



Career-changers' ideal teacher images and grounded classroom perspectives



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Career-changers grounded their ideal teacher images in the realities of teaching.
- Teaching was more time-consuming, demanding, and complex than they anticipated.
- Students' misbehavior and personal needs surprised and challenged them.
- Actual teaching added characteristics to their images of ideal teachers.
- Colleagues' behavior and attitudes in some schools were unexpected.

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ABSTRACT

Seeking to understand whether career-changers experience the idealism referenced in new teacher literature, two teacher educators conducted a qualitative inquiry employing interview, descriptive writing, and focus group methods. Findings from 13 participants indicate their ideal teachers are caring and student-centered in a grounded, not romanticized, way, are knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and organized yet flexible. Participants found actual teaching more time-consuming, demanding, and complex than anticipated and students' unexpected needs and misbehavior challenging. Past teachers influenced their ideal teacher images and becoming a teacher expanded them. The researchers discuss the findings in light of literature and implications for future practice.

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1. Introduction

When new teachers recall their favorite teachers—those they try to emulate—they easily identify and talk fondly about teachers' characteristics and actions. “The imprint of good teachers remains long after the facts they gave us have faded” (Palmer, 1998, p. 21). As teachers strive to be *that* teacher to their own students, they grapple with the visions they have of what the ideal teacher embodies and what their reality experiences as a novice teacher are. Most novice teachers prepare to enter the profession from the other side of the desk where they have participated as students, with

great expectations for themselves and their students. Lortie's (1975) seminal work naming this “apprenticeship of observation” (p. 61) describes this position as being on the cusp between knowing about and being a teacher. Situated in this crevice are expectations and energy created by infinite possibility and fueled by the desire to be a great teacher. It is a fertile crevice for idealism to abound.

Does the idealism—a common theme throughout international literature on new teachers (e.g., Haritos, 2004; Shkedi & Laron, 2004; Veenman, 1984; Wilson & Deane, 2010)—also permeate the experiences of career-changers? Since career-changers bring to their novice teaching endeavors more and different personal, educational, and professional quests, their ideals may be unique. As two teacher educators, we were intrigued about how career-changers might characterize their ideal teachers and what expectations they had for themselves in relation to their ideals. Being passionate about qualitative inquiry and supporting new entrants

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to the field, we had co-taught a course in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) preparation program in a mid-sized, East Coast university in the United States, which provided a context for our study. Our overarching research questions were: What are career-changers' images of ideal teachers, and how has classroom teaching impacted them? Because we sought career-changers' reflections on their lived experiences of ideal teachers and their revised images after they began classroom teaching, we chose to conduct a phenomenological qualitative study.

2. Career-changers

Across the globe, many countries are experiencing a shortage of teachers (Provost, 2011). One response has been to increase the number of alternative routes to teaching programs for those seeking to teach after having studied in other fields (Tigheelaar, Brouwer, & Korthagen, 2008; Williams & Forgasz, 2009). Programs such as Teach for America, Teach First (UK), Teach for Malaysia, and Teach for Australia are examples of programs seeking to reform education through a service approach to teaching in the more challenged areas around the world. Additionally, the more recent emphasis on STEM education has led to some regions seeking to attract scientists, technologists, engineers, and mathematicians into classrooms (Watters & Diezmann, 2012; Wilson & Deane, 2010). Whether second-career teachers enter through alternative pathways or through specialized recruiting for particular content area expertise, there is an international increase of career-changers coming into the field as evidenced by some research about such teachers in Australia (Kember, 2008; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Watters & Diezmann, 2012; Williams & Forgasz, 2009), the Dutch system (Tigheelaar et al., 2008), Greece (Kaldi, 2009), New Zealand (Anthony & Ord, 2008), the UK (Priyadharshini & Robinson-Pant, 2003; Wilson & Deane, 2010), and the US (Fry & Anderson, 2011; Haggard, Slostad, & Winterton, 2006; Mayotte, 2003; Williams, Brindley, & Morton, 2007).

According to the World Health Organization (2014), life expectancy is increasing globally. With improved health and extended lifespans, people are more likely to change careers within their lifetime rather than committing to a particular career path for several decades (Crow, Levine, & Nager, 1990). Across the world, teaching has seen an influx of those with prior occupational experiences (Anthony & Ord, 2008; Kaldi, 2009). The incoming generation of teachers are very likely to view teaching as one of several work experiences they will have (Baldacci, Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2006). Moreover, many see teaching as a "try-it-before-you-buy-it" experience that may be left or extended depending on job satisfaction (Peske, Liu, Johnson, Kauffman, & Kardos, 2001). Because there are variations in definitions of career-changers (Tigheelaar et al., 2008), for the purposes of this study, career-changers are those teachers who did not complete initial teacher credentialing as undergraduates but decided later to become educators. Research on teacher career-changers, which runs the gamut from small-scale, self-report and interview studies to medium sample case studies to large survey investigations, reveals mixed findings.

Much research reports the reasons motivating individuals to make the change to teaching. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003) UK sample as well as the New Zealand participants studied by Anthony and Ord (2008), specified multiple "push and pull" factors for pursuing teaching. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003) indicated the motivations of job satisfaction and security, in addition to changed perspectives on life, memories of influential teachers, and love of their content. Castro and Bauml (2009) as well as Lee (2011) looked at the motivating factors of their respective samples of US career-changers. Castro and Bauml (2009) report

what they term "'Why Now?' factors which include resource availability, latitude, commitment readiness, and program accessibility" (p. 117). Lee's (2011) career-changers indicated motivations relating to desire for different lifestyle, satisfaction in doing their work, wanting to make a difference, and feeling a sense of calling. Analyses of survey research from Richardson and Watt (2005) Australian respondents indicated that motivators in deciding to teach were related to perceived social status, ideas about career appropriateness, prior considerations, monetary compensation, and family reasons.

Another theme pervasive in the literature is concerned with qualities career-changer teachers bring from their previous fields that have a positive impact on the teaching experience. For example, Newman (1995) found motivation, life experience, and stability were qualities career-changers over 40 brought to the profession. General workplace skills (Williams & Forgasz, 2009) like teaming and management, strong communication skills (Kember, 2008; Mayotte, 2003; Salyer, 2003; Tigheelaar et al., 2008), and problem-solving (Mayotte, 2003) have been reported more recently. Qualities like patience (Salyer, 2003), maturity (Fry & Anderson, 2011; Morton, Williams, & Brindley, 2006), commitment (Chambers, 2002; Hapt, 1987; Morton et al., 2006), ability to connect the subject and real-world applications (Chambers, 2002; Salyer, 2003; Tigheelaar et al., 2008), and confidence (Fry & Anderson, 2011; Tigheelaar et al., 2008) are additional positives brought to the classroom from prior career experiences. Additionally, some administrators report positive impact on classroom management as well as instruction that Troops to Teachers career-changers have (Owings et al., 2006).

In a different vein, some authors critique such solely positive rhetoric and call for research about the specific areas of difference between career-changers and other teachers (Boyd et al., 2011; Donaldson, 2012). Donaldson (2012) surveyed a sample of over 2000 Teach for America teachers and found that the older career-changers were more likely to remain in teaching and stay in the more challenging schools than the younger career-changers. Boyd et al. (2011) looked at career-changers' likelihood of staying in the profession as well as at their student testing results. Boyd and colleagues report that there was not a discernable difference in impact on student achievement nor in attrition rates between career-changers and other teachers. Mayotte (2003) as well as Fry and Anderson (2011), after conducting separate case study research in the US with four participants each, report mixed results about adaptability successes of career-changers in terms of their prior career skill sets and beliefs.

Our study seeks to contribute to this varied landscape of prior research on career-changers through a phenomenological investigation. Our inquiry focused on ideal images of teachers held by career-changers and how these were impacted by teaching. Ultimately, the experiences and thoughts of this particular group of career-changers can serve to inform those who work to recruit, prepare, and support career-changers who seek to teach. What follows is a description of the theoretical underpinnings influencing our research design, methods, analysis, discussion, and implications.

3. Theoretical perspectives

Our study draws upon experiential learning theory, which, as described by Dewey (1938) and Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), posits that learning is situated in context-specific experiences that can be reflected upon and analyzed so as to learn directly from them. "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." This Aristotle quote captures the essence of experiential learning as it pertains to new teachers learning about

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