

Pre-service teachers' perceptions in beginning education classes

Walter Fajet*, Manuel Bello, Suzette Ahwee Leftwich,
Judith L. Mesler, Annis N. Shaver

School of Education Research, University of Miami, 1551 Brescia Avenue, Brescia Building, 135, Coral Gables, FL 33124, USA

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Abstract

Based on research concerning the influence and persistence of beliefs about teaching that pre-service teachers (students who are not yet teaching professionally) bring with them to their courses. This study used a survey and semi-structured interview to ascertain what students in a beginning education course felt were the qualities and determining characteristics of both good and poor teachers. Findings suggest that pre-service teachers conceive of teaching primarily as a task involving affective, interpersonal relationships rather than a profession requiring a skilled and knowledgeable practitioner. The findings of this study can be useful in the process of developing teacher education programs.

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0. Introduction

Every child has at one time or another “played school.” By the time they reach college, most students have closely observed and scrutinized teachers and their behaviors for at least 12 or 13 years. These activities leave an indelible imprint on the minds and hearts of most students as they develop folk theories about what it takes to be a teacher (Doolittle, Dodds, & Placek, 1993). It has been widely recognized that pre-service teachers¹

(footnote continued)

teachers study another 4 years in a teacher education program at a college or university. Although teacher training varies from state to state and from institution to institution, students preparing to become teachers, labeled pre-service teachers for the purposes of this study, follow a course of study similar to that of the students enrolled in the teacher education program at the University of Miami, the context of this study. The education program at this institution requires students to complete 14 courses, including foundations, i.e., historical and theoretical background of schooling, curriculum design, instructional methods, classroom management, and subject area classes. In addition to classroom instruction, students are required to spend a minimum of 147 h of field experience in actual classroom settings before spending a full semester (4 months) as an intern or student-teacher teaching under progressively less supervision.

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 786 285 3794.

E-mail address: wfajet@miami.edu (W. Fajet).

¹In the United States, children attend school for 12 years. Following this general education, those who desire to become

hold firm beliefs about the teaching profession long before they enter the classroom and that they persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching. Consequently, examining pre-service teachers' perceptions about teaching is important for evaluating how teacher preparation programs can be structured in order to best align prospective teachers' strongly held beliefs with the pedagogical practices that they will need to learn for their subsequent teaching careers. To this end, this study seeks to examine the perceptions of 62 pre-service teachers with respect to what they felt were the characteristics and qualities of good and poor teachers.

1. Review of literature

Research on pre-service teachers' perceptions suggests that teacher education courses do little to alter the perceptions students develop during their 12 or 13 years of apprenticeship (i.e., their elementary and secondary schooling; Bird, Anderson, Sullivan, & Swidler, 1993; Doolittle et al., 1993; Doyle, 1997; Lermen, 1997). In fact, Holt-Reynolds (1992) found that students tend to accept their own schooling experiences as prototypical and generalizable toward the teaching profession. Therefore, information obtained from studying these inherent belief systems can serve to inform curriculum development for teacher educators.

This phenomenon has been examined further via meta-analyses across multiple studies (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). After comparing 16 studies, Pajares concluded that the perceptions of pre-service teachers play a pivotal role in the way they acquire knowledge during pedagogical training, even to the point of influencing the interpretation of course material. He also noted that these perceptions can even affect the practices of beginning teachers. Likewise, Kagan noted that pre-service teacher perceptions lie at the heart of teaching, influencing interaction among teachers and professional growth, while remaining unrecognized by the teachers. The next step, as proposed by Kagan, is to bring pre-service

teachers to a recognition and realization of their perceptions.

Specifically, pre-service teachers generally expect that their relationships with students will be similar to the relationships they experienced with their own teachers. They feel that experience is the best teacher, having experienced teaching vicariously for 12 or 13 years (Book, Byers, & Freeman, 1983; Doyle, 1997; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). Pre-service teachers expect their teaching contexts to be no different from their student contexts; therefore, they see little to no reason to study pedagogy (Bird et al., 1993; Book et al., 1983; Doolittle et al., 1993; Holt-Reynolds, 1992), even interpreting material presented in teacher training courses in ways that support their *own perceptions* about teaching (Doolittle et al., 1993). Regardless of the form that teacher training takes, these perceptions persist throughout the period of training and remain with new teachers well into their early years of teaching (Doolittle et al., 1993; Griffin, 1989; Lermen, 1997; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Taylor & Sobel, 2001).

Investigating *pre-service teachers'* perceptions about the specific qualities of good teachers² is critical to determining the extent to which teacher preparation programs can affect their subsequent classroom practice (Doolittle et al., 1993; Hollingsworth, 1989; Nespor, 1987; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001). One might reasonably expect that pre-service teachers will perceive "good" or effective teachers as vehicles for producing positive student outcomes; however, this is not the case. In fact, some research indicates that "meeting students' needs" is generally rated low on scales that list characteristics of good teachers (Weinstein, 1989, 1990), particularly for candidates enrolled in elementary education programs (Book et al., 1983). Rather than indicating the importance of

²Throughout the reviewed literature on prospective teachers' perceptions, studies have inquired as to the subject's beliefs regarding the attributes and characteristics that good teachers possess. Throughout the many studies however, the questions were worded in slightly different ways. Researchers used *effective* or *competent* to refer to teachers that would be considered "good." For the purpose of this study, "good teachers" will be used to refer to educators who are deemed effective and competent.

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