

Changing course: The paradox of the career change student teacher

Abstract

The article reports on career change student teachers' (CCSTs) views and experiences regarding their teacher education programs in Australia. Data were collected through an online survey distributed to universities for dissemination to enrolled CCSTs in teacher education programs. The responses from over 500 CCSTs were analysed using an interpretive lens of inquiry and analysis. Over 80% of the responses indicated tensions and paradoxes that exist in CCSTs' lives as they come to terms with being students again. The article explores the impact on their student lives of the characteristics, experiences, and expectations they bring to their studies, mediated by their previous careers and current circumstances. The findings discuss their perceptions of their teacher education programs and consider implications for CCSTs' professional learning needs in the light of the paradoxes that emerge from the data.

Keywords: Career changers; student teachers; second career teachers; paradoxes; learning needs

Statement of ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the relevant university for this study. Informed consent was given by all participants through their choice to anonymously respond to the survey.

Introduction

The number of career changers enrolling in Australian teacher education programs is steadily rising (Richardson & Watt, 2006). According to McKenzie, Rowley, Weldon and Murphy (2014), more than one in three secondary teachers worked elsewhere prior to commencing teaching. Career changers are often characterised as bringing many qualities to the profession that are widely deemed as desirable, including a strong work ethic and sense of professional and personal responsibility and autonomy, as well as broader life and work experiences (author, 2014). Given the likely contributions of this cohort to the profession, it is important to investigate how they view both their teacher education programs and the support offered by their teacher education institutions. Such research has the potential to inform teacher education programs on how to attract such students and how best to support their professional learning needs.

This paper reports on a study that elicited the views and experiences of career change student teachers (CCSTs) in teacher education programs in Australia (n = 508). The study sought to understand their learning needs and current student experiences, their prior personal and professional backgrounds and experience, and the influence thereof. The findings provide valuable guidance for teacher education providers and school jurisdictions. This article considers and explores the paradoxes and the tensions experienced by CCSTs that were suggested by the data.

Review of the literature

Second-career teachers often bring to their work a widely recognised and valuable mix of personal and professional qualities and attributes (author, 2017; Anthony & Ord, 2008; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). They are generally perceived by the education community as making worthy contributions to quality teaching (author, 2017; author, 2014; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). Halladay sums up these contributions, as “hard to quantify values of maturity and worldliness” (2008, p. 17).

Particularly in a context of teacher shortages in some subject areas, such as science, mathematics and technology (Grier & Johnston, 2009; Watters & Diezmann, 2015), and an anticipated mass retirement of baby boomers from the workforce, second career teachers are and will be a significant part of the profession’s renewal. Mature age graduates enter the profession with a ‘wide range of prior experience, skills and personal qualities’ (Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013, p.555) and are valued for their capacity to “contribute positively to changing the culture of the schools” (Richardson & Watt, 2005, p. 476). Findings also suggest that older age teacher recruits often demonstrate a passion for teaching (Gore, 2016) and show more resilience and commitment to remain in the profession when employed in low socio-economic, challenging schools (Donaldson, 2012).

Previous studies (both overseas and Australian) about this significant group have focused on career change student teachers’ motivations for choosing teaching as a profession (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Evans, 2011; Laming & Horne, 2013; Richardson & Watt, 2005, 2006; Watt et al., 2012); their beliefs about learning to teach (Tigchelaar, Vermunt, & Brouwer, 2014); or their workplace experiences following graduation (e.g. author, 2014). Studies have also been conducted to determine if adjustments are required

in teacher education programs to meet the needs of career changers. For example, a study in the Netherlands investigated the Alternative Certification Program (ACP) offered by the Dutch Government and recommended that improvements be made to the program by addressing transfer of earlier competencies to teaching and understanding how career changers go about their learning (Tigchelaar et al., 2008, p. 1548). Suggestions in US and UK studies have included tailoring and adapting programs in ways that recognise second career student teachers' prior experiences and responsibilities (Grier & Johnston, 2009) in "both practical and educational terms" (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003, p. 110) and increasing accessibility for career switchers by having multiple entry points to teaching programs as well as flexible delivery of classes (Castro & Bauml, 2009). The importance of responding to local contexts and circumstances is highlighted in Halladay's US study, in which different types of teaching programs are recommended based on career change candidates' characteristics (2008). Also in the US, Salyer proposed recommendations for school principals that outlined how best they could support career changers "to be successful teachers by recognizing and building upon their skills" (2003, p. 25). In Australia, research has investigated specific topics such as career-change teacher identity (Williams, 2010, 2013), teacher resilience (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017) and the needs of particular groups such as career-changers in high-demand STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) teaching areas (Watters & Diezmann, 2015). The teacher participants in (author)'s study in Australia called for teacher education programs to incorporate learning support better tailored to CCSTs' abilities, and greater recognition of their prior career and life experiences (2014).

While research, both in Australia and elsewhere, has generated recommendations for understanding the aspirations of career changers, and for responding to their needs (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003), there has been limited recent research in Australia into CCSTs' expectations, their professional and personal learning circumstances and the apparent tensions that exist among and within CCSTs.

This article suggests that there is a need for further research to be conducted in Australia that investigates CCSTs' experiences more broadly, including their needs as students and their potential contributions, both of which can sometimes create tensions and paradoxes. The project discussed in this article addressed a gap in the literature by undertaking an Australia-wide survey of CCSTs, eliciting reasons for their attraction to teaching, as well as their expressed professional learning needs and expectations, particularly where these might differ from those of school-leaver teacher candidates. The study sets this information against CCSTs' demographic data, such as age, gender and first language.

A career-change student teacher is defined in this study as one who: is over the age of 25 years; and/or has been employed in a career other than teaching for at least two years; and/or is entering the teaching program eight years or more after completing formal schooling.

Research approach

The project sought answers to the following two research questions:

- What are the characteristics of CCSTs?
- What kinds of professional learning and support do career changers require as pre-service teachers?

The study was guided by an interpretive methodological inquiry approach (Lincoln, 1995) to generate rich and meaningful interpretations from the gathered data. Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory (1938) of how individuals learn from (and use) past experience to gain and share knowledge guided the study and overall project framework.

The principal method for data collection was an online survey. The survey and the research approach were informed by previous literature (Richardson & Watt, 2006; author, 2014). In keeping with the underpinning interpretive method of inquiry, the survey's open-ended items (responses from which informed this paper) sought to understand, describe and interpret participants' experiences as student teachers (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The survey was piloted with eight CCSTs enrolled in a pre-service teaching program in the research team's university. Results from the pilot survey were used to refine some of the survey items for the broader survey. Inter-rater reliability was also achieved through team members discussing and giving feedback on individual items, with regard to their clarity, meaning and value in the survey.

An online link to the final survey was then disseminated to 34 Australian universities offering teacher education and was distributed to CCSTs enrolled in 29 of them, via their faculty deans or heads of schools. Five universities declined the request to disseminate the surveys. A filter question was included in the survey to exclude teacher education students who were not career changers. The survey was not sent to first year students, as it was deemed that they might have insufficient experience of the teacher education program on which to base answers. Responses were received from all Australian states and territories, with the majority of responses from New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland.

The final survey comprised three sections:

- Questions eliciting demographic data such as age, gender, qualifications, previous work, type of teaching course enrolled in, and mode of study;
- Likert scale questions and ranking response data regarding participants' motivations for choosing a teaching career, the attributes they hope to bring to the profession, the extent of satisfaction with their teaching course and their professional experience, and their concerns;
- Open-ended questions gathering qualitative data about participants' learning needs and expectations, suggestions on personal and professional support and ways of recognising CCSTs' skills, as well as life and work experiences.

By the end of the survey period, 508 complete responses had been received. It is difficult to comment upon the response rate strength based on the number of career changers who were enrolled in each of the universities since the definition of who is a career changer varies widely among institutions. Nevertheless, we believe the number of responses is significant and warrants attention.

The quantitative data generated by the survey were analysed using SPSS software by, for example, generating cross-tabulations to identify correlations between categorical variables. The qualitative responses, which are the primary focus of this paper, were thematically analysed by coding, then grouping of similar responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), allowing dominant or recurring themes to emerge. Responses to each open-ended question were independently analysed by at least two team members to increase inter-rater reliability, rigour and trustworthiness. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussions amongst all team members.

For this article, we report on our analysis of responses from three open-ended questions –
The questions were:

- (1) Please state your suggestions on how CCSTs should be supported in universities;
- (2) Please state suggestions you have for teacher education programs in relation to recognising your prior career and life experiences; and
- (3) What are your expectations as a CCST about how your learning needs will be met?

We are reporting on the responses to these questions as they bring to light the learning needs of the CCST respondents. A number of paradoxes or tensions were inherent in participants' responses. The richness of responses made these open-ended questions worthy of discussion. The quantitative data and responses to the remaining open-ended questions are discussed in other articles on this study.

Findings

The findings describe some of the paradoxes and the tensions observed as participants responded to the three open-ended questions. It is noteworthy to mention that paradoxes and tensions are evident among career changers as a cohort and within individual CCSTs.

Paradoxes and tensions are observed in participants' responses when they describe their independence in terms of their strengths and capabilities but at the same time indicate they are very mindful of their 'student-status' and the corresponding dependency. Respondents describe their struggles and frustrations of experiencing the worst of two worlds – having to deal with the demands of student life, as do other students, but at the same time responding to their other demands in life such as work and family.

A significant majority of 411 (81% of total) participants indicated some kind of paradox, contradiction or tension in their responses, either as a whole group or within their own individual set of responses to the three questions (Table 1). Further investigation revealed that in 82 of these 411 responses (or 16%), paradoxes were of the latter kind. We place these responses under the theme ‘autonomous-dependent’ as these respondents all indicated a conflict between desires to be treated as autonomous learners while simultaneously recognising their dependence on others in their learning.

No tension or paradoxes appeared to be experienced by the remaining 19% (N=97 out of 508) of respondents. This group was made up of participants satisfied with their institutions’ meeting of their expressed different needs (4%); not requiring differential treatment as they considered themselves to be the same as other students (5%); and respondents who were giving general suggestions on how to improve student experience (10%).

The paradoxes and tensions from this study are categorised into the following themes:

Paradoxes across our respondent cohort

1. Experienced neophyte
2. Earner-learner

Paradoxes within individual response sets

3. Autonomous-dependent

<Insert Table 1 here>

Paradoxes across the whole cohort

It was clear that the students in our respondent cohort did not all view their experiences in the same way. Analysis of the data raised several paradoxes in the way that students felt they should be treated and the ways in which they experienced their teacher education programs. Some of our respondents called for university staff to recognise their differences as a cohort from the school leavers' cohort, but others wanted to be treated the same as everyone else, or at least not to be treated specially. They come to their studies as 'experienced-neophytes'; they have accrued considerable life and/or work experience, and a commensurate capacity for autonomy and independence that is so important in teaching. Yet, they come, as do the school-leavers, armed only with their student perspective of learning, and as such, are quite dependent, in terms of acquiring new knowledge and a new teacher perspective. They have to juggle the demands of being a non-earning student with their financial obligations, which might be considerably more demanding than for those who have just left school. They are old(er), but new to the profession. Many are both highly ready and yet unprepared for the world of tertiary study. In short, they could be seen as expert-novices entering the profession – a status they might find particularly difficult to accept and adjust to, given their age compared to that of school leavers.

Participants experienced tension because they were unable to find the support and flexibility required to meet the competing demands of being a student alongside their other commitments. At one level, they were similarly placed with all other students, but given their circumstances, they had different needs and demands on their lives. They felt universities were inflexible in responding to their needs in trying to juggle family and work commitments 'as opposed to pre-service students who have come fresh out of school' (Respondent 54). While they recognised the demands of being a student (once again), the lack of institutional

flexibility and appropriate support in response to their needs caused them tension and frustration. Tensions included: having to do group work with younger students who may not have the same work ethic as CCSTs; not having their prior skills and qualifications acknowledged or accounted in their education program; and a general lack of awareness (by university staff) of their family and work commitments with respect to professional experience or practicum placement and assignment submission.

In some ways, their commonality with all other learners (for instance, their common learning needs) should not be surprising. At the same time, CCSTs indicated they would like to be recognised for the knowledge, skills and expertise they bring to the classroom. As one of them put it, they are ‘possible leaders and inspiration’ (Respondent 430), so might be able to take on such roles among their peers, and have this contribution recognised with a reference or letter of recommendation upon graduation. We accept, though, that differential treatment or status might sharpen any existing antipathies with school leavers.

In summary, a paradox seems to exist within the cohort between the desire to be treated like any other student experiencing the demands of student life and simultaneously wanting recognition for who they are and what they bring to the profession. The experiences in this group seem to fit the category “same-same but different”.

The two themes of experienced-neophyte and earner-learner identified in the data from the group are now discussed.

The experienced-neophyte

Some of the respondent CCSTs arrived at their teacher education studies highly credentialed. Eighteen percent of the respondents have higher degrees, including PhDs. As such, their qualifications match or perhaps exceed those of some university academics who

teach them, and will exceed those of the vast majority of teachers, including the principals under whom they will serve. Second career teachers also arrive with greater and broader life and professional experiences. Some CCSTs may be of similar age to the academics who teach them. Thirty percent of respondents have been in middle or senior management, responsible for discretionary budgets well beyond the scope of those of most schools, and for large numbers of staff, and ‘understand the higher responsibilities which come with working’ (Respondent 171). A few (six respondents) indicated that they have ‘run’ families, along with the inherent organisational and budgetary demands – particularly while they are studying. As one respondent summed up, ‘we know how to do a good job by now’ (Respondent 332). Yet, much of their life and work experience is not acknowledged by teacher education providers, schools, or their younger peers.

Moreover, many of the attributes and qualities that CCSTs typically possess are compatible with teaching and with school organisation more broadly. According to Richardson and Watt, CCSTs’ wealth of work and world experience has “the potential to enrich and diversify the profession and classrooms” (2005, p. 488). Personal qualities such as passion and creativity, along with a “well-defined sense of themselves” (Richardson & Watt, 2006, p. 29) create a good fit with highly desirable teacher qualities (author, 2014).

CCSTs believed they brought to the profession valuable attributes, knowledge and experience borne of their prior lives and careers. Some CCSTs brought with them a corporate mentality that may not be an easy fit with the university or practicum school organisation, in terms of perceived optimal efficiencies or priorities. They are keen to share these experiences in the course of their studies and during their professional experience in

schools, and might be more outspoken than their younger counterparts in doing so. As one respondent reflected,

‘as a mature age person, I tend to ‘say it how it is’ when I disagree with something. I’m not disrespectful, but every now and then I will come across a workplace policy that is just absolutely stupid’ (Respondent 509)

Another opined that, ‘the whole school system needs to be put under the microscope’ (Respondent 239).

CCSTs may be older than some school staff members who supervise them during their professional experience in schools. This may cause awkwardness for both supervisor and student teacher. For instance, one respondent noted that, ‘I’m afraid that because I’m old, younger mentor teachers may find me threatening’ (Respondent 292).

Aligned with the above concern is the paradox that may exist regarding perceptions about the CCST at the school. On the one hand, school students might not realise that the CCST is new to the profession. This may be helpful for their classroom management. On the other hand, some of our respondents worried that colleagues might be less inclined to offer assistance (for instance, ‘I think as a mature aged student in the school doing a practicum, people assumed I had more experience within the school environment than I had. I think younger teachers found it awkward to give me instructions’ – Respondent 10). Such lack of assistance would be detrimental to the CCSTs’ learning and adjustment to the school’s ethos. Further, they might see themselves as newcomers to student life given the length of time that has passed since they were last students (for instance, ‘As it is 20 years since I last attended University, I was completely unprepared for the level of commitment required’ – Respondent 19).

Perhaps understandably, some career change student teachers bring with them a sense of entitlement. It may be that career changers’ ‘older and experienced’ status affords them an opportunity to scrutinise and perhaps pass (wrongful) judgements on other teacher

education students. As one participant commented, the younger teacher education students ‘don’t seem to understand the gravity of their role’ (Respondent 300) as teachers. Another described school leavers as ‘unmotivated and substantially less inquisitive than mature age students’ (Respondent 239), which made group assignment work ‘like pulling teeth’ (Respondent 239). Another observed that, ‘the group marking system for tasks is a bugbear of every mature age student I know’ (Respondent 289). Here, respondents indicated the challenges they faced in working alongside their (younger) peers.

To summarise, the findings here highlight the tension that exists as the CCSTs view student life through a lens coloured by their past experiences. A paradox exists in that while they often have higher qualifications than their peers or some of their supervising teachers, they have limited experience in the area of teacher education. They are torn between wanting to contribute and needing to be assisted. They are happy to speak their mind based on their prior experiences but also fear that their supervising teachers will be reticent in supporting them.

Earners - Learners

Another tension concerned the challenges the respondents had to face to fulfil work and study responsibilities at the same time. They felt the burden and responsibilities associated with having to earn a living, perhaps as a breadwinner, whilst simultaneously undertaking full-time study. Being unable to work during their professional experience placed additional strain on their lives. One respondent observed, ‘the workload, compared to younger students, can be quite challenging with the juggle of family, work and study, leaving very little to no time for one self’ (Respondent 179). The CCSTs felt universities did not recognise that ‘we are not high

school graduates, do have real world experience and are often still working to pay the family bills while studying' (Respondent 39).

Career change teachers typically have to juggle their unremunerated study, along with its associated expenses, with sustaining themselves, as well as with carer responsibilities, perhaps for the generation above and below them simultaneously.

The closed responses in the survey indicated that the top three concerns in order of frequency were: balancing study with other life commitments (work and family, 27% of respondents); financial burden of being a student again (20%); and finding the course contents to be challenging or demanding (14%). Another 10 per cent felt that they were under-prepared for their course. We note these responses here as they support the open-ended data in indicating the tensions of being an earner-learner.

Not surprisingly, the above competing demands exerted associated financial pressures. Given the diligence and sense of purpose attributed to mature-aged students (author, 2014), some of our respondents must feel these pressures very keenly.

It is noted that while school leavers are also typically in employment, and most likely on lower pay levels than their older counterparts, they are less likely to be the sole or primary wage earner. Moreover, those living 'at home' with parents are likely to have considerably fewer financial and perhaps other household responsibilities. One CCST spoke of 'being unsure if I will be able to pay the rent next week ... I'm finding it very hard' (Respondent166). This may lead to a certain level of disdain from mature-age students for school leavers, to whom one respondent ascribed 'terrible academic, literacy and critical thinking skills, poor attitude' (Respondent 377). As another of our respondents observed, 'universities need to stop treating mature age career changers like 18 year-old kids still living at home with mummy and daddy'

(Respondent 509). The respondents were not necessarily critical of ‘the younger generation’; at least one referred to a younger version of themselves in this regard.

Understandably, some of our respondents may have become habituated to their former income, in terms of spending patterns. Many of them have existing commitments such as mortgages, and referred to ‘taking massive financial hits to do this course for altruistic reasons’ (Respondent 78). One described her or his circumstances as an attempt to ‘balance poverty, children and full time study’ (Respondent 170). Indeed, some career-change teachers earn less than they did in their previous careers, even once they secure work in teaching (author, 2009), as some of our respondents also noted. One reported that others treated this drop in salary with suspicion: ‘my [former] colleagues see me as ‘copping out’ from my professional career and dumbing down to be a teacher’ (Respondent 51). Some respondents postponed their studies until they were more able to afford to do so, or studied part-time. While part-time study may be a more sustainable option, it prolongs the period without a full-time salary. The quotes below reflect these circumstances.

‘CCSTs are usually coming from a place of working and earning money so the change to not being able to work as much is very difficult financially’ (Respondent 335)

CCSTs have large existing financial commitments such as mortgages that are difficult to defer. Taking on part time employment is often insufficient to cover these larger existing financial commitments. I deferred entering teaching until I had sufficient savings to allow for these commitments (Respondent 417)

Financial responsibilities precipitate particular budgetary and time-related problems during Professional Experience (PE) or practicum, which is typically undertaken in full-time mode, as noted by one respondent.

‘It is extremely stressful trying to support a family when the nature of Practicum means I am unable to work in my usual job for 5 weeks...no work means no pay!’ (Respondent 421)

Respondent suggestions to ease the financial burden, particularly during professional experience and otherwise, included paid internships and availability of scholarships depending on CCSTs’ intended teaching areas and corresponding knowledge. Comments included:

‘Many CCSTs are very serious about study, are high achievers despite family and work commitments. This needs to be recognised’ (Respondent125)

[putting] ‘processes in place that recognise CCSTs, whether that be through acceleration, recognition of learning, or scholarships, in order to get them into the teaching profession more efficiently’ (Respondent 56)

Providing suitable childcare arrangements, including on-campus family rooms and playground spaces, were among other respondents’ suggestions to assist CCSTs to juggle family and study commitments and to form part of the overall support mechanisms put in place by universities.

Addressing the concerns that CCSTs have with respect to their financial constraints would be valuable in helping these students balance their teacher education program and their other commitments, such as their heightened carer and breadwinner responsibilities.

The above two sections indicate the diversity of views within the group. The differences in perspectives indicates that a uniform treatment of challenges of this cohort is unlikely to be successful.

Paradox within individual response sets

Autonomous- dependent

This paradox emerged from respondents wishing to be treated as both experts and novices at the same time. We found these participants describing their strengths as well as their limitations in the same response. They wanted explicit acknowledgement (as well as recognition) of their experiences and expertise in a discipline area, yet, at the same time, acknowledged their limitations and dependencies as a CCST.

Career-change student teachers typically arrive highly motivated, autonomous and eager to succeed and to make the best of their studies and their subsequent career. Our findings showed that they are likely to be self-starters, and as such, they may require little in the way of supervision or monitoring, to enmesh themselves in their work – and may resent such monitoring. Yet, teaching, or being a student of teaching, is almost certainly different from what they did and experienced previously. As with adjustments in income, it is probably quite difficult for a person with experience in running a department, a corporation or a family, to now be so dependent on the instructions and, potentially, the whims of others. In effect, they may conceive their prior competencies in terms of ‘deficiencies’ rather than as ‘strengths’ that can be “enriched by theory and mutually shared expertise” (Tigchelaar, Vermunt, & Brouwer, 2014, p119). Comments included:

Career-changers are not straight out of school, we have forgotten a lot of the content learned 15+years ago...courses need to be mindful of that. On the other hand, I have been completing all manners of reports for sales and products, analysis of various things, hiring and firing of employees and staff education and training...would be nice if that experience can be looked at by University (Respondent 509)

‘I think we are well recognised for the skills we bring to the classroom. Our biggest challenge is probably writing essays, which are so different from scientific writing which I am accustomed to’ (Respondent 359)

‘We have the life experience and content knowledge, what we need to learn is how to teach...’
(Respondent 328)

I’ve come quite far down the road in my current career. When I walk into a room in my building, I expect a certain level of respect and response. Being shunted down to the bottom of the food chain again is going to hurt (Respondent 361).

Responses in this category also revealed CCSTs knew how to overcome these difficulties or so-called limitations. For instance, they would adapt their ways of learning using their prior knowledge.

‘As a CCST, I bring a lot of experience and common sense to teaching. Some course content is so dense that I had to rely on my common sense than on my course reading’ (Respondent 433)

and

‘I approach my entire qualification differently...my university studies form just a part of my professional learning – alongside a range of other experiences’ (Respondent 17)

They were aware of their limitations and their capabilities to overcome the limitations and expected universities to understand and support them in this process. As noted above, there were criticisms of universities’ inflexibility with regard to the pace and place of learning.

In summary, achieving a balance of study-life-work commitments becomes more pronounced in the case of CCSTs. It is somewhat paradoxical to be a self-starter and autonomous on the one hand yet require personal and professional support on the other.

Our findings suggest institutional support in the form of flexibility to be the touchstone for helping CCSTs and our findings concur with previous studies (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013). Another important factor highlighted in the study is recognition and the need for university courses to respond to CCST needs, that is, recognition of the experience, expertise and maturity they embody. There is also a need to recognise and respond to the competing demands in CCSTs' lives. Finally, the findings suggest that an important aspect of supporting CCSTs in their studies may involve working with them to help them gain realistic expectations of themselves and their course studies.

Discussion and Conclusions

The paradox and tensions lens allows us to understand participants' ways of thinking in relation to career change student experiences in the context of their other responsibilities. The themes also illustrate the differential nature and characteristics of this group of student teachers as they embark on their 'new' career. The findings raise important questions on the need for change to occur both within universities and in the behaviours and expectations of CCSTs (Tigchelaar, Vermunt & Brouwer, 2014). With the increase in CCST numbers (author, 2014) and the experience they bring to the profession, this cohort of student teachers and their voices need to be heard by the different stakeholders. At the same time, CCSTs also need to learn to manage their expectations better. With the challenges facing teacher education around the world (such as the requirement for evidence-based outputs on

teacher quality and student outcomes) (author, 2017), the characteristics and quality of future teachers are crucial factors in preparing and value-adding to *all* pre-service teachers.

While the choice and decision to enter teacher education resides with the students themselves, universities and schools may need to assess whether they can play a role in alleviating related concerns of career changers, particularly with respect to their professional learning needs. These concerns include flexibility with assignments, attendance and professional experience. Our findings and discussion extend the work of previously examined studies (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Grier & Johnston, 2009, Tigchelaar et al, 2014) on how best to tap into career changers' potential, through for example, adapting or improving existing teacher education programs to suit the needs of career changers and through the provision of support by school staff. These improvements to address professional learning needs could include: on-line bridging courses that help CCSTs to develop academic literacies such as essay writing, development of assignments and digital literacies. We suggest these be offered online so as to enhance the flexibility of the learning opportunities for CCSTs. Teacher education programs also need to ensure that there is flexibility in the choice of study pathways so that CCSTs can choose to participate in their learning either face to face or online. Collaborative learning could also be reviewed given the difficulties that some CCSTs found in working with recent school leavers and given their particular professional learning needs. We recommend that CCSTs be offered increased flexibility in forming their collaborative groups as needed.

This study confirms previous research in identifying and seeking ways to recognise CCSTs' prior experiences and related knowledge and skills. Given many CCSTs' financial constraints, we recognise the importance of recognition of prior learning in truncating the

time to graduation and paid employment, and related reduction in tuition fees, texts and the like. Author (2014) found that career change teachers enhanced their students' learning and engagement by drawing upon their previous skills and experiences when teaching. Similarly, in this study, participants felt they had much to contribute and were eager that universities and teacher educators recognise their backgrounds and experiences. This plea for recognition is supported by Haggard, Slostad and Winterton (2006) who note that adult learners learn best when they receive recognition and accommodation for their wide-ranging experiences, knowledge and skills. If we seek to meet the professional learning needs of CCSTs, then such recognition and accommodation is essential.

As with the ending and beginning of a personal relationship, we posit here that the ending and/or beginning of a career choice is a higher-stakes affair for a mature aged person, than for someone in their teens, who has just completed school. One respondent referred to the 'strength and bravery we have in doing this' (Respondent 192). The relationship analogy has limitations, however, as some 'career-change' pre-service teachers may be pursuing their first love, one that eluded them in previous years for various reasons (author, 2014). If access to educational opportunities was among the barriers to their pursuit of teaching as a career, their appreciation of education is likely to be particularly keen. Typically, they are making substantial sacrifices; they are likely to have longer-term commitments to partners, to their own children, who, in the words of one, 'will always come first' (Respondent 320), as well as to mortgages and similar financial matters, as well as, perhaps, to aging parents. They are more likely than their younger counterparts to find themselves with simultaneous roles and responsibilities of carer, breadwinner and student. As noted, some come from professional worlds vastly different from those of typical school

leavers, who are sometimes seen as the norm in terms of teacher entrants. For some respondents, these tensions are acute. Some spoke of being exhausted only a few weeks into the semester, or of doubting their career-change decision. One ‘completed this survey at 5 am because I can’t sleep because this course is stressing me out’ (Respondent 170). If these teacher education students have more to prove than their younger counterparts, it is perhaps because they have more to lose. These issues frame some of the paradoxes that governed our discussion. Moreover, the experience and capacities some career change teachers bring to their work may prove beneficial in terms of new and untried ways of school management and other efficiencies.

CCSTs must find it difficult to transition from autonomous adults, responsible for budgets and supervision of underlings, to become positioned as more dependent, passive doers of others’ bidding, in terms of completing assignments and the like. Moreover, the ‘world of assignments’ and of teaching and learning may have changed considerably since they last studied formally, particularly with regard to use of digital resources and the like. This arguably exacerbates the gap between the learner perspective and the teacher perspective that all candidates face on entering teacher education.

With the above experiences and bodies of knowledge, come expectations on the part of career-change pre-service teachers, in terms of how they might be treated. As one recounted, ‘we have done more academically challenging courses, speak more than one language, bring real world experience to teaching’ (Respondent 51). Specifically, given the highly publicised shortages of teachers in some areas (for instance, in STEM-related areas), some of our respondents anticipated being more enthusiastically embraced by the profession. The teaching profession has at times been accused of failing to apply what it knows about

teaching and learning to its newcomers (author, 2016). This limitation assumes further implications when it comes to career change teachers, who bring significant life and professional experiences to their work. We realise that no system will be perceived as entirely fair, but it seems reasonable for teacher education providers, schools and educational jurisdictions to recognise CCSTs' background knowledge and experience. This is particularly noteworthy when insufficient recognition has been a significant factor for teachers resigning the profession (McKenzie et al, 2014). We accept the complexity, as with teaching evaluation and reflection, of discerning what counts as evidence (author, 2006) when it comes to assessing students' prior knowledge and its relevance. On the other hand, we argue that this should not be insurmountable for the teaching profession in particular. Teachers are routinely expected to ascertain their students' prior knowledge as a basis for venturing into new learning. Customarily, they ask their students to 'tell me what you know', and delight when their students are able to articulate some understanding of the topic at hand. Teachers are also expected to cater for diverse needs and abilities of students. This should apply equally to newcomers to teaching, and specifically to career-changers.

CCSTs have much to offer the teaching profession. It is incumbent on teacher education programs to ensure that these students' particular professional learning needs are met and that they are supported during their studies. The benefits of such adjustments to teacher education programs are likely to accrue not only to the CCSTs but also to their future students and school communities.

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