Mature age professionals: Factors influencing their decision to make a career change into teaching

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This paper presents the early findings from a study that addresses the topic of mature age professionals making a career change into the secondary teaching profession by undertaking a postgraduate coursework initial teacher education program. The paper specifically addresses the factors that affect the decision for mature age professionals to make such a change. Education systems worldwide are encouraging mature age professionals to make a career change into secondary teaching to fill teacher shortages in specialist subject areas. However, the literature shows there has been little recent research about this aspect of mature age career changers. The study on which this paper is based utilised a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to explore the stories of mature age professionals who were making a career change into teaching. The paper focuses on the resonances across the stories of 17 mature age professionals as they outline the factors that influenced their decision to make a career change into teaching. The findings of this study would be of interest to educational policy makers and academic administrators responsible for the recruitment of mature age professionals into secondary teaching.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, modern labour markets have been impacted by a number of factors which have resulted in profound changes in the workplace. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training asserted that fast changing technology, unprecedented global competition and regulatory standards, increasingly mobile populations, and the constant generation of new jobs and skills have all impacted on workers (CEDEFOP, 2015). In addition, there have been considerable job losses for state and local government employees in countries such as the United States (Gault, 2013), the United Kingdom (Wright, 2013) and Australia (Helbig & Ironside, 2012). These changes in global and local environments have resulted in many mature age professionals deciding to make a career change.

The teaching profession globally is interested in mature age career change professionals in response to troublesome secondary teacher supply and demand scenarios. Several subject areas have been identified as being the focus of the problem. In the United States, there is a shortage of science, mathematics, special education, and bilingual education/English language development teachers, with significant numbers of teachers required over the next ten years (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond & Carver-Thomas, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). A report by the National Audit Office in the United Kingdom (2016) stated that there are growing signs of teacher shortages, particularly in maths and certain science subjects, signalled by teacher vacancy rates and the proportion of teachers who are teaching in subject areas in which they do not have a relevant degree. The greatest demand and shortage of secondary teachers in Australia is in the specialisations of maths,

physics, chemistry, biology, industrial design, and technology (Queensland Audit Office, 2013).

One initiative to address the worldwide problem of teacher shortages in specialist subject teaching areas is to recruit mature age professionals as second career teachers (Tigchelaar, Brouwer & Vermunt, 2010). Second career teachers are individuals who enter the teaching profession later in their careers, after working in a prior profession unrelated to education (Powell, 1997). A number of programs have been implemented globally to alleviate the problem of teacher shortages. Such programs include the *Teach First* program in the United Kingdom (Teach First, 2017), the *Teach for America* program (Teach for America, 2017) and the *Teach For Australia* program (Teach For Australia, 2017). These alternative certification for teaching programs adopt an integrated approach of learning with practical classroom experience. However, a more common program for career changers into teaching in Australia is a university delivered one or two year full time postgraduate coursework program.

While career changers are seen as attractive candidates for teacher recruitment, research into this particular demographic is very limited (Wilkins, 2013). A detailed understanding of the factors which prompt a career change into teaching would enable education authorities to design more effective recruitment campaigns, and help teacher educators develop courses which meet the needs of this cohort (Laming & Horne, 2013). This paper reports on a study that investigates this issue, with the research question: What factors influence mature age professionals in their decision to make a career change into teaching? First it outlines prior research about career changers into teaching. Next, it gives details about the study that underpins the paper. Data is then presented and discussed, utilising narrative inquiry theory as outlined below. The conclusion summarises the findings and suggests recommendations for educational administrators and recruiters.

Making a career change into teaching

A review of the literature into making a career change into teaching indicates that social and personal factors are relevant influences in making the career change decision. Social factors include a changing economy, losing one's job, or changing location and being unable to find an alternative job in the same field. Personal factors include being dissatisfied with one's previous job, looking for a challenge, the desire to make a difference, having a long standing desire to be a teacher, desiring a sociable environment, wanting a work/life balance, perceiving a career fit based on personal ability and prior career and personal experience. Previous research about social and personal factors related to career change into teaching is outlined below.

Social factors

According to Anthony and Ord (2008), the results of their mixed method study of 70 career change teachers in New Zealand showed that the career change decision was made because other options at the time were limited, an individual had experienced an unplanned life change, or an individual was unable to find a suitable position in their

current career. Raggi and Troman (2008), who conducted interviews with 18 career changers into teaching in England, also found that their study participants had made the career change decision after being displaced from their previous careers. Needing a career change due to the economy and the provision of retirement and health care benefits in the teaching profession also influenced career changers in research by Bunn and Wake (2015), who conducted surveys of 346 careers changers into teaching in the United States. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003) found from their interviews with 34 initial teacher education career changers in England that short term contract workers, such as musicians or artists, made the career change decision into teaching to obtain employment security. Similarly, in their research that used semi-structured questions of five career changers in Australia, Whannel and Allen (2014) found that perceived benefits such as financial security after having experienced short term employment contracts was a relevant factor in the career change decision.

Personal factors

Watt and Richardson (2007) conducted large scale quantitative surveys of career change initial teacher education students at two universities in Sydney, Australia. Their research showed that factors which influenced a career change into teaching included having a perceived teaching ability, a desire to shape the futures of children and adolescents, wanting to make a social contribution and having had positive teaching experiences in other contexts. Similarly, Anthony and Ord (2007) found that prior teaching in a different context, such as providing staff training in industry and private tuition in music or dance, were relevant factors in the career change decision. This prior experience gave the career changers the perception that they had the skills and/or disposition for a teaching career and that they would enjoy teaching.

Some career changers were interested in teaching as a career because they wanted more personal fulfilment in their lives, according to Raggi and Troman (2008). Similarly, Williams (2013), in her primarily quantitative research on 375 career changers into teaching in Australia, found that reasons for the career change included the attainment of personal growth and development, the ability to apply previous experience, to contribute to society and the development of children, and to utilise their skills. They were also keen to utilise their personal qualities and attributes gained from their life experiences. Bunn and Wake (2015) also found factors such as a desire to make a difference and improve the conditions of life for those they teach, were influences for a career change decision into teaching. The love of the subject they wished to teach, and having a perceived personality fit with the teaching profession were also relevant, as was being unhappy in a previous career. Civic duty and responsibility and a desire to be a change agent were reported by Hunter-Johnson (2015), from her focus groups of 18 second career teachers in the Bahamas. Another personal factor, as reported by Whannel and Allen (2014) was the desire to have time for family and having a work/life balance.

This brief review of the literature on career changers has shown that while there have been some qualitative studies, much of the recent research about career changers into teaching utilises quantitative methodology for large scale studies, for example Williams

(2013), Watt and Richardson (2007), Bunn and Wake (2015), and Anthony and Ord (2007). What is missing is the depth of knowledge about the career change decision. The study on which this paper is based utilised a narrative inquiry methodology, which is outlined briefly in the next section. The conceptual underpinning for the study was transition theory, which outlines three stages of transition: moving out, moving through, and moving in (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012, p. 56). The study explored the experiences of career changers in the moving out stage of their transition.

The study

The narrative inquiry framework utilised in this study was based on the work of Connelly and Clandinin (2006). They described narrative inquiry as the study of experience as story and as a way of thinking about experience, with a collaboration between the researcher and participants. In this study, unstructured interviews were used to enable participants to tell stories to the researcher about the experiences which influenced their decision to make a career change. The complexity in relation to factors affecting a career change decision can be shown by utilising stories.

The research outlined in this paper is part of a doctoral study which tells the stories of the experiences of mature age professionals who were undergoing a transition by making a career change into teaching. This paper reports on the early stages of the study, which addressed the factors influencing career changers in their decision to make a career change into teaching. In this study, there were 10 females and 7 males ranging in age from 26 to 52. All 17 participants were enrolled in a one year full time (or two year part time) postgraduate coursework initial teacher education program. The criteria for participation in the study included that participants needed to be mature age students (aged 25 or older), enrolled in a postgraduate coursework program and be in the process of making a change from a prior profession. Further details about the participants are provided in Appendix 1.

The research was conducted at an urban university in South East Queensland, Australia. Participants were recruited by a flyer placed on the university intranet during Orientation Week. Data collection for the doctoral study was conducted over 18 months (30 months for part time students) from the beginning of their initial teacher education program through until they had completed six months' employment in their new career. For the purposes of this paper, where factors affecting the decision to make a career change into teaching are explored, only the analysis of the interviews held within two weeks of the participants commencing their academic studies are examined. These early interviews explored the stories of the participants in relation to why they had chosen to make a career change into teaching. The interviews were either group interviews (focus groups) or individual face to face interviews, according to participant preference. Each interview was approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length. Initial prompts were used, for example, *Tell me about how you came to make a decision to make a career change.* All interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed and copies of transcripts were sent back to participants, requesting their feedback.

The relationship of the researcher to the participants was that the researcher was also undergoing a transition (from a teaching to a research career) and therefore had a personal interest in the topic of career transition. The researcher was aware of the need for *giving back* to study participants and so facilitated a support group whereby study participants could develop supportive relationships with other members in the study. Ethical clearance was given by Griffith University, as the study was conducted under the auspices of this university.

In relation to narrative inquiry data analysis, Josselson (2011) outlined the process as identifying themes within the individual stories and then performing a cross case analysis to discover patterns across the individual interview texts. A written report is then prepared, reproducing excerpts from the data, including the interpretation of the research, theoretical formulations and references to prior theory. For this paper, data was analysed by focusing first on the themes in each individual story, followed by an analysis across the stories to discover patterns (resonances) across the 17 individual stories. In order to ensure credibility of data collection and analysis, a diverse range of participants (in relation to career background) were included in the study, as shown in Appendix 1.

Resonances across stories

The decision to make a career change is complex, with many factors at play. For all of the participants in the study, there were a range of social and personal reasons or factors which influenced their career change decision, although some factors were more important than others. For example, Ray summed up his situation: *I mean, there is a whole pile of reasons why I am here, but the easiest one I can identify is lack of a job.* Personal factors include feelings, hopes and desires of an individual, while social factors include the environment or surrounding factors that form the individual's context (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The findings show that social factors influencing the decision to make a career change into teaching include the need for employment security in the context of international globalisation and changes in local government policies. Personal factors include unhappiness in a former career or lifestyle, wanting to find meaning and fulfilment from employment, a desire for a work/life balance and having a passion for teaching or a subject area. For the participants in the study, the career change decision was the result of these personal and social conditions changing over a period of time prior to their having made the decision.

Social factors

In this study, there were resonances across the stories about job insecurity and unemployment due to global and local changes in the workplace. Participants in the study who had engineering backgrounds spoke of the impact on the profession of the decline of the manufacturing industry over the past four or five years. This decline created job insecurity due to redundancies and difficulties in finding alternative employment in the profession. Callum says, *I was just watching the decline of manufacturing. It made me think it is not a secure job,* while Ray comments *At the moment, it is very difficult to get a job. I got made redundant in May last year.*

The decline in the information technology industry, with the outsourcing of work to overseas countries, has also impacted on job security for participants with a background in information technology. Max had been in information technology, and had experienced the impact of the downturn in the industry: *Why right now? Presently I am unemployed and I thought, well, let's add another string to the bow.* Experiencing unemployment in the information technology industry just prior to Christmas had also been a precipitating factor for Mike to decide to make a career change into teaching: *I just lost my job in December last year.*

Within the local context, the shedding of staff by the state government impacted the workforce and created job insecurity. Being made redundant from her previously secure public service employment as a scientist was a surprise for Kelly: *I had expected to stay there until retirement and had not foreseen the cutbacks in the public service. The change came suddenly.* There was also an indirect impact of these government policies, which created job insecurity for Rick, who had formerly worked in the water industry:

> I was working for a company as a contracts manager and they shed bucket loads of staff. And this has been the consequence of the state government shedding lots of staff as well, it's gone through local government and state government. In the sector I was working in, it had become more and more difficult to find any work at all. Because there is so much competition in the labour market.

Moving interstate, with different legislation and employment insecurity in the area of urban planning, was the catalyst for Neve to make the decision to make a change:

> In the beginning, I hadn't thought of going straight into teaching. I knew I would lose the urban planning career out of it [the interstate move] because of the hard times I had heard of in this state. And also because of the state based legislation and that is a hard jump to make.

Personal factors

The decision to make a career change for personal reasons was a gradual process for some participants and resulted from the realisation that they were unhappy with their former career, which was no longer providing the stimulation and challenges they required to be satisfied in their career. The realisation that she was not working to her full potential caused Bec some unhappiness, leading to the decision to make a career change: *I always wanted to be someone who used their degree as opposed to someone who went to university and then didn't and I became that person.* Having long hours of work that he was no longer finding interesting resulted in Mal making the decision to make a career change: *But the work, I wasn't finding it interesting.* For a number of study participants, changes in their personal lives became the catalyst for the career change. Elise's statement represents this resonance across stories:

> Up until recently it was very much, this is how my life is going to be, it's all mapped out. I guess part of last year was me determining my identity and my sense of self and part of that was, well, teaching is something I want to do.

Finding employment which was both meaningful and provided a sense of fulfilment was important to career changers in the study. For some, this sense of meaning and fulfilment was sought by changing their profession to one which provides meaning from interacting with, and being of service to others. Being a people person was a motivator for Mal, who began to question the meaning of his life, finally deciding that he wanted to be interacting with others who had similar values to himself, where service to others was more important than making money:

> I think I had my own little mid-life crisis of some sort and it was just, what are we here for and how can I make a difference. I've probably always been a people person. Dealing with a computer, I was good at my job but I was just ready to have conversations again and deal with people.

After a long career in information technology, Mike also wanted to engage with others and discuss ideas:

> I think a lot of the struggle I've had in the work environment, for me, has been that wanting to engage and wanting discuss ideas. I guess for me it is that I've had to come back to that people are the focus.

The desire for a better work/life balance and the perception that a new career might provide this balance resonated across the stories of participants. Lynda had previously been a university lecturer, working long hours. She now wanted to have more time to spend with her children: *Well, I know what it's like to be a [university] lecturer, how busy it is. I don't think I can do that with three kids.* Similarly, Rick, who was the primary caregiver to his two young daughters, gave considerable thought to careers which were compatible with his parental duties: *Looking at the possibilities, this seemed the most compatible with being a stay at home dad now, and continuing in that role as a participatory parent.* Sally also struggled to have a good work/life balance, with her husband often being away on military duty. She wanted employment which would provide a better lifestyle for the family: *I have young children and it was all too hard. Really, that life is too hard on your own. Which I am a lot with my kids I think it will be a better life for all of us.*

Having a passion for teaching and/or a subject area was another factor for many of the career changers in this study. They wanted to share this love of teaching their subject area, in order to change lives. Cate expressed enthusiasm and her love of science: *I've always loved explaining science.* An understanding of the importance of educating young people in science and engineering drove Callum's passion for his teaching area: *We need to educate scientists and engineers, just people with maths/science ability, so that is why I am passionate about coming back and doing physics and senior maths.* With a prior background in teaching in a different context, Lynda knew that she had a passion for teaching:

> I love teaching, I know that I love teaching but [teaching] at university, you have to do other things. Teaching is only 50% so I am hoping that by becoming a secondary school teacher, I get to teach more and be involved with the kids a lot more.

Neve also had a background in education in a different context, as an outdoor educator. She was keen to provide opportunities to young people: *I am absolutely here because I believe*

education is the key to life and I want to bring the opportunities that education brings to young people. That is why I am here. With a passion for maths, Sarah wanted to engage kids and show them that this subject doesn't need to be boring: *I would really like to try and engage kids and have them see that maths isn't just boring, that it could be fun and exciting and just turn a couple of lives around if at all possible.*

Discussion

As the data shows, factors which influenced the participants to make the career change included employment instability, being unhappy or having reduced options in a former career, or experiencing life changes. Having a passion for teaching, or a subject area, wanting to be of service to others, or seeking meaning and personal fulfilment, were relevant factors for some career changers. Many career changers wanted financial stability and a better work/life balance. The findings of this study generally reflect previous research in terms of the factors that impact on the career change decision into teaching for mature age professionals. Anthony and Ord (2008) also found that social factors such as needing a career change due to the economy, an unplanned life change in employment, or being unable to find employment or job security resulted in individuals making the career change decision. Personal factors such as the desire to have time for family, and a good work/life balance (Whannel & Allen, 2014), were relevant in the career change decision for these participants. Other personal factors such as the desire to improve conditions of children being taught (Bunn & Wake, 2015; Williams, 2013), a love of the subject being taught (Bunn & Wake, 2015) and wanting more personal fulfilment (Raggi & Troman, 2008) were also outlined by the study participants. Findings in this study resonated with research by Bunn and Wake (2015) in relation to unhappiness in a previous career, the desire to be a change-agent (Hunter-Johnson, 2015) and a perception they would enjoy teaching (Anthony & Ord, 2007).

An important difference in this current research is that by the use of qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology, more in-depth knowledge has been obtained from the stories of career changers about the factors which affect the decision to make a career change into teaching. The stories also point to the implications of the decision to make a career change into teaching. Employment insecurity may result in the decision to make a career change, and the stories from this current research have revealed the relevance of the global and local contexts in the career change decisions of mature age professionals. The impact of the decline in the manufacturing industry, the outsourcing of information technology jobs and government policies to reduce staffing levels are examples of the context in which career change decisions into teaching have been made. These areas of employment insecurity may coincide with the specialist subject areas in which there is currently a shortage of qualified teachers worldwide. Those currently working in professions such as engineering, information technology and science are possibly a valuable resource for educational recruiters and administrators wishing to recruit mature age professionals into teaching. While university initial teacher education program enrolments in the areas of mathematics and science have increased in recent years in some Australian universities, the data in this study indicated that participants had not made their decision in response to advertising for career changers into the teaching profession. By

utilising advertising strategies to recruit these professionals, a broader pool of applicants into initial teacher education programs which address areas of teacher shortages could be created. These strategies could include articles in professional journals about the benefits of a teaching career, or making contact with interested mature age professionals through professional associations.

Three factors that resonated across the stories of the 17 study participants about their decision to make a career change were the need for employment stability, the perception that teaching could provide a good work/life balance, and the perception that teaching can bring personal fulfilment and meaning. When making the decision to make a career change into teaching, mature age career changers need to be able to make a realistic assessment of their future prospects in teaching. For example, it may be the case that teaching is unable to provide employment stability, personal fulfilment and/or work/life balance. An incorrect perception at the time of making the career change decision about the realities of a future profession in teaching could lead to the eventual loss of individuals to the profession after a considerable amount of time and resources have been invested in the transition into the new profession.

Most of the study participants had not researched employment prospects in the teaching profession prior to making their decision. As many mature age professionals have commitments and families, they may be seeking permanent employment in teaching. At, or close to, the time of making their career change decision (e.g., when they make an application to an educational institution), mature age career changers need to be aware of the employment situation in the education profession, particularly in relation to contract and casual employment. One example of where such information could be obtained is from a state regulatory body for the teaching profession, such as the Queensland College of Teachers (2017), who provide online research reports outlining statistical data about the teaching profession in the state, including trends and forecasts for employment. The implication here is that recruiters into initial teacher education programs could direct potential career change students to such websites which clearly outline current and future employment prospects. In this way, career changers can make their decisions based on accurate information.

The desire for work/life balance and a search for meaning and personal fulfilment also strongly resonated in this research. Teachers who are currently working in the profession may have a different view on whether teaching can offer a work/life balance, or whether heavy workloads prevent this. Also, it could be difficult to find meaning and personal fulfilment if career changers find themselves in charge of classes of troubled or indifferent teenagers in secondary classrooms, which might be quite a different scenario from their formerly well-ordered work environments. A realistic understanding and assessment by career changers of these issues is required at the time of making a decision about making a career change into teaching, in order to alleviate the issue of their leaving the profession early in their teaching careers due to the impact of these issues. While there is no easy solution to this issue, one possibility could be having current teachers write realistic (but not overly negative) stories about their day-to-day teaching lives. One example where initial teacher education applicants could read such stories could be on websites such as

that of the Queensland College of Teachers (2017), who have a weblog which has stories from current registered teachers. Educational recruiters could refer initial teacher education applicants to such websites to obtain a more accurate perception of teaching.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined factors which may influence the decision to make a career change into teaching by providing knowledge from the resonances across the stories of 17 study participants as they began their career change transition. The narrative inquiry methodology utilised in the study provided more depth of knowledge than could be gained from quantitative studies. The significance of the study is that an in-depth understanding of the decision making about a career change into teaching and the context in which they are making the decision to change careers, is important information for academic administrators and recruiters into initial teacher education programs. In Australia, the Department of Education and Training (2015) contended that to alleviate the shortage of subject specialist teachers, interventions may be required. This paper has outlined interventions which could be implemented, including creating a broader picture of the employment environment by examining global and local contexts which impact professions suitable for recruitment of career changers into teaching. Another strategy outlined in this paper is referring potential mature age career changers into teaching, at the time of their application to educational institutions, to websites which provide accurate information about future teaching employment prospects and the day-to-day realities of teaching in the secondary classroom.

Limitations of the study include the small number of participants in the study, with the caveat that the purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth study of the transition experience into teaching, which precluded the use of a large number of study participants. Further research could include a longitudinal study of the transition experiences of career changers into teaching. This study would utilise a qualitative design to follow the career changers through their program of academic studies, and into their new profession. An in-depth portrayal of the transition into teaching would be created in this manner to provide valuable information for educational recruiters, university administrators, teacher educators and educational administrators in schools. In conclusion, this paper has outlined the factors which influence the decision of mature age professionals to make a career change into teaching. It is important to have an understanding of the context of the career change decision and the perceptions of career changers about their future profession, in order to effectively recruit and retain mature age professionals in the teaching profession.

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Appendix 1: Demographic details for the 17 project participants

Pseudonym	Prior profession	Teaching subject areas
Bec	Office administrator/manager	Learning enhancement, science
Callum	Engineering manager	Maths, science
Cate	Research scientist	Maths, science
Elise	Project manager	Industrial technology and design, information and communications technology
Eva	Business manager	Business studies, history
Kelly	Scientist	Maths, science
Lynda	University lecturer	Maths, business
Mike	Software developer	Maths, science
Max	ICT manager	Maths, science
Mal	Fire protection designer	Industrial technology and design, graphics
Nadia	Photographer/gallery owner	Visual arts
Neve	Urban planner	Science, geography
Peter	Real estate manager	Maths, business
Ray	Project engineer	Industrial technology and design, graphics
Rick	Contract manager	Maths, science
Sally	Accountant	Science, business
Sarah	IT manager	Maths, computing

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