

Challenge and Discussion of Second Career Middle Level Preservice Teachers During the Teacher Education Process

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Abstract

This study examines the commitment to teaching of preservice teachers seeking middle-level certification. The preservice teachers' commitment was examined through an analysis of candidate surveys and reflections. The findings uncovered that virtually all of these preservice teachers considered that their early teaching experiences particularly substitute teaching, played a critical role in their decision to pursue teacher education. The majority of participants attributed an increase in commitment and efficacy to the acquisition of adolescent development patterns and their teaching implications. Another major finding is that participants changed their views about what defines a good teacher through their courses in teacher education. Initially, they considered knowledge of subject matter to be the most important dimension of excellent teaching; however, through studying adolescent development and how they learn, participants assigned a greater priority to student-centered instruction.

In view of teacher retention problems, teacher educators consider factors that play an important role in teacher commitment and the resulting impact on teacher retention. Typically, middle level teacher candidates enter teacher education with an excitement and a commitment to helping all adolescents learn. However, critical teacher retention levels indicate that this initial commitment is often hindered by school environment, student discipline and lack of motivation, and lack of teacher influence over decision-making (Ingersoll, 2002). Crosswell and Elliott (2004) suggest that teacher commitment influences teachers' readiness for cooperation and reflection to improve their practice. Richard Ingersoll (2002) goes on to suggest that there is a "revolving door" in America with large numbers of qualified teachers leaving the profession, in spite of sufficient numbers of teachers prepared annually to fill vacancies (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Ingersoll, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Ingersoll, 2004). The major concern

remains a matter of finding and retaining committed and exemplary teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Ingersoll, 2002; Szuminski, 2003).

The commitment to remain in teaching is often correlated to efficacy or the degree of feeling prepared to teach in today's classrooms (Darling-Hammond, Chung & Frelow, 2002). Guskey and Passaro (1994) define this self-efficacy as the belief that one is capable of making a difference in children's lives as they successfully influence student learning in the classroom. Tschannen-Moran, W. Hoy, and W. K. Hoy (1998) stress the importance of ensuring teacher confidence in their knowledge and skills of teaching early in their career, as these views of self-efficacy tend to endure. Palmer (1998) suggests that teacher self-knowledge "... will serve our students and our scholarship well" (p. 3) as we encourage personal and professional self-reflection during the teacher education process. Preparing teachers for today's middle schools may require teacher

preparation programs to analyze preservice teachers' efficacy and strength of commitment to teaching adolescents and as an indicator of candidate sustainability. Crow, Levine, and Nager (1990) state that "... the extent of an individual's commitment to the new occupation may have an effect on the reinterpretation of both past and current experiences" and how they adapt these experiences to the new career. (p. 201) Darling-Hammond (2002) suggests that as teachers feel prepared to teach when entering the profession, they are more inclined to remain in the profession and feel responsible for student learning.

Researchers (Guskey & Passaro, 1994; Chambers, 2002) have found that career changers felt confident that their time and previous experiences were different from younger first-career teachers. Realizing the benefits of experience, these second-career candidates see this as a time to be creative in their work and demonstrate learned managerial and communication skills in a classroom filled with young adolescents. The purpose of this study is to examine middle level candidates' commitment and efficacy and to inform middle level teacher educators about factors that may help to sustain this commitment and support teacher retention.

The number of these career changers entering teacher education is growing significantly (Feistritzer, 2005) and reasons for selecting teaching later in life is complex, personal and often altruistic (Serow, 1993). Chambers (2002) discovered that the career changers in her study were motivated to enter teaching by the personal benefits that they would gain through helping others. Crow, Levine, and Nager (1990) classify some of the career changers as persons returning to a lifelong dream, who for various reasons had stayed away. These career changers are part of a growing population within teacher education programs, who come with a

wealth of experiences from previous careers, and who are anxious to apply the knowledge and skills in the classroom. More prospective teachers are exchanging one career for a teaching career by taking advantage of additional or alternative options. University teacher preparation programs have developed options to meet the needs of the growing numbers of these degreed non-traditional candidates, who wish to become teachers. These additional options were created in response to a teacher shortage.

Method

Participants

The population of this study includes preservice teachers in a graduate middle level initial certification program who have changed career paths. Participants included six groups of candidates, who were enrolled in one of the middle level certification courses (*Adolescent Development and Learning Theories*). They have decided to leave their employment to pursue a career in teaching. During six semesters of a middle level certification program, six graduate cohorts responded to questions, surveys, and reflective activities regarding their desire to be a middle school teacher. Candidates elaborated on the idea of changing careers and embarking on a new adventure, or following a call that would not go away. In this group of 149 candidates, the youngest was twenty-five and the oldest was sixty-two. The largest age category was thirty-one to forty years of age. In regards to candidates' previous careers before returning to the university, the most frequent category was business and management, next was medicine, technology, social work, and finally sales and service.

Research Question

Participants' interpretation of their initial and sustained commitment to the teaching of young adolescents led to the

question of this study: *What do responses of participants reveal about their commitment to teaching as they engage in learning about adolescent development and teaching?*

Instruments used to uncover these factors included a survey and open and structured reflections constructed for use in this study. The following sections include results of the reflections and surveys of the 149 participants in the study, the context of the participants' learning environment within the *Preadolescent and Adolescent Development and Learning Theories* course, and elaborations of the themes resulting first from analyses of the open reflections and next of the structured reflections.

Adolescent Development Learning Context

Six sections totaling 149 graduate participants of an *Adolescent Development and Learning Theories* teacher education course participated in on-going reflections regarding their decision to enter middle level teacher education and the process of learning about brain research, adolescent development and culture, and responsive and collaborative teaching and learning. In this area, four teacher education courses and a final field-based residency practicum are required for certification. The courses include: Middle School Classroom Organization, Management, and Methods; Diverse Populations in Today's Schools; Pre-Adolescent and Adolescent Growth, Development and Learning Theory; Content Area Reading and Writing; and a practicum in an approved public school setting. Following certification, candidates may select to continue graduate enrollment for the Masters of Education in Teaching.

The course, *Preadolescent Adolescent Development and Learning Theories* is taught during the first semester of the certification process. A major focus of this graduate course is to ensure that participants gain an understanding of the

psychological, social, intellectual, physical, and moral development of young adolescents. Towards this end, candidates engage in professional topical discussions and research projects. Assignments include reflections of text readings and class discussions with candidates' personal connections. Also, essay examinations relevant to adolescent behavior patterns and the classroom implications assess pedagogical development. Ultimately, presentations of student research demonstrate each candidate's mastery of adolescent development and the teaching of adolescents.

Survey

Initial survey information, collected from students in the form of class exit slips, prompted analysis, which led to construction of a formal survey to aid in discovering factors related to teacher commitment. The first semester's formal surveys were administered after three weeks and during the first or second week of each subsequent semester. Student were instructed to select only one answer and to write in a choice is the last item "Other" was selected. (See Appendix for copy of survey)

Reflections

Student-instructor email correspondence monitored participants' commitment to teaching during the course of the semester and facilitated discovery and analysis of themes as participants articulated the nature of that commitment. Structured reflection prompts included the following: (a) as a middle level candidate, is my commitment stronger; (b) as a middle level candidate, have my goals regarding the teaching process changed; (c) as a middle level candidate, has my understanding of middle level students increased; and (d) as a middle level candidate, has my sense of the middle level curriculum added to my sense of what

should be taught. In addition, open-ended reflections allowed participants to express ideas not included in the structured reflections. Two researchers analyzed data individually with the use of *The Ethnograph* (Qualis, 1998) to discover themes.

Results

Reflections

The study demonstrated two sets of themes arising from each of the two sources of reflective data, the open reflections and the structured reflections. Discussion of resulting themes in the open reflections will precede discussion of resulting themes from the structured reflections. First, the themes arising from participant responses on open reflections are altruism, disillusionment with career, belief in student-centered learning, and realization of self-efficacy. Recurring themes relating to factors influencing the participant's commitment surfaced from the responses. Specifically, these themes related to emphasis on commitment to teaching; personal decisions leading to a career change; change to student-centered teaching and learning; and the fear of the unknown. Participant quotes were selected because of the clarity and the articulate manner in which they were written as they related to particular themes. Names of respondents are not the actual name of the candidate.

Survey

Survey analysis included factors for entering teacher education, as well as, understanding the commitment to teaching before and during this professional development course. Substituting in middle schools created the largest reason for pursuing middle level certification. Participants indicated that someone who had mentored them in work, church, or social experiences had inadvertently given them a reason to enter teaching and to mentor others. High school did not play a role in inviting participants to go into

teacher education. Results indicated the most frequent previous career was in the area of management (office, sales, human resources). Career roles, especially in management made classroom management seem possible and even enticing. Realization of desire to teach occurred for the majority during their previous careers. Given that teaming is an essential component of middle school and the success of these teams depends to a large extent on teacher leadership, participants were asked what role they filled in a group. Seventy-five percent described themselves as a team player. Several suggested that they had been change agents at their previous places of employment. Fifteen supposed they were followers and five indicated that their personality depended on the situation; they could take any role. One participant said that she was comfortable being a "chameleon."

Albeit inviting, many delayed teaching for various reasons, the most significant indicated was financial. All participants had worked with young adolescents in a teaching capacity, such as substitute teaching, Sunday School, work related activities for children, and attending to their own children. These activities were the invitation that was needed to enter teaching, and as they learned more about adolescent development; reflections uncovered realizations of why young adolescent learners had responded as they had in previous teaching situations.

The overwhelming response to what acquired knowledge this semester would help them most as a teacher was increased understanding of young adolescent characteristics and their implications to the classroom. Admittedly, this added to their efficacy as a teacher who is knowledgeable about young adolescent students and how they learn. Unfortunately, Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall (2002) state that "very few middle grades teachers receive specialized training on young adolescents and best practices prior to being employed

by a middle school.” (p. 61)

Participants responded to how children learn best in an effort to demonstrate their assessment of the importance of school instruction and their role in the classroom. Eighty-five percent of the respondees indicated that children learn best in school and fifteen percent indicated that children learn best at home or some place other than school. Initially, participants saw content as the most important component of schooling. As they acquired knowledge of student-centered instruction, content became secondary. Chambers (2002) suggests that these career changers are very effective in relating past real world experiences to the classroom. Enjoying this age group and feeling a connection with young adolescents was the most important reason for selecting this certification. However, several admitted that this was a quick way to become a teacher.

Discussion

Open Reflection Themes

Altruism

Career changers are oftentimes motivated by altruism and benefits that affect them personally (Chambers, 2002). They are anxious to improve the lives of others and see that the managerial skills learned in their previous careers can help others. Julie sees her previous career as a preparation for helping students:

I feel some of my greatest strengths that I will apply as a teacher were honed during my years in the business community. First, I have a developed sense of professionalism that is required both in business and in the field of education. In conjunction with professionalism, I work well with people of diverse personalities and opinions. While working in the business arena, I developed the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and work with computers and technology. I am

trained and competent in working with Microsoft Word, Excel, Access and Power Point. I am also an organized person, which is essential for effective classroom management. I realize that teaching is hard work, and I am willing to take the initiative to work hard with students so that they learn and grow. Finally, I am excited about working with students and enthusiastic in my approach to helping them learn.

Disillusionment with career

The invitation to teach for many of the career changers came as they realized that their present career did not give them a feeling of fulfillment. Susan demonstrates this:

When I first thought about becoming a middle level teacher, I thought about how unsatisfied I have always felt in my jobs. It's not about money or coworkers or managers; it's about feeling pride in your work and knowing you have made a difference in someone's life. Of course, everything you do impacts other people, but to know I have helped a child grow as a person, and to change the way they think is a life altering experience. I have worked in the accounting field for approximately eight years and in the insurance industry for almost three years. These jobs were good, but I never felt passionate about my work. I felt like I was just working to pay the bills. I would often hear other people talk about their jobs with such passion, it would make me think about what I was doing with my life and if it really made me happy.

Belief in student-centered learning

These career changers realize that students need to learn how to problem solve to be successful in school and out of school. These realizations have come from their own experiences in the world of work. The participant responses

demonstrated the importance of facilitating students to be expert thinkers or having the ability to tackle new problems where rules do not apply (Levey & Murnane, 2004). As Karen relates: I have been steeped in hands-on science in the workplace, and am not easily intimidated any more by any text or any field of science. To me it seems natural to think about science as a constantly expanding, improving body of knowledge. Our current understanding reflects the best effort that the collection of people working on it has come up with to date. I look forward to presenting science not as a collection of facts and other people's theories that have to be memorized, but rather as an ongoing project that is accessible to us all, to which we all can contribute.

Realization of self-efficacy

Many career changers see a transfer of skills from the initial career to teaching (McCree, 1993; Novak & Knowles, 1992; Jenne, 1996). All participants had substituted in schools or taught in school related activities and found that they not only enjoyed the work with children, but that they would be good at doing this type of work. Jan connects her past work experiences of working with young adolescents with her self-efficacy as a teacher of young adolescents:

My husband and I current own a retail store selling athletic shoes and apparel. "... [sic] attracts adolescents in a strong way. I have worked daily with these young adults and understand the pressures that they feel from society and peers. Shoes have become a status symbol for many adolescents. Working in this retail environment has also taught me the importance of planning, time management and working with a diverse group of people. Part of being a teacher is working with parents and understanding how to handle those types of situations.

Structured Reflections

Emphasis on commitment to teaching

All candidates stated that their commitment to teaching was strong before they entered the initial certification program. Many indicated altruistic reasons such as: "I want to help people." (Barbara) "I want to give back, because my school experience was great." (Teresa) "I want to teach children the right way to learn math." (Mira) "I think middle school kids need teachers who are compassionate and caring and I want to be that kind of teacher." (Page) "These students need passionate people around them to inspire, motivate, and care about them." (Grace)

After being discharged from the Navy and working as a graduate teaching assistant, John entered the teacher certification program because he felt committed to doing a better job than his own teachers.

Most of all, I wanted to get the students to think. I didn't want information regurgitated but I wanted them to be able to dissect, evaluate, and comprehend what was being fed to them. Pretty ideological for an intro class, but after seven years, I was tired of seeing professors reading off of aged index cards, teaching the exact same thing year after year.

Thirty of the candidates mentioned that their commitment had to be strong to give up their job and face financial burdens for one full year. In spite of financial burdens, Amie remains committed to becoming a teacher.

No, I cannot say that my commitment is stronger because my commitment has been at a very high level from the start. After all, I quit my job and walked away from a financially secure position (as secure as possible in today's economy). In addition, rather than seeking employment on a probationary

certificate, I have committed to *complete the residency program*. This was a very difficult decision to make because adding another semester to what has already been 18 months of unemployment has been a very great financial hardship. However, I am committed to be the best teacher possible and therefore decided to complete the entire certification program. My commitment has been at 1000%!

Personal decisions leading to career change.

Many candidates decided that previous career skills would serve them well in the classroom. Carolyn mentions, "Working in this retail environment has also taught me the importance of planning, time management and working with a diverse group of people." Confidence in their perceived abilities in management translated to managing a classroom.

Also, previous success and excitement of content in one field led participants to decide to share this as they teach adolescents. Karen hopes to relate her real world experiences as an engineer to students in her classroom:

To enter teaching middle school science at this time in history makes you feel a little like a pioneer. Hands-on science is finally becoming the standard. It may take diplomacy, imagination, and persistence to act on my belief that inquiry teaching is not necessarily inconsistent with good test scores, but that's what I do believe. I have been steeped in hands-on science in the workplace, and am not easily intimidated anymore by any text or any field of science.

Many indicated that the desire to teach was evident when they were very young. For financial reasons they rejected the call to teach, but "it never went away." Anne relates the call in her log: "I have spent

most of my adult life trying not to become a teacher. There are several reasons for this. The first was my desire for independence from my mother; the second was the need for a larger income, and the third was an "awareness of difficulties teachers face."

Change to student-centered teaching.

As participants related experiences during the course of the semester, changes in the way they perceived teaching evolved from teaching an endeared content to teaching an adolescent. Mickey shifts from program to adolescent: "As the semester finishes, my commitment is not stronger, but is now shifting from the program to becoming a great teacher and focusing on the adolescents." Pat relates her change of teaching perspective:

I just had a misinformed or inaccurate picture of young adolescents. As my schematic network regarding young adolescents increases, I will add new teaching techniques and skills that will add to my repertoire as a middle school teacher have also gained a greater sense of social issues facing many young adolescents and teaching techniques many educators can use to engage with young adolescents through class presentations.

Fear of the unknown.

All participants had participated in teaching experiences of one kind or another; however, few had experienced sole responsibility for teaching. With the perception of total responsibility for student learning resting upon their shoulders, an expression of fear of the unknown was keen, as Jade states: "I am not too sure if I will be able to "connect" emotionally and interpersonally as quickly or as easily as I suspect that some of my classmates will be able to do with their students." Also, Bonnie demonstrates her fears in the following statements:

I have always enjoyed teaching, but have

also been afraid that I would be very lousy at it. However, with the information that I have been exposed to, and the ideas brought forth in the classes, I think I might be rather good at it, once I get past the nervousness.

Karen relates her fear of the unknown before and during the program:

Committing myself to changing careers was a very intimidating experience to go through. Common wisdom and my peer group public opinion seemed to go against a woman moving from engineering to teaching middle school. The early days were especially hard. My husband was on the laid-off list, and the education language of the textbook was so foreign to me that I had to keep a dictionary beside me as I struggled through the first chapters. The one and only sociology class I had taken was in 1979. Writing in a non-technical style was awkward, and some days it seemed like everyone except me understood what was being discussed in class. Things did get better. By the time I started my research paper, I was feeling much more up to speed with the class, and I could understand the education research papers that I downloaded. I am starting to feel confirmed that this is something I can do, and something that may work out quite well.

Many of these candidates in the study were as Serow (1993) suggests motivated by personal and elaborate goals initiated by their desire to help others. Past experiences, both positive and negative, contributed to this need to give back to young adolescents. This need and the confidence that indeed they could be of service to educating others, became apparent as these career changers discussed and reflected on adolescent development, responsive curriculum, teaming, the modern-day culture of adolescents, and their own development throughout this certification process, as it interfaced with

experiences in their previous careers.

The growing number of career changers in schools of education has had an impact on how we prepare teachers. The importance that the participants in this study assign to making students think critically and problem solve will hopefully remain a constant in their future classroom teaching. The combination of life skills, job skills, and classroom practices of this growing population could possibly contribute to teacher retention numbers. Interestingly, the majority of participants initially considered knowledge of subject matter to be the most important dimension of excellent teaching; however, through studying adolescent development and learning, participants now assigned a greater priority to student-centered instruction.

Survey

The majority of the candidates expressed a desire to do well on class assignments, and did so, even though many of them had not taken a class in over twenty years. These career changers are typically deliberate about their decisions to teach, altruistic about their personal commitment, and feel they have skills, which will encourage students to make connections to the real world (Chambers, 2002). Also, they often are anxious to discuss their reasons for becoming teachers. Results indicate that many of the participants have always wanted to teach, but for various reasons chose another career and in course of life experiences have ultimately reaffirmed that teaching was a call that would not go away.

Conclusion

Analysis indicates that participants' engagement in learning about young adolescent development is an essential ingredient for sustaining commitment and confidence within a middle level teacher

education program. The acquisition of developmental knowledge and pedagogy during each semester of the study increased efficacy and commitment as their fear of the unknown decreased. The findings in this study lend support to the idea that factors causing an increase in teacher efficacy and commitment may assist in teacher retention. Another interesting finding is that participants changed their views about what defines a good teacher from mastery of content to knowledge of adolescent development patterns and their teaching implications with student-centered instruction as a priority. More research is needed to increase our understanding of factors to sustain teacher commitment.

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**Appendix
Candidate Survey**

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|---|--|
| <p>1. I am pursuing a middle level certification because...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I did substitute teaching. b. I always wanted to be a teacher. c. I worked with adolescents. d. Other <p>2. The person most responsible for my becoming a teacher is ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Parent/Spouse/Child b. Teacher c. Coach d. Other <p>3. My last career was in the field of ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Medicine b. Human Resources c. Technology d. Other <p>4. I realized that I wanted to be a teacher ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. High School b. Always wanted to be teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Lack of other choice d. Other <p>5. What type of teaching experiences have you had ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Tutoring b. Substituting c. Coaching d. Other <p>6. When I think of my personality, I think I am ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Leader b. Follower c. Team player d. Other <p>7. Children learn best ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. At School b. At Home c. With parent or guardian d. Other <p>8. What have you learned this semester that will help you most in the classroom?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Adolescent behavior patterns b. Brain research c. Text information d. Other <p>9. Why did you select middle school as your area of certification?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Great need b. Enjoy age group c. Feel connection d. Other <p>10. What is the most important to possess as a teacher?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Content mastery b. Pedagogical skill c. Knowledge of adolescent development. d. Other |
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