



Sea change in the classroom

JASON DOWLING

THE face of teaching is changing: bright young things fresh out of university are being joined by a growing number of older professionals who are retraining for a career in the classroom because they consider it a more useful and worthwhile job.

This is the finding of a report by Monash University researchers Paul Richardson and Helen Watt, who interviewed 90 people who had switched from business careers to teacher training courses.

They found that many had moved because of the "intrinsic value of teaching", and a "desire to shape the future, enhance social equity and make a social contribution".

"Some of those people, regardless of their age, talk about it being more moral," Dr Richardson said.

The study, which is soon to be published, included bankers, accountants, IT consultants and marketing specialists who had decided to change to a teaching career because "they wanted to do something that was not only meaningful but actually made a contribution to society".

Dr Richardson said there was a growing number of older students in teacher training courses. "If we went back 15 years we would find the majority of people coming into teacher education at that time would have been people coming directly from their degree or directly in from schools."

Australian Council of Deans of Education president Sue Willis said the profile of students undertaking teaching had changed, with many students now older and with more professional experience. For example, at Monash University in 2005, only 42 per cent of students were school leavers — the rest were mature-age students, while 31 per cent were aged over 30.

"The typical student in teacher education is no longer young and fancy-free. They are very often 'career change' people — lawyers, engineers, accountants and nurses.

"Many decide they want to work with kids. Others may be 'second chancers', who may have struggled to qualify for entrance having left school early.

"Almost all will have jobs and/or family responsibilities. Many make significant financial and family sacrifices."

Government schools in Victoria require an average 2100 new teachers a year, so the prospects for career-change professionals are good and, according to the Education Department, will continue to expand.

But not everyone believes the increase in "career changers" coming into teaching is wholly positive.

Dr Gloria Latham, who teaches education studies at RMIT, said some people were choosing teaching for the wrong reasons.

"They are doing it for a lifestyle change, rather than necessarily a real desire to teach," she said. "In other words, holidays at the same time as their young children."

She said there were some very bright professionals attracted to teaching who were "not really as passionate about teaching as much as it is a convenience as a career choice".

Professionals yearn for 'noble' career

EMMA Brice wanted more from her job than financial reward — she wanted a job with purpose.

And so Ms Brice, 29, gave up a well-paid career in public relations to return to university to study primary teaching.

Working with children and having a sense of achievement were Ms Brice's key motivations.

"I (worked in the corporate world) for about six months and said you know what, I couldn't do this for the rest of my life, I just couldn't. I guess it was the emptiness of it; there was no real great purpose in it, it was all about just making money or about making more money for people who already have lots of money, not really getting anywhere with your life," Ms Brice said.

"The rest of your life is a long time."



Career switch: Emma Brice and Margaret Crowley.

Margaret Crowley, in her late 30s, was motivated to take up teaching by the idea of helping children. Ms Crowley, a mother who had worked in human resources at BHP, said teaching was a "noble career".

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