Tensions in Learning to Teach

Studying Identity and Excellence in Pre-Service English Teachers
Why Excellence & Teacher Ed?

Schools must be staffed with “high-quality” teachers who can assure “excellence” in education in every classroom in the United States (NCLB, 2003).

Little consensus exists on what exactly excellence in teaching entails (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Getzels & Jackson, 1963).

Terms like *excellence* and *quality* are inherently complex and subjective concepts; as concepts of value, they must be problematized and discussed, not as absolutes, but as constructions of understanding (Wang, Lin, Spalding, Klecka, & Odell, 2011).
Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2006) argued that one of the central problems with NCLB and, more generally, with U.S. educational policy, was the failure to problematize teaching, and the “cement[ing] into law [of] a particular (and, we would argue, narrow) perspective on teacher quality—one that targets training and testing as the bottom lines of educational process and stubbornly ignores the fact that many issues related to knowledge and teaching are contested” (p. 670).
Guiding Questions

1. How do these novice teachers conceptualize the purpose and importance of secondary English education?

2. What practices and behaviors do these novice teachers see as emblematic of excellence in the teaching of English?

3. Did the perceptions of these pre-service teachers regarding excellence in the teaching of English change throughout the course of their practicum, student teaching, and first year in the classroom? If so, how did they change?
1. Literature exploring the importance of the concept of excellence (Aristotle, trans. 1934; Rawls, 1971)

2. Literature describing the formation of pre-service and novice teacher identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Bullough, 2005)

3. Literature establishing the tension between constructions of excellence and understandings of identity (Alsup, 2006; Pillen, Den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013)
Research Paradigm

Interpretive/Constructivist Paradigm of Educational Research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Focus is on “study[ing] things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).
Data Collection & Analysis

• Data Collection
  • In-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2006)
  • Participant observation (Yin, 1994)
  • Content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006)

• Data Analysis
  • Constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
  • Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994)
Findings

1. Candidates believe that primary purpose of English education is the development of critical thinking and evaluative skill (constant throughout study)

2. Early conceptions of excellent teaching tended to be one dimensional, but as teacher candidates accrued experience, these conceptions were broadened and deepened

3. Satisfaction and success for these novice teachers correlates with their ability to reconcile to their own sense of identity with this newly complicated construction of excellent teaching
Finding 1: Purpose

English education “is necessary to provide our citizens with higher order thinking skills to ensure independent thought and discussion of complex issues that affect our lives”

English education allows students to “discern whether or not information is true and evaluate and apply that information if it is true”

English education is a defense against “predatory and exploitative people who want to capitalize on their [students] lack of knowledge and literacy”
Finding 2: Definitions

Early unidimensional constructions tended center on either mimetic or transformative conceptions of teaching (Jackson, 1986).

Mimetic teaching: “transmission of factual and procedural knowledge from one person to another” (p. 117).

Transformative teaching: “to bring about changes in their students (and possibly in themselves as well) that make them better persons, not simply more knowledgeable or more skillful, but better in the sense of being closer to what humans are capable of becoming—more virtuous, fuller participants in an evolving moral order” (p. 127).
Finding 2: Tensions

Discontinuity between initial construction of excellent teaching and contextual factors led to identity tensions and reconstruction of definition.
Finding 3: Reconciliation

Success and satisfaction linked to ability to adjust conception of excellent teaching and reconcile that conception with teacher identity.
David’s “Telling Case”

The *telling case* (Ellen, 1984) can “serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent" (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239)
Excellent teaching is the mastery and delivery of a pre-existing body of content and pedagogical knowledge.

“the technical aspects of pedagogy, namely instruction, assessment and management, set up any teacher to be successful.”

Teacher Identity: a “deliverer of knowledge,” an inheritor and wielder of a body of technical knowledge already established and mastered by past teachers.
“She [his mentor teacher] was very passionate in her work and trying to instill that with students, even when the lesson was nothing quite innovative or cutting-edge, that ‘old school’ teaching. Her genuinely caring persona made for excellent teaching because the students realized her effort to connect and inspire, but she differed from me in that I was focused on using a varied repertoire of pedagogies I was learning.”
“There were multiple times where I felt as if I was failing certain students because I wasn't challenging them enough, or other students were getting left behind because I couldn't work individually with them and keep up with the rest of the class. There were a particular handful of students, mostly young male students, who really enjoyed having me as a teacher and somebody to talk to, but academically, we butted heads many times, so I felt like I never really helped them learn.”
David’s New Construction

“\textquote I took a lot away from realizing it’s not all about those technical aspects, and that I can get much more genuine growth from students from being a human and not just that person standing at the front of the classroom all day.\textquotefont"
David’s Struggle

Struggle to incorporate the role of caring nurturer and to value teaching outcomes beyond transmittal of information

Alsup (2006)—gendered authority

Noddings (2001)—gender and care
David’s Success

Spent year as one-on-one paraeducator

Learned to be comfortable as both caretaker and pedagogical expert

Identities are not mutually exclusive

Now successful middle school teacher
Kate’s Counterpoint

Kate’s Early Definition: Excellent teaching is “inspirational” and “energetic” resulting in students gaining a “passion for learning”

Kate’s Current reality: “I am now learning how to meet the needs of a student who hates women and yells out curse words randomly. I am learning how to meet the needs of 7th graders who cannot read. I am learning how to meet the needs of students who do not speak English and do not have parental figures in their lives.”
Significance

Address issues of attrition (Hong, 2010; Pillen et al., 2013)

- 60% of newly credentialed teachers never enter the profession
- 30-50% percent of remainder leave the profession within the first five years (Cooper & Alvarado, 2006)
“professional identity tensions may be affected by the support and other activities provided by teacher educators and mentor schools” (Pillen et al., 2013, p. 95)

“in order to become successful teachers, university students must develop a holistic understanding of their personal and professional identities and the intersections and contradictions among them” (Alsup, 2006, p. 15)
Recommendation

This study moves toward recommending that teacher educators:

1) analyze their own contexts to understand how their pre-service teachers are struggling to synthesize the competing conceptions of excellent teaching inherent being both challenged and reinforced by their work in university classrooms and K-12 schools.

2) explicitly discuss constructions of excellence with their pre-service teachers and reinforce the fact that a variety of indicators exist by which teachers can measure their own success.
References


References


Thank you very much for your time!

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