The Importance of Managing Expectations: A Challenge for Teacher

Preparation Programs

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Abstract

Pre-service teachers often enter teacher preparation programs with rigid expectations of what teaching will be like. Unfortunately, these expectations are often misaligned with reality, and pre-service teachers often imagine a world in which the emotional or affective outcomes of their work will take precedence over content-based student learning outcomes. Unfortunately, this inspiration/content dichotomy is often reinforced by popular representations of teachers. If unchecked, these misaligned expectations can lead to practice shock, the disorienting, disillusioning, and sometimes traumatic identity crisis that often accompanies the first year of teaching. The challenge for teacher preparation programs is to create intentional and structured reflective spaces in which pre-service teachers can confront and revise their expectations of teaching before they enter the field.

The Importance of Managing Expectations: A Challenge for Teacher Preparation

Programs

I recently asked an undergraduate in our teacher preparation program what she imagined her future classroom would be like. "I want my students to feel comfortable to ask questions when they don't understand something," she replied. "I don't want my students to feel pressured or discouraged. My classroom will be a place where my future students will feel that they can do anything they put their mind to and be successful."

I am grateful for her response, though I am troubled by it. By her own admission, this candidate has "always wanted" to be a teacher. Like many of her classmates, she tells stories of lining up her dolls and playing classroom as young girl, and she's sought out every opportunity she can to place herself in the role of a teacher, whether that means leading Sunday school or working as a camp counselor. Though she has not yet begun her field experiences, she has spent hours imagining what her classroom will look like, what she'll say to her students, and how they'll respond to her. She's envisioned scenario after scenario, interaction after interaction, and, as a result, she's developed a firm and resolute understanding of her role and relationship with her students. She knows what her classroom will be like, and, perhaps more importantly, she knows exactly how she will be in her classroom.

Misaligned Expectations

Unfortunately, the world that this candidate has imagined does not exist. Specifically, she has constructed a world in which the emotional or affective outcomes of her work will take precedence over content-based student learning outcomes, in which what her students can *do* won't be nearly as important as what her student *feel*. This

separation of teaching into opposing outcomes is called the inspiration/content dichotomy (Delamarter, 2015). It divides education into binary categories: teachers can either inspire – that is, address the emotional and subjective domains of the heart – or they can teach content – the intellectual and objective domains of the mind. Furthermore, emotional outcomes are to be privileged over the merely academic. In fact, according to this construct, content-based instruction sometimes operates at cross-purposes with the true aims of education. Remember: the classroom is a place for students to "*feel* like they can do anything they put their minds to."

In extreme form, the inspiration/content dichotomy creates a condition in which emotional and academic outcomes are mutually exclusive. The teacher who focuses on content delivery necessarily abandons her ability to nurture her students' hearts and souls, just as the emotionally-focused teacher must first jettison content-heavy curricula in order to "make a difference" in students' lives. Thus, in many of our candidates' minds, the world is divided into inspiration *or* content, the emotional *or* the academic.

Unfortunately, these divisions are reinforced by popular representations of teachers. For example, decades of popular Hollywood teacher movies have foregrounded the role of emotions in the classroom while downplaying the role of academics. In *Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Henderson, Witt, Thomas, & Weir, 1989), English teacher Mr. Keating claims to be at war against "armies of academics," battling not for students' minds but for their "hearts and souls." After literally shredding the content-based curriculum prescribed by the administration, he reveals his true purposes. "In my class," he tells his students, "you will learn to savor words and language." Savoring – that is, taking "lingering pleasure or delight in" (Savor, Def 5c) – is more important than

studying; the emotional response trumps intellectual inquiry. As a result, Mr. Keating's

students never analyze meter, form, allusion, rhyme scheme, or any other formal poetic

elements. Instead, their interaction with poetry is solely emotional, designed not to make

them think but rather to make them feel. But this is as it should be, because Mr. Keating's

learning targets are emotional, not academic; and, according to the film, that's precisely

what makes him a good teacher.

By and large, Hollywood teacher films promote a version of good teaching based

more on inspiration and emotional catharsis than on content delivery and measurable

student learning (Barlowe & Cook, 2015; Dalton, 1995, 2010; Rehm, 2015). In this

model, good teachers are agents of transformation, exposing and upending the social

structures that keep their students locked in cycles of dysfunction. They view official or

sanctioned knowledge as an acculturating tool that is irrelevant at best and oppressive at

worst, and their "goodness" is first established when they abandon the curriculum.

Thus, Mr. Holland from *Mr. Holland's Opus* (Cort, Duncan, Field, James,

Kroopf, Nolin, Teitler, & Herek, 1995), isn't a good teacher until he stops teaching

classical music and starts teaching rock and roll just as Mrs. Gruell in *Freedom Writers*

(Devito, Durning, Glick-Franzheim, Levine, Morales, Shamberg, Sher, Swank, &

LaGravenese, 2007) doesn't connect with her students until she stops teaching grammar

and starts teaching them how to stand up against race-based social injustice. In *Mona*

Lisa Smile (Goldsmith-Thomas, Schindler, Schiff, Konner, Rosenthal, & Newell, 2004),

Katherine Watson abandons her art history curriculum on the second day of class and

embarks instead on a mission to help her 1950s female students escape the shackles of

patriarchal expectations. In each of these cases, the teachers are champions of their

students' liberty and self-fulfillment. Consequently, they are perpetually at odds with administrators, parents, and other status-quo representatives who would keep students in their place. Their fitness as teachers is determined not by their students' newfound knowledge and skills but rather by the degree to which their students are socially and emotionally empowered.

Pre-service teachers are right to value emotional empowerment. Many educational theorists (e.g. Friere, 2000; hooks, 1994) have highlighted the emancipatory goals of education, citing the teacher's special role in creating a classroom space of liberation and full-participation. In such spaces, students are invited and encouraged to transgress inherited boundaries, to be co-participants in the ongoing creation of society. Such activities require emotional engagement, and, in this sense, our pre-service teachers are correct when they expect that they will be able, and that they ought to endeavor, to "change students' lives."

They are wrong, however, when they divorce "teaching to transform" from teaching content, and they are wrong when they conclude that "changing students' lives" can somehow be separated from the nuts and bolts of effective, content-based instruction. Unfortunately, like the candidate quoted at the beginning of this essay, they expect to be able to teach students to "feel" successful without simultaneously giving them the skills to actually *be* successful. And, when they enter preparation programs, they bring these expectations with them.

The Impact of Misaligned Expectations

The fact that pre-service teachers enter preparation programs with pre-existing and rather solidified conceptions of what good teachers do and are in the classroom is an

underexplored topic in teacher education. Nevertheless, these pre-conceived notions of teachers and teaching play a powerful role in pre-service teachers' experiences both in preparation programs and in the early years of their careers. For example, students begin constructing an image of the "good" teacher during their time in K-12 classrooms (Britzman, 2003). Unfortunately, these constructs are based on incomplete knowledge of a teacher's work and internal life. Students remain unaware of the teacher's instructional decision-making processes, the way she balances curricular demands with student interest, or what it takes to negotiate building level politics. Instead, "the ability to enforce school rules, impart textbook knowledge, grade student papers, and manage classroom discipline appear to be the sum total of the teacher's work" (p. 4). Thus, students form incomplete images of "good" teaching based on partial and one-sided knowledge of a teacher's work.

But images of "good" teaching are also received through cultural transmission, such as the aforementioned teacher movies. Weber and Mitchell (1995) note that images of teachers and teaching are "passed on from one generation to the next" (p. 5). These images, which can be found in every type of media, "infiltrate all arenas of human activity…and affect the word and professional self-identity of teachers" (p. 5). Thus, by the time candidates enter teacher preparation programs, their attitudes towards and expectations of teachers and of the profession have been shaped not just by their own one-sided experiences in the classroom but also by the constant stream of teacher-representations with which they have been bombarded. These expectations can have a profound impact on them, and, unfortunately, that impact is often negative.

We know, for example, that pre-service teachers' expectations of teaching are often rigid and "fixed" (Chong & Low, 2009, p. 61), and we know that these rigid expectations and beliefs often bear little resemblance to the lives and activities of professional teachers (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Consequently, when pre-service teachers enter the field, they often experience "practice shock," the disillusioning and painful identity crisis that sometimes accompanies the first year of teaching (Meijer, De Graaf, & Meirink, 2011). As a result, early career teachers are often forced to confront not only the difficult realities of their classrooms but also the cognitive dissonance brought about by their misaligned expectations, a process that is "conflict-laden" (Bullough, Knowles, & Crow, 1992, p. 6). Ultimately, the psychological and emotional upheaval caused by misaligned expectations can result in "disappointment, frustration, anger, guilt, and hurt" (Hastings, 2010, p. 211).

Pre-service teachers' expectations can play an important role in their long-term career development, as well (Cooper & He, 2012; Kirbulut, Boz, & Kutucu, 2012; Sexton, 2008). Ultimately, those teachers who begin their careers with mismatched expectations and rigid identities are more likely to leave the profession early (Chong, Low, & Goh, 2011). In contrast, pre-service teachers whose expectations were more closely aligned with reality are better able to adjust to the unexpected and use it as an opportunity for personal and professional growth (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

Transformational Learning

The two-fold imperative for teacher preparation programs is clear: 1) we must acknowledge that candidates enter our programs with pre-conceived schema and expectations of teaching; and, 2) we must create space for candidates to confront, reflect

on, and revise their expectations. Unfortunately, preparation programs are, by and large, ill-equipped to programmatically support pre-service teachers through the process of examining and revising their teaching expectations (Sutherland & Markauskaite, 2012), and pre-service teachers' pre-existing expectations of teaching are rarely addressed (Mertz & McNeely, 1991). This must change.

Pre-service teachers do not enter preparation programs as *tabula rasa*. Instead, they bring with them expectations that have been formed by years spent in classroom and by a steady stream of teacher images and misrepresentations. Given an opportunity for structured reflection, pre-service teachers' misaligned expectations might be transformed from liabilities to assets (Delamarter, 2015). Indeed, confrontations with the unexpected can be fertile ground for transformative learning (Meijer et al, 2011), and programs that provide space for candidates to "reflect critically" on the nature of their assumptions and "participate freely" in the discourse surrounding them enable candidates to transform their misaligned expectations into the building blocks of future growth (Mezirow, 2009, p. 94).

The challenge for preparation programs, then, is to build structures that create this kind of reflective space. As teaching becomes increasingly professionalized and technically oriented, it becomes more and more important for preparation programs to acknowledge and address their candidates' emerging ways of being in classroom. The more we can do to help our candidates confront and revise their expectations *before* they are faced with a disorienting reality, the more resilient and adaptable their professional – and personal – identities will be. By normalizing the ongoing push and pull of identity negotiation, and by intentionally facilitating candidates' conversations between

themselves, their expectations, and the realities with which they will be faced, we will

help equip them not only to survive in their new roles as teachers, but perhaps even to

thrive.

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