Educating the Educator:
A Critical Study of the Attitudes and Experiences of Teacher Education Students

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(Preliminary Analysis--please do not quote without the author’s permission)
Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of teacher education students in a regional Appalachian university. It focuses explicitly on the multiple levels of understanding these students encounter as they move from the student role toward teacher status. The students, many of whom are among the first generation to attend college, are frequently critical of the Appalachian schools they attended and realize that in many cases their schooling has ill-prepared them for higher education. They are, however, simultaneously protective of the unique cultural values embedded in these schools and many intend to return to Eastern Kentucky when they begin their teaching careers. As they occupy this unique position between student and teacher roles, these students frequently recognize the inequalities they have experienced as students and therefore hope to “make a difference” in the lives of the students they are preparing to teach. Further, their higher education experiences make them aware of their position as a cultural minority whose values are often criticized by educators outside Appalachia. Given that education reform and teacher recruitment are critical issues for both Kentucky and the nation, the position these students occupy as cultural brokers and critics is an important one. As they struggle to reconcile their educational past with the future they hope to create for students, these teacher education students serve as analysts of inequality on multiple levels.
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This paper examines the experiences of teacher education students from an Appalachian regional university. The study is an on-going one and analysis at this point is quite preliminary. The present paper outlines the issues relevant to the study and serves as an introduction to further analysis. In this regard, the paper raises far more questions than it answers at this point in the research process. Given that teacher shortages and widespread criticism of public schooling are critical issues facing both Kentucky and the nation, however, this research is especially relevant and timely. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study explores the boundary between student and teacher roles and examines how this in-between position provides students an important location from which to analyze educational inequality. The study specifically investigates the ways teacher education students interpret their prior educational experiences and utilize these interpretations as they prepare to teach. As Giroux (1992) points out, students--including those in teacher education programs--“have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages, and cultures that give them a distinctive voice” (p. 17). Because the students participating in this study are both products of an educational system they frequently criticize and are also preparing to enter this system as teachers, they occupy a unique position as analysts of educational inequality.

The beginning point for the study arises from Giroux’ question: “What are the necessary conditions to educate teachers to be intellectuals so they can engage critically the relationship between culture and learning and change the conditions under which they work?” (Giroux, 1992, p. 15). This question implies several basic assumptions that are essential to my understanding of teachers and teacher preparation.

- Teacher education students enter the field of teaching from the student position. That is, they bring with them a history of complex experiences as products of schools and
these experiences necessarily affect their decisions to enter teacher education and their beliefs and expectations about the importance of teaching and the lives of teachers.

- In addition to their formal school experiences, teacher education students also bring to their education programs uniquely individual experiences and beliefs about education that arise from their family and community context. These personal experiences and attitudes also strongly influence their desire to become teachers and their assumptions and expectations about teaching. In the case of many Morehead State University (MSU) students, their Appalachian heritage is an important part of this social context.

- While these earlier experiences and attitudes remain important and continue to influence their perceptions of teaching, the time students spend in a teacher education program also heavily influences their understanding of teaching and their attitudes and motivations toward it. The teacher education program thus provides a critical opportunity to modify and further develop student attitudes and beliefs.

Although these assumptions characterize all students entering teacher education, little research exists that systematically examines student background experiences, attitudes and motivations toward teaching as a career. Thus, the study reported here hopes to increase our knowledge base about background characteristics of teacher education students and those social and contextual factors that influence the decision to enter teaching. Further, this study explicitly examines the role teacher education students play as analysts of classroom inequality and explores ways teacher education programs might fruitfully foster a critical perspective that sensitizes prospective teachers to the social contexts of schools and schooling. I use Giroux's (1992) concept of cultural work as a framework to interrogate the experiences of these teacher education students and their attempts to simultaneously enter into and change the teaching profession. By
conceptualizing teachers—and teacher education students—as cultural workers, this study focuses on their critical role as mediators of inequality.

This research is also based on a view of individuals as social actors who are constantly involved in meaning-making and in the transformation of self within cultural worlds. Willis' (2000) discussion of cultural production is especially illuminating:

Human beings are driven not only to struggle to survive by making and remaking their material conditions of existence, but also to survive by making sense of the world and their place in it. This is a cultural production, as making sense of themselves as actors in their own cultural worlds. Cultural practices of meaning-making are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self-construction: in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves. (Willis, 2000, p. xiv)

The primary “cultural world” under investigation here is the public school classroom. Teachers, students, parents, and administrators are all crucial social actors within this context. While the focus here in on the experiences of students who are becoming teachers, it is the interplay between their past and future selves that is especially relevant.

The (Continuing) Reform of Teacher Education

Teacher education in general and its need for reform in particular have drawn extensive attention from politicians, higher education administrators, and the public for the past several decades (American Federation of Teachers, 2000; Beyer, 1996; Knowles and Cole, 1998). Teacher preparation programs have been the direct focus of much of this debate. As Tyson (1994) points out, “It would be hard to find a highly educated adult in the United States today who lacks an opinion, nearly always a negative one, about the education of American teachers” (p. ix). Among the many “solutions” suggested to the “problem” of teacher education reform are calls for higher state standards for teacher certification, significant restructuring of colleges of education,
alternative routes to certification, and increased accountability measures. While their view is by no means universally accepted, the position of the K-16 Teacher Education Task Force is a fairly representative one that explicitly states "the best way to bring an adequate supply of well-trained teachers into the classroom is not by avoiding collegiate teacher education, but rather by strengthening it--by bringing higher quality, greater resources and much more coherence to the way teacher education screens and prepares teacher candidates" (American Federation of Teachers, 2000, p. 5).

The issues confronting teacher education reform, however, go far beyond simply improving the quality of teacher education programs. With much of the nation facing critical teacher shortages, the additional need to strengthen teacher education recruitment and retention efforts is also clear. Competitive salaries and improved working conditions within schools are plainly important issues that affect recruitment and retention. The American Council on Education points out, "if teaching careers were made more attractive and competitive, and if the attrition of teachers already in the schools were reduced, the quality of teachers could be strengthened and the increased demand of the next decade could be met" (1999, p. 2). While I agree that the transformation of teacher education programs is an important component of reform efforts, the present study suggests that it is also necessary to examine earlier contextual influences on teacher education candidates. Obtaining adequate knowledge about students' backgrounds and the factors that influence them to enter the teaching field is an important first step--and one that has been largely ignored--in identifying and implementing needed changes.

It is, of course, naive to propose a single or simple solution to an exceedingly complex problem! Tom (1997) emphasizes the multifaceted nature of teacher education reform and identifies the need to include not only the perspectives of teacher education faculty but those of administrators as well. As he points out, "we must resist attempts to reduce teacher education reform to one or two factors . . . we must recognize that the
'problem' of reform has political and institutional roots, not just intellectual and conceptual ones” (Tom, 1997, p. 2).

Other researchers emphasize the importance of including the voices of practicing teachers—both those in public school settings and those in higher education—in reform efforts (Cohn and Kottkamp, 1993; Cole and Knowles, 1998; and Tyson, 1994). Cole and Knowles specifically recommend self study at the teacher education program level as an appropriate tool for initiating reform. They maintain:

In effect, self study of teacher education practices is a form of action research, the hallmark of the teacher research movement . . . The action research and teacher research movement have very successfully fought for the legitimacy of teacher research. And, in the struggle, the political stance of the movement as an epistemological challenge to the status quo conception of both knowledge and research have been made explicit.
(Cole and Knowles, 1998, p. 49)

The present study argues that it is not only important to include the voices of teachers, but also those of students who are in the process of becoming teachers, an argument made too by Britzman (1991) in her ethnographic account of student teaching experiences. In demonstrating the importance of prior school experiences on the development of student teachers, she points out “We have all played a role opposite teachers for a large part of our school lives . . . by the time a person enters teacher education, she or he has spent approximately thirteen thousand hours observing teachers” (Britzman, 1991, p. 3). Students’ previous school experiences, then, comprise an important component of the “pre-education” of teacher education candidates. By focusing on students’ background characteristics and earlier school experiences that influence the decision to enter teacher education, the present study provides insight into several important factors relevant to teacher education and its reform.
Asking Students: In Support of a Qualitative Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology to exam student background factors and experiences that affect the decision to enter teacher education. As Willis (1977) points out, qualitative methods "have a sensitivity to meanings and values as well as an ability to represent and interpret symbolic articulations, practices and forms of cultural production" (p. 3). Because meaning-making is an integral focus of this study, qualitative methods are especially appropriate. The present study is an ongoing one with data collected through individual interviews that are audio-taped and transcribed with the resultant transcripts being coded and analyzed for significant themes. Appendix A provides a list of interview questions. All participants in the study have been admitted to the teacher education program at Morehead State University and were recruited for study participation through a senior level education course that is typically taken the semester immediately prior to student teaching. Participation in the study is of course fully voluntary, and the students clearly enjoy the opportunity to discuss their prior educational experiences as well as their expectations for the teaching role.

Because the study is exploratory in nature and seeks information about student values, beliefs, and past experiences, a qualitative design is especially valuable. Willis (2000) provides a useful discussion of the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research:

On the one hand, you can send out questionnaires to generate responses you can count, concerning essentially the regularities of what people do--at school, at work, so many people going to the cinema, to the pubs, to the clubs, so often a week, spending so much, etc. This yields quantitative findings. On the other hand, you can make direct contact with social
agents...[and] through observation, interview and informal interaction you inquire into the means and values they attach to particular activities that are the focus of study, and further inquire how they see them in relation to wider and central life concerns and issues. This produces qualitative findings. (Willis, 2000, pp. xii-xiii, emphasis in original)

While quantitative methods are useful for collecting very specific data from large numbers of individuals, they do not provide the richness of detail about individual experiences obtainable through interviews. It is students’ values and beliefs about education and how these relate to their decision to enter teaching that are the focus of this study.

The appropriateness of utilizing a qualitative design in educational research is also emphasized by Sleeter (1999) who indicates that “such studies illuminate the differences among teachers, the connections between what teachers do and how they think, and complex issues and dilemmas” (p. 10). The descriptive richness and detailed information provided by qualitative inquiry make it especially appropriate for exploratory research like that reported here. Student interviews provide the kind of information on background characteristics and factors affecting the decision to enter teaching that can inform future university decisions about recruitment and retention of teacher education students as well as important information about improving the quality of the teacher education program.

Understanding Inequality through the Appalachian Experience

Morehead State University, the easternmost institution in the state university system, identifies itself as Kentucky’s University of the Mountains and takes seriously its mission as an Appalachian regional institution. MSU draws a significant percentage of its students from the surrounding twenty-two county area located in the heart of Eastern
Kentucky. Many regional students choose MSU because it allows them to remain relatively close to home and family. While significant numbers of Eastern Kentucky students live in the dormitories, others commute relatively long distances while continuing to live at home. This decision is not only financially advantageous, it is also important from the standpoint of maintaining social network systems. Family, in Eastern Kentucky, frequently includes not only parents and siblings, but grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and other extended family members as well. Thus, many MSU students—including a number of those entering teacher education—bring to their university experience an Appalachian identity that frames their lives in important ways.

The experience of being Appalachian, however, is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented by those beyond—and sometimes within—the region. As Shelby points out, “being Appalachian means being presented throughout one’s life with images of Appalachia that bear little or no resemblance to one’s own experience” (Shelby, pp. 153-154). Numerous scholars (Banks, Billings and Tice, 1993; Fisher, 1993; Norman, 1999; Shelby, 1999; and many others) have critiqued the stereotypes frequently used to characterize Appalachia and Appalachians. “Being Appalachian” encompasses a wide range of complex and diverse cultural experiences inaccurately conveyed by the monolithic and simplistic characterization frequently sustained by both the popular media and academic press alike. Banks, Billings and Tice (1993) point out the need to “replace unitary notions of Appalachians and Appalachian identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity” (p. 292). Within the teacher education literature in particular, the experiences of Appalachian students and educators are largely and conspicuously absent.

Stereotypes notwithstanding, many of the problems facing Appalachian Kentucky are very real. Persistent poverty, high unemployment, and low educational attainment
continue to characterize much of the region (Eller et. al., 1994; Haleman, Zimmerman, Sargant, and Billings, 2000). Kentucky’s Appalachian counties contain the greatest concentration of undereducated adults in the state with the result that many MSU students are among the first generation in their family to attend college. In addition, many students enter the university poorly prepared for their academic studies. In an effort to better meet the needs of many regional students, the university has eliminated its minimum ACT score requirement and has increased the number of remedial courses offered. Lack of educational preparedness has a direct impact on teacher education students in particular who are required by the state to obtain a minimum ACT score of 21 in order to be admitted to teacher education preparation (TEP) programs. In fact, many MSU students who wish to enter the TEP program struggle to obtain this required minimum score. Their former school experiences, then, have an important bearing on the attitudes and expectations MSU students bring to the teacher education program. Many study participants recognize that their educational past both enriches and limits them in significant ways. By simultaneously looking backward to their own school experiences and forward to the opportunities they hope to provide for students in the future, these teacher education students often indicate the desire to “make a difference” by better preparing students for both continuing education and the workplace while also preserving many of the unique characteristics of their earlier school experiences they value. Norman (1999) points out another potential strength Eastern Kentucky students may bring to the classroom as a result of their earlier schooling:

The experience of being negatively stereotyped gives white Appalachian Americans, especially of the poorer classes, a way to comprehend the experience of African American, Native American, and other minority people. The shared experience of being socially despised is a powerful
thing, opening the possibility of mutual recognition. (Norman, p. 331)

For Appalachian students who often lack exposure to other cultural minorities, this potential source of identification can serve as an important basis for developing an understanding of inequality based on personal experiences. These students, however, need opportunities to discuss cultural differences and draw parallels between their own experiences and those of other minority students. These opportunities can be deliberately fostered within teacher education programs.

**Teachers as Cultural Workers**

The role teachers play as brokers of classroom inequality—what Giroux (1992) refers to as cultural work—is critical to my understanding of teacher preparation. According to Giroux, cultural work includes both pedagogical and political dimensions:

The pedagogical dimension of cultural work refers to the process of creating symbolic representations and the practices within which they are engaged. . . . The political dimension of cultural work informs this process through a project whose intent is to mobilize knowledge and desires that may lead to minimizing the degree of oppression in people’s lives.

(Giroux, 1992, p. 5)

Teachers as cultural workers, then, are actively engaged in the process of identifying relationships, language patterns, and power differences that privilege certain groups while disenfranchising others. The role of cultural worker is an important one that teacher education students are uniquely positioned to occupy. They are especially aware of the power differences that exist within schools and are simultaneously able to interpret them from both a student and teacher perspective. As McClay (1999) points out, “many education students return repeatedly to the bedeviling questions ‘Am I a student or am I
supposed to function as a teacher? Which hat do I wear?"’ It is precisely their in-between status that makes the position of teacher education students an especially trying but extremely important one.

The recognition that inequality exists in schools and that knowledge is a value-laden commodity created and controlled by individuals with varying degrees of power is an important first step in creating schools where students, teachers, and parents are all acknowledged as important players. This recognition alone, however, is not a sufficient basis for transforming schools. As Liston and Zeichner (1996) point out, “Classrooms and schools are not insulated environments. What goes on inside schools is greatly influenced by what occurs outside of schools” (p. x). The boundary between schools and the larger society is a permeable one. Ignoring the interactions between schools and society is likely to result in the perpetuation of inequality rather than its transformation. Britzman (1991) points out the many ways that schools challenge educators to reconsider change--and the potential for change--that exists within them.

Those researchers who critically study school life in classrooms, as well as those who live their lives there, understand the tensions--engendered by curriculum and its practice--between received knowledge and lived experience. These tensions are ideological; they include notions of power, status, and competence, and represent a cacophony of values, beliefs, ideas, investments, and discursive practices that shape knowledge and its interpretive possibilities. (Britzman, p. 43)

To fruitfully transform schools we must first transform teacher education programs by creating experiences that encourage and support the development of critical perspectives that emerge from their earlier student experiences.
Bibliography


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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Because this research is designed to elicit student attitudes and experiences, the questions are open-ended and may vary somewhat depending on student responses. The following questions will provide the basic framework for the interviews.

1. Can you tell me about your educational experiences in elementary and secondary school?

2. Let’s talk about the value placed on education in your family. Are you the first person in your family to attend college?

3. What factors influenced your decision to enter education as a field? What is your primary motivation for choosing education?

4. Tell me what aspects of your teacher education program have been most beneficial to you. What parts of your program would you change, if possible?

5. What do you anticipate in regard to your student teaching experiences? Do you have any particular concerns or anxieties?

6. What are your plans once you finish your degree? In what geographic area do you hope to gain employment?

7. What are your goals for your students when you enter the classroom? What do you see as the primary responsibility of teachers in the public school system?

8. Is there anything else about your educational experiences or goals that you would like to discuss?