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On the Nature of Experience in the Education of Prospective Teachers: A Philosophical Problem

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Abstract. In this exploratory paper, the author argues that a core, ontological assumption—the nature of experiece—could be a part of the enduring problem in preparing prospective teachers. The paper begins by identifying contrasting perspectives of teaching as simple versus teaching as complex in order to illuminate how perspectives relate to a construction of reality. Positioning this literature review as creative inquiry, the author first identifies seventeen assumptions related to the preparation of teachers in the United States and analyzes the constructs of place, purposes, practice, and the nature of field experiences. Finally, the author asserts that the foundation for the purposes and practices of experience in preparing teachers resides on a problematic assumption about the nature of reality as "out there" in the field or in the future. An examination of this problem in light of extant literature calls attention to the need for teacher educators to attend to ontological assumptions rooted in experience.

Keywords: Field Experiences; Teacher Education; Prospective Teachers; Experience

Introduction

Public mythos that "anyone can teach" (National Commission of Teaching and America's Future, 1996, p. 51) impugns the pedagogical perspective of teaching—however easy it might *appear* (Labaree, 2000)—as a complex (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, Macdonald, and Zeichner, 2005; Jackson, 1974) and difficult (Labaree, 2000) enactment (Kennedy, 1999; Simon, 1980) of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and "pedagogical reasoning" (Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987, p. 118) that requires "adaptive expertise" (Hammerness et al., 2005). These contending views of teaching as simple or easy and teaching as complex and challenging represent different ways of knowing and different constructions of reality for different educational constituents. After all, the United States public comprises, for the most part, people who have been students, and from the

vantage point of the student desk, the commonplace task of teaching may indeed seem easy (Hammerness et al., 2005; Labaree 2000; Lortie, 1975). Even to prospective teachers in a college of education, it is possible that the act of teaching appears easier than it is (Edge, 2009; Edge, 2011). Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005) liken classroom teaching to a concert performance. In this scenario, the public perspective is likened to that of audience member's and the prospective student's view is likened to that of a musician's. From these vantage points, the conductor's role could appear easy. However, the concert-goer's as well as the musician's perspective of the conductor's reality is limited:

> Hidden from the audience—especially from the musical novice—are the conductor's abilities to read and interpret all of the parts at once, to play several instruments and understand the capacities of many more, to organize and coordinate the disparate parts, to motivate and communicate with all of the orchestra members. In the same way that conducting looks like hand-waving to the uninitiated, teaching looks simple from the perspective of students who see a person talking and listening, handing out papers, and giving assignments. Unseen in both of these performances are the many kinds of knowledge, unseen plans, and backstage moves…that allow a teacher to purposefully move a group of students from one set of understandings and skills to quite another over the space of many months. (p. 1)

Like the music lover enjoying a concert or the musician concentrating on playing her instrument well, the general public and the student both view the experience of education from a different perspective, from a different reality than the teacher. This perspective is a physical/temporal reality, and it is "an enacted or constructed reality, composed of the interpretive, meaning-making, sense-ascribing, holism-producing, role-assuming activities which produce meaningfulness and order in human life. These two worlds—or realities—exist in parallel and alongside one another, interacting and influencing each other" (Lincoln, 2005, p. 61). Like the musical novice who cannot understand all that a conductor knows and does from her or his limited physical and enacted reality, the student of education constructs a different sense-making reality from a physical and temporal, often biographical (Britzman, 2003; Kelchtermans, 1993; Lortie, 1975), reality.

Paul (2005) has demonstrated how perspectivism, "the idea that truth is embedded within a particular perspective" (Paul, 2005, p. 43), is useful for broadly thinking about and interpreting scholarship. He offers the philosophical topics of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and values (or axiology) for considering how perspectives are framed. It will be argued here, that a core, ontological assumption—the assumption of reality—could be a part of the enduring problem in preparing prospective teachers to be, first "students of teaching" (Dewey; Cruickshank, 1996), and ultimately, to be "adaptive experts" (Hammerness et al., 2005) of teaching *and* learning (Westheimer, 2008).

Like all scholarship, this review of the literature and its analysis is framed by ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological

assumptions. Although a systematic description of these is beyond the immediate scope of this paper, I make conscious attempts to use language that alludes to the philosophical paradigms in which this review is couched (Creswell, 2013). By no means "exhaustive," I would characterize my attempt to problematize philosophical assumptions of experience in teacher education as exploratory: a first step toward a new notion of knowing in a quest for meaningful understanding in light of extant literature. In his article "Literature Review as Creative Inquiry: Reframing Scholarship as a Creative Process" (2005), Montuori argues that a literature review need not be merely the mealy regurgitation of who said what and when; it is also an opportunity for the kind of critical and creative thinking that delves "deeply into the relationship between knowledge, self, and world" (Montuori, 2005, p. 375). A literature review is a survey of the field, and is the reviewer's interpretation of that field (p. 376). Accordingly,

> [a] literature review can be framed as a creative process, one in which the knower is an active participant constructing an interpretation of the community and its discourse, rather than a mere bystander who attempts to reproduce, as best she or he can, the relevant authors and works. Creative inquiry also challenges the (largely implicit) epistemological assumption that it is actually possible to present a list of relevant authors and ideas without in some way leaving the reviewer's imprint on that project. It views the literature review as a construction and a creation that emerges out of the dialogue between the reviewer and the field. (Montuori, 2005, p. 375)

It is with this intention—to discover, to think about, to critically examine, and to ultimately share my interpretation of the problems in preparing teachers in general, and the problems, assumptions, and peculiarities of the place of experience within that preparation, specifically—that I reviewed the literature on field experiences. Initially, my review led me to generate a list of seventeen assumptions related to the education of prospective teachers—those who are enrolled in a university program or alternative certification program as a pathway to initial teacher certification in the United States.

Assumption #1: Experience is necessary and vital.

Assumption #2: Prospective teachers know how to learn from field experiences.

Assumption #3: Because practicing teachers have classroom experience, they can teach prospective teachers who do not.

Assumption #4: Teacher educators, prospective teachers, and mentor/cooperating teachers share a common language for talking about education.

Assumption #5 (an offshoot of #4): When we do use the same language to communicate "teaching," we mean the same things.

Assumption #5: Field experiences *help* prospective teachers to develop into professional educators.

Assumption #6: Prospective teachers know how to learn from "less than ideal" or non-examples in the field.

Assumption #7: Prospective Teachers know how to use/apply what they have learned during their education coursework to teaching situations in classroom environments.

Assumption #8: Prospective teachers have constructed a cognitive map for teaching and know how to navigate that map in various contexts.

Assumption #9: Enactment—prospective Teachers can *do* what they know they should. (That they know what and why but also when and how to do.)

Assumption #10: Prospective teachers know how to learn from their successes and their struggles during field experiences.

Assumption #11: Prospective teachers (a) evoke their prior knowledge during practice teaching scenarios; (b) they know how to use that knowledge when they do; and that (c) the prior knowledge they recall is in fact, from their study of education and not solely from their personal experience as a student.

Assumption #12: Reflections help prospective teachers to think through their experiences in practicum field experiences. (The assigned task of "reflection" does not necessarily mean that there is much more than recall or hypothetical thinking going on.)

Assumption #13: Prospective teachers know *how* to think through their experiences in ways that help them to analyze, deconstruct, reconstruct, make connections, and grow. (It is possible that Prospective Teachers go through these motions discretely, never linking the pieces together.)

Assumption #14: Prospective teachers know when they are learning, how they learned, and why they learned, and are able to think about learning beyond their own experiences for purposes of helping individual students.

Assumption #15: Prospective teachers either already know how to or will come to see students as individuals rather than a group or class.

Assumption #16: Prospective teachers will develop the ability to consider learning beyond self (student)-centered experiences.

Assumption #17: That the perceived and documented problems in field experiences are "experience" problems.

Further consideration of these assumptions led me to consider the philosophical assumptions of the place, purposes, practice, and nature of experience in teacher preparation.

The Place of Experience in the Education of Prospective Teachers

Experience in education is a topic of perennial interest. Students of education often view field experiences as the most valuable, critical, and personal component of their education (Cherian, 2003; Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; Cruickshank, Bainer, Cruz, Giebelhaus, McCullough, Metcalf, & Reynolds 1996; Lortie, 1975). Teacher educators, the general public, even critics of teacher education also "agree that whatever else might be dispensable, practice teaching is not" (Silberman, 1971 as cited in Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; p. 35). Field experience emerges from the literature as a critical component in the education of teachers (Conant, 1963; Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; Cruickshank et al., 1996; Zeichner, 1980). The notion or place of experience in education is not, then, a point of disagreement; discrepancy, rather, hinges on what is meant by "experience."

The Purposes and Practice of Experience in the Education of Prospective Teachers

Nolan's (1982) historical inquiry into the purpose and nature of field experience in teacher education begins with Dewey's (1904) "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education" as an inaugural treatise to address the purpose of field experiences. In it, Dewey delineates between apprenticeship and laboratory models of learning to teach. He advocates for reflective criticism through laboratory experiences as a way to bridge the historical, psychological, and sociological theories of education with the practice of teaching. Since 1904, the purposes of experience in education seem to swing along a pendulum, arching from the Deweyian notion of intellectual inquiry, experimentation, and critical reflection to the more technical teaching skills designed to induct novices into the profession (Nolan, 1982). Current research indicates that the pendulum of purpose is returning to a point which values the kind of educative experiences John Dewey introduced in 1904 and advocated for in *Experience and Education*(1938).

In the first edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* (1990), Guyton and McIntyre's review of the literature on field experiences noted the missing theoretical basis for the purpose and design of filed experiences in education. In a second edition to the handbook, McIntyre, Byrd, and Foxx (1996) review an emerging constructivist theoretical framework for teacher education and the constructivist framework's emphasis on "the growth of the prospective teacher through experiences, reflection, and self-examination" (p. 172). McIntyre and associates (1996) refer to Bullough (1989) who "asserts that the first priority in developing a reflective teacher education program is to restructure all field

experiences so students can engage in reflective decision making and can act on their decisions in the spirit of praxis" (p. 172). A critical and reflective field experience program which guides prospective teachers in becoming active decision-makers is the beginning of students' being able to see from the teacher's perspective.

In light of a constructivist theoretical framework for teacher education, field experiences have the potential to bridge theory and practice; however, too frequently, field experiences "widen the gap between the two" (McIntyre et al., 1996, p. 172). To modify the conditions of student teaching to meet constructivist methods and values, McIntyre et al. cite McCaleb, Borko, and Arends (1992) who suggest that "student teaching placements must no longer be viewed as the 'real world' and instead should be viewed as learning laboratories or studios where student teachers experience both the university and the school as 'the real world' (McIntyre et al., 1996, p. 172). Such a program would be characterized by the continuing inquiry of the student teacher, the cooperating classroom teacher, and their students.

McCaleb, Borko, and Arends' (1992) ontological assertion—that "the real world" for students of teaching consists of the physical/temporal place of both the university and the community—was timely. Literature from the 1980's and early 1990's was saturated by language which designated "the real world" to be the schools which students of teaching would eventually teach (e.g. Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986; Cruickshank et al., 1996; Nolan, 1982). For example, Cruickshank and Armaline's (1986) frequently cited article on field experiences in teacher education, situates practice teaching as an "unabated" commitment to "learning by doing" since the "dawn of formal teacher training in America" (p. 34). They offer a detailed, five-point taxonomy of teaching experiences. This taxonomy addresses the following characteristics: settings; degree of directness and concreteness; purposes; duration; and placement or sequence in the education program. The nature of field experiences is discussed in terms of whether the experience is direct or indirect, concrete or abstract. This portion of Cruickshank and Armeline's taxonomy reads as follows:

> Directness and Concreteness
> a. Direct experiences with reality. You are the teacher teaching real learners in a real classroom.
> b. Direct experiences using a model of reality. You are the teacher teaching in a contrived setting.
> c. Indirect experiences with reality. You are "observing" real teaching.
> d. Indirect experiences using a model of reality. You are "observing" simulated teaching. (p. 35)

Subtle in the language is the ontological declaration that the real world is "out there" apart from the daily life of the student of teaching in the teacher preparation program. Are the experiences in a university classroom where students teach their peers not reality? Is this not a real classroom with real learners?

Literature since the 2000's (e.g. Bransford et al., 2005; Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, & Beckett, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Edge, 2011; Hammerness et al., 2005; Roasaen & Florio-Ruane, 2008; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Strom, 2015; Westheimer, 2008; Zeichner, 2012) indicates that education has moved and continues to move toward constructivist theories of teaching and learning. Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, and Beckett (2005) state that a constructivist theory of teaching and learning is a theory of knowing not teaching. Lincoln (2005) operationalizes the definition of *constructivism* to mean "an interpretive stance which attends to the meaning-making activities of active agents and cognizing human beings" (p. 60). She outlines constructivism as a theoretical and interpretive perspective that comprises ontology, epistemology, a methodology or methodologies, and axiology. Ontology asks, "What is reality?"; epistemology asks, "What and when is knowledge?"; methodology asks, "How do we know or acquire knowledge?"; and axiology asks, "What contributions do our values and beliefs make toward our judgments of what is true?" (Lincoln, 2005; Paul, 2005). In a constructivist paradigm, researchers think about how learners construct knowledge in relationship to their contexts (Westheimer, 2008). Students of teaching are considered active problem solvers who make sense of their experiential worlds and who influence and are influenced by their contexts.

The Nature of Experience in the Education of Prospective Teachers

The foundation of the purposes and practices of experience in preparing teachers is predicated upon an assumption or presumption of the nature of reality. It will be argued here that this presumption is problematic. It will be hypothesized that this problem is a foundational problem which could potentially create a fissure in the whole "house" of teacher preparation.

First, a reality which bifurcates teaching from learning is a flawed and potentially fatal assumption. As Westheimer (2008) notes, "[i]n both Norwegian and Hebrew, the verbs 'to teach' and 'to learn' are etymologically inseparable. Teaching and learning…are two sides of the same pedagogical coin" (p. 756). When teacher education programs implicitly separate learning—as something you do *here* (e.g., in a college of education; in a university classroom; as a "student")—from *teaching*--something you do *there* (in P-12 schools as a professional)—then the concept of *practice teaching* removes the act of constructing reality from the context in which it occurs, causing fragmented ways of knowing and being for students of teaching. Conversely, in constructivist ontology, the reality of teaching and learning are continuous; they happen both *here* and *there*, both as a *teacher* and as a *student*, for they are transactionally connected by an individual learner's experiences in her or his environment (Dewey, 1938).

When teaching and learning are separated, teacher educators should not be surprised to discover beginning teachers "reverting" to teach in the manner that they learned—and consequently perpetuating the separation of teaching and learning for their own students (Lortie, 1975). What they've come to know

through their apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) is an accumulation of at least 13,000 hours of learning in the only reality they've enacted—their own student reality. To not prepare preservice teachers to examine the philosophical foundations of knowing self and other is to firmly position them further into their apprenticeship of observation. A perspective, if unexamined, could be "mis-educative" (Dewey, 1938, p. 25) and costly to the many students such teachers go on to prepare. To not offer students of teaching a systematic way to examine the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological in learning to teach is to potentially perpetuate rather than repair students' suspected fissure between theory and practice (Dewey, 1938; Lortie, 1975). Dan Lortie's (1975) seminal sociological study revealed teachers' complaints that their education courses were "too theoretical" and therefore not useful does "not mean that the content is too abstract or general. They are not saying that methods course contain too many concepts or too complex an ordering of ideas..." (p. 69). Rather, teachers felt the courses and the instructors to be too removed from "classroom exigencies" (p. 69). Stated another way, there seemed to be no continuity in the situation (Dewey, 1938) between the experiences in the university classroom, the supposed "real-world" P-12 classroom, and the learner's process of learning. Such a separation, according to Dewey (1938), creates a separation between a person and her or his environment, and it creates a schism within the individual preparing to be a teacher. In *Experience and Education*(1938) Dewey explains:

> The conceptions of *situation* and *interaction* are inseparable from each other. An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation….The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had…Different situations succeed one another. But because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later ones. As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. Otherwise the course of experience is disorderly, since the individual factor that enters into making an experience is split. A divided world, a world whose parts and aspects do not hang together, is at once a sign and a cause of a divided personality. When the splitting-up reaches a certain point, we call that person insane. A fully integrated personality, on the other hand, exists only when successive experiences are integrated with one another. It can be built up only as a world of related objects is constructed. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 43-44)

Dewey's notion of continuity and interaction in an individual's experience shed light on the way that teachers' roles and identities are constructed through experience.

Both in-service teachers' and prospective teachers' identities and roles have been explored in the literature. The concept of identity is an important component in thinking about the nature and roles of experience in learning to teach. Questions of "Who am I?" (an ontological question) and "What is my purpose here?" (an epistemological question) are not only fundamental to humankind's basic search for meaningful understanding, but within the context of the classroom, the responses to these questions also shape subsequent questions of "How do I go about my work?"(a methodological question) and "To what end do I aspire?" (an axiological question). Dewey (1902), for instance, argued that the teacher is the mediator between the needs of the child and the demands of curricula. In light of his later work with Arthur Bently in *The Knower and the Known* (1949), the concept of mediator is an active and engaged participant within the environment of teaching and learning rather than a static channel through which information is funneled or transmitted from the curriculum to the teacher and from the teacher to the student. McDonald (1992) has said that "Real teaching happens within a wild triangle of relations—among teacher, students, subject—and the points of this triangle shift continuously" (p. 1). In a transactional or ecological framework the knower, knowing, and the known are all aspects of one process. (Dewey and Bently, 1949) Meaning is made—it is an event that happens in the dynamic coming together of a particular person, the text or object to be made sense of, and the context (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994; Rosenblatt, 2005) The three components of this triangle—individual, text/object to be understood, and context- continually condition each other. However, this shaping does not only begin once a teacher is in the so-called "real world" of teaching—inside the physical/temporal reality (Lincoln, 2005) of a K-12 building filled with children or adolescents. This metaphysical space is one that prospective teachers have been a part of as student learners, and as students of education preparing to be teachers. Prospective teachers need guidance in *how* to learn from their present situations rather than "bank" knowledge for future use and consideration.

The term "field experience" is considered to be an ontological metaphor so deeply entrenched in the culture of teacher education, that teacher educators do not consider its laden assumptions (Rosaen & Florio-Ruane, 2008). This "root metaphor" (p. 707) of preparing prospective teacher preparing to "one day" teach in the "real world" upsets the balance of the transactional triangle by removing the ontological arm of the angle referring to the context in which the learner is to experience learning. Without all three, the triangle collapse upon itself.

Furthermore, by positioning learners as "future teachers," "student teachers," "prospective teachers," or "interns" rather than learners or students of teaching, teacher educators and the research and literature they inspire and proliferate imply a false temporal ontology and deny the very real and rich opportunity to exist in a state of inquiry and reflection that weaves past and

present learning together through activation of schema, interpretation, re-interpretation of present experiences in light of past or even anticipated future experiences.

Conclusion

In the United States, the field of teacher education turns increasing attention and energy to clinical experiences for teacher preparation and practice-centered teacher education (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Zeichner, 2012; Zeichner & Bier, 2012), It is time to once again consider the crux of what it is to experience what Dewey (1938) describes as *educative experience*:

> We always live at the time we live and not some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (p. 49)

Teacher educators and educational researchers must thoughtfully consider the ontological problem of reality in their work to prepare teachers and to study prospective and beginning teachers' lived experiences.

When teaching and learning is viewed as an ecological, transactional, meaning-making process co-constructed by the teacher-learner and the student-learners, then students of education can always be (now and in their anticipated professional occupations) in a community of learners who critically examine what "is" (the ontological), what they know (the epistemological), how they know (the methodological) and how their values contribute to knowing (the axiological) in a "shared enterprise of education" (Westheimer, 2008, p. 756).

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