

Student Teachers' Expectations of Teaching as a Profession in Malaysia*

Ahmad Zamri bin Khairani
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia

Teacher education is an essential professional development for student teachers. The knowledge of both subject matter and how to teach provides some guidance on how teachers make sense of their learning. Teaching expectation is an important topic that has been discussed by educational researchers in order to explain not only why students choose teaching profession, but also why some of them leave off the profession. The present study tends to explore the expectations of student teachers towards teaching as a profession. The sample consisted of 295 student teachers. The results show that in general, student teachers were ready to teach, and the expectations towards teaching profession were high. Some of the findings include: (1) The student teachers were ready to teach their own specialist subjects but not other subjects; (2) Pupils' achievement is the single most important outcomes in teaching; and (3) The right way of teaching pupils is more important than knowledge of their specialist subjects. The implications of these findings on theory and practice of teacher education programme were also discussed.

Keywords: teaching expectations, student teachers, teacher education

Introduction

Teacher education is an essential professional development for student teachers. The programme prepared student teachers in terms of knowledge and skills of both subject matter and how to teach (Wilke, 2004). As suggested by Pajares (1992), besides the core subject content and structure, it was also important to take into account related variables, such as expectations of student teachers, because it gave some guidance on how teacher made sense of their learning during the teacher education programme. Teaching expectation is an important topic that has been discussed by educational researchers. The degree of match between teaching expectation and the reality of what teaching is as a job is one important area that has been developed by researchers, particularly to explain on the motivation among student teachers. For example, a longitudinal study by Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, and Parker (2000) from 1978 to 1993 suggested that entering teaching with positive expectations might have a significant impact on retention.

Expectations of student teachers can be classified into two main categories, namely, expectation towards teaching and the teaching profession and expectations of the teacher education programme. Literature showed that students entered teaching programme with mixed expectations towards teaching. Some entered with high expectations about their ability to do the job well and effectively (Richards & Killen, 1994). Their expectations toward effective teachers include motivating students and being warm and personable (Collins, Selinger, &

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Pratt, 2003; Holt-Reynolds, 1992), as well as the ability to maintain interest and class control (Joram & Gabriele, 1998). With regards to teacher education programme, some possess limited and simplistic views. They expect that teaching merely involves transmitting information (Feiman-Nemser, McDiarmid, Melnick, & Parker, 1989). Others expect teaching as one which is telling, nurturing and hold parent-like practices (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Wilke, 2004). Some student teachers did not expect much from their teaching programme (Joram & Gabriele, 1998) and expected they would be good teachers without any preparation (Mertz & McNeely, 1991). They were also less interested in what they perceived to be theories during their coursework (Whitbeck, 2000; Wilke, 2004; Collins et al., 2003; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). Instead, they expected knowledge of teaching would be from the actual practice in the field or when they eventually entered the classroom (Feinman-Nemser et al., 1989; Joram & Gabriele, 1998).

Teaching expectations, like other variables related to educational beliefs, i.e., self-efficacy, motivation, perception, develop from personal experience, experience with schooling and instruction as well as experience with formal knowledge (Richardson, 1996). This included 12-13 years of experience in watching and participating in classroom as a student (Feinman-Nemser et al., 1989; Gunstone, 1989; Mertz & McNeely, 1991). As a result, researchers, such as Johnson (1988) and O'Loughlin (1988) believed that the pre-existing educational beliefs were very influential and this might explain the reason why attempts to inculcate new beliefs during the teacher education programme were sometimes fruitless.

In order to provide better understanding towards teaching expectations, it is important to explore factors that influence students to become teachers as well as factors given by students who withdraw themselves from the teacher education programme. Literature showed that the appealing factors can be divided into three categories, namely, intrinsic, extrinsic and altruistic factors (Kyriacou, Hultgren, Stephens, & Hultgren, 1999; C. Papanastasiou & E. Papanastasiou, 1997). The intrinsic reason was related to the act of teaching itself where people who loved teaching enjoy every teaching moment to the fullest (Parkay & Hardcastle, 1991). On the other hand, extrinsic factors included benefits attached from embarking in teaching, such as good pay and privilege of having long. Altruistic reason involves factors related to students' wellbeing, such as wanting to help them succeed. In contrast, the main reason why students withdrew from teacher education programme was that they simply found the work more demanding than what they expected (Chambers, Coles, & Roper, 2002; Chambers & Roper, 2000). Thus, it can be concluded that expectation plays a prominent role in influencing students to choose teaching profession as well as to stay in it. However, despite numerous studies (Goddard & O'Brien, 2003; Purcell, Wilton, Davies, & Elias, 2005; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000), little attention has been paid specifically to the initial expectations of teaching (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). As such, this study was designed to explore the expectations towards teaching as a profession of the student teachers in Malaysia.

Teacher Programme in Malaysia

In Malaysia, the training of student teachers for both primary and secondary schools is mainly provided by the 28 teacher training institutes as well as the 11 public universities. The 28 teacher training institutes conduct specialist the teacher education programmes, namely, the post graduate diploma in teaching. This is a one-year course with minimum intake qualification of a bachelor degree. The programme emphasizes on pedagogy and other relevant teaching skills. Meanwhile, all the 11 public universities also provide student teacher education programmes, namely, the bachelor degree of education programme. This is a five and a half years' course with minimum intake qualification of matriculation or Higher School Certificate (an equivalent

to A-level). The programme stresses on both content knowledge and teaching skills. Its main aim is to produce secondary school teachers.

In sum, these teacher education programmes are geared towards the professional, academic and personal development of the student teachers in order to equip them with relevant knowledge, skills and abilities. Nevertheless, the main issue in the teacher education programme in Malaysia is related to the quality of the teachers produced. Teacher training programmes do not usually take into consideration the actual problems encountered by teachers, such as in teaching mixed ability classes. Mohd. Daud, Mustapha, Lee, Khadijah, Ismail, Zulkifli, and Chew (2000) reported that although the teachers are able to dispense teaching competencies that have been emphasized in their training programmes, they lack abilities to ensure that their students can follow and understand their lessons. It is not uncommon that lessons are taught as a whole, where weak students are usually neglected while the more abled ones are not intellectually challenged.

Methodology

The subjects for this study were 295 student teachers (72 males and 223 females) from a local teacher training institute. All were enrolled for the Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching. Majority of the samples ($N = 203$) or 68.8% were Malays, compared to ($N = 62$) or 21.0% local Chinese, and ($N = 30$) or 10.2% local Indians. One hundred and sixty eight student teachers or 56.9% had some experience in teaching, with large composition of them (72.6%) with less than a year of experience. The median age for the sample was 27 years old. The student teachers completed a questionnaire during one of their teaching sessions to ensure a 100 percent response rate. The structured questionnaire used in this study comprised of 18 items adapted from Kyriacou and Kunc (2007). The student teachers' expectations were measured using a four-point Likert-scale (1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly disagree). Six items were designed to measure readiness towards teaching while the other twelve items each had a specific statement measuring student teachers' expectations of teaching profession. The overall internal consistency of the questionnaire was 0.77.

Findings

The responses to the questionnaire are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Overall, the student teachers were ready to teach (mean = 1.50, $sd = 0.46$). In Table 1, a high percentage (61.7%) of the student teachers are absolutely certain that they are ready to teach their own specialist subjects, although 5.1% of them said otherwise. In contrast, when asked to teach other subjects, the percentage drops significantly to only 31.2%. The respondents also expect that they are ready in terms of keeping rules and discipline in the classroom as well as facing students with different abilities. Another observation is that student teachers were generally less in favor of discussing both academic and discipline matters with students' families.

As it is depicted in Table 2, the expectations towards teaching profession was high (mean = 1.67, $sd = 0.50$). Investigation on individual items showed that the respondents have high agreement for the item "I will feel elated by pupils' achievements", followed by "I believe I will have a good rapport with my students". Although ten respondents or 3.4% were of the opposite, the majority of the respondents believe that teaching profession is the most suitable career for them. The student teachers also endorsed that teaching profession is still well respected by people and they will have adequate time to do a good job. In addition, they hope to be promoted into the school management position rather than stayed forever as basic teachers. However, they are neither particularly sure whether the payment will be sufficient nor the profession will fulfill their personal needs.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Readiness Towards Teaching

Items	Mean	sd	Percentage of response (%)			
			1	2	3	4
I am ready to...						
Teach my own specialist subject.	1.43	0.59	61.7	33.2	5.1	
Keep rules and discipline in order.	1.43	0.52	58.3	40.3	1.4	
Face students with different abilities.	1.43	0.51	59.0	40.3	0.7	
Discuss with students' family with regards to learning difficulties of students.	1.52	0.53	49.8	48.5	1.7	
Discuss with students' family with regards to discipline.	1.57	0.57	46.5	49.8	3.7	
Teach other than my own specialist subject.	1.75	0.57	31.2	62.7	5.8	0.3

Notes. 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Disagree; 4 = Strongly disagree, *sd* = Standard deviation.

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of the Expectation Towards Teaching

Items	Mean	sd	Percentage of response (%)			
			1	2	3	4
I will feel elated by pupils' achievement.	1.20	0.40	80.3	19.7		
I believe I will have a good rapport with my students.	1.46	0.52	55.0	44.7	0.3	
The teaching profession is the most suitable career for me.	1.52	0.58	51.9	44.7	3.1	0.3
Teaching is still well respected by people.	1.64	0.65	45.4	45.4	9.2	
I will have enough time to do a good job.	1.68	0.62	39.7	52.5	7.8	
In future, I hope to be involved in management (head of panel, head of department, senior assistant, etc.).	1.70	0.66	40.0	51.2	7.8	1.0
The payment will be sufficient for my lifestyle.	1.92	0.61	21.4	66.4	10.8	1.4
Teaching will fulfill my personal needs.	1.94	0.65	24.0	59.0	16.3	0.7
Teaching is the right career because I can spend a lot of time with my family.	2.19	0.77	17.6	49.2	29.5	3.7
In my opinion, teachers will have more bad time than the good one.	2.26	0.70	11.9	53.2	31.9	3.0
Teaching training has prepared me for the job.	2.67	0.66	3.0	34.6	54.6	7.8
Teaching pupils is more important than knowledge of my specialist subject.	2.77	0.64	3.7	23.4	65.1	7.8

Notes. 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Disagree; 4 = Strongly disagree, *sd* = Standard deviation.

Discussion and Implications

In examining the readiness of student teachers, a high mean was found. The findings were consistent with the study by Abdul Rahim, Mohd Majid, Rashid, and Lyndon (2008) that student teachers had high level of confidence in both classroom management and instructional strategies. It is also consistent with the conclusion in Bourdoncle and Robert's (2000) study that student teachers show great understanding in: (1) How they manage their action; and (2) How to influence the learning of their students. Quite interestingly, however, these tasks are all perceived as extremely difficult by beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984). Similarly, Halford as cited in Rahimah et al. (2006) reported that beginning teachers were always assigned to students with most diverse and challenging needs. The findings also showed that the respondents tended to dodge themselves from teaching other than their specialist subjects. This may provide some difficulties since it is a norm in the teaching profession that beginning teachers are often required to teach other than their specialist subjects.

The present study also found that the student teachers' expectations towards teaching profession were high. The result, however, was not in line with other studies (Abdul Rahim et al., 2008; Ediger, 2002; LaCour, 2005) those student teachers' expectations and attitudes were rather moderate. Placing too high an expectation may have some negative effects. For example, since the respondents place high expectations on students' achievements, it would be very discouraging if they find themselves teaching in a school with very limited opportunity to help students to succeed. Similarly, many student teachers expect to be involved in the school management within a few years. Again, if this does not occur, they may feel frustrated. In Malaysia, student teachers receive an allowance of RM 16,320 (USD\$ 4,663) during their training programme. The amount is considered huge and one might speculate that with that kind of amount, student teachers would expect more on the positive side of teaching. It is also possible that the respondents may have overstated their expectations since the majority of them have less than one year of experience.

The expectation is a continuum. Therefore, it is essential to determine the importance of these expectations towards teaching profession. The most important expectation would certainly be the one that if not fulfilled would lead to the student teacher leaving the profession. The least important, meanwhile, may purely consider as part of learning curves. Then, the teacher education programme may be geared towards making sense of these expectations. However, this is easier said than done since not only expectations differ from one another, they also vary over time. For example, as documented by Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, and Meisels (2007), financial aspects became more important when a teacher starts a family compared to during the duration when he/she undergoes his/her teacher education programme. Therefore, detailed longitudinal studies that assess how expectations change over time would certainly provide valuable information on how student teachers "balance" their high expectations with reality checks in the classrooms.

Conclusions

When a student teacher makes a choice to enter the teaching profession, the decision is similar to what any other student makes in entering any other career choices. The choice may be based on their personal satisfaction or extrinsic factors such as the pay and reward. In Malaysia, teaching has undergone tremendous changes in both aspects that lead to an influx of students choosing the profession. Classroom reality has also undergone drastic changes. However, for the student teachers, many of them come with expectations related to the past, during their schooling periods, but not the present and certainly not the future. Therefore, it is essential for teacher education programmes to provide a platform to enable our students to be sure of what they would expect life in the teaching profession to be like.

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