

Crossing The Bridge: Transitioning from a K-12 Teacher to a College Professor

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This is a qualitative study that was conducted to gain a better understanding of the experiences of professors in Colleges of Education who were former K-12 teachers. The study presents the responses of eighty-nine professors from across the United States. Coding based on the university setting (national, large regional, small regional) in which the respondents worked revealed that professors have different experiences in their transition from K-12. The authors found that the size of the university was a factor in how welcome the new faculty felt welcomed and how colleagues treated them. This study also found that the way professors feel about their move into higher education is dependent on the size of the institution in which they work. Despite the type of higher institution, however, the most significant finding reflects the respondents' feelings of gaining greater autonomy in their lives. Implications for future research are to survey K-12 teachers on their feelings about professors who were former classroom teachers and the authors would also like to implement the current survey at the international level.

Introduction

Most faculty members in colleges of education have experienced some amount of K-12 teaching. An examination of the Chronicle of Higher Education shows advertisements that require 2 to 3 years of teaching experience in a K-12 setting. In their current positions, teacher educators find themselves walking a line between trying to remember what it was like teaching a similar grade and subject level in a public school and creating assignments that will help their current students become more effective teachers.

It is common for those who have moved into a second career to compare and contrast the job they have held. For those in colleges of education this means comparing college teaching to their previous positions as a classroom teacher. It is generally accepted that university professors should be experts in their field of study and those in teacher education should also be experts in pedagogy. Since most teacher educators have taught in a K-12 setting they are also aware of the challenges that classroom teachers face on daily basis. In order to better understand the students

who are products of teacher education programs, research is needed that looks at the experiences of the professors who transitioned from the K-12 classroom to higher education.

While there appears to be a great deal of research and concern for the induction of new teachers (Veenman 1984, Kagan 1992, Britt 1997, Berliner 1986), there is very little research on the induction of education professors who were former classroom teachers. As LaRocco and Bruns (2006) state: “A paucity of literature focuses on the experiences of early career faculty (pre-tenure) who are practiced education professionals and who chose higher education as a second career” (p. 626).

Nearly all institutions have a formal process designed to monitor and mentor new professors. One of the preeminent works on becoming new faculty members at the college level is Boice’s *Advice for New Faculty Members*. Another work that is available for new faculty is McKeachie’s *Teaching Tips*. However, little has been done to examine the specific experiences of transitioning from teaching to becoming a trainer of teachers. It is this process and the experiences of those who have transitioned that interest the authors. One study was found that looked at the experiences of K-12 teachers who transfer into higher academia. LaRocco and Bruns (2006) conducted a qualitative study of early career professors who were previously practicing teachers to see how these individuals describe their experiences of transferring to the collegiate level, connections to the university community, and relationships with colleagues. The study sample was limited to subjects who had been in higher academia more than one year and less than six years. LaRocco and Bruns interviewed 11 people, with seven interviews conducted face-to-face and four over the phone. LaRocco and Bruns found that, “Despite the fact that the early career faculty in this exploratory study were practiced professionals, they experienced varying degrees of ambivalence about feeling prepared to teach at the college level, to conduct research, or to publish” (p. 638).

While the work of LaRocco and Bruns (2006) is enlightening, the study was narrowly focused on a set number of years of service and also limited in the number of subjects studied. It is with this in mind that the researchers decided to investigate the experiences of K-12 teachers who cross the bridge to life as academics.

Methodology

For this research, the methodology used is narrative inquiry, since it is the experiences and perceptions of those who have moved from one area of teaching into another that we, the researchers, are interested in understanding. Because the authors are interested in the personal experiences of those who have made the journey into higher education from the K-12 setting, the participants were asked eleven questions and also to create a metaphor to describe their journeys.

The research instrument employed was a survey with 12 open-ended questions. Prior to the formal administration of this survey, a field test was conducted to analyze its effectiveness. Participants were not restricted to choosing one answer; instead they were allowed to provide as detailed an answer as they wanted. The instrument was placed on the Internet using the *Survey Gold* program because it allowed the gathering of data from a diverse population and a large geographic group. The responses to the survey were coded and the researchers looked for common themes to emerge from each question. The data analysis is presented below followed by an evaluation of the responses.

The Study Population

The University of Texas at Austin hosts a website that lists most of the universities and colleges in the United States by state. We used this website as a starting point to find teacher education departments at various colleges of education or universities. Sites selected varied with regard to student population and degrees offered. The link to the survey was sent to 136 deans or department chairs across the United States who were asked to share the link with their faculty. At least one university/college in each of the 50 states was sent a link to the survey. We received 89 completed surveys from a total of 15 states.

Procedures

Completed surveys were organized according to the size of the university in which respondents were employed. Using U.S. News and World Report's method of categorizing institutions as a basis, the responses were placed in one of the following categories: national, large regional, small regional. By way of definition the national universities in this study have a large student population, offer a variety of doctoral programs, and are considered research-focused institutions. Large regional universities have student populations of approximately

12,000 and offer a select number of doctoral programs. Small regional institutions were identified as having a student population of less than 6,000 and having no doctoral programs. In this study there were 11 national, three large regional, and four small regional universities. Table 1 shows the number of teacher respondents by level from the K-12 group as well as building and system administrators who responded.

Table 1

K-12 Level Taught	Number of Respondents
K-5	35
6-8	15
9-12	27
Building Administrator	7
System Administrator	5

The researchers asked the participants what level they taught in public schools. Thirty-five respondents stated they taught previously in grades K-5, 15 in grades 6-8, and 27 in grades 9-12 (see Table 1). We also had seven who identified themselves as building level administrators and five who stated they were system level administrators. This response led us to believe that we were gathering data from a true cross section of the education field. When asked about their current position: one dean, 21 professors, 16 associate professors, 24 assistant professors, 14 instructors, four lecturers, seven adjunct faculty, and two listed other positions in colleges of education. We asked how long the respondents had taught at the collegiate level and the responses ranged from 5 to 31 years.

Results

After the data was reviewed and coded we found that the responses could be organized into two general categories: positive and negative. After organizing the responses representing positive/negative feelings, several themes were noted. Table 2 displays the themes stemming from the inquiry conducted at the three types of institutions.

Table 2

Inquiry	National	Large Regional	Small Regional
Reasons for transitioning from K-12 to higher education	Teach teachers 30% Do research 28% For freedom and flexibility 42%	Teach teachers 36% Do research 14% For freedom and flexibility 50%	Teach teachers 52% Do research 8% For freedom and flexibility 40%
Description of the experience during the transition	45% reported either politics, challenge or stress	36% reported either challenge or stress	13% reported either politics, challenge or stress
Perceived acceptance by new colleagues	35% not good	22% not good	17% not good
Comparison of workload between K-12 and university	85% reported the workload in higher education was the same or more	86% reported the workload in higher education was the same or more	87% reported the workload in higher education was the same or more
Metaphor describing the transition from K-12 to university	Upward: 53 % New Beginning: 15% Negative: 17% No Answer: 15%	Upward: 64 % New Beginning: 22% Negative: 0% No Answer: 14%	Upward: 65% New Beginning: 13% Negative: 10% No Answer: 12%

Control of Life

The participants in the study were asked what the main reasons were for them switching from K-12 to higher education. As can be seen in Table 2, responses to this question at each type of institution were organized according to the themes of freedom/flexibility, research interests, and opportunity to teach teachers. The responses that were classified in these themes varied greatly by the size and mission of the university in which the participants worked. For national universities, 28% of the responses referred to the desire to conduct research, engage in scholarship, and add to the current field of knowledge. The percentages of those wanting to conduct research dropped to 14% at large regional universities and 8% at small regional universities. An example of a response coded as research is: *“I wanted to have more of a global impact in math education.”* There was a reverse of this pattern in responses coded as the desire to teach teachers. At national universities 30% of responses were coded as wanting to teach

teachers and this rose to 36% at large regional universities and 52% at small regional universities. Some examples of the responses from those who desired to teach teachers are:

“Opportunity to impact more elementary students through producing strong teachers”; *“I felt I could affect the lives of more children by training future teachers”*.

One strong similarity across all three categories of educational institutions was that the majority of responses indicated a desire for freedom/flexibility. Examples of this include:

“Autonomy”; *“I thought it would be interesting, with MUCH more autonomy, and it was”*; *“More Freedom”*; *“Wanted Flexibility.”*

Challenge of Politics

The participants were asked to describe their experiences during the transition from K-12 to higher education. The majority of responses at all three levels (national, large regional, small regional) were positive when participants were asked to reflect on their transition (see Table 2). This positivity was illustrated with responses that used words such as *love, support, great, and good*. Notably, in the responses pertaining to the themes of challenge, stress, and politics, there was a higher percentage of negative responses from national universities, with large regional being second, and small regional having the fewest negative responses. Many of the responses that were coded as negative mentioned politics in the explanations. Illustrative of responses that dealt with politics were: *“The politics of higher ed. are...close to what I experienced as a K-12 teacher”*; *“I’m frustrated by the amount of politics and self-promotion that exists in higher education and the lack of respect for K-12 teachers”*; *“I was naively disappointed in the game playing that goes on at this level”*; *“Gaming for tenure was a shock as was the backstabbing”*; and, *“Very political.”*

Feelings about the challenges and stress of transitioning from K-12 to higher education were also evident in many of the responses. These included responses such as: *“At times confusing as no one tells you the details”*; *“LOTS of hard work getting up to speed”*; *“Lots to learn and become professor like”*; *“I thought that everyone knew so much more than I did about so many things”*; *“I found it hard to make time for writing and research”*; *“It was an adjustment to get used to so much more freedom in completing work tasks.”* As with any new position there is a learning curve and while these responses are not negative they do display the challenges that many new faculty members face when transitioning.

Acceptance

The participants were asked how well their colleagues in higher education accepted them. The answers given were simply coded as *accepted* and *not accepted*. This question did not elicit many in-depth responses, but the researchers were able to determine that 65% of those at national universities felt they were accepted; 78% at large regional universities felt they were accepted; and 83% at small regional universities felt they were accepted (see Table 2). The responses coded as *accepted* were usually one-word answers such as *great*, *terrific*, and *excellent*.

Unfortunately, there were many responses that indicated the participants did not feel they were accepted by their new colleagues in higher education: *“At first with skepticism, but gradually judged more on my abilities”*; *“They look down on the practitioner”*; *“Not very welcoming.”* There were several participants who suggested that outside the college of education they felt they were not as well accepted: *“Not as well accepted as those who see teacher education professors as lower status”*; *“Fine, no problems in COE but really dissed by English Department.”*

Workload

When asked to compare their workload between public education and higher education the respondents gave a wide range of answers. In reviewing the answers, we decided to simply separate the answers into three categories: more, same, and less. Within the workload category two themes kept reoccurring: flexible and intense. Flexibility was mentioned by many of the respondents in relation to managing their teaching and research.

For all three-sized institutions 85% or more of the responses indicated that the workload in higher education was equal to or more than what they experienced in K-12 (See Table 2). While many respondents did speak favorably about the flexibility they have in higher education, many also spoke about the demands of writing and publishing the research they are now expected to complete. This group’s responses are characterized by comments like as: *“More in higher ed. but the workload is self-imposed”*; *“You trade dependent students for your University independence”*; *“WAY more stress and WAY more work in higher education.”*

Some of the examples given when explaining why the work was harder were the expectation for service, publishing, as well as teaching. With regards to service, many of the

respondents spoke about the amount of committee work they were required to participate in and the amount of extra work that many of these committees can place on college faculty. With reference to workload challenges at the collegiate level, the amount of stress and the rigor involved in publishing was mentioned recurrently.

Responses that we identified in the category *same amount* were generally uninformative. However, one response summed it up as: “*Teaching is teaching.*” In the *less amount* of work category the respondents similarly did not provide much insight as to why they felt the way they did. One participant responded: “*I spend fewer hours at work;*” however, this response leads one to ask if s/he works more now from home than s/he did in the past.

Perception

We asked how the respondents’ perception of the world had changed since moving into higher academia. The responses to this question were coded as having a *greater awareness of issues affecting teaching and the world*, *narrow view of teaching and world*, and *power*. After reviewing the data it was determined there were not any significant differences in the percentages in regards to the size of the university. The largest percentage (61%) of answers were identified as having a greater awareness of issues affecting teaching and the world. The word *global* kept reoccurring throughout the responses that we identified in the theme of perceptual awareness. Two examples of this characterization are: “*My perception of the world has become more global*” and “*I see the world as a place that requires service in order to function well.*”

About 25% of the responses reflected a more narrow view of the world. These responses could also be considered as cynical. For example: “*College students seem less prepared than my middle school/high school students,*” and “*Yes, but mainly because I think I engage with the real world less since becoming part of academia.*” Many of the respondents stated their views of teacher education had changed since moving from the K-12 classroom. Some of the more interesting and telling responses to this question were: “*Being aware of the demands placed on classroom teachers today often makes me question whether I should be encouraging students to become teachers*”; “*As an outsider of K-12 I can now see just how hard I worked*”; “*I wish I knew what I know now about teaching and learning when I began teaching in public schools, I would have done a better job I think.*”

The final theme identified in the responses was one of a power struggle and 14% of the responses were coded in this category. It is important to note that the researchers did not delineate as to what the sides of the power struggle were. Two examples of responses in this category are: *“I feel as though I have more authority”*; *“Students have become extremely rude and disrespectful”*; *“I thought there would be more respect.”*

Construct a Metaphor of Your Personal Transition from K-12 to College

We began planning our research with the idea of using a metaphor – crossing the bridge – to describe the transition individuals experience when moving from K-12 situations to college teaching. We therefore asked the respondents to construct a summary metaphor of their experiences of moving from the K-12 environment into higher academia. The responses were coded as *bad to better*, *new*, and *negative beginning* (see Table 2). For all three categories of institutions the largest percentage of answers were coded as moving from bad to better. Examples of these are: *“Reading a script to writing a script”*; *“My match has become a torch”*; *“Reading the “Three Little Pigs” in kindergarten to reading brain research on the pigs and the wolf”*; *“I have the (academic) freedom to fly”*; *“University level teaching is like going from the minor leagues to the majors”*; *“Going from quick sand to terra firma”*; *“K-12 was a gerbil wheel while college is the open road.”*

The metaphor responses coded as negative reached 17% at national universities and 9% at small regional institutions. There were no negative metaphors given by respondents at the large regional institutions. Some of these responses were: *“From the frying pan into another frying pan”*; *“Finally made it to a high society party, found the people uninteresting and boring”*; *“I stepped from the Scrambler to the Merry Go Round, still active, still going round and round, but a little less scary”*; *“Out of the frying pan and into the fire.”* It was also at national universities where 45% of the respondents described their transition as negative.

The final theme identified in the metaphor responses we found was that of a new beginning. The percentage of responses ranged from 13% to 22% in the three categories of universities. Examples of these responses are: *“Like a plant blossoming from a seed into a flower”*; *“As a scholar-practitioner at the university level I am a butterfly who has emerged from my cocoon”*; *“Like a caged bird being set free.”* It must also be noted that out of the 89 surveys five participants used the butterfly emerging from a cocoon metaphor.

Discussion

Without a doubt there is a big difference between the life of a professor and the life of a K-12 teacher. Even though they are both educators, society has different expectations of each and they have different roles to fill. As the responses have shown there is a wide range of feelings that professors in higher education have towards their former jobs, current jobs, and future plans in higher academia. The responses indicate there is a difference in how professors view their new professional lives stemming from the size/mission of the university in which they teach.

Politics is a broad concept that can be used in a variety of ways. However, at the university level it is usually understood to be the relationships one experiences with their colleagues and administrators. At many universities (no matter size or mission) the rank structure is closely followed and it does not take long for a lecturer, instructor, or assistant professor to realize their place in that structure. Unfortunately there are many respondents who stated they had to learn that higher academia is a lone sport and there are those few who will not help a new professor. This is exemplified in responses such as: *“Not very welcoming”* and *“Gaming for tenure was a shock as was the backstabbing.”*

There is a continuous assault on teacher education programs and although this is blatantly clear on the national political level it is also clear on many campuses across the U.S. While those in the Arts and Sciences may not come right out and say anything to our faces their actions speak volumes. The aura of inferiority can be felt even on campuses where the college of education is the “cash cow” for the university. However, those of us who have spent any time in a K-12 classroom can attest to the importance of pedagogy, theory, management, and child development.

The K-12 and university environments both involve the teaching of students. However, while you may have some duties in K-12 settings that are outside of teaching, at the university level teaching is usually less than half of what you are expected to do. Also, since most professors are able to establish their own faculty plan of how much time they want to spend on teaching, research, and service, it is easy to understand how different the university environment is from K-12. Many of the professors emphasized the amount of work they must carry home whether it is grading, research, or just answering e-mails.

Those who do move to higher education are able to conduct research on a larger scale and with more resources than the public school teacher. We felt these responses displayed a level of commitment that many teacher education faculty members have towards the field of education. When a professor is teaching a class of 30 future teachers, they have the ability to influence the future educational experiences of at least 800 elementary students per year. At the secondary level that number can grow to over 4,000 students per year. When viewed in this light, the need for quality teacher education programs and for qualified faculty in those programs becomes apparent. When the K-12 teacher moves to higher education, they do not quit impacting the lives of children: in fact they can impact more lives.

Since most of participants had noted that they had worked in K-12 public education while completing their terminal degrees, it is easy to understand why most were not aware of all the work that college faculty are expected to complete. As we know in order to achieve promotion and tenure, faculty members must research, publish, and show high levels of service at all levels in the university. In regards to promotion and tenure, it was mentioned by three respondents that these cause stress and it is hard to find a balance between teaching and other duties. Three respondents mentioned they enjoyed the theoretical discourses they were now allowed to have with their colleagues.

It may be assumed that a college professor will see their disciplines in a more global sense due to their service on committees and their own research. While a classroom teacher is enclosed in a classroom within a single community that will not see drastic changes every year, the college professor will have students who are from different communities, states, and nations. College professors are more apt to research issues that are comparatively global as opposed to instructors who are confined to K-12 classrooms. However, the college classroom is not “the real world.” In the K-12 setting, all students are allowed to be educated while at the university only those that are financially able to pay for tuition have that opportunity.

Since the college classroom is not an economic microcosm of society it is easy to understand why some respondents felt they are no longer in “the real world.” Still, it was evident that, overall, most professors are happy with their career change and while they may miss certain aspects of teaching K-12 they would much rather stay in higher academia. This study shows that while professors are not in direct contact with K-12 students everyday they feel that they do have

the opportunity to be a positive influence in students' lives; educating future teachers to be effective in dealing with K-12 students can be intrinsically rewarding.

Perhaps the most significant finding in this study has to do with the themes of freedom and flexibility. Across the survey these terms would appear frequently in describing how professors feel about their current roles in higher academia. Many alluded to the freedom and flexibility in managing their own schedules, academic freedom, and having a feeling of autonomy. This may suggest that one of the most important aspects of being a professor is freedom of the mind. At the university level one can ponder, think, theorize, and philosophize instead of being expected to follow a set lesson based on state standards. As professors we need to appreciate this freedom and use it to help our students see new possibilities.

Implications for Further Research:

Using this study as a starting point, there are several implications for future research. We have already begun a similar study asking public school teachers their experiences with and perceptions of former colleagues who have moved to higher education. To develop a full view of this transitional process we need to understand the opinions of those who decide not to move into higher education. Implementing this follow-up study at the national level to public schools has been a chore. We have sent out surveys to over 100 high school principals across the nation and have not received any responses—an outcome which in itself may signal a difference in workload and time that has to be allotted to high school teaching. This is an area that we will continue to work on to develop a population sample that will help us further our research. The authors would also like to see this survey implemented at the international level to compare and contrast the teaching traditions of other countries with those in the United States.

In closing we would like to offer our own metaphor of the transition from K-12 to higher academia; crossing the bridge. While we have crossed to the other side, the bridge is intact and we can still journey back to K-12 and be in contact with students and practicing teachers. We can help guide those who want to join us in higher academia. Finally, since we do have a broader view, we can hopefully conduct research that will help those in the K-12 setting.

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