Learning to Teach:
A Critical Approach to Field Experiences

Second Edition

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Section 1

Preobservational Activities: The Exploration of Self

INTRODUCTION

Education has a unique position among the professional fields. Students majoring in education do not begin to study their field with a blank slate. Instead, preservice teachers enter their programs with a plethora of preconceived notions about what it means to be a teacher. Unlike the fields of architecture or electrical engineering in which students often do not come into contact with architects or engineers before choosing their major, each of us has had rich and personal experiences with a variety of teachers. Before deciding to become a teacher, each of us spent a lot of time in classrooms as students. All education majors (indeed all majors) have had the opportunity to learn a lot about the profession of teaching. We all know much of what teachers do and have witnessed several teachers practicing their art. This knowledge colors the way we perceive the profession of education as we embark on a career in the field.

Knowing so much about the schooling process can be both an advantage and a disadvantage for preservice teachers. The advantages are obvious in that education majors begin with some knowledge of their chosen profession. The disadvantages emerge as education majors discover, once the perspective of a teacher is gained, that some of their ideas about education, which developed from the vantage point of a student, are erroneous. For example, few students perceive the amount of paperwork required of the average school teacher or the hours it takes a teacher to grade papers and prepare for the next day's lessons.

Your teacher education program has been designed to help you make the transformation from student to teacher. One of the first steps in this transformation involves self-reflection and understanding. To transmit knowledge and cultural traditions (values), we must first explore ourselves to know which knowledge and values ought to be perpetuated. Thus, teachers must be reflective practitioners, and the first step in becoming a reflective practitioner is to know yourself. The family roles we take on, the personal cultures we adopt, the religious beliefs to which we adhere, the traditions and observances we celebrate, all are a part of who we are.[1] As teachers, we reflect these values through our presence in the classroom and pass these values on to our students.

A second aspect of becoming a reflective practitioner calls for the interrogation of one's "institutional biography."[2] As students, we have participated in school rituals and routines; we have passed and failed courses. We have obeyed and disobeyed rules. We have been insiders and outsiders of groups, organizations, teams, and cliques. These collective school experiences constitute our biography. Part of the transformation from student to teacher takes place as our biography shifts in focus from the role of student to the role of teacher.[3] In moving to the front of the classroom, beginning teachers should reflectively critique their own school experiences and resulting beliefs about education.

For this reason, we begin this book with a series of activities designed to encourage you to look closely at yourself and the beliefs you have about schools based on your prior experiences.

The intention of these exercises is to encourage you in becoming more reflective about who you are and then about how aspects of your identity contribute to and are influenced by the culture of school.

The exercise in Called To Teach is intended for use early in your observation period. Here, you will have an opportunity to think and write about why you want to become a teacher. This exercise will help you discover if your expectations of the profession of teaching match the experiences of others.

The exercise in Significant Past School Experiences invites you to remember some of your own kindergarten through 12th grade experiences. Because many important events happen to us as we progress through school, we as teachers have a great responsibility to be aware of their power over the lives of children. In completing this exercise, you will be encouraged to remember some of your own positive and negative formative school experiences so that you can be mindful of the power teachers and peers exhibit over students. As you become a teacher, keep in mind that you will play a similar role in the lives of your students.

Finding a Sense of Place is an exercise that is intended to help you learn more about yourself through discovering your own comfort places. Knowing more about what spaces make you comfortable will enable you to create more comfortable spaces for yourself and for your future students.

The exercises in Multicultural Self, Prevailing Privileges, and Cultural Portrait focus on the topic of identity. These exercises encourage you to look at why you are the way you are. How have your gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and physical abilities contributed to your sense of self and your construction of others? These aspects of our identity affect the ways in which we have been treated in school and thus impact our educational and career choices. They also impact how we view others. These exercises will provide you with new ways of understanding yourself in the culture of school.

Related Readings

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CALLED TO TEACH

Background

Do you believe that you have been called to teach? Teaching is a rewarding and exciting career choice. Opportunities abound to positively impact the lives of children. Teachers stimulate the intellectual growth of children, participate in the perpetuation of our culture and heritage, and "touch lives" in significant ways.

Each year, approximately 200,000 new teachers enter the profession[4]. However, approximately one third of beginning teachers leave the field of teaching within the first 3 years.[5] What causes this relatively high attrition rate? What happens to the energy and enthusiasm of these newly minted teachers? As a prospective teacher, these questions are probably important to you.

Two factors that can enhance the potential of new teachers to remain in education are increased mentoring[6] and a greater awareness of what the field of teaching entails.[7] Over the past few years, more schools and school districts have worked hard to implement teacher mentoring programs. Schools are doing their part to address this concern and prepare to support your career choice.

Preservice teachers, like you, also need to work hard to make sure that teaching is the right career choice. One way that you can be better prepared to take full advantage of teacher mentoring programs is to be well-informed about your chosen profession. This exercise is designed to provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your reasons for becoming a teacher.

Activity

What are your reasons for becoming a teacher? Some people enter teaching because they "love children" or expect to have summers off. Others want to teach because they perceive teaching as a career in which one can easily balance work and family. Still others feel family or social pressure to teach. Start by making a list of all the reasons you want to major in education and begin a career in teaching.

After you have a list, investigate these reasons more deeply. Are your reasons for entering the profession of teaching realistic? Are they reasonable outcomes to expect in the field of teaching? Conduct an investigation to find out.

If you have friends or relatives who are teachers, talk with them and listen to what they have to say about your reasons for teaching. Ask them about their reasons for teaching. Compare their experiences with your expectations. Do they match? Why or why not?

Conduct an Internet search for key words and phrases among your reasons for teaching. Are your reasons for wanting to become a teacher shared by current teachers? Do your expectations of the job of teaching seem appropriate and reasonable?

Does the career ladder of teaching match your expectations? What do teachers do to earn raises? Are these the kinds of activities that you are interested in doing? Again, do your expectations of the job match the requirements of the field?

Reflective Narrative

One common motivation to enter the field of teaching that we hear from preservice teachers is "because I love children." A quick Internet search using the key words *teaching* and *I love children* came up with some interesting Web pages. One stated, "While I liked all the kids in the class, I hated the act of actually teaching them."[8] Teachers often experience burnout and isolation from other adults.[9] Before entering the teaching profession, consider what you will do to counteract feelings of isolation and retain your love of children.

What did you learn from this exercise? Are you sure teaching is the right career choice for you? Why or why not?

Related Readings

Ben-Peretz, M., & Schonmann, S. (2000). *Behind closed doors: Teachers and the role of the teachers' lounge*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Cain, M. (2001). Ten qualities of the renewed teacher. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*, 702–709.

Cornbleth, C. (1987). The persistence of myth in teacher education and teaching. In T. S. Popkewitz (Ed.), *Critical studies in teacher education: Its folklore, theory and practice* (pp. 186–210). New York: Falmer.

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SIGNIFICANT PAST SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Background

From the perspective of a teacher, the daily events of a typical school day are just that—typical. Putting grades on papers, marking students present or absent, reprimanding the same students over and over for disruptive behavior, and struggling to create at least a handful of "teachable moments" during the course of a day all begin to take on a rather monotonous and routine flavor. Often, these events become routine for students as well. However, once in a while, something different happens, and the life of a student is changed forever.

The power of teachers and this vulnerability of students in classrooms is often overlooked. Receiving a smiley face or a gold star on a paper may seem like a trivial, quaint, or trite happening from the perspective of an adult, but in the eyes of a child who sees himself or herself being judged as acceptable or unacceptable, the event can loom very large. Other examples of formative experiences might include being the only Black student in the gifted program or being labeled as learning disabled.

These school experiences, both good and bad, have been formative. They have often occurred without the awareness of the teacher. Nevertheless, the teacher usually played a significant role in shaping such experiences, which need not have been part of the teacher's formal lesson plan. These events might not have been a direct part of the subject matter being taught at the moment. They occurred as side effects of a particular teaching style or as part of the human interaction between students or between students and teachers.

For teachers and future teachers, these events become teaching models to emulate or avoid. Critical teacher educators have argued that if preservice teachers do not interrogate and problematize their own past schooling experiences, then as new teachers, they will reproduce and perpetuate existing school practices that reflect the inequalities and prejudices in society.[10] For these reasons, this exercise encourages you to recall at least one significant experience for critical examination.

Activity

Spend some time reflecting on formative experiences you had in school (e.g., being chosen as lead star in the school play or being called on in math class and not knowing the answer). Start by making a list of these experiences. Then, select one or two to explore in depth. Try to remember details of the event. How old were you? What was the subject matter being taught? Who else was in the room or on the playground? What happened and why? Why was this event important to you? What has followed from the event? As a result of this experience, how have you behaved differently? What was it that made this experience stand out from the routine of your school experiences? Write a brief narrative about these experience(s).

Reflective Narrative

After remembering and reconstructing these events, reflect again on these experiences from the perspective of a teacher. Was this a type of experience you would want a student in your classroom to have? If so, what can you do to make this happen? If not, what can you do to keep your students from having this experience?

Having considered this event from your perspective as a student and from your perspective as a student and as a teacher, reflect again about its broader interpretations. Generalize from your particular experience. How does the event inform you about the roles, conditions, and interpretations of schools? Is this experience limited only to schools? Might it occur in a church, a shopping mall, a sporting event, alone in nature, and so on? Where does this event fit in the culture of school? Could any student share this experience, or is it unique to you personally or to those sharing your age, social class, race, and gender? What aspects of your identity went into the composition of this experience? How did the race, gender, age, and social class of the teacher serve to generate your interpretation of the experience? How did your expectations of school work to bring about this experience? How are these events related to achievement, competition, self-esteem, dignity, and the human spirit?

Related Readings

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Greene, M. (1986). Perspectives and imperatives: Reflection and passion in teaching. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 2*, 68–81.

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FINDING A SENSE OF PLACE

Background

Self-discovery is among the most important processes in which you, as a future teacher, can be involved. As teachers, you will be guiding young children and adolescents on the path toward wholeness as human beings and toward living meaningful lives. For this reason, you must develop a strong sense of meaning for your own life.

The following activity is designed to provide you with an opportunity to define the conditions that make you feel most comfortable.[11] Here, you will define the characteristics of environments that are important for establishing and maintaining a "sense of place" for you.

Activity

Find your favorite spot at home or on campus. Go there, sit quietly, and think of other places where you have been happy and at ease. Are they places where you have lived or visited? Are they related to happy memories from childhood? Perhaps they are not in the home or at school. Are these places inside, or are they outdoors?

Next, consider why it is you chose this place? What aspects of this spot please you and why? In your mind, move around your favorite place. Take note of the smells, colors, textures, and ambiance. These various aspects inform you of the qualities you appreciate and the kinds of spaces that make you comfortable in your world.

Reflective Narrative

Where were you sitting while on this imaginary tour? Why did you choose this spot? We all have our own special places where we feel most at peace with ourselves and the world. Wherever it is—at the kitchen table, by a window, in the loft, or a garden hideaway—you should become aware of the unique features of your chosen space. Recognizing them will give you more insight into how you respond to the school and classroom environment in which you will be observing.

Related Readings

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Chawla, L. (1994). *In the first country of places: Nature, poetry, and childhood memory.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Day, C. (1990). *Places of the soul: Architecture and environmental design as healing art.* London: Aquarian Press.

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LaChappelle, D. (1988). *Sacred land, sacred sex, rapture of the deep: Concerning deep ecology and celebrating life.* Durango, CO: Kaviki Press.

Nabhan, G. P., & Trimble, S. (1994). *The geography of childhood: Why children need wild places.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Sinclaire, C. (1994). *Looking for home: A phenomenological study of home in the classroom.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

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MULTICULTURAL SELF

Background

Culture is a term that has received a great deal of press lately. Most individuals consider culture as the artifacts produced by a group of people. Although these artifacts are representations of culture, they are not culture itself. Others define culture as something you can acquire. In this sense, culture is understood as a commodity (like a loaf of bread) that one might somehow get through study or material acquisition (such as paintings, sculpture, season tickets to the opera, or a college course). As you acquire these things, you become more "cultured." Still others understand culture as being tied to race or ethnicity. These individuals often refer to African American, or Irish or Asian culture. According to a more contemporary reading, culture is the particular ways in which a social group lives out and makes sense of its given circumstances and conditions of life.[12]

One great confusion of culture is the belief that people are essentially monocultural, that we somehow reside in great monolithic blocks representing singular cultural perspectives based on some primary defining factor such as skin color. In this way, it might make sense to assume all Blacks see the world in one way, whereas all Whites see the world in another or that all women are naturally nurturing and caring, whereas all men are competitive and out of touch with their feelings. This simply is not true. In reality, we are intersections of multiple cultural positions that simultaneously might be contradictory and mutually supportive, coherent and incoherent. Our ethnicity, georegional origin, sex, religion, social class, sexual orientation, and dominant political orientation, to name a few factors, all intersect within us as individuals (e.g., an Irish, Catholic, working-class female). To make matters more confusing, these intersections shift and change through time as we gain new experiences and reflect on old experiences.

Activity

The purpose of this exercise is to explore and reflect on your own cultural intersections. Take some time to think about what and who you are as a multicultural being. It might be helpful for you to jot down a list or maybe produce some thematic web of cultural influences. After you have thoroughly investigated yourself, informally jot down how these different cultural positions color how you define your actions, your preferences, your prejudices, or realm of acceptable and unacceptable actions. How do these intersections work with each other? Are some contradictory, seeming to cancel one another? Are others mutually supportive? Where are these positions relative to the dominant culture within which you circulate? How might these positions influence your beliefs about teaching and the manner in which you might go about your work? After reflecting on these questions

and jotting down your responses to them, write up a narrative to share with others.

Reflective Narrative

Are there some positions that you found in your life with which you are uncomfortable? How do you feel about those intersections that place you in minority positions or in dominant (i.e., majority or mainstream) positions? What changes might you make? What impact might these discoveries have on your approach to teaching or where you choose to teach? How might these discoveries color your way of looking at others, especially your students? Might it make a difference to understand individual students as complex social beings rather than within the monolithic block of students? How might the knowledge gained in this exercise aid your future work in education?

Related Readings

Banks, J. A. (2004). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. In J. A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 3–24). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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PREVAILING PRIVILEGES

Background

Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, great strides have been made in our society to eliminate institutional prejudices. For example, we no longer see segregated drinking fountains and restrooms for Blacks and Whites, schools have been formally desegregated, women are beginning to obtain and even gain promotions within traditionally male-dominated fields, and the phrase "equal pay for equal work" is familiar and seems reasonable to almost all Americans.

In addition, our language reflects our commitments to eradicating prejudice. We are familiar with terms such as *racism*, *sexism*, and *sexual harassment*—the terms used to help recognize oppression. Furthermore, we are becoming familiar with terms that help overcome prejudice. Terms such as *multiculturalism* and *empowerment* are now also part of our everyday educational vocabulary.

Another step, however, in the fight for equality and the end of oppression is to interrogate our own personal sites of privilege. These privileges, or unearned rights, are of many kinds. For example, the prejudice that Japanese Americans are "naturally" better at math makes it more likely for some teachers to place a Japanese American student in an advanced calculus class than in a remedial math class without even looking at test scores or previously demonstrated academic ability. It is through this process of interrogation that we can begin to understand how we sometimes unknowingly perpetuate racism, oppression, and prejudice. Hopefully, through such awareness, we can become better informed agents of change. Having recognized and begun the process of removing the oppressive and prejudicial conditions under which many Americans still struggle, we are ready to turn our attention to the advantages (privileges) some of us share.

Often these advantages are not one dimensional. Rather, they are based in and reveal the intersections of several preconceived and prejudicial notions (see Multicultural Self and Cultural Portrait exercises). Furthermore, these advantages are likely to be rooted in beliefs about gender and race or those of race and social class. Consider this example. The local basketball coach, assuming that African American males are better basketball players, may give them an advantage in tryouts for the team.

Activity

Make a list of at least 20 privileges you now enjoy. Include things you have taken for granted and assumed you deserve. For example, as a White woman, I know I can go into just about any supermarket and my check will be accepted, often without a show of identification.

Include also privileges you have been given that you probably did not deserve (e.g., the privilege to remain ignorant of the literary contributions of people of color). Such privileges are harmful for both the privileged and those denied privilege. Consider what you are missing by not knowing the work of writers such as Carlos Fuentes, Nikki Giovanni, Terry MacMillan,

Isabella Allende, Salman Rushdie, Amy Tan, and countless others who remain outside the mainstream literature curriculum of public schools. Consider also privileges of age. What advantages do you have now that you did not have before you came to college? What privileges do you perceive faculty members have that you do not? For example, often in college towns students (or people assumed to be students) have more difficulty renting a house or apartment than people assumed to be faculty members or local people.

Reflective Narrative

Now that you have made this list, look again at the contents. Some privileges are clearly unfair advantages that represent prejudicial treatment that should be eliminated. Others, however, are privileges now because they are available only to some people but ought to be extended to everyone.

Once you have made these distinctions, you are ready to take action. Go through the list one more time. This time, for each item on your list, write down one thing you can do to either help eliminate this privilege or extend it to others who are currently denied this advantage. Now, as the opportunity arises (or can be generated by you) put your ideas into action.

Related Readings

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CULTURAL PORTRAIT

Background

Diversity is one of the most pressing issues facing teachers today and probably one of the least understood and discussed. Too many times we make initial assumptions about people based on some distinguishing characteristic such as skin color, sex, age, physical ability, clothing, or the neighborhood in which they live. When we engage these stereotypes, we simultaneously (a) group many individuals into some kind of unified block because we believe they all see the world in the same way, (b) limit our ability to see the person as an individual because we cannot get past distinguishing characteristics and all the meanings we attach to them, and (c) position the individual as the Other, someone who is fundamentally different from us because of some physical or social marker. One resulting problem with these assumptions is the construction of boundaries that limit our expectations of whole groups of individuals and in the same instance, limit our own.

Activity

This exercise requires you to conduct a series of interviews with a person who you believe is culturally different from yourself. On concluding your interviews, you should prepare a written and/or oral narrative in which you present your informant as you came to know him or her through your interactions and present an analysis of your presuppositions concerning this individual.

Phase One: The Interview. First and foremost, your informant must be guaranteed anonymity, and strict ethical considerations of human research must be followed. Your school will have specific guidelines you should follow. You will want to take notes during this time with your informant. The use of a portable audio or video recorder would be most beneficial in capturing the entirety of the interview as well as the inflections and emotions of the informant. You must, however, follow the rules of your institution regarding this method of data gathering. At the very least, you should have written permission of the individual prior to the use of any recording medium.

You should spend time discussing such topics as (but not limited to) childhood, friends, family, goals, schooling and other forms of education, leisure activities, dating, language, church/religion, work, politics, personal points of view on contemporary issues, or any other topic your informant wishes to discuss. You are attempting to understand the world as seen through the eyes of your informant.

During your conversations, identify the cultural contexts from which this individual constructs a world view different from your own. Your intent is to identify and clarify specific cultural perspectives that provide particular meanings for events that have occurred in this person's life. In other words, it is not sufficient to simply identify what happened to your informant; your goal is to relate how and why your informant understood those events in a particular way. For in-

stance, your informant participated in voter registration activities during the 1960s. What did that mean to this person? Why did your informant engage in this potentially dangerous activity? What was it about that era that inspired such actions on the part of so many diverse individuals?

Phase Two: The Narrative. Once the interviews are completed, you should produce a narrative to share with your classmates. This should be more than a simple transcription of the interview. You should present both a portrait of the informant's world and an analysis of your preconceptions. The bulk of the narrative will address your portrait of the informant and his or her world. In doing so, you must first clarify the cultural contexts central to the informant so that we might understand why the informant sees the world in this unique manner. Using excerpts from the interview material helps us to understand how the informant views the world and what factors might have led to those particular perspectives.

With the limitations of space or time, you will not be able to use all the material you collected in the interview. Therefore, your responsibility is to edit the material down to a manageable amount. This edited product should be broad enough to present an adequate portrait of the individual and limited enough to provide for depth of presentation. The narrative should develop in a unified manner without digression. The closing section of the narrative should address your own subjective preconceptions concerning the informant and how these changed or were reinforced during the interview.

Reflective Narrative

Why did you label this individual as being culturally different from yourself in the first place? Were these differences borne out under investigation, or did the commonalties of your experiences mitigate the differences you assumed existed? Were your assumptions based on stereotypes? How has this experience changed the way in which you look at other people who might appear to be different from yourself? How might this exercise have an important impact on your future work as a teacher?

Related Readings

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NOTES

[1]See Palmer, P. (1998). *Courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. See also, Goodlad, J. (2004). *Romances with schools*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

[2]Britzman, D. (1986). Cultural myths in the making of a teacher: Biography and social structure in teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review, 56*, 442–256.

[3]Frank, C. R., & Uy, F. L. (2004). Ethnography for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 55*(3), 269.

[4]McNergney, R. F., & Herbert, J. M. (1995). *Foundations of education: The challenge of professional practice*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

[5]Cain, M. (2001). Ten qualities of the renewed teacher. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*, 702–709.

[6]David, T. (2000). Teacher mentoring: Benefits all around. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 36*, 134–136.

[7]Scherer, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Keeping good teachers*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

[8]Parashar, A. (n.d.). Teaching kids—UGH!! (... and what I learned from it). Retrieved December 13, 2004, from http://www.howtoadvice.com/TeachingKids

[9]Ben-Peretz, M., & Schonmann, S. (2000). *Behind closed doors: Teachers and the role of the teachers' lounge*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

[10]Britzman, D. (1986). Cultural myths in the making of a teacher: Biography and social structure in teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56, 442–456.

[11]This exercise is adapted from Peason, D. (1989). *The natural home book*. New York: Firestone Books, p. 172.

[12]See especially McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman.