responses via Likert scales on topics pertaining to: the course effectiveness of the integration of theory to practice and practical professional issues. As in Questionnaire 1, an open ended response section asked participants to nominate the three most challenging and rewarding aspects of teaching. This would allow for direct comparison with Stage 1 results. Those respondents who participated in Stages 1, 2 and 3 are to have their results cross-referenced an order to detect any change in preferences perceptions and understanding over the two-year course.

## **Discussion**

The preparation and retention of quality beginning teachers is an important topic of discussion both locally and globally. The UK study by Smithers and Robinson (2003), determined that teachers resign from their chosen profession within their first three to five years at a rate of 25% to 40%. The five main factors influencing their decision to leave teaching were identified as workload, the need for a new challenge, the school situation, salary and the teacher's personal circumstances. The initial Stage 1 questionnaire presented to Bachelor of Teaching students in this study, gathered data relating to a number of professional issues including each of these five factors. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed a 'snapshot' of the cohort, who they were, what they believed and what motivated them to become teachers.

Modal percentages of the Stage 1 quantitative demographic data revealed that 65.4% of the enrolled cohort were female. This gender balance is consistent with national trends. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) compared gender balance statistics over a 20 year period and found that in 2002 there were 2.1 full-time equivalent female teachers for every 1 male, an increase from 1.4:1 in 1982. The majority of these females teachers were working in the Primary sector (ABS, 2003). This trend is evident in America also. *USA Today* (Toppo, 2003) reported that in the case of the 445 students followed in the Connecticut Longitudinal Study, 90% of their second and third grade teachers were women. In a similar way Thornton, Bricheno and Reid (2002) reported a concern that the teaching profession in England had become 'feminised'.

In this study 44.3% of students were 20 – 25 years of age, or 74.7% under the age of 30. Such ages are consistent with the usual pathway into the Bachelor of Teaching course allowing for three to four years of previous tertiary study and/or employment.

Nine out of ten (90.1%) of the students entered the course on the basis of possessing a Bachelor degree. Of these individuals, 12.3% had also completed post graduate studies in a field other than education. The relatively low 9.9% of students from a trade background may be the result of additional screening processes by Course co-ordinators to ensure the applicants suitability for university level study or an

indication that few trades are transferable to the school setting. There is also the possibility that some school specialisations are not easily transferable to the employment setting. Creative Arts and Humanities accounted for 65.8% of previous fields of study. This category incorporated Visual art, Music, Contemporary Art, Asian Studies, English Literature, History, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology and Archaeology. These students intended to teach subjects such as Creative Arts (41.8%), English & SOSE (23.9%) and LOTE & SOSE (3%), collectively accounting for 68.7% of the subject specialisations indicated in the data.

The remaining Professional, Trade, Sciences and Service fields were actually employment based with a direct correlation with secondary subjects such as Business Studies, Science, Materials Design & Technology, Home Economics or Food Technology. The nature of the course attracts individuals with previous work experience or fields of specialisation better suited to the secondary school or college structure. This is reflected in the data with 72.5% of students intending to teach secondary or college grades. The low percentage of 2.5 recorded for those wishing to teach in the Early Childhood sector was expected as many Early Childhood teachers are young, female teachers who enter teacher preparation courses from college with a long established intention to teach and with a strong personal metaphor of 'teacher as nurturer' (Sumsion, 2003). These teachers tend to take a more direct route to teaching through the Bachelor of Education programs on offer.

A unique problem for Tasmania is the perceived limited job opportunities in all areas. Full time substantive positions are competitive and many skilled workers, both professional and trade, relocate to the mainland and overseas in high numbers, an issue that has been recently canvassed by both the Australian Education Union and the Education Minister (Ward, 2011). Data from this study showed only 29.6% of participants intended to remain in Tasmania with the majority intending to teach in Australia and overseas. A small percentage of 6.2 planned to only teach overseas and this may be attributed to international students of the University intending to return home at the conclusion of their studies.

Geographically Tasmania's population is centred around only a few regional cities. Greater Launceston area accommodates almost one fifth of the 507626 Tasmanians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), making it one of the State's largest metropolitan areas here and overseas. Schools in country areas often lack access to resources, infrastructure and support (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995; Sharplin, 2002) as well as offering few attractive incentives. This is consistent for many rural schools nationwide as these facilities experience staff recruitment and retention issues (Hudson & Millwater, 2009). The data indicated that 51.9% of the participants wished to work in metropolitan locations. Only 7.4% wished to work in country areas, many of which lived in these areas already and had relocated to Launceston to complete their course. A relatively large 40.7% were prepared to work wherever they obtained employment. This figure supports the idea that students in the Bachelor of Teaching course, who had actively chosen to resign from other fields of employment needed to make the transition successful. Finding employment regardless of location at the end of the course was necessary to justify the financial and family inconveniences incurred. This idea is also reflected in the result of 51.9% of students wishing to find employment in public schools. Only 7.4% of students wished to only work in Catholic schools and this was mainly due to personal experience, family culture and personal ethos. All others would seek employment in public and or Independent schools.

Data was sought via Likert scales to determine the current understanding about professional issues for teachers. This data was to be compared with similar questions asked at the conclusion of the course and after Practicum within schools. The majority of students, upward of 50%, felt they had a sound understanding of professional issues such as pay rates, professional development opportunities, their ability to teach overseas, job stability, career opportunities, public perception, professional status and

availability of relief work the later being viewed as the expected pathway to contract or full time employment (Pietsch, 2011). Thirty eight point three percent of students felt they were well informed about job availability upon qualification. Given the fluid nature of government jobs, funding availability, competitive job markets and the media reporting of under or oversupply of teachers in specialist areas, many students were unsure of job availability two years into the future. Media also regularly report on the challenges facing teachers in schools today and the issues relating to teacher attrition. Data indicated that 46.9% of the participants disagreed that beginning teachers were supported once out in schools. This percentage compared with only 22.2% who did anticipate a level of support in schools reflects the perception that schools are busy professional situations. Further exploration of this concept through Stage 2 interviews revealed that some pre-service teachers viewed themselves as an inconvenience to experienced colleagues who were themselves are under considerable load with limited time and resources to assist new teachers in the workplace.

With approximately nine out of ten (90.1%) participants with children or intending to have children of their own, issues such as required work hours, income, ability to have holidays with children and to be able to assist their own children in their education rated as important issues for upward of 59.2% of the students. Some studies have found that many mature students, having had their own children and subsequently had positive experiences through their own child's school led them to consider it as an alternative career option (Thornton et al., 2002).

However, 34.8% students disagreed that the profession would actually provide family friendly hours due to the amount of 'homework' that would be required. A further 24.7% weren't sure what to expect in terms of being able to keep family friendly hours. This concern was shared with 64% of beginning teachers that participated in the Australian Education Union's (AEU) Australian Beginning Teacher Survey in 2006.

When examining the motivations and beliefs of the pre-service teachers all categories that pertained to the actual 'education' of students were regarded as the core business of the teacher, but also considered as an intrinsic reward of the profession along with nurturing students (Figures 3 & 5). Helping children to succeed and the imparting and sharing of knowledge rated as important for 97.6% and 98.8% of the participants respectively (Figure 3).

The development of a pre-service teacher's professional identity is underpinned by their personal metaphor of teacher. Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992) identified 'teacher as nurturer' as having a profound influence on the pedagogies developed and experiences had by pre-services teachers, one of which, defined teaching as an extension of parenting. Given that this data showed 90.1% of participants had or wished to have children of their own, makes meaning of their nominating 'nurturing students' as important and rewarding. Professional rewards were only mentioned by 13 participants, lending weight to the idea that nurturers consider the development of themselves as secondary to the development of the student. While only 2.4% of pre-service teachers did not consider working with children as important, the possible implications of this finding will be explored through future analysis of the data in relation to those individuals and in what situation they intended to teach.

The initial questionnaire revealed that many professional issues were predicted to be challenging for the pre-service teacher (Figure 4). Increasing class sizes was of particular concern (72.9%) a sentiment echoed by 55% of participants in an Australian study of such issues (AEU, 2006). Data indicated also that the pre-service teachers were confident in areas relating to the fulfilment of their duty of care and interacting with the school community. Eight out of ten (80.3%) participants considered establishing and maintaining student relationships not at all challenging, but noted behaviour management may be.

The challenges experienced by beginning teachers have been widely documented (Bullough et al., 1992; Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Smithers & Robinson, 2003; Pietsch & Williamson, 2005). In this study the actual terms 'challenging' and 'rewarding' were nominated 107 and 106 times respectively in relation to what the pre-service teachers think teaching will be like. The exact same terms were used by pre-service teachers in a British study to describe the perceived teaching experience (Thornton et al., 2002). The common usage of 'challenging' and 'rewarding' to describe the nature of teaching, stimulated discussion and expansion of their definition via Stage 2 interviews with the participants of this study.

## **Conclusion**

The study aimed to examine the diverse nature of Bachelor of Teaching students at the University of Tasmania and identify the preconceptions they have in regard to the teaching profession and their place in it. It seeks to determine whether the teacher metaphor they hold for themselves evolves from their status as pre-service teacher to beginning teacher. Although the scope of this paper is limited to preliminary data from Stage 1 of this study, with a specific focus on the initial perceptions of the pre-service teachers, it does identify some areas of professional uncertainty for the participants and thus highlights valuable information for training bodies such as the University of Tasmania. The data also fit with that described by other researchers (Bullough & Gitlin, 2001; Pietsch & Williamson, 2005) but an interesting trend of more mature students returning to study is becoming evident. Understanding pre-service teacher's perspectives on areas of need provides significant and valuable feedback that has the potential to inform the on-going curriculum renewal process by the University and an insight into the changing needs of enrolled students for consideration by the associated course advisory committees. This study provides the evidence needed to shape and improve the policy development within the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania in partnership with employers, Unions and the Teacher Registration Board, each contributing from a different perspective, to the development of qualified, valuable and prepared educators.

The demographic data revealed in the study suggests the nature of the teacher in this contemporary context is changing. The personal and professional influences on the individual must be considered if teaching is to be thought of as an attractive long term career and if quality teachers are to be retained and developed into the future. These data support those identified in recent Australian research (Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Plunkett & Dyson, 2011). The data also provides specific insights with the potential to bring about change in the way in which teachers are prepared. In particular, support made available to beginning teachers has emerged as a significant issue identified by the participants early in this study, the implications of which impacts upon policy makers for Universities and relevant stakeholders. Support could take a variety of forms; school based formal mentoring, the creation of school positions for the management and support of beginning teachers, an added requirement for in-school or department promotion or an extension of the Universities role in the provision of continuing on-line professional resources.

The outcomes of the study contribute to the existing, relatively small body of knowledge about beginning teachers in Australia and specifically Tasmania. Analysis of data gathered beyond the initial Stage 1 exposes the difficulties encountered by the teachers in their early classroom experiences and provides suggestions from the perspective of the pre-service and beginning teachers on how the gap between the theory and practice of education may be bridged to improve the successful transition into professional teaching.

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