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# Profiles of professional engagement and career development aspirations among USA preservice teachers



Helen M.G. Watt<sup>\*</sup>, Paul W. Richardson, Kari Wilkins<sup>1</sup>

Monash University, Faculty of Education, Building 6, Wellington Road, Clayton Campus, Melbourne, Victoria 3800, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

Future teachers have been found to exhibit different profiles of professional engagement and career development aspirations (PECDA) even at the very outset of their teaching career (Watt & Richardson, 2008). Highly engaged persisters, highly engaged switchers, and lower engaged desisters differed in their initial motivations for having chosen teaching as a career, perceptions about the profession, career intentions, and demographic characteristics. The present study builds upon and extends this line of research by exploring profiles with a sample from the United States, a culturally similar, yet different setting. Among 246 elementary and secondary preservice teachers from 2 midwestern universities, 3 distinct clusters were identified: highly engaged persisters, lower engaged desisters, and classroom engaged careerists. Teaching motivations and perceptions were compared for the 3 types, as well as changing satisfaction ratings from the start until completion of their teaching qualification; patterns were enriched using qualitative responses from open-ended survey questions. Explanations are advanced in terms of cultural differences in teaching career structures.

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## 1. Introduction

Over recent years there has been a shift in the focus of research from why people enter into a teaching career, to an ensuing interest in determining what helps to retain and sustain teachers in what can often be a psychologically demanding and difficult job. There are significant losses of beginning teachers during their first five years in the profession; estimates in the USA range from 25% in the first three years (Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003), up to 40% (Chang, 2009) or 45% within five years (Ingersoll, 2003). Ingersoll and colleagues in particular have established in the USA that areas of teacher shortage are primarily due to a “revolving door” through which large numbers of teachers depart teaching long before retirement (e.g., Ingersoll, 2001, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Studies of teacher retention or attrition have mostly been informed by conceptual lenses directly derived from economic labour market theories of supply and demand (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006). Explanations for why beginning teachers leave the profession have often alighted on the “reality shock” of the conflicting roles demanded of them and their unpreparedness to adequately deal with those demands (e.g., Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Veenman, 1984). While this explanation has been anecdotally persistent, there may be other explanations. It is our contention that beginning teachers’ motivations constitute an understudied dimension of their professional engagement and career development aspirations.

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9905 2819.

E-mail addresses: [helen.watt@monash.edu](mailto:helen.watt@monash.edu) (Helen M.G. Watt), [paul.richardson@monash.edu](mailto:paul.richardson@monash.edu) (P.W. Richardson).

<sup>1</sup> Deceased.

Governments and teacher employing authorities around the world are intent upon improving the quality of the teaching workforce in order to promote improved student learning outcomes (OECD, 2005). The focus on teacher quality as the most important factor impacting student learning (Hattie, 2009) foregrounds the notion that there are different types of teachers who possess different ambitions, goals, aspirations, values, abilities and skills, and that these differences may be important in relation to teachers' career aspirations, development and commitment, and thereby student learning. Indeed, the strong effects of teachers on student learning can be traced to the classic Coleman report, which concluded teacher characteristics explain a greater amount of variance in student learning than any other school resource (Coleman et al., 1966).

Until recently, research into factors related to teacher motivation and engagement has been limited by the absence of an integrative theoretical framework to guide the selection and organisation of factors that influence teaching choice and persistence. This has produced a lack of cohesion in this literature, and a less than systematic approach. The FIT-Choice (Factors Influencing Teaching Choice; [www.fitchoice.org](http://www.fitchoice.org)) framework was developed by Watt and Richardson to provide a precise conceptualisation of components, link the various elements together, suggest causal sequences, and outline relations between individuals' motivations, perceptions and their professional development (see Richardson & Watt, 2006, 2010; Watt & Richardson, 2007, 2008). Background experiences, self-perceptions, task perceptions and values are theorised to shape individuals' choice behaviours regarding whether to undertake a teaching career. Individuals are subsequently influenced by their experiences during their teacher education, shaping their professional engagement and career development aspirations.

The FIT-Choice framework is founded upon the expectancy-value framework of Eccles and colleagues (see Eccles (Parsons) et al., 1983; Eccles, 2005, 2009) within the specific context of teaching as a career choice. This framework has been subsequently validated across a range of cultural settings and different samples (for example, see special issue of the 2012 *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(3)). The expectancy-value framework of Eccles and colleagues is the most prominent motivational model investigating issues relating to choice and persistence. Although initially developed as a framework for explaining students' choices to participate in mathematics at school, it has since been applied to other academic school disciplines, as well as to choices to participate in specific types of careers (e.g., Watt, 2006, 2008) and has proven fruitful for guiding investigations into teaching as a career choice.

Given that teachers in most countries constitute a large, heterogeneous workforce it seems naïve to imagine that they all enter the career for the same reasons. It makes good conceptual and theoretical sense that there are different "types" of future teachers who, at the outset of their careers, are characterised by different profiles of the amount of effort they will expend in doing the job, the length of time they plan to stay in teaching, the degree to which they will engage in professional learning to develop and sustain their career, whether they aspire to leadership roles in schools, and the degree of satisfaction they experience with their career choice. Indeed, we identified significant variation in the reasons for career choice among preservice Australian teachers (Watt & Richardson, 2008). Moreover, it is possible that different motivational profiles would predict different aspired career trajectories and important longer-term career and educational outcomes.

Previously we have established that, at the point of entry into teacher education, Australian preservice teachers are well aware that the job is difficult, and salary and status low, yet they have still chosen a teaching career, and report high satisfaction with that choice (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Further, a substantial proportion already planned to leave the profession within their first five years even prior to professional entry (Watt & Richardson, 2008). The variety of reasons for which they planned to leave included many that were positive and planful, for example as a "stepping stone" to broader education careers such as youth ministry or workplace trainers, as well as those who identified as "restless spirits" and did not wish to remain in any one career for the long term. A smaller proportion had been "turned off" teaching due to negative teacher education and practicum experiences in schools (Watt & Richardson, 2008). This provides a new perspective on, and explanations for, early career teachers' attrition. The highly engaged switchers had not yet commenced in teaching and therefore could not have been put off by their early professional experiences. Instead, their motivations and profiles of professional engagement explained their intended short period of time in teaching.

### *1.1. A typological approach to the study of future teachers' professional engagement and career development aspirations*

In contrast to a variable-centred approach where the focus is on normative patterns and development, typological approaches frame the study of teachers' development for coherent subgroups, leading to developmental profiles and pathways for identified types, and potentially different implications for supporting the career development of each. Our thinking about different types of teachers was influenced by large-scale typological studies of teachers and other health professionals in Germany (see Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008), the Netherlands (de Heus & Diekstra, 1999), and the USA (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). We applied a typological approach to the study of future teachers' professional engagement and career development aspirations, and used this as an organising framework to examine different initial teaching motivations, perceptions about the profession, and career choice satisfaction through the teaching degree. Just prior to completion of their teaching qualification, we hypothesised and discovered that different subtypes of graduating teachers could be discerned based on their profiles of professional engagement and career development aspirations (PECDA; Watt & Richardson, 2008) who differed in teaching motivations, but interestingly, not by secondary/elementary strand.

The PECDA scale was developed to provide a multidimensional measure tapping planned effort, planned persistence, professional development and leadership aspirations. To understand who plans to remain in the profession as engaged and

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