Student Teachers’ Motives For Choosing The Elt Profession: A Qualitative Description

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Abstract

The present phenomenological, qualitative research study aims to explore student teachers’ reasons for choosing the teaching profession. This study incorporates the perspectives of 101 first-year ELT (English Language Teaching) student teachers from a large western state university in Turkey. Written responses to open-ended questions and focus group discussions comprised the data sources for the study. Findings indicate that intrinsic, altruistic and extrinsic considerations are the basic motivations that participants had for choosing the teaching profession. Overall, student teachers reported intrinsic or altruistic reasons such as love for teaching, children, and the English language; and a desire for making a worthwhile contribution to the social and academic development of others. Extrinsic reasons such as long holiday periods or job security were less important to student teachers. These results, emphasizing mainly intrinsic and altruistic motivations, are informative both for future researchers and those currently involved with teacher education.

Key words: the ELT profession; student teachers; motivation factors

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, many studies have been conducted to explore the reasons why people choose to become schoolteachers. The interest in this research topic results from the worldwide problems and challenges in the recruitment and retention of quality teachers (e.g. Yong, 1995; Kyriacou, Hultgren, & Stephens, 1999; Bastick, 2000; Kyriacou & Benmansour, 2002). Findings indicate that a better understanding of prospective teachers’ reasons for choosing the teaching profession and their preconceptions of this job could have important implications for teacher education.

Previous research mainly focuses on the altruistic, intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence students to become teachers. The altruistic factor is associated with seeing teaching as a desire to help children succeed and a desire to contribute to society. The intrinsic factor includes aspects of teaching itself such as the activity of teaching children or an interest in using their knowledge and expertise of a subject. The extrinsic factor covers benefits that are attracted to the teaching profession such as long holidays and level of pay.

However, there are some obvious differences in the rankings of these reasons from country to country, which may reflect the differences between countries in their social, economic and cultural positions (Kyriacou et al., 1999). In Morocco, for instance, Kyriacou and Benmansour investigated the views of 203 university students about a career in teaching. Results showed that Moroccan students see teaching as a career dominated by an intrinsic motive, which may, in part, explain why levels of teacher recruitment in the country are quite healthy.

In other contexts such as Norway, however, student teachers tended to place a high value on extrinsic factors like long holidays and social hours (Kyriacou et al., 1999). The importance of extrinsic factors for university students has also been reported in another study conducted in Cyprus by Papanastasiou and Papanastasiou (1997). Researchers found that extrinsic factors such as immediate employment after graduation, pension and sick leave that are offered to teachers have been the most influential. Similarly, Yong's (1995) and Bastick's (2000) studies conducted in Brunei Darussalam and Jamaica respectively highlighted the fact that extrinsic motives are the main determinants for trainees to choose teaching. Bastick referred to the economic differences on motivation and concluded that the reasons given by Jamaican teacher trainees are similar to those reported from trainees in other
developing countries and are in contrast with results from metropolitan countries that emphasize intrinsic and altruistic motivation.

Unlike these developing countries, recent studies within the Turkish context suggest that Turkish teacher trainees from various branches like primary teaching, mathematics, chemistry and geography have been influenced mainly by altruistic and intrinsic reasons in their choice of the teaching profession (Saban, 2003; Gurbuzturk & Genc, 2004; Ozbek; 2007; Boz & Boz, 2008). Particularly noteworthy in these studies is the fact that student teachers considered teaching as a sacred profession and had an idealistic attitude towards it, disregarding the economic and social challenges teachers face in the country. On the whole, student teachers seemed to be strongly influenced by a desire to contribute to society whatever the conditions they might encounter.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the related literature by incorporating the perspectives of ELT student teachers. Given the paucity of research literature on the perspectives of ELT student teachers, this study employed a qualitative research design in order to best investigate their reasons for choosing the teaching profession.

**METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative methodology was selected to understand the general phenomenon of how they come to understand the teaching profession, by allowing them to tell their stories - in the qualitative tradition (Firmin, Firmin, Wood, & Wood, 2010). Participants for the study were drawn from a large western state university in Turkey. A total of 101 first-year ELT student teachers (75 females and 26 males) whose ages ranged from 17 to 21 participated in the study.

The material for this study was collected from a survey that asked two open-ended questions requesting the respondents to provide reasons for choosing the teaching profession, basically the ELT profession. The survey was followed by focus group discussions which encouraged student teachers to speak freely and completely about behaviors, attitudes and opinions they possess (Berg, 2004). These discussions provided an excellent means for collecting information from young people.

Directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was the qualitative research technique used. This approach is guided by a more structured process than in a conventional approach. In conducting directed content analysis, the responses and the transcripts of group interviews were first read to highlight passages that appear to represent motives. Most of the responses to open-ended questions represented a mixture of three types of motivation. The next step in analysis was to code all highlighted passages using the predetermined categories suggested by previous research (Bastick, 2000; Saban, 2003; Boz & Boz, 2008). This two-step process helped increase the trustworthiness of the study.
FINDINGS

Table 1. Reasons for choosing the ELT profession

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Number of statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Altruistic reasons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I love to share my knowledge with others</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to help children learn and succeed in school</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching is a sacred profession</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can contribute to society</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to serve as a model for my students</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic reasons</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy the subject I will teach</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My previous experience gave me a positive image of the job</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is the profession I have always wanted</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching suits best to my personality</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see it as a life-long career</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a desire to work with children</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extrinsic reasons</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people encouraged me to become a teacher</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching offers job security and a steady income</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are long holidays</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It can lead to other jobs in the future</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a socially worthwhile job</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noticed from Table 1 that student teachers’ reasons for choosing the ELT profession are mainly intrinsic (N=86). It also shows that student teachers have been strongly influenced by altruistic reasons (N=77). Extrinsic factors received a relatively low rating as an important influence (N=52).

On the whole, participants reported being strongly influenced by enjoying the subject they would teach. They stated that they love the English language and the processes of learning and teaching it. One female student teacher summarized the general sentiments of the participants and their excitement about learning and teaching English: “Our job includes not only teaching a new language but also opening the doors of other cultures and their ways of life to our students”. Participants further described that their love for the English language teaching arises from their positive previous schooling experiences, as one student teacher explained: “Most of my English teachers during primary and secondary education were good models for me. Our English lessons were full of enjoyable activities and we had great fun. I had then decided that I could be an English teacher”.

Additionally, participants shared that they have been strongly influenced by a desire to contribute to the future of the Turkish society. They were generally positive about the importance of helping children succeed in school and liking the idea of sharing their knowledge with others as reasons for becoming teachers. Their descriptions of the profession were overflowing with idealistic statements. One male student teacher concurred with his friends, emphasizing the enthusiasm he feels for this sacred profession: “I have a dream of contributing to society by educating young people. Many artists create masterpieces, but it is the teacher’s task to create masterpieces which are alive”.

Student teachers’ idealized and romantic notions of the profession featured prominently in their reflections. The descriptions were centered mainly on the affective issues, as one female student teacher wrote: “Teaching is very important to me. You teach new things to people whom you have
never met or known before and you expect nothing in return”. Similarly, a male student teacher highlighted the affective dimension and added:

“Teaching is not as easy a job as many people think. To me, every teacher is a William Wallace; you know, the Scottish common man in the movie Braveheart who fights for his country. Teachers shape the future of a society, as the hero in this film changes the destiny of his nation”.

Another male student teacher reported the key factor impacting his decision to become a teacher as follows:

In teaching, you help a human being grow just as you grow a sapling. If you water it too much, it dies. If you over fertilize it, it is poisoned. So it is in your hands to shape his or her future. That is why I love this profession.

As for extrinsic factors, student teachers referred to the influence of others, especially their families and teachers, on their decision to become a teacher. Participants were, to a lesser extent, concerned with getting a secure job with a steady income. For some student teachers, the long holidays the teaching profession offers was another important factor in their decision. In addition, some participants agreed that being an ELT teacher could lead to other jobs in the future. These students indicated that they might also apply for positions in the private sector or work as an interpreter after graduation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study indicates that for Turkish ELT student teachers intrinsic factors have been very influential. They have also been greatly influenced by altruistic reasons such as a desire to share their knowledge with others. Finally, extrinsic factors such as job security, work hours or vacations seem to be less influential for participants. These findings are broadly in line with other studies emphasizing intrinsic and altruistic motivations in the Turkish context (Saban, 2003; Gurbuzturk & Genc, 2004; Boz & Boz, 2008).

It is quite encouraging to observe that ELT student teachers see teaching as a career that appears to be dominated by an intrinsic motive. Student teachers in this cohort like the teaching profession itself and English language teaching in particular. Yet, few participants see teaching as a life long career, which shows that today’s prospective teachers hold different expectations about job security and career mobility.

Apparently, this general emphasis on the intrinsic factor puts a great responsibility on the shoulders of the teacher education institutions. Student teachers’ preconceptions seem to have been formed based on limited experience and understanding of the real world of teaching. Therefore, it is necessary for teacher educators to attend carefully to those beliefs and attempt to build on them in productive ways, developing appropriate teacher education strategies (Goldstein & Lake, 2000).

Although the reflections of the participants showed their optimism and hope for their future lives in the teaching profession, they also emphasize their lack of real-world experience in classrooms. Therefore, “teacher educators”, as Hatch (1999) argues, “may be setting them up for a fall if they fail to explore with their students the day-to-day realities of working in schools” (p. 239). It is crucial that teacher educators introduce their students to the real world of teachers’ work in order to avoid the burn-out and exhaustion that can accompany this idealism and optimism (Hatch, 1999; Goldstein & Lake, 2000). Only by having first-hand experience could these student teachers come to understand the complexities involved in the teaching profession.

In conclusion, this study offers insight into the nature of ELT student teachers’ conceptions and understanding of teaching. This knowledge points to the important role of teacher educators in helping their students develop a richer and fuller understanding of teaching. The techniques and
strategies which will enhance student teachers’ understandings can be explored in another research study.

REFERENCES


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