Learning to teach;

What do pre-service teachers report?

Dawn Naylor.

M'ED; B'Ed (Hons); Dip T; MACE
PhD Candidate

Edith Cowan University, Mt Lawley. Western Australia
Email; dawn.naylor@ecu.edu.au

Abstract

This study seeks to understand the phenomenon of learning to teach. This phenomenon was approached by questioning who is learning to teach; what has to be learnt; where, when and how does learning to teach occur? In this regard the individual, professional and contextual aspects of learning to teach represent a socio-cultural perspective. This study seeks to examine the extent to which pre-service teachers identify and attribute individual, professional and contextual aspects as significant influences on learning to teach.

The study involved a mixed model approach. The main qualitative part of the study was based on phenomenological research as it sought to report on pre-service teachers' learning to teach experiences through semi structured interviews and case studies. Data was collected from eight pre-service teachers. The quantitative part of the research was non-experimental because it sought to determine the degree to which the case studies were representative of the cohort fourth year pre-service teachers. 45 surveys on individual aspects were distributed with a return rate of 55%. As data analysis is only in its preliminary stage only one case study is detailed in this paper.

Audience; teacher educators, adult educators

Key words; pre-service teacher; adult education; learning to teach

Author Biography
Dawn has been involved in education for the past 25 years as a classroom teacher/ researcher, principal and education lecturer. She has taught all primary year levels and worked for both the government and independent sectors in Australia and New Zealand. Her main interests lie with language, science and more recently teacher/ adult education. Currently, Dawn is undergoing data analysis towards her doctoral studies which investigates the phenomena of learning to teach.

Introduction and Literature Review

The quality of teaching is the single most important impact on students' achievement of desired outcomes (DeCourcy Hinds, 2002; Zammit et al., 2007) Pre-service teacher education programs are the commencement of the formal training of a teacher. This study has evolved from the general consensus that pre-service teacher education as it currently exists does not adequately prepare graduands for real teaching (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; DEST., 2001; DET, 2002, 2004; MACQT., 1998; Maloney & Barblett, 2003; MCEETYA, 2003; NPQTL, 1996). A number of research studies conclude that the impact of teacher education is thought to be meagre and with limited transfer to the work place (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005; Feiman-Nemser, 1990; Lacey, 1977; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). The literature attributes this conclusion to factors such as lack of practical experience, too much/ too little theory, the university style of teaching, fragmentation of coursework, tension between university and school based staff and conflicting and inconsistent pre-service teacher expectations of their coursework. This consistent evidence over the past 25 years warrants an investigation into the phenomenon of learning to teach.

The conceptual framework to emerge from the literature review suggested a socio-cultural perspective on learning to teach. Socio-cultural approaches to research emphasize the interdependence of the social and individual process in the co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Socio-cultural approaches are based on the fact that human activities take place in cultural contexts and as such involve social sources, psychological processing and change process (John-Steiner & Mahn, 2008). The pre-service teacher's subjective experience of learning to teach is at the centre of this study. Essentially, the conceptual framework for this study is captured in Figure 1 which illustrates the socio-cultural influences on the development of a teacher. More specifically, the following general questions framed the research design;

- Who are pre-service teachers? What individual aspects do they bring to the learning to teach classroom in terms of demographics, epistemological beliefs, dispositions and self efficacy? To what extent and in what ways do pre-service teachers identify their individual backgrounds as an influence on learning to teach?
- What do pre-service teachers understand about the professional aspects of teaching? How has this changed since they commenced their course? To what extent and in what ways do pre-service teachers learn key learning area knowledge, pedagogy, knowledge of learners, professional relationships, assessment and monitoring and professional ethics of teaching?
- Where, when and how do pre-service teachers believe they have learnt to teach? What contextual experiences did pre-service teacher value the most and least? To what extent and in what ways do pre-service teachers identify the learning context as an influence on learning to teach?
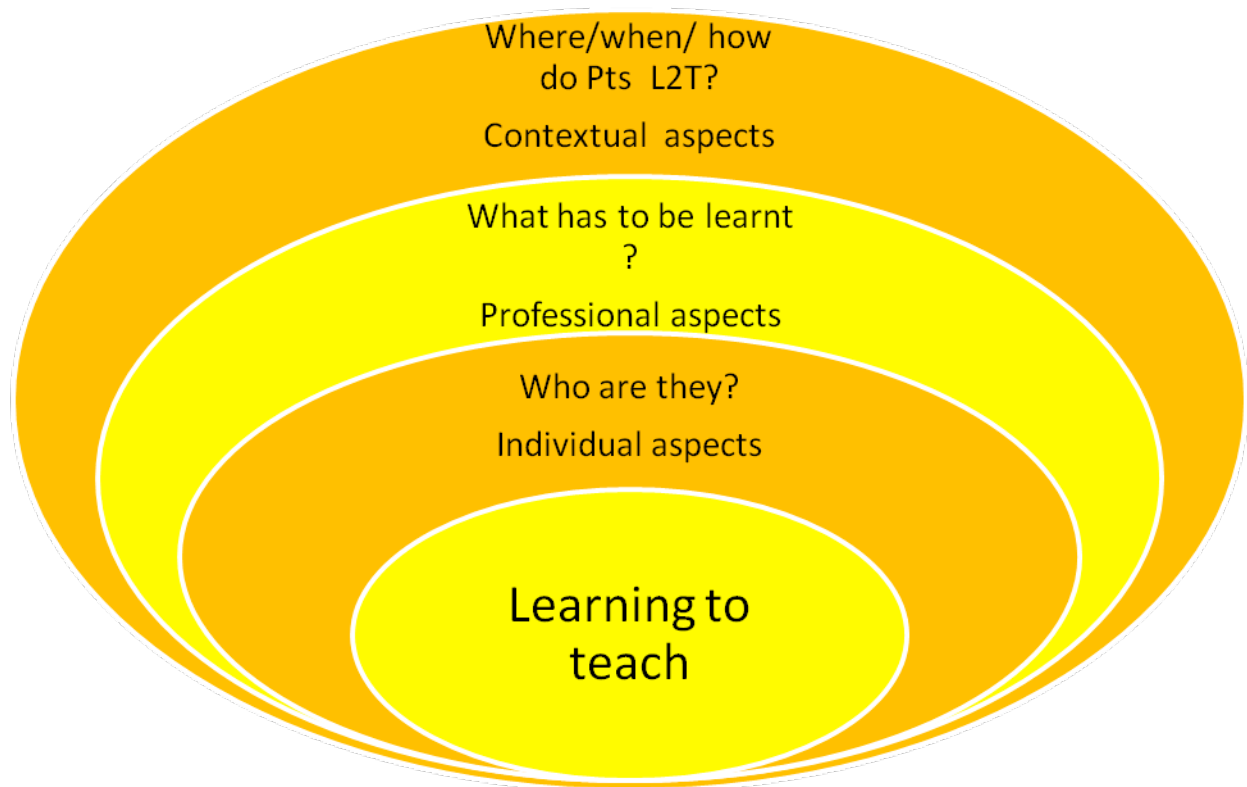
Where/when/ how do Pts L2T?

Contextual aspects

What has to be learnt ?

Professional aspects

Who are they?

Individual aspects

Learning to teach

Figure 1; A socio-cultural model of the influences on teacher development.

Design

This study used mixed models of data collection (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddie, 2003). The qualitative phase of this study sought to describe and interpret the learning to teach experiences of eight volunteer pre-service teachers in their final semester of coursework. The data came from three semi-structured interviews, a four part survey and artefacts supplied by the participants. The four part survey was designed using a combination of multiple choice and short answer questions which became the semi structured interview questions in the first interview. Part one of the survey targets demographic details. Part two of the survey sought to identify epistemological beliefs and was based on the work of Schommer (1990), Chan (2003) and Jehng, Jacobson, and Maouri (1996). Part three of the survey deals with dispositions. The final part was a Self Perception Rating of Teaching Competencies [SPRTC] adapted from the six dimensions identified in the professional aspects of teaching.

The interviews were audio tapes and transcribed. The transcripts were used to write up case studies. The case study structure reflects the social-cultural conceptual framework described above. The first interview allowed participants to elaborate and rationalize their ratings and answers to the four part survey. The second interview discussed their experiences in the first two years of study and the third interviewed considered the last two years of study. Participants were encouraged to bring artefacts, such as philosophy statements, to support their understandings. In order to ensure accurate interpretation, completed case studies with supporting quotes were returned to participants for endorsement and/ or editing.

The quantitative part of the research was non-experimental because it sought to determine the extent to which case studies were representative of their cohort in terms of individual aspects (Bandura, 1986; Calderhead & Sharrock, 1997; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Jackson, 1990; Lortie, 1975). Only one case study is described in this paper.

Case study 5

P5 is a mature aged student between 31-35years and married with three school aged children. She was born in NZ, but is an Australian citizen. Her father works in a trade and her mother works in retail. P5 was educated in NZ in both primary and secondary education in 1980s and 90s respectively. She completed her fifth form certificate which is equivalent to year 10 in Australia. She regrets not completing her final years at school, but has a high regard for education as a result of this experience. P5 works irregularly doing her husband's book keeping and she exercises regularly less than 10 hours per week and socializes less than 5 hours per week. P 5 is mostly typical of her cohort in terms gender, ethnicity, marital status, parent's occupations, recreational pursuits and time, academic and personal strengths and challenges. However, she is in the minority age group of 31-35 years and schooling.

Summary of individual aspects

Before she entered her bachelor of education course she completed a university preparation course. She commenced this course to determine if she could cope with both academic studies and family life. P5 made the decision to teach because she wanted to make a difference and she enjoys working with students. She also alluded to a social justice appeal because she wants to make a difference for students from under privileged family situations. She cites personal qualities suited to teaching as an interest in diverse cultures, her experience with her own children and her organization skills. Her personal strengths include compassion, organization and goal setting. Her academic strengths lie in key learning area content in literacy or English and her writing skills. Personal challenges include oral communication skills such as drama performances. Academic challenges were comprehension of academic texts, particularly those that are lexically dense.

Her epistemological beliefs about the nature of knowledge and ways of knowing were cautious in four out of seven dimensions. For example she felt knowledge could be both discrete facts and integrated concepts dependent on the purpose for using the knowledge. Dependent on the nature of the content, knowledge could be stable and certain or it could change with further inquiry or investigation. The degree of familiarity with the content also played a part in what was interpreted. She believes knowledge can come from both expert/authorities and be empirically researched. Some abilities can be improved whilst others were fixed. She was more decisive about the speed of learning and indicated it took time and effort, and was incrementally acquired. She believes the role of teaching is to facilitate learning through active learner engagement. She also believes you learn to teach by trial and error and observation of others teaching. P5 suggested teachers need to have a disposition for teaching in the form of a passion to teach and enjoy students. She believes effective teachers are flexible, compassionate, knowledgeable and team players. She anticipates her greatest challenge in teaching will be handling parent conflicts. P5 is not overly confident of herself and her self-efficacy about the dimensions of teaching reflect this. Whilst she was the only pre-service teacher to be confident in five of the six dimensions, her ratings were *tends to be confident* in those five dimensions. She is usually not confident about assessment and monitoring because she has had very little practical experience.

P5 believes being a parent has significantly advantaged her and influenced learning to teach. In addition, she has helped out at schools and has seen teachers in action and noticed students' *levels of development'.* She says that this significantly helped when she was doing assignments and relating theory to practice. In addition, she attributes being motivated to achieve as an individual aspect that she believes has helped her learn to teach. She saw returning to study as a personal obligation to herself and her family.

Professional aspects
P 5 was enrolled in primary degree and she prefers the early childhood phase of development because she is passionate about this age group and she alludes to being inspired by teachers. In particular how teachers cope with the diverse cultural and economic backgrounds of their students. She has a passion for literacy which comes from both her love of reading and her successful experiences in secondary school.

P5 attributes her key learning area knowledge to her secondary school experiences and her love of reading. She attributes her pedagogical knowledge and skills to a combination of parenting, being a parent helper and using this to make connections between her university assignments and content/theory. Her knowledge of learners is also attributed to her own children's development and her experiences as a parent helper. Her knowledge about professional ethics were attributed to her personal dispositions and her respect for teachers/education. The area of least confidence is assessment and monitoring, which P5 attributes to a lack of experience and instruction at university. She has not assessed students, is unfamiliar with the types of formal tests and how to interpret the results. However, she believes she is able to determine if her lessons were successful in terms of achievement of desired student outcomes.

Contextual Aspects
In her coursework P5 had completed 20 units at the time of interview. She reported unit satisfaction with 15/20 units, and of those 15 she rated five as highly satisfactory with comments like '*fabulous', most beneficial* and '*great'.* In terms of her academic standing she usually gains either a credit or a distinction. Based on her secondary school experience she was not expecting to fail any units and that her ability and conscientious nature would carry her through. P5 believes the completion of the university preparation course was a though and useful preparation for mature aged students and those who had not studied for a while. She had no particular expectation of the university experience except that she was expecting to be an independent learner and to work hard. She was surprised by the responses of younger students straight from school, as they were not independent learners. She was not surprised by the number of mature age students but noticed a difference in work ethics between mature –aged and the younger pre-service teachers. From her experience at the university preparation course she was expecting traditional contexts of lectures, note taking, and listening.

P5 went through each unit and recalled significant and insignificant events and activities. In recalling and discussing her first two years of study the most common experiences were assignments. Typically, 'good' assignments had characteristics or combinations of characteristics such as real world type issues, relevant teaching application, planning and preparation for teaching, applying frameworks to investigations, and group work. Another type of university experience was where the theory to practice links was made explicit, such

as rationales for content knowledge, lesson planning, structure and organization, practical teaching strategies (debriefs) and games.

In discussions about textbooks P5 characterised 'good textbooks' as those with longevity, background information directly connected to teaching, such as developmental learning, management of behaviour, teaching strategies, or frameworks for teaching key learning areas.

Less favourable assignments and units reflected similar characteristics to those favoured but in the negative. The most common complaint was irrelevance to teaching, but additionally fragmented units and generic units. She experienced one unit as a Summer school and whilst she enjoyed the unit, she did not retain the information.

In summing up her first two years of university she said it went very quickly and she learnt how children learn, about teaching documents and the value of integration. She summed up preferred learning contexts as collaboration and co-operation type activities that promote positive social interactions which lead to active engagement, challenge, analysis, hypothesising and concluding or taking a position based on evidence.

The main difference between first and second year was the move from individual lesson plans to forward planning documents. She felt the timing of this change particularly suited her development and identity as a teacher. An unanticipated experience happened in the last semester in second year, where P5 experienced a kind of 'meltdown' where she wasn't sure if she would be able to complete her studies.

In her final interview P5 described her final two years of study as 'more pressured' because of workloads. She was unsure if this was self imposed or university imposed. Similar to her first two years she identified useful experiences as those in which rich teaching resources were developed, usually through an assignment. Planning for teaching was again considered paramount, but her planning skills had become more flexible and more readily generalized or adapted to suit various phases of child development and other key learning areas. She again appreciated units that were highly relevant to teaching and where practical activities were carried out in school and with students. Less favourable experiences were units with repetitive content such as having to do a first year unit in third year. In line with her perception that third and fourth years were more pressured, she acknowledged the combination of compacted units, practicum requirements and time consuming assignments which resulted in her prioritising the time spent on particular units or assignments and choosing to 'simply pass'.

P5 also experienced three incidents where she witnessed university and school disparity. The first incident occurred when working with a specialist mentor teacher, who mentioned three problem solving techniques for P5 to teach her students. P5 had not heard of the strategies and hence felt inadequately prepared. The second incident involved visits to a school to teach a student with specific needs. This time the disparity came in the form of the practices endorsed by the university were not being used by school. P5 felt the school was letting the student down. The final incident occurred on her last practicum, whereby her mentor teacher was surprised and negative about a university workplace requirement. P5 felt somewhat helpless and obliged to do the university requirement, but it had been severely devalued.

Discussion

This study, to date, serves to highlight the incredibly idiosyncratic nature of learning to teach. P5 entered her degree somewhat hesitantly, and by her own convictions, not overly confident, however, her individual aspects of motivation, previous schooling, dispositions, being a parent and parent helper served to build her identity as a teacher. These individual aspects appeared to be gently coaxed out by positive contextual elements such as rewarding and reaffirming assignments and collaborative problem solving. The assignments provided the obligatory time to play with, sort through, elaborate and generalize on the concepts/ content being provided. The collaborative problem solving provided a similar opportunity but with social interaction. In partnership these individual and contextual aspects have laid the foundations from which the professional aspects appear to be emerging. P5's journey represents a shift in thinking about what teachers do to what they know about the orchestration of events in a teaching episode.

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