‘Elite’ career-changers and their experience of initial teacher education

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Abstract

This study explores the motivation of ‘high-status’ professionals to change career and enter teaching, and their experience of undertaking initial teacher education (ITE) programmes in England. The study builds on previous research which found that career-changers are disproportionately more likely to fail to complete their ITE studies, and that those who do complete the transition into teaching frequently experience frustration with some aspects of induction and often feel undervalued by their new colleagues. The participants in this study were largely positive about most aspects of their ITE experience, and felt their professional background enabled them to be resilient when faced with the challenges of transitioning from being an expert in one domain to novice in another. However, they report variable experiences of mentoring, and for some, a sense of their previous experience being under-appreciated by ITE tutors and schools. The study also finds little evidence of personalisation built into ITE programmes to take account of the distinctive needs of career-changers. This paper concludes that the current policy focus adopted in England and in many other countries on entry quality may detract from the more fundamental issue of ensuring ITE programmes provide the flexible and personalised professional learning environments that enable a diverse range of entrants to flourish.

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Introduction: teacher quality and system quality

The growing consensus that teacher quality is a key determinant of educational system quality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2005, 2011; Barber and Mourshed 2007; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] 2011), increasing the quality of entrants to the profession has come to dominate policy-making in many countries (Furlong 2005; Hanushek 2011). This has been intensified by the heightened political significance attached to international comparisons drawn from datasets such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), particularly in Europe, where becoming a global ‘knowledge-based’ superpower is central to European Union strategy (Ertl 2006; Dale and Robertson 2009).

However, whilst recruiting teachers from the top tier of graduates is undoubtedly a characteristic of ‘high performing’ school systems (Barber and Mourshed 2007), in many countries this is not easy to achieve (Furlong 2005; Ball and Forzani 2009; OECD 2011). In England, despite policies designed to raise academic entry quality, in the first decade of the century, only produced a modest rise in the proportion of entrants with a ‘good’ degree (a final degree award of $\geq 2i$), from 50% to 60% (Wilkins and Comber 2015, 1011); in the USA, where academic entry quality into teaching is significantly below OECD average (Freedman et al. 2008), the challenge is even more acute. While salary levels below that of comparable professions and wider ‘quality of life’ concerns for teachers partially explain these challenges, a more significant (and intractable) factor is the social status of teaching. In ‘high-performing’ systems such as Singapore and South Korea, teaching is viewed as a highly prestigious profession, meaning that teachers are recruited from the top performing 10% of graduates

(Barber and Mourshed 2007), whereas elsewhere it lags significantly behind other professions in this respect (Hargreaves 2009; Vegas 2007).

Improving entry quality has been a widespread feature in recent teacher education policy, for instance, the expansion of *Teach for All*, which recruits ‘elite’ graduates for two year ‘internships’ in schools serving socio-economically-disadvantaged communities, now operating in forty countries worldwide (Teach for All 2016), and in England, the differential financial incentives used to attract high-performing graduates (National Audit Office 2016). In a number of countries, including England and the USA, efforts have been made to attract ‘high-quality’ individuals already established in other careers to switch to teaching. Many US states have introduced ‘Fellows Programs’, with a similar ‘internship’ model as *Teach for All* (Kane et al. 2008; Muijs et al. 2010), whilst in England a range of employment-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes have been introduced in order to attract mature professional entrants.

Perhaps the most significant reforms of ITE in England began in 2010 with the explicit move to create a ‘school-led’ system (DfE 2010, 2011). Although this was primarily an ideologically-based drive to rebalance ITE, to shift the focus away from universities towards a more skills-based ‘apprenticeship’ approach (Furlong 2013), part of the rationale was that more ‘practically-focused’ training programmes would be attractive to career-changers than traditional university-led postgraduate ones (Taylor 2013). Proponents argued that attracting skilled and motivated professionals to teaching would not just bring the benefits of ‘accumulated wisdom’ to the classroom (Tigheelaar et al. 2010; Wilkins and Comber 2015), but have a positive impact on schools’ leadership and management practices (Freedman et al. 2008). Whilst not always explicitly articulated, the implicit message lying behind this is a

perception that the private sector values that career-changers can supposedly bring to teaching will bring about improvements to public sector leadership and management practices (Wilkins and Comber 2015). This focus on ‘transferable professional assets’ is also evident in schemes to bring ex-military personnel into teaching (the US *T3* and UK *Troops into Teaching* programmes [Tipping 2013]). These programmes have been promoted by governments with an explicit presumption that they bring ‘unique’ expertise in “leadership, discipline, motivation and teamwork” to the profession (Laws 2013; DfE 2014).

The discourse of ‘exceptionalism’, the notion of a straightforward process by which “getting the very best” into teaching in order to “get the best” out of young people, has come to dominate teacher recruitment policy. It is evident in the promotion of *Teach for All* internship programmes across the world, and in England it is also noticeable in the focus of policy-makers on how the profession could capitalise on high-calibre individuals (characterised as “bankers, architects and bosses” (Future Foundation 2009)) re-entering the labour market following the global recession of 2008 onwards. This discourse also lies behind the creation (in 2015) of a National Teaching Service, a task force of ‘elite’ Master Teachers available for secondment to support improvement in ‘struggling’ schools.

The discourse of exceptionalism is explored in this study of ‘elite career-changers’ in ITE, for although studies have noted the ‘added value’ second-career teachers bring to the classroom (Mayotte 2003; Tigchelaar et al. 2010), there is no compelling evidence of their impact on institutional practice or leadership culture from studies carried out in a wide range of contexts. Kane et al.’s study of the New York Fellows Program’s impact on overall school improvement, and Brouwer’s review of alternative certification in the Netherlands are equally inconclusive (2008).

The study reported here builds on an earlier study (*hereinafter referred to as ECC1*) of professionals who had successfully made the transition into teaching (Wilkins and Comber 2015). The most striking finding of this previous study was that despite strong evidence that resilience is a key attribute of career-changers, they are significantly less likely to complete their ITE programmes than ‘first career’ entrants. This follow-up study (*hereinafter referred to as ECC2*), therefore, focuses on the experiences of career-changers as they undertake ITE programmes and their perceptions of the distinctive positive attributes that they bring to the profession and the challenges they may face in transitioning between professional cultures. It also explores further issues from previous studies, such as the generally negative perceptions of in-school induction and mentoring (Long et al. 2012; Hobson and Ashby 2012; Wilkins and Comber 2015) and career changers’ perceptions that their ‘transferable’ attributes were under-utilised, leading to a lack of wider impact on school leadership cultures (Chambers 2002; Mayotte 2003; Wilkins and Comber 2015). In order to do this, this study set out to reveal further insights into the process of both ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a teacher and the complex identity construction involved in making the transition between often contrasting professional cultures.

Conceptual background

As already noted, research evidence regarding the experiences of second-career teachers and the contribution they make to the profession is limited. This study therefore draws primarily on literature for its conceptual starting point on more general studies of entry into teaching, such as what motivates individuals to teach, the process of enculturation into professional cultures and the ways in which teacher identities are constructed. In particular, it draws upon literature conceptualising the key challenges and tensions that can lead to high levels of attrition

amongst beginning teachers, as well as literature discussing ways in which successful beginning teachers are able to navigate these challenges and so develop stable ‘authentic’ professional identities in performative school cultures.

Motivation to teach?

The reasons for individuals choosing to enter (and remain in) teaching has been extensively researched, with remarkably consistent findings. Since Lortie first highlighted the significance of altruism for teachers (1975), numerous studies (e.g. Huberman 1989; Hansen 1995; Ayers 2001; Kyriacou et al. 2003) have also noted the moral imperative to ‘make a difference’ to students and so make a positive contribution to society; others have found this altruism to be a key factor in enabling both ‘survival’ of the undoubted challenges of an intensely demanding profession (Nias 1989; Day et al. 2005), whilst others have shown how this initial ‘pull’ to teaching is reinforced, enabling motivation to be maintained over time, by the fulfilment resulting from the ‘psychic rewards’ of positive relationships with students and impact on young people’s lives (Lortie 1975; Smethem 2007). The small number of studies focusing specifically on the motivation of individuals who have changed career to become teachers suggest they are similarly driven by social utility and intrinsic emotional satisfaction (Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant 2003; Manuel and Hughes 2006; Wilkins and Comber 2015).

Some research has found a relationship between teacher recruitment levels and conditions in the wider economy (so impacting on graduate-level job security (Borman and Dowling 2008); the perception of teaching as a career that is virtually immune to economic context means that both recruitment and retention levels are increased during economic downturns. However, there is little or no indication in previous studies that this is a significant ‘push’ factor for

career-changers; they are overwhelmingly ‘pulled’ by the perceived attractiveness of teaching as a career (Powers 2002; Anthony and Ord 2008; Wilkins and Comber 2015)

Challenges and tensions in developing stable teacher identities

Much research into teacher motivation has centred on the ways in which teacher identity is constructed and developed over time, linking to notions of ‘self-efficacy’ (Day et al. 2007). Many of these studies have concluded that identity construction is neither predetermined nor linear, but a dynamic process influenced by a multiplicity of individual, institutional and structural factors (Sachs 2003; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009); central to this contextualised notion of professional identity is a close intertwining of personal and professional identities (Day et al. 2007). Wenger’s work on communities of practice (1998) has been highly influential in studies examining the challenges teachers frequently experience in aligning personal/professional values with institutional ones. This has led to teacher identity construction being conceptualised as a ‘negotiation of power’ between the personal, institutional and wider policy contexts (Lasky 2015; Wilkins et al. 2012; Gu and Day 2013).

Many recent studies of teacher identity development have addressed the growing influence of ‘performative’ governance of education systems, through which layers of external and internal accountability frameworks intrude into all aspects of teachers’ work (Ball 2003; Troman et al. 2007; Cherubini 2009; Wilkins et al. 2012). Proponents argue that this trend, which characterises the global ‘modernisation’ agenda in education, has contributed to a greater professional self-confidence, setting in place the essential conditions for a ‘self-improving’ system (Hargreaves 2012, 8). Critics, however, argue that performative systems essentially ‘de-professionalise’ teachers by undermining conventional notions of autonomous

professionalism (Ozga 1995; Gleeson and Gunter 2001). Ball warns of the ‘profound consequences’ of performative systems that restrict space for teachers to maintain an “autonomous or collective ethical self” (2003, 226), and others argue that where ‘traditional’ professional environments that allow individual autonomy and collaborative critical reflection to flourish are undermined by the conflict and compromise associated with constructing professional identity in performative systems (Galton and MacBeath 2008; Priestley et al. 2012). The end result may be one where “commitment, judgement and authenticity within practice are sacrificed for impression and performance” (Ball 2000, 6).

Developing resilience

A dominant theme in research into teacher’s lives in recent years has been that of resilience, as researchers have sought to better understanding of the risk factors that lead to attrition and protective factors that mitigate these (Beltman et al. 2011). Whilst there has been a global focus on teacher recruitment in the past two decades, policymakers have also been increasingly concerned by perceived high levels of attrition. Researchers have identified a number of common risk factors that may lead to teachers leaving the profession; excessive administrative workload (Galton and Macbeath 2008; Castro et al. 2009), work-life balance pressures (Smethem 2007), behaviour management challenges (Buchanan 2010) and ‘policy initiative overload’ (Leaton-Gray 2006; Day and Gu 2010). However, it should be noted that some research provides a counter-balance to these findings. Hahs-Vaughn and Scherff (2008) found that these commonly-cited reasons for teacher attrition did not appear to be supported in their analysis of national staffing surveys in England; this study found salary levels were the only variable that appeared to significantly impact on attrition rates.

Other studies have focused on protective factors rather than risk, and a key theme has been the importance of the development of resilience through the maintenance of a stable professional identity. Perhaps the most significant influence on teacher resilience is high self-efficacy, enabling teachers to retain confidence in their professional competence and using their own achievements to continually reinforce this confidence (Day and Gu 2010; Castro 2009). Crucially, teacher resilience has been increasingly come to be seen not as an innate quality, but as an active process of adaptation in which successful teacher develop effective strategies for coping with adversity, meaning that they are ‘thriving, not just surviving’ (Beltman et al. 2011).

This notion that resilience can be fostered through active adaptation resonates with Sachs’ argument that de-professionalisation is not an inevitable consequence of the performative accountability, but that teachers can retain an authentic professionalism and moral purpose by means of a collegial ‘activist agency’ (2003). However, there is relatively little empirical evidence pertaining to this particular aspect of teacher identity, so it remains a question worthy of further study, particularly given that some studies have noted a possible generational effect, in which younger teachers, the ‘products’ themselves of increasingly performative schooling, are sanguine about accountability demands, effectively leading to performativity as a normative condition (Evans 2011; Wilkins et al. 2012). This is an aspect of teacher professionalism that may well become increasingly significant as the ‘post-performative’ generation of teachers (Wilkins 2012, 404) become established as school leaders.

Transitions to teaching: induction into professional cultures

Many studies of teacher resilience, particularly for beginning teachers, have noted the importance of a supportive collegial school environment (Olsen and Anderson 2007; Wang 2008; Beltman et al. 2011) Studies of early career teachers’ experiences of in-school support

suggest that not only is induction is variable in quality (Soares, et al. 2008; Carver and Feiman-Nemser 2009), but that developmental support can rapidly fall away once the formal induction period ends, leading to what has been described as a ‘reality aftershock’ (Hobson and Ashby, 2012). It is at this point, therefore, that the wider school culture (and, by extension, the school leadership culture) begins to play a crucial part in shaping the professional identity and the self-efficacy of the teacher (Hord 1997, Stoll and Louis 2007; Katzenmeyer and Moller 2009, Day and Gu 2010). Increasingly the Professional Learning Community concept is not seen simply as a matter for individual schools, but to groupings of schools coming together to share capacity and promote ‘school-to-school’ collegiality; this lies at the heart of the concept of a ‘self-improving system’ (Hargreaves 2012). Leadership culture, therefore, can be viewed as a key determinant of the extent to which genuinely collaborative professional cultures can be fostered (Stoll and Louis 2007; Gu and Day 2013).

This study takes as its starting point the notion that the transition from being a high-status professional to becoming a novice in a different field is a complex one, with even greater complexity overlaying this as the ‘second-career novice’ gradually becomes an expert again. In many respects career-changers differ little from other entrants to the profession other than their age; they are attracted to teaching for broadly the same reasons as others (Mayotte 2003; Anthony and Ord, 2008; Wilkins and Comber 2015), and the challenges in developing and maintaining an authentic professional identity are similar for all entrants (Haggard et al. 2006). Previous studies of second-career teachers have revealed notably low level of satisfaction with induction support (Powers 2002; Mayotte 2003) and frustration with the apparent reluctance of schools and ITE providers to capitalise on previous career experience/expertise (Haggard et al. 2006; Wilkins and Comber 2015). This strongly suggests that), suggesting that schools are

failing to fully capture ‘institutional gains’ (Tigchelaar et al. 2010) from individuals with the potential to be highly effective ‘change agents’ (Chambers 2002, 216).

Research questions

The aim of this study was to pursue lines of inquiry emerging from previous studies; both of second-career teachers in general (Chambers 2002; Mayotte 2003; Tigchelaar et al. 2010) and ‘elite’ career-changers in particular (Wilkins and Comber 2015). Wilkins and Comber found that career-changers’ previously acquired attributes reinforced their self-efficacy and therefore resilience, so enabling their ongoing success in a demanding professional role. However, this presented a paradox with ECC1’s finding that ‘elite’ career-changers entering teaching have a significantly higher level of attrition during ITE. ‘Elite’ career-changers make up around 9% of entrants to the profession each year in England (Wilkins and Comber 2015, 1015), so although a minority, they are a significant enough sub-group to make their attrition rate a concern, both in terms of maintaining future teacher supply and of their ‘value for money’ return on public expenditure investment. The current annual government expenditure on ITE in England is approximately £700m, producing approximately 33,000 new teachers a year, with the overwhelming majority of this sum spent on training bursaries (National Audit Office 2016). This translates to a wasted investment of around £20k of public money for each ITE ‘non-completion’, and given that career-changers are over-represented in subjects that attract the highest bursary levels, such as mathematics and physics, their disproportionately higher non-completion rate makes their cost-effectiveness even more questionable. The significance of this concern is even greater when we take into account the self-evident fact that even for

those who do make it into teaching – and stay in teaching, their higher age profile means it is likely they will have shorter careers than ‘first-career’ entrants.

This follow-up study sought possible explanations for the high levels of attrition by exploring the experiences of career-changers during their ITE programme, with a focus on key findings from previous studies;

- i. Motivation to change career;*
- ii. Resilience;*
- iii. Perceptions of mentoring (in comparison with previous careers);*
- iv. Personalised professional learning;*
- v. Recognition of (and opportunity to utilise) previously acquired competences/knowledge*

Specific research questions for this study were:

1. What were the most challenging aspects of participants’ ITE experiences?
2. What enabled them to ‘survive’ critical moments of challenge/self-doubt?
3. What was participants’ experience of school-based mentoring?
4. To what extent did participants perceive the ITE experience to be personalised to meet their needs?
5. What opportunities were there for explicitly drawing upon competences/attributes acquired during previous careers?

Research Method

Context

Participants were all undertaking a one-year PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) programme (the PGCE is the most common ‘Qualified Teacher Status’ route in England, responsible for approximately 85% of registrations (NCTL 2016)). Participants were drawn from all the four main PGCE ‘pathways’ available in England; (i) ‘traditional’ university-led, (ii) School Direct (fee-funded), (iii) School Direct (salaried), and (iv) School-Centred (SCITT). Detailed explanations of the different routes into teaching in England can be found elsewhere (Furlong 2013), but for the purposes of this study, it should be noted that even within these different routes there can be a significant variety of provision. The School Direct route was established by the Coalition Government in 2010 with the express intention of creating a more ‘practice-focused’ model. However, the overwhelming majority of School Direct programmes are offered through a university-school partnership, and although in many cases these were established as new programmes with a stronger emphasis on a ‘practice-based’ approach to professional learning, in others (including University A and University B in this study) the ‘fee-funded’ School Direct programmes are almost indistinguishable from the university-led programmes. SCITT programmes are generally more orientated to practice-based learning, although the vast majority are delivered in collaboration with universities and offer the same postgraduate level qualification as university-led PGCEs. School Direct (salaried) programmes, as the name suggests, are an employment-based training route, and so learning is much more significantly skewed towards a practice-based approach.

Participants and sampling

20 career-changers were interviewed for this study, drawn from four different ITE providers and including students on all four PGCE routes (see table 1). SCITT D offers its provision in collaboration with University A, SCITT E is in collaboration with a different university and was identified through the professional networks of the researcher.

The study was approved by the researcher's institutional Ethics Committee, with participant informed of the overall aims and methods of the study. This included provision, at the time of the initial request for participation, of a concise description of the methodology used to define 'elite' career-changers (see below). However, it should be noted that at this stage the term 'professional' career-changer was used rather than 'elite', since whilst the 'discourse of exceptionalism' described earlier justifies the use of the term 'elite', using it at the point when participants are being asked to 'self-identify' was felt to be problematic for a number of reasons. It is probable that many potential participants would have been unwilling to label themselves as 'elite', and create unhelpful connotations about the focus of the research for those that were willing to participate. Once participants had expressed an interest in the study, the participation consent letters reverted to using 'elite career-changers', and the reason for the change of terminology was explained to all participants at the start of their interview.

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

For the purposes of this study, 'elite' career-changers are individuals whose previous occupations fall within the top three tiers (out of seventeen) of the UK government's National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NSSEC), with an additional criteria requiring them to have been employed in such a capacity for a minimum of three years. The NSSEC methodology (explained in more detail in Wilkins and Comber 2015) is derived from the Goldthorpe Schema (Goldthorpe 2000), and provides a clear differentiation of occupational positioning within labour markets; occupations in the top three tiers are distinctively

characterised by high levels of authority and autonomy (ONS 2014). None of the providers in this study held detailed records of the previous career histories of students, but all four felt that their career-changer intake was broadly similar to the national figure (as determined by larger scale sampling in the ECC study) of around 9% (6% for Primary and 12% Secondary). This is perhaps worth noting, as it does not support the often-cited assumption that school-based ITE routes (SCITTs and School Direct) are particularly attractive to mature entrants and career-changers. Table 2 suggests that subject specialism is probably more significant in determining the appeal for career-changers; mathematics is particularly prominent in this study, with other STEM subjects and Modern Languages also featuring heavily. Although national data is not able to confirm this, it is likely that this reflects a national trend; this would be unsurprising, given that these are subjects that traditionally struggle to recruit to target and so attract generous recruitment incentives.

Interviews

The participants were undertaking PGCEs during 2014-15, and were initially contacted either just before beginning or in the early part of their studies; 2 interviews took place in December 2014, with a further 12 (all from University A and B) taking place in January-May 2015. The two SCITT providers were contacted slightly later (in November-December 2014), with all but one interview taking place during March-May 2016 – the final participant was interviewed just after completion of their PGCE, in June 2015. The method of identifying potential participants was effective in that it only elicited responses from individuals with career histories that broadly matched the NSSEC criteria (see table 2 for participants' own descriptions of career background).

INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE

The interviews were semi-structured in approach, using prompts closely related to the key themes emerging from the ECC study; *motivation for career change, resilience, experiences of being mentored, personalised professional learning and recognition of previously acquired competences*. The interviews also adopted a similar approach to the ECC study, with participants asked (in advance of the interview) to come prepared to reflect upon significant ‘critical incidents’ in their professional development. Their reflections were used to stimulate discussion in the interviews and give participants an opportunity to articulate the extent to which these had both been influenced by their previous career histories, and in turn influenced their developing professional persona. As a consequence of the different contexts of participants’ current teaching posts – and of the wide variety of their previous career histories – the foci and evolving scope of interviews varied considerably.

Data Analysis

The analytical approach adopted for this study was a hybrid one, using both deductive and inductive approaches to coding (Fereday 2006). All the interviews were carried out by a single researcher, but a third party transcriber was employed and a research colleague supported the analysis phase by carrying out an independent ‘parallel’ coding of the first 6 completed interviews. The initial coding used *a priori* themes drawn from established literature in the field (set out in the ‘Conceptual Framework’ section); these transcripts were then exchanged between the collaborating research and re-coded, with the resulting coding revisited several times as each new interview was analysed and the themes reorganised and refined. The remaining transcripts (n=14) were analysed by the lead researcher using the established codes;

once this process was completed, three transcripts were selected at random for ‘coding cross-check’ by the other colleague. Further validation was carried out by ‘member checking’ (Miles and Huberman 1984), with a random sample (n=3) of participants contacted to offer their views on the researcher’s interpretation of their responses.

Findings

Motivation to change career

The motivation of the participants in this study for entering the teaching closely match those of previous studies of entrants to teaching. Almost all participants (n=18) suggest that a desire to contribute to the ‘social mission’ of schooling was a significant factor in their career-change decision. This also echoes the findings of previous studies of career-changers in that ‘pull factors’ (the rewards of teaching) appear to be much more significant than ‘push factors’ (dissatisfaction with previous careers and/or redundancy). Sam’s response is typical.

I meet a lot of people who think that teaching was a safety net for me, that I’d somehow gone into it as an escape from some awful job, or that I’d been made redundant or something...[but]...I just reached a point where I felt I wanted a different challenge (Sam)

One of the participants, Ross, had actually been facing redundancy when he applied for a PGCE, but even in this case he suggests that although the threat of redundancy has influenced the timing of his decision, it was not the primary cause.

It could be hindsight, but I think now it...[redundancy]...was the best thing for me... I’m from a family of teachers and they joke about it being, you know, inevitable, but I think

they're probably right. It's always been at the back of my mind; I nearly applied for a PGCE when I was at uni, but somehow it just didn't happen (Ross)

Although Ross was only the participants who explicitly articulated a sense of being 'pre-destined to teach', more than half (n=11) either come from 'a teaching family', or have a significant adult in their life who is a teacher (in two cases a current partner). The notion of individuals following in familial footsteps is a familiar one in studies of teachers' lives (Heafford and Jennison 1998), although the sense of destiny is not as marked here as it was with ECC1 participants.

Resilience

Resilience has become an increasingly significant attribute that teacher educators look for when recruiting to their programmes, building on the substantial body of research evidence pointing to resilience as being crucial not just to teacher retention, but to teacher *effectiveness* (Gu and Day 2007; Beltman et al. 2011). ECC1 participants almost unanimously perceived themselves to have high levels of resilience, and this is also largely the case with participants in this study.

Notably, almost every participant (n=17) had experienced at least one significant point in their PGCE studies which gave them serious cause to consider leaving the course. For some (n=5) this was due an isolated (albeit very challenging) incident, but more commonly (n=12) involved a more sustained period of self-doubt. The precise circumstances of the difficult moments/periods were varied, but more common issues included difficulties in coping with workload issues (n=4), 'personality clashes' with student peers, school-based mentors and/or tutors (n=3), disillusionment with culture in school (n=3) and external pressures (negative impact on family life/relationships) (n=3).

However, participants clearly articulated a confidence in their personal resilience, and that this had been key to them surviving these challenges. Sam attributes this to inherent personal qualities, whereas Sophie and Will directly link their resilience to previous professional experience.

I nearly didn't go back in on the second week, but, it's not in my nature to give up so easily. I don't rush into things headlong, but once I've decided on something then I don't give up on it....It's about personal pride. (Sam)

When I thought about where I've come from, I thought I just can't let a bunch of Year 9s get to me...I've had to face a huge amount to get on in construction, and I've had to fight for respect in a seriously masculine environment. I think I drew on that, and it got me through. (Sophie)

There's a bit of a sense of "We're special" in teaching, that the pressures are somehow unique, but...I used to have a whole lot riding on decisions I made every day. It's no different, and I think in some ways that's been really helpful for me in coming to terms with the pressure. I know I can cope. (Will)

Only one participant was going through a period of 'self-doubt' at the time of interview. Tom had recently completed a gruelling school placement experience; his teaching had "not gone well" and relationships with his school-based mentor and with his university tutor were "difficult". Finally, on the day of the interview he learned that he had failed an academic assignment. Despite this, Tom appears to have a 'reservoir of resilience'

I don't actually feel like I am not coping, it's just that I haven't quite adapted. I think it's in my control, though. I'm used to pressure and I'm not fazed by it...I've overcome bigger things than this, professionally speaking, and so I can do that again. (Tom)

Tom's insistence that he is 'not fazed' by pressure is characteristic of an overwhelming sense of resilience amongst these career-changers; both Tom and Will appear to provide a counter to

a widely-held perception (in public discourse and popular media rather than research literature) that teaching is, compared to other professions, exceptionally stressful.

Experiences of being mentored

The overriding perception of school-based mentoring emerging from this study is of inconsistency. Nearly three-quarters of participants (n=14) recalled significant variance in the perceived quality of support offered.

It was pretty clear in my first school that the mentor didn't want me in her class...It made me feel really uncomfortable...like I couldn't ask for anything. Now...my mentor is really supportive, and treats me like a colleague. I get the respect, but she gives me really good feedback. It makes such a difference to get someone who really understands what mentoring is. (Claire)

My mentor didn't go to the training...he told me he didn't need to because he'd been mentoring for years. He was a great teacher, I learnt a lot observing him at the start, but he had no idea how to support me properly. To be honest it felt unprofessional. (Ibrahim)

Dissatisfaction with mentoring, particularly when compared to their experiences in previous careers, had been a key finding of many studies of both career-changers (Haggard et al 2016; Wilkins and Comber 2015) and other beginning teachers (Carver and Fieman-Nemser 2009; Hobson and Ashby 2012), so participants were specifically asked about their pre-teaching experiences of mentoring (either as mentor or as mentee) to see whether this elicited similarly unfavourable comparisons. This was not actually the case to a significant degree; although Claire did bring with her a clear sense of “*what good mentoring looks like*” the comparison with mentoring she had experienced in school was implicit rather than explicit.

There were occasional references to the difficulties mentors might have in working with older career changers, but these tended to focused purely on age difference.

She was, at least 10-15 years younger than me, and she hadn't been teaching long. I didn't do anything to make her uncomfortable, but it's difficult not to....the biggest problem was that she didn't want to say anything critical...she tended to just do stuff in writing and not talk to me. (Emily)

It's probably understandable that some mentors find it difficult when someone like me turns up...it's pretty unusual to be faced with a 50 year old novice. (Mark)

Emily gave no indication that her mentor found it difficult to support her had any connection to her status as a career-changer (in fact, she said that in all probability her mentor had not even been aware that she had been an established professional prior to entering teaching). She saw the difficulty as simply one of insecurity in dealing with an older 'novice' (Mark also commented that "*it's pretty unusual to be faced with a 50 year old novice*") combined with a lack proper mentor training.

Personalised professional learning

Notwithstanding this variable experience of mentoring, the participants were largely very positive about the practicum elements of their PGCE. Although the practicum triggered the majority of critical moments of self-doubt, it also provided ongoing validation of the decision to change career – the psychic rewards of positive engagements with young people and the satisfaction of doing 'socially purposeful work'. For Jon is was the "*lightbulb moment*" of a child overcoming a learning challenge that "*made it all worthwhile*"; similar anecdotes were related by other participants.

Impressions of non-practicum elements of the PGCE (seminars/workshops/lectures either in university or school-based training centres) were more mixed, with some participants (n=5) explicitly critical, primarily due to a perceived mismatch between ‘reality’ and ‘theory’. These criticisms echo those found in many studies of pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their ITE programmes (not just career-changers), suggesting that many student teachers are sceptical of the utility and relevance of ‘theoretical’ components (Hobson 2003; Hobson et al. 2008). However, the reservations expressed here are nuanced.

I do sometimes find myself thinking, you know, is this really important?....this would be so much more relevant if we did it in school, but, I do appreciate that learning the theory is useful...up to a point (Jamie)

Only one participant felt that their training experience had been personalised to take account of their background. Mark, with a 25-year career as a civil engineer behind him, describes a number of situations when tutors had made explicit reference to his background and asked him to make particular contribution in training sessions, and also noted that his SCITT Programme Leader had made special arrangements for a placement in a College specialising in vocational STEM education. This, he suggests, was a significant experience.

The school really appreciated me and I really felt like I made big strides. It was a real validation...I came away knowing that I had something extra to give. (Mark)

Although no other participants acknowledged any personalisation of their training experience, this was not generally viewed negatively. Some (n=3) felt that they might not have been comfortable with being “singled out” (Nur), suggesting that to do so might have brought unwarranted additional pressure, whilst Sophie clearly felt that it would have been inappropriate.

I think I've had enough to cope with, frankly...I don't think I'd be comfortable with constantly have to talk about...tell us about your work, how does this relate? (Andy)

Of course I can draw on my experience when it's relevant, but teaching is just a different world. I don't think I have a head start on anyone and, I don't feel that I would benefit from getting special treatment. (Sophie)

This is clearly an aspect of the teaching induction process that was viewed with ambivalence by participants. Whilst Andy and Sophie directly expressed a desire to be 'treated like others', some participants (n=3) were frustrated by an apparent lack of accommodation; both Chris and Rajinder described training sessions (one related to applying for jobs, another on 'laboratory safety') that they felt took no account of their previous experience as "going through the motions".

Recognition of previously acquired competences

The frustration felt by some participants at the lack of personalisation of training is also reflected in a sense of previously acquired skills and expertise being ignored. In the example above, Rajinder goes on to say that this was a missed opportunity for other students

It wasn't the only time when I've felt, if only you'd realise how much...real world experience is in the room, we could all learn from each other. (Rajinder)

As with previous studies of career-changers, there is a strong sense that schools appear reluctant to capitalise on prior knowledge/expertise (with the notable exception of Mark's placement in a specialist vocational education college). None of the participants recall a head teacher asking them about their previous careers; with the exception of Mark's SCITT Manager, this was the same for ITE tutors. Claire, who was told by her university programme leader that "everybody

starts here as a blank slate - you can't walk in and think you've got a head start because of what you did before", perceived this to be a significant challenge

It felt as if she wanted to put me in my place, set down a marker. It could have been really undermining, but....it actually made me dig and I was even more determined to see this through. (Claire)

Although Claire's programme leader was unusually explicit in expressing their views, the perception that previous experiences are at best irrelevant, and at worst a hindrance, was widely shared by participants.

Discussion

Before discussing the findings of this study, its limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the small scale of the study and its relatively narrow focus, which is exclusively on the perceptions of individuals currently undergoing the process of career transition, means that any claims made must be cautious ones. In particular, although participants are drawn from the four most common routes into teaching in England, the sample is in no way representative of the variety of provision available. As noted in the Research Method section, the two University providers are operating a model in which the 'university-led' and School Direct (tuition) programmes offer an almost identical experience; this is certainly not the case for all ITE provision in England. Similarly, whilst some SCITT provision is run solely or largely independent from university partners, the two SCITT providers involved in this study offer a collaborative provision model with relatively close involvement with their university partners – both offer the same postgraduate PGCE qualification as the university 'core' programme. For this reason, the interviews did not focus in any detail on the balance between 'academic' and 'practice' aspects of programmes. The narrow scope of the study, focusing on the perceptions of student

teachers, also means that the perspective of ITE providers and of school leaders and mentor teachers is missing. Clearly further to broaden the scope of this study would facilitate a richer understanding of this complex research question.

Notwithstanding these important caveats, the study did produce some useful insights into the experience of career-changers of the very early stage of career-transition. In many respects, perhaps the most notable finding was a reinforcement of previous studies showing that career-changers express similar views about career choice and the early career experiences as any other entrant to teaching. A sense of *civic duty*, the desire to contribute to the ‘social good’, is overwhelmingly the most significant motivation to teach, echoing the findings of a succession of studies of teachers’ lives (e.g. Lortie 1975; Nias 1989; Flores and Day 2006). Other similarities can be seen in the importance of relational rewards of positive experiences with students in sustaining motivation, a perception that may explain school-based components of ITE being valued more than the more theoretical elements.

Previous studies of career-changers have found that career-changers perceive prior career success as a key factor in developing resilience in the face of the challenges involved in the transition to teaching (Wilkins and Comber 2015, 1024). This in turn supports the findings of many studies finding resilience to be central in enabling teachers to negotiate challenges during the critical early development of a stable, authentic professional identity (Cherubini 2009; Pillen et al. 2013; Gu and Day 2013).

A key motivation for carrying out this study was the paradox that whilst previous career success appeared to be key to ‘surviving’ moments of self-doubt, ‘elite’ career-changers are significantly *less* likely to complete their ITE experience than other entrants (Wilkins and

Comber 2015, 1015). However, this study does not provide a compelling explanation for this; conversely, it reinforces the findings from many previous studies investigating the ways in which beginning teachers establish themselves within the ‘situated culture’ of their school, a process by which they adapt their developing professional identity to specific micro-political contexts (Ball and Forzani 2009; Keltchermans and Ballet 2002; Wilkins et al. 2012). These career-changers clearly have a strong sense of possessing distinctive attributes that support the process of ‘becoming’ a teacher, and so this study does not resolve the paradox of career-changers’ low ITE completion rates.

It should be noted, that the study shares a significant limitation with the preceding one; it does not capture the experiences of those who *do* leave the profession (through ‘course failure’ or voluntary withdrawal). Almost all of the participants were, at the time of interview, making good or better progress in their studies (despite having experienced moments of self-doubt); only Tom was at a point where he was experiencing significant difficulty. During the ‘participant-checking’ phase of the study, it transpired that two of the sample had in fact failed to complete their PGCE. Jamie withdrew only three weeks after being interviewed, citing only ‘personal reasons’, whilst Steve withdrew close to the end of his final teaching placement, citing ‘workload pressures’, also a relatively short time after interview. Tom, meanwhile, successfully completed his PGCE, having recovered from his mid-course ‘crisis’.

This sketchy information was obtained from ITE providers, and it was not possible to establish contact with either of the participants who withdrew to carry out follow-up interviews (nor, indeed, with Tom, to explore further his ‘recovery experience’). This highlights a fundamental difficulty in researching retention/non-retention issues (in any context, not just ITE); namely the difficulty in gaining access to individuals who have left. In many respects this is

understandable, given that withdrawal may often be perceived as a ‘failure’, but it is a significant challenge to researching the factors that influence those who do not ‘survive’ the crisis points. Certainly there were no obvious indicators in the interviews with Jamie and Steve of what might have triggered withdrawal; if anything their general perceptions of the PGCE experiences appears rather more positive than others.

Teacher attrition has been widely studied, with workload stress (MacDonald, 1999), behavioural challenges (Buchanan 2010) and a lack of scope for innovation and creativity (Goddard et al. 2006; Burnard and White 2008) commonly cited as key factors. Other studies have found similar patterns in withdrawals during ITE (Bielby et al. 2007; Hobson et al. 2009). However, this means that the puzzling level of attrition of career-changers entering teaching remains unanswered. We still do not know why a distinct sub-set of entrants to the teaching profession, who are without doubt high-calibre individuals, who are highly motivated and display notably high levels of resilience, are significantly *less* likely to survive the ITE experience. This runs counter to the ‘common-sense’ assumption that the very qualities and characteristics that distinguish ‘elite’ career-changers from other entrants would equip them better than most to survive crisis points. If anything, this study has reinforced the dissonance between the perceived self-efficacy and resilience of ‘elite’ career-changers and the population level outcomes on their ITE experience.

It is not possible to disaggregate system level data on teacher retention (either in the English school system or elsewhere) to identify the characteristics of individuals (beyond age, gender, ethnicity and phase/subject specialism) leaving the profession. However, it would be entirely reasonable to speculate that the higher than average ITE attrition rate may also be reflected in

the in-service attrition rates of ‘elite’ career-changers. This would suggest a need to further explore the career trajectories of this distinctive sub-group of teachers.

Teacher recruitment policy in England has generally seen ‘elite’ career-changers as being at least a partial solution to the challenge of raising teacher quality (Freedman et al. 2008), but more recently they have also been viewed as a solution to a quantity problem, as a way of meeting teacher supply needs (Wilkins 2014). However, if it is the case that career-changers (i) have a higher non-completion rate, (ii) are predominantly recruited to subjects that attract the more generous bursaries, and (iii) even if they do complete their ITE successfully, are likely to have shorter careers than other entrants, then the overall cost effectiveness of investing heavily in the recruitment of career-changers is called into question. This is particularly pertinent in the English context, where government ITE expenditure is overwhelmingly directed towards training bursaries.

It is widely recognised that although entry quality is key to teacher quality, so too is the quality and appropriateness of ITE and in-service professional development (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009; Barber and Mourshed 2007; OECD 2011). Whilst this study reveals career-changers to be highly motivated and resilient, it is apparent that neither pre- nor in-service professional development support takes sufficient account of their distinctive needs and potential contributions. Given the evidence that personalising the training and induction experience is crucial if career-changers are to build on and utilise established competencies and attributes (Mayotte 2003; Haggard et al. 2006), this is clearly a cause for concern.

In conclusion, this study builds on the work of the earlier studies to provide further insights into the motivation of high-status professionals who make the decision to move into teaching,

and into their experience of the transition from expert in one domain to novice in another. Notwithstanding the acknowledgement of the limitations of this small-scale study, it provides support for the findings of previous studies that schools and ITE providers need to do more to acknowledge and so ease the challenge of ‘transition shock’ inherent in transitioning to the distinctive professional culture of teaching. However, the picture is not a straightforward one. One interpretation of these findings could be that the current global policy focus in entry quality overlooks a potentially important aspect of the ITE experience; that is, the need to ensure ITE programmes are sufficiently flexible and personalised to enable a diverse range of entrants to flourish.

Alternatively, of course, the ambivalent responses of some participants in this study may mean that a more personalised training experience would do little to improve the retention rates of career-changers. The apparently paradoxical level of attrition amongst this group may even be explained by the mere fact that mature individuals with ‘high value’ CVs have less to lose by leaving teaching when they experience frustrating or demotivating experiences. Whereas a first-career entrant has invested their entire ‘professional capital’ in teaching, and so is likely to view withdrawal as a possibly traumatic last resort, the career-changer has the perhaps more palatable ‘escape route’ of returning to a previous career. If this is the case, then despite the fact that career-changers bring undoubted added-value to teaching, are clearly motivated to teach for the same reasons as any other entrant, and, moreover, possess very high levels of resilience, keeping them in the profession may always prove to be a difficult challenge.

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Table 1: ITE routes of participants

	‘Core’	SD (fee-funded)	SD (salaried)	SCITT	Total
University A	4	5	0	0	9
University B	2	1	2	0	5
SCITT D	0	1	0	2	3
SCITT E	0	0	0	3	3
Total	6	7	2	5	20

TO BE INSERTED AROUND PAGE 11

Table 2: Participants’ previous career and PGCE subject/phase

	Gender	ITE route	Phase/Subject	Previous career
Andy	M	SCITT	Mathematics	Accountant (company director)
Chris	M	SCITT	Primary	Marketing Executive
Claire	F	HEI (SD)	Primary	Sales Executive
David	M	HEI (SD)	Mathematics	Banking
Emily	F	HEI (core)	Chemistry	Higher Education lecturer
Ibrahim	M	HEI (core)	Mathematics	Financial Services Executive
Jamie	M	HEI (SD)	Modern Languages	Public Relations Management

Jon	M	HEI (SD salaried)	Mathematics	Financial Services Executive
Kelly	F	HEI (SD)	Physics	Engineering
Mark	M	SCITT	Physics	Civil Engineering
Mohamed	M	HEI (core)	Mathematics	Engineering
Nur	F	HEI (SD)	Mathematics	Banking
Paul	M	SCITT	Physics	Engineering (CEO)
Rajinder	F	HEI (core)	Chemistry	Industrial Chemist
Ross	M	HEI (core)	Geography	Civil Engineering
Sam	F	HEI (SD salaried)	Primary	Lawyer
Sophie	F	SCITT	Mathematics	Engineering
Steve	M	SCITT (SD)	Mathematics	Banking
Tom	M	HEI (core)	Mathematics	Engineering
Will	M	HEI (SD)	Modern Languages	HR manager

**Jamie and Steve did not complete their PGCE year*