

# Career Change Teachers

Meera Varadharajan · John Buchanan

# Career Change Teachers

Bringing Work and Life Experience to  
the Classroom

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Meera Varadharajan  
Centre for Social Impact  
University of New South Wales  
Sydney, NSW, Australia

John Buchanan  
University of Technology Sydney  
Sydney, NSW, Australia

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*This book is dedicated to all career changers in the teaching profession: current and aspiring teachers, who have made or aspire to make the leap to teaching, making a valuable contribution to the profession.*

# Foreword

One of the most often stated realizations that parents experienced during the 2020 remote emergency teaching period brought on by lockdowns during periods of the COVID-19 pandemic regarded the importance of school teachers. I think it would be fair to say that parents developed renewed respect for the teaching profession after supporting their children to learn at home. The general public became aware of a fact that is central to the purpose and themes of this book: that teaching is complex, nuanced, multifaceted and far more than just the imparting of information and skills.

Much has been written (admittedly before the pandemic) about the deprofessionalization of teachers. The compliance requirements and form-filling aspects of an already demanding profession seem to have increased enormously over the last decade. Many decry the numerous tasks that take teachers away from teaching and from their students, in order that they be seen to have met the many non-teaching requirements that are now part of a career as teacher. Additional to these tasks are the numerous complexities faced by teachers in increasingly diverse classrooms, with students, who have many varied needs, all rightfully demanding attention. It really is not enough to know the intricacies of the subject matter being taught any more (if indeed, it ever were). Teachers need to know the needs, motivations and capabilities of each of the charges in their classes. They also need to be skilled in contemporary approaches that include appropriate technological skills. Indeed, as I write this, new waves of respect wash over me for the sterling job that most teachers do, under often difficult, often challenging circumstances. But as a former teacher (admittedly many years ago), I also remember the joys and excitement of having breakthroughs with students, both intellectually and affectively. It was those moments that motivated me to teach.

This book acts as an advocate and champion of the teaching profession. The heroes of the book are the career change teachers who participated in the research studies that are reported here. As they embark on their new journeys as teachers or on their studies in teacher education, it is their lived experiences, thoughts and actions that we learn about. In particular, these teachers' stories allow us to understand the complexity of teaching and to value the contributions that career change teachers have brought to the profession.

The book is based on the doctoral and subsequent research conducted by Dr. Meera Varadharajan, which focuses on the lived experiences of this special cohort of teachers, career change teachers. These teachers have come to teaching, not directly as school-leavers, but from other professions. Often, they are teachers who are “coming home” to a profession they have always wanted to be part of but have been unable to join earlier due to a variety of circumstances. Others have come to teaching because they felt it was time to give back to society or because they sought more meaning for their daily lives. In all cases, Varadharajan shows her compassion and respect for this cohort in her study of their lives as early career teachers and student teachers and ensures that she highlights their contributions. She is ably assisted in the telling of their tales by her colleague and co-author, Associate Professor John Buchanan, whose research on teaching and teacher education offers additional insights into both how teachers are perceived in society and how complex and nuanced their roles are. Buchanan brings his knowledge of policy, professional requirements and teacher education to provide added insights into the contexts in which the teachers operate. He, like Varadharajan, is a strong supporter and advocate for these new teachers and their new profession.

The first part of the book allows us to understand the passions and interests of Varadharajan and Buchanan and assures us that this book will contribute to our understanding of teachers and the contexts in which they work. The tone is quite hard-hitting concerning the challenges of the external environment, and the numerous difficulties teachers may encounter in the classroom. The hoops and loops of accountability and protocols are identified and critiqued.

After this initiation into the complexities and challenges of teaching, the tone softens and we are introduced to the heroes of the book, the career change teachers. In particular, we are given clear insights both into how career change teachers approach their teaching careers and into what they believe that they can bring to the profession. It can be seen in this discussion that the authors have a deep respect and appreciation for the contributions that these teachers offer as well as an understanding of the motivations and experiences these teachers might have on entering the profession. We are provided with insights into their journeys as beginning teachers and access to their voices as they navigate the twists and turns of a new career. We see how these career change teachers are determined to provide students with the benefits of their experiences in their previous careers and how their teaching practices and methods reflect their beliefs and own learning.

The pathway for career change teachers through their teacher education programs is another topic of research reported in the book. The topic provides insights for teacher educators on the different requirements this cohort may have, compared to other student teachers. The students’ experiences and difficulties as they embark on their in-school experiences are reported and recommendations are made for teacher education institutions to consider the varied needs of their students and support career change teachers appropriately.

Underlying all the evocative experiences of career change teachers that are reported here is a strong theoretical perspective. The use of phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of the teachers in this book is highly appropriate and

allows their experiences to come to life for the reader. The numerous case studies of early career teachers, together with the research on career change teacher education students, illuminate both how career change teacher can contribute to teaching and how teacher education can work to better support career change student teacher groups.

This book is timely. Writing this foreword in early 2021, when we are reflecting on changes wrought by a pandemic, the book allows readers to reconsider a profession that has deservedly (if belatedly) won the respect of many, over the past few months. At a time when people in other occupations are realizing that there is more to being a teacher than meets the eye, a discussion of the lived experiences of teachers assists in this recalibration of views of teaching and teachers. A focus on career change teachers is useful as numbers of people are considering new careers as a result of the many changes wrought by the pandemic. What better a way to gain an understanding of what the teaching profession may offer than to read this book? Varadharajan and Buchanan are to be congratulated on providing these well-researched and theoretically strong insights into the cohorts of career change beginning teachers and student teachers and the contexts of the teaching profession into which they are entering.

I anticipate that the book will both inspire and challenge newcomers to the teaching profession, especially if you are coming to teaching from another career. I anticipate that this book will affirm those readers already in the profession. I anticipate that this book will provoke and guide teacher educators to better support their career change student teacher cohorts in ways that better match their characteristics and needs. And I anticipate that all who read this book will come away from it with a renewed respect for the profession of teaching and with admiration for all who teach, but perhaps especially for career change teachers and their contributions.

Sandy Schuck  
Adjunct Professor of Education,  
School of International  
and School Education  
University of Technology Sydney  
Sydney, Australia

# Preface

*I really hope we can come together with a strategy that will get people into teaching, the right people and retain them ... we [career change teachers] have got a lot to offer and I think it is something that should be encouraged.*

—Career change teacher (Varadharajan 2014).

As the world seeks to move beyond the current crisis of COVID-19, the theme of “build back better” appears to gain momentum with the hope that we can change things for the better. In the education sector, remote learning has created both opportunities and barriers to student learning with an increasing recognition that learning is a partnership between teachers, learners, families and communities. Flexibility, adaptability and agility are often discussed during these changing times. They are considered to be essential skills that better prepare learners of today to face an uncertain and evolving future. With present-day classrooms being increasingly diverse, we need educators from different backgrounds, contexts and experiences who recognize the importance of “future preparedness” in learning and education contexts. One such group of educators are career change teachers. Yet, we know little about them as a cohort. As individuals who come to teach in schools from different walks of life, career changers are quite different from teachers we may normally think of or know of. Career change teachers have the potential to make unique and significant contributions to student learning and engagement in and beyond school. As the education sector considers and explores various paths for building back better beyond the pandemic, one important focus of any teacher recruitment and retention policy should be about bringing diversity and experience to the classroom. We hope this book goes some way in helping to better understand career changers and inspires individuals from other careers to consider becoming a teacher.



## **Author's Impetus for Writing This Book—Meera**

This book was borne out of passion, knowledge sharing and motivation—passion for the work of teachers, interest to share with the community about a lesser known group of teachers, and motivation to make a contribution to the teaching profession. I was drawn to this group of teachers in strange but coincidental ways. Career change was part of both my personal and professional life. In my previous professional life, I was once an accountant. A combination of reasons including disillusionment in my work, soul searching and an interest in education and in schooling led me to change careers and pursue a doctorate in education. The reasons for choosing my research topic, “Understanding the lived experiences of career change teachers,” may seem obvious considering my own career journey of changing professions. In fact, choosing the area of research did not come naturally and like any other would-be researcher, it took time to settle comfortably on the topic. The strong urge to learn more about teachers, to build a career as an educational researcher; and to conduct research in an area where there is a potential gap to contribute, featured strongly in my decision-making processes. Before long, it occurred to me that my personal experience became my professional research. Having completed my doctorate six years ago and then working in the social sciences discipline in various capacities, I felt close to my newly found career—yet there was something missing. Whether one might label it as irony or a strange coincidence, my path regularly crossed with someone who was, is, or knew of a teacher—a career change teacher. Every new conversation or story I heard rekindled my passion for this group and reinforced the knowledge that I had gained through my research. Though my thesis and subsequent research publications on career change teachers did contribute to building knowledge about this cohort, there was still much more to be told. In a sense, it felt like a “calling” to write a book on career change teachers, to let people know about this little known cohort, why they joined the profession, what they thought of teaching, and their journey as a career changer.

Career change teachers as a cohort, nationally and globally, continue to be under represented in educational research, policy and practice, and it is our hope that this book will go some way in telling their story. The pragmatic and philosophical dimensions of my own career change journey enabled me to recognize the relevance of understanding career change teachers and their construction of meaning in contexts, relationships and situations.

Our hope is also that this book will give a voice to the teaching profession. Teachers have always had a strong presence on students' lives, both within school and beyond school. Each of us can remember at least one teacher who made an impression on us in some way. Despite this, as a society, we still have a long way to go in acknowledging their impact in the same way we may acknowledge significant figures in our lives, for instance, our parents. At a time when the profession continues to come under increasing scrutiny, it feels important to write about teachers and their work. The challenge is to shift societal perceptions so there is a collective recognition of the profession. With COVID-19, the tide might have slightly shifted in favor of our

educators as the community may have started to realize their value, grit, contributions and complexity of their work. In that sense, the timing of the book seems about right to build on the current momentum of public sentiments to bring much needed awareness about this cohort of teachers.

## **Author’s Impetus for Writing This Book—John**

I sometimes wish I had taught kindergarten. That way, I would know the answer to one security question for many of my ex-students. The point is, our teachers stick with us. We remember them long after we have forgotten most of what they taught us. Teachers are so often our unsung heroes; we fail to recognize at the time how they shape us. As a society, I think we often fail to recognize the complexity of teaching, and to support our teachers.

Most of us can teach something to someone. But to tailor a suite of learning experiences to meet the needs of, and maximize the potential of, a group of maybe 30 or so learners, is much more demanding, particularly when also taking responsibility for their safety and well-being, and remaining faithful to syllabus documents. We perhaps believe we can all do the work of a teacher, having witnessed much teaching during our school years. I have watched a lot of golf, listened to a lot of music and flown in many planes. But let me loose near a golf club, microphone or joystick at your own peril. It is so easy to mistake watching for learning. Some parents have learnt this lesson during recent COVID lockdowns, having had to tackle the complexities of facilitating associated schoolwork for their children. Even this is the work of a teacher’s aide, rather than of a teacher. Such parents are not required to devise activities to help their children to meet syllabus outcomes.

An important part of what motivates me is support for teachers. Teaching was hard. It consumed everything I had, intellectually and emotionally, and still wanted more. Australia has recently introduced a set of Professional Standards. Standard 1 of the 2017 Australian Professional Standards for Teachers requires them to know their students and how they learn. This is a noble quest, but it begs questions as to how educational jurisdictions, parents and the community more broadly, know how teachers learn and how to support them accordingly. One of the “givens” of teaching is to understand learners’ starting points, so as to best build upon existing knowledge, mental models and the like. Those entering teaching from other professions come ready-equipped with associated content and procedural knowledge, as well as an acquired maturity and sense of responsibility. We do well to recognize this prior learning.

Sydney, Australia

Meera Varadharajan  
John Buchanan

# Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the writing of this book in unique and inspiring ways. First and foremost, we would like to acknowledge all current and prospective career change teachers and career change student teachers who have been a constant source of inspiration in the writing of this book. In particular, we would like to acknowledge all those individuals who gave up their valuable time to participate in the research which led to publications and the writing of this book. Secondly, the research work on career change student teachers and STEM career change teachers in Australia was made possible through funding from Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA) and we would like to acknowledge their support. Meera's thesis work and further research on career change teachers would not have been possible without the resolute faith and guidance from her PhD supervisors Professor Sandy Schuck and Dr Helen Russell. John and Meera are grateful to our co-authors of Chap. 7 (Dr. Don Carter and Prof. Sandy Schuck) who gave permission to reproduce/adapt the published article on career change student teachers' in-school experience. Our sincere thanks to Assistant Professor Lesley de Putter from Eindhoven Institute of Technology who was a key contributor to Chap. 8 on the international research conducted on STEM career change teachers. A special thank you to Dr Carroll Graham who immensely helped with proof reading and chapter editing.

As always, many thanks to our families, as without their understanding and support, we would not be able to pursue these writing opportunities in our work.

## **Country Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge the Darug and the Gadigal people, the traditional custodians of the lands in Australia where we, the authors, currently live and work. We acknowledge and give thanks to the contributions they and their Elders make to our society and recognize their unceded sovereignty over their land. We would also like to acknowledge and pay our respects to the original custodians of the lands where everyone else who is reading this book are living and working.

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## About the Authors

**Meera Varadharajan** I have been privileged to work on the area of career changers in the teaching profession for more than a decade now and consider myself fortunate to be one of the handful of education researchers in Australia to have conducted a consistent and systematic research on this cohort. This has enabled me to understand them closely as well as recognize the potential impact that this group can have on the profession and more importantly on students. My doctoral thesis examined the lived experience of career change teachers using an interpretive and phenomenological approach. My subsequent research work involved examining the experiences of career change student teachers in teacher education programs and career change teachers who came from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) backgrounds. My central contribution has been to raise awareness and highlight qualities of commitment and expertise career changers bring to the profession, suggest ways of improving teacher education (TE) programs for this cohort and contribute to the development and retention of a high-quality teacher workforce. Throughout the course of all my research work, I have been privileged to speak to current and future teachers about their past and present lives and hopes for the future of the teaching profession. Working with colleagues, like John, has been extremely important in my development and personal growth as a researcher, and I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to learn and be inspired by his knowledge and passion for the profession.

My research work on career change teachers and career change student teachers has been recognized through successful research grants, peer-reviewed publications and more importantly in the several encounters I have had with current and potential career changers who have inspired me to continue with my passion.

I currently work at The Centre for Social Impact at The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia in the areas of education inequity and improving social outcomes for marginalized and disadvantaged groups.

Publications and research interests can be found at <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Meera-Varadharajan/research>.

**John Buchanan** I am a teacher educator of more than 20 years' experience, and prior to that, a teacher. I have published in areas of teacher recruitment, quality, retention and attrition, as well as the content areas of social and environmental education, including intercultural education, and language and linguistics, the areas in which I teach. My own philosophy of learning resonates with Meera's. I am driven by a quest to understand how others make sense of the world in the ways that they do, why these sense-makings differ from mine and how theirs might be remedied. Just kidding about the remedied bit, but I confess it is a default I need to identify, to own and to interrogate. Having worked with Meera on several projects, my understanding and appreciation of the contributions has grown considerably.

Publications and research interests can be found at <https://scholar.google.com.au/citations?user=BZ9zHdUAAA&hl=en>.

# Abbreviations

AATE	Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACOLA	Australian Council of Learned Academies
ACOSS	Australian Council of Social Service
AIHW	Australian Institute for Health and Welfare
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
AMSI	Australian Mathematical Science Institute
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CCST	Career Change Student Teacher
CCT	Career Change Teacher
CTE	Career and Technical Education
HSC	Higher School Certificate
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LANTITE	Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy
NESA	NSW Education Standards Authority
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCK	Pedagogical Content Knowledge
PCP	Professional Conversion Program
PE	Professional Experience
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PWC	Price Waterhouse Coopers
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
STEM	Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Technology
TAS	Technology and Applied Studies
TEMAG	Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group
TEQSA	Tertiary Education Quality Standards Authority

TIMMS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study Test
TPA	Teaching Performance Assessment
TPACK	Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge
TPRACK	Technological Pedagogical, Relationship and Content Knowledge
TtT	Troops to Teachers (UK)
TTT	Troops to Teachers (USA)
UAC	Universities Admission Centre
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USA	United States of America