



Exploring preservice teachers' metaphor plotlines

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how entering female preservice teachers position themselves—the plotlines, obligations, responsibilities and duties they are prepared to enact, the expectations they hold for students, and the implications these have for teacher education. Using positioning theory, the authors analyze application letters of 20 elementary preservice teachers to uncover metaphor plotlines for teaching. Preservice teachers' application letters contained 12 metaphor plotlines presented here in terms of the definition, the role of teacher and the role of student. The paper explores implications for the content of teacher education, development as a teacher, and the ability to engage students.

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1. Introduction

The work by the AERA Panel on teacher education research begins with an analysis of the demographics and characteristics of the students in teacher education. Zumwalt and Craig (2005) assert that because of its focus on demographics there was more research in this area than any other. Yet the committee findings reveal that while a lot is known about the ethnicity, class status, gender, and test scores of these students particularly in relationship to other university students, as a profession there is shallow knowledge about how they actually position themselves as they enter the teaching profession (Lay, Pinnegar, Reed, Wheeler, & Wilkes, 2005).

Adding perspective to this fairly surface portrait of preservice teachers, Brookhart and Freeman (1992) provide evidence that preservice teachers are altruistic, with service oriented goals and are motivated by a high sense of job satisfaction rather than merely a paycheck. Many, especially those preparing to work in secondary schools, chose teaching as a profession because of the influence of a former teacher, while other reasons listed include a good preparation for family life and an interest in children. Parallel with these philanthropic motives, preservice teachers were noted to be confident, self-assured and optimistic. Many listed as important characteristics for teachers those that were identical to what they identified as their personal character strengths. Dewey asserted early in the last century that students' openness, wholeheartedness, and commitment were indicators of how they would engage

with their education. Loughran (1996) argues that these characteristics are vital if beginning teachers are to engage with teacher education coursework and continue to grow and develop as reflective professionals.

Studies in international contexts that explore entering characteristics of preservice teachers focus not so much on which preservice teacher candidates demographic relate most strongly to retention in the profession but on the development of self-efficacy beliefs. As a result, international studies of entering teacher candidates usually explore cross-country comparisons among preservice teachers self-efficacy beliefs (e.g. Gorrell, Hazareesingh, Carlson, & Sjoblom, 1993) and report only shallow changes across their teacher education programs (e.g. Lin & Gorrell, 1998). In addition international studies have also explored the relationship between the epistemological beliefs of preservice teachers and their preferred model of teaching (e.g. Wong, Chan, & Lai, 2009).

Bullough, (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995; Bullough, Knowles, & Crowe, 1991) have argued that who students become as teachers emerges from who they are as people. In order to gain evidence about how they will respond in their preparation as teachers, what they will learn from coursework and how they will position themselves in classrooms (Holt-Reynolds, 1992), there needs to be a deeper understanding of who preservice teachers are as they enter the profession and how they orient themselves in the learning to teach process. Students do not come to teaching collectively. They arrive as individuals with particular personal histories, understandings about teaching and learning, and decision paths that led them to choose to study to be teachers. This is the kind of deep knowledge that can guide their decisions about pedagogic practices they will attend to in teacher education. Understandings about preservice

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teachers' knowledge in these areas should guide teacher education institutions in making decisions about what kinds of coursework they should offer and what they should hold preservice teachers accountable for. Bullough's work (Bullough & Gilin, 1995; Bullough et al., 1991; Bullough & Stokes, 1994) has clearly demonstrated that understanding how students position themselves as they enter teaching will allow us to better prepare them as teachers. Recent work by Olsen (2008) further supports that claim. Three areas of research show promise for developing this understanding: preservice teachers' metaphors for teaching, their beliefs about teaching and learning, and their identity as a teacher.

1.1. Metaphors

Research in teacher thinking more than a decade ago revealed much about the relationship between teaching metaphors and action as a teacher (Bullough et al., 1991, Bullough & Stokes, 1994). More successful beginning teachers had richer and conceptually more complex metaphors for teaching, and they had more options in the plotlines they constructed with students. Tobin's work (Tobin, 1990; Tobin & LaMaster, 1995) provided evidence that supporting beginning teachers in uncovering their metaphors and in evaluating and altering these metaphors, could lead to radical change in practice. When teachers embraced new metaphors to guide their teaching they could instantiate new plotlines in their teaching practice. Martinez, Sauledua, and Huber (2001) argued that metaphors are "an essential mechanism of the mind," (p. 966) and that professionals in a given field are influenced by the central metaphors or archetypes which circulate throughout their field. Metaphors are "profoundly affecting teachers' thinking about teaching and learning" (p. 966). But, while metaphors can guide teachers' learning and practice, they can also limit the "thoughts, attitudes, and actions of prospective educators" (p. 966). Thus, the metaphors that guide teaching provide implicit suggestions about the kinds of teacher–student relationships teachers will attempt to create, the approach they will take to content, and the obligations, duties and responsibilities they will enact. The metaphors teachers hold for teaching shape and give form to the plotlines they enact as teachers.

Because metaphors capture the potential plotline for teacher–student interaction, educational purpose, and assumptions about teaching and learning held by a preservice teacher, metaphors and the plotlines they represent are potentially an important tool in teacher education, as attention to the imagined plotlines behind enacting the role of teacher and the position of the teacher on that plotline has the power to bring about conceptual changes in preservice teachers' perspectives and identities as teachers.

1.2. Beliefs

Richardson and Placier (2001) argue that the relationship between belief and teaching is not straightforward. They point out that beliefs have the capacity to impact all aspects of preservice teachers' work in field placements, including what ideas and concepts they choose to accept or reject and how they teach their lessons. Research on teacher education around the world has recognized that preservice teacher beliefs impact their work as teachers (e.g. Gordon & Debus, 2002). For example, research in Canada (Guftason & Rowell, 1995), Taiwan (Lin & Gorrell, 1998), Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2009), Australia (Gordon & Debus, 2002), and Turkey have taken up the study of beliefs in preservice teachers' education in order to study how teacher education impacts or influences beliefs. This research seems to substantiate the notion that what preservice teachers believe about teaching and how that belief shows up in practice are not straightforward.

Work in practical argument, where teachers consider events in their practice in order to uncover the conflicting or congruent beliefs behind their actions, helped make visible that while teaching beliefs end in the action of the teacher the connections are neither transparent nor obvious (Morgan, 1993; Tidwell & Heston, 1998).

Teachers' beliefs (or visions) function as skeletal understandings which impact planning for teaching as well as teacher interaction and action in the classroom (Hammerness, 2003). According to Breidenstein (2002), because preservice teachers come into teacher education believing in certain cultural myths about teaching, it is the teacher educator's responsibility to help students reconstruct their beliefs. Munby, Russell, and Martin (2001) show that for experienced teachers these beliefs form the basis for reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, from which classroom practice and continued teacher learning grow. Indeed these beliefs undergrid individuals' identity as a teacher. While this research makes it obvious that teacher education should take account of preservice beliefs, what may be less obvious is that if unexamined these beliefs may, in fact, position students so that they are either unable learn from teacher educators or to misinterpret teacher education as supporting views opposed to those their teacher educators are attempting to promote.

1.3. Identity as a teacher

Pinnegar (2005) and Bullough (2005) have articulated the relationship between the identity of the teacher educator and the challenge for educating preservice teachers. Unfortunately, the identity of preservice teachers entering teacher education is usually not apparent to teacher educators. Research in identity (e.g. Josselson, 1996) argues that it is during the college years that society allows a last moratorium before it expects young people to have a clear sense of their identity. Her research demonstrates that identity is clearly related to young adults' sense of competence and connectedness which are both important aspects of the disposition of good teachers and essential in young adults' ability to move forward successfully into vocations they have chosen.

Past research on teacher professionalism focused on how preservice teachers assumed the role of teacher and how teachers were socialized into the teaching profession. Indeed stage theories of teacher development, like that of Katz (1972), or the expansion of Fuller's work (Conway & Clark, 2003), suggest that there is potentially one plotline for teacher development, and thus, teacher educators only need to attend to that singular plotline. This view of teachers' development suggests that there is a static thing called a *teacher's role* and that one puts it on. Researchers have called into question this conception of the unidimensionality and permanence of identity and role construction. Harré and van Loughoven (1998) argue that individuals position themselves and are positioned by others, and it is this moment to moment positioning that across time reveals identity and builds it. They assert further that acts of positioning reveal conceptions of self and assumptions about the world and just as importantly reveal the obligations, duties, and responsibilities that underlie a particular act of positioning. Thus, how preservice teachers attempting to enter teacher education position themselves in relation to teacher education, teaching, schooling, and learning reveals much about their expectations from teacher education; the obligations, responsibilities, duties they feel toward teaching and students; and the teaching plotlines they are prepared to enact.

The purpose of this study was to explore how preservice teachers applying for admittance to teacher education positioned themselves and what their positioning revealed about the obligations of a teacher for which they are prepared to be accountable, the

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