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Becoming a teacher: the thoughts of undergraduates training to work in Primary Education and ideas for their university education

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ABSTRACT

What makes a good teacher and what motivates a person to want to teach are timeless questions that concern us all. This study focuses on those who are currently training to become teachers, more specifically undergraduates studying a degree in Primary Education in the universities of Catalonia. It adopts a quantitative methodology based on a self-administered questionnaire conducted with a representative sample. Participants' open-ended responses are recorded and codified. Three main categories are constructed: personal, authentic teacher; the teacher as story teller; and, the teacher as motivator of learning. Results highlight important differences between these categories, extolling above all the authentic, personal teacher, who leaves a mark thanks to their character and way of being. This, together with other findings, raises various considerations for the university training of future teachers.

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1. Introduction

It is hard to imagine a community achieving any degree of development without the help of its teachers (Jaeger 1981; Peters 1966). Such a premise does not refer solely to the fact that a community that seeks to grow has to have a good number of teachers, implement good educational policies and provide optimal working conditions for the profession; it also recognises that it must have the *best* teachers possible.

Everyone has an opinion about the teachers we need. However, there is a group of individuals that deserve our specific attention: those who want to become teachers. Why do they want to take on such an important role? What should a good teacher be like in the opinion of those who aspire to be one? The responses to such questions are far from trivial, especially for the universities that must train our future teachers. According to the World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century, a key document in the building of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the mission of university education is to “educate highly qualified graduates and responsible citizens able to meet the needs of all sectors of human activity, by

Table 1. Why do you want to be a teacher? (percentage by student year).

Teacher typology	%	Year	
		First	Fourth
Personal, authentic teacher	83.8	90.8*	78.4
Pupil-oriented	70.3	75.1*	66.7
Self-oriented	48.3	52.9*	44.8
Teacher as agent of social change	25.8	31.2	21.8
Teacher as motivator of learning	25.1	26.4	24.2
Teacher with instrumental vocation	1.5	1.3	1.6
Teacher as story teller	–	–	–
<i>Base</i>	887	382	505

Multiple response. * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2. What should a good teacher be like? (percentage by student year).

Teacher typology	%	Year	
		First	Fourth
Personal, authentic teacher	71.7	79.6*	65.7
Teacher as motivator of learning	49.4	57.0*	43.8
Teacher with lifelong learning	31.1	34.6*	28.5
Teacher as story teller	24.3	26.7	22.5
<i>Base</i>	887	382	505

Multiple response. * $p < 0.05$.

offering relevant qualifications (...) continually tailored to the present and future needs of society” (UNESCO 1998). The teacher training provided by our universities, therefore, should have some sort of impact on the reasons why students want to be teachers, and on the way in which they perceive the qualified role they wish to fill, above all at a time in which the world of education is subject to constant change (Hargreaves 1994).

This paper has two aims: first, it reports the responses given by undergraduate students studying Teacher Training for Primary Education when asked why they want to be teachers and what they believe a good teacher should be like; and, second, it raises a number of considerations for university education today. The research is conducted in the universities of Catalonia (and hence in the Spanish and European university), but some of its conclusions can be extended to universities elsewhere. Below, and before describing the methodology employed and the study’s results and conclusions, the theoretical framework employed herein is outlined.

2. Theoretical framework

The search for the good teacher began in Classical Greece (McEwan 2011) and has yet to be called off – as it could not otherwise be, since education remains a fundamental concern for all our societies (Dewey 1916). In recent years, international projects such as “Schooling for Tomorrow” (OECD 1997), “Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers” (OECD 2002) and the well-known strategic document “Rethinking Education: Investing in Skills for Better Socio-Economic Outcomes” (European Commission 2012) have continued the search, and in so doing stress the need to connect the real world with the world of education, in which schools are attentive and responsive to the demands of present-day socio-economic reality.

In addition to optimising education systems, projects of this kind (which have had considerable repercussions in our societies) seek to provide a response to the question: What constitutes a good teacher in today's world? Their general discourse speaks of professionals trained in all those skills that ensure they can attend to both present and future educational requirements. Clearly, the teaching profession has been both modernised and reappraised, but it is arguably no less true that teachers may well have been turned into a body of technicians at the service of governments that, ultimately, seek to boost competitiveness and efficiency (Angus 2007; Cochran-Smith 2003), that is, the good teacher might be conceived as what some have called the "compliant technician" (Weber 2007).

Yet, there is another perspective that, without necessarily denying the one described above, argues that good teachers are more than just experts that boast some or other professional skill, but that they are individuals that embody a particular and unique way of living (Gusdorf 1969; Steiner 2004). In recent years, various studies have been undertaken to address this very question. Broadly speaking, some have examined the profiles of the teachers that have the greatest educational and personal influence on their pupils (Opdenakker and Van Damme 2006; Timmerman 2009); others have focused on the reasons underpinning the desire to form part of that special group of persons of whom Dewey spoke (Abrandt and Hammar 2009; Trent 2011).

These studies, while highlighting the complexity of the question (Korthagen 2004), allow three categories or typologies to be constructed that capture the most important traits of a good teacher, and the main reasons why an individual wants to be a good teacher. While these categories are by no means exclusive, their separate treatment is useful for designing an empirical study, analysing its results and reflecting on the training needs of future primary school teachers.

The first category is what might be referred to as a "personal, authentic teacher", the meaning of which lies deeply rooted in the past (Marrou 1956). Plato, inspired by the figure of his own teacher Socrates and his critique of Protagoras, believed the ideal teacher to be someone who seeks their personal authenticity by establishing a special relationship with their pupil. For Plato, this relationship is one of love, an idea that, in one way or another, has continued to be defended to the present day (Goldstein and Lake 2000). The teacher, thus conceived, is "someone that you think you would like to be like, a feeling that has nothing to do with ambition, but one that is more closely related to love, to *eros*" (Steiner and Ladjali 2005, 129). Rousseau speaks of friendship, and others of a relationship of caring (Noddings 2010; Weinstein 1998). Seen from this point of view, the good teacher is someone who initiates an educational relationship that resembles a therapeutic relationship, insofar as teacher and pupil jointly seek each other's perfection (Scott 2000). This way of thinking about the good teacher has been approached from various fields, though primarily from ethics, morals and the character (Matsuba and Walker 2005; Power et al. 2007), and from that of personal identity (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Swennen, Jones., and Volman 2010).

In short, this category describes teachers that combine, on the one hand, a concern for their pupils, insofar as they involve themselves in their lives, in their schooling and personal lives; and, on the other, a concern for themselves insofar as they seek their own growth and authenticity through teaching.

The second category is what can be referred to as “teacher as story teller”. A good teacher, without doubt, is someone who is well versed in what they have to explain (Verloop, Van Driel, and Meijer 2001). However, this category, in light of the previously cited studies, needs qualifying carefully. First, it is not a question of simply knowing one’s field, be it mathematics, biology or literature, but of being familiar with other fields that might nourish it. The good teacher is a person who embarks on a lifelong journey towards knowledge (Ayers 2001) and, therefore, is interested in any cultural or scientific question that might add to their lessons (Nussbaum 2001; Oakeshott 2009). Second, it is not enough just to know what one has to explain, or even of having an enlightened knowledge, but of awakening an interest in knowledge, whatever that might be, through its transmission (Delpit 2003). This aspect, as might well be imagined, has important ramifications for the pupil: “We’ve all been able to experience how our preference for a specific subject has been forged, on many occasions, by the charisma and skill of a teacher” (Ordine 2013, 98).

In short, the “story teller” is the teacher that nurtures and enhances their lessons with information that is related to what they seek to explain. And, moreover, they do not just transmit what they have to explain in any old fashion, but in a way that impacts and arouses the mind and soul of the pupils, not momentarily but for the rest of their lives.

The third and last category is that of the “teacher as motivator of learning”. This category is rooted in the sophistic movement (Kerferd 1981), and is centred on the methodology, the set of competencies, skills and techniques needed to teach something to someone, and above all, to motivate the learning of what the teacher seeks to teach. The good teacher needs to be equipped with the necessary know-how, the best approach, whatever it might be, that leads to the construction of authentic learning scenarios. This way of conceiving of the good teacher has been addressed many times in recent years (Ritter and Hancock 2007; Applegate 2010). Moreover, the fresh challenges that school education faces each day means that opinions regarding best teaching practices are being constantly revised. Alongside this constant updating of methodologies in each area of knowledge, teachers must also be able to teach conflict management in the classroom (Morris-Rothschild and Brassard 2006), how to live in multicultural classrooms (Tartwijk et al. 2009), how to appreciate and value the inclusion of the disadvantaged (Jordan, Schwartz, and Mcghie-Richmond 2009), how to make use of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993), and how to team teach with colleagues (Hargreaves 2001), and so on.

In short, this category refers to teachers that in addition to dominating the methods and techniques that foster good learning, can convert their classrooms and lessons in optimal spaces, where the levels of motivation and enjoyment generated mean pupils learn more and better.

3. Methodology

3.1. Method, design and sample

The study sample comprises students who in 2015 were enrolled either in the first or last year of the university degree course in Teacher Training for Primary Education at

1 of the 10 Catalan universities. A stratified random sampling was undertaken, the fixed criteria being the university at which the students were enrolled and the year in which they were enrolled. The final sample comprises 887 students from a population of 2901 individuals, representing a sampling error of 2.74% with a confidence level of 95%, assuming maximum variance ($p = q = 50\%$).

In the survey development phase, the questionnaire went through various stages to ensure the construction of a methodologically valid instrument (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2013). The questionnaire was evaluated before being administered, a process that adhered to the stages of a full pilot testing or pretesting (Converse and Presser 1986) and allowed for changes in the research design to be made where necessary (Hitchcock and Hughes 2011).

In this testing phase, the pilot study was useful for evaluating the effects of a study of this kind on participants (Oliver 2011). All efforts were taken to ensure student respondents were fully respected by adopting ethical behaviour – “a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others” (Cavan 1977, 810) – and avoiding all questionable practices in social research (Robson and McCartan 2016).

3.2. *Category construction process*

The questionnaire was self-administered, and in addition to a battery of closed questions about the university (using a five-point Likert-type scale), and personal details (age, sex, university year and university), it included the two open-ended questions that are the subject of this study: “Why do you want to be a teacher?” and “In your opinion, what should a good teacher be like?” The responses to these two open-ended questions were subsequently coded, thus enabling the construction of the categories described above, in addition to a number of others that were not contemplated at the outset.

In the case of the question: “Why do you want to be a teacher?” the open-ended responses were first codified using semantic criteria and 17 different codes were identified. These were then grouped into the three categories described. Two additional categories were added: namely, “teacher as agent of social change”, understood as someone who wishes to improve the educational and social world, and “teacher with an instrumental vocation”, understood as someone who wants to enjoy the labour and social conditions of the teaching profession. In the category of “personal, authentic teacher”, codes were identified referring to the growth and development of the pupils (*pupil-oriented*): an affinity for children, helping children, making a difference, teaching children how to live, fomenting their happiness, being a guide to life, being a point of reference and a vocation for working with children; as well as codes referring to the student teachers’ own personal and professional development (*self-oriented*): personal growth and personal fulfilment. In the case of “teacher as story teller”, no codes were identified. In the category of “teacher as motivator of learning”, the following code was identified: children learn with me. This points to the self-perception that one knows, from experience, how to motivate learning. The category “teacher as agent of social change” includes the following

codes: improving the world of education, changing the education system and promoting social change. Finally, the category “teacher with an instrumental vocation” includes the codes: good working conditions and flexible schedule.

In the case of the question: “In your opinion, what should a good teacher be like?”, 34 codes were identified and grouped into the categories described, plus “teacher with lifelong learning”, by which it is understood that good teachers should never stop learning throughout their professional lives. In the category of “personal, authentic teacher”, codes were identified that, given the orientation of the responses, refer solely to pupil-oriented approaches. They are the following: affective, attentive, authoritative, comprehensive, transmitter of values, empathetic, committed, just, careful with children, egalitarian, inclusive, able to establish limits, patient, close, a point of personal reference, respectful, responsible, vocation for working with children, generous and fair. In the category of “teacher as story teller”, the following codes were identified: good communicator, critical in one’s explanations, reflective and open to other ways of seeing the world. In the category of “teacher as motivator of learning”, the following codes were identified: able to adapt one’s teaching, guide to learning, innovative, flexible with the pace of learning, motivator, organiser of good learning, decisive in the face of learning difficulties and promotor of class teamwork. In the category “teacher with lifelong learning”, the codes were continuous training and an interest in new teaching methods.

4. Results

The responses to the two questions posed are not mutually exclusive, but rather they may both differ and complement each other. This means that a student’s responses to either question usually include codes that correspond to different categories. For this reason, a multiple-response methodology was adopted in which the data presented may exceed 100%. Below, the results for the two questions are presented separately.

4.1. *Why do you want to be a teacher?*

The majority of students (83.8%) want to be “personal, authentic teachers” and, moreover, are more pupil-oriented (70.3%) than self-oriented (48.3%); that is, the growth and development of their pupils are more important than their own personal growth. The results also indicate that a greater percentage of first-year students want to be “personal, authentic teachers” than do those in the final year (90.8% vs. 78.4%). This distinction is also found with regard to pupil-oriented teachers (75.1% vs. 66.7%) and self-oriented teachers (52.9% vs. 44.8%).

Roughly, a quarter (25.1%) of students want to be “teacher motivators of learning”, with no significant differences here between first- and fourth-year students. Likewise, just over a quarter (25.8%) want to be “teacher agents of social change”, with significantly more first-year students (31.2%) responding in this way than final year students (21.8%). However, barely 1.5% of students say they want to be a “teacher with instrumental vocation” and, as discussed above, no responses included codes for the category of “teacher as story teller”.

A more detailed analysis of the category “personal, authentic teacher” reveals significant differences between the responses of students at private (92.6%) and public

(80.7%) universities, and those of students at medium (90.0%) and small (90.5%) universities, on the one hand, and at large universities (77.1%), on the other. Likewise, there are more pupil-oriented students at private (76.8%) than at public universities (68.1%) as well as more pupil-oriented students at medium (75.4%) and small (71.4%) universities than at large universities (65.4%). Similarly, there are more self-oriented teachers among the students at private universities (54.4%) than among those at public institutions (46.1%) and among those at medium (52.4%) and small (54.6%) universities than among large institutions (43.3%) (Table 1).

In general, there are no significant differences by sex in this category; however, an examination of the percentage of students who claim to be more self-oriented and to show a greater concern for their own personal and professional growth reveals a significantly higher number of men (56.7%) than women (46.4%). This situation is reversed when the percentage of students who claim to be more pupil-oriented is considered (78.6% of women vs. 72.4% of men).

In the case of “teachers as agents of social change”, significant differences are only found by sex: men (32.6%) responding more frequently in this category than women (24.2%). In the case of “teachers as motivators of learning”, significant differences are only found in relation to the size of the universities: the response being more frequent among students at small (28.1%) and medium (29.2%) universities than among those at large universities (21.0%).

Finally, despite the limited presence of the “teacher with instrumental vocation” category, significant differences are found in the responses of those attending private universities (2.6%), contrasting with responses from just 0.9% of students at public universities.

4.2. What should a good teacher be like?

For most students (71.7%), good teachers should be “personal, authentic teachers”, for almost half (49.4%) they should be “motivators of learning”, for roughly a quarter (24.3%) they should be “story tellers” and, finally, for almost a third (31.1%) they should be “teachers with lifelong learning”. Apart from the “teacher as story teller” category, significant differences were found for all the others when comparing the responses of first- and fourth-year students, with the former always scoring higher (Table 2).

In the case of the “personal, authentic teacher” category, significant differences were found between students at public (70%) and private (76.3%) universities, and between those at medium (74.9%) and small (74.9%) universities and large universities (67.8%). In the case of the “teacher as story teller” category, students at small (28.1%) and medium (27.1%) universities also scored higher than their peers at public universities (21.1%).

In the categories “teacher as motivator of learning” and “teacher with lifelong learning”, no differences were found between type of university (public vs. private) or size. Finally, in none of the categories were significant differences found between men and women.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The results obtained leave a number of questions open to discussion, and at the same time allow a number of conclusions concerning the university training of future primary school teachers to be made.

The first question of note is the imbalance between the three categories studied, or rather the marked preference expressed for one of them. Most students want, above all, to be a “personal authentic teacher”, and believe that a good teacher is, first and foremost, someone who acts as such. These results are in line with most of the studies cited in the literature review. Indeed, it would seem that this is exactly the type of teacher that wins acclaim in the biographies of leading figures and is lauded on the screen, and that our own common sense tells us to value more than any other type of teacher.

Student teachers want to be someone important in the lives of their pupils and they attach greater value to this than to their own personal and professional growth. This motivation appears to be more frequent among women than men, which again is consistent with the literature (Acker 1995; Gilligan 1982). This tendency to place greater value on the welfare of the pupil to the detriment of the teacher’s own welfare cannot be ignored. Because, contrary to expectations, the educational and personal influence that teachers have on their pupils does not depend solely on such factors as their vocation for working with children or their wanting to make a difference, but on their personal growth and development, and on their self-knowledge and understanding (Gusdorf 1969; Steiner 2004). Good teachers are, above all, good teachers for themselves, and this, in short, has much more to do with the development of individuals and their character. Where are the opportunities for such development in the university today? Do the teaching certificates awarded by universities guarantee the necessary human quality and sensibility to practice the profession? Acquiring a character that influences pupils both educationally and personally is not simply resolved by having a vocation or by mastering the so-called personal competencies (González and Wagenaar 2003), it involves much more.

This discussion allows, at least, two conclusions to be drawn. The first is that teacher training should attach some importance to those activities that invite students to think about themselves as future teachers, and that allow them to reflect on the exceptional teachers of history (Chateau 1959), in short, that they focus on ideas that can inspire them. Such work is typically the domain of the theory of education, educational anthropology, the philosophy of education, the history of education or similar disciplines, and while it might not be profitable in a postmodern sense, it can be tremendously useful (Higgins 2011). The second conclusion is concerned with the need to take full advantage of the university tutorial (Walton 1972). This is an excellent educational tool to help foster the development of a student’s character, and it is worrying how often it has been reduced to an optional exercise with students treating it as if it were an office to air their complaints. However, such activities are not so easily introduced. Indeed, both appear to be out of step with the main thrust of many government policies on teacher education in recent decades. For a critical analysis of these controversies and differences of approach, see Townsend (2011) and Gilroy (2014).

The second question is the significant devaluation suffered by virtually all the categories as students move from the first to fourth years. The hope would have been that students expressed a stronger desire to be “personal authentic teachers”, or “teachers as story-tellers” or “teachers as motivators of learning” at the end of their course, but the opposite is the case. It would seem that the social disenchantment with current university education (Collini 2012), which is by no means new (Bloom 1987), also affects student teachers. Of course, this is not to criticise the current teacher training courses provided by the universities, after all, the categories identifying the good teacher and the desire to be one are present from day one to the end. What should be stressed, however, is the failure to strengthen the perceptions and beliefs that students have when they start university, and the fact that if anything they are eroded with the years. Teacher training, and this is the third conclusion, should take the necessary steps to ensure it can provide a life experience, one of personal transformation, and not simply constitute an obstacle race made up of different subjects that have to be successfully overcome (Delbanco 2012). This is not to contradict, however, studies that confirm that things have changed in recent years and that good teachers are being required to acquire good information and communication technology skills and to be familiar with the latest teaching innovations (Tirri 2014).

The third question concerns the category of “teacher as story teller”. Surprisingly, the category does not stand out in student conceptions of what constitutes a good teacher, and it is somewhat disconcerting that it does not even appear among the reasons why students want to become teachers. The category combines two important characteristics, first, the skills of eloquence, what are usually referred to as the techniques of communication of the good teacher, and second, an exhaustive knowledge of everything that helps teachers explain what they have to explain (Nussbaum 2001). Teacher training in few countries appears to place any great value on this category or dimension of teaching (Gilroy 2014). Powers of oratory, rhetoric and a good cultural knowledge are not usually found on the syllabuses of future teachers. It would appear that we have yet to be convinced that teachers’ lessons, regardless of the subject they teach, can be enriched by their ability to express themselves with eloquence and skill, and, above all from having had, for example, to read Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, admire Michelangelo’s paintings in the Sistine Chapel and Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, listen to Beethoven’s nine symphonies and the Beatles’ albums, see Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Matrix*, and hear *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini and Verdi’s *La Traviata*. Future teachers need to immerse themselves in culture, in the decisive moments in history (Zweig 2002), so as to ensure that their authentic influence on the education and character of their pupils is effective. This is the fourth conclusion: a cultural education needs to be more than a matter of personal choice, while the optional courses, seminars and conferences organised need to form part of the curricula of our Education Faculties. Moreover, as various studies show, this would appear to be a good way to train critical teachers that know how to reflect seriously on ethically controversial matters (Perry 1970; Tyrone 2010).

The fourth question concerns the differences found between students attending large universities and those enrolled at medium and small institutions. Fourth-year students at the latter score more highly in the majority of categories than students at large universities. These results confirm a logical assumption. Teacher training calls for a

considerable amount of work in which teachers and students work closely together, and hence, an environment in which personal relationships can be forged. It might be argued that questions such as student–teacher ratios and the availability of resources, although both have improved in recent years, undermine the work of the large universities. Yet, there is another question that deserves more attention. Medium and small universities are better able to examine in greater depth the work of the categories presented, not because they have fewer students, with all the benefits that this entails, but because their small faculties have more opportunities to reflect on the training they want to offer their students. This applies even more so to private universities, where, confessional or otherwise, students are seen as customers that are charged high fees for their training and, as such, are entitled to demand quality. The last conclusion is related to this discussion. It is critical that teachers in the Faculties of Education work together to consider the question of what constitutes a good teacher and how they can strengthen students’ reasons for becoming one. This work extends well beyond handing out syllabuses and timetables, listing competencies and agreeing on teaching methodologies, rather it is a task of philosophical reflection that converts teachers in team members who can improve the work they do and improve themselves, as has been demonstrated in a number of studies (Wenger 1998). In addition, it requires that the importance of the shared reflection of university teachers is appreciated, both in terms of the research, management and the bureaucratic issues that today take up so much of the time of university teachers (Firestone and Bader 1992), as in the official accreditations used in evaluating academic work, and in which questions of this type count for little.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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