Why Did I Become a Teacher? Using Written Narratives to Explore the Sociocultural Influences Affecting the Preservice, Elementary Teacher’s Decision to Enter the Field of Education

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Abstract
This qualitative study sought to investigate the sociocultural factors influencing the preservice, elementary teacher’s decision to enter the field of education through the analysis of written narratives. The 14 participants, all enrolled in a teacher education program at the university level, were in the process of completing their student teaching in either an EC-6 elementary generalist or EC-6 bilingual generalist classroom. The participants were asked to examine their ideals in the areas of (1) culture and society, (2) culture and family, and (3) culture and education. Data analysis suggested that sociocultural influences have impacted the pre-service teacher’s decision to enter the field of education. They account this to (1) an exchange of cultural values and ideologies via the community, (2) experiences with family members, and (3) their own past experiences in and out of educational settings. Interconnectivity has presented itself through the examination of the sociocultural distance between the participants and their close/extended community; thus suggesting the meshing of home and school environments with society at large when educating individuals.

Introduction
The demand for teachers continues to grow at rapid rates; 200,000 teachers are needed annually to help educate the masses (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). While factors such as teacher retirements and attrition fuel the demand, the number of increasing students also plays a role in the need for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005). The National Center of Education Statistics (2009) report 34.2 million students enrolled in public elementary campuses alone in 2008. The call to become a teacher and help educate these large numbers of students has affected individuals of all backgrounds.

Haddiix (2008) noted that the teaching community within the United States is largely diversified, resulting in teaching that is not culturally or socially neutral. Through the interactions between teachers and students, there is an exchange of ideologies that engulf social and cultural practices (Duff and Uchida, 1997). This phenomenon is explained through the Sociocultural Approach; a term used to describe the idea that society and culture shape people’s beliefs, values, language, and ultimately a person’s identity by influencing their decisions (Warschauer, 1997).

Similar points has been found in the work of Vygotsky and Halliday (n.d) who also argue that an individual’s manner of thinking, understanding of social and cultural practices, and previous experiences all influence the decisions he makes (cited in Dworin, 2003; Warschauer, 1997). With this in mind, the questions being asked are: who exactly are the teachers educating the students of this nation? What factors have influenced their decision to educate children? According to Cochran-Smith and Fries (2005), previous research has addressed the demography of the teach-
ing profession, presenting statistics on race, gender, level of education, and salaries of teachers. However, little studies have been conducted focusing in on the teacher as an individual, seeking their personal reasons for entering the teaching profession.

This study researched the sociocultural influences affecting the preservice teacher’s reasoning for entering the field of education through the use of written narratives. Taggart and Wilson (2003) report that the use of written narratives can help induce reflective thinking; in the case of the participants in this study the task of writing narratives provided them with the opportunity to become more aware of their surroundings and how those surroundings influenced their decision to become an elementary educator.

The research questions that guided the study and outline for the participants’ written narratives (See Appendix A) are as follows:

1. What influence, if any, did sociocultural factors have on the preservice, elementary teacher’s decision to enter the field of education?
2. Has prior sociocultural experiences of the preservice, elementary teacher affected her understanding of the role language and culture play in society?

This paper will present the themes that emerged through the analysis of the participants’ written narratives where they discussed the sociocultural influence home, school, and society at large had in forming them into the individuals they are today.

**Review of Literature**

Surely the decision to become a teacher is influenced by certain factors? But what exactly pushes an individual to become a teacher? One way to answer this question may be to look at the demography of teachers within this nation. By studying these numbers valuable insight into who is educating the nation’s future can be devised as well as the factors possibly influencing certain groups to join the teaching workforce. Surely the 200,000 individuals needed to teach the masses yearly need to be recruited from somewhere (National Center of Education Statistics, 2009). But where exactly do they come from? The National Center of Educational Statistics (2009) report that 84% of the teaching workforce is White, non-Hispanic; of the remaining proportion, 7.8% were African-American, 5.7% Hispanic, 1.6% Asian American, and .8% were Native American.

Although the vast majority of teachers come from White, non-Hispanic backgrounds, Zumwalt & Craig (2005) report that there is a continuous growth in the number of minority teachers across the nation. While the number of minority teachers is reportedly growing the primary analysis of these statistics suggest a mismatch between the culture of educators and their students. In a nation with a suggested 7 million school-aged children from minority backgrounds the question as to the level of sociocultural influence educators have on their students comes into play (U.S. Census Report, 2006); especially since Duff & Uchida (1997) report that through teaching comes an exchange of social and cultural values between teachers and students.

Although the social and cultural values exchanged among individuals can influence a person’s decision to enter the field of education, other factors reportedly come into play. Among the factors that influence individuals to become teachers is that of socioeconomic status. Teaching has long been viewed as an upward mobility career choice for those in lower and middle classes (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Pigge and Marso (1992) and Gordon (1994) report that families of high socioeconomic status advise their children away from the teaching profession because of its status within society (cited in Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). According to Book, Freeman, and Brausseau (1985) this has been the pattern reported by teachers and teacher education candidates (cited in
Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Although socioeconomic status of an individual can sway their decision, yet another factor reportedly influencing teachers has been their own educational experiences at all levels and the interactions they have with family and extended community members (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Ferrel, 2006).

Lortie (1975) and Almaraz (1996) maintain that teachers’ prior experiences in educational settings influence their decision to become a teacher (cited in Duff & Uchida, 1997). However, that is not all that can influence the preservice teacher’s decision. Cultural and social experiences with family, friends, and community members has also been found to be another factor influencing the teacher’s decision to enter the field of education (Duff & Uchida, 1997). Through interactions with family and extended community the preservice teacher begins to build ideologies that shape her social attitude, which affects the decisions she makes not only when it comes to career choices, but also on the opinions she forms about people and interactions among them (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Ferrel, 2006; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005).

Although several factors have been suggested as triggers for an individual’s reasoning to become a teacher, in truth regardless of the factor(s) that affect the preservice teacher’s decision to enter the field of education, once in the classroom the preservice teacher is presented with the unique opportunity to cross cultural, linguistic, and social borders; thus aiding in providing their students with more not just an academic education but also a social, cultural, and multi-linguistic one as well (Duff & Uchida, 1997).

Haddix (2008) is one scholar who examined this phenomenon. Through his ethnographic study he explored how the preservice teacher’s exposure to different cultural and social groups influenced her own identity, understanding of linguistic and cultural diversity, and how this knowledge on diversity ultimately influenced her teaching practices. The aforementioned scholar reports that the participants who took part in this study had varying conceptions of the role that language and culture play in the classroom. When asked to reflect on their understandings the preservice teacher not only became more aware of the role that culture played in educating students, she began to explore the ways that culture could actually be implemented in daily lessons.

Yet another study with similar results was carried out by Ferrel (2006) who suggested that both personal beliefs of preservice teachers and their prior experiences may fuel their views on educating students. The results of this study conveyed that teachers use their personal experiences to not only influence their teaching practices, but also to aid in understanding their role in the classroom as a teacher and the curricula being used with the students (Ferrel, 2006).

The above aforementioned studies serve as an example of the type of research previously done with the preservice teacher. While focus on how language, culture, and personal experiences affect the teaching practices being used in the classroom, little to no studies have been conducted to focus specifically on the sociocultural factors that influence the preservice teachers to actually decide to enter the field of education. This study will provide insight into not only the decisions that drive the teacher to enter the field, but their teaching ideologies and practices once they are in the classroom.

**Study Overview**

This qualitative study took the form of narrative research. Creswell (2007) defines narrative research as “a term assigned to any text or discourse, or, it might be text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research, with specific focus on the stories told by individuals (pg. 54). Through the use of narrative research the participants in the study participated in reflective
thinking, a constructivists approach known for aiding in the process of change as it aids in making informed and logical decisions on educational matters (Creswell, 2007; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Krathwohl, 2004; Pavlenko, 2008; Taggart & Wilson, 2009). Narrative research can be conducted in many forms; some of the forms the research can take are autobiographical sketches, written biographies, case studies, study circles, and observations (Creswell, 2007; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Krathwohl, 2004; Taggart & Wilson, 2009).

This qualitative study integrated written narratives to gather the data from the participants because it provided the preservice teachers with flexibility and the opportunity to reflect on their educational background and gain a better understanding of themselves as individuals as they reflect on the factors that have influenced their personal decisions. In addition, written narratives serve as a vehicle for educational reform because it empowers practitioners, promotes self-understanding, aids in personal growth, and professional development (Densin & Lincoln, 1994; Taggart & Wilson, 2005). The narratives written by the participants were used not only to promote growth within the participants as scholars suggest, but also to answer the research questions of the study.

The research questions that guided this study are: (1) What influence, if any, did sociocultural factors have on the preservice, elementary teacher’s decision to enter the field of education? and (2) has prior sociocultural experiences of the preservice, elementary teacher affected her understanding of the role language and culture play in society?

The participants for this study were recruited through convenience sampling; they were all enrolled in a university course the researcher had access to (Creswell, 2007; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Krathwohl, 2005; Taggart & Wilson, 2005). Fourteen potential participants were approached, presented an overview of the study, and extended an invitation to participate. Of the fourteen participants all agreed to participate by signing and turning in consent forms to a third party. Once the participants were committed to the study they were given a list of probing questions to guide their reflecting and creation of the written narrative they were assigned (See Appendix A).

The participants were provided with a window (3 weeks) to complete the writing assignment and were given the opportunity to turn it in during that time via e-mail or hard copy. As the window came to a close all 14 participants turned in their written narratives. As the participants turned in their narratives a pseudonym was assigned to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality (Creswell, 2007; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Pavlenko, 2008). Once their identities were masked, the narratives were then read and coded for themes. Creswell (2007) and Krathwohl (2004) suggest the coding of texts to aid in the organization of the data as themes emerge across the texts. As the themes emerged the researcher created a list of them and presented them to 5 randomly selected participants for verification and input. Their responses were noted.

Results

Through the coding of the narratives and verification of the themes from the participants, the following emerged in this study:

**Theme 1: Participants’ Background**

The participants shared through their written narratives background information. This qualitative study had a total of 14 participants, all female. Of the fourteen participants, 9 were seeking a degree as an elementary generalist teacher and 5 were seeking a degree as elementary, bilingual generalists. Thirteen of the participants were of Hispanic origin and 1 was White, non-Hispanic. Nine of the participants reported English as their native language, the other 5 reported Span-
ish. When asked to identify the socioeconomic status they grew up in, 2 identified themselves as coming from high socioeconomic backgrounds, 4 placed themselves in the middle socioeconomic status, and 9 identified themselves as coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. [See Table 1: Participant Overview]

**Theme 2: Sociocultural Influence via the Community**

**Cultural exchange.** Upon reviewing the participants’ narratives, the theme of sociocultural influence through their home communities emerged. The communities that the participants were exposed to did vary. Seven of the participants note coming from a Spanish speaking community, with the majority of the members coming from low socioeconomic statuses. Four of the participants note exposure to a community that was predominantly English speaking. Three noted communities that utilized the English and Spanish languages.

The participants noted 3 major types of communities, some of them sharing commonalities that didn’t revolve around linguistic use. Six of the participants noted the community as a place of cultural exchange and practices among the community members. When talking about her predominantly Spanish speaking community Rachel wrote: “*growing up, my family engaged in many Hispanic traditions that those around me also participated in, such as having piñatas at fiestas or learning how to cook tamales.*” Diana shared a similar experience about her Spanish speaking community as well noting that they “would always have traditions and holidays to celebrate, for example, “*la Independencia y la Revolucion Mexicana*”[Mexican Independence Day and the Mexican Revolution] or “*El Dia de Muertos*” [The Day of the Dead].

Participants from communities of mixed language use also wrote about cultural exchanges within community members. In the cases of communities with both English and Spanish speaking members the participants described an intermixing of the American and Mexican traditions. Gloria noted the following: “*taking into consideration that we live in R****** [name of city] we don’t experience much of the American culture, but we do celebrate American holidays...with our Mexican ways such as food, music, and people.*”

**Close relations.** Yet another theme that emerged as the participants described their community involved descriptions of a close knit community. Four members described communities where members looked out for each other, offered advice on life, suggested routes toward success, and education. Rachel shared the following about her community:

“*While growing up, the world was much different than what it is now. The fear of crime was not high and everyone could go about everywhere calmly. Living under these conditions were not setbacks for parents to send their children to school. On the other hand, it was a motivation to provide the opportunity to get an education so they could better themselves and have a more prosperous future. In the community there were always kids playing outside and their parents knew that they were safe.*”

Dalia shared a similar experience. However she noted that this togetherness among the community members has helped her now as an adult. She wrote:

“*since my community is very close I am used to “family-like” relationships and consider it an advantage to be able to get along with people and communicate*
very well with them. I feel this has prepared me for becoming a teacher. Furthermore, my culture of being surrounded by family supplied me with what I believed are the essential characteristics a teacher must possess.”

While being a teacher that can get along with others is a skill one can play to their advantage, Elizabeth shared another. She states that also speaking the same language as the community not only brings members closer, but provides them with advantages over others. She comments that “one of the advantages of speaking the same languages as my community is that I can communicate with them about any concern that I may have in the future…I can also relay to them any projects they would love to plan for our community, such as buildings, parks, and better roads.” Yet another advantage is shared by Natalyn who believes that individuals who come from mixed language communities like here were at an “even greater advantage because we were bilingual and spoke both English and Spanish. Whatever the case might have been whether we were traveling, conversing with others, or asking for directions, we were able to fully understand and communicate the language being spoken.”

**Theme 3: Family and Sociocultural Exchange**

While the participants noted that cultural exchange occurred within the community, they did not discount their immediate family as agents contributing to the sociocultural exchange of information. The advice to succeed was a message also sent to the participants from their family as well as the community. Three participants note that their family members also served as agents of influence in their lives as they pushed them to succeed in their education. Jessica tells that “…it has always been instilled in us to get an education to have a better life. My mom made sure that she emphasized the importance of doing my best and getting good grades so that I will be well prepared for when I go to college.”

Jessica continued to share that within her family getting an education was important. She notes that one of her reasons for going to college was that she learned from home that it “would be a shame to not be able to contribute to society because I did not get an education.”

Dalia noted having the same values instilled in her. She shares “…since I was a child, I’ve believed it was important to go to school. Maybe it was because my mom used to tell us we would never get the job we wanted if we didn’t finish school, but as I grew up I began to agree with her.”

Natalyn believes that “how one is raised reflects what their values and beliefs will be and it will mold them into becoming the person they are.”

**Theme 4: Cultural Displacement**

The family and community play a role in instilling in their members culture, values, and beliefs. While 12 of the participants report positive exchange of information, 2 reported feelings of displacement when discussing their cultural identity. Amy shared concerns of not feeling as if her native tongue and culture were always well received. Jessica reported that she felt lost in between the culture of the majority and the culture of her family. She wrote:
“Sometimes I did not feel like I was Mexican enough. I did not and still do not like Spanish music. I do not care to listen to mariachis, I do not know how to make tortillas, nor did I experience my mom making them as often as other children would talk about. We also did not celebrate Mexican traditions such as Dia de los Muertos, or La Posada. I also did not grow up as a Catholic like most people did. I am Christian. Because of these things and more I did not feel Mexican. Sometimes I wondered where I fit in. I am not white, but I found myself relating more to the ethnicity since we seemed to follow more of those traditions and practices.”

**Theme 5: Relaying Cultural Values to Students**

As the participants reported mixed reviews on the cultural exchange that happened between them, their community, and family all students reported the idea of using the lessons learned from past experiences to positively impact their future students. Among the participants the following themes emerged: (1) equality in education and (2) acknowledging diversity among students.

**Equality.** Six of the participants noted equality for students as a goal they hope to address and accomplish in their teaching. Three of the participants imparted that this goal they have set for their future students comes from previous experiences. For example, Christina wrote that she learned from her mentor teacher’s teaching that Spanish speaking students were taking into account in her classroom and taught in their native language. She shared, “I was happy to see my mentor teacher teach the children in a real bilingual setting. Being there brought back so many memories and it made me realize…everybody needs an education.” In the same spirit Natalyn and Rachel believed that through equity in teaching students can succeed and receive a college level education. Natalyn disclosed the following:

“I strongly believe that receiving a college degree not only broadens new horizons or tells someone that you are educated, but that there are so many other qualities about you that come along with it. Getting an education is something so precious and dear…learning is never ending.”

**Diversity.** Addressing the diversity within the student population is yet another goal that the preservice teachers shared through their writing. Seven of the participants noted recognizing diversity as something positive through interactions with members of their community. Using lessons learned in life, Jessica shared that she wants “to expose my students to many different cultures and practices to show all of them they are valued I feel that part of my identify confusion was because I was constantly exposed to the Anglo American traditions.” Alma embraced diversity and showed her support for it when she wrote:

“I am a person who has lived experiences outside of the R*** [name of city] and actually see what it is like to be around other cultures. I am a very accepting person when it comes to other races and the belief that it does not matter what culture, race, socioeconomic status, or life that one comes from everyone deserves the same education.”

Diana offered advice similar to Alma and Natalyn. She acknowledged diversity by reporting that the only advice she could give her fellow teachers would be “…to never forget their roots,
where they came from, plus absorb as many things as you can when you get to know another place, learn about people, about traditions, about. With all these you might be a more valuable person” and one that students can learn from.

**Theme 6: The Connection between Language and Culture**

One final theme that emerged in the participants’ writing involved the connection between language and culture. The participants linked the two in their writing noting that one could not be separated from the other. As they spoke of the sociocultural aspects affecting their decisions to become teachers they included experiences which involved language that also affected their mindset about teaching students and forming an appreciation for students of varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Seven of the 14 participants noted a strong connection between language and culture. Alma shared that she believed that having the ability to be bilingual aided in cultural exchange. She wrote:

“I feel it is an advantage that I am able to speak the language that is spoken in my community for many different reasons…I am able to communicate with the community when necessary. I can’t even imagine how hard it would be to live in a community where it seems that nobody around could understand you.”

Natalyn shared a personal story about her mother placing a bumper sticker on their vehicle that read “el que es bilingual vale por dos [he who is bilingual counts as two individuals].” She wrote that her mother explained: “the meaning of the sticker is to learn more than one language.” She then shared that her mother’s explanation “greatly impacted my life at a very young age. I learned then, that knowing two languages and cultures was indeed an advantage.”

**Discussion**

This study sought to examine what role, if any, sociocultural influences played in affecting the preservice teacher’s decision to enter the field of education. The 14 participants, all female, were in the process of completing their student teaching semester in either elementary generalist or bilingual generalist classrooms. The data was gathered through the written narratives and input of randomly selected participants.

In reviewing the data, the broad theme of interconnectivity emerged. While the participants come from varying linguistic, social, educational, and economic backgrounds they all reported a strong influence from home and school settings, plus the community at large. The interactions they had with individuals in varying settings not only impacted their decisions, but also played a role in the forming of their personas as well. Through daily interactions the preservice teachers reported learning how to communicate well with others and the importance of an education. They all reported learning to value others as individuals, regardless of linguistic or cultural differences. In addition, they also noted that through their personal experiences they have found the importance in providing linguistic and culturally relevant instruction in the classroom. The preservice teachers also communicated that through their sociocultural experiences they have learned that the ability to communicate with their students will help them reach success regardless of the students’ backgrounds. Finally, they also stated that they learned through their daily interactions that language and culture go hand in hand. All the above aforementioned skills will not only come in handy when in the classroom, but make them better teachers.
Based on the literature, the participants’ narratives, and the input of those that were randomly selected commonalities have been found. The idea that relationships with family and community members influence the preservice teachers’ decision to educate others has yielded true in this instance (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Haddix, 2008) that reinforcing Warschuer’s (1997) Sociocultural Approach to looking at an individual’s forming of identity and decision making. Four of the preservice teachers report the close-knit community provided them the sense of security needed to enter a field where communication is key. In addition, 6 other participants reported that through close relationships with family and community members they also learned the importance of cultural practices including the maintenance of native language use and reverence to culturally relevant holidays and traditions.

It can be concluded that past educational experiences also influence the preservice teachers’ decisions as suggested by Duff & Uchida (1997). For the preservice, elementary teacher interactions with community members, family, and their own past educators have influenced their choice to become teachers. Furthermore, all 14 of the preservice teachers have noted that the type of experiences they have had serve as reference for practices that should or shouldn’t be carried out. The participants’ narratives certainly confirm Ferrel’s (2006) conclusion that “preservice teachers come to any teacher education course with prior experiences, knowledge, and beliefs about learning and teaching” (p. 236).

The study has produced knowledge on the factors that affect the preservice teachers’ decisions to enter the field of education. But like with any knowledge the big question is: what should be done with it? It should be used to help not only understand the area being studied, but also to help make advances in it. Taggart and Wilson (2005) suggest taking a constructivist approach to working and preparing the preservice teacher. In order to do that the knowledge gained should be used for the benefit of the participants and the larger audience they represent. This study has brought to light that teachers do indeed enter the field of education with previous sociocultural experiences that whether positive or negative have contributed to forming the participants into who they are. The interconnectivity reported between home, school, and the community should be taken into account and used to provide better service for students being school now. After all, they too will one day become adults and have to make decisions.

**Conclusion**

For the preservice teacher the knowledge gained from this study has provided them and those like them with better chances of becoming effective educators. Not only can they practice reflective thinking to find out about themselves as suggested by Densin and Lincoln (1994), but by implementing guided discovery through the use of written narratives preservice teachers not only learn a new approach to problem solving, they also learn to apply their knowledge (Dworin, 2003; Ferrel, 2006; Haddix, 2008, Taggart & Wilson, 2005). All choices made in and out of the classroom are rooted in past experiences for the preservice teacher. Those past experiences may feed their decisions to (1) handle issues of curriculum, (2) meet student needs, (3) reach out to the community, and (4) ensure strong parental involvement. Arming the preservice teacher with the tools to critically approach the situations they encounter in the classroom will ultimately provide students at large with better service.
References
Appendix A:

Stem Questions for Written Narrative

A Look at the Sociocultural Factors Influencing the Pre-Service, Elementary Teacher’s Decision to Enter the Field of Education in South Texas

Stem Questions/Topics

- Use the following stem questions/topics to spark your thinking. Answer each section as fully as possible.

  o Section I: Background
    - Briefly tell about yourself.
    - Family
      - What is your native language?
      - What is/was your socioeconomic status?
      - What type of education does your family have?
    - Growing up
      - Describe the community in which you were raised.
        - What was the population made up of?
        - What was the predominant language of the community?
        - What was the predominant culture?

  o Section II: Education
    - What type of schooling did you have?
      - Private?
      - Public?
      - Bilingual?
      - Monolingual?
    - What is your personal belief on “getting an education?”

  o Section III: Culture and Society
    - What was the culture adopted by the majority of the citizens of the community in which you lived growing up
      - Did you share their culture/background?
        - Is so, how did this impact your thinking?
        - If no, what were some of the culture differences and how did it impact your thinking?
    - List any personal experiences that involved your language and community that significantly impacted you and your thinking?
      - At home?
      - At school?
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