

Focused Career Choices: How Teacher Educators Can Assist Students with Purposeful Career Decision-Making throughout a Teacher Education Program

By Jennifer Mahon & Jill Packman

Each semester in my teacher education classes, I explain some career facts to my students. I ask them to take a good look at each other, because the reality is that they will not all be graduating together and becoming teachers.¹ One or two in the room will never make it to student teaching, some will start to student teach and

hate it, others will finish, but never pursue teaching. Many who complete the degree will be so disheartened from subbing or from trying to compete in saturated job markets that they will give up and find another line of work. Some graduates will complete one year in a full-time position, others two or even five, but very few will complete 30.

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I do not tell my students this to scare them or to weed out the class. I tell them this because I want to give them permission not to be teachers. I have found that students put so much pressure on themselves to finish a degree that they oftentimes do not stop to think if they will enjoy the work they have nearly prepared themselves to do. Others simply do not want to admit that they truly do not like the work because they “just

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want to be done.” For many, they already have a good idea that they do not want to be teachers, but they believe they have invested too much time and money and so they trudge on to graduation. Having no other employment prospects, they may begin subbing or teaching, many marking time until they “get a real job.”

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008), a recent longitudinal study of graduates from 1993 who pursued teaching careers revealed that 87% had either never taught or had left the profession. For those who did major in education (as opposed to a content area major, for example), 40% were no longer teaching. In urban environments, research tells us that the attrition rate is even higher. Annually, high-need schools, such as those with the majority of students receiving free and reduced lunch, replace 20% of their faculty (Ingersoll, 2001). Such turnover is a good thing neither for the teachers nor for the children in the schools. It is also a poor use of the institutional resources used to train, hire, and retain educators.

I understand students have opportunities for career counseling, and that as teacher educators, we are not career counselors. Nonetheless, many of us are charged with teaching and advising those seeking initial teacher licensure. We must make a concerted effort to have students reflect seriously on the meanings they are constructing of their work. We need to ask them to gauge continually their confidence in their career choice when they are engaged in learning what is required in the daily work of teaching. Not only would such a phenomenological approach enable us to help pre-service students consider whether their fears may be reality, but if there truly is a lack of fit, to enable students to begin the process of selecting another major long before the semester prior to graduation.

I believe that by adding more continuous and focused career instruction within our initial licensure programs, we can at least attempt to address whether our students’ perceptions of their careers match their realities. For the sake of the children they will teach, we can also perform our function as gatekeepers of quality in the profession by ensuring as much as possible that students’ career aspirations match their intentions to teach. We should determine if they truly understand, as best as is possible prior to spending significant time in the classroom, the nature of the work they will be called upon to perform. It is, of course, impossible to ensure that the students are positive about their career choices. Nonetheless, it seems prudent to consider that they are not. Teaching is difficult enough. We need to be in the business of preparing teachers who show up everyday focused on the task at hand, on the children, and not on planning for how they will get their “real job.” Thus, the following article seeks to illuminate aspects of career choice and conflict for teacher education students seeking initial licensure. Secondly, foundational knowledge on career decision-making is addressed. Finally, suggestions are made for ways in which a career-counseling model might be directly applied within a curriculum framework.

The Knowledge of Fear

Noted educator Parker Palmer (2000) discussed his own career conflict:

I had started to understand that it is indeed possible to live a life other than one's own. Fearful that I was doing just that—but uncertain about the deeper, truer life I sensed hidden inside me, uncertain whether it was real or trustworthy or within reach—I would snap awake in the middle of the night and stare for long hours at the ceiling. (p. 2)

By speaking aloud about what students may fear, I hope I can provide an opportunity to validate their feelings so they may have the courage to, as Palmer (2000) would say, let their lives speak. Moreover, like Palmer, it is a fear I know only too well.

Until the age of 18, I was positive I was going to be a big-animal veterinarian. In fact, in my mind I had already begun my preparation, reading every James Herriot (1981) book (e.g., *The Lord God Made them All*). Never mind that I had not been around anything much larger than a Labrador retriever for most of my life. I truly believed I would spend my life assisting with the birthing of horses and cows. Such is the power of literature. I never considered the realities of the job, but rather invested my energies planning a college-prep course load that I assumed, though was not advised, would prepare me for veterinary school—advanced biology, extra math, and Latin.

However, during my senior year of high school, I found out that as a vet, I would be working on living, breathing things, which had living, breathing owners who tended to be very attached to their animals. The career inventories never delved into the life and death responsibilities. My teachers and counselors never asked me to consider anything more than whether I had the ability to handle the academic challenges of the work, not the emotional ones. All I could picture was that, with one slip of the scalpel, I would have to explain to a distraught elderly woman that her beloved dog, her companion of 15 years, died on my table. I was gripped by fear, and so began the decades of career turmoil. Many great teachers and writers had inspired me, so after three changes of majors, I chose to be an English teacher. Once I declared my major, no one ever asked me to reflect on my choice. I was not about to change a fourth time, and so I finished my degree but I am not sure I was truly convinced that I wanted to teach. It was not until many years later, when I taught seventh graders, that I found my grade-level fit, but I never truly loved teaching English, and eventually, I left.

The 15 minutes I spend having the career conversation with my students is not part of our formal teacher education curriculum, nor are the countless office hours I spend with students, many in tears, who are questioning their career paths. In our teacher education program, perhaps like many others, students learn about the profession they will enter during a sophomore-level course on the introduction to the profession. One assumes the point of such instruction is more than just helping students have a foundation about their profession, but also to help them begin to

grasp the realities of their chosen line of work. If the latter is this case, we must recognize that in introductory courses, students are filled with the idealized form of teaching, and any realities we discuss may be difficult to envision.

Lortie (1975) noted that teaching is the one profession into which people are socialized from childhood. Having observed teachers from the perspective of the student desk for many years, students assume they understand the tasks involved. Richardson and Watt (2005) found that one reason students pursued a career in teaching was a perception that it would be satisfying work. The authors related this to Holland's (1997) notion of career congruence, "the match between the individual and his/her [sic] work environment" (Richardson & Watt, p. 480). However, they also noted work by Lortie (1975) and Serow and Forrest (1992) that emphasized that the perception of the career may not fit the realities experienced once individuals confront the demanding institutional issues involved in teaching. Palmer explained how his own visions did not match reality (2000):

So I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find and set out to achieve them. The results were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque. But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self—as must be the case when one lives from the outside in, not the inside out. I had simply found a "noble" way to live a life that was not my own, a life spent imitating heroes instead of listening to my heart. (p. 3)

Why They Teach

Recently while I was visiting some teacher education students in their final field placement prior to student teaching, three students confessed they were seriously contemplating, or had already decided, not to finish their teaching degree. Although this may seem like a large number in one day, I do not believe it is a great anomaly. In 2003, the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future stated that nearly 1000 teachers left the profession *each day* (emphasis added). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), teacher turnover has been on the rise since 1987. In fact, 17% of teachers left their positions at the end of the 2004 school year. Eight percent changed schools while 9% left the profession altogether. In high-poverty schools, this number is even higher, with 21% annual turnover. The most commonly reported reasons for leaving the profession included retirement (20%), family (16%), child rearing (14%), desire for better salary and benefits (14%), and pursuing a different career (13%) (NCES, 2005).

How, as teacher educators, can we help ensure that our students are satisfied with the path they have chosen? While a great deal of research seems to exist regarding induction and mentoring of the newly minted or career teacher (Guarino, Santibañez, & Daley, 2006; Ingersoll, 2007; Ingersoll, 2001; Strong, 2009), very little recent research exists on the career decision-making process of the pre-service educator within the United States. Larger studies have been found in England and Australia. Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) investigated the perception of teaching as a career

among 298 undergraduate students at a British university. The authors found that participants' career expectations did not match their perceptions of what a career in teaching would offer. For example, 95% of participants indicated the most important factor in choosing a career was having "a job that I will find enjoyable," but only 15% thought that a career in teaching would offer that opportunity. Secondly, the authors noted the importance of distinguishing between undergraduates who were not considering a teaching career, were undecided, or were considering teaching. They found that those in the undecided group had a greater fit between what they wanted from a career and what they expected teaching would offer. The authors contended that teacher recruitment would be better served by investigating what students find to be the most important factors in choosing a career and then work to demonstrate how teaching meets these concerns.

Herr and Cramer (1996) noted that almost half of all college students experience some indecision regarding their career decisions. In 1991, Ivor Goodson, a British researcher, pointed out the following:

We must, I think, constantly remind ourselves how deeply uncertain and anxious most of us are about our work as teachers whether in classrooms or in (far less contested) lecture halls. These are often the arenas of greatest anxiety and insecurity—as well as, occasionally, achievement... What I am asserting here is that, particularly in the world of teacher development, the central ingredient so far missing is the *teacher's voice*. Primarily the focus has been on the teacher's practice, almost the teacher *as* practice. What is needed is a focus that listens above all to the person at whom 'development' is aimed. (pp. 141-142, emphasis in original)

Goodson, who has been considered a leading expert on teachers' lives and work (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1994), noted that many teachers point to either a favorite teacher or a classroom experience as the point of departure for their decision to pursue a career in teaching. Other important considerations were issues such as class, gender, and lifestyle. Kyriacou and Coulthard (2000) explained that the literature generally indicates three reasons why people choose teaching as a career: extrinsic reasons such as summers off or pay; intrinsic reasons, including the type of work, being actively involved with children, and using one's expertise; or altruistic reasons, including the improvement of society or the life of children. Studies have shown (Wright & Tuska, 1967; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1983) that teachers are influenced to choose the profession by family members who are also involved in the profession. In fact, in the latter study, the authors pointed to the romanticization of teaching as a way to recreate childhood relationships, a phenomenon they term a psychoanalytic explanation.

However, recent research by Richardson and Watt (2006) of 1,653 first-year college students in Australia contested such notions. Participants did not consider teaching a "fallback" career, nor did they choose teaching because of the influence of another person such as a family member, however, many participants did report that they were actively dissuaded from pursuing a career in teaching. The participants

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pointed to prior experience with teaching and learning as important. In addition, they had strong beliefs in their abilities to teach and in the personal social values that went along with teaching. Many reported that despite the difficulties inherent in teaching, and the low financial rewards, the intrinsic rewards were most important.

According to the National Education Association (NEA) (1997), the majority of teachers (68.1%) pursued a career in teaching because they wanted to work with young people. Other reasons people choose this field include the following: valuing education (41.9%), subject matter interest (36.5%), influence of prior teachers (30.5%), summers off (20.3%), never considered another career (19.3%), influence of family members (19.3%), job security (18.1%), and finally self-growth (10.9%). Ribak-Rosenthal (1996) also suggested differences in why people chose to become teachers rather than counselors or administrators. Such differences included a desire for security, versus a helping role, or prestige. Dieterich and Patton (1996) investigated adults who changed to a teaching career and found that their reasoning included the following: desire to make a difference, personal fulfillment, societal change, career advancement, or burnout from previous career. The authors also found that “individuals changing their career to teaching often are idealistic about teaching and enter a training program with illusory motivations about teaching as a profession” (p. 256).

Career choice, however, is not just about the student. On the contrary, issues of teacher recruitment, state and federal education policy, and school context also influence the decision-making process. For example, Goodlad explains that with numerous pathways to licensure brought on by state mandates, “anyone with determination and a modicum of effort can find an unlatched gate or a stile over the fence so as to enter teaching” (2004, p.24). He emphasized that it is not just the teacher education program that affects career decisions, but also the local schools in which students complete their practice teaching.

Combined, they will contribute enormously to the career decisions of the one-third of these neophytes who will not be in classrooms three years later and the two-thirds who will be. To deal with the alarming level of attrition solely on the basis of demographic statistics such as salaries and benefits, important though these are, is to ignore the profound effects of individual school culture, the social and political intrusions that shape this culture, and the place of schools and the their teachers in the ethos of public support and the nation’s priorities. (p. 40)

Soder (2004), in a study of more than 200 pre-professional educators, found that the students expected to have independence and autonomy to teach as they saw fit when they got their own classrooms and became “real” teachers. This is, of course, anything but the reality they will face in the era of accountability ushered in with No Child Left Behind.

The Teacher Life Cycle

In order to help students grasp the concept of a lifetime in teaching, it is im-

portant, noted Goodson (1991), to distinguish the teaching life cycle. In this way, they may begin to understand how their attitudes and approaches to teaching may change as they age. The teacher life cycle uses the life-span-development perspective, indicating the influences on teacher work at various intersections of their lives. That is, one teacher may work with 17-year-olds her entire life, but her perspective on the necessities of educating 17-year-olds may change greatly from the vantage point of a 23-year-old neophyte, to that of a 28-year-old new parent, and then a 45-year-old parent of a teen.

Secondly, Goodson detailed the importance of looking at career decisions of teachers as related to the various stages of their careers (for example the new teacher vs. the nearly retired teacher). In particular, he pointed to the necessity of examining the critical incidents in both lives and work that “may crucially affect perception and practice” (1991, p. 147). For instance, a veteran teacher who is faced with assessment demands brought on by No Child Left Behind might have a very different reaction to the new work than the novice teacher.

Career Education for Teachers:

What the Research Recommends

The point of this article is not to advocate that teacher educators become career counselors. It is, however, to share information that we may use to augment our practice so that we can help students continue to revisit their career choices throughout the teacher education program and beyond. Therefore, we turn to the work of researchers in the career education and counseling fields to find any specific recommendations or cautions.

There are numerous career decision-making models available, and it is important to have familiarity with their basic components when considering the development of career education for teachers. Hartung and Blustein (2002) explained that most models fall into two general categories—either rational-choice models or alternative-to-rational-choice models. Rational-choice models are linear, methodological, and value objectivity, and thus, the authors contend, should involve independent and “unimpulsive” decision-making. The alternative models, on the other hand, emphasize subjectivity, intuition, interpretation, and interdependence (see e.g., Gati & Asher, 2001; Peterson, Sampson, Reardon, & Lenz, 1996).

Hirschi and Läge (2007) have worked to develop an approach that synthesizes these various models. They identified six stages which include: awareness about career decision making, exploration regarding career options per one’s interests and attributes, reduction of possibilities to focus on in-depth investigation of a select few, making a decision, confirmation of the choice and making a commitment, and finally being firmly committed after the choice is made (pp. 165-166).

However, Hartung, and Blustein (2002) noted that career decision-making models must also pay attention to social justice and honor individual and cultural

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differences. They created a synthesis model that they illustrate through a project completed in the Boston Public Schools. Although the project was designed for high school students, it seems appropriate for beginning college students from a variety of backgrounds. Students investigate the following four themes: “Who Am I,” “Identifying Resources and Barriers,” “Connecting School and Work,” and “Building Personal Strength” (p. 45). The authors explain that the sessions are intended

...to provide an active and supportive environment in which students will enhance self-knowledge, clarify career and educational goals, explore the impact of their peer group, connect to adult mentors, integrate ethnic and racial identity factors, deal effectively with family issues, and internalize the linkages between school and work. (p. 45)

Their integrated decision-making model is oriented around four goals. First, ways of making decisions are emphasized that enable participants to pay attention to the contextual factors in their lives. It is also recommended at this stage that individuals be mentored by a trusted adult. The second goal involves empowerment. Students are taught the skills and knowledge that will help them make appropriate career decisions for a global and changing world. The third goal is education. Not only does the program seek to help students make decisions about their futures; it also attempts to enhance students’ reading and writing skills through a “literacy-rich curriculum.” The fourth goal is social justice—“to help students to view themselves as active agents in defining their life trajectories” (p. 46).

Suggestions for Teacher Education Curriculum

Teacher educators can require students to engage in direct reflection and engagement with career choice. A number of options are available to infuse career decision-making into the teacher education curriculum. The following discussion is divided into two approaches, including individual assignments dispersed throughout the program, and a course or seminar devoted to in-depth career exploration. This work might be done in a co-teaching atmosphere involving assistance from a university career-counseling office. At the very least, students should be given information on whom to contact for more in-depth follow-up counseling.

The seminar model

Gladding (2003) supported the use of group work to investigate career issues. He noted that career support groups might be especially helpful for women because the groups help them develop coping mechanisms and self-efficacy around their career experiences. Only one example of a career investigation study focusing on teacher education students was found in the literature. McWhiter, Nichols, and Banks (1984) created a career-investigation seminar that involved collaboration between elementary, secondary, special education, and counselor education faculty. The article describes their efforts in teaching a required course designed

to help students decide if they do indeed want to become teachers, as well as the particular grade level they want to focus on. The technique of Career Awareness and Self Discussion (CASE) groups was used. This involved a 30-minute lecture followed by small-group discussion. Discussion themes included self-disclosure, trust, communication, anxiety, self-esteem, self-fulfilling prophecy, and small-group behavior. The course consistently showed positive results during the 4 years it was conducted. The last cohort's data ($n=290$) revealed that students did self-select out of teaching (9%) or switched to a different grade or content area (15%). Another group shifted certification areas completely (8%), for example, moving from elementary to secondary licensure. Finally, 50% opted to get additional preparation in another area. The authors noted that 90% of the respondents cited the groups as "particularly meaningful" for reasons such as decision-making skills taught, support, and development of self-esteem.

Individual Assignments

Given the demands of the teacher education curriculum, it may be more feasible to consider career investigation assignments that could be woven into existing coursework rather than a full seminar. The following addresses assignments that investigate important factors in decision-making such as gender, age, personality, and cognitive development.

Social cognitive theories, for example by Kniefelkamp and Slepitz (1976), emphasize how individuals think about careers at various stages. The cognitive developmental model based on these theories involves factors such as locus of control, analysis, and openness to alternative perspectives. Thus, a teacher educator might find it useful to require students to engage in the exploration of alternative careers that still have a teaching function, such as coaching, tutoring, administration, or counseling. Additionally, students might be required to observe teachers (who are not family members or prior mentors) who work in very different teaching contexts and who have very different approaches to teaching.

As noted, another reason mentioned for pursuing a career in teaching was an individual's idea of fit between his/her own perceived attributes and preferences, and the nature of the work. In the counseling theories, this is explained through the trait-and-factor theory, especially that explicated by Holland (1997). Holland categorized the nature of work into six different areas, including realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. For example, elementary teaching would be considered social and artistic work, and thus it might not be the best career choice for someone who enjoys highly investigative work such as research. The Holland Career Inventory (Holland, 1997) is readily available in both short and extended forms and could be used with students at various stages throughout their programs.

The issue of gender roles becomes important in career decision-making (Dolton & Makepeace, 1993; Healy, 1999; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Simpson, 2005). Gott-

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Goodson (1981) argued that career aspirations were highly dependent on gender. As teaching has long been considered “women’s work,” males may be concerned about the stigma attached to being a teacher, especially at elementary levels. From this work, then, it would be important to have discussions or journal entries that ask students to focus on how members of their own sex and the opposite sex judge or react to their decisions to be a teacher and how they may cope with criticism they receive.

In regard to adult career-changers, Dieterich and Patton (1996) recommend a number of strategies to help students make realistic decisions about changing to a career in teaching. Such steps might occur during initial advising or coursework. Examples of these include discussing the student’s desire for changing careers, encouraging them to visit classrooms, connecting them with alumni and present students who were also career changers, and clearly explaining expectations of the program that may conflict with their current job or life demands.

Finally, another possible investigatory approach would be to use narrative methodology. Zeichner and Gore (1990) recommend life history research, grounded in interpretive and critical frameworks, to help teachers explore their career paths because it can help to uncover the full range of the teachers’ socialization. Goodson called it “unconscionable” that educational researchers have for so long deemed the life of the teacher as “irrelevant data” (1991, p. 142). Goodson and Choi (2008) asserted that life history is “powerful for the analysis of individual beginners’ subjective career experiences and the situational responses of the self to daily interactional contingencies” (p. 6). By adopting such a technique for career education, not only would we be able to draw upon individuals’ life stories around their understanding of their career trajectory towards (or away from) teaching, we would also be able to construct a shared vision of their perceptions of teaching as a career. Other methods such as autobiography (Grumet, 1988; Kelchtermans & Vandenberghe, 1994; Knowles, 1992) and narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) could elicit student understanding of the role of teacher from their first school days to the present moment, using simple prompts that are then analyzed for important themes.

For a more structured approach, Zeichner and Gore (1990) recommended repertory grid techniques (Ingvarson & Greenway, 1984), which are based on Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory (1955). This method allows individuals to investigate the meanings of different aspects of a subject using what are termed similarity and contrast poles (Denicolo & Pope, 2001). Thus, a grid might be created with different aspects of the teaching career such as degree of autonomy, influence of parents, or dealing with federal mandates. Students would then rate their perceptions of the degree to which they perceive each aspect would be similar or different to the ways they predict it would affect their teaching careers. (see e.g., Steinkuehler & Derry, 2001).

Potential Program

Granted no one approach to career choice will fit every teacher education

program, but it is hoped that a skeletal outline will help those educators seeking to infuse their programs with more career exploration. The following is a suggested template, based on the undergraduate major at my institution (a midsized state university in a semi-urban area), for a career advisory strand as part of a teacher education program. As the prior research has indicated, effective career education should include self-directed investigation, direct instruction, job shadowing, and career-assessment inventories as well as instruction in handling the stress of teaching. Thus, it is recommended that a seminar such as the Career Awareness and Self Discussion (CASE) groups used by McWhiter, Nichols, and Banks (1984) be included in the required course work *in addition to* ensuring that career development is at least mentioned in nearly every course in the program. Given issues with numbers of credit hours required in programs, this seminar might be just one-credit. The following utilizes the aforementioned synthesized career model developed by Hartung and Blustein (2002), which emphasizes personal history, empowerment, education, and social justice.

Introduction to Education/Foundations

(200 level/freshmen/sophomore level)

I recommend that a great deal of time be spent in this course in career exploration, as it is offered when students are not only the least invested in terms of credit hours earned towards the degree, but also when they tend to be most idealistic regarding the nature of the profession. During this course, it would be appropriate to have students complete some of the aforementioned individual assignments, such as a life history essay or career inventories such as the Career Decision Scale (Osipow, 1994) or the Holland Career Inventory (1997). In addition to asking students to spend time observing elementary and secondary classrooms, they should also observe the community. For example, students would spend two days riding busses in the district so they can get an idea of what secondary students are like outside the school walls. (This assignment has already led to more than one student changing their major.)

Another common assignment in the early coursework is the philosophy of education paper. While this can be a useful exercise, it is important to realize that many students are still lost in fantasies about teaching. Students could write a rough draft of their philosophy on the very first day of class, and then have them revisit that same statement as their final exam. Activities completed throughout the course should give them a better perspective on the kind of teacher they want to be. Ideally, this same paper should be carried throughout the entire teacher education program, although that is admittedly logistically difficult to do. Finally, pre-service teacher fantasies about teaching provide even more impetus for working to provide much more actual practice teaching experience at the earliest points of a program, rather than at the end. While one might argue that observation or extensive hands-on activities could suffice, I would disagree. Until the students get a sense of what

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it is like to be in control of the classroom, I do not believe they truly process what being *the* teacher means. This recommendation seems admittedly problematic given difficulty in achieving cooperating classrooms and state and federal mandates (and thus could easily be the topic of another paper).

300/400 Level

(junior-senior)

It is often during the middle of a student's program that they are engaged in learning various elements of the teaching job such as methods, classroom management, diversity, and lesson planning. This is the time when career education is often left behind, despite the fact that many students are engaged in school observations that could provide excellent data for their career decisions. It seems that not until students actually attempt to teach lessons do they question seriously whether this is the right career for them. For now, it may be enough to ask students one career-focused question on their final exams, such as the following: What did you learn in the course that helped solidify your desire to become a teacher? What did you learn that challenged your desire to become a teacher? Additionally, a simple rating scale might be added that asks students to rate the likelihood that they will become teachers and to compare this rating with their perceptions at the beginning of their program.

During courses on diversity in education and special education, students might be asked to think about the various issues around gender, race and special needs involved in the teaching career. They should also look at the high rates of turnover in urban and high-poverty schools so that they have the opportunity to probe the statistics and to consider more deeply whether such teaching is for them – especially considering the fact that many new teachers end up in the highest-need schools. It would also be appropriate at the 300 level to ask students to discuss their career plans with an assigned career mentor. This might be a program advisor trained in career counseling, a faculty member or graduate assistant, or someone from a university career office. The point is that now would be an excellent time for students to pursue any doubts they currently have about the career before they move on to the final phase of their coursework.

Student Teaching/Internship

Student teaching is often the time when individuals make decisions regarding whether or not they really want to be a teacher, and it is the authors' argument that this is much too late. Nonetheless, teacher educators should take every opportunity during this last semester to gauge whether or not the students have begun to question seriously a career in teaching. Perhaps as an individual assignment, or portion of a cumulative assessment such as a teaching portfolio, students might be asked to examine Goodson's (1991) work on the teacher life cycle, and to compare what the thought of teaching at various stages in their lives compared to what they think of it now that they are immersed in it daily.

Future Directions

The literature reviewed in the present study indicates that direct career decision-making is either not being frequently conducted within teacher education programs or it is not seen as an important aspect of research. There are surprisingly few studies on teacher career decision-making, and what does exist is not always current. Thus, much more empirical research is needed both on the decision-making process of the students, and especially on the efficacy of efforts used to assist them with this process. It is ironic that, as teacher educators, as gate-keepers to the profession, we do not do more to understand the issues that surround why students choose to enter the profession. We spend an incredible amount of time teaching about assessment, technique, and content, perhaps taking for granted that students are invested in such work. The reasons for choosing this career run too deep for just one course to be effective in helping students make decisions. Parker Palmer (2000) concludes his essay on *Listening to Life* with the following question:

How are we to listen to our lives is a question worth exploring. In our culture, we tend to gather information in ways that do not work very well when the source is the human soul: the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations. At best it will stand in the dock only long enough to plead the Fifth Amendment. At worst it will jump bail and never be heard from again. The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting and trustworthy conditions. (p. 7)

This article argues that a teacher education program should be such an inviting and trustworthy place, where students can engage in quiet or in conversation to ensure that they are pursuing the career that is right for them. After all, it is not only individuals who lose out when they decide to enter or exit teaching without fully exploring the reasons; it is the children who stand to lose or gain a great deal as well.

Note

¹ While this article is co-authored by Jennifer Mahon and Jill Packman, the experiences described in the text are presented as the first-person viewpoint of the first author.

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