

Rocky Roads: The Transformation from Middle Level College Student to Pre-Service Teacher

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The transformation from middle level college student to pre-service teacher often resembles an arduous journey along rocky roads. It is the journey from being primarily a college student and thinking of oneself in those terms to becoming a pre-service teacher and developing the image of oneself as a future teacher. This case study sought to assess how undergraduate Middle Childhood majors at a mid-size university in the Midwest made the transformation from college student to apprentice teacher, and how their teacher preparation program helped them make connections between theory in the college classroom and practice in the schools. In particular, this study sought to determine the impact of prior beliefs, course work and field experiences on the participants' transition into the teaching profession.

Nearly three decades ago, in his now classical sociological study *Schoolteacher*, Lortie (2004) argued that as a result of the many years they have spent in an apprenticeship of observation pre-service teachers come to their teacher preparation program with strong prior beliefs about teaching and learning. Consequently, teacher preparation rarely involves a dramatic conversion or transformation of perspectives as pre-service teachers firm up the values and beliefs that will guide them as teachers (Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver and Yusko, 1999). As this argument goes, rather than lay the basis for a reflective disposition towards their own teaching practices, pre-service teachers typically dismiss teachings that challenge their beliefs as “theoretical, unworkable or simply wrong” (Lortie, 2004; Raths, 2001).

Zeichner and Gore (1990) have argued that the role of innate “primitive spontaneous pedagogical tendencies,” the relationship they had as children with important adults, and the thousands of hours they spent as pupils, constitute the three most significant influences on the prior beliefs of pre-service teachers. They also argue that general education and academic specialization courses, methods and foundation courses, and field-based experiences constitute the three major components in

teacher preparation programs that may potentially influence the beliefs of pre-service teachers.

Wilson, Floden and Ferrini-Mundy (2002) argue that the research suggests there is a value added by teacher preparation course work. In addition, these authors suggest that study after study has shown that experienced as well as beginning teachers see field work in the schools as a powerful – and sometimes the most powerful – component of teacher preparation. However, whether the power of the field work enhances the quality of teacher preparation may depend on the particular experience. Similarly, Patterson (2001) has argued that no amount of modeling, mentor support, or peer interaction can make beginning teachers feel successful unless they are in a school environment that supports their beliefs.

Rather than focus on beliefs, Raths (2001) has argued that teacher educators would benefit more from focusing on predispositions as these can be strengthened by modeling and through apprenticeship experiences. Wanting to “wash clean” students who return from their field experiences with completely different notions than those with which they left their courses, Toll, Nierstheimer, Lenski and Kolloff (2004) suggest that the answer to their dilemma as teacher educators is not to seek a solution

but rather to model reflection, openness, and humility as an alternative way to assist pre-service teachers in developing ways to live with and honor differences.

In summary, the research suggests that it is context that matters, and that teacher socialization is a process in which pre-service teachers mediate between their own beliefs and those they encounter in the universities and schools.

Method

This case study sought to assess how undergraduate Middle Childhood majors at a mid-size university in the Midwest made the transformation from college student to apprentice teacher, and how their teacher preparation program helped them make connections between theory in the college classroom and practice in the schools. In particular, it sought to determine how these students mediated between their own prior beliefs and those espoused in their course work and field experiences.

The Middle Childhood program is a unique program in which preservice teachers must select two areas of concentration. At the university in this study, all Middle Childhood majors must earn 79 quarter hours in their education core courses, their reading courses, their two methods courses, and their student teaching. In addition, they are required to take 37-45 quarter hours in each area of concentration, i.e. language arts, mathematics, science or social studies. Once they have met all program requirements the state will license them to teach in grades 4-9 in their two areas of concentration only.

All 7 male and 21 female pre-service teachers who participated in this study were Caucasian. Each participant was a junior enrolled in one of two sections of a required Middle Childhood curriculum course, each taught separately by the authors. During their sophomore year, Middle Childhood majors typically spend about 40 hours in mostly classroom observations. However, during his or her junior year the typical Middle Childhood major completes at least 120 hours of field experience. In this crucial year prior to their student teaching,

and as they are required to take a more active role in the classroom and begin to teach lessons themselves, many start to make the transformation from college student to pre-service teacher.

This study employed a case study approach and was begun without any prior expectations. Advocates of such an interpretative approach (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) argue that this method is especially appropriate when a contemporary phenomenon is being studied in a naturalistic setting.

Data sources in this study consisted of questionnaires and interviews. All participants voluntarily completed a written questionnaire while they were enrolled the Middle Childhood curriculum course. After analyzing the data in the questionnaires, the authors purposively selected seven participants from the two courses for a taped in-depth interview. After the interviews were transcribed the tapes were destroyed. To protect his/her identity each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

An interpretative approach was used to analyze and triangulate the data (Yin, 1994). Employing the constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to discern confirming as well as disconfirming evidence helped to determine common themes. Because of the qualitative nature of this study the responsibility to generalize resides with the reader rather than the researcher (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

Findings

Prior Beliefs

Pre-service teachers often come to their teacher preparation program with strong prior beliefs about teaching and learning. While the university in this study is located in a predominantly rural region, the majority of the pre-service teachers in this study came from an urban background. Nearly all had a middle class background and most had parents who had attended college themselves. Twenty-five of the 28 participants had a very positive experience in elementary school. They enjoyed their school, had involved parents, and shared

the same teacher with many of their neighborhood friends. Only three students had a mixed experience while they were in elementary school because they were not able to establish good relationships in the school community.

Thirteen participants, or nearly half of the participants, indicated they themselves had a positive experience in middle school because they had caring teachers and many friends, and were involved in sports. Seven participants, or one fourth, had a negative experience because their families moved or because they struggled with adolescence. Eight participants, or slightly more than one fourth, said they had a mixed experience in middle school.

Many participants in this study indicated they decided to become a teacher because it was something they had always wanted to do and/or because they themselves had had excellent teachers while in school. However, three participants indicated they did not have very good teachers in middle school, which motivated them to want to be better teachers than the ones they themselves had had. Many participants also indicated they liked the state requirement to have two content area specializations for Middle Childhood licensure. Several participants especially enjoyed teaching the middle level child. For example, Andrew suggested that he was “still a kid at heart and [that he] might as well stay a kid and get paid for it.” Family members and friends generally responded positively to about two-thirds of the participants’ decision to become a teacher and suggested that they would be “a great teacher.” However, some did wonder though why the participants would be willing to work for a low salary or whether he/she was simply “crazy because this age is such a difficult one.”

About half of the participants indicated they had strong beliefs about teaching before deciding to become a teacher. They indicated that they were “patient, caring and understood how to motivate students to learn.” In a response typical of the other half of the participants who suggested they had no strong prior beliefs, Andrew indicated that “before starting at the university [he] had no idea about much of the stuff [he had] learned.” In general,

however, in their responses few of the participants made any references to specific pedagogical methods. For example, while Holly indicated she had some strong beliefs prior to entering the teacher preparation program she merely stated that “learning is [the] key to successful participation in society.”

Course Work

One fourth of the pre-service teachers argued that their courses had had little to no impact on their beliefs because much of the information that was presented in each course was redundant and, furthermore, that they had an innate ability to teach. For example, Carly argued that “the theory and stuff was kind of telling [her] what [she] already knew [because she] kind of [understood] the nature of kids.”

Yet, three fourths of the participants indicated that their courses had had an impact on their beliefs about middle childhood and had helped them to develop and/or refine their own philosophy of education. When asked to articulate their philosophy of education, most participants indeed echoed ideas they had learned in the teacher education courses they had completed so far. Their responses included references to specific courses and instructors as well as general concepts they had learned such as creating a democratic classroom, building a classroom community, promoting meaningful and active learning, and using authentic assessment. They wanted to be creative teachers who knew how to develop relevant lessons, serve as role models for their students, and be respected and strong, yet funny and compassionate. During their first year in the classroom, they hoped to be organized, find out what works and what does not, establish a democratic classroom and establish a good rapport with both their students and colleagues.

Most participants in this study suggested that their courses had helped them learn how to address multiple intelligences, create a democratic, student-centered classroom, and address issues of diversity. While most comments focused on having learned these new ideas about how to teach, several participants commented that

their courses deepened rather than changed their beliefs and “opened their eyes to what is going on out there in the schools,” especially after reading and discussing *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003) and being required to articulate their own philosophy of teaching. Furthermore, Andrew commented that he had learned a lot “because [some of his professors] “actually have [many years] of classroom experience” and that “the way they talk about it in class ... is really meaningful.” While Marissa argued that “each class prepared [her] a little bit more for being out there,” Melanie thought that her methods classes had helped her “figure out how to make [her teaching] student-directed[and] fun.”

Field Experiences

More than four fifths of the participants indicated they had learned a lot from their field experiences because “there is no better way to learn than through interaction with the students [and see] the other side.” Only two participants argued that they did not learn much from their field experiences because they did not get to spend enough time in the field, while another remaining two participants were undecided. The participants who argued that their field experiences had been beneficial argued that they had helped them understand the importance of being well prepared for, yet flexible in, teaching their lessons. They argued that these experiences had taught them how to use hands-on learning, address different learning styles, be patient and understanding, and develop trust with the students. In a typical response, Jonathan indicated that “no matter how many classes you take, once you are out in the field [that] is where you got to make it happen,” and “that you can have all the book smarts but you have to be able to apply it in a classroom.”

When asked if their field experiences had an impact on their beliefs about teaching and learning in middle childhood most participants said that it highlighted their “false hopes.” As they saw “what [they] agree with in education

and what [they] don’t,” they realized what kind of teacher they did and did *not* want to become. The quality of their field experiences clearly was a determining factor in whether they thought their field experiences had been beneficial.

The participants in this study found their field experiences especially effective if their cooperating teacher was welcoming and made them feel comfortable in his or her classroom. For example, Melanie stated that her cooperating teacher “treated [her] as an equal,” and “left her in charge,” which helped her to “start feeling like a teacher and not just a student.” And, once she started to feel more comfortable, Marissa, began “to see the importance of building relationships with other teachers” as well. Andrew, on the other hand, thought his cooperating teacher was so “awesome” and inspiring that, like her, he wanted “to be a favorite teacher too someday.”

Some of the participants, however, described field experiences that made them feel uncomfortable as their cooperating teachers sometimes did not even take the effort to introduce him/her to the students. For example, Jonathan related that he “would come in and just sit at the desk” and that the teacher “didn’t have [him] interact with the students or help them out at all.” Likewise, Marissa remembered a field experience during which her cooperating teacher did not even introduce her to the students, did not make her feel welcome and treated her “more like a pain.” Fortunately in another field experience at a middle school that was more based on the ideas espoused in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2003), her cooperating teacher was “really concerned about [her]” and “want[ed her] to learn.”

Context

Finally, the participants were asked whether their course work at the university or their field experiences in the schools had been the most significant in shaping their beliefs about Middle Childhood education. The largest group, or two fifths of the pre-service teachers in this study, argued that their field experiences

had been more significant to them. For example, while Tara argued that her field experiences were more significant “by far” because they “can tell you what works and with which student,” Brook said that they gave her a chance for “hands-on experience and that no course work can replace that.”

Nearly one fifth of the participants thought that their course work had been the most beneficial to them. Noah, for example, argued that while his field experiences had not been very meaningful because “most of the time [the cooperating teacher asked him] to run copies or grade papers,” his courses gave him a chance to discuss and study theories. Elsa thought that her time in class at the university was more valuable because it gave her an opportunity to “talk with [her] peers and instructors.” Likewise, Jonathan argued that his courses gave him “time to sit down and examine and talk about [his] beliefs.”

About one third of the middle childhood majors in this study argued that courses at the university and field experiences in the schools were equally important. In such typical responses, Andrew argued that he couldn’t “specify one [because] they are all meant to be significant,” while Marissa said that “there is nothing more like the experience we gain in the schools but [that] without the course work at the university I would know very little about the teaching profession” because it “is fundamental to be[ing] able to go out into the field and teach.” Finally, in a response that perhaps best synthesizes the significance of the experiences these pre-service teachers had in both the college classroom and the public schools, Grace wrote:

I don’t think it was only one aspect, it was everything combined. There were some things that I don’t think I will use and some I will from each course and field experience. The farther along we get, the more the classes seem to help.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the experiences the participants in this study had in their

courses as well as in the schools both had a discernable impact on their beliefs. As other researchers have found (Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver and Yusko, 1999; Raths, 2001), they clarified their own beliefs as they continued their transformation from college student to apprentice teacher. It is evident that most participants in this study argued that, despite the sometimes rocky roads they traveled through their course work and their field experiences, the entire teacher preparation program helped them to clarify and deepen their own beliefs about teaching middle level students. Therefore the specific context of both the course work and field experiences mattered.

Consequently, the findings of this study suggest the need for further research to answer some of the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of education majors who choose to become middle level teachers?
2. What contextual factors in course work as well as field experiences are most effective in helping middle level majors clarify their own beliefs about teaching middle level students?
3. How can middle level teacher educators most effectively support cooperating teachers who mentor their field experience teachers?
4. How can cooperating middle level teachers most effectively help their field experience students make connections between theory in the college classroom and practice in the schools?
5. How can practice in the middle schools best inform what is being taught at the university and how to organize field experiences?

Meanwhile, as Toll et al. (2004) suggest, the answer to the dilemma of teacher educators how to assist middle level pre-service teachers on their journey out into the schools is to model reflection, openness, and humility.

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