Chapter 61
A New Generation of Teachers:
A Case for Critical Thinking and Linguistic Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a contemporary profile of teacher candidates. While some education majors enter the program with requisite knowledge, intellectual curiosity, a willingness to push themselves, and the ability to accept critique in order to learn how to become a teaching professional, many of their peers enter professional coursework lacking critical thinking and other skills needed for the profession. The author provides a rationale for why professional dispositions and linguistic knowledge are critical for education majors, especially Pre-K-8 teachers—those grade levels where language learning is critical for subsequent school success. In doing so, this chapter suggests how teacher preparation curricula and pedagogies might be reconsidered.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are artists at work in the classroom, wielding ordinary tools of the trade to transform the lives of learners. Carrying the weighty responsibility of multi-tasking, teachers perform with skilled craftsmanship in what appears to be ordinary classroom conditions. In the best case scenario, these practitioners work with apparent ease, executing a lesson with aplomb and providing feedback. The astute teacher understands that one student might benefit from a word of encouragement, but that another requires a mini re-teaching of the concept. Great teachers are able to intuit because they have refined their classroom observational skills and know how to leverage their proficiency with content to adjust instruction for each child. Teachers are also problem solvers, seeking to find answers to their questions, and then analyzing their findings with an eye for what will happen next. They continually ask themselves how to

better deliver their content to meet the needs of their students. To answer these questions requires that teachers break down, analyze, and critique their own instruction. This process requires critical thinking and openness to change to practice adaptability and constructive criticism of one's self and one's colleagues.

The author, a former K-8 classroom teacher and literacy specialist, who has been preparing teachers since 1990, has observed changes in student performance over the past several years. Of course, there always has been a split between high- and low-performing students. But in speaking with colleagues at various higher-education institutions across the country, there appear to be more students who struggle. This segment of the student body enters with skills, attitudes, and dispositions that are not in alignment with what is required for the professional educator (Clawson & Page, 2011; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). As an instructor in a teacher preparation program and an advisor to education majors, who are juniors and preparing to student teach in the coming year, the author was concerned by this apparent trend and conducted interviews with would-be elementary teachers to learn more about why they chose education as a course of study and how they viewed teaching. Many shared their K-12 recollections when they were students—for the majority, a fairly recent experience—and, from that vantage point, they considered the role of teacher as easy to adopt. Motivations for choosing education ranged from altruistic to more self-centered reasons. And a few viewed education as a commodity, something they paid for, including grades—namely, "A's." These varied perspectives suggest that there are many reasons why young people opt for education as a college major.

This chapter traces elementary education students' viewpoints about teaching and seeks to elucidate some of the reasons they desire to become teachers. It also offers suggestions for how teacher preparation in curriculum and instruction can adapt to meet the needs of today's teacher candidates. In doing so, this chapter presents a story of two disparate narratives. One is that of teacher candidates who appear to be motivated to become teachers because they want to make a difference in their future students' lives. This group understands that teaching is hard work and demands cognitive skill sets, among other factors. The other story chronicles situations that teacher education faculty must meet in helping teacher candidates of a different kind. There are some young people who believe teaching to be an easy major, which involves checking off boxes on a curriculum worksheet so they can enter a job that provides days off, matched to student holidays and summer vacation. Additionally, with such attitudes, these same students reported their distaste for discipline-specific tasks that involved writing and critical thinking. In their own words, they share their perspectives. While it would be unfair to categorically label students in either group, this study is committed to addressing honestly how teacher preparation faculty confront the reality of helping *all* elementary education majors to understand the pivotal role they will play as educators and provide them with those experiences that lead to the discovery of what teaching really involves. Implicit in this approach is the understanding that faculty and administrators involved in teacher preparation must themselves have had direct classroom immersion. An individual in teacher education who lacks the authenticity of experience of being a classroom teacher is akin to the dean of a law school who has not practiced law or a nursing professor who has no practitioner experience. Valuing applied experiences matters on all levels.

In taking the long view and recognizing the advances made from Normal Schools, early teacher training programs, to current standards for accreditation for teacher training programs and licensure for teacher candidates, the re-examination of teacher preparation programs—requirements, expectations, and support mechanisms—is timely. In particular, the author will argue that the quest to build a qualified elementary teacher, who thinks critically and guides students on their teaching and learning discovery, depends on numerous features, including recruitment of individuals who have an ethic of openness and

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