Sustaining Teacher Educators: Finding Professional Renewal Through Vocation and Avocation

Jeffrey S. Winter: National-Louis University

This paper examines motivations for becoming a teacher educator and explores ways in which teacher educators can find renewal, revitalization, and sustenance during times of challenge. The field of teacher education is discussed through the lens of the classical notion of "calling" or vocation. The article provides a context for examining the nature of vocation and suggests a context for sustaining personal growth in teacher education.

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight

"Two Tramps in Mud Time," Robert Frost

"*Work is love made visible*" *The Prophet*, Kahil Gibran

Introduction

What sustains the commitment of teacher educators to work in the complex and often challenging world of preparing future teachers? How might those of us who work as teacher educators maintain our ideals in the face of difficulties that can so easily lead to cynicism and burn-out? The goals of this paper are to examine motivations for working as a teacher educator, and to propose ways in which one's avocational pursuits can serve as a powerful means tool to maintain the vitality and creativity necessary for occupational satisfaction and fulfillment. This paper discusses several studies that describe the decision to work as a teacher educator in order to increase understanding of how teacher educators can find support and personal renewal through enrichment outside the vocation.

These are challenging times for teacher educators. Our work is often devalued when we see reports that critique teacher education programs as inadequate, uninspired, and superficial (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). Alternative programs to certification may have a stated or implied agenda of wanting to replace university-based programs, which are painted as continuing outmoded and irrelevant practices that were discontinued decades ago. Cole (1999) states, "Faculties of education are caught in a maelstrom of political, public, and internal pressures to improve teacher education" (p. 281). As educators it is increasingly important to understand and strengthen the motivation that sustains our commitment to integrity and excellence.

For many, the choice to become a teacher educator is linked with a desire for school and teacher improvement. However, many veterans will verify the increasing difficulty in attracting and retaining talented colleagues to this field. Perhaps the place to begin to understand this issue is to ask who and what is a teacher educator.

Context

The work of teacher educators is dynamic and diverse but difficult to fully define. A recent study of teacher educator identity by Klecka, Donovan, Venditti, and Short (2008) highlights the complexity of defining a profession which faces changing policies and curriculum and have practitioners who may not define themselves as teacher educators.

Why do people become teacher educators? A definitive answer is elusive. Carter (1981) explains that studies in the 1960s and 1970s "considered the intentions of teachers . . . yet no equivalent studies focus on teacher educators" (p. 1). Apparently, people don't typically become teacher educators in pursuit of financial gain. A study by Dupuis and Post (1991, p. 469) found that seeking financial rewards was actually the lowest motivator for becoming a teacher educator. Cole (1999) found that "typical" teacher educators began in the field by first paying "high associated costs" (p. 283). In other words, in order to become a teacher educator, people left jobs with more money, security, support, status, and credibility. All of those who participated in the study shared the desire to make a difference and effect change of some kind. Cole found that teacher educators are an idealistic group overall and are concerned with "making a difference" and they share a "desire for change" (p. 284).

Teaching and Teacher Education as Vocation

There is agreement that educators can benefit from examination of their core drives and commitments to their profession. Bolin (1987) emphasized the importance of understanding and nurturing one's professional and personal goals stating, "We cannot [educate] year after year without attending to our own meaning making and empowerment" (p. 219). Teachers often view their work as having a unique and special set of goals that relates to a deeply held desire to serve others.

Teacher educators are often continuing a career choice of teaching adults rather than younger people. There are many values shared between teachers of all ages, including the motivations to educate. Some highlight the decision to teach as bringing unique qualities of service to others. Ayers (2001) explains the world of teaching as a calling which links belief with action and idealism with practice. He describes teaching as committing oneself

> to move beyond the world as we find it... in pursuit of a world and a reality that could be, but is not yet. ...that supports the human impulse to grow. In this sense it is to choose teaching not as a job only, and not even as a career or a profession. It is to choose teaching as a project or vocation, something one is called to do. In a vocation like teaching there is a vital link between private and public worlds, between personal fulfillment and social responsibility. There is also a sense of commitment and purpose that rejects the measured calculation that pervades so much of work today. Teaching is the vocation of vocations, because to choose teaching is to choose to enable the choices of others. (pp. 23-24)

The concept of vocation and its derivative avocation are derived from the Latin *vocatio* or *vocare*, meaning *a calling* or *to call*. Teaching has often been considered a calling that distinguishes it from many other professions. Westerhoff (1987) states: "Teaching is a pilgrimage. It is a vocation in the original sense of a profession, a call to a way of life shared with others in a common search for meaning, rather than a profession in the modern sense of possessing knowledge and skills to be marketed in the workplace" (p. 198).

This idea of a call to serve is rooted in religious teachings and is often found in the dedicated service of clergy and others who engage in work for religious institutions. The secular world also has a longstanding tradition of those who

view service to others as a primary goal in choosing careers in medicine, education, social work, and other so-called *helping* professions. Author and activist Parker Palmer (2000) discusses the importance for teachers to follow the needs of one's authentic self. He views vocation as a calling that one is compelled to answer:

> Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live—but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life. (pp. 4-5; emphasis in original)

In a study of preservice teachers, Serow (1994) found that those who viewed teaching as their calling in life displayed "significantly greater enthusiasm and commitment" to teaching, were more "mindful of its potential impact on other people," and were "less concerned about the sacrifices that such a career might entail. The respondents reported that teaching-as-calling extended to the personal conviction that "teaching represents the best chance for achieving a unity or congruence among the different spheres of life". Being called to teach was for these individuals, "not necessarily identical with one's purpose in life, but it probably is seen as a significant part of that purpose" (pp. 70-71). It is likely that many teacher educators also share this quality and can benefit from awareness of the acceptance and celebration of this quality of calling, which is often linked with vocation.

John Dewey and other progressive educators emphasized the need to blend experiential, skill-based pursuits (avocation) with conceptual understanding, observation, and problem solving (vocation) in order for students to gain the optimal education. These lessons are reminders about the growth potential of sensory and experimental learning that can be gained through exploring personal interests.

Hansen (1994) calls for revitalizing the idiom of vocation to describe the work of teaching. This term embodies both a public and personal dimension and "calls attention to the personal and moral dimensions of the practice that draw many persons to it from the start, and that keep them successful within it despite adversity and difficulty" (p. 260). Shifting the metaphor from occupation to vocation acknowledges "that teaching is a way of living, not merely a way of making a living" (Huebner, 1987, p. 22). Many would agree that a similar sense of deep commitment and purpose also describes teacher educators.

Career choices emphasizing service to others may carry negative baggage, often in the form of mediocre (or low) wages and prestige. Although some bristle at the close association between the selfless devotion that is often linked with the call to teach, others accept this as part of a longstanding aspect of working in education. Huebner (1987) stresses the need to draw strength from the unique sense of service that comes from teaching others. He discusses how the satisfactions and idealism of teaching offer balm for many difficulties of the job, stating, "From the point of view of teaching as a vocation, in which work is our life, our calling, these and other frustrations are indicators that we are not yet whole, at one with our work" (p. 19).

Bolin (1987) acknowledges the challenges in sustaining the personal factors that inspired vocational choice. She encourages teachers to cultivate supportive relationships with teachers, students, and others who support, encourage, and celebrate the meaning of teaching and growth. Bolin states, "We must attend to the ethical character of teaching and study more closely the concept of renewal" (p. 220).

People and perceptions are affected by terms used to describe one's work. Hansen (1994) discusses several reasons for the disuse of describing teaching as vocation when the term became closely associated with "preparing people for

specific forms of wage-based employment" (p. 260). The role of teacher is for some, a matter of employing technical or mechanistic means to support high achievement (e.g., test scores, accreditation) within an institution. For others, teaching takes on a transformative role as one becomes a mentor who deeply affects the lives of students. Huebner (1987) asks

> Can we look at students as we look at ourselves: on a journey, responding to that which calls them into the world? ...How do we help them with the scaffolding that will help them make sense of who they are, where they are, and who they might be?" (p. 22)

Teacher educators may ask how we help transform teachers as people, as practitioners, and as agents of change.

Some have examined the need for teachers to integrate meaning into their work. Westerhoff (1987) explains that teachers must be willing to embrace the world, endure suffering, embrace silence, value life in a community and to "pay attention to the deep restlessness in our hearts" (p. 200). Neafsey (2003) understands the work of teaching as vocation or avenue for expression of deep personal goals, stating

> Each and every human person has a vocation ...whether or not we are aware of it or respond to it [we] have the potential to hear and follow a personal calling in our own lives. ...Once we have heard the call, we then face the challenge of making intelligent and discerning and courageous choices to follow where it is leading. (pp. 2-3)

We are challenged by Neafsey (2003) to differentiate between our superficial, egocentric desires and "the deeper more authentic desires or our inmost self" (p. 9). Our work is personal and operates on deep levels of change. It is said that the choice to work in classrooms is a decision to devote oneself to a pursuit where individuals "enact their most deeply held values" (Nieto & Gordon, 2002, p. 67).

Teacher educators, like all teachers, face challenges and stress that can lead to emotional stress or cynicism. Burnout, according to Hamann (1990), is a negative experience involving distress, discomfort, or dysfunction and is associated with emotional and physical exhaustion. High rates of burnout in education often reflect the degree to which educators no longer feel that they are fulfilling the deeper goals which once brought them pride and fulfillment. For some, avocational endeavors may form a rich source of occupational fulfillment and meaning. Kosnik, Beck, Freese, and Samaras (2005) note

> When teacher educators feel a connection between their personal and professional lives, they come to the education enterprise with wholeness. The teacher educator's self has a strong influence on the program. Hence, the personal, professional, and program dimensions form a unity. (p. xix)

Some have described how the blending of vocation and avocation may be helpful for personal growth, provide an outlet for moral, social, and ethical expression (Werner, 2002), and generate a sense of achievement (Gelber, 1999). Werner advocates for teachers to use hobbies as a means to "enhance student learning and encourage students to develop interests in useful and fulfilling avocations" (p. 211).

Avoiding the stumbling blocks of frustration and discouragement begins with attention to the self. Bolin (1989) wrote "As teachers, we are creators and bearers of meaning. Our work is to empower students to find their own personal meaning. But we cannot do that year after year without attending to our own meaning making and empowerment" (p. 229). She explains that this renewal confirms our original vision in revitalized ways.

As teacher educators we might be well served by blending avocational growth into our vocational perspectives. This may be for many a robust and rewarding source of rejuvenation and vitality.

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Author's Note

Dr. Winter is an Associate Professor at National-Louis University in the Department of Elementary and Middle Level Teacher Education, National College of Education.