



# Learning (not) to become a teacher: A qualitative analysis of the job entrance issue

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## ABSTRACT

Reporting on 12 case studies of student teachers, this paper examines how experiences during teacher education affect graduates' decision on job entrance. Interpretative data-analysis reveals that powerful sources of the shift in motivation to enter teaching concern interactions in which the person of the teacher is at stake. These mainly involve student teachers' need to develop a socially recognized sense of professional competence as well as their dealing with social and cultural working conditions in schools. These crucial determinants act as "double-edged swords", being at the same time important sources for recognition as for self-doubts and loss of job motivation.

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## 1. Introduction

Several countries show a recurring shortage of teachers (OECD, 2005). The concerns are three-fold: too few candidates entering teacher education (recruitment), too many beginning teachers leaving the profession (retention), and too many teacher education graduates who never enter teaching (job entrance). In this article we focus on the last. Because all students entering teacher education already have had a long "career" as pupils/students (see Lortie's (1975) "apprenticeship of observation"), one may assume that they have a sense of what the job entails and thus a rather job-specific motivation for teaching. It is therefore plausible to assume that experiences during teacher education influence their job motivation and the decision eventually not to enter teaching. However, while the issues of teacher recruitment and (beginning) teacher retention have received much research attention (see e.g., Borman & Dowling, 2008; Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Rinke, 2008), surprisingly little attention has been paid to graduates' choice (not) to enter the teaching profession once their teacher education is complete (Rots, Aelterman, Devos & Vlerick, 2010; Sinclair, 2008; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Moreover, from their review on teacher motivation research, Richardson and Watt (2010) conclude that while

many studies have investigated the factors that initially motivate people to become teachers (see Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; OECD, 2005), much less is known about changes to those motivations over time. Particularly, there is a lack of empirical research that helps to understand how motivations are framed, shaped, and constrained by experiences during teacher education.

Although we don't deny the possible impact of 'external' factors (e.g., labour market mechanisms, see Guarino et al., 2006), our analysis aims at disentangling how the way student teachers' make sense of the experiences during teacher education affects their job motivation and decision on job entrance. Thus we not only want to contribute to the research-based understanding of student teachers' development, but we also want to provide suggestions for optimizing the pedagogy of teacher education.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Epistemologically and conceptually this study builds on the so-called 'teacher thinking'-research (see a.o., Clark & Peterson, 1986; Richardson & Placier, 2001) as well as the interpretative tradition in sociology (a.o. symbolic interactionism, Blumer, 1969). In line with this stance becoming a teacher is conceived of as a continuing process of professional development, resulting from the meaningful social interaction between the student teacher and his/her professional environment (Kelchtermans, 2007). During initial training the professional context is constituted by the training institute (with its staff, students, curriculum, etc.) as well as the schools in which student teachers perform practical training.

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Research has documented that student teachers are not passive receptors of socialization processes, but rather as active agents interpret their experiences, make sense of them and learn from them (Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002; Carter & Doyle, 1996). Throughout this learning process student teachers not only acquire content knowledge, pedagogical skills and educational attitudes, but also actively construct a sense of themselves as teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijjaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Although we acknowledge that normative images of the teacher profession in society influence and frame the ways individuals interactively construct this image of themselves as teachers, our theoretical approach differs from the more (post) structuralist frameworks in that we stress the role of agency and sense-making in this process.

As a consequence of our epistemological and conceptual stance we avoid the notion of “teacher identity”, because of its static and essentialist connotations but argue for the concept of *self-understanding* (Kelchtermans, 1993; 2007; 2009). Stressing its dynamic nature, self-understanding refers to both the understanding one has of one's ‘self’ at a certain moment in time (product), as well as to the ongoing process of making sense of one's experiences and their impact on the ‘self’. Acknowledging its multifaceted character, Kelchtermans (1993; 2007; 2009) has identified five components in teachers' self-understanding.

The *self-image* is the descriptive component, the way teachers typify themselves as teachers. This image is based on self-perception, but also on what others mirror back to the (student) teacher (e.g., comments from pupils, mentors/supervising teachers, teacher educators, etc.).

*Self-esteem*, the evaluative component, refers to the teacher's appreciation of his/her actual job performance. Again the feedback from significant others constitutes an important source. The self-esteem also reflects the inevitable role of the emotional dimension in the teaching job (van Veen & Lasky, 2005). Positive self-esteem is crucial for experiencing job satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment in the job.

Closely linked to the self-esteem, is the *task perception*. This normative component reflects the understanding of what one has to do in order to have a justified feeling of doing a good job. In the task perception, it becomes clear that teaching is never a neutral endeavour, but encompasses deeply held beliefs on the values and norms that make up good teaching. When these deeply held beliefs are questioned teachers feel that they themselves as a person are called into question.

Next, the *job motivation* (the conative component) refers to the motives that make people choose to become a teacher, to stay in teaching or to give it up for another career. This component will thus operate as the starting point for our interpretative analysis. Johnson and Birkeland (2003) state that the ‘new generation’ of prospective teachers see themselves as having the option not to choose teaching upon graduation. Although most students start teacher education with a more or less explicit motivation to become teachers, some primarily regard teacher education as a way to earn a degree that offers a wide variety of job opportunities, including those outside teaching (Jarvis & Woodrow, 2005; Roness & Smith, 2010).

Finally, the *future perspective* reveals a teacher's expectations about his/her future in the job. This component indicates how temporality pervades self-understanding: one's actions in the present are influenced by meaningful experiences in the past and expectations about the future.

Kelchtermans (1993; 2007; 2009) has linked the notion of (student) teachers' self-understanding to their *subjective educational theory*: the personal system of knowledge and beliefs on teaching. The interconnection between teachers' self-understanding and subjective

educational theory forms the core of their *personal interpretative framework*: the set of cognitions and beliefs that operates as a lens through which teachers perceive their job situations, make sense of them and act in them. This personal interpretative framework is to be understood as the – always temporary – ‘mental sediment’ of teachers' professional development.

The ongoing processes of sense-making – both reflecting and developing the personal interpretative framework – are considered to be crucial for understanding student teachers' development and thus also for the development of their job motivation and their decision on job entrance. In (student) teachers' accounts of their experiences in teaching (or teacher education) there are always particular events, phases or people which – in retrospect – have had a pervasive significance, i.e. have led to a revision of one's personal interpretative framework. Among those so-called *critical incidents, phases or persons* (Kelchtermans, 1993; Sikes, Measor, & Woods, 1985) the periods of practical training have been documented as very influential socializing experiences (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Student teachers are challenged to actually perform their competences and become aware of their motives, commitments and their sense of self as a teacher (Bullough & Young, 2002). The confrontation between the professional self-understanding and the subjective educational theory, as developed prior to and during teacher education on the one hand and the complexities of the teaching reality on the other, often leads to tensions, doubts, and possibly modifications of the personal interpretative framework. For some student teachers this “praxis shock” is sufficiently severe to terminate their teaching career before they really had a chance to begin (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Kelchtermans & Ballet (2002) have argued that the praxis shock of beginning teachers not only has to do with issues at the classroom level, but also with teacher socialization in the school as an organization. The challenges of the internship are to an important degree determined by the organizational contexts and the working conditions in which student teachers find themselves (relationships with mentors/supervising teachers, school culture, material conditions, etc.). From their personal interpretative framework, student teachers hold beliefs about what entails good teaching and what conditions are necessary or desirable to perform their professional tasks properly. Kelchtermans & Ballet (2002) revealed how these desirable or necessary working conditions operate as professional interests and lead to micro-political actions, i.e. actions to establish the desired working conditions, to safeguard them when they are threatened or to restore them when they are lost.

Using this conceptualization of teacher development throughout teacher education as a theoretical framework, our central research question is: How is student teachers' job motivation (as part of their developing personal interpretative framework) affected by experiences during teacher education resulting in a particular decision on job entrance? More specifically we want to reconstruct a) the different shifts in job motivation that result in a change of the initial intention for job entrance and b) identify the factors determining the process.

### 3. Methodology

As processes of interpretation and sense-making were a central focus of this study, a qualitative–interpretative research methodology, more specifically a ‘multiple case study’ design, was adopted (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A ‘theoretical sampling’ method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used, meaning that the choice of cases was made on conceptual grounds, not on representative grounds. This method of sampling attempts to select cases which yield in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalization (Patton, 2002). The

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