

“TEACH YOUR HEART OUT”: PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS PUSHING BACK AGAINST THE ANTI-TEACHER NARRATIVE

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Abstract

The researchers surveyed fifteen pre-service teachers across two content-area teacher education courses to explore their current perceptions about the teaching profession and their roles as emerging professionals in the field. The guiding research question was: Given the current negative climate around the teaching profession, what causes pre-service teachers to persist with goals of becoming teachers? Through open-ended questions, the pre-service teachers shared their current perceptions of the field of education, what factors impact them to persist, and their plans to affect the larger teaching narrative. The findings examine these pre-service teachers' desire to push back against the anti-teaching narrative, how they view teaching as a noble profession, the pre-service teachers' inclinations toward advocacy, and how they perceive a holistic view of the profession's impact on society. Implications for teacher preparation programs include creating space to foster and grow pre-service teachers' teacher identity. The study also highlights that pre-service teachers have a desire to know more about avenues for leadership and advocacy in their time as early career educators.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, teaching profession, deprofessionalization, perceptions of education, advocacy

Introduction

Society's perception and denigration of the field of education and teachers have increased recently, certainly aggravated by the stark disparities and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though overall society agrees that teaching is important, the profession is often viewed negatively. This anti-teacher narrative pervades both local communities and the nation through media coverage. Through this intrinsic case study, the researchers focused on pre-service teachers' perception of the profession, with a particular interest in their decision to pursue teaching licensure amid the deprofessionalization of teaching. This study indicates that though these pre-service teachers are aware of society's views about teachers, they feel called to teach and anticipate that their impact on students will enliven them towards being advocates within the profession.

The Anti-Teacher Narrative: Review of Current Literature

Teachers have long been viewed as technicians rather than professionals (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Giroux, 2011; Ingersoll & Collins, 2017; Milner, 2013), and this deprofessionalization of teachers is also evident in the current media (Bailey, 2023; Missouri State, 2022; Will, 2019). Additionally, there are teacher shortages across the nation (Henebery, 2023). Teachers are leaving the profession in droves due to this deprofessionalization, impacts from COVID-19 (Gillani et al., 2022), budget cuts (Zimmerman &

Amin, 2023), and political policies (Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022). Many teachers leaving the profession cite that they felt like they were no longer teaching the whole child, but rather teaching for achievement, data, and test scores (Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022). In short, Berliner (2018) found that educators were saddened and disheartened by their inability to enact change in young lives.

There are a multitude of factors that affect teachers' perceptions of their job and the profession as a whole. Will (2019) states that teachers across the nation continue to feel the effects of the pandemic, coupled with a crisis of waves of educators leaving the classroom due to teaching being deprofessionalized through media, politics, and funding (para.2). Low wages that do not even keep up with inflation and regular budget cuts to school funding are additional factors that weigh on teachers (para.3). Missouri State University notes that the uptick in teachers experiencing burnout is another cause of teachers leaving the profession (MSU, 2022, para.2).

Across the last two decades, there has been a shifting emphasis between comprehensive national policy (NCLB, etc.) geared toward solving the perceived learning and achievement problems of schooling and the issue of teacher education being more about teacher candidates becoming "professionals with appropriate attitudes, beliefs, and values as well as the necessary professional knowledge and skill" (Cochran-Smith, 2023). Through this shift, teacher education programs became more controlled by policymakers who saw the purpose of schooling as to prepare K-12 students to be competitive globally (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2023). This belief endures today, though more so veiled under curricular reform efforts at the local and state levels. Relative to teachers' perceptions of their jobs, the competing narratives highlight issues related to teacher autonomy and expertise (Cochran-Smith, 2015). These tensions are actualized, particularly contemporarily, as teachers face criticism, pushback, and even censure through the removal of curricular materials and alterations to the curriculum. With in-service teachers leaving the field in large numbers and teacher preparation programs shrinking, what beliefs ground pre-service teachers in their decision to pursue this profession?

Theoretical Framework

For this study, the researchers took up a knowledge-of-practice view on teacher learning that acknowledges the interwoven impacts of both theory and site-based practice as spaces that generate knowledge and inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Additionally, the researchers were informed by a poststructural perspective of teacher identity formation where investigating the emotional components of a teacher identity offer a richer understanding of the teacher self (Zembylas, 2003). The researchers argue that individual identity is continually (re)contextualized in and within the socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. Because identities are being (re)written based on contextual factors, reprofessionalizing teaching can happen through teachers' ability to re-story themselves as professionals, which will foster agency (Tondreau & Johnston, 2022). Various factors shape teachers' professional identities and help them develop a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities as educators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Additionally, the researchers argue that a poststructural analysis of teacher identity formation emphasizes teacher agency to contribute to their resilience in the face of challenges and to help them (re)construct resistance to the anti-teaching narrative (Zembylas, 2003).

Methodology

Through an intrinsic case study (Stake, 1995) the researchers sought to uncover pre-service teachers' perceptions of the current teaching climate and their plans to contribute to the field as emerging

professionals. Given the contemporary deprofessionalization of teaching, the rapid changes in the expectations of education, and teachers leaving the profession, the researchers desired to know why these pre-service teachers persist in their teacher preparation program. What is it about these individuals' teacher identity that allowed them to resist the current anti-teaching narrative? Amidst the increasing scrutiny on teachers themselves, in-service teachers also encounter policies directed at restricting curriculum, less preparation time, extensive budget cuts, legislation that undermines education, constant inquiry through digital media, lack of autonomy, and increasing disrespect from students and parents. The researchers surveyed fifteen pre-service teachers who were enrolled in either an elementary literacy content course or a secondary literacy content course. Distributed across their first, second, and third years in the teacher preparation program, most of the students were in their second and third years of study and had taken other education courses in both content areas and methods. The researchers provided basic context ahead of the participants completing the questionnaire, outlining the tensions and challenges that in-service teachers encounter.

Instrument Questions

What are your current perceptions about the state of the teaching profession?

How have your previous teachers/instructors inspired you to take up the call to teach and persist in today's climate?

What are your plans to positively change the narrative about teachers and education through your work as a pre-service and early career teacher?

The questionnaire centered on obtaining authentic responses to the guiding research question: Given the current negative climate around the teaching profession, what causes pre-service teachers to persist with goals of becoming teachers? The instrument consisted of three voluntary open-ended questions aimed at understanding the pre-service teachers' background, current perceptions, and future plans. The researchers engaged in constant comparative analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by first using brief memoing and open-ended coding. Then the researchers developed coding patterns, and then finally, developed recurring themes (Miles et al., 2014).

Findings

Findings indicate that pre-service teachers have strong desires to change the anti-teacher narrative. Despite the national deprofessionalization of teachers and the increasing teacher shortages across districts and states, emerging educators reiterate that they are committed to their chosen profession.

Recurring Themes

Teaching as Work Worth Doing

Preservice Teachers' Desire to Advocate

Including Perspectives & Voices

Teaching as a Profession & Its Impact on Society

First, pre-service teachers feel that the profession of teaching is worth the hard work, and they feel called to teach. Second, the surveyed pre-service teachers desire to advocate for both their profession and their students and to work alongside parents. Third, they also aim to include multiple perspectives and voices in their future conversations with students. Finally, despite all being enrolled in content-specific courses, the pre-service teachers have a holistic view of teaching and their future impact on education and society. As participants in this study, the pre-service teachers examine both their own beliefs about teaching and education in addition to positioning their beliefs contextually with regard to society's perception. The responses of these pre-service teachers exemplify that identity is continuously being (re)contextualized based on their socio-cultural and socio-political lived experiences. Pre-service teachers are beginning to cultivate a professional network among their peers, mentors, professors, and other colleagues. Through these interactions, they may experience shifts in their professional identity, developing a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities as educators. Through study of these participants' positionalities, the researchers see that the pre-service teachers' emotions can become spaces of resistance and transformation. As they continue to form and reform their teacher identities, the pre-service teachers already begin to describe their agency as emerging professionals and their desires to both resist the anti-teacher narrative and persist in their chosen profession.

Teaching as Work Worth Doing

The pre-service teachers first and foremost note that though the anti-teacher narrative pervades society, they are not turning away from their teacher preparation program. Despite the challenges and tensions, they feel called to continue their program and enter the profession with open minds and hearts focused on improving education through their work. Upon entering the profession, their perception is that, as teachers, they will give back to communities and work to engage students in meaningful learning experiences.

Participant #2: I believe teaching is the most essential part of a successful society, but the profession is often undermined and looked down upon. The American public school system is falling apart, and I think we need to change the way we approach certain things in the teaching realm of education... I plan on being the best teacher I can be, and staying positive regardless of the narrative.

Participant #15: Due to the large impact made on me by many teachers throughout my life, I feel called to teach and impact the lives of students, especially those at a very impressionable age at the secondary level, to learn about themselves and learn about the world around them from a unique perspective.

Of consequence is that these pre-service teachers notice and acknowledge the realities of a less-than-ideal educational system, but they are still motivated and hopeful in how they will be able to impact the profession. The pre-service teachers' positive outlook illuminates their underlying belief that teaching is a valuable profession with inherent worth to society. Though society continues to deprofessionalize teaching, these pre-service teachers are not deterred as emerging educators. Because they view teaching as an essential part of a successful and functional society, they are reaffirmed in their choice to pursue teaching.

Preservice Teachers' Desire to Advocate

The majority of the participants articulated that teaching is a vehicle through which change can be enacted. These pre-service teachers see themselves as advocates who will work to improve the educational system from within; they aim to stand up for themselves and their colleagues as teachers, but they also anticipate standing up for their students against perceived obstacles and challenges.

Participant #5: I think by impacting my students I will help change their opinions. Working with the parents will help. I also think standing up for oneself and other teachers will be important in my future career.

Participant #14: I hope to follow in my previous teachers' footsteps that had beneficial impacts, such as creating a safe, respectful, and productive classroom environment, as well as showing educators, students, and parents why keeping literature, even controversial literature, is important for shaping the future.

Some of the responses indicated that the participants are already thinking about what types of advocacy roles they may seek out when they enter the profession. This forward-thinking exemplifies their desire to be proponents who will work to reprofessionalize teaching. A well-defined professional identity can lead to increased advocacy for education and oftentimes positions teachers as leaders within their schools or communities. Drawing on their own experiences as students, many recounted impactful teachers whose support and guidance instilled positive schooling experiences that these pre-service teachers want to recreate in their future classrooms. Also evident in the participants' responses is that they view positively impacting their students as a way to improve the anti-teacher narrative. By engaging students in meaningful and enjoyable learning, the pre-service teachers anticipate that their work will speak for itself and positively affect family and community perceptions of teachers.

Including Perspectives & Voices

A number of the pre-service teachers branched out from the intended scope of the questionnaire to reference how they value including multiple perspectives and voices in their future classrooms. Their belief that an inclusive and diverse curriculum will improve learning for all students stood out as a piece of their emerging ideologies.

Participant #14: Teachers know what is best for their classrooms and students. I also feel the war on literature and removing books from schools/ classrooms makes for a more ignorant sheltered future generation and that we can talk about touchy subjects in a respectful manner.

Participant #8: I think hearing [student] voices and understanding where they are at, it will go a long way and mean a lot to them.

They resolutely believe that improving education starts at the most local of levels- with their students in their classrooms. By elevating students' voices and experiences, the pre-service teachers anticipate a richer and fuller community of learning that will be of mutual benefit to the students, the teacher, and the school. They intend to create classroom communities where students are empowered and empower each other so that deep learning can occur.

Teaching as a Profession & Its Impact on Society

Many of the responses indicate that, aligned with their own valuing of education, the pre-service teachers experience positive reinforcement in their choice to become teachers.

Participant #15: I have had numerous teachers and mentors pour a lot of belief and confidence into me as a student learner. They opened my mind to a lot of opportunities and brought so much value and interest to my life that I wanted to do the same...I perceive teaching to be a really noble profession and vitally important to society in educating the future generations.

Participant #10: My teachers have been able to help me through extremely hard times in my life not only academically but also personally and I want to be able to give back to the future generation of students.

Participant #5: Some teachers are successful in making a positive impact on their students. Those teachers are the ones I remember. The fact that they care makes a world of difference. The fact that they care is then reflected in their teaching.

Their families, their professors and instructors, and even their peers are people who speak about the teaching profession as worthwhile and vital. Bolstered by that support, the pre-service teachers are inspired to pour themselves into this work knowing that the relationships they build with students and the growth they cultivate will be worthy endeavors, even amid the challenges they know they will face too. Because the participants value education for themselves and for others, they are invested in rebuilding a profession through their perseverance in the teacher preparation program and their eventual entry into the profession.

Implications

The findings of this research indicate that, perhaps against all odds, the pre-service teachers in teacher preparation programs are passionate about their emerging professional roles and they are excited to enter the profession. These results, though from a small sample size, have implications for teacher preparation programs, teacher education professors, and the larger teaching profession.

Focus on Identity & Ideology

Amid the admittedly bleak conditions surrounding education, pre-service teacher preparation programs are an integral place for teacher educators to have conversations about identity with pre-service teachers. Naming socio-cultural and socio-political factors that affect identity development provides pre-service teachers with the language and space to further interrogate and expand how their lived experiences impact their ideology and pedagogy. Even within an imperfect system, the pre-service teachers realize that their professional and local work can be spaces to dismantle the anti-teacher narrative. Many of the participants in this study indicate that teaching is a calling to them, and teacher educators might consider exploring and expanding this teacher identity narrative with their students further as it relates to ideology and pedagogy. Pre-service teachers' evolving professional identities can have a profound influence on their commitment to continuous improvement and the perceived impact of their teaching.

Focus on Leadership & Advocacy

It is essential to consider the potential benefits of weaving together practical experiences and coursework in teacher preparation programs with a focus on leadership and advocacy. The pre-service teachers in this study articulated their desire to be advocates, but none noted any concrete avenues for doing so. Perhaps incorporating more opportunities to examine what advocacy looks like as early career and in-service teachers would provide pre-service teachers with a space to start imagining how they can be advocates for education and teaching. By offering real-world opportunities to explore leadership roles, pre-service teachers can gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances for advocacy in their classrooms and in the larger education system. Additionally, it is worth exploring the role of mentorship and peer support in fostering the development of advocacy skills among pre-service teachers. Pairing aspiring educators with experienced mentors who actively engage in advocacy work can provide valuable guidance and inspire them to pursue advocacy efforts in their own early career years. Structuring these opportunities for pre-service teachers to collaborate with their peers and emerging colleagues can lead to a richer exchange of ideas in the cultivation of a supportive network that supports initiatives that stem from advocacy work. Teachers who see themselves as advocates and agents of change for students and their profession can have a significant impact on educational practices and policies at their local school and district levels.

Conclusion

The prevailing negative perceptions of teachers and education have undoubtedly cast a shadow on the teaching profession. However, this study delving into the perceptions of pre-service teachers and their decision to pursue teaching certification amidst these challenges reveals a ray of hope. Despite their awareness of society's often unfavorable views of education, these aspiring teachers remain committed to their calling and hold a steadfast belief in their potential to have a meaningful impact on students. Taking into consideration these findings about pre-service teachers pushing back against the anti-teaching narrative, teacher preparation programs can empower future educators to become more engaged and effective practitioners. Their determination to become advocates within the profession signals a resilience that may play a vital role in reshaping the narrative surrounding teaching, and, ultimately, contribute to the betterment of education. While it is not teachers alone who are responsible for combating the anti-teacher narrative, it gives us hope that pre-service teachers look to enter their classrooms with optimistic attitudes and passionate intentions to positively affect the larger teaching narrative from the very beginning of their professional journey.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank our undergraduate students for sharing their pre-service positionalities and experiences with us in this study. Our work is grounded in their meaningful teaching and learning preparation, and we are grateful to work alongside them.

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