



Prospective Teachers' Beliefs and Perceptions about Teaching as a Profession

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how of a group of prospective teachers' beliefs and perceptions about teaching (as a profession) change as they complete a teacher education program offered by the Curriculum and Instruction Department at an Eastern U.S. University. Considering the fact that there is quite a difference between prospective teachers' entering and exiting perceptions and beliefs about teaching as a profession, there exists a need to provide new insight into the reasons causing this difference. The findings indicate that field experiences gave the prospective teachers the opportunity to modify their self-perceptions about teaching careers.

Key Words

Prospective Teacher Beliefs; Prospective Teacher perceptions; Teaching Practicum; Teacher Education Programs; Negative Experiences.

What are prospective teachers' beliefs about teaching as a profession as they enter teacher education programs? How are these beliefs and perceptions impacted by the field experiences they have in their program of study? How do prospective teachers frame the concept of teaching as they enter or exit their programs of study? These kinds of questions have been asked many times in the literature (Ezer, Gilat, & Sagee, 2011). The story of how prospective teachers experience teacher education programs begins with a questioning of who they are and what beliefs they bring to their training. The answers to such questions evolves over time as prospective teachers progress through teacher education programs, which in return may impact teachers' beliefs

and perceptions about teaching. Regardless of what beliefs prospective teachers hold, one may wonder about the extent to which prospective teachers' initial beliefs are subject to change by the experiences they gain in teacher education programs, especially those related to subsequent field experiences gained during teaching practice. For example, as prospective teachers begin their field experiences (as outsiders coming into the field), the ideas they have about teaching and schooling may differ from what they think about the teaching profession after their field experiences because during their field experiences, they become players in the classroom (either as a teacher or as a participant observer) and they see to what extent the theory they learn about in courses matches with the practice. The difference between entering and exiting beliefs may also be because prospective teachers may not consider "teaching[as a] complex process that begins and ends with students" (Enerson, 1997, p. 12), whereas field experiences give them the opportunity to think about and experience different parts of classroom teaching. In other words, with the help of field experiences, they have a better awareness of the complex dynamics of the classroom (Collier, 1999; Çakmakçı, 2009). Therefore, investigating the impact of this transition from being a prospective teacher in a teacher

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education program to a prospective teacher in the field has the potential to inform educators about what to do to ease this transition process.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate how of a group of prospective teachers' beliefs and perceptions about teaching (as a profession) change as they complete a teacher education program offered by the Curriculum and Instruction Department at an Eastern U.S. University. The specific research questions to be pursued in this study are:

1. What are participant prospective teachers' beliefs about choosing teaching as a profession as they begin field experiences?
2. What specific experiences impact the participant prospective teachers' beliefs and perceptions as they both progress through and complete their field experiences in their program of study?

Considering the fact that there is quite a difference between prospective teachers' entering and exiting perceptions and beliefs about teaching as a profession, there exists a need to provide new insight into the reasons causing this difference. Identifying the nature of this gap may not only allow educators to get clues about how to close it but may also enable them to revise field experience courses currently being offered within colleges of education to increase the quality of teacher education programs.

Relevant Literature

Traditionally, student teaching has been seen as the bridge between theory and practice. This bridge enables prospective teachers to transfer the necessary knowledge and skills gained at the university level into actual teaching practice (Bell & Robinson, 2004; Britzman, 1986). Teacher educators typically see prospective teachers' initial teaching experience as a time for them to examine nontraditional ways of teaching (Griffin, 1989), to apply pedagogical content knowledge learned on campus (Onslow, Beynon, & Geddis, 1992), to take risks (Chandler, Robinson, & Noyes, 1994), and to focus on the "why" of teaching rather than the "how" (Pape, 1992). The initial and evolving beliefs and perceptions prospective teachers hold about teaching as a profession play an important role during this transition process (Pajares, 1992). What are those initial beliefs and how do they evolve? This is further elaborated below.

Pajares' (1992) and Richardson's (1996) reviews of research on prospective teacher beliefs emphasize the importance of beliefs held by prospective teachers before entering a teacher education program. These researchers have highlighted four important issues regarding prospective teachers' beliefs. First, beliefs about teaching are well established by the time a student reaches college. Second, changes in beliefs during adulthood are quite uncommon. Third, when changes in beliefs take place, they occur as a result of what Pajares refers to as a "conversion" (p. 14) from being a student to being a teacher. Finally, these prior beliefs about teaching come from personal experience, schooling and instruction, and formal knowledge. Moreover, many researchers describe prospective teachers' initial beliefs as liberal and humanistic when they enter teacher education programs. For example, some researchers (e.g., Bell & Robinson, 2004; Mahlios & Maxson, 1995; Orion & Thompson, 1995; Weinstein, 1990) have investigated how prospective teachers react to a phrase like "a really good teacher" and concluded that prospective teachers associate being "a really good teacher" with qualities such as caring, understanding, warmth, and the ability to relate to children. On the other hand, other researchers like Bolin (1990) have argued that those students coming into teacher education programs with craft knowledge are confident in that they believe they know how to teach and that all they require are a few strategies to get them started. Weinstein added that such beliefs are fairly strong and act as filters for viewing and experiencing teacher education programs.

Teachers' beliefs have a powerful impact on their willingness to adopt new teaching strategies. The need to focus on teachers' beliefs is indicated by Tobin, Tippins, and Gallard (1994), who state that

[f]uture research should seek to enhance our understanding of the relationships between teacher beliefs and education reform. Many of the reform attempts of the past have ignored the role of teacher beliefs in sustaining the status quo. Many studies reviewed suggest that teacher beliefs are a critical ingredient in the factors that determine what happens in classrooms (p. 64).

Indeed, in recent years, teachers' beliefs have been the subject of inquiry to clarify how beliefs are improved and how they affect the teachers' practice (Donovan & Bransford, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Examining prospective teachers' beliefs and perceptions could provide both a new focus for potential as in teacher education pro-

grams that don't exist yet and an understanding of the effect that method courses have on prospective teachers—a process that could be useful as a model for other teacher educators.

Identifying ways to develop and transform prospective teachers' beliefs and perspectives should be a priority for teacher educators. Researchers in the field of teacher preparation focusing on prospective teachers' beliefs have found promising results. Prospective teachers develop beneficial skills such as empathy for diverse learners, a stronger commitment to teaching as a profession, an increased use of reflections on their own practice, and substantive changes in beliefs and perceptions (Hedrick, McGee, & Mittag, 2000; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002). Additionally, Pajares (1992) has provided the following synthesis of findings on beliefs: (i) new information is filtered through beliefs; (ii) beliefs are prioritized by the connection to other beliefs; (iii) some beliefs are more incontrovertible than others; (iv) it is relatively rare for adults to change their beliefs; (v) beliefs influence perception, but can be an unreliable guide to reality; (vi) beliefs strongly affect behavior; and (vii) beliefs are well established by the time a student enters college. Furthermore, McKenna (2000) has examined the effects of how field-based experiences that are integrated into teacher education courses lead to substantial changes in prospective teachers. Regardless as to how beliefs are defined, what is significant is that they substantively affect prospective teachers and therefore should be of great importance to teacher educators. According to Pajares, "few would argue that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom, or that understanding the belief structures of teachers and teacher candidates is essential to improving their professional preparation and teaching practices" (p. 307).

Field experiences give prospective teachers various opportunities to practice what they have learned during their course of study in teacher education programs. Not only is student teaching a time for implementing the acquired pedagogy, but also it is a valuable time to learn how to manage the classroom (Britzman, 1986; Collier, 1999; Çakmakçı, 2009). Although teacher education programs can prepare prospective teachers with methods of teaching, helping them to take a proactive stance in dealing with different kinds of problems in the classroom is more difficult (Fosnot, 1996; Shapiro, 1991).

Studies on school and teacher education institution partnerships emphasize the significance of initial

teacher preparation in terms of linking such preparation with experience gained in schools and with those who practice in schools (Bell & Robinson, 2004; Imig & Switzer, 1996; Tarman, 2010; Tarman & Acun, 2010). Behind the idea of the partnership program is the goal to lessen the problem of disconnection between theory and practice when prospective teachers' teach, providing them with an opportunity to work with experienced teachers in a real school context (Asan, 2002; Bell & Robinson; Valiandes & Tarman, 2011; Yucel, Acun, Tarman, & Mete, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

Prospective teachers constitute their foundation of professional experiences initially in schools during their field experiences as a two-way process which has a mutual benefit for mentor and candidate teachers (Schön, 1990). Field Experience courses are an important bridge between theories and practice (Giebelhaus and Bowman, 2002). This kind of courses provides an opportunity to prospective teachers to expand their beliefs and perceptions of the teaching profession.

There are several different but related definitions of "beliefs" made in the literature. One overarching definition for belief refers to personal convictions, philosophies, or opinions about teaching and learning (Czerniak, Lumpe, & Haney, 1999). Rokeach (1968) defined beliefs as "any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase, 'I believe that' " (p. 113). In this study, the author adopted these overarching definitions to analyze participants' beliefs in general to distinguish whether what participants mention during the seminars/discussions is a belief or is something else.

Like Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), Sanger and Osguthorpe (2010) also emphasize the complexity behind the definition of beliefs as "it applies to the posited relationship between belief and action" (p. 3). They also do not presume that "changes in beliefs will necessarily result in a consistent, predictable change in a teaching practice" (p. 3). On the other hand, Richardson (1996) acknowledged that prospective teachers' prior beliefs were open to change if teacher preparation programs were committed to acknowledging those prior beliefs and provided field-based experiences, courses, and opportunities for reflection. In this regard, there has been an inconsistency in literature on defining beliefs as phenomena that influence perspec-

tives, candidates' thinking, and behaviors (Pajares, 1992). Malone et al. (2002) defined perspective transformation as "the process in which a student substantively modifies his/her self-perceptions and perspectives on various issues" (p. 62). In investigating how participants' beliefs shifted from one state to another in regard to choosing teaching as a profession, the author referred to this definition of perspective transformation.

Faculties of Education aim to prepare teachers who are curious, questioning, researching and discussing with the University-School Cooperation. The parties to this cooperation, sharing duties and responsibilities required to work together resolving issues that arise (Öztürk, 2001). The main purpose of this model is to provide practice opportunity to teacher candidates and provide contribution on their professional development under the Faculty-School Cooperation (Yükseköğretim Kurumu [YÖK], 1998).

Method

Research Design

Participants: Participants¹ in this study were seven prospective teachers: Five elementary education majors and two secondary education majors who were registered in a one-semester field experience course taught by the author. Of the elementary education majors, three were female and two were male; the two secondary education prospective teachers were female. The participants were exposed to two different levels of training during this field experience. Each participant spent the first five weeks at an elementary school and the following five weeks at middle and secondary schools in a public school district in the Mideastern U.S. Each of the participants attended one of three elementary schools during the first five weeks. Dora (preschool), Jess (kindergarten), Rodgers (third grade), and Jim (kindergarten) were assigned to the First Elementary School; Jill (second and third grade), and Lee (fourth, fifth and sixth grade science/health) were in the Second Elementary School, and Linda (fourth grade) was in the Third Elementary School. For the second five-week period, the participants were assigned to different departments in the high school: Jim (Mathematics), Jess (Special Education), Rodgers (Driver Education/Social Studies), Dora (Social Studies), Jill (Reading/Resource Room-Special Education), Lee (Social Studies/English), and Linda (Arts).

The Field Experience Course

This is the College of Education's first field experience course designed for elementary and secondary education majors. Prospective teachers take this core course during the second year in their program of study. The course is the first official practical experience, and participation is largely observational. The participants in this study had only taken general education courses (i.e., no teaching methods courses) before attending this field experience course. The only course prerequisite was that these prospective teachers needed to be a full-time student for a whole year prior to taking the course.

Even though this course is mainly based on classroom observations, the prospective teachers profiled in this study had spent most of their years in schools as students and had already, although informally, done a great deal of observation. What made this official experience different from the prior schooling experiences is that the prospective teachers would have had the opportunity to examine teaching by wearing the lenses of a classroom teacher. In other words, they were indulged into a classroom micro culture that included many dimensions such as management, student knowledge, teaching, learning, and motivation. The participant prospective teachers had opportunities to analyze and discuss their teaching observations within the seminars the author conducted right after those observations were completed. Even though not required, the mentor teachers that the participants observed allowed the prospective teachers to take on the teacher role for some classes during their field experiences.

During the post-observation seminars, discussions concerned both the participants' observations of mentor teachers' teaching, and the participants' own teaching experiences when they take on the role of the teacher. The first half-hour of seminars focused on their classroom observations/teaching with the main question: "What did we gain/learn today?" Once this primary question was asked, the prospective teachers' answers were followed with general probes such as, "Tell me more about that," or "What do you mean by that?" In order to elicit further responses from the participants without altering or directing an offered opinion, some other specific questions posed included, "What was the subject/s of the day that the teachers taught?" "What kind of methods did they apply?" "Were those methods useful for the students?" "What were the students' reactions?" "If you were the teacher, what would you do when you came across

1 All participants' and school names are pseudonyms.

a difficult situation?" These questions allowed participants to express themselves broadly and individually with respect to the effect of the teaching practicum on changing their prior beliefs about the nature of teaching and teaching as a profession. In other words, as the participants analyzed their observation through discussions in these seminars, they also revealed their prior beliefs and perceptions about teaching. The second half hour of the seminar dealt with some specific readings from the course packet which included "The Purpose and Goals of School," "Classroom Environment," "Tracking Progress," "Inclusion of All Students," and "Assessment of Student Learning." These readings also gave the participants a chance to rethink about issues such as assessment, instruction, management, and diversity in learning in general.

Data Gathering Process

The author gathered data through use of several instruments. These instruments were: an information sheet consisting of specific questions (called Field Experience Information Sheet (FEIS)), weekly field notes taken by the author right after the seminars, copies of reflection papers (about readings) prepared by the participants, and copies of online discussions conducted in between two observations. At the beginning of this field experience course, the prospective teachers completed the aforementioned information sheet which required a response for statements such as: "My anticipated certification program is..."; "I have had previous experience with children in... and length of time..."; "My special interests are..."; "My strongest subject areas are..."; "Experience I hope to have during this field experience include:"; and "Provide and autobiographical sketch, emphasizing why you desire to teach." Additionally, participants were also asked for written opinions in response to the following questions: "Who is a good teacher?"; and/or "What makes a teacher good?" The goal of using the information sheet with these questions was to determine the participants' beliefs and perceptions about the nature of teaching before they began the practical field experience.

Weekly post-seminar field notes continued to document as much recalled information about the seminar discussions as possible. As part of the course requirements, participants were to provide their own reflections of assigned readings as well as to participate in online discussions using the online course management system known as Angel. The recording of their online discussions allowed the author to monitor participants' progress and analyze their ideas, perceptions, and beliefs.

Data Analysis Process

The data gathering process produced a large amount of information. After thoroughly going through the data gathered from the initial questionnaire, seminar sessions, field notes, and online discussion documents, the author initially identified categories of perceptions and beliefs of the prospective teacher participants on teaching and (choosing) teaching as a profession.' This categorization process was guided by the aforementioned definitions of beliefs and changes in beliefs. The overall purpose of data categorization was to determine the evolving beliefs and perceptions through constant comparison between the participants' opinions.

More specifically, the data was processed by constant comparative analysis to reach generic categories throughout (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The data was initially categorized by coding each view into as many categories as possible based on 'feels right' or 'looks right' judgments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and leading to tentative categories. Then, each view was compared with other views to find similar properties of the categories (Glaser & Strauss). To a greater extent, cross-comparisons were utilized to generate recurring categories. The participant responses were examined for consistent themes in order to determine if they employed common distinct criteria for the evaluation of 'teaching' and '(choosing) teaching as a profession.'

Findings and Discussion

The data analysis revealed two overarching categories and several subcategories. The overarching categories are about participant prospective teachers' initial beliefs about teaching careers and evolving beliefs about choosing teaching as a profession. Certain factors that seemed to affect participants' evolving beliefs about teaching careers were investigated within five subcategories.

Prospective Teachers' Initial Beliefs about Teaching Careers

The prospective teachers' *opinions* revealed many reasons for choosing teaching as a profession; these reasons have been derived from several *propositions* the author generated as a result of his analysis of the answers the participants provided in completing the FEIS instrument. Among these reasons are desire to teach; "striv[ing] to raise a new generation" (as stated by Dora and Jill); the importance of teaching to society (as highlighted by Lee, Linda,

and Jim); and the role of the teacher who had been admired in the past (as mentioned by Rodgers, Jim, and Jess). These opinions suggest that the participants have a variety of *personal convictions* about teaching as they begin the field experience course. These personal convictions also serve the participants in determining their expectations from this course. They value this course: a) to learn whether they are suitable for a career in teaching; b) to confirm the area (as a subject) they wish to teach, and c) to observe different teaching techniques.

Prospective Teachers' Evolving Beliefs about Teaching Careers

After the prospective teachers finished the 10-week teaching practicum, their beliefs about becoming a teacher were obviously different from their initial opinions. In other words, they registered for the practicum course to make a decision about choosing teaching as a profession. While some of them (Rodgers, Linda and Jill) were confused about choosing teaching as a future career after the practicum, some others "still want to be a teacher" (Jess, Jim, Lee, and Dora) even though much of their experience had been negative. The term "negative" here refers to situations during the field experience that impacted the participants' beliefs about choosing teaching as a profession. The negative examples they saw in their field experiences not only impacted their ideas about teaching but also affected their decisions about choosing teaching as a future career. For instance, Lee stated, "Even though I am not exactly learning from the good techniques of my mentor teacher, I am learning a lot from the observations of the students and some of her bad techniques in educating the students." Rodgers added, "I might see a mentor teacher dealing with a child in a negative manner and say to myself, 'I will never do that, there are other ways to handle the situation.'" Whether or not the participants' beliefs are impacted by negative examples of teaching, the participants gained a great deal of understanding about teaching as a profession. Therefore, from this point on in the paper, the author will focus on the negative events that the participants observed or were exposed to during their field placement and the events' impact on participants' beliefs about teaching careers and decisions about their profession. These negative experiences are detailed within the following categories: (i) the location of the school district (rural, urban or suburban); (ii) level of placement (elementary or secondary level); (iii) role of mentor teacher; (v) community of the school;

and (vi) distance of the location assigned for the field experience.

Location of the School District (Rural, Urban or Suburban)

The school district where the participants completed their field experiences was an extremely small district in a rural area in the Mideastern U.S. Because all of the participants had prior experiences in urban and large school districts, they were purposely placed in a school/were exposed to a classroom situation different from what they were typically accustomed to. Jess' opinion about this experience was that "[t]his semester, in this course, I had some of my prejudices altered. I grew up in a large school in a rather suburban setting. Because I had never lived elsewhere, I pictured most school systems as similar to my own. My experiences in the school district turned all my ideas upside down and allowed me to see a new form of education, one where everyone knows everyone else." Another student teacher, Linda, also indicated similarly that "[c]oming from a larger district, it shocked me that the majority of the students knew each other and their families." She further elaborated on the advantages and disadvantages of working in a rural area as follows:

The majority of the students knew each other and their families. Everyone knew everyone else, which can be good as a motivating factor, but can be bad for gossip. It bothered me a great deal how much the teachers, especially in the elementary schools, gossiped about students and their family situations. They would talk about information that no one in my school district would ever know.

Such opinions suggest that participants' beliefs about school culture were greatly impacted by their placement in rural schools. Their prior self-perceptions that students do not know each other in a school was altered not only by "shocking" observations of students as well as parents knowing each other, but also by the impact that such acquaintances had on teaching practices in a smaller school. The source of this shift in the participants' beliefs about students seemed to be caused by the negative, or in this case, a counterproductive situation in which participants had the chance to work in a rural school setting, in contrast to what they were used to.

Placement Level (Elementary or Secondary)

Without exception, all participants had a negative insight about their assigned high school place-

ments and experience once the field experience was over, and the high school field experience proved to be a disappointment when compared to the elementary school field experience. Linda's opinion about this issue, for instance, was that "[b]ecause of our secondary educational assignment, I do not feel I had a great experience or opportunity to determine definitely the grade level I wish to teach." Jim added that "[a]fter spending a few weeks in the secondary school, I knew that this wasn't the place for me. I enjoyed the classroom experience, but I felt out of place everywhere else within the school. Maybe it's because I felt out of place during my own high school experience." Jess further elaborated her experience in secondary school as having been a "waste of time." At the end of the experience she still wanted to be a teacher, but not in a high school. "I feel that my natural talents for creativity and working with children will equip me to work with young learners better than older, more cynical students," she said. I still feel called to teach, and now I feel secure in my choice to pursue a degree in Elementary and Kindergarten Education rather than Secondary Education-English, which was my other option."

One can infer from the opinions of Linda, Jim and Jess that their secondary school experience affected their beliefs about what it means to teach in a secondary school. Their perspectives about teaching in a secondary school were modified because of the negative experiences they had in the secondary school settings. These negative experiences were mostly related to the difficulty of classroom management due to the students' ages. Even though the participants had such a negative experience in secondary schools, this experience helped them modify their decision about which grade level to teach.

In addition to secondary school placement experience, some negative situations that arose in the elementary placements also impacted participants' perceptions of teaching as a profession and, in turn, their decision about whether or how to continue pursuing a teaching career. These experiences led the participants to seriously take into account the age level of students. The following three examples highlight how teaching a certain age group can be challenging. For example, Dora said,

[...] my first placement was so far from what I hope to be doing in the classroom. Observing in a preschool class was enlightening and entertaining. I looked forward to visiting the mentor teacher's class once a week, despite the early mornings. The subject that I want to teach, however, is high

school English: quite a far cry from the elementary class. Although I liked being with the four-year-olds, it was not enough to change my mind about what I want to teach. I guess I did benefit from the experience by ruling out early childhood education as my major. I liked the pre-school for a few hours once a week, but I don't have the patience to do that every day. I like working with younger kids though and I enjoyed the experience a lot.

As for Rodgers, at the end of the elementary school experience, he realized that, "I don't want to go any lower than sixth grade because the kids can't do as much as being firm but nice." It is possible to see a similar perspective when we consider Jim's experience:

I knew that I did not want to teach this grade (kindergarten) for two reasons: I did not think I was good enough to teach children at that age, and I did not want to teach in a class that was like my own kindergarten. Well... kindergarten has not only drastically changed in the past fourteen years, but I realized that I felt like I fit better in this grade than with older children. I came to understand that I am here to learn. Even though I don't think I am the perfect person for kindergarten... well, I'm probably right. I am not ready for this, which is why I am here at this university—to prepare myself for when the day comes when I have my own classroom.

Their placement in the elementary grades obviously gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs about teaching certain age groups. Dora, Jim and Roger all had the chance to reevaluate their opinions about teaching lower grades because they did not consider themselves to be patient enough to manage early grades; this opportunity helped them to modify their self-perceptions of teaching certain grade levels. These participants all considered the age or grade level as a negative factor when modifying their decisions about the grade in which to continue their teaching career.

Role of Mentor Teacher

The behavior and teaching approach of mentor teachers in their field experiences also played a significant role in shaping participants' beliefs about how or whether to continue their teaching career. For example, Jess stressed the role of the teacher: "I spent most of the time sitting around not doing much at all. The two teachers staffing the room don't teach, they stand over the kids and make sure they do the work their regular teachers assign." Another insight from Jill indicated a negative perception: "Even in the elementary school I was not overly

fond of my teacher, and the way she viewed things. For example, she is a second grade teacher, an age when the students are still unable to give their undivided attention to things, and she would get very upset when someone would talk out." Moreover, a situation like Linda's provided two different experiences from two different mentor teachers:

It seems as if high school is more a daycare facility to keep the kids off the street until they graduate rather than a place of learning. The teachers complain of the low achievement test scores, but fail to realize that they are the actual reason for this problem. Even though most of the students will not go on to college, it is a teacher's job to give each student the best possible education they can get in the small amount of time they have with them. These teachers are simply unmotivated and uncaring about the futures of these students.

The negative experiences such as mentor teachers' lack of interest and skills in teaching (as in Jess' case), lack of patience (as in Jill's case), and lack of appropriate assessment (as in Linda's case) helped the participants reshape their beliefs about teaching as a profession.

These negative experiences not only helped the participants decide on their future career but also gave them the opportunity to redefine their perception of what a good teacher is; these newly formed beliefs were expressed in online discussions the participants took part in at the end of the semester. Almost every prospective teacher (Rodgers, Jill, Jess, Dora, Lee, and Linda) felt that a good teacher must have a sense of humor, love the job (Dora, Lee, Jill, and Linda) and the subject matter (Jill, Jess, Rodgers), be creative (Kuran, 2002; Selçuk, 2000) be confident in subject knowledge (McPhee ve Humes, 1998), and have control of the classroom (Dora, Jim, Lee, Rodgers). Humor is a simple yet essential way to make class enjoyable; if used properly, it can even be a teaching tool. Regarding sense of humor, many of the participants gave examples of how their teachers used this tool in an appropriate ways when the prospective teachers were students in elementary and secondary schools.

Socio-economic Status of Students

Another negative factor impacting participants' beliefs about teaching as a profession and decisions about whether to become a teacher was related to the school community. Apparently every participant seemed to value the importance of school communities, but again, much of this experience

has been gained from observing negative events. Jim had the opinion that "[t]he district is a small rural community whose people are aware and concerned about what is going on in their area." Linda added that the importance of socio-economic status of students had an impact on their education as follows:

The socio-economic background of majority of the students was fairly low in the district. Most of them live on farms and have very little support from their families for education. A given is, almost, that most of the students will never move out of the small town. They were expected to either farm or work in the few factories that remain in the town. Education is seen as a waste of time and effort when the students could be home helping with the farm work.

These observations, originating from negative experiences suggest that participants included the component of socio-economic status (SES) of students into the equation of teaching. SES is now part of their modified self-perceptions of teaching.

Distance of the School from university

All of the participant prospective teachers' enthusiasm was negatively affected because of the long distance between their university and the school district where they had their field experience. Since the commute from the university to the school district took almost two hours (one way), this was perceived as a waste of time by all prospective teachers. In turn, the participants' beliefs about working in a rural area far from where they live were negatively impacted. This may appear to be a minor issue impacting the participants' beliefs, but it seems that lengthy commute was an important consideration. Even though the long travel was a negative experience, such trips gave the participants the opportunity to discuss issues related to teaching and teaching as a profession, reflect on those issues, and modify their decisions and beliefs about teaching. In this regard, such a negative experience had positive implications for participants.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study investigated how prospective teachers' field experiences in a university teacher education program impacted their root beliefs and perceptions about teaching as a profession. Similar to what several previous studies (Bell & Robinson, 2004; Mahilos & Maxson, 1995; Orion & Thompson, 1995) have shown, the findings of this study also

indicate that field experiences gave the prospective teachers the opportunity to modify their self-perceptions about teaching careers and also provided an opportunity to reflect on their understanding of teaching as a profession.

The negative situations that the prospective teachers observed and experienced during their field placement played a significant role in shaping the participants' beliefs and perceptions about teaching as a profession. One of the negative experiences was related to participants' placement in different levels, elementary and secondary. The participants in elementary education programs were more likely reevaluating their decision to become an elementary teacher after observing negative situations in secondary schools. The same thing seemed to be true for participants training to be secondary education teachers; they also had the opportunity to reconsider their choice of grade level. Different level placement levels enabled participants to see different components of teaching (e.g., importance of students' age level, behavior of teachers, different teaching methods appropriate for diversified student levels) better and helped them modify their perspectives about what to do and what not to do in teaching as well as what level to teach and what age level to avoid.

Another important result worth mentioning is in regard to the location of the schools chosen for the field experiences. Placing prospective teachers from metropolitan areas into rural schools seemed to have an impact on shaping prospective teachers' beliefs about teaching as a profession. Regardless of the nature of the district, the fact is out there: Schooling is a social activity, and individuals' schooling experiences locate them in a multi-dimensional society structure defined by the social institutions in which individuals participate and the social roles they perform (Pallas, 1993).

As mentioned previously, this study shows that an important consideration is to better understand the process in which prospective teachers' root beliefs and metaphors change over time, along with the factors that influence the prospective teachers to change their beliefs (Bell & Robinson, 2004). Negative factors such as the location of the practicum, level of placement, mentor teacher, SES, and the distance between prospective teachers' university and the practicum school district certainly play a role in changing prospective teachers' beliefs about teaching profession as well as their decisions to choose teaching as a profession. Therefore, in designing field experience courses in teacher education programs, educators need to seriously consider the impact of how negative experi-

ences shape teacher beliefs. At the very least, educators need to pay attention to the level of placement, the population of the practicum school district, and the choice of mentor teachers who reveal variety of techniques (good and bad) to help prospective teachers' development.

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