A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT TEACHERS TOWARDS TEACHING

By

Moo Swee Ngoh
Isabella Wong
Angela Wong

INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of research has shown personal perceptions and beliefs to play a significant role in career development (Bandura, 1997). New teachers’ experiences are, in many cases affected by perceptions and expectations formed before even their teaching preparation programmes. Any incompatibility between future teacher’s perceptions of teaching and the realities of the work and workplace may lead to job dissatisfaction and possible attrition from the teaching force. According to Murmane et al. (1991), teachers are more likely to leave the profession in their early years due to the high incidence of job dissatisfaction.

Studies have also shown that their dissatisfaction is especially likely in the case of pre-service teachers who often hold unrealistic beliefs of the teaching job and the teaching environment. Weinstein, 1988, for instance reported that pre-service teachers often underestimated the problems they were about to face as first year teachers. Johnston (1994) found a sense of disillusionment among pre-service teachers with respect to the experience of teaching.

There is abundant literature on the reasons why people choose a career in teaching and why they decide to leave the profession (Ross, 2000), but surprisingly, little attention has been paid to the initial perceptions and beliefs about the teaching profession held by
student teachers. As such, this study was designed, as part of a larger research study, to explore the beliefs and expectations held by student teachers about teaching as a profession in Singapore. Interviews were conducted with a randomly selected, but representative group of student teachers (who were part of the cohort in the main research study) at the National Institute of Education.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the part of the study that this paper is reporting on is to investigate the perceptions and beliefs that student teachers hold of teaching and teachers in Singapore at the beginning of their initial teacher preparation programme.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

A representative sample of 50 student teachers from all the Initial Teacher Preparation (ITP) programmes participated in this part of the study. They comprised about 3% of the total cohort of student teachers from the Diploma in Education Year 1, BA/BSc (Education) Year 1, and Post Graduate Diploma in Education programmes.

Data Collection

The 50 student teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 11 main questions. Responses to 2 of the questions formed the data set for investigating the perceptions and beliefs that student teachers hold of teaching and teachers in Singapore at the beginning of their teacher preparation programme. The 2 questions were

Question 1: What is the public’s attitude towards teaching and teachers?  
Do you agree or disagree with these perceptions?  
What might some of the reasons be?

Question 4: What are your expectations about the teaching job?
For both questions, only the parts of the responses which pertained directly to student teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about teaching and teachers were extracted for analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Content analysis of the interview transcripts was carried out by the three researchers. Substantive statements relevant to the two questions, and common themes that emerged were first identified by individual researchers. A meeting was then held to determine the inter-rater agreement to the themes. Categories were constructed and the themes with the relevant substantive statements were assigned to them. Frequency counts and percentages of the number of responses were recorded, calculated and tabulated. In addition, verbatim examples of the student teachers’ responses for each theme were quoted as evidence of the perceptions held by them of teaching and teachers in Singapore.

**RESULTS**

The focus of this report is on the perceptions and beliefs about teaching held by student teachers at the beginning of their initial teacher preparation programmes. The interviewees expressed these perceptions either as direct statements (e.g. “I think teaching is a noble profession.”) or in the form of agreeing with perceptions held by others (e.g. “I agree with my friends that teaching is very tough.”)

**Question 1:** What is the public’s attitude towards teaching and teachers? Do you agree or disagree with these perceptions? What might some of the reasons be?

At the beginning of each interview, interviewees were asked to talk about public attitudes towards teaching. This was followed up with questions on whether they agreed with those views, what their own perceptions were, and possible reasons for those perceptions.

**Question 4:** What are your expectations about the teaching job?

The interviewees’ perceptions of teaching were also revealed in their answers even though Question 4 was about their expectations of teaching as a job. For example: “I
have to be able to cope with the high stress level and the responsibility of teaching the students because if I don’t do my job well, I know that parents, the HODs, and principals are there.”

Categories of the responses are listed in Table 1, together with their respective descriptors.

**Table 1 : Categories and descriptors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Regard for Teaching</td>
<td>Noble profession; important; meaningful, worthwhile; satisfying, interesting; challenging Not a profession; easy job; last resort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teacher Roles and Responsibilities</td>
<td>Multiple roles: not only teach, discipline and manage, also administrative tasks, CCA, form teacher, counselor, nanny, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teacher Attitudes and Dispositions</td>
<td>Role model, ‘a ministry’, positive attitudes, invest self, enthusiasm, interest, care for students, connect with students, dynamic, energetic, professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teacher Skills and Knowledge</td>
<td>Meeting new initiatives and policies, designing interesting lessons and new pedagogies, managing difficult students, no room for mistakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Stakeholder Issues</td>
<td>Issues related to parents, principals, colleagues, MOE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **Regard for Teaching as a Profession**

a. *Teaching is a noble profession; it is a meaningful and worthwhile profession, and it is satisfying.*

As the interviewees were student teachers about to join the teaching profession, it was not surprising that their perceptions of teaching were positive. As one of them had put it, teaching generally had a “*healthy and positive image*”. What was interesting, however, was the emphasis given in the positive perceptions, and their reasons.

Almost all the interviewees (47 out of 50) had positive perceptions of teaching describing it to be a “*noble profession*”, “*meaningful*”, “*worthwhile*”, and “*satisfying*”. They saw that teachers had an important part to play. What was significant was that all the reasons
cited for these positive perceptions had to do with “students”. 26 interviewees mentioned what they could do with their students (in their academic as well as character development) as the reasons for their positive views of teaching. The verbs often used included educate, inspire, mould, nurture, motivate, help, guide, build up, develop etc.

“I feel the sense of satisfaction of being able to help the students. It’s like if you teach you make a difference to all these kids.”

“I think teaching is a professional job in the sense that we actually educate our young. You have to inculcate values in the students, ..to nurture them, as in trying to develop their potential.”

“Teaching is a very big job, not a normal job. We are educating the next generation. I think we should not only focus on the results and academic studies. We should also concentrate on the child’s character, and their values and things.”

b. Teaching is very interesting, exciting, enjoyable, and wonderful, but also challenging and tough.

In addition to teaching being seen as meaningful and worthwhile because of what they were able to do for the students, four of the interviewees felt that teaching was also interesting and exciting in itself. One reason was that teaching offered them opportunities to relate to the young and to interact and communicate with students. As one of them put it, “It’s more people related so you will be interacting with students. It’s nicer to handle students than people of your own age.”

An interviewee with an engineering degree said that in teaching, he would be able to “have more interaction with human beings rather than relating to machines all day long.”

Another felt that teaching was exciting because “even though we might be going through the same content year after year, I think with different students, it will be different. So it will be challenging but I believe, exciting in its own way.” Teaching was certainly more interesting “than just sitting there and doing a lot of paper work.”

Three interviewees perceived that teaching was not easy, and in fact, it was quite tough.
“Teachers’ job is quite tough. You’re stuck between the parents, school and the principal and all that... Teachers can be put into very difficult positions sometimes, but I don’t regret my choice.”

“Teachers must do everything, must get A’s. It’s a tough job.”

c. Teaching as a career offers economic security, and stability, but is it a profession that is held in high regard?

It was interesting to note that most of the interviewees did not seem to give premium to the financial returns of teaching as one of the reasons for their positive perception of the profession. In fact only one mentioned that teaching was a “well paying job”, although seven others saw teaching being a “stable job”, “secure job” and “iron rice bowl”.

The interviewees seemed a little less sure when it came to the respect teaching had as a profession. This was in part based on what they perceived to be the public’s regard for teaching and the apparent lack of respect for teachers.

“I think the public don’t actually have an understanding of what teachers do. So basically they really expect a lot from teachers. Somehow, it’s like parents, they don’t really think very highly of teachers.”

“I think that teachers we lack a bit of respect.”

“Teaching might not be on par with other professions. That’s what I feel. It’s not as prestigious. But there are some who think teaching is a noble profession. I think it’s very few. Generally I find that people put other professions on top of teaching.”

2. Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

a. Teachers hold multiple roles

Perceptions that the interviewees had on teaching as a job were often expressed in terms of a teacher’s roles and responsibilities. Six of them were clearly aware that teachers played multiple roles:
“Teachers are doing a lot of things, not only teaching. A lot of management in a way, manage your own class, and a lot of administrative work as well.”

“Administrator, counselor, friend, break up fights … listen to parents complaining. All rounder.”

“..we have many roles to play in school; not only as an educator, but also as a nanny.”

b. Teachers not only teach, but they have also to perform many non-teaching tasks: administrative (as form teachers), organizational, CCA, school committees etc

The interviewees perceived teaching to be a “multifaceted” job, and were apparently well informed about what a teacher’s work entailed. Eleven of the interviewees indicated that setting and marking homework assignments, setting and marking examination papers, as well as teaching remedial lessons were all part of teaching:

“.. set a lot of homework .. mark a lot of homework..”

“You have to set test questions, and do other computer related things.”

“Now we are going single session, and your day ends at 4 pm after all the remedial lessons, and all that. And you still need to mark and you still need to prepare and all that. It’s an on-going job.”

Teaching as a job was also perceived to be one that included “non-teaching” tasks.

Altogether there were more than forty substantive statements made on the “non-teaching” functions of teachers:

i) Administrative tasks

“..being a teacher is not just teaching. You got to also get yourself into the administration side as well.”

“Besides that, if you’re a form teacher you have to take care of the admin matters.”

ii) Organizational responsibilities

“I think when there are a lot of celebrations going on, they have to put in a lot of hard work .. decorating the school.. Make that function or concert
go well. for example art teacher. have to put up banners.”

“Any programme, camp, function and teachers’ day celebration is all planned by teachers.”

“I don’t mind doing those organizing stuff, but I mean frankly it’s time wasted.”

iii) Co-curricular responsibilities, committees, contact time etc

“They have outside commitments, like CCA activities.”

“I think there is quite a lot of administrative stuff to prepare, like CCA, we have to be in charge of all those.”

“. sitting in different committees.”

“Contact time, CCA meant longer days.”

3. Teacher Attitudes and Dispositions

In the course of discussing their perceptions and beliefs about teaching, fourteen of the interviewees gave several examples of the attitudes and dispositions teachers would need to have in order to be effective in performing their roles and responsibilities. Eleven of the interviewees felt that teachers should be role models to their students. The attitudes and dispositions teachers should have included:

- Enthusiasm
- Interest
- Commitment
- Passion
- Patience
- Professionalism

Teachers would also need to

- Have high energy
- Be willing to work hard
- Be dynamic
- Be creative
- Show care
- Connect with the students
- Be open minded
- Be willing to learn and not be stagnant
- Be willing to upgrade oneself
In the words of three of the interviewees:

“.. basically you have to be committed. You must have the passion, and … you must always have this perception of an open mind when you step into classrooms… and you must be willing to work hard and it’s not just for, on, I just want to get a job.”

“I feel teaching is a job that requires a lot of energy. It is something you cannot just do as a job. I feel that it is something that you have to, in a way, invest a lot of yourself into it as well. There is no way you can just go in, preparing a lesson and just deliver it in a deadpan manner. But you have to put in a lot of yourself, your own experiences even, in your classroom delivery. And besides just preparing a good lesson or even coming up with interesting materials, I think an important thing about teaching is that you actually have to connect with the students. That is very important.”

“as a full fledged teacher.. always thinking of new ways to upgrade myself, my pupils, new ways to interact effectively with my colleagues, parents..”

4. Teacher Skills and Knowledge

In talking about their perceptions on teaching and their expectations of teaching as a job, the interviewees also mentioned what they considered were some of the skills and knowledge they would need, especially with regard to the following:

a. Instruction and new pedagogy (21 interviewees)

“You have to make sure you teach so students excel academically.”

“.. many different skills needed as a teacher..”

“…new methodologies.. will be required..”

b. Classroom management and dealing with students (12 interviewees)

“Students have changed… they are very different now..”

“Students are becoming more disrespectful..”
“Kids are really rebellious.”

5. Stakeholder Issues

Several interviewees perceived that there were many stakeholders in Singapore’s education system and set-up who impacted teachers and teaching. Chief among these were the parents. To at least twenty two of the interviewees, parents seemed to make life difficult for teachers because many either do not care to cooperate with the teachers over their child, or they interfere too much in the teacher’s work. Four of them mentioned principals, while two felt that they could do with more support from the MOE.

“Parents are a very big problem.”

“Parents are teaching the kids different kinds of concepts about teachers.”

“Some parents just leave everything to the teachers so it’s very difficult for teachers.”

“Some parents are...they interfere when you’re teaching. They interfere and compare...”

“Parents have more power over teachers..”

“Principals can help me enjoy teaching.”

“..principal always pushing for results..”

“Ministry may not take up the task together with us... not on our side..”

“So it’s the expectations that is quite stressful especially from the top level and from the parents itself.”

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Participants in the interviews were student teachers at the beginning of their initial teacher preparation programme. They were asked for their perceptions on the teaching
profession and their expectations of the teaching job. The positive findings were therefore not unexpected since they had already made their career choice. The results, however, were useful and interesting. While they showed the general perceptions held by the “beginning trainees” about teaching, it was seen that different emphases were given by the individuals. The main themes that emerged from the findings were as follows:

1. Teaching was perceived to be a noble profession that was meaningful, worthwhile, and satisfying. The bulk of the reasons cited for these positive views related to what the interviewees perceived they could do for, and with, their students. This “student-focused” rationale seemed to indicate that the student teachers interviewed were clear that teaching was all about helping our students learn.

2. Teaching was interesting, enjoyable, exciting, and challenging because it had to do with communicating with, and relating to people. The nature of the work of teaching, in itself, was a good enough reason for some of them to want to teach. They saw the intrinsic worth of teaching as a profession. It would be interesting to find out if such insights would translate into greater commitment and enthusiasm for teaching.

3. Teaching was perceived as a career that offered economic stability and security, but teachers could do with more respect from the public, especially parents. There were two who felt that the teaching profession was an “iron rice bowl”. Probably they were not aware of MOE’s strict guidelines regarding non-performing teachers. However a large majority of the participants did not seem to regard teachers’ pay as an issue worthy of mention. This could yet suggest a perception, probably held but not articulated: that in Singapore, teachers’ salary was not a problem. A real concern, however, was that of parents who did not understand or appreciate the work of teachers, and who showed little respect for teachers. They were seen by many of the participants as the bane of teachers, and their fears were probably not totally unfounded. How to work with parents would probably be an area that deserved consideration as part of the beginning teacher induction
programme.

4. Teachers had multiple roles and responsibilities besides teaching. The words used by the participants to describe teaching included “imparting”, “transferring”, “delivering”, and “giving” of knowledge. These words represented how teaching was defined by the interviewees. This would be a major misconception of what teaching meant that would need correction. Teachers did not only teach, but they also had to perform many other ‘non-teaching’ tasks and functions. The few examples given (being form teachers, CCA, and school event organizers) however, showed that the participants had yet to fully comprehend the wide range of roles teachers in schools had to perform. They could do with more information on this.

5. Teachers needed to have certain qualities, attitudes, and dispositions before they could become ‘good’ teachers. These included commitment, enthusiasm, interest, and professionalism besides many others. As these were unsolicited comments, they showed that many of the participants realized the importance of teachers having the right values and attitudes. Teachers would also need to be equipped with many different skills and much pedagogical knowledge in order to teach successfully and effectively, and to meet instructional challenges posed by the many educational changes and new initiatives.

CONCLUSION

This is a report on the perceptions and beliefs of teaching held by a representative, but randomly selected group of fifty ‘beginning’ student teachers. It was shown that they had generally positive perceptions of teaching and held certain expectations of teaching as a job. The findings gave insights to how the participants viewed their career choice, and provided some useful baseline data for the developing of an enhanced initial teacher preparation programme that could address some of the major issues surfaced in this study.
References

Weinstein, C. S. (1990) Prospective elementary teachers’ beliefs about teaching: