Understanding Career Change Student Teachers in Teacher Education Programs

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Executive Summary

Overview of the Study

The research project was supported through a grant by the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA). This one-year project (September 2015 – August 2016) had the aim of examining the views and experiences of career change student teachers (CCSTs) enrolled in teacher education programs in Australian universities. It sought to understand CCSTs' backgrounds, expectations and learning needs in order to suggest strategies that support and meet the needs of this significant cohort of student teachers. The study also sought to fill the recent gap in research on Australian CCSTs' demographics and learning needs.

The project team comprises researchers from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney: Dr Meera Varadharajan, Dr Don Carter, Associate Professor John Buchanan and Professor Sandy Schuck. The study builds on the work of Dr Varadharajan, whose doctoral thesis examined career change beginning teachers and their school experiences (http://hdl.handle.net/10453/29255).

The study involved the development and implementation of a national online survey, comprising quantitative and qualitative components, to explore and investigate CCSTs' backgrounds and their learning needs and experiences in their teacher education programs. The findings will inform universities and teacher education providers about how best to support and recognise CCSTs.

Aims

The specific project aims were:

- To investigate CCSTs' backgrounds, characteristics, experiences and other demographic data;
- To identify CCSTs' professional and personal learning needs and concerns

Key Findings

The key findings of the project are summarised below:

(1) CCSTs come from diverse professions and disciplines

(2) Their reasons for choosing teaching are primarily driven by intrinsic and altruistic motivations rather than extrinsic motivations

(3) Most respondents are satisfied with the program in which they are enrolled

(4) Flexibility in course offerings is the most important factor valued by participants with regard to learning needs support

(5) Acknowledgement and recognition of their prior career and life experiences are rated as important by participants

(6) A certain paradox in participants' responses exist – many exhibited a need to be treated differently while at the same time requiring the same support as anyone else

Recommendations

The study recommends universities and teacher educators to be more cognisant of this growing cohort of student teachers. Teacher educators should be familiar with their CCSTs - their backgrounds, educational qualifications and prior career and life experiences. Such awareness helps to appropriately assist CCSTs in ways that suit their needs and requirements taking into their account their work, family and financial commitments. Key strategies that address CCSTs' personal and professional learning needs revolve around flexibility in course offerings, academic literacy support and recognition of participants' prior career and life experiences both at the time of enrolment and for the duration of the program.

Conclusions

CCSTs join the teaching profession after much thought and deliberation as this study and previous studies have shown. Their desire to share their knowledge and experience and some of their attributes such as passion and creativity are characteristic of quality teachers. It is imperative that universities, teacher educators and schools recognise the potential contribution that this group of student teachers can make to the teaching profession. Recognition and appropriate support will increase the likelihood of these highly motivated groups of future teachers entering (and staying in) the profession thereby enhancing student learning and achievement.

Project outputs and deliverables
- Presentations
  - School of Education Research Seminar, University of Technology Sydney, 29th June 2016. Presenters: Meera Varadharajan and Don Carter

- ATEA annual conference, Ballarat, Victoria, July 3-6 2016. Presenters: Meera Varadharajan and Don Carter, University of Technology Sydney

- Research article in Australian Teacher Education Association:
  https://atea.edu.au/2016/06/15/understanding-career-change-student-teachers/
- Papers: In preparation for journals

Introduction, Background and Aims

The project examined the views and experiences of career change student teachers (CCSTs) in teacher education programs. It sought to understand their prior backgrounds, particular learning needs and their current student experiences. The aim of this research was to inform teacher education programs about ways to best support this cohort of student teachers.

The number of career changers who are enrolling in Australian teacher education programs is steadily increasing (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Data from schools also suggest that nearly 35% of secondary teachers worked elsewhere before commencing teaching (McKenzie et al, 2011).The benefits of bringing in career change individuals to teaching are now widely accepted. Such teachers are actively sought and recruited to fill the gap caused by teacher turnover, particularly in high demand subject areas such as science, mathematics and technology (Grier & Johnston, 2009). Mature age individuals are considered attractive by employers as they are "well-suited to the shifting demands of the contemporary workplace" (Serow & Forrest, 1994, p. 556) and they are perceived as able to "contribute positively to changing the culture of the schools" (Richardson & Watt, 2005, p. 476). They bring "hard to quantify values of maturity and worldliness" (Halladay, 2008, p. 17), possessing some of the attributes essential for quality teaching (Varadharajan, 2014; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). Certain findings also suggest that older age entrants are less likely to leave their teaching commitments when employed in low socio-economic challenging schools (Donaldson, 2012).

However, despite growing numbers of CCSTs entering teacher education programs in Australian universities, there has been little recent research concerning their experiences in these programs. Prior studies drew attention to career changers and their motivations to enter the teaching profession (Richardson & Watt, 2005, 2006; Watt et al., 2012). Some Australian studies have tended to focus on specific groups such as STEM career-changers (Watters & Diezmann, 2015) or on specific

issues such as teacher identity (Williams, 2010). There are recommendations from overseas studies highlighting the significance of meeting the needs, expectations and aspirations of career changers (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003), but there is limited Australian literature on CCSTs' expectations and professional learning needs. Recently, Varadharajan (2014) provided an in-depth examination of career change beginning teachers' lived experiences in schools and found that participants called for learning support better suited to their abilities and prior career and life experiences. Few studies have specifically investigated career change pre-service teachers, their characteristics and their professional learning needs, and none has done so in recent years.

This project addressed this gap in the Australian literature by conducting a comprehensive survey on CCSTs to examine their professional learning needs and expectations, and their motives for choosing teaching.

The specific project aims were:

- To investigate CCSTs' backgrounds, characteristics, experiences and other demographic data;
- To identify CCSTs' professional and personal learning needs.

For the purposes of this study, a career change student teacher is defined as someone who has been employed in a career other than teaching for at least two years; and/or is a mature age student over the age of 25 years; and/or entering the teaching program eight years or more after completion of school.

Research approach

In seeking to identify CCSTs and examine their background, experiences and their current and anticipated learning needs and expectations, the project set out the following two research questions:

- Who are CCSTs and what are their characteristics?
- What kinds of professional learning and support needs do careers changers require as pre-service teachers?

The study was guided by an interpretive methodological inquiry to derive rich and meaningful interpretations from the gathered data. Dewey's Experiential Learning Theory (1938) of how (mature-aged) individuals learn from (and use) past experience to gain (and share) knowledge provided an inspiration to the study and overall project framework.

Data collection occurred through a national online survey distributed to career change student teachers enrolled in 29 Australian Universities. The survey items included questions to gather demographic data and to probe participants' responses and views on their expectations and professional learning needs (Figure 1). It included:

(1) Closed-ended questions to gather demographic data – Participants' age; gender; educational qualifications; previous role and discipline area and type of teaching course enrolled in

(2) Likert scale ranking response data – Reasons for choosing teaching as a career; attributes participants hope to bring; degree of satisfaction with teaching course and practicum; concerns and support suggestions

(3) Open-ended questions to gather qualitative data – Participants' learning needs expectations; suggestions on personal and professional support and ways of recognising their prior skills and experiences.
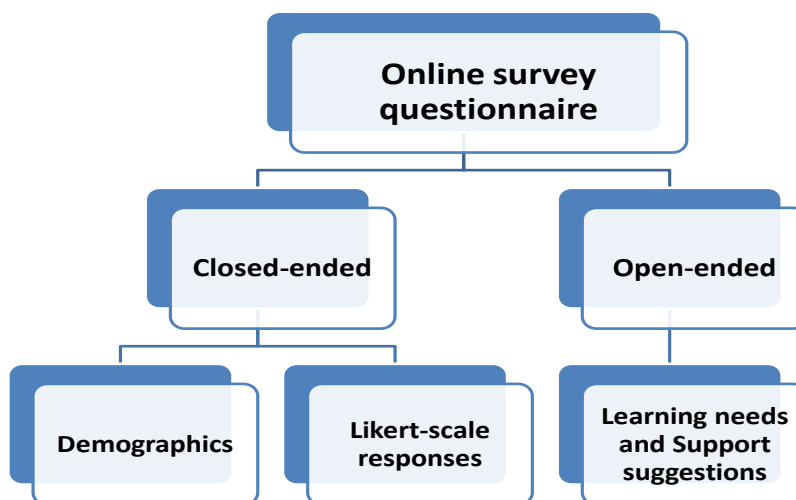
Research approach

Figure 1

The research approach and initial framing of the questions was informed by previous literature (Richardson & Watt, 2006; Varadharajan, 2014). Team members provided comments and feedback which helped to frame the final questionnaire. The survey was designed using the University's survey tool.

A 'Pilot survey' was conducted among CCSTs enrolled in a pre-service teaching program in the researchers' university. Results (N=8) from the pilot including students' feedback on survey were used to refine some of the survey items for the broader survey.

Once the survey content was finalised, information about the project and survey link was emailed to participating universities' Deans/Heads of School of Education with a request that part of the email content (that was addressed to students) be forwarded to *all* teacher education students enrolled in their university other than the cohorts who had just begun the program. The new students would have been unable to make comments regarding their expectations and learning needs having only just started. It was also indicated in the email that a filter question contained in the survey would determine if participants are career changers or not. The email was sent to 29 universities across all States and Territories in Australia and a reminder was sent out after 6 weeks.

At the end of the survey closing date, there were a total of **508 complete responses**.

The study used both qualitative and quantitative modes of analysis. The team enlisted the services of an expert statistician and academic to analyse the quantitative results (eg. using SPSS and cross-tabulation to identify correlations between categorical variables). These are being analysed at the time of writing this report. The qualitative responses were thematically analysed by grouping together similar ideas, words and patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for dominant categories to emerge that were relevant to the research questions. Responses to each open-ended question were independently analysed by at least two team members to establish inter-reliability, rigour and trustworthiness while drawing out emergent themes. This was followed by discussion among team members to resolve any discrepancies.

Findings and Discussion

Due to the number of detailed (both quantitative and qualitative) responses provided by participants, data are still being examined at the time of writing this report. However, the presented findings provide a rich insight into career change student teachers, their views and learning experiences in universities.

Participant responses based on states and territories is diagrammatically represented below in Figure 2.
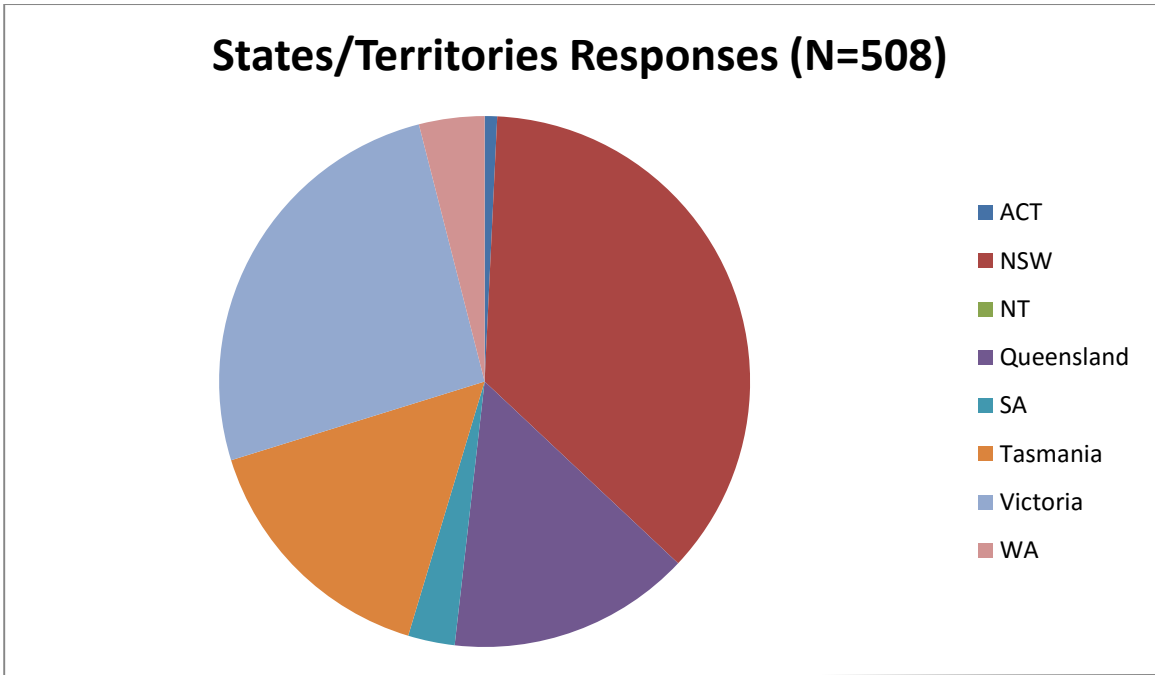
States/Territories Responses (N=508)

Legend:
- ACT
- NSW
- NT
- Queensland
- SA
- Tasmania
- Victoria
- WA

Figure 2

Key demographic data

The majority of the responses were from NSW followed by Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland. Twenty percent of the respondents were aged between 26-30 years and another 20 percent between the ages of 41-45 years. A third of respondents were between 30-40 years. Three-quarters of those who responded were female and for the majority (well over 90%), English was their first language. On educational qualifications, over two-thirds had at least a bachelor's degree and out of these, 18% had post graduate qualifications including PhD.

The results of this project concurred with previous studies to indicate career change individuals are a diverse group coming from different careers and disciplines. Many of the respondents had occupied management positions including in hospitality, catering, as well as in human resources, with several holding senior roles; numerous other respondents had been employed in the education and training sector, from tenured academic lecturers and tutors to early childhood and school-based educators. There were also individuals who had been previously employed in the mining and resources sector.

There were an equal number of respondents from regional and city universities. A sizeable proportion (over one third), were undertaking their course on a part-time basis, indicating other commitments including work and family. The same reason could be attributed to a large proportion (50%) choosing the on-line/distance mode of study. Participants were also asked the type of teacher education course they were enrolled in. The most popular four courses and the percentage of

responses are shown below (Table 1). More than half of the respondents had undertaken at least one Practicum.

Type of course	%
Under-graduate Primary	24
Master of Teaching (Primary)	21
Master of Teaching (Secondary)	19
Graduate Diploma (Secondary)	18

Table 1

While it may be inferred (assuming they had previous qualifications) that career changers are more likely to enter a Master of Teaching or Graduate Diploma program, a third of respondents were enrolled in the under-graduate (primary or secondary) teaching program. This could partly be attributed to the different 'types' of career changers who responded to the survey based on the definition provided in the filter question.

Reasons for choosing teaching

Participants' motives for choosing teaching were examined to identify factors that influenced them to change careers and enter the teaching program. The reasons for choosing teaching vary depending on age, circumstances, current and prior professions and beliefs; however decisions to enter teaching are usually well thought out and are "rarely whimsical" (Priyadharshini & Robinson-ant, 2003, p.96). Previous studies (Varadharajan, 2014) on career changers also strongly indicated that intrinsic and altruistic motives played a significant role in their decision and this was echoed in the results from this survey (Table 2).

	Reasons for choosing teaching	N	% (agree/strongly agree)
	I believe I have the necessary attributes to be a teacher	527	94
	I want a career that gives me job satisfaction	528	94
	I want to share my knowledge and love for the content/subject area	530	87
	I want to make a social contribution	529	87
	I want a stable and secure career	528	81
	I want to share my prior career and life experiences	526	78
	Teaching offers balance between work and family	528	70
	Due to stress in previous career	529	29
	Attracted by TE program options and pathways	529	44

Table 2

Reasons for choosing teaching can also vary between genders. It is worth noting that three quarters of survey respondents were female and is something to be attentive to while examining the reasons for choosing teaching. Generally, as is indicated by some previous studies (Donaldson, 2012), the proportion of males attracted to teaching is higher among career changers than first career entrants).

Personal attributes and qualities

One of the reasons why employing career changers is considered desirable by the teaching profession is the attributes or qualities they typically possess and bring as a teacher. According to Richardson & Watt, the wealth of experience brought from their prior career and lives has "the potential to enrich and diversify the profession and classrooms" (2005, p. 488). Some of these personal qualities such as passion and creativity with a "well-defined sense of themselves" (Richardson & Watt, 2006,p. 29) can be linked to teacher quality (Varadharajan, 2014). Participants were asked to rank the top three attributes they think they will bring to teaching from the list below.

- o Life/real world experience
- o Career experience
- o Content knowledge
- o Maturity and wisdom
- o Commitment to teaching
- o Passion and enthusiasm

The top three attributes were passion and enthusiasm; life/real world experience; and commitment to teaching followed closely by maturity and wisdom. CCSTs believe they have valuable attributes as well as knowledge and experience from their prior lives and career. They are keen to share these experiences in their teaching role. Career changers' personal skills and attributes such as passion and commitment together with their intrinsic and altruistic motivations make them an attractive and valuable group of quality teachers who can potentially "make a positive impact on the lives of students, the success of colleagues and the culture of schools" (Goe & Stickler, 2008, p. 13).

Learning needs

The second research question of the project study sought to examine CCSTs' views and expectations of their teacher education program including their professional and personal learning needs and suggestions for support as a mature age student. It was thought that due to career changers' ages and backgrounds, most of them would perceive their learning needs to be different from those of

other student teachers. However, interestingly, only half of respondents considered their learning needs to be different with the rest indicating they do not want to be treated differently by virtue of being a career change student.

Overall, two thirds of respondents were satisfied with their chosen teacher education course and the same proportion was also satisfied with the practicum program undertaken. Respondents were given the opportunity to indicate their main concerns affecting them as pre-service teachers. The top three concerns in order of importance were (1) balancing study with other life commitments (work and family); (2) financial burden of being a student again and (3) Finding the course contents to be challenging or demanding.

Students faced challenges trying to balance the competing demands in their lives and voiced this concern on several occasions. Many of them were in employment and had families with children. Hence, it stands to reason that the pressures of undertaking tertiary studies including class and tutorial attendance and completing assessments and tasks within the required time frame, are considerable.

Another major concern for CCSTs was the cost of undertaking the course of study. Respondents made several references to the financial burden of returning to study. Many of them had existing commitments such as paying for a mortgage and referred to "*taking massive financial hits to do this course for altruistic reasons*" (Respondent 78). Some of them recognised this difficulty and either postponed their studies till they were able to afford to do so or studied part-time, despite both these options delaying their entry to the teaching profession. The quotes below reflect these sentiments.

> "*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*" (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*" (417)

The cost aspect was particularly hard-hitting and stressful for respondents during the Professional Experience (Practicum) period as they were unable to work at all during the time.

"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!" (421)

While the choice and decision rests on students, universities need to assess whether they can play a role in alleviating such concerns.

The third major concern dealt with being 'university ready' in terms of content and academic literacy. Participants expressed a sense of apprehension and worry about whether they have the necessary skills to cope with the demands of the course. This could be explained due to the changes that have occurred in tertiary education and patterns of study since the time they did their degree. Specific strategies to overcome this concern as well as an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses by university educators were mentioned in several responses.

"Most CCSTs were in high school more than 10 years ago and the content has changed dramatically - extracurricular support for ICT etc would be helpful "(377)

"...Students who pursed a different career since attaining their undergraduate qualification, their content knowledge may be significantly depleted...some kind of refresher course is required" (77)

"I think that the biggest challenge is coming back into a university setting where we are unsure of where to find the information on readings, using Blackboard and other websites" (359)

"Lecturers need to understand that a CCST is often there for a very different reason to high school leaver, has gained many of the collaboration and communication skills necessary to teach, but do not necessarily have the ability to write an essay..". (387)

Suggestions

Participants' suggestions stemmed from their personal and professional learning needs and concerns as mentioned above.

The three most important areas of suggestions were with respect to (1) Flexibility; (2) Support in content and academic literacy; and (3) Financial support.

Flexibility was a strong theme that emerged from the responses particularly in reference to balancing study with other commitments. Participants suggested different ways in which universities can address the flexibility issue both within the course and in the practicum. Some suggestions included increased time allocation to complete assignments, blocks of day lectures, questioning compulsory lectures, more options for night classes and tailoring or compressing of courses to suit career changers' backgrounds and abilities. Flexibility suggestions surrounding practicum involved the structure, length and location of placement taking into account CCSTs' other commitments. For instance, one respondent put it, "*difficult to plan for your practicum when you get one week's notice of your location especially when you are also the primary caregiver to young children*" (58). Distance mode students found it difficult to organise their practicum placements and suggested the university should provide help in this regard.

A key issue for distance mode students was flexibility in online participation, contribution and submission of assessment tasks rather than having to meet strict timelines.

> "*Students studying by distance should be supported by always being provided with flexible assessment timeframes. Distance students choose distance because they are juggling multiple responsibilities .... when tasks are set to be available on a certain date at a certain time, this undermines the flexibility of online learning*" (479)

Suggestions with respect to providing support in content and pedagogical knowledge and provision to improve their academic literacy have been mentioned previously. Participants also spoke of academic and administrative staff being accessible with a view to providing increased support and feedback.

Participants' specific suggestions to ease the financial burden (during practicum and otherwise) included paid internships and offer of scholarships based on content knowledge and experience. CCSTs were clearly keen that their educational qualifications, skills, career and life experiences be

recognised by universities and teacher educators. The study strongly concurs with previous literature in identifying and seeking ways in which their prior experiences can be recognised. Varadharajan (2014) found career change teachers drew upon their previous skills and experiences in classroom with a view to enhancing student learning and engagement. In this study too, participants felt they had much to contribute and were keen that universities and teacher educators are aware and informed of CCSTs' backgrounds and experiences. Haggard et al (2006) point out that adult learners learn best when they receive recognition and accommodation for their wide-ranging experiences, knowledge and skills. To quote some participants in this study:

> *"Many CCSTs are very serious about study, are high achievers despite family and work commitments. This needs to be recognised"* (125)

> *"Encourage passion and creativity. Support and embrace career change"* (102)

> *"..if there are processes in place that recognise CCSTs, whether that be through acceleration, recognition of prior learning, or scholarships, in order to get them into the teaching profession more efficiently"* (56)

Finally, a certain paradox was found to exist when responses were unpacked to understand CCSTs' views and expectations. On the one hand, they were keen for universities to be cognisant of their presence through recognition but at the same time, they acknowledged the need for support just as any other student.

Recommendations

The study has enabled us to understand the significance of this growing cohort of student teachers who enter the teacher education program from diverse backgrounds, areas and disciplines with valuable career and life experiences. It has enhanced our knowledge about career change student teachers and shed light on their views, expectations, learning needs and support suggestions.

Student teachers show high commitment to the path they have chosen, having made a conscious decision to be an educator – *"The majority of us who have made this decision have not done so lightly"* as quoted by one CCST. However, in today's employment environment and due to the nature and perceptions of the teaching profession as a whole, it is not surprising that even those who commit themselves to teaching evaluate the 'worthiness' of their chosen path at every step of the

way, re-visiting the question "is it worth it?" (Hammerness, 2006). Similar sentiments were echoed by participants in the study who were questioning their decision to stay or leave.

Based on the analysis of the survey results so far, the study recommends that universities and teacher educators:

- Enhance their understanding and knowledge of CCSTs backgrounds, including qualifications and experiences
- Are aware of and responsive to the learning needs of CCSTs, taking into account their work, family and financial commitments
- Recognise more fully CCSTs' skills and experiences, being open to suggestions raised in this study such as tailored courses and financial incentives geared to suit CCSTs' expertise and knowledge
- Pay further attention to the practicum issues raised by CCSTs in the study and find ways to address them

Overall, universities can be alerted to the various strategies that value CCSTs as well as ways to personally and professionally support them, taking into account their needs and circumstances.

Implications for teacher education

The study is significant because understanding and appropriately supporting this important cohort of student teachers is crucial to ensure their continued participation in the profession.

Teacher education providers need to think innovatively on how best their programs attend to CCSTs who are both 'experienced and novices' at the same time. Effectively utilising their strengths and responding to their needs will result in a winning outcome of building quality teacher workforce. While this research confirms that CCSTs join the profession more for intrinsic than extrinsic reasons, financial burden can be a huge concern particularly when they have left well-paid jobs. Whilst issues regarding pay are not unique to career change teachers, policy makers and stakeholders should take note of these concerns and suggestions in the overall context of attracting and retaining career change teachers, with a view to lifting the status of the teaching profession.

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