

January 1980

Mature Aged Students in Teacher Education

Roger B. King
Claremont Teachers College

Bruce T. Haynes
Claremont Teachers College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

King, R. B., & Haynes, B. T. (1980). Mature Aged Students in Teacher Education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 5(2).

<https://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1980v5n2.5>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ajte/vol5/iss2/5>

MATURE AGE STUDENTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

by Roger B. King and Bruce T. Haynes
Claremont Teachers College

Consider the following:

- (1) The film "Now the Chips are Down" (a BBC film on the effects of the silicon chip technology on society and its workforce) was shown to first-year Diploma of Teaching students in 1979. A number of the younger students noticeably became bored and restless with the film, apparently because it was not seen to have immediate practical relevance for classroom teaching. The older students, and the other staff who came to see the film, were, however, profoundly affected by it.
- (2) In a standard evaluation survey of Education 110, a first-year introduction to Education unit for Diploma of Teaching students, the students who were 21 years old or over rated the unit's overall value significantly higher than did the younger students.
- (3) Analysis of a survey of third year Diploma of Teaching students' ratings of the relevance of units for teaching (a survey conducted just after an extended period of practice teaching) showed that students over 25 years of age rated the Education and Educational Psychology units significantly *more* relevant to teaching than did the younger students (the older students also rated Language Arts units and a Remedial and Special Education unit as significantly *more* relevant and Art Education units, Physical Education units and Science Education units as significantly *less* relevant to teaching than did the younger students).

Such occurrences suggest that mature age students (21 and over on first enrolment) differ notably in what they look for in their course from the younger students. If one postulates 3 classes of approaches to deliberate action; a rationalist approach based on a coherent theoretical rationale, a judgemental approach based on individual judgement drawing eclectically on experience and others' ideas and a cookbook approach of applying routines fairly mechanically; one would suggest that the mature-age students tend towards the judgemental approach, that the younger students tend towards the cookbook approach and few students tend towards the rationalist approach (which is probably un-Australian anyway).

The following comments from recent graduates may help clarify the distinction between the judgemental and cookbook approaches to teacher training.

- J. "In my present employment in a C-class hospital, I find that the Psychology units and Communication skills I developed have helped me in understanding the older generations. . . . Life has turned full circle and Early Childhood Education helps with understanding the elderly." (mature-age student)

- J. "I found units in Ed. Psychology most helpful in that I fell back on much of the information gained - and surprisingly recalled in months of need." (mature-age student)
- J. "The units studied should be more flexible in the actual areas they cover. They should aim much more at interesting the student - challenging them and requiring their thought and responses . . . Many units I found boring and not intellectually stimulating yet requiring my time and effort." (younger student)
- CB. "Most of the units did not cover material relevant to my teaching. . . . I consider it to have been a waste of time because the unit was given over to the 150th celebration. Seeing as that year is nearly over then the course has only been of use for 1 year." (younger student)
- CB. "Much more practical work needed in the areas of making charts, games, aids etc. in the social science areas. J.P. units covered this area extremely well." (younger student)
- CB. "More assignments should be directed towards future use in the classroom. Many hours of work went into preparing assignments which were of little or no value later. The physical education index, as mentioned, has proven worthwhile over and over while on practice." (older student)

The judgemental approach emphasises the understanding, person development, intellectual stimulation and the integration with experience of the trainee teacher. The cookbook approach emphasises the materials, aids and routines that the student can collect and use without further understanding. The notion that the 150th material is just a theme, which could have been replaced by any of a number of themes without loss of the point of the unit, is not congruent with the cookbook approach.

As may be noted by the attributions of the comments, not all younger students emphasise a cookbook approach and not all older students emphasise a judgemental approach. However, the claim that mature-age students do tend to utilise the judgemental approach while younger students tend to utilise the cookbook approach is supported by the following material.

Mature-age Students and Course Evaluation

A postal survey of 1977, 1978 and 1979 (mid-year) Diploma of Teaching graduates of Claremont Teachers College was conducted in late 1979. Only a 35% response rate was obtained so the results should be treated with some caution. In that survey recent Diploma of Teaching graduates over 25 years of age rated 2 components of their course significantly higher on adequacy of outcomes than did younger students. The older students felt that the course had aided their development of an understanding of current curricula and their personal development to a greater extent than did younger students. On a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 high development and 1 low development, the graduates responded as follows:

TABLE 1
Graduate Evaluation of Course Outcomes

(1) Development of understanding of current curricula					
Age	No.	Mean	s.d.	t	p
25 or less	74	2.73	0.83	2.51	0.014
More than 25	40	3.15	0.89		
(2) Personal development					
25 or less	74	3.45	0.95	2.66	0.009
More than 25	40	3.95	0.99		

The first result indicates that while the older students are moderately satisfied that they have acquired an understanding of current curricula the younger students are not. They have learned some of the components of the curricula but they do not understand what the curricula is about, how they fit together and what the teachers are to do. The second result indicates that both groups of students feel that they have gained some personal development from the course but that the mature-age students feel they have gained more in this regard. One might have thought that it was the young who would gain more in this area since they would still be formulating their view of self, whereas the older students would already have a more settled self-image. However, one can turn this point around and suggest that it is the very security provided by a settled self-image that allows older students to rely on their own judgement and explore ideas, experiences and interests with more confidence. It is the younger students who are looking for secure strands to hang on to so that they do not go under. Thus their explorations tend to stop at the level of easily grasped surface skills and knowledge.

This notion is reflected in student choice of their major area of curriculum study. The most common majors selected by students 25 years of age or less were Social Studies, Junior Primary and Physical Education. The over 25's chose Social Studies, Remedial and Special Education, Reading, Language Studies and Art. Social Studies combines both practical bits and pieces and development of an understanding of people and society and so is popular with both groups.¹ However, Junior Primary and Physical Education are popular with the younger students but not the older. It may be that younger students feel more threatened by older primary pupils and thus feel more confident about dealing with smaller children. It may also be the case that older students, particularly older females, would be less fit and less attracted to sports than the younger students. However, it can also be

1 Note that students are required to do either a major or a minor in one of four areas; Social Studies, Language Studies, Mathematics or Science.

suggested that while older students may be less attracted to sports, their own child-raising experience might attract them towards Junior Primary as an area of familiarity and interest.

The neatest way to make sense of these choices of major is to note that both Junior Primary and Physical Education involve a large amount of discrete practical skills and activities and to suggest that these attract the younger students and deter the older students. The older students' emphasis on Remedial Education compared to the lack of such choices by younger students expresses a concern to go beyond mastery of standard procedures and the average pupil to an understanding and capability in regard to pupils who are different from the rest. Attention by older students to Reading, Language Studies and Art suggests a concern with understanding people's communication and modes of expression that goes beyond a concern for mere techniques. It might be noted in passing that in the selection of minor areas of curriculum study (in some cases double majors) Art headed the list for both groups. This was followed by Junior Primary, Physical Education and Reading for the under 25's and Speech and Drama and Reading for the over 25's.

These different emphases of the younger and older students do not only show up in subject choices made while at College. They also appear when the graduates, with up to 2 years teaching experience since completion of their course, are asked to evaluate their course components. In judging the units of the course the younger graduates (25 years old or less) still strongly favour Junior Primary and Physical Education units whereas these do not rate much of a mention with older graduates (26 or over). The older graduates responded most favourably to the Educational Psychology and Remedial Education units. In regard to negative judgements of units the younger graduates strongly nominate Education units, followed by Educational Psychology and Teaching Workshops. The older graduates rate Teaching Workshops least favourably, followed by Education units. It is noticeable that the younger graduates also pick out particular Education units as being poor, whereas this is not the case among the older graduates.

However, when one turns to evaluation questions which focus more on the relationship between course components and their teaching experience a higher degree of congruence occurs. Both older and younger graduates felt that their course had been a good preparation for teaching in the areas of classroom programming, teaching skills, Maths Education and Physical Education. While the younger graduates also felt they were adequately prepared in Junior Primary, Records, Reading, subject knowledge and classroom discipline, the older graduates placed emphasis on adequate preparation in Reading, lesson preparation, Social Studies, Science and Remedial activities. In regard to areas of teaching for which their course had not adequately prepared them, there was agreement in both groups that classroom programming (in spite of the above high rating of preparedness in this area) and administrative competence had not been areas of adequate preparation. The younger graduates greater proportion of country postings perhaps showed up

when they expressed inadequacies in dealing with split-aged groups, report writing, Music and Aboriginal pupils in rural schools. The older students felt inadequacies in Maths areas, Language Arts and classroom discipline (possibly reflecting a greater rate of relief teaching among older graduates). The older graduates had no difficulty over remedial activities (partly related to a greater emphasis on this in their course work) whereas the younger graduates did have difficulties in this area (which may again reflect some country postings). Thus it appears that the exigencies of programming and administration in a teaching post and the character of particular teaching posts override the differences in emphases between older and younger graduates when it comes to evaluating the adequacy of the relationship between their course and their teaching positions.

Three questions arise from these indications of differences in emphasis by trainee teacher students of different ages, with the younger students pursuing a cookbook approach of accumulating discrete materials, routines and skills and the older students pursuing a judgemental approach of acquiring understanding as a basis for judgement. Do these different emphases affect student performance in teaching training? Do these different emphases affect the likelihood of a student becoming a good teacher? And, what policy implications can one draw from these matters? These questions need to be pursued in more depth than can be the case here. However, some points should be noted.

Age and Student Performance

In regard to the first question one should note the accumulating body of literature supporting the contention that mature-age students do better, as students, than do younger persons (Eaton and West, 1978). The following fairly dubious results from the graduates survey (fairly dubious because of the 35% sample, the reliance on student memory for the marks and the fact that the relationship is only significant under a particular breakdown) lends some support to the applicability of this contention to teacher training students.

TABLE 2

Recent Graduates' Overall Average Marks by Age

Age	Overall Average Mark		
	Less than 70%	70%	or more
Less than 22	16	7	23
22 to 25	24	17	41
More than 25	<u>14</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>38</u>
	54	48	102
$K^2 = 7.02$	2 d.f.	$p < 0.05$	

By contrast, with similarly dubious data, there is no such relationship

between age and the students' final practice teaching marks. Since there is a limited relationship between the two sets of marks ($r = 0.49$) one might take this as an indication that age and the associated different approaches to the teacher training course noticeably affect students as students but not students as teachers.²

One of the reasons put forward for mature age students doing better than younger students in their studies is that the older students are more organized and motivated to succeed in their course. (Eaton and West, 1978, p.4). This is perhaps best captured in some quotes from a study about mature-age women in a Diploma of Education course at the University of Queensland where the younger students are commenting on the older ones.

"The mature-age students? Oh they're the ones who get the best marks usually. They are so conchy."

"I think it is really great that they can devote themselves so entirely to their study. That's what they're here for, and they are so interested and absorbed by it."

"... you sort of resent the fact they are sitting there with their much older eyes, and talking at the same time as you - and they have usually done a lot more work. I just resented that - that sort of superiority thing."

"Most of them I have met are highly motivated and incredibly organized. They can run a family, study fulltime, race off and do the shopping, and still have their parties and socials and things. I was flat out just studying! I was just envious of their ability to organize themselves, which I suppose they had plenty of practice at." (Yeates, 1978, pp. 19-20).

And an older student:

"There's such a discrepancy between the types of people doing Diploma of Education ... I was sitting at the back of a lecture this morning in the middle of a group - you know flat-footed, small-brained males, giggly twenty-year old females. They did nothing through the whole lecture ... The older group seem to be there for a reason and the differences between the two (age groups) just staggers me." (Yeates, 1978, p. 17).

In a study of the work experience of Diploma of Teaching students at Claremont (King and Haynes, 1980), it was found that students with a work experience break between school and college were similarly

2 In the follow up study of the student records of 1979 Diploma of Teaching graduates (only 16 of these 108 students were in the survey sample) mature age students scored significantly higher overall average marks than did younger students ($K^2 = 25.19$, 8 d.f., $p < 0.01$) but there was no significant difference on practice teaching marks. In regard to the latter, the most common suggestion is that teachers (and principals to some extent) in schools feel more insecurity with practice students of their own age or older and thus tend to downgrade them to some extent.

thought to have an advantage in their studies.³ Students were asked whether trainee teachers should be required to have a six months work experience break (given the availability of jobs) and 68% approved of the idea while only 10% disapproved. Older students (who generally had a work experience break) were far more strongly in favour of the policy than were younger students, with 88% of students 21 and over favouring the policy and 47% of students under 21 favouring it. There was strong agreement between the older and younger students that the main advantage of such experience was to "improve maturity and self-confidence" (44% of single choices for both groups). "Improve basis for career choice" was also favoured (20% of students over 21 and 21% of students 21 or less). However, the older students also favoured "Improve understanding of society" (21% of students over 21 and 5% of students 21 or less) while the younger students put some emphasis on understanding the world of work and gaining money. It was noticeable in the students' comments, though, that maturity was said to be an advantage in handling the workload at College, in motivation at College and in commitment to a teaching career (rather than using the teacher training course to make up one's mind on what one wanted to do). The students also emphasised the advantage of a period as a teacher's aide or in child-rearing, not because it would help one's teaching but because it would help one make a sound career choice. The advantages of maturity and career choice from a work experience break were thus applied by students of both groups more to life at College than to life as a practicing teacher.

Thus, while further research needs to be devoted to the first question there is support for the contention that mature-age students tend to have more academic success in teacher training than younger students due to their greater maturity as it is expressed in their greater organizing ability, greater motivation and greater commitment to a teaching career.

Age and Trainee Teacher Performance

The second question, of whether mature-age students (with their judgemental approach) are more likely to make good teachers, is the hardest given a lack of consensus on the criteria for being a good teacher. Perhaps one pointer here is the employment rates of mature-age students by the W.A. Education Department given the Minister's reported statements that:

...the competition generated by the present circumstances ensured that the best teachers got into schools.

...Teachers were recruited according to merit and this worked to the benefit of the students.

...He was confident that the department was by and large employing the best teachers available. (Kovacs, 1980)

- 3 In an 80% sample covering all three years of the course some 51% of students had a significant work experience break between school and college (43% with a break of over 1 year). During that break 47% of them worked in a private enterprise job, 21% worked in a public service job, 12% were engaged in home duties, 6% travelled and others were self-employed, in military service, unemployed etc.

One might enter some caveats about these statements given that the W.A. Education Department is known to have priority rankings on criteria such as W.A. training or training elsewhere, breadwinner status and availability for country postings. It has also been noted that the Department employs equal proportions of graduates from each of the state's teacher training institutions (Kovacs, 1980). However, within such priorities the current teacher surplus would suggest that the Department would try and select the best available teachers.

Thus, the work history of mature-age teacher training students after graduation may, when compared to the work history of other graduated students, shed some light on whether mature-age students are better teaching prospects, from the employer's view, or not.

Responses to the survey of recent graduates from Claremont's Diploma of Teaching course (note again the 35% response rate) indicates that 97% of the graduating students applied to the W.A. Education Department for employment. Though older and younger students did not differ in their preferences for grade levels (despite greater preference by younger students for Junior Primary units) there was some difference in location preferences. Some 83% of the students under 25 nominated that they were prepared to go to any area of that state compared to only 44% of the over 25's. Only 7% of the younger students restricted themselves to the metropolitan area compared to 39% of the over 25's (presumably because of differences in family commitments).

In spite of such differences in location preferences and in breadwinner status between older and younger students (70% of the younger students were single) there was *no difference* between the rates at which older and younger students were offered teaching jobs (approx. 10% of job offers were from organisations outside the Department).

Only one of the variables available, the final teaching mark, did in fact show a significant relationship with the rate at which teaching offers were made (and it may be remembered that there was no noticeable relationship between age and the teaching mark).

TABLE 3
*Time Until Teaching Job Offer by
Final Teaching Mark*

Offer Time	Teaching Mark			
	6 or less	7	8	or more
Less than 2 months	9	38	21	68
2 months or more	16	27	2	35
	25	65	23	103

$K^2 = 16.83$ 2 d.f. $p < 0.001$

It was noticeable that there was no such relationship between the student's overall average mark and the time until a teaching job offer. Thus the academic area, where mature-age students did better than other students, did not appear to feature in decisions on job offers to anywhere near the extent to which practice teaching marks, in which mature-age students scored similarly to other students, did. It is not clear here whether the teaching mark over-shadowed factors of location restrictions and lack of breadwinner status among some of the mature-age students or whether these negative factors were cancelled out by a slightly positive trend in other factors, such as mid-year completion, higher average marks or a better interview presentation. Note that 80% of the over 25's who took up a full-time teaching position did so in the metro area compared to 45% for the under 25's (27% of the under 25's went to the Goldfields or the North). In all events there is little evidence here to suggest that mature-age students make better teachers as judged by the Education Department (and other educational institutions) employment offers.⁴

Two other points should be noted, though, in regard to mature-age students' prospects as teachers. If one looks at the actual work histories of recent graduates (as distinct from the incidence of teaching offers) one finds that mature-age students who were not offered teaching jobs within two months of course completion tended to take up other jobs (primarily relief teaching) whereas younger graduates tended to hang on for a job with the Department eventually.

TABLE 4
Work History by Age

Work History	Age		
	25 or less	More than 25	
Early offer/teaching F/T	49	27	76
Delayed offer/teaching F/T	18	3	21
Other jobs @ activities	10	12	22
	<u>77</u>	<u>42</u>	<u>119</u>

$K^2 = 7.63$ 2 d.f. $p < 0.05$

This relationship is supported by figures showing that younger graduates who did not find full-time teaching jobs tended to hold part-time or other jobs for less than six months while older graduates who did not find full-time teaching jobs tended to have part-time or other jobs for more than 12 months. It seems that the older graduates showed more

4 At a public meeting in Perth in 1979 Professor Auchmuty noted that some submissions to his Inquiry had argued for minimum quotas of young teacher entrants to preserve an age spread in the teaching service. There is no evidence that this is present policy of the W.A. Department.

initiative and experience in finding another job if they did not get an early F/T teaching offer while the younger students showed less enterprise here and primarily looked to the Department for their future if possible. Older graduates with children would also be more likely to have contact with, or make contact with, the local schools for relief teaching opportunities. They would also be more selective in the job offers accepted, though, and more inclined to stay with a suitable part-time teaching job even if a (possibly inconvenient) full-time position became available. The basic point to note here is that older graduates tend to exercise more discretion over acceptable teaching offers and tend to use more initiative in seeking out suitable relief teaching, part-time work or other positions than do the younger students who seem more inclined to leave their fate to the Department.

The second point to note in regard to mature-age students as prospective teachers comes from the survey of the work experience of trainee teachers referred to above. Students were asked whether they felt they had sufficient understanding of the world of work to help prepare school pupils for (a) work in private enterprise, (b) participation in trade union activities and (c) possible unemployment. Students over 21 were significantly more confident about their level of understanding and ability to help pupils prepare for work in private enterprise (80% yes compared to 37% for younger students); to help pupils prepare for trade union participation (39% yes compared to 13% for younger students); and to help pupils prepare for possible unemployment (63% yes to 50% for younger students).

Policy Implications

The third and final question concerned the policy implications of the differences between mature-age teacher trainee students and the younger teacher trainee students. As noted previously a lot more work needs to be done in these areas before one can arrive at a well-grounded set of policy recommendations. However, the material presented here does indicate that there are good reasons for encouraging mature-age students into teacher training. They are likely to do well at it, to look for deeper understandings, to use a judgemental approach, to be highly motivated students, to organize themselves well for their studies and to be committed to becoming good teachers. The material presented here is even more inadequate in regard to judging the merit of the claim that mature-age students are more likely to become good teachers than other students. If the attributes they display in their course of study carry over to actual teaching then one would expect them to be better teachers. They would exercise their judgement more, reject mere routines, try to get a deeper understanding of their role and their pupils and be more organized, more motivated and more committed in their teaching than younger students. The material on their initiative and judgement in finding jobs when not offered employment by the Education Department and their greater confidence about preparing pupils adequately for the world of work suggest that these attributes should carry over to practical activities such as teaching. Yet on the material presented here (with no great confidence) it does not appear

that the Education Department, in looking for the best available teachers, favours the mature-age students. It could be that they are favoured but that the location and breadwinner restrictions remove this edge. However, the major significant relationship with the rate of job offers to graduating students is with the final teaching mark and there is no connection between age and that practice teaching mark.

It has often been suggested that academic success has little to do with success in actual teaching so there is no problem here if one accepts this view. Yet it seems difficult to accept that the sorts of attributes associated with mature-age students do not carry over to actual teaching. What appears more plausible is the argument that these attributes do not show up in the awards of teaching marks because of the exigencies of marking teaching practice; that the Education Department (and possibly other educational employers) places prime emphasis in their teaching employment offers on the practice teaching mark; and, thus, that mature-age students are not favoured in teaching employment offers. Would one expect an interest in understanding ideas, people and society to show up in assessment of teaching practice? Would one expect a judgemental approach to show up in assessment of teaching practice? Would one expect motivation, organization, commitment, initiative, confidence to show up in assessment of teaching practice? Would one expect an understanding of the world of work and confidence in one's ability to help prepare pupils for that world to show up in assessment of teaching practice? With some exception for motivation, organization etc., one would suggest not. Assessment of teaching practice is most likely to concentrate on the readily apparent, the activities of control, questioning, explaining, organizing and assessing within the classroom rather than the judgements, understanding, motivation and organization behind what goes on in the classroom. It is not clear given the circumstances of teaching practice assessment that the assessing focus could be much different. However, if one takes a good teacher (and this may be the big if) to be one who pursues the sort of judgemental approach evidenced in the mature-age students' approach to teacher training rather than a cookbook approach, then the seemingly high emphasis employing authorities place on the teaching practice mark needs to be changed.

The Schools Commission discussion paper on teacher education (1979, pp. 10-12) suggests that more mature-age students will provide a more effective teaching force because of the greater experience and broader perspective of such students. What comes out of the present discussion is that mature-age students do tend to have different attributes but that these show up more in academic assessment than in teaching assessment. If such attributes are held to be desirable, as we would argue is the case, changes should be considered in judgements of teaching capacities, particularly a reduction in the emphasis on teaching practice assessment for employment offers. This would enable mature-age students to gain a deserved role in teaching.

This paper, then, has provided some material on the attributes of

mature-age students in teacher training, has focussed attention on the difference in the questions of the performance of mature-age students as students and as teachers and has had something pertinent to say about assessments of teachers that do not pay adequate attention to underlying perspectives, understanding, motivation and judgement.

References

- EATON, E. & WEST, L.H.T. "The academic performance of mature-age students: A survey of the literature". Conference papers. Returning to Study Conference. Sydney University. August, 1978.
- KING, Roger B. & HAYNES, Bruce T. "Work Experience & Trainee Teachers". *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, June, 1980.
- KOVACS, Z. "Heeding the lessons of Teacher Unemployment". *The West Australian*. February 7, 1980.
- Schools Commission. *Issues in Teacher Education*. Discussion paper. Canberra: Aust. Government Printer, 1979.
- YEATES, Helen. "Reflections on Experience — The Mature-Age Female Graduate Student". Conference papers. Returning to Study Conference. Sydney University. August, 1978.