The "Myth" about Teaching: What Motivates Pre-Service Teachers to Choose Teaching as a Career Choice?

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Abstract. This research was undertaken at an opportune time with an ongoing need to further strengthen teacher quality and increase teacher numbers to match supply with demand. Taking into account the significance and context of the research, the prime purpose of this research is to shed light on motivational factors influencing teaching as a career choice. This study found that participants’ decision to teach was made in the context of being aware of both positive and challenging aspects of the profession. Interestingly, respondents tend to rely on perceived intrinsic rewards of teaching (e.g. feelings of enjoyment and fulfilment) to resist any negative thoughts or remarks about teaching as a career. Thus, conclusions drawn from the analysis suggest that participants’ seemingly high motivation for teaching is likely to involve the feature of weighing or balancing the perceived positive and negative aspects of teaching. The findings have practical implications for helping future teachers fulfil their articulated professional goals and sustain their morale and enthusiasm for teaching; and, for assist teacher educators to make teacher education courses more effective and to adequately prepare students in transition to teacher status.

1. Introduction

Teacher and teaching are the key to education. The quality of teaching is likely to impact profoundly on student learning and achievement. Teacher recruitment and retention might be one of the important ways to ensure good quality of teaching. However, in many countries, educators, schools and policy makers have been faced with the challenging issues of attracting and retaining highly qualified teacher over recent decades [1]. To improve teacher recruitment and retention, in 2016, Scottish government announced the intention to fund over £1million to develop teachers, enhance teacher education and teacher professionalism, as well as to tackle teacher shortage in an attempt to minimise the imbalance between the supply of and demand for qualified teachers in Scotland, especially in STEM subjects (i.e. science, technology, engineer, math) [2]. In this respect, if policy makers or schools would like to encourage qualified graduates into teaching or to keep the
well-trained force stay in the profession, it is arguably important and helpful to understand what attracted or inspired these teacher candidates to join the teaching profession in the first place. To date, less attention has been focused on addressing this issue in a comprehensive manner. It is in this context that this research aims to explore the motivations for choosing teaching as a career choice from the perspective of Scottish pre-service teachers who have embarked on teacher education programme. It contributes to knowledge by offering insights into 1) pre-service teachers’ motivations for teaching in the Scottish context; 2) how these motives link to student teachers’ perceptions, values, expectations, and attitudes towards teaching as a career; and, contribute to the development of their identity as a teacher. Arguably, understanding preservice teachers’ motivation to teach have important practical implications for school leaders, policymakers and the stakeholders in the struggle of recruiting and retaining teachers; and, in order to create meaningful opportunities for teacher candidates to fulfil their interest and professional goals of teaching and to sustain their commitment and enthusiasm in teaching.

2. Theoretical Framework: Expectancy-Value Theory

This study employs expectancy-value theory to approach the research questions pertaining to pre-service teachers’ motivation for entering the teaching profession. The important reasons behind this selection are it is conceptually robust and has proven to be valuable in theorising and developing a measure of motivation patterns for career choice across various sociocultural contexts [3]. Expectancy-value theorists believe that individuals’ belief in their ability and expectancy of success and the value they attach to the task has a strong impact on educational, occupational, and other achievement-related choices (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Researchers explain expectancies for success as beliefs about how one will perform on achieving the impending tasks. Factors that constitute value components include intrinsic value (enjoyment or interest in the task), utility value (whether the task is regarded as useful), attainment value (whether it is important for reaching one’s goal), and cost value (the effort and time required or what the individual must sacrifice financially or psychologically for completing a task Wigfield and Eccles suggest three sets of constructs within expectancy-value theory: (a) expectancy/ability beliefs, (b) subjective task value (i.e. attainment, intrinsic, and utility values), and (c) perceived task difficulty (i.e. effort required and task difficulty).

3. Methods

The semi-structured interviews were conducted, and they were expected to collect detailed perspectives or personal stories about the decision to pursue a teaching career. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted for 40-50 minutes. The interview questions were developed as open-ended questions to encourage participants to construct their personal points of view on teaching as a career choice and how the decision to teach was reached, in terms of the events, the situations, and the processes that lead to the choice of teaching. The participants comprise thirty-seven students undertaking a PGDE (Professional Graduate Diploma in Education) programme in Scotland. Nineteen participants were studying primary education and eighteen were studying secondary education. There were twenty-five females and twelve males. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 33. Interview data was coded and analysed using inductive thematic analysis to identify themes aligned with the research inquiry with the assistance of NVivo Software.
4. Results and Discussion

Results suggested that pre-service teachers exhibited multiple motivations to pursue a teaching career with a combination of different types of motivational factors evident in their decision to enter the teaching profession. These motivations were closely related to altruistic factors (e.g. being able to help children and make a positive impact on their lives), intrinsic factors (e.g. enjoying teaching and working with children), previous teaching experience, perceived teaching abilities, extrinsic rewards (e.g. job security, income reliability), school experience and other people. Most pre-service teachers perceived teaching as very high in demand in terms of the workload and professional knowledge but not provided with a very high return in relation to salary and social status. In addition, it was surprising to find that they expressed doubts if teaching was a proper career choice even the consideration of leaving teaching, deriving from high workload, emotional stress and insufficient salary. Given the results above, the authors present a graphical representation (see figure 1) on influential factors and how they interact with the perception/expectations/attitudes towards teaching to motivate or demotivate participants to enter the teaching profession.

![Figure 1. A graphical representation of motivational factors influencing teaching as a career choice.](image)

In general, the data obtained from this study supports expectancy-value theory suggesting that individuals select an occupational choice that is in line with their hierarchy of expectancy for success and subjective occupational values. What is clear is that participants’ choice of teaching appears to depend on their perceived high competence in teaching (e.g. expectancy for success) and beliefs that a career in teaching is compatible with their professional and life goals and values. Furthermore, these perceptions, values, and aspirations can be seen as central to participants’ self-concept and identity formation. On the positive side, as noted in many studies, the sense of altruism and internal rewards within teaching might be more important and appealing than the external rewards regarding the salary and career prospect. Research has suggested that altruistic and intrinsic motives are important factors in long-term commitment, nonetheless, for a career choice of teaching, external aspects such as workload, salary and prestige of teaching have the potential to give rise to job dissatisfaction that may contribute towards a decision to leave the profession. Again, although extrinsic reasons may not predominantly motivate participants to enter the teaching profession.
profession in the first place, they perhaps play an important role in sustaining pre-service teachers’ intention to maintain commitment to a career in the long term. Unlike much research less focused on the role of cost value in the choice, many participants in this study expressed the concern about the high emotional cost of teaching, in the context of other positive value constructs (i.e. intrinsic value, attainment value) still playing a fundamental role in the choice of teaching. It is suggested that these findings can further inform debates on motivations to teach, especially in the context where the role of potential demotivators including doubts, uncertainty or negative comments towards teaching as a career choice in influencing the decision to teach are often less studied or overlooked in the existing literature. This study thus extends the understanding of what underpins pursuit of a teaching career by not only considering the motivators (i.e perceived attractions of teaching) but also capturing accompanying potential demotivators (e.g. doubts about teaching) in influencing the decision to teach.

Given the mixed ambivalent feelings many participants conveyed in this study, teaching as a career choice is potentially related to how these pre-service teachers evaluate and weigh the pros and cons of teaching as a profession, and how they respond to their perceived negative aspects of teaching is probably crucial in the final decision to enter or sustain in the profession. In this sense, to attract and retain teachers, policy makers and school leaders should place equal importance on intrinsic and extrinsic values of teaching and help make teaching both internally and externally rewarding career. The policies should fully support teachers to fulfil their professional goals and make teachers less distracted by excessive workload and work-related stress that can take them away from the work they expect and value doing with children. On this basis, teachers are more likely to retain their enthusiasm for teaching, avoid experiencing frustration, and produce greater job satisfaction, thereby increasing retention.

References