

How do you know you want to be a teacher?

By

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Abstract

How does providing professional knowledge of the education system impact students' commitment to teaching? This study aimed to investigate how exposure to information about the American education system influenced future public-school teachers by analyzing student work in class after an instructional unit that included the documentary *Waiting for Superman*. There are forty-five students in this study who were all enrolled in a core course about education. Many of the students were freshman or sophomores still deciding whether or not they would major in teacher education. The results showed that with increased understanding of the teaching profession, students in this class seemed to become more passionate and emotionally invested in the teaching field. Additionally, the increased understanding also seemed to initiate a process among those students who want to be teachers in the future to renegotiate what it means to be a teacher. The implication of this study suggests that prioritizing professional knowledge for students working toward a degree in education will increase commitment and create positive teacher identities within the field.

Introduction

A major issue in the field of teaching is the high attrition rates. Many teachers enter the field without long term expectations, or leave because they are not satisfied with the job. If there is a lack of teacher identity and no sense of one's self, it will intensify teacher attrition (Hovarth, Goodell, & Kostea, 2018). Teacher attrition comes at a huge cost to the field of teaching. The time and money that goes into training, preparing, and educating new teachers puts a big strain on schools that have to continue this cycle, because teachers are not committed to the profession. Without a teacher identity, there is no connection between one's self as a teacher and the importance of that position, and therefore no obligation to maintaining the role. Consequently, teacher identity is a very critical aspect of pre-service teacher's experiences and training. Teacher identity would allow students to make sense of themselves as professionals and helps them understand the role they will hold once they begin their profession.

In this study, we will examine how student's teacher identity is negotiated after watching the documentary *Waiting for Superman* in a class that is designed for freshman and sophomores. Future teacher's responses to the documentary, which provides information about the reality of a teaching career, will be analyzed using constant comparison qualitative method. The findings of

this study would allow us to explore how professional knowledge of teaching enhances the formation of teacher identity as well as commitment to the field.

Literature Review

Teacher identity refers to “how teacher make sense of themselves as teachers.” (Duru, 2016). Misconceptions that stem from this prior knowledge about teaching can negatively impact attrition by limiting a pre-service teacher’s ability to understand the teaching role, which would result in weaker teacher identities. Because many pre-service teachers have some level of teacher identity when they begin teaching programs, it is important that their education training provides them with relevant and authentic information that will encourage them to create an accurate and meaningful teacher identity and boost commitment (Duru, 2006).

Further, intrinsic motivation is a great initial step to forming a teacher identity. Because intrinsic motivation encourages personal development and internal growth, it is the most ideal form of motivation for teachers. Through intrinsic motivation, pre-service teachers are able to continually develop and enrich their teacher identity, because they are building up a sense of value and interest for themselves in the role of a teacher (Liu, Li, & Zou 2018). As pre-service teachers begin negotiating their identity before becoming a practicing teacher, having a personal and individual understanding of why the teacher’s role is important will help minimize attrition rates in teaching and enhance commitment to teaching (Hovarth, Goodell, and Kosteas, 2018).

Methodology

Settings and participants

During an instructional unit of a core education course meant for freshman and sophomore students at Texas Tech University data was collected from 48 students who watched the documentary *Waiting for Superman*. For a classroom discussion assignment students were asked to write down their reactions to this documentary.

The documentary *Waiting for Superman* investigates the public-school system in the United States and its numerous weaknesses. This film shows the impact that public schools vs. charter schools have on students. By following five individual students put in a lottery that will determine their educational fate, viewers are able to understand what the role of a teacher and a school should be (Caruso, 2011).

Data collection

Students from the class provided written responses of their reactions to the documentary *Waiting for Superman*. Forty-five student responses to the documentary were collected without any identifiable information.

Data analysis

We analyzed the forty-five unidentifiable reactions to the documentary through three separate investigations. Initially, we looked for frequency of emotional responses. After identifying the main reactions, we looked at specific quotes and explanations for these emotions through a second round of investigation. In the last round, we found three overall ideas, which stemmed from the initial emotional responses: teachers' role, teachers' identity, and teachers/educations impact on students. Through each round of analysis, we were constantly comparing student responses to understand the impact of the documentary.

Findings

In this study, the overwhelming reaction to the documentary *Waiting for Superman* indicated some sort of emotional response. The most frequent reactions were sad, shocked, heart broken, inspired, disappointed, eye opening, and looking at self as future educator.

Emotional response	Number of students
Sad	12
Shocked/ Surprised	9
Heart-broken	7
Inspired/ motivated	7
Disappointed	3
Eye-opening	3
Looking to self as future educator	11

“I’ve always wanted to be a teacher because I love to work with kids, but this video changed my perspective. Not only do I want to be a teacher because I love kids, but now I want to be a teacher because I want to make a change in this nation.”

“After watching this, I am inspired by this topic and am interested in what we can do better.”

“It reminds me more and more how I strive to be the best teacher ever, I never want to let a student down.”

These quotes show each student resonating with an emotion and then connecting that emotion to themselves in the future. These emotions were influencing student’s perceptions of teaching.

Three themes also emerged from our data: teachers’ role, teachers’ identity, and the influence a teacher/education has on students.

Data Themes	Number of students who mentioned this
Teacher role	7
Teacher identity	13
The influence a teacher/education has on students	24

This documentary influenced students to negotiate their teacher identity. Responses specifically about a teacher identity, as well as responses that indicated a better understanding of what a teacher does, shows that students are beginning to look at themselves in the teacher role. Furthermore, each of these responses is tied to an emotional reaction, which indicates some form of intrinsic motivation. Students are connecting with the ideas of teaching in a way that allows them to find value and interest. This encourages the students to look at themselves in the teacher role and instigates the negotiation of a meaningful teacher identity.

“Watching this video makes me want to be able to make a difference in the system even if it’s just me being the best teacher I can be.”

“It makes me want to teach so bad!! It also helps me understand the type of teacher I want to be that would better my future student’s education in the best way.”

“This documentary showed me more of what it’s like for kids not having good teachers, what, and how important a teacher’s job is for kid’s futures.”

“I didn’t realize how important teachers were to this whole society, an effective teacher can change a life.”

“Teachers need to think highly of themselves and understand how important and impactful their jobs are.”

A major issue within the field of teaching is the high attrition rates. Misconceptions around teaching, as well as lack of teacher identity, both have a major influence on these high numbers. Without a thorough understanding of what a teacher’s role is, or the ability to view oneself in that position, it can be difficult for teachers to stay committed.

The documentary *Waiting for Superman* elicited numerous emotional responses that connected to developing an understanding of the role/impact of a teacher and teacher identity. These connections show how intrinsic motivation impacts the negotiation of a teacher identity. Exposure to professional knowledge allowed students to understand the impact and role of a teacher. The elimination of misconceptions, as well as the presence of a teacher identity, will encourage commitment among students to teaching. Furthermore, the connection between student’s initial emotional responses to the key points, teachers’ role, teachers’ identity, and the influence of a teacher/education on students, shows the influence that an impactful documentary can have on a student still discovering whether or not they want to be a teacher.

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine how professional knowledge impacts future teacher’s identities. The results suggested that increased professional knowledge through the documentary initiated the negotiation of a positive teacher identity and enhanced future teacher’s commitment to the field. By analyzing student’s responses to the documentary *Waiting for Superman*, we were able to understand why students initiated the negotiation of a teacher identity. The majority

of the students in this study elicited an emotional response to the documentary that was in some way connected to oneself as a teacher in the future.

Furthermore, the emotions represent intrinsic motivation within the students, which is why they were able to negotiate their teacher identities. Supported by previous research, intrinsic motivation is a key factor in the formation of a positive teacher identity, and how a base line of intrinsic motivation encourages commitment to the field. In our research, we analyzed responses to the documentary *Waiting for Superman* in which all forty-five unidentifiable responses elicited some form of emotional response. These emotions connected to the negotiation of a teacher identity that was rooted in intrinsic motivation. Showing a powerful documentary that provides additional information about the teaching profession as a whole, as well as the individual role of a teacher, encouraged students to negotiate their teacher identity in a meaningful and lasting way. Providing students with the resources to form strong teacher identities rooted in intrinsic motivation before entering the field is how the gap between commitment to the field of teaching and high attrition rates can be resolved.

Some common emotional responses that students in our research had to the documentary *Waiting for Superman* were shocked, surprised, and eye opening. Consistent with previous research (Duru, 2006), these students had beliefs and misconceptions around teaching and being a teacher, and were shocked when they were able to gain a deeper, more accurate understanding. Students still deciding whether or not they want to pursue a career as a teacher were shown a video that allowed them to gain knowledge about teaching and form concrete ideas about themselves as a future teacher.

Based on these findings we believe that pre-service teachers should be provided with more exposure to information and experiences that allow them to gain relative, realistic, and practical knowledge about the teaching profession. This will encourage students to find/develop intrinsic motivation for teaching and lead to the presence of strong teacher identities. Recognizing the important role that professional knowledge and teacher identity play in commitment will lower teacher attrition rates, improving education for both teachers and students.

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