

Judy Williams: *Constructing New Professional Identities. Career Changers in Teacher Education.* Rotterdam/Boston/Taipei, Sense Publishers. 2013.

Reviewed by Magdolna Chrappán

This book by Judy Williams charms the reader right from the beginning. How many monographs can we read that starts by a sentence saying that the author wandering in the crowded, noisy cafeteria catches sight of someone called Shaunt who is „40 years old, married with teenage children, male in a predominantly female course and profession, and suffering from a physical disability that made studying, while not impossible, a significant challenge (...) As I watched him (...) my heart went out to Shaun – I felt a surge of empathy, compassion, sadness, concern and admiration. And I asked my self the question: What is it like to be Shaun?” (p 1.). Do we need any more motivation to start researching?

The author analyzes a topic which is less palpable in Hungary, as there is not a large-scale or not even a sporadic number of students appearing in teacher education here with a stable existence who want to be teachers leaving their previous career behind. Judy Williams examined the population of such career changing student teachers at Australian universities by supporting the theme with her own path of life analysis.

In the first third of the volume, the author looks into the specialist literature of the issue very closely and thoroughly (which may seem to be extremely complex for a Hungarian reader), paying special attention to counterpointing the subjective tone of the opening with its rich academic background, also focusing on a personal, a philosophical and a pedagogical stance as well during her research. The author provides a firm basis for the research questions which give the consequent logical guiding principle of the book during the theoretical and empirical analysis. The questions follow as this: 1. what are the career backgrounds of people who change careers into teaching, 2. why did they change career into teaching, 3. what attributes do they bring into teaching, 4. how do they experience teacher education and 5. how do career change students construct new professional identities as students teacher. The mixed method approach contains online surveys with 375 students of three Victorian universities, semi-structured interviews with 15 students and three case studies. The interviews had to be carried out along with the online surveys because the author wished to show not only the data but present the strength and diversity of the personal stories at the same time.

The co-authors', Lave-Wenger's interpretation of data is based on the conceptual dichotomy of newcomers-old-timers, from which Judy Williams constructs and supports the concept of expert novices with convincing figures with the help of which she describes those students who get to teacher education with a significant professional career and life experiences and have ambivalent feelings about being treated as novices in teacher education despite all their life and work expertise. It is hard to get over this kind of controversy, nevertheless the author carefully explores the roots of the problem and points out the indifference of higher education to be the most crucial reason. „It seems ironic that on the one hand, career changers view their past experiences as one of the most important attributes they bring into teaching, and that being able to apply these to the teaching context is one of their greatest rewards, and on the other hand, these experiences are not always recognized and valued (...) at university” (p. 96).

The main focus of the volume is on the process of developing professional identity, the author precisely explores the theories of different fields referring to developing identity, in the chapter of Developing a student teacher professional identity we may learn about the influence of biography as well as social influences on teacher professional learning and in the subchapters we can read about learning and identity construction through participation in communities of practice. The author devotes another chapter to deal with the question of making a career change into teaching, and she does not only examine the reasons of career change in general, but also gives several explanations for becoming a teacher as a result of career change. Referring to the data of several experts, the most typical answers were the following: help (working with) young people learn; giving something back to the community; enjoyment of the subject; personal fulfillment.

The second third of the volume presents research data and contains the inferences, giving answers to the following questions: who are they; why are they here, what career have they come from; what attributes do they bring to teaching; what is it like to be a career change pre-service teacher education student?

It turns out from the answers that 76% of the respondents are women and most of them (42.8%) belong to the age groups of 20–29 year olds, the majority are in primary or secondary education courses (92 %). The most frequent reasons for a career change are: „I wanted to further my own education and to learn new skills; I wanted a change of direction in my life” (~62 %), „I wanted to utilize knowledge and/or skills more fully than was possible in my previous career (49.7 %)” ; „I was dissatisfied with my previous career (47.7 %)” (p. 58). Previous career fields, „the data suggested, that many of the respondents came from careers that are people-focused, rather than from more technical or manual jobs” (p. 62) also show an impressive pattern. Analyzing the answers of the 4th group of issues (attributes that career changer bring into teaching) resulted in four main attribute groups, whose frequency distribution is the following: broad-life experiences (56.5%), workplace experience and skills (21.4%), personal qualities (16.5%), beliefs about teaching (5.6%).

The author concludes based on the comparative data that for career changers it is more important who they are than what they know, which she interpretes as „sense of identity as teachers is likely to be strongly tied to their personal and professional biographies” (p. 68).

It is the determining effect of personal life path that makes the analysis of career changer students’ motivations an outstanding factor for teacher training programs as well as the understanding of how they experience student’s status in everyday life.

The rank of motivation to teach is the following: „I believe I have the necessary attributes to be a good teacher (81.8%)”; „I believe teaching will give me high job satisfaction (81.6%)”; „I want to work with children (70.3%)”; „I want to contribute to society (59%)”; „I have enjoyed working with children in another capacity e.g. as a parent, coach (63.9%)” (p. 60).

The student status among these students shows a unique pattern of rewards-difficulties, the most positive outcomes are personal growth and development; ability to apply previous experience; practicum; on-campus interaction with students and staff; and the different course-related difficulties, balancing demands and financial difficulties seem to be the biggest challenges. The tabular review is completed by textual quotations which were selected from the respondents’ answers by the author and these provide a much richer, more subtle notion and according to the original intention, they will draw a more sensitive and ’broad brush’ picture about career changer students’ personal lives.

Another huge block of data analysis along with on-line survey is related to the interviews. We may find meticulously constructed and detailed summary of the interview subjects concerning sex, age, course/enrollment details, previous career field, roles and responsibilities. The author reveals from the compilation of every single interviewer’s reply those typical motivations, the deep-rooted reasons of career, explanations found in personal circumstances, which finally gain the shape of a specific narration in the text.

The last third of the volume includes three case studies, whose characters are Patrick, a technician, project and staff manager; Michelle, a HR-manager in a large department store and Bill, a science researcher. The case studies are built upon the dichotomy of expert old-timer/novice student teacher, introducing the inner tensions of being a career changer student teacher, professional difficulties and especially the sometimes controversial attitude of the communities of practice towards these students.

In the closing chapter we can read not only the essence of the research and the volume but we also have the chance to go through the opportunities of helping career changer students more adaptively, e.g. transition and orientation programs, pastoral care and support.

The topic is important for the author not only for the sake of the development of her own pedagogy of teacher education, but also because „identity development is not a by-product of a teacher-education course, but rather a central element of the curriculum of teacher education” (p 29). The latter statement,

although it seems to be an evidence, should be the axiom and guiding principle of the entire teacher education and training development.

The volume promises empirical data and analysis, however, it does not trouble the reader with detailed sets of data of mathematical statistics, it shows basic distributions and there is not even a crosstable analysis. Although it would be interesting to know what background correlations could be gathered from the quantitative data but this may come in another volume.

The book, however, is convincing even without any deeper statistical analyses, it gives what it promises: about constructing professional identity, the process through which the expert-novice becomes an expert-teacher. The volume chosen by Sense Publishers with the usual sensitivity and high standards is a thought-provoking and extremely informative reading at the same time.

One mistake of beginner researchers is if they are too involved emotionally in the research theme they chose and another is if they are not at all. This book avoids both, thus it is a perfect reading not only for experienced researchers and those who are interested in the topic but also and especially for beginner researchers.

Anyway, Shaun disappeared from education before it could have turned out what it is really like to be Shaun, after all.