



'We teach who we are': Male Primary School Teacher Candidates' Views of Being the Teacher

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on part of a larger study that sought to uncover and explore the interpretations about being a teacher, and teaching, that male primary pre-service teachers brought with them to their initial teacher education programme. The results indicated that it was the primary school teachers from their own schooling who informed how they saw themselves in the role of teacher. Specifically, it was the primary teachers from their own schooling, who had demonstrated the characteristics seen as ideal models of positive teaching practice, who influenced their 'self as teacher' role identity the most. Implications from this study point towards the vital role that reflections on one's own prior schooling experiences play in how teacher candidates see themselves in the role as the teacher.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher candidates have been shown to enter teacher education programmes with powerful and significant preconceptions about teaching that have developed out of their own personal histories (Carter, 1994; Finnie, 2004). Brownlee (2004) concluded it is these personal histories and prior experiences that have informed their educational thinking while Poulou (2007) reported teacher candidates use these self-perceptions of teaching to directly predict their own future teaching practice. Students enter teacher preparation programmes with more than their desire to teach. They bring with them their life-time of cumulative experiences. Rodriguez and Cano (2006) highlighted that through the interpretations of these prior experiences teacher candidates enter their education programmes with images as to the type of teacher they do want to become. Palmer (1998) summarised this most succinctly with his statement – *We teach who we are* (p.2) – which is why it was chosen as the opening to the title of this paper.

I was one such teacher candidate. The foundation course of my teacher education programme provided opportunities to discuss how we saw teaching and the role of both the teacher and student. It became apparent that every member of my cohort held their own unique image of themselves as the teacher. This paper reports on the male primary teacher candidates who were part of a larger research study (Sexton, 2007). This study grew out of my cohort's reflective discussions focusing on how we saw ourselves as the teacher.

LITERATURE ON WHY TEACHER CANDIDATES CHOOSE TEACHING

There is an established body of international research on males and obstacles to entering the teaching profession. Martino's (2008) study was an American historical perspective behind the anxieties of male primary teachers in a perceived feminised profession. He then linked these masculinity anxieties to hegemonic relationships in the school systems. Cushman (2005) surveyed male New Zealand secondary students and reported there were four common 'barriers' to them entering the teaching profession: status, salary, working in a feminised profession and physical contact with children. She then explored these 'barriers' with currently practising male primary teachers with regards to how they were experienced and dealt with in their teaching careers. Carrington and Skelton (2003) and Oyler, Jennings and Lozada (2001), from Britain and America respectively, focused their studies on the supposed stereotypical roles of primary teachers as a hindrance to males entering and remaining in the profession. Both studies concluded that the issues around males in primary teaching did not appear to be simply addressed by levelling the teacher gender balance.

More specific to this paper are research studies with a focus on why teacher candidates choose teaching as a profession. Richardson and Watt (2006) sought to uncover the reasons why some Australians choose primary teaching. They surveyed a large number of first-year student teachers and reported that self-efficacy, perceived intrinsic rewards to teaching as well as previous positive schooling experiences would help them to make a difference in their future students' lives. Priyadharshini and Robinson-Pant (2003) explored British career changers' reasons for entering into teacher education programmes and the realities faced once they began their respective programmes. These reasons for changing careers were broadly categorised as being 'pushed or pulled' into education. They reported pushes such as dissatisfaction with previous career or seeking greater stability in career, and pulls as fond memories of school and wanting to use specialised knowledge. Stroud, Smith, Ealy and Hurst's (2000) study asked Mid-Western American male primary teachers and student teachers why they chose teaching and reported similar findings to Richardson and Watt (2006) and Priyadharshini and Robson-Pant (2003). The three most common reasons for choosing teaching were to make a difference in students' lives, to be able to help children and be a role model to students. Most importantly for the present study is that these male teacher candidates reported that a prior teacher was the greatest influence on their decision on becoming a teacher and were able to describe at least one teacher who stood out in their memory as a role model of how to be a teacher.

Research studies have explored why teacher candidates choose teaching. There have also been studies into teacher candidates' self-reflections and beliefs about teaching. But where do male primary student teachers' perceptions of teaching and being the teacher come from? Specifically, how do entry-level male primary teacher candidates interpret their own prior classroom experiences as to the type of teacher they want to become?

METHOD

The larger study (Sexton, 2007) was designed to investigate the influences of prior schooling experiences on the teacher-role identity of three non-archetypical teacher populations: male primary, female secondary and mature aged adults. The study employed a mixed-model research design (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003) using both survey instrument and interview methods. All 2005 teacher education programme entrants at both an Australian and New Zealand university were invited to participate. Phase 1 used quantitative and qualitative analysis of the self-administrated questionnaire *What Was School Like?* (Sexton, 2007). Phase 2 utilised qualitative analysis of phenomenological accounts gathered in interviews to explore how these teacher candidates interpreted prior teacher experiences. Both phases of the study were conducted prior to the commencement of any coursework to prevent possible course content altering pre-existing beliefs (Brownlee, 2004; Redden, Simon & Aulls, 2007).

Phase 1

The questionnaire asked the teacher candidates first to provide demographic data. They were asked to recall both their primary and secondary school years and choose from a list of metaphors, or write in their own metaphor, that best described what these educational experiences actually were like. The participants were given the opportunity to use the same list of metaphors to describe what they wanted their school experiences to have been like. The teacher candidates were asked to describe themselves using a four-point Likert scale inventory of self-esteem adapted from the short form of the Coopersmith (1967) Self-Esteem Inventory. Teacher candidates then chose from a list of metaphors or wrote in their own for how they saw teaching. Finally they were asked to choose eight characteristics from a list of 62 characteristics as to how they perceived their ideal student and teacher.

Phase 2

The interviews began using the teacher candidates' own questionnaire as a means to explore the meanings behind their reported responses. This established a prior schooling context. Further exploration of teacher experiences informing how they saw teaching and being the teacher was developed throughout the remaining interview.

All interviews were conducted on the respective universities' campuses. Interviewees were guided by the researcher as needed to provide explicit examples of their prior teachers and why those teachers were remembered. Transcripts were returned to interviewees for data authentication prior to data analysis and any changes made by interviewees were incorporated.

RESULTS

Of the 354 respondents (40.2 percent) who voluntarily agreed to complete the survey instrument, 208 (58.8 percent) were from New Zealand and 146 (41.2 percent) from Australia. 28 were male primary teacher candidates. Of twelve of whom agreed to be interviewed, two were from Australia and ten were from New Zealand. The audio-taped interviews ranged from Matthew's (all names are pseudonyms) 23 minutes to Alex's 43 minutes with an average of 36 minutes. The number of interviews was limited as the researcher conducted all interviews in both countries prior to respective programme commencements requiring travel back and forth between countries.

Through the analysis of the narratives generated in these twelve interviews all of these teacher candidates were seen to hold an image of themselves as the teacher. Half were seen to hold clear and distinct images they were able to articulate upon whereas the other half were less certain and more ambiguous. In reporting on their prior schooling experiences, all of the male primary teacher candidates recalled having positive primary school experiences. Eleven reported having positive role models in prior teachers. More importantly to this study, seven had only primary teachers as role models of good teaching practice. There was a range in the number of prior teachers remembered, as Thomas was able to explicitly recall seven while Liam and Benjamin remembered only one each. Those teachers were also directly related to at least two of their choices for what they believed to be ideal teacher characteristics or in the cases of Thomas, Lachlan and William all eight of their ideal characteristics. It is this theme of effects of prior schooling that will be discussed with close reference to the teacher candidates' own reflections.

PERSONAL HISTORIES' IMPACT ON TEACHER CANDIDATES

As stated, all twelve interviewed teacher candidates reported having positive primary schooling experiences. In fact half of the teacher candidates reported prior schooling experiences as only positive: William, Alex, Lachlan, Ethan, Joshua and James. These teacher candidates felt school was what it should have been as it was supportive, caring and a family of friends. These positive experiences resulted from their teachers making their class feel safe and secure as if school was a natural extension of home.

William is an example of this group as he recalled four prior teachers whom he felt demonstrated positive teacher characteristics. He not only described all eight of his ideal teacher characteristics in detail but also related all of them directly to his recalled teachers. He detailed how one of his previous teachers was a positive example of how he saw teaching demonstrating six of his ideal characteristics:

My Form 2 teacher was like that. [How?] She was incredibly, she was incredibly committed to us – she worked really hard for us, she gave us a lot of homework, but in a way that was really about more than getting us from point a to point b. I mean I learned so much in her class it was phenomenal.

She always demanded that we get work in on time and she returned it back as well on time, so in that sense, also if there was ever any problem or issue she was also incredibly present and she offered ideas. She gave a lot of feedback – I see that feedback as really important – she also, developed a, she used a lot of different structures with us to get us interested in things, like we had time on the computers to do things and she managed to break up the day well, and yeah in that sense there was this real industriousness.

She, she also, cultivated I think a relationship with us where she, in addition to be a teacher you could approach her as being a friend as well, there was a kind of, she had a genuine interest in us as a person.

William and the other five teacher candidates like him recalled detailed accounts of how their prior teachers demonstrated those traits they saw as important in being the teacher. More significantly for the present study, William, Alex, Joshua and Lachlan incorporated these well-remembered events of teachers into how they saw themselves as the teacher. Alex had vivid and distinct images of prior teachers who he felt provided good examples or role models of what a teacher should be. Alex believed those teachers were able to set the example on how to guide students through the curriculum, not just reciting the information needed to pass the next exam. He described how one of his teachers (year 7) did this:

He knew his stuff and made us think for ourselves. I remember one project where he set up the experiment and we were to discover the inside of a box without opening it, and at the end of the experiment he took the boxes away and never told us whether we were right or wrong, as scientist don't have the advantage of being god and knowing the answer all the time – but did we believe our answers were right and could we defend our answers. It was brilliant, we really had to think about what we did and what our actions resulted in and how it works in science.

Joshua was just as explicit in how he saw teaching and how he was going to achieve his ideal teacher goals. He described his sense of teaching simply as: *that it is positive, student-focused, caring and sensitive*. Joshua also stated the teacher directs the learning that the students see as being important and worthwhile not just to pass an exam but for life beyond this lesson, the year and schooling. Joshua already saw in himself a great deal of what he felt a teacher needed: *I certainly aspire to those ideals and to a large part would hope to certainly say yes* (His ideal teacher characteristics and those he felt he largely possessed were: determined, considerate, visionary, self-confident, receptive to others' ideas, versatile, adventurous and courteous).

Lachlan was able to relate how all eight of his ideal teacher characteristics were evidenced in prior teachers. He described one of his secondary teachers in the following words:

He was great because he was thorough and I mean he knew his stuff, and the way that he knew what he talked about is, is that whilst he was ___ of the school he was doing papers and stuff as well at university and he got degrees and all that and ... he walked the talk.

For Lachlan this teacher not only knew what to say but meant what he said and led by example. He was thorough in his subject matter knowledge and evidenced a desire to excel in his own academic life as an example to his students. Lachlan then related how this teacher made the effort to form a connection with each student as he would make the effort to know students' names: *when he was there at school he knew your name ... so he was one of the ones who really stood out in my mind in terms of the ideal teacher.*

James and Ethan knew what they saw as good teaching and were able to describe their ideal teacher characteristics but did not see themselves in this manner. These two teacher candidates entered teacher education straight out of secondary school while Lachlan and Joshua spent several years in teaching and learning related professions prior to this formal study – professional sports and English as a Second Language, respectively. William and Alex were entering straight out of secondary schooling but were openly gay men who had already experienced self-identity issues. This 'coming out', combined with a decision to enter into a profession that has had media attention on issues of male contact with small children, may account for their strong sense of self as teacher (see, for example, AVERT, 2009; Education International, 2004; Press Association, 2006). James and Ethan may have yet to encounter such life experiences.

Teacher candidates affected by perceived positive and negative prior histories

Five of the student teachers informed their teacher role identity based on both positive and negative prior teacher examples: Matthew, Rily, Thomas, Liam and Benjamin. All five reported having positive schooling experiences in primary school. Benjamin was the only one who felt his primary school was also partly negative as he did not always like being observed by teachers, as if he was, *a fish in a fishbowl*. All five reported negative teacher experiences in their secondary schooling.

Three of these candidates were unable to clearly articulate how they saw themselves as the teacher: Matthew, Benjamin and Liam. Matthew, for example, recalled three prior teachers of whom two were seen as positive examples of teaching:

My chemistry teacher [years 11 and 12] and just very, very exciting and energetic and caught my attention I guess, and I had another teacher that I would have to say she was persistent.

He felt those two teachers had changed him personally for the better but was not able to express why or how in any qualifying detail. He also based his ideal teacher characteristics on a negative teaching example: *I had one teacher [secondary] that was really aggressive and impatient and, results*

driven and, not a children person. Matthew knew this was not the kind of teacher he wanted to be but at his entry into teacher education could not find the words needed to express himself.

As stated, Thomas recalled the most prior teachers of all interviewees. He explicitly remembered personal histories with seven teachers; six he felt were positive examples of teaching and five of whom were from his primary schooling. His seventh teacher was a secondary teacher who confused him with another student during a parent-teacher interview: *It was apparent that he didn't really know the students that were in his classroom.* Rily's negative teacher experiences arose after he left a community-based religious primary school that was an extension of both church and home for a secular secondary school. He settled into a group of friends after a year or so and felt the remainder of secondary school went well. Both Thomas and Rily entered teacher education after time spent in teaching and learning related fields – Thomas as a swim instructor and Rily as a youth minister. So while Thomas and Rily's personal histories were both positive and negative, the positive aspects from their primary schooling far outweighed their negative experiences in secondary as to how it informed their teacher role identity. This combination may help to explain their stronger sense of self as teacher that Matthew, Benjamin and Liam did not have.

Jack's negative personal history informing his teacher role identity

Jack was the only teacher candidate who informed his teacher role identity based solely on what he saw as negative teaching examples. He did report having a positive primary school experience with one teacher: *I can always remember her as always smiling, and always had a nice little tone.* Jack saw teaching as more a means to correct all the wrongs he had experienced as a student as he planned on teaching in the same low socio-economic environment in which he grew up. His image of teaching evolved more from the point of view of how bad it was for him as a student and determined not to do that as the teacher. Jack explained this:

As I start my own career as a teacher, those are the ideal benchmarks I would like to set for myself, and it is those things that I bring across not only as a teacher, or as an adult male, but also as a father. As you know I have my own children and I have just sort of plucked certain attributes from those sort of figures, to say, hey about being a father that is what I like most, I'll bring that in. Being a coach of a rugby team required that sort of thing; I, I like part of coaching so I will bring that in and, and all these different attributes to make my own sort of ideal benchmark that I, I would like to try and aim and strive for as a teacher.

Jack saw teaching as a means to reach students to make a positive impact on their lives. However, he did so from the point of view that if he informed his teacher role identity as the exact opposite to what he experienced then he could make a difference. Jack explained how he would not be like in class and why he would not be that way; however, he did not see himself as the teacher he wanted to be; only the type of teacher he did not want to be.

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought the opportunity to explore how male primary teacher candidates' previous life experiences and backgrounds help shape their view of teaching. As shown, all twelve of the participating male primary candidates used prior experiences with teachers to inform how they saw themselves in the role as the teacher. It would appear that the ability to recall prior teachers does not indicate the degree of teacher role identity formation in male primary teachers. While Thomas was able to recall seven teachers, Lachlan only recalled two but was able to express a similar sense of self as teacher. It does appear that the strength of epistemological belief to which these male primary candidates could articulate what their ideal teacher characteristics meant to them did indicate the degree of teacher role identity. All six of the candidates able to explain their ideal characteristics were seen to hold a clear sense of self as teacher. This sense of self as teacher was not as defined in those candidates who found explaining their reasons or meaning more difficult.

Eleven related how they had role models of teachers they wanted to emulate in their own teaching practice. Most significantly, seven of these student teachers only had primary teachers as role models of the good teacher. Half of these participants only recalled positive examples of prior teachers. Five of the remaining six had mixed experiences of both positive and negative prior teachers and all but Jack used those teachers they saw as good examples to inform their teacher role identity. As this study has shown, these male primary teacher candidates were not just simply formed or socialised by their lifetime of experiences; they were active participants in interpreting these experiences.

Cushman's (2005) study into primary education in New Zealand identified four common barriers to males entering primary teacher: issues regarding professional status, physical contact with children, salary concerns and working in a perceived feminised profession. These barriers were reported in other studies. Martino's (2008) and Carrington and Skelton's (2003) studies found that similar issues around masculinity and social perceptions were also evident in America and Great Britain, respectively. These male primary teacher candidates may appear to refute the barriers uncovered by Cushman (2005). Cushman's study surveyed secondary student populations regarding concerns they had about primary teaching. The present study's teacher candidates had already made their decision to enrol into primary education. This may indicate that for these participants the barriers identified in Cushman's study were not significant enough to deter them. These teacher candidates believed that as primary school teachers they have the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of their students. The combination of these factors might help explain why masculinity issues were not mentioned by any of these teacher candidates as a benefit or hindrance.

IMPLICATIONS

This study was only exploratory with a limited number of participants and can not be taken as indicative of all male primary teacher candidates. Nevertheless, it would be valuable to investigate whether the patterns emerging from this study are similar in other teacher education programmes.

The conclusions drawn from this indicate that these male primary teacher candidates did remember their time spent in the classroom as students. It was those memories of actions by teachers that have influenced the type of teacher they want to become. Further, these previous experiences have had important consequences for their beliefs about their role as the teacher. For these student teachers, it was the influence of positive role models predominately from their own primary schooling that have directly led them to entering into primary teacher education. This was done with the express intent to return the positive learning experience that they received to their own future students.

This leads to the need for not only in-service teachers but also teacher candidates to be made aware of their own formative learning experiences. As this study has shown, classroom decisions and instructions do have an effect on students. Teachers, and therefore teacher candidates, need to be conscious of the impact of their own prior experiences and how it influences their classroom behaviour. This classroom behaviour can be a positive and motivating force when students feel valued, cared for and supported as seen by the primary candidates participating in this study and their wanting to return these experiences to their future primary classrooms.

All of the male primary participants in this study stated that the personal issues raised in these interviews were things that they had not really given much previous thought to. All reported that participating in both the survey and interview portions of the study had given them the opportunity to reflect and think about what teaching and being the teacher means to them. Reflection takes time and guidance as participants move from simply remembering events to critically reflecting on what these events mean to them and how they see the influence of these events.

As Palmer (1998) stated, *We teach who we are* (p.2) and it is those teachers from our own educational past who help make us who we are. Thomas summarised this best:

I would encourage my students to take risks ... I am the kind of person that is always trying to push things forward, and I am always asking questions myself so I would want my students to do the same ... I want them to be critical and engaged thinkers, and if they are critical and engaged thinkers then they will take the other students forward.

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