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Why I chose to become a teacher and why I might choose not to become one. A survey of student teachers' perceptions of teaching as a career

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Abstract

A detailed questionnaire about why they chose teaching as a career and the challenges that they face on their ITT course was completed by 189 third year student teachers on a third year BA in Primary Education with QTS programme at a university in Wales. The findings showed that several factors contributed to their choosing a career as primary school teachers, including reasons related to perceived teaching ability, altruistic reasons, intrinsic reasons, and extrinsic reasons. The data also revealed that the main stressors faced by the respondents were linked to four factors, namely: high levels of accountability; the pressure of monitoring; the continual demand for change; and the perceived lack of respect given to the profession. Differences were found between the male and the female respondents in the ways they perceived their role within the profession. The findings have important implications for all those who are concerned with the attracting and retaining the most competent teachers to/in our primary schools.

Key words

ITT; student teachers; attracting and retaining teachers; teacher stress.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore the reasons why people choose to become primary school teachers and the challenges they experience during their training. The first part of the article seeks to provide an overview of the academic literature on this topic while the second provides details of student teachers' responses to a range of questions about this area. It also explores some of the differences between how male and female student teachers view the profession. There can be little doubt that attracting and retaining the highest quality teachers is a fundamental requirement if we are to achieve the best standards of pupil progress, aspiration and achievement in our schools in the future. It is intended that the findings of this study will shed some light on the factors which need to be taken into account when trying to motivate the most suitable candidates to enter the profession and ensuring that they have extensive, fulfilling, satisfying careers as teachers.

Why do people choose to become teachers?

There is a wealth of material (e.g. Reid and Caudwell, 1997; Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000; Manuel and Hughes, 2006) which highlights that intrinsic motivations (such as finding the job enjoyable) and altruistic motivations (such as finding teaching socially meaningful) are the most important reasons teachers enter the profession. Drawing on academic literature and a series of international surveys, Watt and Richardson (2010) proposed a 'FIT Choice' model (Factors Influencing Teachers) to explain why young people choose to become teachers. According to this model, people join the teaching profession for five reasons: antecedent socialization (prior experience of teaching/learning and social influences by significant others around them); perceived teaching ability; intrinsic reasons (an interest in the teaching career and their subject); personal utility reasons (quality-of-life reasons such as a job security, teaching hours, vacations, job transferability and mobility); social utility reasons (opportunity

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to make a meaningful social contribution, enhance social equity, work with children and adolescents); and choosing teaching as a fall-back career. The literature suggests that most teachers do not enter the profession for the material benefits it offers (Ross and Hutchings, 2003; Krcici and Grmeck, 2005; Heinz, 2015) nor is it seen by the majority as a 'fall-back career' (Richardson and Watt, 2007; Watt and Richardson, 2010).

Manuel and Hughes (2006) argued that many pre-service teachers saw the profession as one of high demand and low returns but found that such teachers remained motivated against the odds as a result of a core motivation which the authors described as the 'calling of teaching'. The opportunity to 'make a difference' and 'job satisfaction' have also been found to be salient motivators for choosing teaching as a career (Ross and Hutchings, 2003; Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant, 2003). Brookhart and Freeman (1992) also found that altruistic motivations were high amongst primary school teachers, especially female teachers (Tudhope, 1944). The literature also suggests that teachers' experiences of their own former teachers were less important but important nonetheless (Reid & Caudwell, 1997; Iantzen, 1981). Menzies, et al. (2015) noted 'many interviewees' family connection to the profession helped them to the role' (Menzies, et al., 2015:7).

Career progression, social impact and school-focused factors like culture and ethos have also been seen to contribute towards choosing a teaching career. According to the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) (2000), the four reasons teachers remain in the profession were: recognition of their work; pupil development and learning; manager approval; and family and friends. It was crucial to primary teachers that their post was 'socially satisfying' in terms of their relationships with students and colleagues (Nias, 1989). Meanwhile for head teachers, motivations to stay in teaching include the prospect of future rewards, the enhancement of school resourcing and the provision of support and the advisory service (NFER, 2000).

The challenges faced by teachers/student teachers

Student teachers as well as their qualified colleagues face many challenges during their course, particularly during their professional teaching experience. According to a survey conducted by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) in 2015 these challenges included: a heavy workload; teacher bashing in the press; constant changes; challenging student behaviour; and Ofsted inspections. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report released in 2014 found that two-thirds of teachers felt undervalued. Although teachers in the UK were above average in feeling valued, at 35% (unlike France where the figure was only 5%), they still fared quite poorly.

As a profession, teaching is plagued by significant turnover, often attributed to burnout, with documented rates of teacher turnover rising in schools since the turn of the century (Ingersoll, 2001; Aud et al., 2011). Around 10% of UK teachers leave state sector teaching each year (YouGov, 2015). According to a survey carried out by the YouGov (2015) for the National Union of Teachers (NUT), 50% of teachers were planning to leave the profession within the next two years and over 40% of newly qualified teachers left the profession within 5 years of teaching. For teachers, who stay, stress can impact their ability to be responsive and active in the classroom. Multiple sources of stress have been cited, including time demands, workload, student disruptive behaviour and organisational factors (Blasé, 1986; Boyle, et al., 1995). Teacher stress and their inability to cope can lead to burnout (McCormick and Barnett, 2011). The research suggests that in order to avoid emotional exhaustion and psychological distress teachers need a sense of self-efficacy and a sense of connectedness with students and colleagues (Klassen, Perry and Frenzel, 2012; Punch and Tuettman, 1990). However, few attempts have been made to address stress and burnout amongst teachers and to boost teachers' well-being (Kyriacou, 2001; Chaplain, 2008). Programmes that have been geared towards teachers are varied in scope and have been met with varying degrees of success (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008).

One approach that has been suggested is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Hofmann, et al., 2010). This approach suggests that teachers may derive benefit from learning and practising mindfulness techniques. Various researchers have argued that stress reduction techniques should be made more readily available to teachers (Grossman, et al., 2004; Hofmann, et al., 2010) and that a greater effort needs to be made to tackle the causes of teacher stress (OECD, 2014; ATL, 2015).

The second part of this article seeks to explore the views of student teachers regarding why they chose a career in teaching and the challenges that they face in their Initial Teacher Training (ITT) course.

Research Design

A detailed questionnaire was sent out to two cohorts (2015 intake and 2016 intake) of third year student teacher on a B.A. in Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) degree course at a university in Wales. Out of 194 students who completed the questionnaire, 189 questionnaires were returned, making a response rate of 97%. Part one of the questionnaire employed multiple-choice questions to gather information regarding the respondents. The variables included sex, age, and medium through which the teacher training course was studied. Part two contained a range of questions which were designed to elicit information from the respondents about why they chose to become primary school teachers and the challenges they had experienced during their training. The key themes for the questions were based on an analysis of the above literature. The respondents responded to the question on a five point Likert scale ranging from 'agree strongly' to 'disagree strongly'. The statistics are based on the 'agree' and 'strongly agree' categories which were merged together for the purposes of this study. The respondents included 30 males (16%) and 159 females (84%). The data were analysed by the SPSS statistical package, employing the reliability, Pearson correlation and partial correlation routines. To establish whether the responses between males and females were statistically significant the Pearson's chi-squared test (χ^2) was applied. The differences between the two groups was considered to be statistically significant when the p-value of the χ^2 was less than 0.05. To ensure validity and reliability care was taken to ensure that the questionnaires were completed anonymously and independently. The activity was undertaken purely for research purposes and was not used as part of the student mentoring process.

Results and Discussion

The following results and discussion were drawn using the quantitative data to be found in the tables below. Table 1 explores the reasons why the respondents chose to become primary school teachers. Ninety-seven per cent claimed that they chose the profession because they loved working with children and because they found teaching really satisfying. Teaching was also highly valued because it was potentially a varied, challenging and enjoyable profession. Almost all claimed that they chose teaching because every day as a teacher was different (95%); that it was a fun profession (93%); and that they enjoyed the challenges that the job presented them (88%). Eighty-four per cent (84%) chose the teaching profession because they had been inspired by their own teachers and a similar percentage that becoming a teacher had been a lifelong ambition (82%).

The figures suggest that the second highest priority for young people who want to become teachers was the feeling that the profession could enable them to make a real difference to the lives of pupils and to the world. Almost all noted that they became teachers because education could potentially make a very real difference to children's lives (96%); and make a positive response to the worst aspects of modern life such as poverty, racism and prejudice (95%). An overwhelming majority also chose teaching because it was a profession they felt could help to make the world a better place (86%). Sixty-seven per cent claimed that they felt that teaching was their calling in life. While we may, rightly, take considerable comfort and pride from the fact that the profession attracts people for such noble reasons, these findings have an important message for all those concerned with the future

DAVIES & HUGHES: WHY I CHOSE TO BECOME A TEACHER AND WHY I MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO BECOME ONE. A SURVEY OF STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A CAREER

recruitment of primary school teachers. To recruit the best and most suitable teachers for the future, potential candidates should be helped to understand that teaching is a profession that could possibly enable them make a significant difference to the world and the lives of the people within it.

Table 1. The reasons participants gave for becoming a teacher.

| | Overall % | Males % | Females % | χ^2 | p< |
|---|--------------|------------|--------------|----------|--------|
| I love working with children | 97 | 80 | 100 | 26.658 | 0.0001 |
| I find teaching really satisfying | 97 | 77 | 99 | 26.738 | 0.0001 |
| Education can change the world | 96 | 90 | 97 | 0.012 | NS |
| Education can make a positive response to some of the worst aspects of modern life e.g. poverty, racism and prejudice | 95 | 100 | 95 | 0.935 | NS |
| Every day as a teacher is different | 95 | 90 | 96 | 1.479 | NS |
| It is a fun profession | 93 | 90 | 93 | 0.045 | NS |
| I want to make a difference to children's lives | 84 | 98 | 98 | 0.169 | NS |
| I love facing challenges | 88 | 67 | 93 | 13.905 | 0.0002 |
| I want to make the world a better place | 86 | 67 | 86 | 9.641 | 0.0019 |
| I was inspired by my own teachers | 84 | 63 | 88 | 9.770 | 0.0018 |
| It has been my lifelong ambition | 82 | 57 | 86 | 15.577 | 0.0001 |
| Someone suggested that it would be a great career for me | 70 | 73 | 69 | 0.029 | NS |
| It is a great career with excellent chances of promotion | 69 | 97 | 63 | 11.415 | 0.0007 |
| It was the culmination of a process of reflection about what I wanted to do with my life | 68 | 70 | 67 | 0.006 | NS |
| It is my calling | 67 | 47 | 72 | 7.379 | 0.0066 |
| I will be able to have the same holidays as my children | 54 | 20 | 60 | 14.977 | 0.0001 |
| My teachers were my heroes | 43 | 59 | 54 | 0.492 | NS |
| The pay is good | 42 | 67 | 37 | 7.891 | 0.0050 |
| The long holidays | 41 | 60 | 38 | 4.284 | 0.0385 |
| I could not find another suitable career | 23 | 30 | 21 | 0.632 | NS |

Table 1. shows that the least popular reasons for choosing a career in primary school teaching are the ones linked to the extrinsic rewards of the profession. Half the sample (54%) felt that the job was a suitable one because it would enable them to have the same holidays as their children. Forty-two per cent chose teaching because they felt that the pay was good and that the job enabled them to have long holidays (41%). Only a small minority (23%) chose the profession because they could not find another suitable career.

The data in Table 1 support the findings of previous research (e.g. Ross & Hutchings, 2003; Heinz, 2015; ATL, 2015) that primary school teachers are more likely to enter the profession for intrinsic reasons (such as an interest in the teaching career) and altruistic or social utility reasons (such as an interest in making a meaningful contribution) than for personal utility reasons or because they consider it as a fall-back career. The 'calling of teaching' (Manuel & Hughes, 2006) remained strong as did 'the desire to make a difference' (Ross & Hutchings, 2003) and the desire to work in a career which was 'socially satisfying' (Nias, 1989) featured highly in the respondents' priorities.

Table 2. looks at the sample's responses to a series of statements about teaching. They reveal that despite being generally satisfied in their career choice they found their ITT course to be very challenging and demanding (81%). Such was the level of the demands and challenges that twenty-

DAVIES & HUGHES: WHY I CHOSE TO BECOME A TEACHER AND WHY I MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO BECOME ONE. A SURVEY OF STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A CAREER

seven per cent had given serious consideration to quitting during their three year ITT course. A small minority (5%) did not expect to be teachers for more than 5 years. Perhaps more worrying is the finding in the YouGov (2015) quoted above that over 40% of newly qualified teachers left the profession within 5 years of teaching.

Table 2. To what extent do participants agree with these statements?

| | Overall % | Males % | Females % | χ^2 | p< |
|--|--------------|------------|--------------|----------|--------|
| I am driven and very ambitious | 83 | 77 | 83 | 0.569 | NS |
| I see myself as a caring, supportive teacher rather than an ambitious person | 82 | 66 | 85 | 4.994 | 0.0254 |
| My ITT course is both very challenging and demanding | 81 | 93 | 80 | 1.110 | NS |
| After a few years as a teacher I would like to become part of the school's senior management | 48 | 87 | 40 | 19.977 | 0.0001 |
| I have seriously thought about quitting the ITT course | 27 | 43 | 24 | 8.375 | 0.0038 |
| I hope to be a head teacher after a few years in the profession | 25 | 73 | 15 | 41.802 | 0.0001 |
| My determination to become a head teacher is unwavering | 19 | 73 | 9 | 32.327 | 0.0001 |
| I do not expect to be a teacher for more than 5 years | 5 | 10 | 4 | 1.003 | NS |

Despite the perceived challenges, the over-riding message from table 2 is that the vast majority (83%) of the student teachers in the sample considered themselves to be both driven and ambitious. This ambition was not primarily linked to the extrinsic rewards offered by the profession. The data suggest that for many their ambition and drive was often more for their pupils than their own personal gain. Eighty-two per cent were keen to note that they considered themselves to be caring and supportive rather than ambitious teachers. Nevertheless, a significant number (48%) claimed that they would like to be part of their school's senior management team after a few years. Twenty-five per cent expressed a wish to become head teachers while almost a fifth of the sample (19%) claimed that they had an unwavering ambition to become head teachers.

Table 3 examines student teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face during their ITT course. It is clear from the survey results that student teachers experience many of the stressors which are encountered by their qualified counterparts. Almost all the sample felt that the main challenge was the heavy workload (93%). Unlike purely academic courses, ITT involves a significant practical classroom element where students are required to prepare lessons and teach in schools in addition to the academic assignments which are a feature of most undergraduate programmes. The biggest burden for the student teachers (79%) was the need to monitor pupils' progress during teaching practice. Seventy-four per cent felt that there was too much unnecessary paperwork while 69% felt that the constant changes in the curriculum proved particularly burdensome.

Table 3. The challenges faced by participants on their teacher training course.

| | Overall % | Males % | Females % | χ^2 | p< |
|--|--------------|------------|--------------|----------|--------|
| I am driven and very ambitious | 83 | 77 | 83 | 0.569 | NS |
| I see myself as a caring, supportive teacher rather than an ambitious person | 82 | 66 | 85 | 4.994 | 0.0254 |
| My ITT course is both very challenging and demanding | 81 | 93 | 80 | 1.110 | NS |
| After a few years as a teacher I would like to become part of the school's senior management | 48 | 87 | 40 | 19.977 | 0.0001 |
| I have seriously thought about quitting the ITT course | 27 | 43 | 24 | 8.375 | 0.0038 |
| I hope to be a head teacher after a few years in the profession | 25 | 73 | 15 | 41.802 | 0.0001 |
| My determination to become a head teacher is unwavering | 19 | 73 | 9 | 32.327 | 0.0001 |
| I do not expect to be a teacher for more than 5 years | 5 | 10 | 4 | 1.003 | NS |

Almost half the sample (43%) felt that teachers were undervalued by society. Twenty-five per cent even felt that the profession had no real status in the country. The long working hours were a concern for many. Sixty per cent claimed that they found the long working hours to be challenging with the same number (60%) claiming that the profession provided them with a poor work-life balance. Almost half (48%) said that teaching left them with no time to pursue their other interests. A concern for a significant minority of the respondents (42%) was the challenging pupil behaviour they experienced on placements. Disrespectful pupils were also considered to be a challenge by twenty-nine per cent of the respondents. This is a very understandable concern for people at the beginning of their careers given the fact that the pupils they teach come from a variety of different backgrounds, some of which can be particularly difficult.

Table 3. shows that only a minority of student teachers were concerned about practical issues such as class sizes and pupil motivation. Thus, only thirty-five per cent of the sample noted that they felt challenged by poor classroom resources and large class sizes (35%). Only twenty-five per cent felt that they had too little support from their mentors. The lack of pupil aspiration was noted as a challenge by only 15% of respondents while less than a tenth (8%) felt that the multicultural nature of their classrooms made them difficult to teach.

One clear message from the respondents was that they were fully aware of the many practical challenges that they face as teachers working in primary school. In fact, eighty-eight per cent relished facing such challenges. Indeed, the figures suggest that they would not have chosen this profession if they had not been prepared to face them. A second clear message from the student teachers was that what they wanted, more than anything else, was to given an opportunity to develop to be the best teachers that they were capable of being. While they would welcome support and guidance with practical issues such as dealing with challenging pupil behaviour in the classroom (42%) and dealing with pupils who lacked aspiration (15%), what concerned them most were the factors which they felt prevented them from achieving their full potential as teachers such as the heavy workload (93%), too much unnecessary paperwork (74%), poor work-life balance (60%) and insufficient time to reflect on practice (48%).

Does gender make a difference?

The figures demonstrate that there are significant differences between the perceptions of male and

DAVIES & HUGHES: WHY I CHOSE TO BECOME A TEACHER AND WHY I MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO BECOME ONE. A SURVEY OF STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A CAREER

female student teachers about the teaching profession. First, the data in Table 1 suggest that there are some important differences between female and male student teachers regarding why they chose to become teachers. For example, on the one hand, females are more likely than males to claim that they chose the profession: because they love working with children (100% against 80%); because they find teaching really satisfying (99% against 77%). Females were also more likely than their male counterparts to claim that becoming a teacher had been their lifelong ambition (86% against 57%); that they were inspired by their own teachers (86% against 57%); and that they felt that the profession was their calling in life (72% against 47%). As might be expected, they were also more likely to claim that they thought that teaching was a suitable profession because it would enable them to have the same holidays as their children (60% against 20%). On the other hand, males were more likely than females to become teachers because it was a great career which offered them excellent chances of promotion (97% against 63%); because the pay was good (67% against 37%); and because of the long holidays (60% against 37%).

The data in table 2 follow a similar pattern. On the one hand, female student teachers were more likely than male student teachers to see themselves as caring, supportive teachers rather than as ambitious people (85% against 77%). On the other hand, male student teachers were more than twice as likely as their female counterparts to want to become part of their school's senior management team after a few years of teaching (87% against 40%). They were almost five times as likely to want to be a head teacher after a few years in the profession (71% against 15%) and more than seven times as likely to claim that their determination to become a head teacher was unwavering (73% against 9%). Interestingly, males were also significantly more likely to seriously consider quitting their ITT course (43% against 24%).

The answer to the question of why males are more likely to withdraw from their ITT course may be found in Table 3. As can be seen, male student teachers are more likely than female student teachers to be concerned about the fact that everything they do on their ITT course is monitored so carefully (80% against 45%); about the level of accountability on their course (67% against 47%) and about the expectation to take part in out-of-hours activities (53% against 31%). They were also twice as likely as female student teachers to feel that the profession has no real status in the UK (44% against 22%).

The pattern of responses in the three tables suggests that females are more likely than males to choose teaching for altruistic reasons (such as making a difference to young children's lives and making the world a better place), whereas males are more likely than females to be attracted by the extrinsic rewards (such as the remuneration and the chances for promotion). This finding supports that of previous researchers such as Brookhart & Freeman (1992) that altruistic motivations were higher among female teachers.

Conclusions and recommendations

Several conclusions and recommendations emerge from these data findings which have important implications for all those who are concerned with attracting and retaining the most competent teachers to/in our primary schools.

First, there is evidence in this survey that many people who could potentially make excellent primary school teachers are discouraged from entering the profession because of the negative associations which are currently linked to the job. As one respondent noted:

I know a number of able young people who would make outstanding teachers but they would not dream of entering the profession because they know that teachers are overwhelmed with paperwork, have little spare time for themselves or their families and are given little respect for all their hard work

DAVIES & HUGHES: WHY I CHOSE TO BECOME A TEACHER AND WHY I MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO BECOME ONE. A SURVEY OF STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A CAREER

(Respondent A).

Ways must urgently be sought to raise the profile of the profession and to help people from a variety of different backgrounds to understand that teaching in the primary school can be a fulfilling, satisfying and financially rewarding career.

Second, any programme of recruitment for the profession is more likely to succeed if it pays due heed to the factors which motivate people to enter the profession. The findings in this survey suggest that the main motivators for people choosing a career in teaching were linked to their perceptions of their own teaching ability and suitability for the profession and the intrinsic rewards that the profession offers. They believe that it is the job which best matches the set of skills they have to offer the workplace and which will give them the greatest sense of fulfilment. The next set of motivators were linked to what Watt & Richardson (2010) described as social utility reasons. Almost all the respondents emphasised altruistic reasons such as being able to make a positive difference to children's lives (96%); and being able to make a positive response to some of the worst aspects of modern life such as poverty, racism and prejudice (95%) for becoming teachers. The clear message from the data was that people are more likely to choose a career in teaching for altruistic reasons than for any extrinsic or material rewards the career may be seen to offer. A third factor which was likely to motivate entry to the profession was the suggestion of suitability by a respected person. Seventy per cent claimed that one reason they became teachers was that someone suggested that it would be a suitable career for them. The figures suggest that people are often influenced by the suggestions of others (particularly if they come from people who are highly respected) when it comes to their career choice. The clear message for all those concerned with the future of ITT is that the best, the most able and most suitable candidates will only be attracted to the teaching profession if someone who they respect draws their attention to their suitability for the job and to the altruistic, intrinsic rewards, as well as the extrinsic rewards the profession can offer them. Clearly, there is a strong argument for those concerned with ITT to establish links with schools and colleges to encourage suitable young people to seriously consider a career in teaching in the primary school for the many rewards that the profession can offer them.

Any recruitment programme should also give due heed to the finding in this survey that there are significant differences in the way males and females view the profession. As the preceding discussion has shown, females are significantly more likely than males to be attracted to teaching for altruistic reasons (such as wanting to make the world a better place, 86% compared to 67%) and intrinsic reasons (such as finding teaching really satisfying, 99% compared to 77%). Conversely, males are significantly more likely than females to be attracted to teaching for the extrinsic, material rewards that the career may offer (such as, the fact that it can be it is a great career with excellent chances of promotion, 97% compared to 63%).

Third, ways must urgently be found to combat and deal with the more stressful aspects of the teaching profession as these have a negative impact on both the recruitment and retention of teachers and trainee teachers. The survey has shown that the main stressors were linked to four factors: high levels of accountability; the pressure of monitoring; the continual demand for change/innovation; and the lack of respect given to the profession. The above data provide a strong argument for including training about how to efficiently manage and respond to the many challenges faced by teachers within ITT programmes. Whether that training includes Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) as noted above or other methods of responding to the numerous challenges faced by teachers is beyond the scope of the present study. However, if we are to avoid the possibility of significant burnout, absenteeism and exit from the profession (Betoret, 2006; Jepson & Forrest, 2006) it is essential that either measures are taken to lessen the causes of the stress of teachers or/and they are taught how to successfully respond to these causes.

Fourth, the study suggests that in order to ensure that the best possible candidates are attracted to and retained within the teaching profession the following needs to be achieved:

- Targeted attempts should be made (for example, visits to secondary schools by teacher educators) to attract the ablest and most suitable young people to the teaching profession. Such attempts are most likely to succeed if they enable potential teachers to understand that teaching can be a hugely rewarding career because it can provide a sense of satisfaction for personal utility and social utility reasons and is a career which potentially offers attractive chances of advancement and promotion.
- Student teachers should be provided with ample opportunities to observe and learn from teachers similar to themselves who have succeeded in different challenges relating to teaching. Feelings of self-efficacy are likely to be raised if inexperienced teachers learn that successful teachers often achieved success because of their sustained effort and reflection on practice.

As this was a small scale study of two third year cohorts at a university in Wales, further replication studies in other parts of the country are now needed to test the security of the above findings.

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DAVIES & HUGHES: WHY I CHOSE TO BECOME A TEACHER AND WHY I MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO BECOME ONE. A SURVEY OF STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING AS A CAREER

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