

## CHAPTER SIX

# Preservice Teachers' Understandings of Being a Primary Teacher

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on prospective teachers' understanding of being primary teachers as they interact in the first year with stakeholders on the university and school sites, and possible influences of being out in front of a class. It is argued that some teacher entrants clarify their impressions of their chosen career during the first year. Comparison between understanding at the commencement of the course, and what being a teacher means to them at the end of the first year, can have implications for their future career paths.*

### Out in front: first year

**T**his research focuses on student teachers' understandings of being primary school teachers as they interact with 'others' on university and school sites in the first year of the teacher education course. I argue that some teachers clarify their impressions of their chosen

career during the first year of their teacher education course. Potential teachers must explore the marketplace of life in schools. The study draws from research on preservice teachers to help reconstruction of student understanding. Using case study methods can make possible the identification of teacher growth. By concentrating on this time period, such research becomes an important step in trying to address any concerns that may become apparent in the initial understandings of preservice teachers on a regional university campus in Queensland.

At the end of 1998 I conducted a Pilot Study with eight volunteer First Year student teachers on Mackay CQU campus using a semistructured interview. This year was unique in the formation of teacher entrants on the campus as the cohort will be the first to graduate from the Mackay university. The study details how I am building joint construction using Constructivist methodology so that the story co-constructed in our interviews can be told. For instance, on that campus the greatest number of dropouts occurred in the first term of First year, so having an understanding of what these entrants believed about teaching was an important step in beginning to identify problems. The research may not address all these problems centred about recruitment, socialisation and the first few months on a new campus, however determination of understanding as constructed by students themselves can lead to the enhancement of emerging professional knowledge in regional universities.

The Pilot Study was undertaken to refine the interview pro forma and techniques, and to establish the beginnings of the analytical procedure. The pro forma sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the student teachers' understandings of being teachers?
2. After commencement of the teacher education program what does being a teacher mean to commencing students?
3. What does being a teacher mean to them at the end of the First Year?
4. How does comparison between these views lead to a better understanding of students' construction of prior and acquired knowledge?
5. What are the implications of these understandings for the students' future career paths and their career preparations?

The interview pro forma was used in conjunction with the literature base. The opinion of Murnane (1995) was that a positive relationship between a single attribute, academic ability, and the quality of teaching has not been forthcoming, and that no consensus has emerged of the vital academic, personal and professional qualifications of prospective teachers. It would appear that there is a gap, an unknown predicability, in the context of the prospective teacher, and I intend to use that gap with the implication that the understanding of being a student teacher could start before university enrolment of the teacher education course.

Lortie (1975) wrote of the 'five attractors of teaching' vital to recruitment, while McArthur (1981) pointed to the 'reality shock' apparent in concerns of teacher entrants. Other researchers, Bogard (1983) and Berry (1986), focused on the negative aspects of teacher retention, while Diamond (1989) probed the relatively high attrition rates in the first few years of teaching. Such research forms a background

to the current context of teacher education in Australian universities, as a Senate report on the status of teachers (Juddery, 1998) noted that Australia faced a shortage of teachers, in the context of an ageing teaching profession. Preston (1997) discussed the projections, implications and issues that she believed lead to a shortage of teachers in this country. Heeding this warning, Eltis (1997) asked how do we attract entrants to teaching, yet fight other higher education alternatives which attract potential students, and therefore in my interviews respondents were asked what attracted them to teaching, and to reconstruct their understanding of that attraction in interviews over that first year.

Crowley (1998) also probed the greater range of career options available for women as part of the decision for non entrance to a teaching career in Australia, but especially for men in expression of community attitudes: fears of litigation, in the perception of teaching as 'women's work', the impact of university fees, and uncertain job prospects. Those who chose to become teachers in Mackay *do* reflect the growing demand for teacher education, prompting an increase in these courses so that student teachers can stay at home, and thus this research reconstructs the changing perception of motivation whether coming from school or other form of admittance.

During a teacher education program, prospective teachers may be considered as being enculturated into the profession (Nimmo, 1994). He argued that description of any such enculturation must recognise the 'subtle interplay of biographical and contextual factors'. These factors of the personal background and life experiences are important to the student teachers' understandings of teaching as they grapple with the new teaching and learning environment of the university, but they also perceive teaching as work,

perhaps for the first time. Socialisation in the once familiar classroom now contains two teachers, and there are pupils also with whom to build relationships.

Tinto (1993) claimed that the key to effective retention is shown to lie in a strong commitment to quality education and the building of a strong sense of inclusive and social community on campus. Holbeck (1990) concluded that early withdrawal by rural students in their first year of higher education was characterised by low educational commitment, because of unrealistic expectations in tertiary studies, leading to a lack of fit. Tinto also identified the failure of transition to a university's intellectual life. Studies of prediction of attrition may be problematic (Price, 1991) because factors were so complex, the real reasons for 'dropping out' could evade the researcher and could be due to the former student's unwillingness to identify the reason. In my data collecting I noted not merely the student teacher's construction of their own understanding, but comments on peers' understanding also. Loughran and others (1996) researched the teaching and learning of students that occurred in the teacher education program, in the context of concerns that student teachers perceive in the course. Danielwitz (1998) found that student teachers were concerned with self, who they were going to be as teachers?

Clandinin and Connelly (1987) described a small set of interesting studies, that of teacher theories and beliefs, that in this small subfield the various terms eg personal knowledge, constructs and conceptions, are simply different words meaning the same thing. Personal practical knowledge may be reconstructed out of the narratives of teachers' lives. In data collection the students and I, as researcher, make mutual reconstruction of the teacher's narrative. This sub-field of teacher beliefs, but more importantly of student teacher beliefs, is important to our

understanding of teacher entrants in the first year, their development and any change in their perceptions of the teacher education course. It is not possible in this paper to encompass all studies on beliefs of student teachers and recruitment, however further aspects may be addressed in further comment on the emerging data.

### Student Interviews

The interviews of the eight volunteer student teachers in the Pilot Study were transcribed and coded to reduce data. I had called this pilot interview an initial snapshot of teacher understanding, as a prelude to data collecting. The unstructured interview was planned for the 1998 pilot study, and I adapted that interview for use in the data collecting with the new First Year cohort in the next year, 1999.

I wished to expand the snapshot of first year student teachers which I had gained in the Pilot Study, and I therefore interviewed nine volunteer student teachers at the beginning of the 1999 university year. I added further interviews at the middle and end of their first year. In this way I was able to obtain answers for the other research questions with data that flowed through the student teachers' first year.

Of the forty-five questions in this interview the first twenty questions were about the background of student teachers and why and how they were in the course. The next twenty questions were about the student's experiences in the first year. The last few questions asked about future concerns, intention to continue teaching and future employment choice and prospects.

Transcripts from the first interview were prepared, and each interviewee was given a copy for the mid-year interview so that we could discuss together any issues emerging from the student beliefs at the beginning of the year. Relevant

questions for mid year were also asked. A similar interview took place at the end of the first year.

Of interest was the composition of the group of student teachers who volunteered, both in the Pilot Study and the Data collection. Those interviewed in the Pilot were all female student teachers aged from eighteen to forty-three years, of whom two had come straight from school and who always wanted to be teachers, and six mature age student teachers, some from TAFE and STEPS entry, all with children. Nine student teachers, from eighteen to forty-six years of age, were interviewed over the Data collection year: one male and six females who came from a variety of workplace experiences and mature age university entrance, as were two female student teachers, who had always wanted to be teachers, coming straight from school. Gender representation was important on this new campus, as the number of male entrants was minimal, unlike other studies, Bortwick (1988) and Diamond (1989), where the male view was present and presented. Those student teachers on Mackay campus taking part in this research gave reasons why both female and male presence on campus and schools were important.

### Emerging Themes

Having established my coding system through reiterative analysis firstly in the Pilot Study and then more thoroughly in data collection, I was able to identify the emerging themes. A brief description of the themes is included, as further analysis is still ongoing.

#### *Teacher likes kids*

All student teachers identified contact with children as being the primary reason to become teachers. They believed their attitude to children was in being able to help, to make

a difference. Many said they had prior experience with children, whether as parents, work experience at school or in childcare employment. They described the effect that teachers had upon children, often using role models from their own childhood experiences, or that they observed with their own children's teachers, or in the supervising teachers they had teamed with on the school site. Teacher personality was seen as an important facet of pupil motivation. Teaching as work was perceived as a combination of the many ways that teachers related to children so that the relationship between the class and teacher could be built over the whole year. However the student teachers, while expressing their 'own liking for kids,' were quick to comment on reasons why some of their peers left the teacher education course in that first year, because they found they 'didn't like kids', couldn't relate to kids.

McArthur (1981) stated that in the very early stage of teacher socialisation the processes of compliance and identification are uppermost, as observed by Danziger (1971), and the realisation that teaching is not all 'happy smiles and little children' can be a shock to entrants. McArthur noted this phenomenon of the effect of initial experience in teaching can be likened to similar patterns observed in medicine and nursing, 'a sudden, sometimes traumatic realisation of the disparity between the way a job is envisaged before beginning work and the actual work situation. (p2-3)

Although the academic component of the preservice course may be the source of some tension, leaving the place of learning to take part in the practicum in the school is part of occupational socialisation. I argue that the crisis of 'reality shock' (McArthur, 1981) may be very real to some student teachers. McArthur emphasised the importance of this in a comment found in his interviews with student



teachers, about 'being better off not teaching if one cannot relate to kids.'

Lasley (1981) stated that preservice teachers often 'cite' their love of children as an important guide to their belief of success in the field, that if they like children, effective teaching will result. Merely remembering that a former teacher seemed to like all pupils and that the student liked the teacher, may demean the 'learning to teach' each prospective teacher accomplishes in a career.

*Understanding teaching means teaching involves contact with children. A student teacher presumes a developing relationship with children*

#### *Called to teach?*

Only some of the student teachers stated they always wanted to teach, only the few volunteers had come straight from school. Many mentioned the alternate positions they had held over their life experiences, and that they were seeking a career that would 'fit' them, or so that their life experiences would allow them to 'fit' into teaching. Some were uncertain in their choice, sometimes indicative of those who had influenced their choice, supported or retarded that choice. Others saw teaching as a change of career, an opportunity to attend university, a way to secure material benefits. Family motives to teach could be specialised, such as parents or siblings who were teaching, related to material family needs or a reason to choose teaching through a change in family relations. The decision to teach came early or late for some, or when the geographically-distant university became closer to home. All alluded to their own experience of being students over almost fifteen years at school.

To change teaching was a reason for some to teach, wanting to change what they had seen. Those who always wanted to teach appeared to be immured with a sense of

commitment, therefore in later interviews I questioned whether student teachers perceived whether they were called to teach. Danielwitz (1998) had presumed that her student teachers had deliberately chosen teaching, but found in interviews that this was not so, that two didn't feel it to be a calling, that a 'star' student dropped out as 'she just couldn't make it feel right. Leigh Williamson (1998) quoted the study of Dinham (1998) who had found that fifty per cent of teachers 'just fell into teaching. Stokes (1997) focused his research on the belief that teachers take with them into the teaching profession, and on the worldviews of called' teachers, whom he declared consists of about fifty per cent of incoming teachers. My interviews revealed that during the first year that most student teachers in the first year considered the possibility that they were called. Being called to teach, (Hansen, 1995), continues during a teaching career, but Hansen suggested that having 'a sense of vocation may enable teachers to identify those very opportunities in the first place'.

*Understanding teaching means making a decision to teach. A student teacher believes that teaching is the right choice.*

*Process of reconstruction: being a teacher*

Organisation through planning was seen as a practical way to learn how to teach. This was accomplished through an organised way of life to prepare for teaching, through time management of university, school and home requirements, and by estimating what amount of work was needed in various programs of the teacher education course. Management strategies were perceived as important, whether behaviourally as for children or in any aspect of teaching. Role models were seen as an aid to teach, to be able to begin to judge the effectiveness of any such models,

from the past, present or future as a role of teaching, on any site. The role models as 'seen' in classrooms, whether the supervising teacher, the lecturer on campus, or peers in microteaching or in schools were observed by the student teachers, perhaps critically by some, in the practicum experience. This built on their understanding of today's teacher, as opposed to perhaps some of their former beliefs, and enabled the theoretical to flow to the practical, to observe their perceptions of any change in teaching. Communication skills were shown by some students as imperative, contributing to their relationship skills with children, staff, parents or significant others, contributing to a professional identity. Critical incidents were used as a challenge to grow as teachers, and to build ongoing commitment during the first year.

Fuller (1969) in her teacher development model has shown that student teachers may shift from concerns about self, from curriculum, and to the pupil. As student teachers do move from concerns about student learning, they may begin to use their recognition of problem situations to become more responsive to student learning.

*Understanding teaching means reconstructing the process of becoming a teacher. A student teacher believes that teacher education is a process, a series of actions involved in the accomplishment of an end—a stimulus that rouses the mind or spirits towards such activities.*

#### *Reflection on current satisfaction*

This challenge to reflection could be as simple as being personally satisfied with progress in the first year, or using any concerns encountered by the student teacher as a means of overcoming any shortcomings. Satisfaction was seen by many as the reason for teaching, enjoying the growing

relationship with children in the same classroom over several weeks, as a way to see individual progress of the children or the explanation of the supervising teachers as to why 'it is so.' Assessment satisfaction with academic success was encountered by most volunteers, although some repeated units so as to be able to continue. Career satisfaction was evident at the end of the year, as was the growth of professional prestige.

Interviewees were encouraged to bring their reflective journal to the final interview, as they are required to maintain them by the Faculty, assessed during practicum events. These were an obvious source of pride as they reconstructed what they had been doing over the year, and how they overcame any expectations or beliefs they thought needed to be changed. Liston and Zeichner (1991) saw reflection as a critical component of the practicum, which enhances teacher development through inquiry.

*Understanding teaching means reflecting on current situation. A student teacher reflects or thinks about whether teaching measures up to one's own desires and longings.*

*Reasons to stay; through growth of knowledge and qualities*

University support was seen as crucial by student teachers including the roles of all staff on or off campus. The decision for establishing a mentor system was explored, as those in the pilot study did not have such support, but readily became mentors for those involved in the data collecting. Knowledge of 'how to teach' and the theory outlining the 'why' were discussed in the interviews. Questions which dealt with growth in qualities and knowledge were reiterated over the year to allow comparisons to be made. Mental stimulation was shown as

necessary for maintaining commitment to teaching, and also for the ongoing reflection the teacher 'carries at all times in the mind'. Awareness of mental stimulation and motivation for children was declared as part of the teacher's role. The emergence of a philosophy of teaching was portrayed as part of the professional identity of student teachers. The initial decision to teach was reviewed over the year in the light of any change in commitment. The importance of the percentage of males in this teaching education program continued to be of concern through interviewing.

*Understanding teaching means growth of knowledge and qualities. The student teacher perceives worthwhile career experiences.*

#### *Future teaching*

During the year students were asked what employment did they expect, perhaps hypothetically after graduation, ranging from 'geographic areas through to expected salaries and conditions'. The areas of teaching they would choose whether from High school to preschool may have changed, and were noted as evidence of such change.

Lortie (1975) saw recruitment as consisting of attractors and facilitators attracting different types of people. The five attractors were long contact with children, providing societal service, enjoyment of former school life, hours, holidays etc, and opportunities for material benefits and economic security. Interviewees were asked over the three interviews whether they perceived any changes in such attractions, and why they believed their ideas, and those of others, had changed. In my study, commitment to the number of years that student teachers intended to stay after graduation was ascertained. A final question involved

student teacher satisfaction ranging from "I am extremely satisfied with my career choice" to "I am extremely dissatisfied with teaching".

*Understanding teaching means considering future career paths. A student teacher creates a pathway as a course of life.*

## Conclusions

The research questions in this study ask what are the understandings of student teachers at the start and end of the first year and how what happens in that first year have major importance to the future of the student teachers' career. Preliminary outcomes of this research show that student teachers in their first year of teacher education believe that understanding teaching means: contact with children, confirmation that teaching is the right choice, that the teacher process is ongoing, reflection on current course satisfaction, growth of knowledge and qualities as worthwhile career experiences, and the consideration of a future teaching career as a pathway through life.

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