

Perceptions of teaching as a career for students enrolled in a foundational qualification

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of 48 students enrolled in the Certificate in Early Childhood Education (Intro Cert) at Auckland University of Technology about teaching as a career. A questionnaire with a series of 28 statements and one open-ended question was used to collect, organise and summarise information on perceptions of teaching as a career choice. Using a 4 point Likert-type scale, participants were asked to nominate the strength to which they agree or disagree with each statement. The questionnaire also sought demographic information, such as, ethnicity, gender, enrolment status and educational background on leaving school. The three items with the highest mean scores in ranked order were, “I want to help children learn”; “The caring nature of teaching appeals to me”; and “I want to become a teacher because teachers serve their community”. The findings support the notion that pre-degree students seem to have similar motivations to entering teaching as those entering at degree level teacher education programmes. These motivations were ones that could be considered to reflect Intrinsic Values (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

Introduction

Like other English speaking countries, the issues of teacher recruitment, retention and postgraduate teacher education continue to feature on political agendas. With increasing shortages of teachers there has been renewed interest in understanding what motivates people to choose teaching as a career and what motivates them to persist in teaching (OECD, 2005). The multidimensional character of the teacher’s role has amplified and the complexity of the skill set and temperament now needs careful consideration for those engaged in teacher education. The changing role and levels of accountability of a teacher may now clash with entry motivations and perceptions based simply on the desire to work with children for example (Richardson & Watt, 2006).

Efforts to improve recruitment have focused on the range of motivations that attract people to the teaching profession. Over the last five decades there has been a steady flow of studies and reports from many countries, but by far the largest number of studies of teacher motivation has been conducted in the United States. Most studies have indicated that the main reason for choosing teaching as a career falls into three

main areas: intrinsic reasons; extrinsic reasons; and altruistic reasons (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Watt, & Richardson, 2008). While we would expect some commonalities with these in the New Zealand context, earlier explanations may now be revised in the face of teaching in the 21st century and beyond.

Historically, teachers have been expected to look upon teaching more as a vocation than strictly as a job (Miles & Snow, 1996). However, over recent times there have been significant changes to teacher education programmes which have been a factor in altering the perception of teaching as a career. Different socio-cultural contexts potentially frame and shape motivations for career choice and satisfaction. For example, how a society perceives and measures career satisfaction, the social status of the role of a teacher and the rewards of making a social contribution are ways of perhaps quantifying the perception of teaching as a career. Teacher educators have perhaps overlooked such motivations and perceptions of those entering teaching, in favour of academic ability and results. Insufficient ongoing exploration of how these shape beginning teachers motivation for engagement as a teacher and subsequently how teaching meets these, can impact on the trajectory of their career in teaching. The question then becomes, how as teacher educators can we help ensure that our students are satisfied with the path they have chosen?

While a great deal of research seems to exist regarding the motivations of undergraduate students, very little attention is paid to the perceptions and motivations of those at pre-degree level within New Zealand. The aim of the present study is concerned with profiling foundation students and their perceptions of teaching as a career. In this type of programme one might assume that students are filled with an idealised perception of teaching and the purpose of a programme like this is to assist students to begin to grasp the realities of a career as a teacher. If there is indeed a mismatch between student's perceptions and the realities of teaching, students are still able to select another career trajectory.

The purpose of this study is to share information with our colleagues involved in teacher education to assist students to revisit their career choices throughout their programmes and beyond. The infusion of career exploration and decision-making into the teacher education curriculum has the potential to contribute to issues of teacher engagement, commitment and persistence and ultimately teacher quality.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were the Semester Two 2013 cohort of The Certificate in Early Childhood Education (Intro Cert). The cohort totalled 62. Demographically,

95.1% were Domestic Students and 97% were female. Ages ranged from under 17 (n=13), 18-19 (n=30), 20-24 (n= 10) and the remainder older than 25 (n=9). Reported ethnicity was 14.5% Māori, 19.3% Pasifika, 32.6% European, 19.5% Asian and the remainder indicating other or non-declared.

The Intro Cert is an NZQA Level 4 pre-degree qualification offered by the AUT University Te Kura to Mātauranga School of Education (SOE). It is comprised of four 15-point papers (Introduction to Curriculum, Introduction to Child Development, Introduction to Professional Practice, and Introduction to Mātauranga Māori). These four papers are offered in one semester and are a full-time enrolment for students in the programme. The programme is open-admission, meaning that students are not required to meet the academic standards of degree qualifications offered in the SOE. As a Level 4 qualification, it is considered to be a “bridging” or foundational qualification that is intended to provide the academic background required to enter the Bachelor of Education (BEd). Although the title of the Into Cert contains “Early Childhood”, paper outcomes are generic to prepare students for both the Early Childhood and Primary Education majors of the BEd. A high percentage of students who successfully complete the Into Cert are offered admission to the BEd.

Of the 62 students enrolled, 48 participated in the study. The sample was 95.8% female and 4.2% male. Ethnicity was reported to be 33.3% European, 4.2% Māori, 20.8% Pasifika, 12.5% Asian, 20.8% other (e.g., Sri Lankan, African, Indian) and 8.3% multiple responses. The highest NZ equivalent educational level reported was 7.7% NCEA Level 1, 30.8% NCEA Level 2, 35.9% NCEA Level 3, 17.9% Certificate, 2.6% Diploma and 5.1% Degree.

Materials and Procedure

A 28-item questionnaire was constructed to capture students’ motivations for choosing teaching as an occupation. The questionnaire consisted of 28 items that presented possible reasons for selecting teaching. Respondents indicated the degree to which each statement was relevant to their choice of teaching by using a four-point Likert-type scale. The items on the questionnaire reflected the reasons for entering teaching developed by Richardson and Watt (2006) in an investigation of choice of teaching by students at three Australian universities. Themes identified by them were Socialisation Influences, Task Demand, Task Returns, Intrinsic Values, Personal Utility, Social Utility, Fallback reasons.

The questionnaire used in the current research did not request names, but did request demographic information of Gender, Ethnicity, Enrolment Status (Domestic or International) and Highest Education Level. There was also an open-ended section where respondents could write other reasons for choosing teaching.

Ethics approval to conduct the current study was obtained from the AUT Ethics Committee. A member of the research team visited an Intro Cert classroom to explain the research and to obtain responses on the questionnaire. Intro Cert students were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form. For those who agreed to participate, the questionnaire was distributed and they were given time to respond.

Results

Responses to completed questionnaires were coded. A value of 1 was assigned to Strongly Disagree, a value of 2 was assigned to Disagree, a value of 3 was assigned to Agree and a value of 4 was assigned to Strongly Agree. The numeric data were entered into SPSS version 20 and means for each item were computed. The mean for each item is presented in Table 1.

The items with the highest mean scores were ones that could be considered to reflect intrinsic reasons for choosing teaching. The item “I want to help children learn” had the highest mean score of 3.77. The item “I’ve always wanted to be a teacher” had a mean score of 3.34. Other high mean items reflected values that could be fulfilled by teaching. “The caring nature of teaching appeals to me” yielded a mean score of 3.29 and “I want to become a teacher because teachers serve their community” yielded a mean score of 3.06. Social influence was also strongly indicated by the mean score of 2.95 for “My teachers in school provided positive role models and I want to be like them”. A third influence appeared to be labour market considerations for teaching. “I want to go overseas and I am training as teacher so I can teach overseas” had a mean score of 2.84, “Teaching is attractive to me because there is good opportunity for advancement and promotion in teaching” had a mean score of 2.77 and “Teaching appeals to me because the job market is good for teachers” had a mean score of 2.65. A fourth influential reason for selecting teachers appears to be role within family. The item “A reason for me to become a teacher is teaching would allow me to be with my family during school holidays” had a mean score 2.58.

Possible “negative” reasons for selecting teaching were not evidenced. The lowest mean scores were for the items “I choose teaching because I am unable to enter my first choice of occupation” had a mean score of 1.56, “I want to become a teacher because teachers don’t work very hard” had a mean score of 1.44 and “I have selected teaching because I don’t know what else to do” had a mean score of 1.37.

Notably, influence from career advisers was not a strong reason to select teaching. The statement “My career adviser influenced me to study teaching” was ranked 21st. This is not perhaps, not surprising as other potential influences such as teachers in school, the community and family (whanau) are ranked well above this statement.

Review of the open-ended items did not suggest additional motivations for selecting teaching. The open-ended statements repeated concepts that had been reflected in the questionnaire.

Discussion

The results of the survey are consistent with other research that has investigated the motivations of students to enter teaching. Brookhart and Freeman's (1992) meta-analysis of 44 studies that examined the characteristics of students who entered education majors reported many of the same motivations for selecting teaching as an occupation that emerged from the our sample. However, past research that has been conducted on this topic focused on students who had started university-level qualifications (i.e., degree level). The findings of the current investigation support the notion that pre-degree students seem to have similar motivations to enter teaching.

The themes that are suggested in the highest ranked items mirror the reasons for entering teaching found in research conducted by Kane (2008). In Kane's study, reasons for becoming a teacher were sought from Early Childhood teachers who were employed New Zealand. Kane identified "helping children", "professional and personal development", "pay and career paths", "status and respect", and "family issues" as motivators for entering teaching. These are again consistent with the motivations given by the pre-degree students in the current study.

Clark (2012) identifies the desire to help children learn as an essential element in professional "passion" for teaching. The highest ranking of reasons to enter teaching given by the Intro Cert students in the current study also was a desire to help children. This suggests that although the Intro Cert students are only entering formal education, they share similar motivations for teaching as experienced teachers.

It might be hypothesised that pre-degree students, because they lack the academic backgrounds to immediately enter degree-level education programmes, might be more externally motivated by employment prospects, family-friendly holiday schedules and salaries. Yet, this was not our finding. Indeed, the motivations that were most highly expressed were ones that could be considered to reflect Intrinsic Values (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Personal Utility, reflected in motivations associated with international transportability, the potential of advancement and the good job market for teachers, were motivators, but ranked below Intrinsic Values statements.

While our survey asked participants to focus on why they were entering teaching, it would be equally as important to investigate why people may *not* enter teaching. Concerns may be raised regarding the low number of Māori students currently enrolled in the Intro Cert. Particularly as this programme provides a pathway for students to enter teaching, it could be a viable option to Māori who are interested in teaching but have not achieved the required academic level required for entry into the

BEd. The more we understand the influences, motives, perceptions and aspirations of those Māori students enrolled, the more likely we will be able to contribute to the recruit and potentially retention, of Māori into teaching. The number of participants who identified as Pasifika and Asian is also very encouraging. Understanding the diverse cultural values of students entering teaching may provide some insight for teacher educators when developing pedagogical beliefs in their programmes.

There are limitations to the results from this study. Responses may have been influenced by participants' notion of desirable responses. Nevertheless, the consistency between the responses of Intro Cert students and those of students in degree programmes suggests that similar motivation exists.

The survey was the first stage of our research. Intro Cert students who agreed to participate could also indicate their willingness to participate in focus groups. Twenty of the participants consented to join a focus group. We intend to form 4 to 5 groups and meet for a total of 1 to 2 hours so that qualitative data can be gathered. We anticipate that the focus groups will provide expanded and detailed data about the motivations of the Intro Cert students to become teachers.

Possible future research could follow those Intro Cert students who enter the BEd and track the maturation of their motivations as they move towards implementation of their goals. Additionally, conducting a similar study using the same survey and focus group design with students who directly enter the BEd could provide comparisons and contrasts to those who are first entered the Intro Cert.

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Table 1
Questions, Means and Rank Order

Question	Mean	Rank
I want to help children learn	3.77	1
I've always wanted to be a teacher	3.34	2
The caring nature of teaching appeals to me	3.29	3
I want to become a teacher because teachers serve their community	3.06	4
My teachers in school provided positive role models and I want to be like them	2.95	5
I want to go overseas and I am training as a teacher so I can teach overseas	2.84	6
Teaching is attractive to me because there is good opportunity for advancement and promotion in teaching	2.77	7
Teaching appeals to me because the job market is good for teachers	2.65	8
I want to be a teacher because teachers are respected in the community	2.64	9
A reason for me to become a teacher is teaching would allow me to be with my family during school holidays	2.58	10
Teaching appeals to me because teachers have high status	2.31	11.5
A reason that I am going into teaching is that my culture values teachers	2.31	11.5
Members of my family (whanau) are teachers and they have influenced my choice to be a teacher	2.29	13
A reason that I have selected teaching is that a teaching job would be convenient to my home	2.25	14
My family (whanau) suggested that I become a teacher	2.14	15
Teaching is appealing to me because teachers have many holidays	2.08	16
Information from the Ministry of Education influenced me to enter teaching	2.02	18
I chose teaching because it is an easy profession to enter	2.02	18
Teaching is appealing because teachers earn good salaries	2.02	18
My friends are studying teaching and they have influenced me	1.97	20
My career adviser influenced me to study teaching	1.95	21
A reason for my choice of teaching is that it is an appropriate occupation for my gender	1.93	22
I like the control that teachers have over others	1.72	23
TV shows and the movies have influenced my decision to become a teacher	1.65	24
I chose teaching because I can receive a loan, scholarship or other allowance for studying teaching	1.58	25
I chose teaching because I am unable to enter my first choice of occupation	1.56	26
I want to become a teacher because teachers don't work very hard	1.44	27
I have selected teaching because I don't know what else to do	1.37	28