STORIES OF TRANSITION : FROM STUDENTS TO TEACHERS

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Introduction

Following three or four years of university study in pursuit of a degree with a focus on specific academic disciplines, students are selected for entry into the Postgraduate Diploma in Education course at The University of Queensland. Successful applicants are offered a course featuring curriculum studies, foundational studies and practice teaching. At the end of the one year course successful students are provisionally certified as teachers by the Board of Teacher Registration. The certification allows them to apply for teaching positions in public and independent schools. During this one year, the central objective of the teacher education program is to help the students to change into teachers. Exploring aspects of this change is the orientation of the research reported in this paper.

Institutional Impositions and Student Pre-dispositions

A persisting notion is that the primary requirement of the teacher is to have enough knowledge to pass on to the students (Burke, 1987:3). From this basis it is felt to follow that if teachers have sufficient knowledge, they will be successful in providing learning for others. Coupled with this assumption is another persisting notion which postulates experience as the best teacher (Kindsvatter, Wilen and Ishler, 1988:329). The problem with this view is that teaching experience by itself offers no assurance of improvement of one's teaching. Having an adequate amount of knowledge and gaining teaching experience are unarguably important, but because teaching is such a highly personalized professional activity, greater account must be taken of how the aspects of teachers' work are individualized.

Katz and Raths (1990:241) describe a teacher education program as 'a set of phenomena deliberately intended to help candidates acquire the knowledge, skills, dispositions and norms of the occupation of teaching'. This could serve as a framework for a collaborative endeavour, but it tends to overlook much of what the student teachers have acquired before entering the teacher education program. Clandinin and Connelly (1991:2) acknowledge the obvious, that is, that teacher education students have already lived twenty or more years, and they contend from this observation that 'the curriculum of teacher education too often appears to ignore the lives of the prospective teachers'. The curriculum, in these cases, usually contains prescriptions and models of teaching to which the novice is expected to conform, without the involvement of the novice in the design

process.

Rigid pre-service teacher education courses, with inflexible models of teaching drawing on the preferences of the people teaching the courses are attacked by Diamond (1991:11). Rather than focusing on imitating behaviours and 'objectively' gathered or received information about teaching and learning, he believes there should be greater emphases on meanings and the beginning teachers' subjective experiences. This would entail a greater consideration of the students' histories than is ordinary in pre-service courses. Diamond (1991:45) would have such courses begin 'with the exploration and articulation of the personal understandings that constitute a beginning teacher's perspective'. This would be done by telling stories about and to themselves through the process of developing as teachers. Through these 'self-narratives' alternative possible realities may be discovered. 'If we are to direct and control our own thinking and teaching lives, both of which are fictive processes, we must begin by being more conscious of them' (Diamond, 1991:90). To bring this about requires space in the pre-service curriculum, and importance should be assigned to this space.

One method of raising awareness among beginning teachers as to how their priorities, values and attitudes intersect with the teacher education course is through 'self-confrontation' (Tisher and Klinzing, 1992:43; Kindsvatter, Wilen and Ishler, 1988:329). This means that the novice teacher should examine his or her self as a teacher using a variety of data sources. These may include micro-teaching episodes, supervising teacher reports, comments from colleagues, and, of importance to the study reported here, shifts in their teaching priorities recorded by them in response to a questionnaire stimulus. What they write can help them to explore themselves as teachers. 'These text worlds can be easily and readily shared' (Diamond, 1991:13).

Institutional Accommodation of Transitions

Teaching about how to teach while novice teachers are on the university campuses, and actually 'doing' teaching in the schools, are two facets of the same objective. Wideen and Holborn (1990:20) observe that where the teaching practicum and campus input are offered separately, especially in one-year programs, student teachers are critical of most aspects of the teacher education provisions. A more positive view towards campus work and teaching experience in the schools emerges where efforts have been made for one to inform the other.

A high value is usually placed on the practicum by beginning teachers and this has prompted the occasional response by teacher educators of placing the pre-service course within a school environment. One such occasion is reported by Maclennan and Seadon (1988) of a school-sited PGCE methods course. Fifteen students in a one-year course were placed in a school for a whole year. The concluding report by the authors of the evaluation caused the experiment to be abandoned. The reasons they advanced for not reproducing the project were that the students were placed in an ambiguous position as neither students nor 'real' teachers, the demands on the supervising teachers were so great they would not repeat the

experiment, the logistics were too difficult for teachers in the school and university staff, and the student teachers missed the initial security and support of a university-based course. A different situation, with different student teachers, supervising teachers and university staff may produce a different outcome, but the same general problems would be likely to reoccur.

While an exclusively school-based teacher education course has its problems, so too would a course that was exclusively university-based. Teaching realities gained from experience in the school are universally proclaimed as essential elements in teacher training. They provide opportunities for the beginners to test and modify their views about teaching in a setting much more realistic than can be contrived in a university environment. McNergney and Satterstrom (1984) believe there exists a close relationship between ego development and teaching performance, and a class of school pupils is much less protective of a beginning teacher's ego than university teacher educators would be.

Several mixes of the practicum and on-campus tuition are possible. Among the possibilities is the common technique of having students share and discuss with colleagues and university staff the experiences they had during practice teaching. Kindsvatter, Wilen and Ishler (1988:205) see these discussions as purposeful because they cause students 'to engage in high-level critical and creative thinking as they solve problems, clarify values, explore controversial issues and form and defend positions'. Talking about teaching addresses the very reasons why students are studying to be teachers. When working in contexts such as this which promote the importance of reflection and judgement-making, Grundy (1987:97) observes that the actions of students 'seem to have a quality of prudence or wisdom which is different from the qualities of effectiveness and efficiency associated with the technical interest'. Clearly, when the agenda contains items of personal interest, as opposed to the institution's more technical interest, student teachers become more absorbed by the issues.

A currently fashionable approach to involving student teachers in their own development is by action research. However, as Zimpher and Howey (1990:179) contend, 'for action research to fulfil its potential it must go beyond describing and interpreting classroom practices, and generate means for analyzing and improving practice'. There must be connections between confirming and revising thoughts about teaching and subsequent practices. This entails a consideration of priorities within the teaching styles and repertoire of each student teacher. What emerges will not simply mirror the skills they are acquiring in their training, but rather what emerges 'is themselves, the people they are, the viewpoints they have adopted' (Diamond, 1991:123).

Devising a self-narrative is a way of extending discussions about practice teaching, and structuring such a self-narrative by using stimulus questions allows the text to be more tightly focused. However, there are problems with writing about one's personal experiences. Leslie Hurst (1991) writes of her impressions of negotiated teaching in a junior high school. She had no difficulty making her analytical points in the essay form, but she admits that richness and roundness suffer because of the need to stick to the point. She concludes with the observation that 'The essay

form allowed me to write a solo whereas I would have liked to develop harmonies along with the theme' (Hurst, 1991:202). The research reported here tells of efforts by the researchers to make a choir from the solos provided by student teachers.

Description of the Project

Eighteen students in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education course at The University of Queensland volunteered to take part in a project to discover how their teaching priorities were modified or confirmed as a result of two practice teaching periods of five and six weeks respectively. Stimulus questions were provided by the two researchers and students wrote their responses independently and out of class time. Students claimed it took them approximately three hours to respond to each set of questions. These questions were patterned on the findings from a large international study which was also interested in the concerns of beginning teachers.

A project conducted by Veenman (1984) examined 83 empirical studies appearing between 1960 and 1984 Veenman (1984) investigated the perceived problems of beginning teachers. The research drew upon studies conducted in Western Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia, and rankings of perceived problems of beginning teachers were established. The concerns of novice teachers are shown below in rank order.

1.   Classroom discipline
2.   Motivating pupils
3.   Dealing with individual differences
4.   Assessing pupils' work
5.   Relationships with parents
6.   Organization of classwork
7.   Insufficient and/or inadequate teaching materials and
supplies
8.   Dealing with problems of individual pupils.

These eight perceived problem areas were compacted into five areas for the research reported here. The fifth problem area provided by Veenman would rarely apply to teachers in training ('relationships with parents'), the third and eighth problem areas were combined under the theme of individual differences, and the decision was made by the researchers to treat the 'organization of classwork' (number six) and 'motivating pupils' (number two) as cognate for this research. The major topics for the research into shifting priorities then became:

1.   Classroom management
2.   Teaching and learning
3.   Individual differences
4.   Resources
5.   Evaluation.

Using each topic as the focus, three questions were then posed to the students:

'How important is this for successful teaching?'
'What is your present level of confidence with respect to this topic?'
'What is your expected level of confidence at the conclusion of practice teaching?'

The students were asked to elaborate on the factors they felt to be most significant in influencing their answers to these questions.
The questions were first posed immediately prior to the first period of practice teaching (March) and were re-posed in October at the conclusion of the final practice teaching period. In October the question on expected level of confidence was replaced by one asking where the major increases in confidence had occurred.
Following the first practice teaching period, the researchers presented the outcomes of the March questionnaire to the class of respondents. This followed from a promise made to the students that they would be able to discuss the data in their untreated forms before the researchers attempted to consolidate the data into 'storied' versions. The presentation gave the opportunity for the participants to view and discuss their group and individual priorities and confidences.

From Data to Stories
Using first person accounts of experience has a long intellectual history (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990:2), and it is certainly not uncommon for these accounts to be treated as data in a wide field of disciplines from society to medicine. Alexander, Muir and Chant (1992) used stories written by beginning teachers to construct larger, more encompassing stories about how learning to teach occurs. They found commonly recurring themes in the stories from the student teachers which were then collected into metathemes. These metathemes became stories about learning how to teach.
The self-narratives from the eighteen respondents in this study were treated initially as data, in the sense that they were approached 'objectively'. That is, the data were transcribed into a collection by a typist, and they were organized by each student's name. They were further organized according to the topic and the question to which they responded. In total, there were fifteen categories; five by topics which were multiplied by the three questions relating to 'importance', 'current confidence' and 'expected confidence'. Of the eighteen student respondents, three did not complete the second questionnaire.
The concern of the researchers was to compare the students' accounts of their priorities from their first school experience with that of their second school experience. At the point of comparison, the data became stories of transitions. The stories reflected changes and confirmations of priorities held by students related to the five topics. The end result is what Alexander (1992:77-78) calls a 'neonarrative'; a story more representative than the one it replaces. The neonarratives deserve their place of importance because these are the more recent stories of experience and the ones which accompany the students into professional

practice as teachers.

Method
        Two important issues related to qualitative research methods need
to be addressed before describing the procedure used in this study. These
are the issue of researcher subjectivity and the issue of reductionism.
        Subjectivity in studies such as this cannot be avoided. The
researchers in this study have a combined total of over fifty years of
association with teaching. Both have been school teachers; both are
university teachers and researchers. The frame of reference for this study
is teacher education, and this means that part of the agenda of the
researchers is translated into the construction of the neonarratives
(Alexander, Muir and Chant, 1992:67). Gouldner (1979:28) accounts for part
of this professional subjectivity by his concept of a 'Culture of Critical
Discourse whereby professional cultures generate specific vocabulary and
ways of talking among themselves'. What the neonarrative adds to this is a
way by which meaning, albeit subjective, may be derived from stories.
        Uhrmacher (1991:111) has the view that '...any theory or research
method is by nature reductionist and therefore deals only with a 'fragment
of reality'. The fragments of reality explored here are those related to
the five topics of management, teaching and learning, individual
differences, resources, and evaluation, and how the students changed or
confirmed their views within these topics during their teacher education
course. The major reductions take place as the researchers try to make
sense of these reflections by way of consolidated and condensed versions of
the disparate fragments of reality provided by the stories. Strauss and
Corbin (1990:120) note the necessity of getting one's thoughts down on
paper when describing 'the story' (their emphasis), 'yet once you are
committed to a story then it is necessary to move beyond description to
conceptualization, that is, to the story line (their emphasis)'. The story
line is what the researchers sought to reveal; this is the narrative.
        Acknowledging subjectivity and the reductionist nature of the
method used are important antecedents to any qualitative work. More
important is the close connection of the two issues in the research act
itself. Perception, selection and construction are heavily influenced by
who the researcher is, and this influence continues through to the
condensation and consolidation of data to more manageable, more
comprehensible accounts. The story line, or as we call it here, the
neonarrative, represents the ultimate reduction of each of the five topics.
        Following the order of the topics already presented, we will
present discussions of each drawing upon students' comments. These will be
followed by a number of illustrative examples from the sixty-two pages of
single-spaced typed script. Following the examples will be the
neonarratives constructed by the researchers.

Classroom Management
        Not surprisingly, this was perceived to be extremely important by
the students. The importance of management remained high for both practice
teaching sessions, though following the second practice period quite a few
students linked classroom management with careful lesson planning and

keeping the class on task.

Examples from the script:
Before:
'I feel class management and having teacher learning activities that will benefit is most important in the classroom'.

'Classroom management is the most important tool a teacher can have'.

After:

'If the class is poorly organised, students will not concentrate on the task at hand and will be more likely to misbehave'.

'From prac., I found that even though classroom management was important, if you had strong, interesting activities, classroom management became minimal'.

'After last prac-session ... I saw that if a classroom is not managed very well by the teacher then the quality of teaching declines quite markedly'.

'Having the class' attention is very important. I found this to be the thing to aim for in every lesson.'

'I was never given warning or directions in Dip.Ed. about aggressive, foul-tempered students'.

Classroom management remains a major concern, but with more experience it becomes part of an ensemble of concerns associated with successful teaching. Confidence grows through classroom involvement by the teachers and its perceived significance varies markedly among students.

Teaching/Learning
Many students saw this topic as one which was connected with others, particularly classroom management. The word 'attention' was used a great deal, and this suggests that didactic instruction was perceived as the main method of teaching. Learning does not get the same emphasis in the script as teaching. The focus is more on the teacher than the learner.

Examples from the script:
Before:
'At this point, I want to concentrate on being as well-organised as possible for a particular lesson'.

'Whole class attention is of vital importance as little else can be achieved without it'.

'To me, motivation is the keyword to teaching and learning'.

After:

'Creating an interesting and motivating classroom is probably the most vital thing in giving a successful learning environment, but you can't do that if you don't know your content and objectives'.

'Long term goals of motivating to learn are more important than short term aims of covering content'.

'The logistics of lesson preparation would be my strong point now; my present level of confidence allows me only to guess what the class reaction will be'.

Teaching and learning are closely associated with planning the lesson. Keeping motivation high in the classroom is a major objective with the teacher being the main figure in the teaching and learning enterprise.

Individual Differences

The students conceived the meaning of this topic in various ways. Physically and intellectually handicapped as well as slow and fast learners were considered. Planning figured prominently in their responses as the most important way to cater for differences in a classroom. The classroom teacher is uniformly depicted as the one with a responsibility to accommodate pupil differences.

Examples from the script:
Before:

'However, teaching to different ability levels should never hinder the extension of gifted and talented students'.

'It is just as important to provide for slower learners as for faster learners who need to be extended'.

'I have no confidence in my ability to teach the intellectually disabled because I have no experience at all with these people'.

After:

'A teacher will get to know his/her class and will be able to plan for the differences'.

'...it is difficult to plan (student's emphasis) a lesson to take into account individual differences'.

'From my observations, each class has a wide range of ability in it and it is part of the teacher's job to cater for all abilities'.

Catering for mild differences in learning abilities poses no perceived problem. The problem increases with the range of pupils' abilities. Those pupils with serious disabilities would require a specialist teacher.

Abilities of slower and faster learners must be reflected in the teacher's planning.

Resources

Because the students had different academic backgrounds, and they were teaching in different subject areas, resources were thought of in various ways. Musical instruments, computers, VTRs and OHTs were among the resources mentioned. No serious concerns are apparent, primarily because the students tend to think of resources as complements to a lesson.

Examples from the script:
Before:

'The piano is the most effective means of musically communicating ideas and a virtually indispensable resource'.

'It is important for variety that you use a range of different resources'.

'In history, I regard excursions as an enjoyable and important way to facilitate learning'.

After:

'From a student's point of view, it is important to have a good textbook for most subjects'.

'The most important resources to me are the blackboard and the library and developing criteria for the use of these resources are vital in teaching practices'.

'Use of computers will become more important, but I think they should be used only as an aid and not as the teacher'.

'To motivate students it is clear that a range of resources need to be used and used constructively with explicit planning'.

'The Dip.Ed. (especially teaching prac.) has resulted in me being able to effectively use a B.B. - to write down focus questions, vocabulary, concepts, etc. I don't really like O.H.T.s - although the Dip.Ed course has taught me how and when they may be used'.

The type and amount of resources used correspond closely with the subject being taught. The resources used are important for variety and interest. The more technical a resource is, the less likely it will be used by most teachers. Computers are important, but their uses are limited in some subjects.

Evaluation

Because of the instrumental value put on evaluation and assessment

by teachers, most student teachers would not have been given a great deal of responsibility for either course or materials evaluations or pupil assessments. As a consequence, many of the responses suggested this topic was one they would deal with more fully subsequent to their teacher training course. Evaluation is not given the same, general, high level of importance assigned by the student respondents to the other topics.

Examples from the script:
Before:

'Evaluation is a problem because of [my] reluctance to judge others. Also, it worries me about how to be accurate with formal assessment'.

'I think you need to understand the system [ROSBA, etc] before you can design formal tests and other assessment items'.

'Although my ability to set tests and other assessment tasks will improve with experience, I feel I could cope with normal assessment procedures and provide formative feedback to students'.

After:

'Most important is to give students formative feedback as to their progress to help them know what is required in the future and how to improve'.

'I am sure that as I gain more experience, I will become more confident in designing tests and a variety of other assessment pieces...'

'At this stage, I am very unsure of the relative values of assessment procedures'.

Evaluation is most important at the point where it intersects with teaching and formative aspects are more beneficial to students. With their experience and greater depth of understanding of systemic procedures and requirements, evaluation is assumed as an experienced teacher's task.

Conclusions
This research rests on several premises as does all research. Three related to this study deserve special metnion.
First, we believe all intending teachers, as they enter their pre-service course, possess views about a wide range of matters connected with teaching. Some relatively common views are held as point-of-entry thinking, but many others are not commonly held at all. Individually held views are those which should be sought initially.
Second, we believe views held by student teachers about teaching - especially views within the five topics used in this research - should be given an opportunity for expression. This could be done orally, but to have the students write about themselves develops more commitment. It also causes them to reach deeper into their thoughts 'to make the tacit

explicit' (Freeman, 1991:439). Constructing thoughts in writing brings what had been tacit into the open and available for sustained scrutiny.

Third, the research we have illustrated here has utility for curriculum development in teacher education. The storied lives of the beginning teachers may be used as foundations for their further development of confidence and competence with very little required of the teacher educators. Each student provides her/his viewpoint on pertinent issues. These viewpoints are then compared and contrasted with others, and future directions of an individual and collective nature can be devised. Such a technique attributes value to the students' narratives, increases their personal involvement and provides tasks of a collaborative kind.   By challenging generalisations embedded in the neo-narratives, a dialectic tension can be generated with the students that provides both stimulus and focus to the ongoing debate concerning the purpose and practice of teaching.

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