

# Second-career teachers in mathematics education: Discourses on motivations to enter the teaching profession

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the motivations of second-career teacher trainees in Austria and Sweden who have entered the teaching profession through Alternative Certification Programs to address teacher shortages, particularly in the subject of mathematics. In the results, six discourses on motivations to become a mathematics teacher are construed by the researchers, based on interviews with two second-career teacher students from different countries: 1) Breaking the self-perception barrier – a longtime aspiration to become a teacher, 2) Finding purpose – leaving previous profession for something more meaningful, 3) Impactful experiences with one’s educators, 4) Mathematics is stable, when everything else changes, 5) A desire to share the beauty of mathematics, and 6) Being perceived as a successful mathematics student. These findings underscore the multifaceted and contextually contingent nature of second-career teachers’ career transitions. By illuminating these motivational discourses, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the factors driving second-career teachers’ engagement with mathematics teaching.

**Keywords:** motivation, second-career teachers, mathematics education, discourse analysis.

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## 1 Introduction

According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, a major global issue in primary and secondary education is the massive shortage of teachers (UIS, 2016). One approach to addressing this shortage is the development of Alternative Certification Programs (ACPs), which aim to attract second-career teachers (SCTs) (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). Shaw (2008) demonstrated that ACPs are an effective strategy for recruiting SCTs, particularly in hard-to-fill subject areas such as mathematics, science, and foreign languages. In Europe, approximately one-third of education systems offer ACPs, according to the European Commission (Eurydice, 2018). This strategy is also employed in the Austrian and Swedish education systems, both of which are experiencing significant challenges related to teacher shortages (e.g.,



Bertilsson, 2018). In Austria, a significant trend has emerged in which prospective teachers in primary and secondary education begin teaching while still completing their formal training, driven by the urgent need for teaching personnel. In some Swedish counties, the proportion of qualified teachers is estimated at 72% (Skolverket, 2021). Although no official data are available for Austria, the increasing number of SCTs and early entrants suggests a similar situation.

To increase the proportion of qualified teachers, particularly in mathematics, attracting skilled teachers (SCTs) is considered crucial. This is not only due to the teacher shortage itself but also to the diverse competencies that SCTs could contribute to education (Baeten & Meeus, 2016). To gain a deeper understanding of the motivations behind SCTs' decisions to leave their previous careers and enter the teaching profession, this paper presents initial findings from a qualitative study of SCTs in Sweden and Austria.

By analysing interview data from one Austrian SCT and one in Sweden using discourse analysis, the following research question is addressed:

- What motivates SCTs to pursue a career in mathematics education?

## 2 Literature review

According to the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), 24 of 34 OECD countries employ teachers with 2 to 10 years' experience outside the classroom (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). Depending on the ACP, individuals without a complete teaching degree may be eligible for recruitment into the teaching profession (Hoffkamp & Koch, 2025). Åstrand (2021) links the issue of teacher shortages and the resulting approaches to alternative teacher qualifications to broader concerns about teacher competencies and the quality of teacher education. Hoffkamp and Koch (2025) note that the prior knowledge and qualifications of SCTs vary considerably, particularly in mathematics. These individuals often lack key components of the training received by teachers with an undergraduate degree.

Furthermore, the question arises as to how first-career teachers and SCTs differ not only in terms of skills, knowledge, beliefs, and autonomy, but also in their motivations for entering the teaching profession (Ruitenburg & Tigchelaar, 2021). There is existing research on both the motives for becoming a first-career teacher and factors related to beginning teachers' retention. Research by Watt et al. (2012) indicates that entry into the teaching profession is primarily driven by intrinsic

motivations, such as perceived teaching ability, the desire to make a social contribution, to work with children and adolescents, and positive prior experiences of teaching and learning, while personal utility values (e.g., job security and time for family) and social influences are rated considerably lower. Related research on beginning teachers' retention highlights long working hours and perceived low-quality school leadership as primary sources of dissatisfaction, with workload, particularly time spent on preparation, assessment, and administrative tasks outside school hours, being the most frequently cited reason for considering leaving the profession (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). However, there is comparatively little research on what motivates individuals to begin a new career as a teacher (SCT). According to Baeten and Meeus (2016) and the literature they cite, the reasons why SCTs choose to change their profession are diverse. Many are driven by a desire to pass on their expertise, help young people, and make a positive contribution to society. In addition to this altruistic motivation, SCTs often enter teaching careers for anticipated personal benefits (Chambers, 2002; Laming & Horne, 2013) and perceive teaching as more exciting, interactive, and creative than their previous professions (Haggard et al., 2006). These intrinsic motivational aspects are generally considered more significant than extrinsic ones (Baeten & Meeus, 2016). However, dissatisfaction with their previous careers, stemming from limited career advancement, job insecurity, financial rewards, and working hours, can also be considered important motivational factors in their decision to become teachers. According to Ruitenburg and Tigchelaar (2021), SCTs are strongly motivated to pass on their subject expertise, whereas first-career teachers are still developing these motivations. However, SCTs' strong initial motivation is often challenged by the gap between their ideals and the realities of teaching. Ruitenburg and Tigchelaar (2021, p. 3) describe this experience as "reality shock." An evaluation of studies by Baeten and Meeus (2016, p. 176) revealed the following subgroups of second-career teachers (SCTs) based on their motivations:

- SCTs who have always wanted to teach, but did not go into teacher education earlier because of the attractiveness of another job or because of financial barriers to resuming studies
- SCTs who chose teaching for pragmatic reasons: job reward, family-friendliness, or a combination of both
- SCTs with a strong sense of service

- SCTs who choose teaching based on previous experiences (teaching-related experiences, teachers in the family, or crucial events)
- SCTs who want to explore teaching as a second career

In this paper, the ACPs of Austria and Sweden are described to provide contextual grounding for the interview findings. Moreover, interview analysis offers a comprehensive examination and description of the motivations behind participants' engagement in an alternative teacher training program.

## 3 Context of the study

### 3.1 ACP in Austria

In Austria, SCTs can enter the teaching profession in general education subjects (e.g., Mathematics, German, English) at the secondary level through an ACP, which, however, varies in its implementation across the federal states. Eligibility for entry into the teaching profession through this route requires a completed, subject-relevant or subject-specific university or university of applied sciences degree equivalent to at least 180 ECTS credits (bachelor level). In the case of mathematics, for instance, degrees in business administration (subject-relevant) or mathematics (subject-specific) are acceptable. Additionally, applicants must demonstrate at least three years of relevant professional experience following graduation. Admission is contingent upon successful completion of an aptitude assessment procedure specific to the general education ACP. Candidates who do not meet these requirements may pursue a traditional teacher education program, which is also available in part-time formats.

The required postgraduate teacher training in mathematics in Vienna and Lower Austria (a federal state in Austria) consists of a university course comprising six modules with a total workload of 120 ECTS credits over a standard duration of four semesters with a maximum duration of eight semesters. The program aims to develop a range of professional competencies, including instructional design, planning and classroom management, diagnostic and support strategies, differentiation and individualisation, as well as legal and professional knowledge, with a focus on mathematics education.

### 3.2 ACP in Sweden

In Sweden, SCTs can enter ACP as a fast-track to becoming a teacher if they have prior academic qualifications. The courses are similar to those in the regular subject teacher program, and students receive an equivalent degree and qualification to teach their subjects, just like those in the regular program. To be admitted to ACP, general entry requirements for higher education studies, as well as relevant subject knowledge, are required. The requirements for subject knowledge vary depending on your chosen specialisation. To be eligible to apply for a mathematics teaching position in grades 7-9, you must have at least 90 ECTS credits in mathematics. For eligibility to become a mathematics teacher in upper secondary school, 120 ECTS credits in mathematics are required. There are also requirements for certain content within mathematics.

Furthermore, ACP is structured in two different ways: 50% study pace or 100% study pace, allowing students to choose. If you are a full-time ACP student, you study for a total of three semesters, whereas a half-time student studies twice as long. Part of the ACP program is carried out as an internship, meaning students work with an experienced mathematics teacher at a school. This is the only part of the education that is specifically focused on mathematics, as the university courses have a general pedagogical focus suitable for all subject specialisations. ACP is often delivered as distance education, which means you can live anywhere in Sweden. Every semester, a few compulsory meetings are organised at the university.

## 4 Discourse analysis as theory and methods

In this study, discourse analysis is employed in line with Gee (2014a, 2014b), serving both as a theoretical framework and an analytical tool. Discourse analysis was chosen in line with the research question to gain a deeper understanding of the discourses underlying SCT's motivation to become a mathematics teacher. Thus, the discourses in this study are theoretically viewed as part of the social practices that shape and redefine the understanding of the motivation of SCTs to become teachers. Language not only reflects but also creates existing realities, with discourses playing a crucial role in the ongoing processes that continually shape and redefine the meanings of social practices (Gee, 2014b). Furthermore, since social practices are constantly changing, so are discourses. Thus, the discourses construed in this study say something about SCTs motivation to become teachers, at a given moment.

The interview sample consists of two participants: one second-career teacher (SCT) from Austria and one from Sweden. For easier readability, the SCT from Austria will be referred to as Alex and the one from Sweden as Sofia. Both are currently enrolled in an alternative certification program (ACP) in their respective countries. Alex is already employed as a teacher, as this is a required component of the Austrian ACP. Both participants volunteered for the study after a call for participation was issued during their university course. Within the Austrian survey, three individuals were interviewed, whereas the Swedish survey included only one participant. To align the methods across the samples, a single Austrian participant (Alex) was randomly selected from the three Austrian interviewees. They provided informed consent in accordance with their national data protection regulations. All ethical guidelines and requirements applicable in the respective countries were strictly followed.

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, developed and administered in the participants' respective native languages. Audio recordings of the interviews were made for transcription and analysis purposes. While the primary focus of the interviews was on participants' motivations for entering the teaching profession, additional themes included the knowledge, skills, and support needs of SCTs in relation to their professional roles.

When using discourse analysis as an analytical tool, it is possible to distinguish between two types of discourses: small 'd' discourses and big 'D' Discourses (Gee, 2014a; 2014b). Small 'd' discourses refer to the way language is used, explaining how words and sentences relate to each other. In contrast, big 'D' Discourses provide a broader context for analysis. Since this analysis has a delimited focus on students' motivation to become teachers, small 'd' discourses were construed in the analysis. Gee has formulated 28 tools for discourse analysis. In this study, five of these tools were adapted and used in the analysis:

- The Deixis Tool (#1): What is talked about as given, based on the students' context?
- The Fill-In Tool (#2): What is not said? What knowledge and what assumptions are required for communication to be clear?
- The Significance Building Tool (#14): What words are used to build or lessen the significance of some things and not others in the students' communication?

- The Situated Meaning Tool (#23): What situated meanings, related to the context, do words and phrases have in the students' communication?
- Figured World Tool (#26): What typical stories or figured worlds are assumed in the students' communication?

In line with Gee (2014a), five tools were chosen, and for each tool, questions were formulated based on the context of this study. The analysis was carried out in two steps by posing these questions to the material. In the first step of the analysis, a big-picture view was taken to make visible the broader context and typical stories (#23, #26) in students' talk about motivation to become teachers. (e.g., *Sofia's expression about her desire to share the beauty of mathematics.*) In the second step of the analysis, a smaller perspective was focused on (1#, #2, #14) to make visible the implicit meanings in students' talk about motivation in their surrounding context. (e.g., *Sofia's intention to create a mathematics teaching where students can discover the beauty of mathematics by themselves.*)

Even if moving from a big to a smaller perspective, the discourse analysis moved back and forth through an iterative process. Through this discourse analysis, six discourses were construed by the researchers.

## 5 Results

In the results section, six discourses are described, construed based on the motivation of two second-career teacher students to become teachers. These discourses are supported by excerpts from the two interviews.

### 5.1 Alex in Austria

Based on the interview with Alex, three small discourses on motivation to become a mathematics teacher were construed: *Breaking the self-perception barrier – a longtime aspiration to become a teacher*, *Finding purpose – leaving a previous profession for something more meaningful*, and *Impactful experiences with one's educators*.

### 5.1.1 Breaking the self-perception barrier – a longtime aspiration to become a teacher

This discourse is construed around Alex's comments about his long-standing interest in becoming a teacher. He mentions that this aspiration had been present since the beginning of his studies in a field unrelated to teaching.

The idea of becoming a teacher, which I had already thought about earlier, was something I wanted to seriously consider. As I said, it wasn't a sudden decision.

Simultaneously, as Alex describes his desire to become a teacher, he also expresses concerns about his suitability for the profession. However, through experiences with his family, especially his children, along with his previous academic training and profession, he now feels more suited for this job, which motivates him to begin his training to become an SCT.

Yes, in addition, there was the handball training, where I worked with the kids. And also, my job, where I kind of got a bit closer to the school environment again, in a way, all of that gradually led me to keep thinking about it.

The choice of mathematics as a subject relies entirely on Alex's prior qualifications. It is neither explicitly stated as a motivating factor nor implicitly assumed. Alex's primary motivation is the teaching profession itself.

### 5.1.2 Finding purpose – leaving a previous profession for something more meaningful

This discourse is based on Alex's talk about his current profession and his future visions for how his career development should unfold. He shares his thoughts on the path he hopes to take professionally, including his aspirations and the changes he envisions for his work life.

What I'm currently doing is something I'd have to do until retirement – or maybe I'd be interested in something else, you know. And yeah, the teaching challenge that I'd thought about earlier, that's what I wanted to take on.

Implicit in Alex's communication is the perception that his profession as a software developer is less meaningful to him than teaching. His experiences as a father of three play a significant role in this view, reinforcing the importance and personal significance he attributes to teaching compared to his current career. These

parental experiences have deepened his connection to education and strengthened his motivation to pursue a career in teaching, highlighting the contrasting meanings he assigns to the two professions.

### 5.1.3 Impactful experiences with one's educators

This discourse is construed based on Alex's reflections on his experiences as a young student in mathematics courses. He recalls positive memories of individual progress, alongside negative experiences involving insults, particularly regarding whether his acceleration was subjectively recognised or dismissed. Alex associates the quality of teachers with their ability to both support and challenge him during his studies. This connection is particularly evident in his experiences with the inspiring teacher he mentioned, which can be interpreted as an implicit indication of a significant source of motivation for him to pursue a career in teaching.

For me, the most important thing is that you always have the opportunity to actively engage with the subject and work through things yourself to a certain extent, with steps that are not too big and where you reach your goal after a few small steps at the latest.

Alex seeks to provide students with the opportunity to experience this form of teaching, which he considers particularly effective. He aims to help ensure that students have similarly positive learning experiences as he did and to prevent them from being "dropped" by the teacher, an experience he faced as a student. His motivation is to fully support and encourage students, empowering them to realise their potential while feeling secure and welcome in the learning environment.

## 5.2 Sofia in Sweden

Based on the interview with Sofia, three small discourses on motivation to become a mathematics teacher were construed: *Mathematics is stable – when everything else changes*, *A desire to share the beauty of mathematics*, and *Being perceived as a successful mathematics student*.

### 5.2.1 Mathematics is stable – when everything else changes

This discourse is construed based on Sofia's talk of mathematics as something stable and consistent. Sofia talks about her experience of moving to Sweden from another country. She describes how this experience has led to everything around her feeling

new:

I had to start from scratch; it's a new country and a new language. Something new, but mathematics is something stable. It doesn't matter which country /.../ you can see that it's mathematics. And thus, I thought, I can use this, and it feels okay.

In the example above, Sofia describes mathematics as a contrast to the fact that everything else is in constant flux. Mathematics is explicitly described as something familiar, stable and consistent, something that does not change just because you are in another country. Furthermore, Sofia explains how mathematics helps her feel at ease. However, the desire to become a mathematics teacher is a new desire, which has grown with both age and life experience.

Yes, because now, with age, I feel I can teach/.../ Now I have developed as a person, and it is interesting for me to explain.

Implicit in Sofia's communication is a view of mathematics as a subject that gives her the sense of security she needs when everything around her is changing, and thus contributes to her desire to become a mathematics teacher. In contrast, all the changes in Sofia's life, her new life experiences, contribute to her feeling ready to become a mathematics teacher.

### 5.2.2 A desire to share the beauty of mathematics

This discourse is based on Sofia's discussion about how she wants to make a difference by sharing the beauty of mathematics. Sofia describes how important it is that the teacher shows his or her interest in mathematics, but how this is something that not all teachers do:

It's not just about a lack of knowledge. Sometimes it feels like /.../ the teacher, for example, he/she, is a little tired. And then they [the teachers] choose, how can I say, a very simple way of teaching. Maybe a very short explanation, and then they [the students] just use the textbook and work, just work /.../It's just like we're talking about now, to create interest, to show your own interest in mathematics. I think it feels a lot. Students feel it. If you like mathematics, if you love it.

Based on the discussion about teachers who choose the easy path in teaching, Sofia expresses her desire to contribute something else. She argues that teachers

need to show an interest in mathematics. Sofia describes mathematics as something beautiful.

It's interesting to teach others something new, to help the children master mathematics, and I really like mathematics /.../ to help them discover mathematics as an art.

Sofia describes how she truly enjoys mathematics and wants her students to discover its beauty. Mathematics is explicitly described as an art form to be discovered. Thus, having the opportunity to help students discover mathematics as an art contributes to Sofia's desire to become a mathematics teacher.

### 5.2.3 Being perceived as a successful mathematics student

This discourse is construed based on Sofia's talk about her experiences as a young student. Sofia describes how she used to like mathematics a lot when she was a student in secondary school:

I remember when I was studying, when I was a student, I liked mathematics a lot. Can I explain? It was a bit like school competitions. Do you understand? In secondary school, for example. And then she [the teacher] asked me, do you want to participate there /.../ So that competition, it was interesting to participate and understand the interesting tasks, and compare my knowledge with other students from other schools.

In the example above, Sofia describes how her teacher asked whether she wanted to participate in a mathematics competition against students from other schools. She describes the competitions as an interesting and positive experience. Implicit in Sofia's talk is an understanding of her as a successful student, even if this is not mentioned explicitly. Furthermore, Sofia connects succeeding as a student herself with the role of her mathematics teacher.

The teacher I had, she managed to create interest. She let us, for example /.../ you don't have to listen now or follow my explanation. If you understand, then just continue working. So, she created interest. It kind of pushed me up, all the time, and motivated me to develop and discover more and more in mathematics.

Sofia describes how her teacher challenged them to learn more by letting them work at their own pace. Although it is not said explicitly, it is clear that she felt seen

by this teacher. Implicitly, this teacher becomes an inspiration for Sofia about the kind of mathematics teacher she wants to become.

## 6 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the motivations of second-career teachers (SCTs) entering the field of mathematics education in Austria and Sweden through alternative certification programs. By conducting a discourse analysis of two individual cases, Alex in Austria and Sofia in Sweden, this study identifies both cross-national similarities and differences. However, given the small sample size and the absence of a direct comparison between the two cases, the study cannot be considered a comparative study. However, as highlighted in the results section and below, these two cases illustrate the complex, context-dependent motivations and the role experience plays that other studies cannot capture. While both participants demonstrate strong intrinsic motivations (Baeten & Meeus, 2016), these are embedded in different professional contexts, which shape their discourses in unique ways.

Both Alex and Sofia express a deeply personal commitment to teaching, rooted in prior educational experiences and personal values. For instance, both participants reference encounters that occurred during their initial experiences in earlier stages of life. This echoes findings by Baeten and Meeus (2016), who identify “previous experiences” and “a strong sense of service” as common motivational categories for SCTs. Additionally, both participants express a desire to contribute meaningfully to student learning – Alex through creating supportive learning environments, and Sofia by sharing the beauty of mathematics. These motivations align with Ruitenburg and Tigchelaar’s (2021) observation that SCTs often enter the profession with a strong initial idealism and subject-specific commitment.

Despite these shared themes, differences influence how motivations are construed and articulated. Alex’s motivations are closely linked to a long-standing but previously suppressed aspiration to become a teacher. In contrast, Sofia’s discourse is shaped by her experience and by mathematics as a “stable” element amid life changes. Her discourse reflects not only a pedagogical interest but also an existential dimension, where mathematics serves as a means of continuity and self-affirmation in a new cultural context.

While both participants meet the formal entry requirements for mathematics teaching in their respective ACPs, the significance of mathematics differs. For Alex,

mathematics is almost incidental; his motivation is centred on the act of teaching itself. For Sofia, mathematics is both the subject and the medium through which she envisions making a difference.

## 7 Conclusion

This study of second-career teachers in Austria and Sweden offers valuable insights into the complex and context-dependent motivations that drive individuals to transition into teaching mathematics. While both participants expressed a strong intrinsic desire to teach, their narratives revealed differences shaped by national contexts, prior professional experiences, and personal life circumstances.

The Austrian case highlighted a long-standing but delayed aspiration to teach, rooted in a desire for meaningful work and shaped by family experiences. The Swedish case, in contrast, emphasised mathematics as a source of stability and identity in the context of migration, and a motivation to inspire others through the aesthetic and intellectual richness of the subject.

These findings underscore the importance of designing alternative certification programs that recognise and support the diverse motivations and needs of SCTs. Tailored support mechanisms, flexible structures, and opportunities for reflective practice can help second-career teachers sustain their commitment and navigate the challenges of the teaching profession. Ultimately, by acknowledging the distinct paths that lead individuals to the classroom, policymakers and educators can better harness the potential of second-career teachers as a valuable asset in addressing subject-specific teacher shortages and enriching mathematics education.

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