

This Isn't Dress Rehearsal: A Study of the Beliefs of Nontraditional Teacher Candidates as Career Changers

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This study examined the beliefs about teaching of 6 nontraditional teacher candidates who identified themselves as career changers. In-depth interviews regarding their academic histories, previous careers, teacher preparation experiences, and general philosophy about school improvement were used for cross-case analysis. Results suggest that nontraditional candidates who are enabled to identify with the new role of teacher, develop an inquiry focus on teaching and learning, and reconcile adult developmental issues as they pursue a new career have strongly held beliefs that are compatible with contemporary expectations for teaching K-12 schools.

Twenty-five years ago, Lortie (1975) described nontraditional teacher candidates from other fields as a small pool of "counteridentifiers" who were inclined to "innovate more and show greater readiness to accept change in school organization" than were typical teacher candidates (1975, p. 230). Although Lortie did not go into much detail about the particular characteristics of career changers who wanted to teach, his statement hinted at some kind of compatibility between the characteristics of nontraditional teacher candidates and the ongoing demands of change in schools. Since Lortie's book, there has been an increasing interest in the particular characteristics of nontraditional teacher candidates, especially those who have changed or switched careers to become teachers (e.g., Birrell, 1992; Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Feistritzer & Chester, 2000; Freidus, 1992; Powell & Merseth, 1994; Rodriguez & Sjoström, 1998). The development of post baccalaureate and graduate degree programs leading to teacher licensure has contributed to the increase of nontraditional teacher candidates in the United States (Eifler & Pontiff, 1998). So, too, has the viability of alternative certification programs that enable nontraditional teacher candidates to become fasttracked into available teaching positions by means of special training programs and hiring agreements (Sandlin, 1993). At the beginning of the new millennium, more than half the people admitted to teacher preparation programs come from occupations outside education (Bradley, 1999).

The anticipated need for 2.2 million new classroom teachers in the United States by the year 2004 has become the concern of not only the educational community but of policy makers and the voting public as well. The current emphasis on content standards, high stakes testing, and legislative mandates to reduce class size in American schools makes a good argument for the quick training and hiring of an available pool of candidates who already hold baccalaureate degrees in academic areas. It is assumed that

nontraditional teacher candidates from other fields, who are well into adulthood, could more easily meet the current expectations for higher professional standards. Yet, despite the fact that these arguments make "common sense" to many stockholders in education, little is known as to whether or not these candidates are a good match for the demands of a proactive approach to teaching embodied by modern ideas for school reform.

We do know that some teachers function as "agents of change" by means of their connectedness to the cultures of schools and the complexities of school change (Sarason, 1971). These teachers are "proactive teachers who make substantive decisions that alter traditional practices found in classrooms" (Goodman, 1987). They conceive the teacher's role as an active one, and they are critical and creative thinkers. Teachers who are agents of change tend to regard student diversity as an asset to the teaching/learning experience. Their relationships with the school and community are integrated. Teachers who are agents of change also share control with others. Moreover, they are willing to depart from official curriculum or disobey official regulations when established guidelines interfere with the welfare of learners (Teacher Belief Inventory, Posner, 1989). Having worked as a teacher educator with nontraditional candidates for more than 10 years, I became concerned about whether or not career changers hold beliefs about teaching and change that match some of the current expectations for teachers as proactive professionals. Trends, such as the standards movement, site-based management, and the professionalization of teaching, now have a great impact on life in schools. Although career changers may bring maturity and experience to the teaching profession, do they conceive their new role as teacher as that of becoming a change agent?

In this article, I describe and discuss the beliefs of six nontraditional teacher candidates who identified themselves as career changers. By using in-depth interviews regarding

their academic histories, previous careers, teacher preparation experiences, and general philosophy about school improvement, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of career changers' beliefs and values about teaching and change. Because "the measures for entrance into the profession usually do not look for depth of analysis, challenging conceptions, and professional efficacy" (Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1998, p. 185), I chose to engage these nontraditional teacher candidates in extensive conversations about their career transitions. These conversations helped elicit their beliefs and values through deep descriptions of their personal and professional histories. Thus, I was able to identify characteristics of career changers who hold proactive beliefs about teaching and change, as well as some of the elements that help contribute to the development of those beliefs.

Theoretical Framework

A career is "an accumulation of role-related experiences over time" (Louis, 1970, p. 330) and includes non-professional work and central life roles, such as parenthood. When making a career transition, an individual must examine the internal or subjective aspects of careers, including changes in attitudes and values, needs and aspirations, self-assessments, and self-concept in relation to the new role. These subjective differences are combined with the more publicly knowable aspects of change, such as the objective features of a new role or setting.

Contrasts or "surprises" emerge in the career transition when there are gaps between the anticipations and the actual experiences in the new role. These surprises help the person in transition to make sense of his or her new role by shedding light from newly gained and previously unavailable first-hand knowledge of the situation. Through sense-making, what is new, different, and what was unanticipated becomes integrated into the transitioner's cognitive map (Louis, 1970). Fullan (1982) wrote that learning how to implement educational change requires skills and experiences that must, to a significant extent, be learned on the job. This hypothesis suggests that beginning teachers will be weak change agents. Zeichner (1983) and Goodman (1987), however, both demonstrated that some beginning teachers have the potential to influence changes in education, especially if they employ reflective practices and receive appropriate professional support within the first years of teaching. Goodman identified these teachers as "proactive" because they made substantive decisions that altered traditional practices found in schools (1987, p. 208). Proactive teachers could effect change in part because they held broadened conceptions of teaching, initiated change without alienating school authorities, and formed support networks with other progressive individuals within the school setting (Goodman, 1986).

Although within recent years there has been some research that explores the characteristics of nontraditional teacher candidates in the areas of gender differences, teacher

development, and pedagogical constructs (Freidus, 1992; Powell & Birrell, 1992; Powell & Riner, 1992), little is known about whether or not career changers hold proactive beliefs about teaching. Some of the literature on beginning teachers, however, does support the idea that career changers may have special qualities that set them apart from typical beginning teachers.

For example, Goodlad (1990) found that the strong drive to become teachers was particularly obvious in nontraditional teacher candidates. This group had a strong desire to begin teaching as soon as possible and chose teacher education institutions on the basis of convenience and thus offering a best chance at local teaching positions. Freidus and Krasnow (1991) examined the perceptions about teaching held by career changers at the time of their career transitions. As they entered into their student teaching internships, the career changers not only wanted to serve society as teachers, but they also saw themselves as "agents of social change" who could "repay" society by making the world a better place. At the conclusion of their teacher preparation, however, their views became more realistic concerning the extent to which they could actually "make a difference in the lives of children and, ultimately, the state of the world" (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991, p. 12). They realized early in their teaching experience that, as in most of their former professions, teaching is socially and politically contextualized. This understanding and identification of the teaching context gave them a more mature and realistic perspective from which to proceed in their work (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991).

A review of the results of research-based studies on the characteristics of nontraditional adult teacher education students revealed both strengths and weaknesses of the students (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). Strengths of older teacher candidates included well-articulated reasons for wanting to become teachers; identification with students by teaching in home communities; and the ability to be flexible and cope with change. In addition to the typical problems encountered by beginning teachers, such as classroom management, evaluation, and interactions with different groups, certain weaknesses specific to older teacher candidates were identified. These weaknesses included a limited or parochial view of instruction; discomfort in the novice status of beginning teacher; inability to transfer skills from previous occupations into lessons useful for students; disillusionment and frustration with some of the conditions of public education; and additional financial burdens incurred as part of the transition into teaching (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998).

In a comparison of the beliefs and teaching behaviors of traditional and nontraditional teacher candidates, Rodriguez and Sjostrom (1998) found that nontraditional candidates were generally more comfortable about teaching than were their younger peers. Nontraditional candidates were categorized as being reflective practitioners who were self-directed and exhibited professional efficacy. Nontraditional teacher candidates were focused on their

students' learning and development. They were future oriented and saw their teaching experience as a developmental process. Finally, they were aware of the culture and politics of schools and were able to develop collaborative professional relationships. Traditional teacher candidates, on the other hand, reflected little on their teaching; focused on their teaching performance rather than on their students' learning; were concerned about the present; and were dependent upon the directions of others.

Method

This study is a cross-case analysis of six nontraditional teacher candidates who changed careers to become teachers. Data for the study were collected in two phases. In the first phase, the Teacher Belief Inventory (TBI) (Posner, 1989) was administered to a large sample of 58 teacher candidates who were enrolled in graduate level teacher certification programs in the Metropolitan New York City area and who had identified themselves as career changers. The TBI version used for this study is a 57-item questionnaire adapted from a shorter instrument originally developed by Zeichner and Tabachnick (1984). It is a self-assessment tool for teacher candidates that helps them "examine [their] initial perspectives" on teaching (Posner, 1989, p. 93). The TBI was chosen because it employs a continuum of beliefs ranging from a passive acceptance of the existing conditions of teaching (low scores) to a proactive approach to teaching (high scores). However, for use in this study, the TBI was subjected to SPSS alpha tests of reliability. The alpha reliability for the total scale was found to be .75.

In the second phase of the study, six participants were drawn at random from the total score distribution of the TBI: two from the lowest third, two from the middle third, and two

from the top third. This strategy was in keeping with Tabachnik & Zeichner's (1984) original use of the instrument as a means of stratifying a sample prior to conducting case studies. This strategy also ensured some degree of difference in the beliefs held by the participants for the purpose of cross-case analysis. The participants included two females and four males; one African American, one Latina, and four White candidates. Five were 25 to 30 years old ("early" career changers), and one was age 45, a "second wave" career changer (see Merseth, 1994).

An interview schedule of 47 open-ended questions was used that had been piloted in a preliminary study on the beliefs of career changers (Murphy, 1991). The questions were aligned with items from the TBI and asked the candidates to provide critical incidents that typified their relationships with other members of the school community, changes they had made regarding curriculum and instruction, and their willingness to participate in the school change process. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Transcripts of the interviews were coded using the categories from the TBI and then given to six peer debriefers for their review (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, an adaptation of the "file folder" method described by Merriam (1988) was used to sort the coded transcripts and create categories for the findings.

Findings

Table 1 displays the characteristics of nontraditional teacher candidates from other fields who hold proactive beliefs about teaching. These characteristics are divided into three categories: (a) identification with the role of teacher, (b) inquiry focus, and (c) resolution of adult developmental issues. Although the characteristics were derived from the cross-analysis of all six cases, a preponderance of proactive

Table 1
Characteristics of Nontraditional Teacher Candidates Who Hold Proactive Beliefs About Teaching

Category	Characteristics
Identification with the role of teacher	Learning from other teachers Empathy with students Willingness to implement teaching/learning
Inquiry focus	Reflection on teaching/learning Assessment of learners' needs
Resolution of adult developmental issues	Reality testing Compromise

beliefs was evidenced in the cases of the two candidates who had moderate scores on the TBI. An interrater reliability of 80 percent for the coding of the transcripts was determined.

In the following section, I explain each of the three categories of the characteristics of nontraditional candidates who hold proactive beliefs about teaching. It contains representative comments from the interviews that lend credibility to the categories as areas for self-assessment and reflection in teacher preparation.

Identification with the Role of Teacher

In order to effect change in schools, nontraditional teacher candidates must first identify with their new role as teacher. Identification assumes that the internalizing of many of the values of a committed and dedicated teacher has taken place, despite the candidate's neophyte status and lack of expertise.

Career changers who have proactive beliefs about teaching learn from other teachers. They have respect for and admire classroom teachers and university instructors who can model best teaching practices. Conversely, career changers who have proactive beliefs do not assume they "know it all." They learn from the successes and shortcomings of other teachers, whom they now consider to be colleagues.

Career changers who have proactive beliefs develop empathy with students. This is especially important because the majority of the teacher candidate pool continues to be white and middle class, even though many beginning teachers may have their first teaching assignments in schools with large minority populations and/or children placed at risk. Nontraditional candidates must be equipped, both emotionally and by virtue of the quality of their new training, to implement teaching and learning within an array of contexts and situations. The standards movement and high stakes testing, for example, make it imperative that even beginning teachers must positively affect student learning.

The following examples from the interviews demonstrate how nontraditional candidates identify with the new role of teacher:

Candidate 2: During my teacher education, I worked harder than any other time in my life. I really wanted to do well.

Candidate 5: I'd like to be like the teachers that I see who've been doing it for 20 or 30 years and love it. I just want to be half what they are. I just feel I have an awful lot ahead of me to learn.

Candidate 4: My reading course was one of the best courses I took because it really taught me how to interact and a lot of it was simply by the modeling the instructor used. She would go back and explain what she did and that probably started my development toward being able to transfer skills from college down to a high school teaching level.

Candidate 4: I want to be approachable because

if you want to talk about it in terms of business, the students are clients, and so if they can't approach you or come to you, then you're not doing your job.

Candidate 2: I treat them as if they were my own children.

Candidate 3: I'm not afraid to make a mistake. I can make fun of myself.

Inquiry Focus

Nontraditional teacher candidates who hold proactive beliefs have an inquiry focus on their teaching. They view teaching as simultaneously benefiting themselves and their students. They reflect on the quality of their teaching performance and how it impacts student learning. By examining the connections between teaching and learning, they assess the needs of their students as part of continuous improvement.

The following quotations from the interviews suggest the teacher candidates' inquiry focus on their teaching:

Candidate 4: I have to change my examples so the students understand the message in a different example that is relevant to their lives, and that's what I still have to work out. I am getting better at it.

Candidate 4: I was using bigger terms, but I let the students speak in the language they wanted to speak in. I thought it was very positive because they expressed their views. They were good views and they knew what was going on and a lot of people say they don't. They were appreciative of the fact that I was a receptive audience.

Candidate 4: So I just had to refocus in terms of this lesson that I had originally planned to take 10 minutes and make it two weeks! And that's fine because I'm realizing that my initial outline was probably for college level, and that's the whole learning process.

Candidate 4: If the students are interested in the material, then they're going to be motivated, and then you can build the skills. And bring the students, using those skills as a stepping stone, to the expectations I have.

Candidate 3: I negotiated with the kids ... and I think that probably made me connect with the kids as much as I did because I was reasonable. A win-win situation.

Resolution of Adult Developmental Issues

Although many nontraditional teacher candidates are technically in early adulthood, they experience the pressures of the "deadline decade" bearing down on them. They believe that by age 30, they must have made a final commitment to a career that will be compatible with personal and societal goals, such as marriage and having families. By becoming a teacher, they forego their prior attempts at various types of

work in order to focus solely on the one career that will, hopefully, integrate their intellectual, emotional, and social needs (Murphy, 1991).

In order for this resolution to take place, nontraditional teacher candidates who want to make a difference for students use the teacher preparation experience as a testing ground for who they are and who they want to become as teachers and mature adults. Through reality testing and practicing the art of compromise, nontraditional candidates begin to find their place in a profession that, under certain conditions, can afford them the kind of psychological rewards they desire.

The interviews for this study afforded the following examples of resolution through reality testing and compromise:

Candidate 2: I have to slow down because I'm used to meeting deadlines. But that was dealing with paper work, and this is dealing with children's lives where little things cannot be so easily fixed.

Candidate 2: I think that even though my life has not always been that easy, that all these things are good character builders. They give me a good perspective on life and that is something I can use with the kids.

Candidate 5: I just decided that I really wanted to go into a profession where money is not really an issue and I'll never be obsolete because I'll always be able to make a contribution as a teacher.

Candidate 5: Compared to other professions, teaching is more in tune with the problems of society.

Candidate 5: I think you have to be kind of teflon-coated and let a lot of things slide off. I think I'm good at that—not to take things so personally.

Candidate 5: I feel bad for those student teachers who have had a brutal experience. It's hard enough doing this for the first time.

Candidate 3: And the risk ... I have a mortgage. I have car payments. I have debt from credit cards. Making this decision of how I'm going to cover myself for a year. And even then, who knows if I can get a job when I graduate. And then, can I be a good teacher?

Candidate 3: You have to work hard to excel. You don't necessarily have to be the most talented person. It's just hard work, and that can be brought to school work or life.

Candidate 3: This isn't dress rehearsal. This is real life.

Discussion

Although this study relied primarily on the self-reports of the participants and is limited by its sampling method, the results suggest that some nontraditional teacher candidates

who are career changers do hold beliefs that reflect a proactive approach to teaching. These beliefs are compatible with modern ideas for school reform that emphasize the teacher as decision maker, learner centeredness of the curriculum, connectedness to parents and the community, and the professionalization of teaching.

In this section, I make some comparisons of the key features from the six cases. This is done to emphasize the subtle yet important differences among the individuals in terms of their personal histories, backgrounds, and beliefs which they bring to bear in their new careers as teachers.

The Moderate Scoring Candidates

Analysis of the interviews of the two males who had moderate scores on the TBI revealed a complexity of thought that took into consideration the personal, professional, and political realities of teaching in today's schools. This complexity was not evidenced to the same degree in the interviews of the other candidates. This finding was surprising because it had been assumed the teacher candidates who had high scores on the TBI (i.e., "proactive"; see Goodman, 1987) would have projected similar, proactive beliefs in their interviews. But this was found not to be so. Instead, the high scoring candidates, as well as the two candidates who had low scores on the TBI, projected beliefs about teaching that are, for the most part, asynchronous with current ideas for school reform. These beliefs include that (a) teaching is a competitive endeavor; (b) there is nothing that can be done to help some learners; and (c) teaching is an occupation rather than a profession.

It should be noted that the moderate scoring candidates had several features in common about their backgrounds. Both had business degrees; they had prior experience in designing and delivering services customized to the needs of clients; and they spoke of themselves in terms of being team members who were mentored by senior partners. Both had left the business world because they were disenchanted by a perceived lack of ethics, and both had experienced a full-time substitute teacher internship in a large, comprehensive high school.

The High Scoring Candidates

In contrast, the two females who had high scores on the TBI had undergone teacher preparation programs (one in elementary education and one in special education) at a large research institution known for its progressive approach to education. Although both high scoring candidates projected many "proactive" beliefs about teaching as measured on the TBI, they failed to project similar beliefs in their interviews. It is possible that their beliefs on the TBI reflected more of what they had learned in their graduate studies than what they believed at a deeper level, as projected in the interviews. Both high scoring candidates were tentative about their plans to remain in teaching. Both revealed that becoming a teacher was compatible with their long range

goals for marriage, parenthood, and further graduate study.

The Low Scoring Candidates

As anticipated, the two males who had low scores on the TBI projected beliefs about teaching that were predominantly conventional. One candidate (a secondary education major) had spent the bulk of his internship substitute teaching in a middle school in which he covered very challenging special needs classes. It was not surprising that his interview revealed a sense of concern about the social issues surrounding education, with little mention of curriculum and teaching. This perspective may also have been related to his desire to go on to become a school counselor rather than remain a classroom teacher.

The second low scoring candidate was unique among the six cases for several reasons. First, he was 45 years old, which made him what many consider to be a "true" career changer. Next, as a former photographer and artist, he had spent his career doing freelance work because he had experienced difficulty working in companies where he felt the jobs were too prescribed or confining. At the time he was interviewed, he had been working as a long-term substitute teacher in an elementary school computer class. Finally, although he had taken advantage of a state-funded grant that subsidized 12 credits of graduate study toward teacher certification for minority teachers, he had not enrolled in a formal teacher preparation program. For this reason, he had not received the academic and field supports typically afforded beginning teachers in university or district sponsored programs. In addition, since he was not a regularly appointed teacher, he had not received standard supervision from the school district.

In summary, this study demonstrates that screening tools, such as the TBI, may be useful for helping nontraditional teacher candidates reflect on their initial beliefs about teaching and learning, but do not necessarily match candidates' more deeply held orientations toward the field of education. A deeper analysis of candidates' beliefs, as represented here, shows that there is clearly a range of beliefs held by career changers, as would be expected to be found in any pool of novice teachers. Some of those beliefs match a proactive orientation to teaching, while others do not. Although career changers bring rich life experiences to teaching, much has yet to be learned about how to educate them effectively and expeditiously as part of the quick response to the impending teacher shortage (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). The proliferation of alternative routes to teacher certification and post-baccalaureate and graduate programs in teacher preparation (Feistritzer & Chester, 2000) demonstrate the considerable investment being made by many states and teacher education institutions to recruit and prepare career changers. However, those candidates whose orientations include a balanced view of the aspirations and limitations in the field of education may have the best chances for continuing as agents of change. Because the beginning teacher's experience is a complex interplay

between the beginning teacher's self-discovery and the conditions of the workplace (Featherstone, 1993), deliberate attention must be given to creating professional pathways in which nontraditional candidates can best identify with their new role, develop an inquiry focus on teaching and learning, and reconcile adult developmental issues as they pursue a new career.

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