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Prior Teacher Experiences Informing How Post-Graduate Teacher Candidates See Teaching and Themselves in the Role as the Teacher

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This study examined the preconceptions and beliefs that 17 entry-level post-graduate preservice teachers held about the type of teacher they do and do not want to become. Results indicated that there are differences in the way the primary and secondary preservice teachers entering into this post-graduate teacher certification program interpreted their prior teacher experiences. There were differences in not only how but also why participating teacher candidates remembered their prior teachers. Specifically, results highlighted that it was those remembered teachers, which informed on how they saw teaching and themselves in the role of the teacher.

Preservice teacher education, teacher cognition

INTRODUCTION

How entry-level preservice teachers, those students enrolled in their first teacher preparation course (Brookhart and Freedman, 1992, p. 37), see themselves as teachers requires an exploration and understanding of teacher-student interactions, particularly their own experiences as a student of these interactions. Research about teacher-student interactions is a well-established field of inquiry; however, this research has been historically from the point of view of the teacher. Two of the prominent researchers in this area Good and Brophy (2000) revisited an earlier synthesis (Brophy and Good, 1974) of over half a century of work in this area. These interactions were catalogued into an extensive list of causes and consequences ranging from higher praise given to higher socio-economic status students to differentiation based on everything from students' speech characteristics, seating location in the classroom, promptness, handwriting styles to deportment. Good and Brophy (2000) then augmented this initial work to include another quarter century of research and study into classroom relationships.

Teacher-student research has seen a redirection in focus away from the teacher to how students themselves perceive and make sense of the educational experience (Weinstein, Marshal, Sharp, and Botkin, 1987; Weinstein, 1983, 1985; Whitfield, 1976). Preservice teachers have spent more than a decade observing first-hand the role of the teacher. Therefore, it is no revelation they come to teacher education programs with ideas about teaching (Anderson, Blumenfeld, Pintrich, Clark, Marx, and Peterson 1995; Anderson and Holt-Reynolds, 1995; Henson, 2001; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Hollingsworth, 1989; Kagan, 1992; Tatto, 1998; Weinstein, 1989 Wubbels, 1992). That they are the product of their own lifetime of experiences and these life experiences affect not only what they do but also why and how they do it, was recognised in Lortie's (1975) seminal work, *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. This shift from teacher-student interactions to student-teacher interactions has been further carried on through the works of Babad, Bernieri, and Rosenthal (1991), Galbo (1983, 1989) and Tierno (1996) in the recognition of the significant roles teachers play in the lives and development of their students.

These student developments have resulted in studies, which have explored participants' beliefs about teachers, students and education. Beliefs are those tacit and often unconsciously held preconceptions and assumptions about students, classrooms and the academic material to be taught (Kagan, 1992, p. 65). These beliefs have been the focus of research studies and papers as to how they are addressed by teacher education programs (Aldridge and Bobis, 2001; Bobis and Aldridge, 2002; Freppon and MacGillivary, 1996; Johnston, 1992; Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber 2001; Wubbels, 1992). However, the emphasis of this research has been primarily on how the teacher education programs can more effectively change these beliefs to those espoused by either the education ideology of the researcher or investigating institution and not on where, why or how these beliefs were formed.

PURPOSE

This study sought to identify those beliefs that entry-level preservice teachers brought with them to their post-graduate teacher education program about teaching and their role as the teacher. There has been a growing trend in research away from quantitative observations of the classroom and into the qualitative life experiences of both students and teachers. One area of this trend is research into prior schooling experience, which has resulted in a broadened exploration of preservice teacher and teacher beliefs. Preservice teachers are not just simply formed or socialised by their lifetime of experiences; they are active participants in interpreting these experiences. As such the focus of this field of research has shifted from what is going on in the classroom to what went on in the classroom from the point of view of the participant. What do preservice teachers remember about their prior schooling experiences? Why do they remember these events or people? Do their interpretations of those prior experiences influence the teacher they see themselves to be?

Preservice teachers enter teacher education programs with powerful and significant ideas that have developed out of their own personal histories (Buckmann and Schwille, 1983; Carter, 1994; Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991). It is these personal histories, those prior experiences that have moulded their educational thinking (Knowles and Holt-Reynolds, 1991, p.89), that preservice teachers use directly to predict their own future teaching practice. Through the interpretations of these prior experiences, prospective teachers enter their education programs with images as to the type of teacher they do and do not want to become (Connelly and Clandinin, 1994).

METHOD

This study was conducted in two phases. The study employed a mixed-model research design using both survey instrument and interview methods. The phase one survey instrument was used a) to gather demographic data, b) to give participants the opportunity to reflect upon their prior schooling experiences, c) to report what these experiences meant to them, and d) to report on what they saw as the ideal characteristics of a teacher. The phase two interviews initially focused on what the participants actually reported in their questionnaire and the meanings the metaphors held for them. This allowed a means of establishing a prior schooling context for the further exploration of prior teacher experiences.

Participants

Out of the 264 candidates entering the program, 66 (25%) agreed to participant in this study. Of these, 26 (39.4%) were male and 40 (60.6%) were female. 26 of the participants were primary education majors and 40 were secondary education majors. Eleven (16.7%) of the teacher candidates were classified as recent undergraduates, under the age of 24 years; 53 (80.3%) were

classified as adults returning to education, aged 24 years or more; and two (3%) declined to answer this question. Forty-six (69.7%) of the participants classified themselves as being Anglo/Caucasian; 18 (27.3%) as Asian; and two (3%) as Other.

Seventeen of these 66 respondents were then selected for interviews. Interviewees were selected to represent best the wide range of candidates entering this post-graduate teacher certification program: male, female, primary, secondary, adults returning to education and recent undergraduates. Nine of the interviewees were male, of whom five were primary education and four were secondary education majors. Four of the nine male teacher candidates were classified as recent undergraduates and five were adults returning to education. Eight of the interviewees were female teacher candidates, of whom three were primary education majors and five were secondary education. Of these eight, there were four each of recent undergraduates and adults returning to education.

Phase 1

A self-administered questionnaire *What Was School Like?* (Mahlios and Maxson, 1995) was offered to all of the 264 primary and secondary education students entering a post-graduate teacher education program at a large university in Australia before they commenced their academic year. All prospective degree program students were invited to complete voluntarily the questionnaire, 66 students (25%) agreed to participate in this study. This questionnaire asked participants to provide demographic data then recall both their primary and secondary school years and then choose from a list of metaphors, or write in their own metaphor, that best described these educational experiences. Participants then chose from a list of metaphors or wrote in their own for how they saw teaching and finally chose eight characteristics from a list of 62 characteristics as to what they perceived were ideal student and teacher characteristics. This questionnaire was selected as it had a research history with cross-cultural populations, established validity and research use in both its original and modified forms (Hardcastle, Yamamoto, Parkay, and Chan, 1985; Mahlios and Maxson, 1995; Yamamoto, Hardcastle, Muehl, and Muehl, 1990).

Phase 2

Seventeen of the participants were then selected from the survey instrument respondents for interviews to further explore the meaning and reasoning behind their questionnaire responses. The interviews took approximately one hour and were conducted on the university's campus. All interviews were conducted prior to the commencement of the program to prevent any course content from altering the teacher candidates' preconceptions and beliefs about teaching and their role as the teacher (Connelly and Clandinin, 1994; Hollingsworth, 1989; Mahlios and Maxson, 1995; Phelan and McLaughlin, 1995; Tabachnick and Zeichner, 1984). The researcher conducted all interviews.

The interviews began as semi-structured interviews following an interview protocol asking the respondents to expound upon the reasons behind their reported responses to the questionnaire. The interviews, after establishing a prior schooling experience context, became semi- or unstructured interviews about the respondents' prior teacher experiences. Interviewees were guided by the researcher as needed to provide explicit examples of their prior teachers.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaires allowed the researcher to gather demographic data about the participating teacher candidates and were used primarily as a means of obtaining life stories, an interpretive framework through which the meaning of human experience was revealed in personal accounts (Creswell, 1994), from the interviewees. The questionnaire was present for each interview in

order to allow the researcher to modify the interview protocol for each interviewee. The interview protocol was designed to elicit incidents of prior teachers from each participant. This protocol provided a rich contextual background for the extraction of participants' beliefs about their role as a teacher and how this role has been informed by their own prior teachers.

The constant comparative method provided the theoretical construct from which the researcher operated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The researcher transcribed each interview and individual references about prior teachers and teaching were recorded. The process of data collection was consistently compared to generate categories. As the data were coded and compared, the categories were collapsed. The following categories were used to examine and describe the participating preservice teachers:

a) how the participants saw themselves in the role of the teacher;

b) their positive or negative examples of prior teachers held;

c) how those prior teacher examples influenced their selection of ideal teacher characteristics; and

d) common trends.

Results

The analysis of the data yielded many insights into these preservice teachers' beliefs about their role as the teacher, teachers and teaching. Most of the participants saw their role as the teacher in one of three ways: facilitator or guide, encourager or enthuser, or role model. These three categories accounted for three-fourths of the interviewees' images with each category nearly equally represented. The remaining mixed images were of someone who took a holistic approach to students' mental, emotional, physical and intellectual growth, a helper and an experience giver.

In relating their ideal teacher characteristics to prior teacher examples, 43 explicit prior teacher examples were remembered. Of these, the interviewees saw 29 as positive teacher examples and 14 as negative teacher examples. Ten additional general or vague references were also made about prior teachers; two of these were positive and eight were negative. These ten references grouped all teachers into one category and were not comments about any one specific prior teacher, such as, "in my high school the teachers took a real interest in the way they taught, their enthusiasm just rubbed off on the students" (Adrian - all names have been changed to protect identity) and "I was never enthused by my teachers … most of them, I would have to say most of them" (Carolyn).

Twenty-six (90%) of the positive teacher examples involved teachers who were judged to be good because they were seen as teachers who were "not teachers but people … and saw me more as a person … to be encouraged rather than a student" (Louisa). These teachers were seen as willing to go beyond the classroom boundaries and become involved in the students by actively encouraging, inspiring, and showing enthusiasm to and for their students. While ten (71%) of the negative teacher examples were seen as bad teachers because they did not provide this enthusiasm, inspiration or encouragement to either their students or their classes.

These 43 prior teacher examples resulted in 134 separate references to the respondents' ideal teacher characteristics. Of these, 77 were remembered as prior teachers positively demonstrating or possessing a certain characteristic and 57 as prior teachers either demonstrating the opposite of an ideal characteristic or not possessing this characteristic. In addition to these 134 references, another 28 ideal teacher characteristics were remembered with both positive and negative teacher examples. Seven of the interviewees remembered only positive prior teacher examples. While

four were only able to remember negative examples in vague or general terms, two of the interviewees had only clear and distinct negative teacher memories. The remaining five interviewees had mixed well-remembered prior teachers.

Seven of the interviewees felt that teaching should be fun for the students, “she would be spontaneous … she would use our contributions and that would just make class fun, she always brought us around to a positive goal …, she had a good sense of humour” (Kristy). This was seen as the best way to keep students engaged and Chuan stated best what five of the teacher candidates expressed, “if you are going to be a teacher you need to have that good experience.” This kind of positive educational experience, positive being seen as fun, inspired or enthused, was required for students to want to become teachers. This was carried further with five other teacher candidates stating that they believed it was more important how you teach than what you actually teach, such as Sook’s comment “I think it is more important not so much what they are teaching but the way they teach you.” However, five of the interviewees stated their prior teachers’ level of subject matter knowledge and interest in the subject matter were the key to their positive memories of school, “they knew what they were talking about … they developed an interest in that particular subject” (Matthew).

Eight of the interviewees saw their ideal teacher characteristics as “how I want to see myself” (Andrew) in the classroom with an additional three seeing parts of themselves in these characteristics but with room to improve after experience in the classroom. Only one interviewee saw himself as his idea of the ideal teacher. Six stated that their favourite teachers had the characteristics of what they listed as ideal teacher characteristics. Four stated they wished to emulate what they saw as positive teacher role models while four stated they did not want to be like those teachers they saw as negative role models.

Most striking was that 13 of the interviewees referred to teachers who encouraged, inspired, demanded, or insisted on students’ own critical thinking, “independent thinking is what education is really about … critical thinking” (Gabrielle) and “think outside the square, independent thinking” (Stefan). This critical thinking was seen as an example of good teaching practice and a teaching method worth emulating. Those teachers who did not employ this method were seen as boring, uninspiring or the so called ‘old school chalk and talk’ style teachers who were seen as not really wanting to be there.

Choosing from a list of 62 characteristics in the questionnaire, the participants’ top eight characteristics for their ideal teacher were: visionary (65%), versatile (56%), thorough (52%), sense of humour (52%), self-confident (50%), receptive to others’ ideas (41%), energetic (33%) and sincere (30%). A so-called ‘Visionary teacher’ is someone who can see more than just what this lesson is or even the next lesson is about. This teacher knows how the entire program is tied together and can bring that across to their students and even bring in those outside resources needed, “you gotta think about different ways of presenting stuff … how can I teach this in a variety of ways … you gotta have a vision for where you want to go” (Gabrielle). The so-called ‘Versatile teacher’ is the teacher who can “think outside the square” (Stefan). This teacher is able to take not only what is in the curriculum but also that which is currently a part of their students’ lives and still bring their students around to the syllabus’ aims and objectives. The so-called ‘Thorough teachers’ have their class work prepared and know each students’ individual wants and needs, “you have to make sure your work is all prepared and ready and make sure you assess the characteristics of each student properly” (Gilda). The teacher with a ‘Sense of Humour’ is able to go with the flow of the school’s day-to-day activities and interruptions. This teacher appreciates those spontaneous outburst that come up and is able to keep the students interested, “you need to make students laugh occasionally, you can’t take them seriously all the time, it’s a bit boring that way … they just lose concentration” (Chuan). ‘Self-confident teachers’ know not only what they

are doing but also how they are going to do it. Their students see them as capable and someone able to be trusted, "I think that's what all children look for in a grown-up … if you are not self-confident as a teacher the child will see through that and not be as willing to confide in you" (Anthony). The teacher who is 'Receptive to Other People's Ideas' listens not only just to other teachers in the common room but also the students in their classes:

> if you work in a school you are part of a team, the teachers teaching there, so listen to what they have got to say and also the students might not agree with you in class and stuff, I think you should be able to listen to everyone's ideas. (Gabrielle)

So-called 'Energetic teachers' are able to show their students that they are: willing to work, want to be there and can keep up with their students, "you have got to be at the energy level of the class … if you show that energy you are showing you enjoy being with them" (Carolyn). And finally, the so-called 'Sincere teacher' is a teacher that students can trust and are willing to learn from:

> sincere is really just a part of getting on the students' level, if you can gain the students' trust you are not just speaking trash … if the students' trust you then I think you will be able to really help the students to learn. (Stefan)

DISCUSSIONS

All of the participants interviewed were able to recall at least one well-remembered event of what they interpreted as an example of what they thought as either a good or bad teacher. This example was also directly related to at least one of their selections for what they believed to be an ideal teacher characteristic. Thirteen of the participants had clear and distinct memories of specific events and feelings relating to several of their prior teachers. The remaining four were able to remember one or two teachers and events; however, they did so with less clarity and generally referred to those experiences in vague terms.

Most of the interviewees were able to describe what they interpreted as examples of good or bad teachers. Gabrielle described what she meant by her idea of what a good teacher was, "we all respected him, he dealt with it (a school camping trip incident) in a sensible way, he treated us like adults. We just had really good teachers, they weren't like teachers they were like people." Louisa also demonstrated this similar interpretation of prior experiences when she described some less favourable teacher examples she remembered, "I had teachers who would … tease or bully as if that was some kind of good teaching practice, which quite frankly I just don't agree with." The following discussion demonstrates how these memories have helped shape the type of teacher these preservice teachers see themselves as becoming along with highlighting how the participating primary and secondary student teachers interpreted those prior teacher experiences differently.

Primary candidates remembered favourable teachers principally because they were seen as willing to go beyond the classroom and get personally involved with their students. These teachers were interpreted to be good role models not only just as teachers but also as people to be emulated. Five of the primary students interviewed were able to remember specific positive examples of prior primary school teachers that directly influenced their idea of whom a teacher should be.

Adrian remembered his two primary school teachers as "moral" since that he felt they had provided him with "good role models." As a result of those two teachers' positive influence, this is the way he would like to see himself as a teacher:

> (they) were very good people, very stable … they were always caring, caring and looking out after the interest of those they were teaching … I trusted my teachers almost as much as I trusted my parents, I had no reason to fear, I was very comfortable in a very comfortable learning environment … I would like to be a good role model for them because whether I like or not, the children are going to look to me. (Adrian)

This type of teacher is to be emulated as a teacher who is not only loving and caring but also interested in them and their differences, specifically someone who is "willing to listen to them … try to understand them." His primary school teachers were "considerate … caring" possessing traits he considers as being ideal in a teacher. As he had primary school teachers who provided him with what he considered to be good role models, it was his intention to pass this experience on to his students by being this same type of teacher.

Gilda stated a very similar idea about passing along the benefit of a perceived good role model, "because having a positive education myself, it's a role model, if I've had a positive educational experience then, hopefully, I will impart that to my students." She, like Adrian, remembered her school experiences positively and felt it was her responsibility to pass this positive educational experience onto her own students in the future. Specifically, she saw this as one of her primary roles in being a teacher.

Primary school teaching candidates saw good teachers in terms of those teachers who were more than just teachers. Their teachers were open, caring and considerate and these were the qualities they believed an ideal teacher should have. And more importantly to this study, these were also the qualities they themselves hoped to possess when they became teachers.

Secondary school teaching candidates also remembered those teachers who were seen as more than just teachers but unlike most of the primary school teaching candidates they also remembered those who were seen as negative examples by being rigid or inflexible. Their positively remembered teachers, those being predominantly from their high school experience, also went beyond the classroom but in ways that were different to how the primary school teaching candidates described their primary school teachers. Their memories of rigid and inflexible teachers, who were also predominantly from high schools, were examples of teachers expressly stated not to be emulated.

Chuan explained what he meant by a teacher who was more than just a teacher, "(he was) a terrific teacher … he got you interested in your work, he made it interesting … he made this enjoyable for us, we'll do some work for him." These teachers just didn't open a book and start at page one with exercise one; they were able to relate the subject matter to their students in ways that engaged them in the subject matter. Matthew also stated this same sentiment:

> how they related to us was fairly important, um I guess that's why I put sincere in there, um but they knew what they were talking about, they were, were interesting to listen to, they developed an interest in that particular subject, there was only a few of them I can think of, I had a Maths teacher who was really good, he really developed my interest in Maths and helped me achieve in it… he took an interest in us, he was enthusiastic about what he taught, he knew what he was doing. All those things.

Primary school teaching candidates saw good teachers as those who would go beyond the classroom by getting involved emotionally and personally in their students' lives by being concerned for the student as a whole person. Whereas secondary school teaching candidates saw good teachers as those who were subject matter experts and could bring their students into this subject matter with fun and interesting ideas. Unlike primary school teaching candidates, secondary students were also clear on what they perceived as examples of a bad teacher. These so-

called 'Bad teachers' were more than teachers just seen as boring. Carolyn explained what she meant:

> I think mainly because there was never any enthusiasm shown in the classroom, it was like, it was just drudgery, there was no, nothing dynamic in the way they taught, it was pretty much here is a textbook, here is what we are learning.

This type of teacher showed no enthusiasm for either their students or their subject matter. Those teachers were unable to relate to their students that the subject matter was in any way important and therefore something worthwhile to learn. This belief that subject matter was important and should be made relevant to students was also stated by Gabrielle:

> I want them (my students) to think and not to agree with me, that's what I expect, that's when you really learn, to be a lateral thinker to be a critical thinker. I just hate the education where people go and memorize that and just spew it out. I don't want to be that sort of teacher, I want to be the teacher that makes kids think.

The idea of subject matter being relevant and important along with the teacher being more than just a giver of subject matter was brought together in Sook's example of her History teacher. She explained not only why this teacher was more than just a History teacher but also how she was so much more:

> it was just enjoyable to be in the class, she made it very easy to learn what we were learning … it was history but she did sometimes take time out to teach us generally about self-esteem and things like that … she was just very good in respect to that as well, she wasn't just a History teacher, she sort of taught us a lot.

Primary school teaching candidates remembered prior teachers, almost exclusively from primary school, for affective reasons, "encouraging and willing to help students" (Kim) and "they were considerate, they were caring" (Adrian). Whereas secondary school teaching candidates remembered good teachers, almost exclusively from high school, for academic integrity and teaching abilities, "they knew what they were talking about … they developed an interest in that particular subject" (Matthew) and "a lot of them were mentors, I mean a lot of them were and are still" (Louisa). This difference was seen in their ideal teacher characteristics. Primary school teaching candidates selected 'Determined' and 'Adventurous' as opposed to the secondary school teaching candidates' 'Thorough' and 'Self-confident'. 'Determined' and 'Adventurous' primary school teachers went beyond the classroom because they knew how to enter students' lives by bringing the class to their level. 'Thorough' and 'Self-confident' secondary school teachers knew their subject matter and are able to bring students into this by showing its relevance and importance to their personal lives.

CONCLUSIONS

This study was an exploratory search into the preconceptions and beliefs of post-graduate teacher candidates on how prior teachers informed their ideas about the type of teacher they either did or did not want to become. While this study was able to demonstrate differences in how the participating teacher candidates interpreted their prior teacher experiences, one limitation of the study must be noted. This study was conducted at only one educational institution and these findings should not be seen as indicative of all teacher candidates. Future research would be valuable to investigate whether the patterns emerging from this study were similar in other preservice teacher education programs.

The findings of this study made an important contribution to the effective teacher literature by highlighting the dearth of work relating to preservice teachers' beliefs at the entry-level. While

there is a large body of work relating to how educational institutions affect preservice teachers' beliefs there is very little relating to what they bring with them. Future research in this area should continue.

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