



Two Teachers in Dialogue: Understanding the Commitment to Teach

Philip E. Bernhardt

Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado USA

In this study the author explores two educators' understandings about their commitment to the teaching profession. The following question sits at the heart of this investigation: How do two teachers understand the manifestation of commitment within their teaching practices. Hermeneutic inquiry, which quietly situates this work, provides a unique lens to explore the significance of personal and professional experiences, interpret how to make sense of these experiences, and reflect on the meaning of these revelations within the context of one's life narrative. Findings reveal that while both the participant and researcher both have a deep commitment to positively influence the lives of their students, there were major differences in their career pathways and how this commitment emerges in practice. Keywords: Teaching, Teacher Education, Teaching Beliefs, Hermeneutics

Setting the Stage

Each August I returned to school for the first staff meeting with the hope conversations would focus on more than just our recent standardized test scores. Maybe we would discuss new ways to conceptualize curriculum, the possibilities of performance-based assessments, or share ideas about how to develop more meaningful relationships with students. Each year, however, I would glumly sit through the standard PowerPoint presentation detailing the highs and lows of last year's test scores only to be reminded of how deeply frustrating it is to work in an environment where the central focus is on standardization. Needless to say, I was disheartened with the vast amount of intellectual, financial, and emotional resources allocated toward year-end, state mandated assessments.

Most disappointing, though, was many of my colleague's unapologetic apathy to the static education atmosphere they were helping to support and sustain. I just never understood how so many teachers could be so passive and complacent as rigid mandates, explicating what to teach, how to teach, and what knowledge was of most worth, were callously dropped in their laps. After a faculty meeting a few years ago, a colleague pulled me aside to find out why I was always so vocal about issues that made other teachers feel uncomfortable. "Why did I care so much?" he asked. "Why was I so emotionally invested?" This life moment situates the following study in two particular ways.

First, while my immediate response to my colleague's questions has long faded from memory, the underlying premise of his concern, 'why was I so committed to my work as a teacher?' still echoes in my mind and is positioned at the center of this inquiry. Second, this experience made me realize that I did not conceptualize teaching and learning in the same way as many of my colleagues. As a result, I began to pay closer attention to the different ways teachers in my school engaged with students, communicated their beliefs and values about learning, and interacted with other staff members. I soon began to recognize my teaching beliefs and practices differed from other adults in the school; not everyone was as

concerned as I was about searching for, acknowledging, learning about, and becoming comfortable with difference.

Research Purpose

This IRB approved research project emerged from my experiences as a high school social studies teacher, co-coordinator of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, and teacher-educator. As expressed in the opening anecdote, I have a deep interest in how teachers make sense of their professional experience and what they consider to be the most important aspects of teaching.

The following question guided the development of the early stages of this research study: *How does one teacher experience the phenomenon of teaching?* This initial question was focused on uncovering and describing the core essence of teaching. However, while wrapped up in the research process, the certainty I was seeking did not emerge. As I listened and re-listened to interview transcripts, I could hear my own voice, feel an emotional attachment to the participant's words and expressions, and envision myself standing in my old classroom. Completely detaching myself from the life world of my research participant would not provide a context for the type of investigation I wanted to pursue.

Hermeneutic inquiry, which methodologically situated this study, provides a framework to "interpret and contextualize the meaning of human experience" (Nakkula, 1998, p. 7). While initially concerned with identifying the core essence of teaching, this work ultimately morphed into an investigation focused on the construction of meaning and the uncovering of lived experience. The following question became the central focus of this inquiry: *How do two teachers understand commitment within their teaching practices?*

Co-Participant

I first met Zeke while still a classroom teacher. We were both deeply involved with the AVID program, an intensive pre-collegiate preparation program targeting student populations traditionally underrepresented in both advanced-level classes and higher education. Our interactions over email and at monthly administrative meetings resulted in the development of a collegial relationship. Zeke, who teaches 9th and 10th grade English, has a diverse background within the field of education. He began his teaching career with Teach for America (TFA), obtained his Master's Degree in Education at Harvard University, and spent two years mentoring TFA recruits in rural Texas. In 2007, he was named teacher of the year at his school and was selected to participate in a Department of Education fellowship program.

I did not, however, select Zeke as a study participant because of the depth and diversity of his background. Prior to the first interview I knew little about his past employment or professional accomplishments. I selected Zeke because of his teaching perspective. He has a strong belief in the power of education to influence one's social and economic mobility and is genuinely dedicated to supporting ALL students with meaningful opportunities to prepare for and pursue higher education. I was excited to investigate the experiences of an educator whom I believed viewed the world through a similar lens.

Theoretical Investments

This inquiry embodies both descriptive and interpretive approaches. Phenomenology informs my understanding of "human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 19). As a researcher, I am mindful of how

“phenomena – ‘the things themselves’– present themselves in the lived experience of the individual, especially as they present themselves in lived time” (Pinar, 1995, p. 405). I recognize Zeke’s experiences cannot be reduced to a universal understanding of what it means to be a teacher. Additionally, I attempted to be mindful of the things we take for granted and that what is hidden or unsaid, is often significant to understanding. This hermeneutic lens helped me to explore the significance of Zeke’s experiences, interpret how he makes sense of those experiences, and reflect on the meaning of these revelations in the context of my own experiences.

Using anecdotal narratives as forms of representation, I hope to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the commitment to teach. Van Manen (1990) suggests, “[the] anecdote is one of the implements for laying bare the covered-over meanings” (p. 119). These narratives hold the potential to not only reveal what is hidden, protected, or unspoken, but they offer perspective into the life world of the storyteller. This process creates opportunities to “better understand the ‘already there’ of everyday [personal] and professional experiences” (Nakkula, 1998, p. 4). Hermeneutic inquiry demands attention to the intentions and meanings of everyday experiences and provides opportunities for deep self- reflection and discovery.

The Commitment to Teach

After deciding on a research question, I began to engage in the hermeneutic process of reflection and interpretation as a way to contextualize my own life narrative, what it means to teach, why I teach, and how commitment manifests itself in my teaching practices. Additionally, this method of inquiry allowed me to consider my experiences within the context of literature investigating the commitment to teach. I believe this approach, which fuses both research and experience, illuminate my personal and professional connection to this work and situate its importance within the field of teacher education. What follows is a subjectivity statement that not only explores literature related to the commitment to teach, but also draws attention to how this commitment emerges within my own educative practices.

Becoming

Thinking back, I am not really sure why I decided to become a teacher. I knew nothing about teaching, never really had opportunities to interact with or mentor younger children, and had no formal experience preparing me for the classroom. Nonetheless, becoming a teacher was one of the most important decisions I ever made. Becoming a teacher required an ethical commitment to treat others with care, compassion, and empathy; it required learning to give of myself in ways I never thought were possible. I put aside my self-interest and self-consuming lifestyle in an effort to focus on how other people were living, learning, and making sense of the world. For me, teaching offered “a space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom...It is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning” (hooks, 1994, pg. 11). Teaching quickly became the most important thing in my life; besides the health and well being of my family and friends, it still is.

Examining the motivation to teach, both Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) and Moran, Kilpatrick, Abbott, Dallat, and McClune (2001) highlight distinctions between intrinsic, extrinsic and altruistic reasons for selecting the teaching profession. Intrinsically motivated teachers, it is argued, emphasize the benefits of the activities specific to teaching; they are, it is posited, focused on the inherent satisfaction of teaching. Extrinsically motivated teachers,

on the other hand, tend to highlight benefits such as time off, salary, and other external rewards associated with the profession. Finally, the altruistically motivated teacher views teaching as a job that has societal value and has a genuine desire to positively impact the growth and development of adolescents.

Synthesizing research examining the characteristics of incoming teachers, Brookhart and Freeman (1992) identified intrinsic sources of motivation and service-oriented goals were common factors influencing reasons why individuals decided to become teacher. Similarly, Borrero (2011) Found the desire to care for and build relationships with urban youth was a central urban pre-service teachers; interests in teaching. Additionally, participants' also emphasized promoting positive social change in their communities as part of their rationale for entering teaching.

In Coladarci's (1992) often cited study examining whether teacher efficacy predicts one's commitment to teaching, he reported that a teacher's psychological attachment to the teaching profession has historically been measured in two ways: attrition and to survey teachers about whether they would choose this profession if they had the decision to make over again. This study departs from this particular orientation in that it is specifically focused on the social, emotional, and ethical dynamics that influence one's decision to enter into and remain in the field of education.

As I reflected on and reconstructed those experiences shaping my own motivation and commitment to the teaching profession, one primary theme emerged: *a strong belief in teaching for social change.*

Personal transformation - Early in my teaching career, I was completely unaware of the public education system many students and teachers existed and struggled within. I rarely looked outwards from the extreme comfort of my own middle class position to inquire about the overwhelming presence of inequity that continues to permeate many schools in the United States. It never dawned on me I had a moral responsibility to critically question the education system in which I worked. Why was I instructed to teach certain content while ignoring others? How were certain populations of students or perspectives marginalized? Why did schools serve as a place of access and privilege for some, and discomfort, constraint, and discontent for others? Teaching had become a form of activism that not only required resistance to the status quo, but also demanded critical analysis of the normative values and objective truths supporting hegemonic structures, oppressive hierarchies, and the attitude that, "this is just the way life is; deal with it."

During this time of critical reflection into my identity, social norms, and the deeply rooted issues I believed were polluting education, I realized many my students were in clear positions of disadvantage. The school was doing very little to address this, and in my view, was actively supporting an academic environment which reinforced a tacit system of hegemony and a culture of reproduction.

The act of teaching - Although I am no longer teaching in a high school classroom, I still have a deep personal connection to the teaching profession and a strong desire to better understand the "what it means to be a teacher." I have always been interested in the motivations, commitments, and attitudes of other teachers. I have often tried to figure out why some teachers appeared content, engaged, and inspired while others seemed unhappy, frustrated, and unsatisfied. My observations, however, rarely provided any satisfying answers and typically, I was usually left with more questions. As I left school most evenings, classrooms dark, hallways still, and the parking lot empty, I often wondered if other teachers were as committed to their students as I was. When I noticed certain teachers were more involved with school activities, I constantly tried to understand why some gave more of themselves than others. Do all teachers, I wondered, have similar commitments to their profession?

New Horizons - As a result of my constantly shifting understanding, or as Heidegger ([1927] 1977) conceptualized, my “expansion of horizons,” I became a more enlightened educator. This transformation, one deeply rooted in critical questioning of normalized ways of thinking, compassion for those I believed were being unfairly treated, and a commitment to disrupt patterns of inequity, manifests itself in three interconnected ways.

First, I no longer approach curriculum, classrooms, or school reform as neutral; rather, “every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are politically contested spaces” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 2). Second, I have come to the conclusion that teachers are agents of change who hold a tremendous amount of power; the decision of how to use this power has significant implications in the lives of students. Finally, because teachers are primarily focused on their immediate setting, they often lose perspective of how schools are designed to help certain students gain advantages over others and how the curriculum can serve as a site of constraint rather than empowerment. Teachers, I believe, are responsible for not only engaging in reflective and interpretative practices, but also questioning the forces shaping and defining their horizons. These beliefs manifest themselves in my professional commitment to help all students become as successful as possible. A brief discussion about what it means to be a teacher sheds light on why it is important to better understand the ways in which the commitment to teach manifests itself within the personal and professional lives of educators.

Becoming a Teacher and Moving Beyond the Curriculum

A way of life - Teaching is not just a “job” and “school” is not simply a place where teachers go for ten hours each day; it is a way of life. Teachers bring students’ problems, challenges, and personalities home with them and often, these become subjects of consternation, worry, and even discussion with friends and family. Teachers frequently encounter moments of uncertainty, chaos, and the unexpected. Writing about being a teacher Philip Jackson (1990) suggests teachers need to be able to put up with the ambiguity, unpredictability, and tenuous nature of classroom life. “The challenge of teaching is to decide who you want to be as a teacher, what you care about, and what you value, and how you will conduct yourself in classrooms with students” (Ayers, 2001, p. 23). In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (1998) grounds his perspective of teaching in the belief, “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). Reflecting on what it means to be a teacher, bell hooks (1994) writes,

“To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. (p. 13)

Teaching is not about getting students to meet standards, pass certain tests, or get high grades. Rather, I suggest teaching is about instilling an ethic of love, compassion, virtue, courage, joy, and humility. Teaching involves a heartfelt commitment to the emotional, physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of students.

Thoughtful Participation - When students enter school, they arrive with differing sets of experiences and knowledge immediately situating them into a system of stratification which, often, influences both academic and social outcomes. Hence, teachers have an ethical obligation to utilize their personal agency to confront, challenge, and alter the marginalizing hierarchies shaping the school experiences of their students. This disposition embodies the

belief that pedagogy serves as political action (Freire, 1970). Teaching, in this context, represents what hooks (1994) refers to as, “engaged pedagogy” – an act of teaching that emphasizes “well-being” and a commitment to “empower[ing] students (p. 15).

This unwavering commitment to a moral agenda pushes us to uncover ways to break down those barriers negatively influencing the lives of our students. Ayers (2001) argues, “our larger goals as [teachers] must be oriented toward the creation of a system that provides a decent adequate education to all children” (p. xv). Zeke and I are not simply teachers; we are, in Freire’s (1970, 1998) vision, cultural workers acting upon the world in order to transform it. We are activists charged with finding ways to empower students who are being marginalized by a system they do not fully understand.

Student Voice - Teachers also have a responsibility to develop pedagogical approaches that embrace, recognize, and encourage the emergence of student voice. Ayers (1990), shedding light on the value of honoring and students’ voices, suggests our work with children is to “convey their lives as they present them, to portray the world with immediacy as they see it, to create a monograph on meaning in which youngsters are conscious collaborators (Ayers, 1990, p. 272). This process provides opportunities for teachers and students to develop meaningful relationships. Reflecting back to his experience co-authoring a curriculum with his fifth grade students, Brian Schultz (2008) recalls when his students first realized their voices counted:

My teaching was transforming, but I was still looking for opportunities to provide space for my students to excel, realize their abilities, and use their talents to help themselves. Because I had come to realize that what they had to say was not only important but also enlightening. I knew their ideas needed to be heard. (p. 23)

Linda Darling Hammond points out, “good teachers know how to understand student’s thinking: where they are, what they know, what they understand, and how they learn and perceive” (Moulthrop, Calegari, & Eggers, 2006, p. 94). Effective teachers must move towards a caring pedagogy concerned with the lives, perspectives, and experiences of their students. Ayers (2001) offers the following questions for teachers to ask themselves: “Who is this person before me? What are his interest and areas of wonder? How does she express herself and what is her awareness of herself as a learner? What effort and potential does she bring? (p. 29). hooks (1994) offers valuable insight into this process of learning and discovering students:

Throughout my years as student and professor, I have been most inspired by those teachers who have had the courage to transgress those boundaries that would confine each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning. Such teachers approach students with the will and desire to respond to our unique beings. (p. 13)

Conceptualizing students as unique beings whose voices are waiting and wanting to be heard, embraced, and acknowledged sits at the core of being a committed teacher.

Data Collection

Hermeneutics is not only an interpretative endeavor, but it also requires, at each step of the research process, an iterative encounter with text. To begin this process, I listened to the interview tapes immediately following both 90-minute sessions with Zeke and

documented reflections about the interviews. Did Zeke craft his answers in certain ways because he was familiar with my deeply rooted beliefs about teaching? How did the types of questions I asked influence which experiences Zeke felt comfortable sharing? Was I listening close enough to Zeke's description of his experiences or was I relying too much on what I already knew about his teaching ideals and values? Whose voice was present in the questions I asked - the teacher or the researcher? The most challenging aspect of the interview process was to consciously monitor whether questions were driven by personal experiences or the questions framing this inquiry. What follows are two excerpts from those data collection memos. These represent my efforts to better understand my role in the interview process.

Becoming the researcher - As I listened to Zeke reconstruct his experiences, I found it challenging to "become" the interviewer and hide or ignore my investment in this work. When talking and interacting with teachers I have a tendency to throw myself back into the world of classroom life. I listen with a sense of empathy and unquestioning camaraderie and speak with a voice that projects an unconditional concern for the lives, beliefs, and experiences all students. In the position of interviewer I found myself trying to separate from my teaching identity because I was concerned it would somehow affect the research process, the types of questions I asked, and how Zeke would respond to my inquiries.

During the interview, I made a conscious effort to create an environment in which Zeke felt comfortable reconstructing and sharing important life moments. I did not engage with Zeke in any lengthy back and forth discussion, analysis, or interpretation. Instead, drawing on phenomenology, my primary goals were to be active listener and to ask meaningful questions aimed at eliciting insight into concrete teaching experiences. Zeke's role was to colorfully illustrate and describe these experiences to help me understand his commitment to teaching.

In an effort to reduce any implicit or explicit power dynamics that might influence the interview, I decided it was important to take some time before we started the interview to clarify the underlying purpose of the study, explain the basic foundations of phenomenology and hermeneutics, and emphasize the importance of Zeke's role in this process. As I developed interview questions I paid close attention to the wording and meanings underlying the questions. To verify whether the questions were constructed in a way that would result in meaningful inquiry, I asked two colleagues to separately review the questions and provide feedback. One particularly helpful suggestion was to rephrase the questions so they were not focused on a reflective orientation, but instead were geared towards drawing out detailed descriptions of experiences.

Challenges - As I reflect on my interview with Zeke, two particular challenges deserve attention. First, asking clear, straightforward questions is a difficult task. I found myself asking Zeke questions that had purpose, but were not asked in a direct manner. Consequently, his responses did not always go in the direction I intended. Additionally, I found it challenging to adjust my thinking and quickly develop follow-up questions on the fly when Zeke responded in a way that surprised me or told stories I wanted to explore more deeply. Developing thoughtful follow-up questions aimed at surfacing important details of experience is an important skill because it makes it possible to gain a closer perspective of an experience.

Second, because Zeke and I have had similar teaching experiences there may have been moments during the interview where I did not fully investigate or follow-up on some of his comments. For example, on a number of occasions during the interview Zeke references his Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) class. When he mentioned AVID I never really asked him to specifically talk about his experiences teaching this class. In retrospect, because I already have a clear understanding about the underlying premise of the

AVID program, its impact on students, and what it is like to teach the class I may have unknowingly foreclosed the possibility of uncovering new insights and perspectives.

Data Analysis

To begin this process, I listened to the interview tapes and read through the transcripts four times recording significant thoughts, ideas, and themes in the margins. During the first read-through this process entailed identifying comments related to Zeke's use of language. This yielded comments related to his changing tone of voice, the possible meaning of his pauses, and his continued use of the phrase "your kids" when referring to the students in his class. In the second read-through data was coded using themes from the literature. These included "teaching outside the curriculum," "being present in the life of students," and "care for the safety, success, and development of students." With the third read-through, emergent themes were identified by looking for important words, phrases, or ideas surfacing from Zeke's stories and experiences. From this, I was able to develop a list of open coded themes which included "building relationships," "feeling difference," "academic impact," "commitment," "concern for student well-being," and "frustration."

As a method to clearly identify and visually organize the codes in the transcript, I recorded themes consistent with the literature in red and placed them in the left hand column of the transcript, and I marked emergent themes in green and situated them in the right hand column. In the fourth read-through, I developed broader thematic labels, identified meaningful metaphors, analogies, or conflicting statements, and noted any particular experiences grabbing my attention. As a way to synthesize and organize, I created matrices outlining the themes I uncovered with specific examples from the data.

As a last step, I asked an individual who was unfamiliar with my research interests to look through the data, and consider my findings. This was a valuable process because I was able to listen to how another person understood and made sense of Zeke's experiences. I purposely selected an individual with intellectual and emotional distance from my research as a way to get a 'fresh perspective.' In addition to gaining a different point of view on the data, this review process helped me to verify I was representing Zeke's life in trustworthy way.

Findings

When Zeke agreed to participate in this study, I thoroughly explained the underlying premise of the research project and how the data would be analyzed and eventually made public. In addition, I also spent time talking with him about the rationale of phenomenological and hermeneutical research. In doing this, I purposely framed the research process in the context of Seidman's (1998) belief in treating participants with the dignity:

The researcher must be alert to whether he or she has made the participant vulnerable by the narrative itself...Participants volunteer to be interviewed but not to be maligned or incriminated by their own words. A function of the interview process and its products should be to reveal the participant's sense of self and worth. (pp. 122-123)

In representing Zeke's experiences my aim to not only gain a deeper understanding of the research question, but to also honor the intent of his words, value his perspectives, and respect his role as a teacher.

Two central themes emerged from the data related to Zeke's commitment to teach: "*teaching outside school*" and "*building relationships*." Considering these themes in the

context of my own experience, I now also have a much clearer understanding of how commitment manifests itself within my own teaching practices. First, both Zeke and I have a deep commitment to positively influence the lives of students. This obligation comes through in the way we both talk about and conceptualize our teaching experiences. Second, reflecting on each of our commitments to positively impact students has surfaced major differences in our career trajectories and how we put these commitments into practice. The recognition of this divergence, which manifests itself in a personal longing to be back in my classroom, has provided valuable insight into how past experiences influence my present life.

Teaching outside school

When Zeke describes how teaching emerges day-to-day, his response, which came with little hesitation, calls attention to the central importance of teaching within his life. “That is a hard question because, well [teaching] ‘is’ my life. You can’t just be a 7:00 am - 3:00 pm teacher. It is something you always do” (p. 20). Speaking passionately, Zeke makes it clear teaching is not limited to the formal school day and it directly influences other parts of his life. This point, which he emphasizes throughout the interview, positions teaching as a process that is not always linear, does not depend on a teacher-student power dynamic, and can very well take place outside of the school context.

Connecting with struggling or challenging students sometimes requires finding ways to teach them outside of school. Zeke explains this point by reconstructing an experience with his 12th grade English teacher, Matt Johnson “He knew I wasn’t coming into [class] with the same set of skills as the other kids had, but that I wanted it badly and so he really believed in me” (p. 9). Zeke continued by making it clear why this life moment was so critically important. “I think for me the fact that this guy was willing to give up a Saturday morning to help a couple kids be more successful was like wow this guy cares. He is interested; it means something to him (p. 9).

Mr. Johnson’s commitment to his success clearly has had an influence on Zeke’s current disposition towards working with students outside of the traditional boundaries of school. For example, Zeke’s relationship with one particular student, Yeksson Gutierrez, highlights his steadfast commitment to working with students where and whenever they need help:

One day I came up with this great idea and said Yeksson we have this quiz tomorrow and you need to do well on it and I know you got to work tonight so I am not sure you are going to study so I am going to meet you at the bar/restaurant at this time and I am going to sit there and we are going to study and I am going to work with you. So I went that one day and it was quiet this was a small town and there were not many people there. I sat at the counter and quizzed him on the stuff we were taking the quiz on the next day. I was there for like 1.5 hours and it was like cause it was outside of school that I got to know him a little bit better and saw his environment outside the classroom. He came in the next day and rocked the quiz and did so well and I tried to build on that. (p. 6)

As Zeke continued to talk about Yeksson, it became increasingly clear why teaching is so important to him. “I teach because I want to be able to have an impact on kids the same way some of those people have had an impact on me.....I really think that it’s the most important job in the world” (p. 9).

Building meaningful relationships

During the interview, Zeke discussed the importance of building relationships nine times without any direct prompts from me. Through these relationships, Zeke demonstrates his overwhelming commitment making sure his students are as successful as possible. Describing the first time he realized the impact relationships could have on students, Zeke shares part of an experience listening to Teach for America volunteers at a recruiting session during his senior year in college:

They told stories about kids who like if you heard the stories without hearing the end you would think this was a hopeless situation this is a kid who or a situation like very little good can come out of this...but I started hearing them talk about relationships they built with kids. (p. 4)

This moment changed Zeke's life; this was the moment he decided teaching was the career for him. His reasoning for this decision provides valuable insight into why building meaningful relationships has become a central component part of his teaching practices:

I wanted to have a purpose and do something that meant something to someone and I think that was those stories really struck me like that is where I can have an impact and that is where I can build a relationship with someone and use that to propel them to somewhere they would not be otherwise. (p. 4)

Zeke thinks about relationships in two distinct ways. First, he is clearly committed to doing whatever he can to build meaningful relationships with struggling students. Through the context of these relationships he believes can gain a deeper understanding about the challenges his students face on a day to day basis and to help them be successful. As Zeke talks about the process of developing productive relationships with his students he uses phrases like "having real conversations," "creating safe environments," and "having a purpose." His words highlight his commitment to finding ways to connect with students, earn their trust, and help them overcome adversity; "I think I am just doing my job like I'm doing a.... it is something I love, but I mean I am doing what I am supposed to do" (p. 13).

Stressing the importance of getting to know his students personally, Zeke explains how this can ultimately lead them towards success:

For me personally it made me realize and I knew this already it just kinds confirmed the belief with every kid there is some way to get him/her and there is some way to push kid to the next level and you just have to work hard to figure out what it is....you got to work hard to get to know your kids cause each one of them is unique yet they all have that similarity in that they want to be successful in some way. (p. 7)

Wanting to find out a more about Zeke efforts to develop relationships with his students, I asked him to talk about other related experiences. He immediately began to talk about a one of his AVID students, Marcus, who was failing a number of classes. Marcus was being raised by a single mother, has 12 siblings who all lived together in small townhouse, and has familial responsibilities that make focusing on school difficult. Because Zeke was familiar with Marcus's background he was able to directly engage him in a "real conversation" (p. 8). Because Zeke had slowly fostered a positive relationship with Marcu during the year he was able to uncover that he was not sleeping much at night and cannot find

time to complete his homework because his mother needs him to watch his younger siblings while she works. Zeke's experience with Marcus supports his beliefs about the underlying importance of fostering meaningful relationships with students:

The relationships piece is so important cause I just feel like and I hear this from kids and they need teacher who cares about them. They need to know that a teacher is willing to put in the time and if they are not, the kids are not really going to give them the time of day either...it's setting up a situation like the kids see you as more than a teacher, but not a friend. Nothing like that, but like as somebody who is willing to go above and beyond. (p. 7)

The second way Zeke addresses relationships is when he discusses the importance of developing connections with his colleagues. As the coordinator of the AVID program in high school, Zeke has the opportunity to meet and interact with a variety of teachers throughout the school. Describing his relationship with Daniel Dax, a history teacher, Zeke explains:

We have a really positive relationship because we share kids and we talk about them and we talk about them not...like yeah we talk about what they are doing in history but we also talk about the outside stuff. (p. 17)

As he provided further details about the reasons he enjoyed working with teachers, I got the impression Zeke's motivation was directly related to his commitment to find any means to learn about and connect to his students. Describing interactions with Ms. Dax, Zeke illuminates why close teacher relationships are so critical:

We think about how you get to a kid who who uhm who has situations lime that what is working for you. What are you doing that is making him successful? How can I implement that in my classroom? So that is one we talk a lot sometimes it is email and sometimes it is a stop in the hallway. It's a fun relationship it's funny we joke with each other but we are also very professional because at the end of the day like it's the kids that matter. (p. 17)

For Zeke, teaching is all about building meaningful relationships. On the one hand, he uses his relationships with students to find ways to help them develop emotionally, socially, and academically. Getting to know his students is an essential part of how he experiences teaching. On the other hand, he also believes it is important to reach out to other teachers to make valuable connections and support struggling students. Zeke's underlying motivation is to develop lines of communication with colleagues to find out how his students are doing in both their classes and in life.

The Arc of Reflection

Roots of our commitment

My research question oriented me towards identifying a deeper understanding of how Zeke experiences commitment as teacher. I found for Zeke this commitment was driven by a moral responsibility to positively impact students. This commitment, one which embodies passion, sincerity, and an ethic of care, has influenced Zeke's belief that teaching in a high school classroom is how he can have the most effective influence on students. To highlight

this, I turn to a point in the interview where I asked Zeke to talk about what was missing in his life while he was pursuing his graduate degree at Harvard University:

I think it goes back to that idea of like what impact am I having and I think I guess I just really love working with kids and I was not really getting that directly you know as a student.... As a student and granted it was only a year so it was not that long of a time. I really I did not feel like I was moving forward and wanted to get back in the classroom where I could actually do the things I was learning. I am a doer. Give me an idea and I will run with it and put it into practice and I will see if it works and I will go back and readjust something like that. But so I missed that, but I also missed working with kids I missed the relationships I missed thatugggh what got me in teaching in the first place ... the mentor role model aspect of the job I did not have that.

While commitment also sits at the core of how I understand teaching, the way in which it manifests itself in my life had led me to a different place than Zeke. To start, the longer I was in the classroom, the more isolated I became from my commitment to impact students. I only had direct access to 125 students a year and did not feel like I was in a position to really have the broader influence I envisioned.

When I first began teaching at the High School where I spent the majority of my teaching career, my ideas were welcomed and encouraged by administrators and other teachers. I was viewed as an individual who had the capability to help move the school in new directions. However, within a couple of years my colleagues were no longer interested in the presentations I made at faculty or department meetings or the conversations I tried to have at staff meetings. I was quickly being considered radical and for the most part, my ideas were dismissed by others as overly progressive, excessively liberal, or simply a result of youthful idealism and exuberance that would “eventually simmer down.”

As a result, I began to seriously question whether the high school classroom was the venue where my commitment would get the physical, intellectual, and emotional space and support it needed. I knew I was committed to teaching, working with teachers, and most importantly, the overall success and development of students. However, I was “stuck” in the classroom; I was only reaching a small set of individuals and longed to be in a position to influence large numbers of educators who would in turn, impact large groups of students. Thus, my commitment to positively impact students drove me out of the high school classroom and into a position at a university where I would be immersed in academic work with developing teachers – but no adolescents. Zeke’s commitment, on the other hand, pushed him towards a life surrounded by and directly working with adolescents.

Points of divergence

When Zeke speaks about his time at Harvard and away from his TFA students in South Texas, he talks about it as if he was not fulfilling a promise, or a commitment he made as a teacher. His exit from the classroom and away from those who were at the center of his world was a trying time in his professional life. While not completely dismissing the possibility of one day pursuing doctoral work, Zeke made it clear this would not happen if it required him to completely leave the classroom or in some way hindered his steadfast commitment to working with adolescents. Conversely, I saw my exit from the classroom as a point of liberation. Since my departure I have been in an educational context where new ideas and different perspectives are valued and embraced. In addition, I now have the opportunity to not only teach and supervise novice teachers, but to also have a much broader influence on

a larger number of students. My commitment has not altered, but the venue in which I put it into practice has changed dramatically.

Zeke and I have a deep respect for each other's teaching beliefs, values, and practices. Through conversation, it became clear that Zeke does not regularly think about the role or influence of academia in his work or the complex process of developing new teachers. He does not dismiss the underlying importance of either of these important endeavors - they just exist outside of his daily encounters, thoughts, and experiences. Being out of the classroom and consumed by academic pursuits, I sometimes forget about the importance of keeping the challenges and nuances of classroom life close to my heart. Writing, researching, and presenting at conferences are all incredibly enriching and rewarding endeavors. However, they often feel distant and removed from life in the classroom. Zeke's words, experiences, and life moments have reminded me to not forget where my commitment to impact students first began to develop.

Longing

As I reflect on my experience talking with Zeke and continue to sift through the data, there is no way to disregard the fact that I genuinely miss teaching adolescents. There are days I wake up and find myself thinking about what I would be doing if I was still a classroom teacher; there are moments I find myself checking the my old High School website to see if any of my former students are being recognized, where the football team is playing on Friday night, or who won the homecoming spirit stick. Admittedly, I sometimes have a thirst for moments of nostalgia. I often long for those meaningful relationships with students that I worked so diligently and passionately to establish. I miss interacting and communicating with students on a daily basis; I miss hearing students tell me stories of about their successes; and I miss being in a position to advise students as they deal with their trials and tribulations.

As a doctoral student and a teacher educator, I no longer get this opportunity. When I do get to visit classrooms or talk about students' lives it is always in the context of educating beginning teachers. I long for the opportunity to once again stand in the middle of the hallway between bells, high five my varsity basketball players as they pass by, or to eat at the annual PTSA Christmas luncheons. These are the experiences I no longer get. They were, and still are, important experiences in my life.

At times, though, I loathe having these feelings of nostalgia. I can remember days last year when I withdrew from life because I did feel connected to anything and regretted my decision to leave the classroom. I can remember wondering if I somehow sacrificed feelings and experiences that were irreplaceable. I have recently come to the realization that my longing to be back in the classroom is important to honor. To ignore it or wish it to completely disappear would be a mistake. Without these experiences I would think differently about the world. My longing for life as a high school teacher keeps my thoughts, ideas, and passions rooted in the 'real' experiences of teachers. This connection has also led me to develop stronger relationships with the novice teachers I work with. My longing for the classroom serves as a constant reminder of my commitment to teaching.

Gazing towards the horizon

I have come to understand teaching as a deeply personal commitment that, often, embodies a strong ethic of care, compassion, and dedication to the success, development, and well-being of students. Teaching demands more than standing up in front of a group of students to talk about the fall of the Roman Empire, Newton's laws of physics, or the complex

nature of quadratic equations. Being an educator requires engaging with the spiritual, emotional and effective dimensions of teaching. Nel Noddings (1995) suggests, “educators must recognize that caring for students is fundamental in teaching and that developing people with a strong capacity for care is a major objective of responsible education” (p. 4). Teaching is a multidimensional enterprise that requires thought, perseverance, and an acute awareness of the present.

I often wonder how others view my commitment to teaching. I also worry my understanding of teaching as a higher calling, like a religious figure of some sort, will be written off as naïve. Is my vision of what it means to be a teacher overly idealistic? Does my belief teachers need to develop a strong ethical commitment make the profession less desirable? I still wonder how to make sense of my conviction that, “artificially separating the emotional, academic, and moral care of children into tasks for specifically designated experts contributes to the fragmentation of life in schools” (Noddings, 1995, p. 679). Is teaching truly an act of altruism and piety? Or have I turned it into an act of desire, narcissism, and selfishness?

I still have many unanswered questions about why and how people make the commitment to teach. While I have not completely reconciled my concerns and anxieties I am, for the moment at ease with a bit of uncertainty. I also know I may never find a completely satisfying answer to the question that will no doubt continue to linger in my mind. Nonetheless, I think it its best of I keep asking: How do teachers understand their commitment to teaching?

References

- Ayers, W. (1993). *To teach: The journey of a teacher*. New York, NY: Teacher College Press.
- Borrero, N. (2011). Entering teaching for and with love: Visions of pre-service urban teachers. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research*, 7, 18-26.
- Brookhart, S. M., & Freeman, D. J. (1992). Characteristics of entering teacher candidates. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(1) (1992), 37–60.
- Coladarci, T. (1992). Teachers' sense of efficacy and commitment to teaching. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 60(4), 323-337.
- Freire, P. (1970). *A pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers*. New York, NY: Westview Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *Being in time* (J. Macguarrie and E. Robinson trans.). Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York, NY: Teacher College Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008). *Critical pedagogy primer* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Kyriacou, C., & Coulthard, M. (2000). Undergraduates' views of teaching as a career choice. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 26(2), 117–126.
- Moulthrop, D., Calegari, N. C., & Eggers, D. (2006). *Teachers have it easy: The big sacrifices and small salaries of America's teachers*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Moran, A., Kilpatrick, R., Abbott, L., Dallat, J., & McClune, B. (2001). Training to teach: Motivation factors and implications for recruitment. *Evaluation and Research in Education*, 15(1), 17–32.
- Nakkula, M., & Ravitch, S. (1998). *Matters of interpretation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Noddings, N. (1995). Teaching themes of car. *Phi Delta Kappan*, (76)9, 675-685.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Pinar, W., Reynolds, W., Slattery, P., & Taubman, P. (1995). *Understanding curriculum: An introduction to the study of historical and contemporary curriculum discourses*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Schultz, B. (2008). *Spectacular things happen along the way: Lessons from an urban classroom*. New York, NY: Teacher College Press.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teacher College Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Ontario, CA: The State University of New York.

Author Note

Philip Evan Bernhardt is an Assistant Professor of Secondary Education at the Metropolitan State University of Denver. He spent eight years as a secondary social studies teacher and has presented at national education conferences on a variety of issues related to the barriers to higher education, college readiness, curriculum development, and teacher preparation. Research interests include: college readiness and access, anti-oppressive education, mentoring pre-service teachers, autobiographical inquiry, and the relationship between learning, equity, and school. Philip holds a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from The George Washington University School of Education and Human Development and an M.A.T in Social Studies Education from Boston University. He can be contacted at Metropolitan State University of Denver, 1201 5th Street, Campus Box #21, Denver, CO 80204; Phone: 303.556.2918; Email: pbernar@msudenver.edu

Copyright 2012: Philip Evan Bernhardt and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Bernhardt, P. E. (2012). Two teachers in dialogue: Understanding the commitment to teach. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(Art. 104), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/bernhardt.pdf>
