Pathways to Service:
A Phenomenological Exploration of Career Related Values among Selected Preservice Teachers

By Debra Peters Behrens

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine which career related values are prevalent among student teachers, and to determine patterns relative to the decision to teach. The research utilizes phenomenological methodology, and is designed to determine the core value which is most salient for the respondents.

Research Questions

As the study progressed, the research questions became more sharply defined through the emergence of major categories and core values that were drawn from the data in the pilot round of interviews.

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The objectives of the study were to explore the ways that student teachers describe and interpret:

1. **The meaning of teaching**—How do respondents describe their career related values? In what way are these values fulfilled and expressed through the teaching process?"

2. **The purpose of teaching**—what do respondents hope to achieve as educators?

This study addresses the meaning of teaching by examining the most salient occupational values among preservice teachers. The process through which respondents decided to teach is also explored. The decision to teach is analyzed along the internal-external dimension, exploring the question of whether the respondent was influenced by others, or by internal processes, such as self-assessment and reflection.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach can elicit the underlying meanings and motivations of events and experiences in the respondents own voice, it is a rich source of data. As Carter (1993) observes:

> these stories capture...the richness and the complexity of our understandings of what teaching is and how others can be prepared to engage in this profession. (p.5)

The research methodology is **constructivistic** (Berger & Luckman, 1985; Markus & Wurf, 1987); the respondent construes her career experiences into the framework of a story that holds personal meaning. Career research in which qualitative, specifically phenomenological inquiry is used can hold formidable explanatory power. The utilization of this approach can yield critical information for determining approaches to recruiting, retaining, and motivating teachers in areas where they are greatly needed.

This study utilizes Strauss' (1990) grounded theory approach, which entails several processes of data analysis—specifically, open coding (codification along the lines of broad themes and categories), axial coding (identifying relationships between categories), and theoretical sampling (conceptual density, towards theory development). The research design utilizes open-ended, focused interviews to elicit information. An interview guide was developed with which to frame initial questions in the pilot round, and modifications were made based upon the content and direction of the responses from participants.

Participants

The respondents in this study were female preservice teachers enrolled in public universities and colleges in southern California. The 20 participants ranged in age from 23 to 39. The ethnic diversity of the sample included five African-Americans, 11 caucasians, and four Latinas.

More than 50 percent of all public school pupils in California are ethnic minorities, another reason for sampling broadly. There is an increasingly critical shortage of ethnic minority teachers, as Zimpher (1993) explains:

> The racial composition in the profile of teacher education students...has remained almost unchanged since the 1970s....Teaching, therefore, not only remains prima-

rily a female profession, but a white profession despite the fact that...there is an increasing growth of ethnic minorities, notably Hispanic and black, in the K-12 population. In one of the southern states nearly half of the population in the schools was black, but over 90 percent of the teacher education students...were white.

The diverse group of respondents can provide perspectives on career development and occupational choice which relate to both gender and ethnicity.

Research Findings

The findings in this study yield five core values associated with the decision to teach, which are identified as sociopolitical empowerment (SPE), spiritual empowerment (SE), intellectual empowerment (IE), cross-cultural relations (CR), and child centered pedagogy (CP).

Sociopolitical Empowerment (SPE)

This category is evidenced by:

> ◆ **The education process is described from a systemic perspective, societal and political contexts are used to examine educational institutions.**

Throughout the data there appears the dominant theme of examining the ways in which race and class circumscribe the educational experiences of young people.

I honestly believe that schools are set up to maintain the status quo...they are just replicating society to keep poor people and minorities down and to keep the upper class where they are...everyone stays in their "place." ...I'm a real radical, change-the-system sort of person. —*Pam*

Figure I

Core Values

Sociopolitical Empowerment
Melanie ◆ Ariel ◆ Vera ◆ Pam

Spiritual Empowerment
Tanya ◆ Barbara ◆ Robin

Intellectual Empowerment
Heather ◆ Jaqueline ◆ Karen ◆ Liz ◆ Donna ◆ Enid

Cross-Cultural Relations
Sarah ◆ Judy ◆ Gloria

Child Centered Pedagogy
Colleen ◆ Jenny ◆ Yvette

Other
Danielle

The literature on social contexts of education also corroborate this perspective. As Shujaa (1994) describes the purpose of schooling:

> Schooling is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements.

◆ Early negative educational experiences.

Each respondent in this category cited an early negative schooling experience as an influence in her decision to teach and desire to change social conditions.

> With my own learning disability, I was realizing that I could help other kids and give them the boost that I never had.... I'd like to share what I've learned with kids who are having the same problems. They end up being high school bullies or high school clowns... —*Pam*

Another interviewee recalls:

> I decided to teach actually when I was in elementary school. I just saw there was a lot of bad things that went on and I thought, "there's gotta be a better way, so I decided to put my money where my mouth was." —*Ariel*

A third respondent states:

> At the end of my sophomore year I looked back on my education and didn't like the way things were done. I wanted to approach things in a different way...so maybe other kids wouldn't have the experiences I had. —*Melanie*

Respondents in this category not only had negative school experiences, they identified the educational system as the source of the problem, rather than attributing blame to themselves or other students. The desire to make changes is rooted in the early negative experiences with schools and teachers. Respondents report that their experiences were the impetuses for the broader issues of race, gender, and class. Their own experiences provide a context for understanding ways in which other groups are marginalized or disenfranchised based upon race or socio-economic class. Casey's (1993) case histories of teachers working for social change also reflect situations where the personal is transformed into the political (p.158).

◆ The effects of race, class, and gender on the educational experiences are salient.

The concern expressed by respondents regarding racial and socio-economic inequities was consistent throughout the data. Respondents describe their perspectives relative to race, class, and gender:

> Inner city schools are written off. That's the lower 20 percent, it's a shame, there are a lot of really smart kids...who can contribute to their communities and to society, but they're seen as numbers...and...it seems that no one cares. —*Melanie*

If white, middle-class kids...do better on tests than minorities and kids from poor backgrounds, well then that's not fair and it should be changed. If males score better than females, that's not fair either. We already know about these things and should change them. *—Ariel*

Respondents seek to change the system from within, by empowering students who are members of groups that traditionally wield little formal power in United States society. They have very specific interests in teaching poor, ethnic minority students:

Everyone wanted to teach, you know, in the Chicago suburbs and I definitely didn't want to do that. I wanted to teach in the inner city...to do something different. I grew up in the suburbs and never knew anything else... *—Melanie*

I was interested in how race, class, and gender affected teacher perceptions, the issue of tracking, who's in the lower track and why, who's in the gifted classes and why...also...the study of history. Who's left out of history and why, the power that history has in shaping perceptions about different groups... *—Ariel*

...I guess I've always wanted to do that...a lot of good people end up being thrown away. All those kids that are being pushed to the back of the class, those are the ones I want. To tell you the truth, I get along better with them. *—Pam*

The motivation to teach in environments that differ from their own schooling experiences, and the desire to teach at-risk students are central to the SPE construct. We see in this theme a critical examination of the social contexts of schooling, particularly with respect to the ways in which race, ethnicity, and socio-economic class intersect with students' educational experiences.

Spiritual Empowerment (SE)

This category is evidenced by:

◆ **Teaching is described as a mission or calling.**

Teaching is described by respondents as the vehicle or means of providing service to others. It is clearly a vocation in the true sense of the word, rooted in the Latin word *vocare* or "to call." Interestingly, the meaning of vocation encompasses a spiritual element, defined as:

a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action ;specifically, a divine call to the religious life. A skill or trade to be pursued as a career.

The act of choosing a career is essentially that of choosing a life's work, as respondents note:

...it is a calling in a lot of ways...

...it's what I was meant to do...giving service...

I really prayed a lot over it, hoping that I would figure out what I needed to do. Teaching is my mission.

The concept of a career as a life's work is described by Cochran (1990, p.71):

> A career is the course of a person's life, particularly in some pursuit or integrated set of pursuits as in a lifework.

From the perspective of student teachers in the SE category, there is no dissonance between what one does for a living and what one fundamentally believes in. The two in fact parallel and complement one another.

◆ **The belief in a higher power is an unequivocal, publicly stated value.**

Spiritual faith is a publicly stated and affirmed value. As one respondent describes her discussions with students:

> We talk about safe sex and I emphasize that at their age there's not safe sex, there's no sex! They know how strongly I feel about these things. I'm a Christian. --*Bárbara*

The context of culture is significant in the SE category. The core values are consistent with cultural values such as a strong spiritual base and the congruence of one's actions and beliefs. There is a need to examine the realm of experience specific to African-Ameri-can women, as Cone (1984) asserts:

> The need arises from the uniqueness of black women's experience.... Black women, by giving an account of their faith in worship and living out their faith in the world, create the context for authentic theological reflection.

School and community contexts are salient as well; these respondents are student-teaching in schools with large African-American populations. Respondents may be more likely to feel more comfortable expressing their beliefs and faith to a population that they perceive to hold similar perspectives and cultural values.

◆ **Humanistic orientation-connectivity.**

The theme of connectivity, or interpersonal relations through which individuals demonstrate caring, concern, and creating bonds is prevalent throughout the data. As one respondent states:

> They have so many barriers, locks on their hearts, and I see my job as I try to gently unlock those barriers. They need to learn to care about each other and to believe in themselves. —*Tanya*

Another states:

> I know that self-esteem is something we talk about a lot.... I don't want to use clichés, but...this is really important, students need to know that they matter, that caring and showing concern for people is a strength, not a weakness. —*Robin*

◆ **Moral development of children.**

The respondents in the SE category exhibit an interest in children's lives, in

their moral and humanistic development:

> After the riots...we talked about it.... They wrote in their journals and drew pictures. Some of them had very strong feelings; one student wrote, "I want to go kill 'em and get a gun and shoot 'em down [the rioters]." It does have an effect on them, but one thing that really gave me hope was that they have a sense of...right and wrong. —*Barbara*

> I do see my job as a teacher to include character development, because good citizenship is a part of what students should learn in school, and how can you teach them to be good citizens without talking about what is right, ethical behavior and what isn't? —*Robin*

> We discussed...the beating of Denny—the white truck driver and they knew it was wrong to beat this man because he was white. One or two kids thought it was right and we talked about it, about why people felt the way they did...most of them have an understanding of right and wrong. —*Barbara*

Intellectual Empowerment (IE)

This category is evidenced by:

> ◆ **Excitement about the learning process.**

Respondents in this category exhibited enthusiasm about the process of inquiry, and sought to ignite within their students the same sense of excitement. Respondents describe their experiences and strategies for motivating students.

> What's really fun for me is when the light goes on, when they say "aha, I got it!" That's very exciting because as a teacher, you play a part in getting students to that point. —*Liz*

> Seeing them realize "I'm not dumb!" That's it. A light goes on in their heads and they understand. I think every single student who comes to my classroom and sits down and really stays-a light goes on. I have bright students. I have a well lit classroom. —*Jacqueline*

Student teachers are describing discovery in action, the turning point that leads to comprehension and the excitement inherent in that process.

> I think developmentally you have to understand the stages in which kids learn. You have to make them interested, give them challenges, things that you know they can do, but they're not sure they can do. —*Liz*

> I want them to leave feeling like, knowing that they learned something. And if they do, they can build on that...I asked them "Do you feel you learned from this class?" "Are you proud of what you've accomplished?" Most of them say that they learned academics—that's what they identify with the most. They say, "I learned to be a better writer." "I learned how to explicate poetry." —*Jacqueline*

> ◆ **Relativistic and critical thinking.**

Respondents emphasized that they want students to consider that there is more

than one perspective or way of interpreting events and information. The student teachers guide students to think more broadly and critically, as noted in the following:

> We end up talking about...yes, there were injustices and there were some really horrible things the U.S. has done and Anglos have done, but at the same time it allows them to see that there's two sides to an issue and you can't just say that one group is better. We've all made mistakes, we have to be able to look at those and argue and if you really believe that they made mistakes then learn how to argue to show that they've made mistakes against other people... —*Karen*

> There are skinhead and white supremacist groups in this community, and some students, I see their attitudes already, to exclude people of other races. I do feel very fortunate in teaching because you can reach kids...giving them the opportunity to speak freely and not having it escalate into an argument, that's very important to me. If they can listen to different points of view, if they can really listen, and respond with what their thoughts are rather than flying off the handle, then there is a chance of opening minds... —*Heather*

◆ Questioning as a part of inquiry.

The act of questioning is related to relativistic thinking; one must consider questions upon which alternate viewpoints and premises are predicated. Respondents discuss the importance of constructing questions about issues events and ideas as a part of the work students must undertake. These teachers in training will not let students off the hook by accepting a simplistic or dogmatic perspective; they require that their students practice clear and cogent reasoning, that involves an examination of the other point of view. The following comments of secondary student teachers reflect the importance of questioning:

> I emphasize, "don't believe everything you hear. Question and think for your-self... question me." I tell them because that is how you learn and figure things out. And they do follow my advice. We have some fascinating discussions, but most importantly they are growing and developing confidence in their intellectual abilities. —*Jacqueline*

> In one session I asked how many...thought communism was wrong, and they all raised their hands. Then I asked if someone could define communism and no one could. I used that example to show how we all need to question our beliefs, whether they are based on understanding or on preconceptions. That was really powerful because they could see how easy it is to get trapped into set beliefs... —*Heather*

> An elementary student teacher describes her use of questioning:
> ...opening up a book, having them make predictions about what's going to happen based upon the pictures and they want to know, "Am I on the right track?" A lot of times, maybe half the time they do get it right. And they're not upset if they're wrong. They are excited, they're offering their responses. —*Liz*

◆ Active learning.

Respondents in the IE category draw a distinction between teaching which

exemplifies passive learning and teaching which is active and dynamic. The difference between education that views students as receptacles for information, and education in which students learn, analyze, and hold reasoned opinions is discussed in the following:

> ...all those things like dates, in history all those things don't really matter to me. I don't care if they don't—well to some degree I want them to have...an idea of time lines, but I want them to be able to grow, I want them to be better people as adults, to be able to say "hey wait, I need to think about this" and learning how to learn, and to think can make a difference in their whole lives... —*Karen*

> I don't care if they don't remember the exact date the Civil War started, or World War II. What I do want them to know is why—I want them to have an idea of what the key issues were, and to be able to voice an opinion or observation about historical events...when they learn to use their minds there is literally nothing they can't accomplish.—Heather

Embedded in the construct of active learning is the notion of intellectual and personal growth that results from giving students responsibility for learning, as respondents state:

> I want them to be better people as adults...

> When they learn to use their minds, there is literally nothing they can't accomplish...

◆ Knowledge as empowerment.

Each respondent in this category stressed the relationship between the acquisition of knowledge and the availability of life choices. They spoke about their desire to facilitate student empowerment by giving their students an appreciation for reasoning, analytical skills, and ways of obtaining knowledge. A critical element of empowerment is that knowledge must be made accessible to all students; it is not construed as a finite resource to be distributed sparingly. Respondents cite the importance of disseminating knowledge to at-risk students:

> I wanted to teach because I saw how much of a positive effect you can have on kids' lives. I really want to teach in an urban area because they need good teachers. There are some good teachers there, but not enough. Especially for children of color... —*Donna*

> Sometimes it seems like—to use an analogy, education is—it's like an airtight container, it is limited in how we use it-in a vacuum. There needs to be accessible knowledge, taking the lid off, so to speak is what we need to do.... I'm excited that I can give these children the tools to succeed. I feel that if I go into a middle class school, a white middle class school, that I'm not really needed. —*Enid*

> I try to reinforce with them that right now they have different paths they can take, and I want so much for them to succeed in life... I try whatever I think will get through to them. —*Jacqueline*

Cross-cultural Relations (CR)

This Category is evicenced by:

◆ Purpose of the educator is viewed as bridging cultures.

Respondents in the CR category seek meaningful approaches to bridging cultures, both in their instructional roles and through their personal experiences of interacting with people from diverse cultural and ethnic groups. The ability to understand and respect differences from a depth orientation is a part of the teaching process for these individuals.

> I think you need to understand what it's like to be a foreigner. When I was in Yugoslavia, I didn't speak the language, so I couldn't communicate on the level that I wanted to. I gained a little bit of a perspective what it's like...not have people like you because you're an outsider, because you're different. I think that maybe more people should experience something like this to make them more sensitive to other cultures, and most people don't have this experience... —*Sarah*

> Teachers need to have a bi-cultural background in some way, because there are children from so many nationalities speaking different languages, with different ways of seeing the world... —*Judy*

◆ Cultural and bilingual knowledge is valued.

Respondents express an appreciation for bilingual and bicultural competence. They view students from linguistic minority groups in a positive manner, rather than subscribing to the deficit theory approach. Their observations are:

> I always tell them that they're wonderfully gifted people, that they know two languages and most people barely know one... One of the things they're most fearful of is reading out loud, and I tell them "never be afraid of not speaking English correctly, never be afraid to try." They have to know that it's OK to need improvement and that they won't be ridiculed or made fun of. —*Sarah*

For some respondents, the interest in bilingual education and value of bicultural perspectives is rooted in personal experience:

> ...I had a really bad experience. The teacher told us we couldn't speak Spanish in class. It was very difficult to communicate in English, because I was still learning the language. I love being able to work with students in bilingual education because I can help them to succeed, to know their language and culture and to become fluent in English. —*Gloria*

Sarah echoes this sentiment:

> Education is important, but not the way I've seen it done, by imposing our values on them, not keeping their values or teaching them anything about their heritage.

> ◆ **Concern expressed about intolerance and bigotry.**

Respondents wrestle with the practical considerations of confronting intolerance within school settings and in society at large.

> You don't see anyone crossing cultural boundaries. There are white middle class kids, Hispanic gang members, Vietnamese kids that say, "don't hang out with the Chinese kids." Then you bring them into the classroom and say to work with someone who's different, and my concern is, how do you do this? It's tough without pushing them and not creating a conflict in the classroom. —*Sarah*

This respondent is struggling with the contradictions arising within a society that has popularized multiculturalism as a topic of discourse while practicing de-facto segregation in schools and communities. She states further:

> It's not surprising that kids are this way. A lot of our society is racist underneath. My husband's family can be very racist. Whenever they see an African-American person they will make very bigoted stereotypical comments.

Another respondent says:

> Right now there is backlash that seems to be growing...towards all immigrants, but mainly towards Latino people. I am anxious for some of the young students who haven't been here long and people are looking at them, pointing fingers, like "you're taking something from us" and the kids don't understand-there's a lot of hostility towards Mexican people right now. —*Gloria*

The effects of segregated communities that are evidenced in the stereotyping, distancing, and objectifying of those who are different are prevalent themes in these observations. Respondents in the CR category share concerns regarding bigotry and intolerance, although there experiences are qualitatively different. Sarah, who is caucasian, is privy to the uncensored biases of her in-laws and co-workers. By virtue of her race she is deemed to be an insider regardless of her personal beliefs. In contrast, Judy and Gloria, who are Latinas, describe their experiences with prejudicial comments which serve to distance them and cast them as "the other."

Child-Centered Pedagogy (CP)

This construct is evidenced by:

> ◆ **The education process is described within an interpersonal context, the language of the respondent is child-centered.**

These respondents view the interpersonal connection and the ability to comprehend the child's perspective as central to their role as teachers.

> The kids are really open about their feelings and what they're thinking...Sometimes the things we find hard to do as adults are so natural for kids. I don't ever want to lose that fresh way of looking at things and relating to people. —*Jenny*

When you're a kid and it seems that everyone else is part of the group and you're the new one in class—it's just hard. I can remember what that feeling is like, and not even having the vocabulary to express it to anyone... —*Colleen*

◆ **Relationship with students and their families.**

The approach in this category is that of relationship development, to understand and attend to children's needs as individuals and as learners. Respondents in the CP category express an interest in working with children, similar to the category in the Lortie (1975) study identified as "desire to work with young people."

This approach often extends to understanding and communicating with parents and other family members. The respondents describe their experiences:

I create a safe place for children. I was the kind of kid who felt. I felt things intensely, I felt a lot of pain...I know what it feels like to be on the outside and I try to help children to feel safe, to feel accepted. —*Colleen*

I think I really love the relationship with the kids, getting to know them.... Getting to know their families is really important, I enjoy that part of the job because you get to know children better that way. —*Jenny*

The thing I love most about teaching is that I try to understand each of my students, what their needs are and what their strengths are; this isn't easy with 26 or 28 in a classroom, but it's worth it. They are all unique and they all have something to offer. —*Yvette*

Summary

In conclusion, the five core values that represent varied manifestations of the decision to teach are child-centered pedagogy (CP), cross-cultural relations (CR), spiritual empowerment (SE), intellectual stimulation (IS), and socio-political empowerment (SPE). These themes reflect approaches to helping which are rooted in interpersonal relations and connectivity (CP, SE and CR) or a change orientation (SPE and IS).

Because the study sampled widely in terms of respondents' ethnicity, subject area, grade level, and teacher training institutions, the constructs that emerged from the findings may be relevant to broad groups of student teachers.

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The California Council on the Education of Teachers (CCET) invites submission of proposals which address: (1) Research related to teacher education including policy issues, classroom-based issues, teacher effectiveness, or other related topics; (2) Projects or programs reflecting best practice; and (3) Other innovative sessions related to teacher education.

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Content of the Proposal: Include the following: A brief overview of the study/ project/program session including purpose/objectives, theoretical framework, methods, data source, results/conclusions/points of view, significance to the field of teacher education

Criteria for Selection: The criteria are: the proposal contributes to the knowledge base of preservice and inservice teacher education; the proposal is methodologically or theoretically sound; and the proposal clearly states its significance for teacher educators.

Miscellaneous: Papers resulting from accepted proposals will be considered for publication in *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Proposals for Fall 1997 (deadline July 15, 1997) should be addressed to Joel Colbert, School of Education, California State University Dominguez Hills, 1000 E. Victoria, Carson, CA 90747. Proposals for Spring 1998 (deadline November 15, 1997) should be addressed to Vicki LaBoskey, Department of Education, Mills College, 5000 MacArthur Blvd., Oakland, CA 94613.