

# **Why We Teach: Autobiographies of Traditionally and Alternatively Certified Pre-Service Social Studies Teachers**

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*This study describes the analysis of the social studies autobiographies of 46 students compiled over a 15 month period. Two major questions were addressed: (1) what motivational patterns are revealed in these autobiographies and (2) what differences and similarities exist in the autobiographies of students seeking alternative and traditional certification. Both groups noted the influence of family and other significant adults, and the influence of social studies teachers, both K-12 and postsecondary, in their decisions to pursue social studies teaching careers. There were more similarities than differences between the two groups. The autobiographies echoed influences that are found in the literature, and reveal that active learning opportunities and inspiring teachers are important in motivating students to pursue careers in social studies education. Key Words: Social-Studies Education, Motivations for Teaching, and Autobiography*

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## **Introduction**

“Evidence suggests that in the thinking and practices of pre-service teachers, early personal histories are very powerful” (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991, p. 88). “Oh, me too,” I say as I read. “That had such an influence on my decision to major in history!” Other times, I wonder at the tremendous impact of an influence that a student has shared, especially that of a good or poor teacher. I feel an additional connection to my students as they share their stories with me, revealing the various paths that have brought them into my secondary social studies methods class.

Past experiences and reflection on those experiences have a significant impact on the formation of teacher pedagogy and beliefs (Beattie, 2000; Bullough, 1994; Carter, 1995; Coia & Taylor, 2001; Coughlin, 2003; Doyle & Carter, 2003; Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991; Rossiter, 2002; Salyer, 2002; Trapdeo-Dworshy & Cole, 1996). “Teachers’ beliefs develop throughout their lifetimes” (Knowles in Smith, 2001, p. 1). Preservice teachers bring a variety of experiences into their college classrooms. Just their participation in a teacher education programs may be indicative of these experiences, as some research has suggested that a person’s past experiences, through family, other people or events, can influence whether or not a person becomes as teacher. As well, past experiences influence what a person believes about teaching and how he/she teaches or will teach (Coia & Taylor; Knowles & Holt-Reynolds; Smith). “In order to understand teaching, it is of considerable interest to know the actors-who they are and how they conceive their task” (Lindblad & Prieto as cited in Andrews & Hatch, 2002, p. 188).

As an educator of preservice teachers, it seemed worthwhile to ask students to consciously reflect on some of the experiences that shaped their decisions to become social studies teachers. In order to aid them in this process, I decided to ask them to write social studies autobiographies in which they identified influences in their lives that aided them in making this decision. "Life history and narrative approaches" have been used as ways for educators "to explore their lives and their teaching" (Coughlin, 2003, p. 6). Holt-Reynolds (1991) proposed that a narrative approach suggests "that the knowledge base for teaching resides in the stories of experience as a teacher" (p. 5). I asked the students to think of the autobiography as a story because "People are 'story telling animals'" (MacIntyre as cited in Coia & Taylor, 2001, p. 3). Bruner (as cited in Beattie, 2000) proposed that we "make sense of our lives by telling stories about our lives." (p. 5). The main goals of this assignment were to examine the influences or experiences, the students identified as formative, and to engage the students in the self-reflection that is so essential in effective teaching. I planned to use the results as the basis of discussions about the importance of life experiences as it related to their future students, since the preservice students' experiences and those of their future students might be quite different. This is particularly important as some research suggests that "preservice teachers use their own experiences as students to predict appropriate teacher actions they might use" (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, p. 7). In addition to learning about motivations behind their teaching, I was also interested to discover if any differences existed between the students in the traditional certification program and those in the alternative certification programs since some research suggested that there are differences (Andrews, & Hatch, 2002; Tyler & Stokes, 2002).

Biographical writing is a way to "overhear...preservice teachers' thinking" (Holt-Reynolds, 1991, p. 21). The autobiography was given as a formal assignment (see Appendix A). In order to guide the students in their writing, they were provided with a focus that asked them to write about their early experiences in social studies. They were given some suggestions on some influences they might consider.

When asked to identify those individuals who most influenced their decision to teach, a 2001 nationwide survey of members of the Collegiate National Association of Music Education identified parents and former and current music teachers. They also noted experiences directly related to music, such as participation in choirs, bands, choruses, competitions and performances (Bergee, Coffman, Demorest, Humphreys, & Thorton, 2001). The influence of former teachers was also acknowledged in a 2000 survey of 914 public, private, and parochial school teachers, with fewer than five years of teaching experience. These new teachers noted that former teachers had both strong negative and strong positive influences (Farkas, Johnson, & Faleno, 2000). An Australian survey of both traditional and non-traditional education students in a teacher education program also reinforced the influence of former teachers and family (Tyler, & Stokes, 2002). Lorties (as cited in Joseph & Green, 1986) identified parents and former teachers as one of his eight themes of influence for entering teaching. In examining differences between elementary teachers or elementary candidates and those of secondary teachers or secondary candidates, some researchers have proposed that elementary education students enter the profession because of a love of children, while secondary students are more focused on the love of their subject matter and the desire to share this with their students (Andrews & Hatch, 2002; Booth & Freeman, 1986; Tyler & Stokes). From

studies conducted in Northern Ireland, Booth and Freeman concluded that students who enter the education profession from other jobs are more motivated by their interest in sharing a subject about which they are interested. This finding was validated by Serow and Forest, who identified more “intrinsic motives” in those who entered the profession later, as opposed to “altruistic motives” of those who were preservice teachers (as cited in Andrews & Hatch, p. 185).

### **Participants**

For this study, I analyzed 46 student autobiographies from three sections of social studies methods classes taken over a 15 month period. The university is a public university located in the southeastern United States. Eight of the students were graduate students, seeking alternative master’s level certification through the university, and two were degreed students seeking alternative baccalaureate certification through the state department of education. Five of the students were teaching at the time they wrote the autobiographies and were all in one of the alternative certification programs. The other 36 students were undergraduate students in the traditional university certification program.

### **Procedures**

All of the students enrolled in the three sections of the social studies methods classes completed the autobiography assignment. The assignment was assessed only for completion and the students were told that no one else would read the papers. The students gave the instructor verbal permission to use anonymous quotes in research that might identify the student by gender, race, and whether or not the student was in an alternative or traditional certification program (see Appendix A). No student declined permission. The autobiographies were submitted electronically, and I removed the students’ names, replacing them with a number and a “t” for traditional certification or an “a” for alternative certification. Institutional Review Board exemption was obtained for this study, as it was considered classroom research.

My personal connection with the subject matter and the students was that I have an undergraduate degree in history and received an alternative bachelor’s certification. This was the second course in which I had taught most of the students in this class, and I served as the program advisor for all of them. I do not believe that any of these connections had an impact on my analysis of the autobiographies, since there were no specific answers for which I was looking. The autobiographies were word processed and because I coded the autobiographies during the first reading, I did not know whose autobiography I was reading.

Upon seeking similar studies in the literature, I found no studies that dealt specifically with social studies majors, although I did find information dealing with the influence of past experiences on pre-service teachers. The study that was the most similar to mine was conducted with science education pre-service teachers (Salyer, 2002). This study identified four categories of influence: childhood experiences, parent or other significant adults, K-12 schooling, and post secondary schooling. I began the analysis of the autobiographies by reading through each several times and noting beside each paragraph specific influences discussed by the students. These influences provided the

data for this study. For example, a student wrote the following: “My family had a big influence on my love for the social studies. They were always taking my siblings and I [sic] to historical places...some of my best childhood memories come from little trips my family took”. (traditional certification student) For this student, I would have noted family and travel to historical places.

Some students identified many influences, and some only a few. After noting the influences for all of the students, I grouped them into general descriptive categories. The categories were very similar to those identified by Salyer (2002): However, because I found frequent overlapping of childhood experiences such as travel or storytelling and the influence of family or other significant adults, I used three major categories; influence of family or significant adults, influence of K-12 schooling, and influence of post secondary teaching. Besides identifying the influences I also wanted to see if there were any differences in influences between the traditional and alternatively certified students, so I kept a tally sheet of the influences described by each certification group.

In addressing rigor and trustworthiness, I had the students’ original work, so was not trying to rely on memory or on transcribed conversations (Byrne, 2001; Poland, 1995). The students’ confidentiality was protected. Also, because I had the original assignments, I felt confident that I was able to allow the students’ voices to be heard correctly (Byrne, 2001; Lletz, Langer, & Furman, 2006), since I was able to go back to the assignments. I kept notes of how I conducted the research, thereby providing an audit trail (Byrne; Lletz et al.; Merriam, 1995). Replication of this assignment and analysis would certainly be possible (Bryman as cited in Byrne). The discussion of the results of this study will be organized around the three descriptive categories under which the student influences were grouped.

## **Results**

### **Family or Other Significant Adults**

As in the literature, family influences were very strong with 36-six of the 46 students identifying items that I included within the category of “family” or “other significant adults.” The most frequently mentioned item within this category (N=27) was related to family vacations and other travel. Students mentioned trips to historic places and visits to museums. In discussing these trips, students often commented that the trips made social studies or history come alive for them. Two students remarked,

My love of history grew as I got older. My father always took the family on a vacation that related to history in some way...This vacation [to Washington, D.C.] had a huge impact on my life because it made me appreciate history and connected me to the material that I learned in class. This vacation was one of the most valuable experiences of my life. (alternative certification student)

Another driving force behind my love for history was the historical museums and exhibits that my parents took me to as a child...sparked my

interest in history even more because I could see how past events related to my own life and my own hometown. (traditional certification student)

Music education students also identified summer vacations and participation in musical events as influential factors in their decisions to become teachers (Bergee et al., 2001). Salyer's (2002) findings emphasized the importance of visits to places of scientific interest and participation in science events and activities. These findings would seem to demonstrate that actually experiencing places or events dealing with a particular subject matter were powerful influences.

Besides visits to places with historical connotations, many students (N=17) also cited family stories or stories told by significant adults as importance influences. One student commented that,

I remember as a very small child talking to my grandparents with wide eyes about them walking for miles to school and for water. They told me about the cold winters and the hot summers, taking baths from bowls, and the agony [of] child birth...These types of conversations with my grandparents made history relevant and enjoyable to me. (traditional certification student)

Just as the visits to historic places made powerful impressions on the students, family stories also helped the students make connections to the social studies. Motivation is heightened when a student understands why something is being studied or sees the relevance of that subject to his or her life. Other items mentioned within this category, with less frequency, included family discussion of current events, listening to the news, and reading biographies and historical novels.

### **K-12 Influences**

As with students and teachers in other studies, the effect of teachers was a definite influence. In analyzing the students' discussions of their K-12 experiences, the most frequently mentioned influence (N=26) mentioned was that of teachers. Students commented favorably on teachers who made social studies interesting through their teaching methods, and who had knowledge and passion for their students and subjects.

In the seventh grade I was taught world history by a woman who had been to all of the places that the class studied and who showed us slides from her many trips. She turned history into a series of stories for us to listen to and be fascinated by. (alternative certification student)

Students were also motivated by those teachers who they viewed unfavorably, which were findings in research by Andrews and Hatch (2002) and Farkus et al. (2000). Teaching styles and assignment types were the primary focus of comments in this category.

One teacher recorded her voice reading the chapter in the history book during first period and would then replay the tape for the rest of the classes. When this was done, the class would answer the questions at the end of the chapter or do worksheets. This class was American History, which is one of my favorite areas. It is terrible that teachers like this are given the power to ruin children's impressions of history...some teachers waste opportunities to make students want to get involved in a subject. (alternative certification student)

Some students noted that they just had a love of the subject or that the subjects of social studies came easily to them. Since the students making these comments are in teacher preparation programs, it is especially important that they realize the impact, both positive and negative, that teachers can have on their students and on their interest in a subject. Especially important here is the focus on teaching methods.

### **Post Secondary**

In analyzing comments from the Post Secondary category, the positive influence of professors was most frequently mentioned (N=19). As in the K-12 category, the evident love for the subject matter and knowledge of the professors were noted, as were teaching methods which the students enjoyed.

Not only did he [the history professor] make history fun, he made it the most interesting thing in the world. He knew all kinds of tiny tidbits of personal stories of the people in our history studies. He brought history to life. He gave students more than facts to remember. He was fascinating. He got so involved and passionate about whatever he was talking about that you could not help but get caught up in his enthusiasm. I got excited because he was excited. (alternative certification student)

### **Differences Between Certification Groups**

Although some research suggested differences in motivational factors between the two certification groups (Andrews, & Hatch, 2002), the highest percentages of both groups selected items within the "family" or "other significant adult" category with the most frequency. Seventy-two percent of the traditional and 80% of the alternative students identified influences within this category.

A review of literature revealed the importance of good teachers in influencing a decision to teach (Australian Government Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2006; Bergeee et al., 2001; Farkas et al., 2000; Salyer, 2002). In the K-12 category, both traditional and alternative students cited the influence of good teachers as the most frequently mentioned, although it was identified more frequently by alternative students than by traditional students (60% alternative and 47.2% traditional). Types of assignments were the second most frequently mentioned factor by both groups, at nearly the same levels (33.3% traditional and 30% alternative).

Although a higher percentage of alternative students cited good K-12 teachers as an influence, in the Post Secondary category, the positive influence of post secondary faculty was the item most frequently mentioned by both groups of students at nearly the same frequencies (42% traditional and 40% alternative). In most studies I examined, the influences both K-12 teachers and higher education faculty were discussed together. Salyer's (2002) findings also confirmed the positive influence of post secondary faculty.

### **Future Considerations**

In examining the literature, several issues of interest were raised. Initially, this assignment was done just for the basis of classroom discussion, not as a basis for research. There were several issues that could have been included to produce richer results. For instance, some studies I examined asked at what point in their lives students decided to become teachers (Australian Government Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2006; Bergee et al., 2001; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Farkas et al., 2000). This would be of special interest in examining the autobiographies of those students returning to school in alternative programs. Also, some authors (Bergee, et al.; Joseph & Green, 1986; Kyriacou & Coulthand, 2000) asked survey participants how long they believed they would stay in the field of education. This would be an interesting aspect to examine because of the extremely high drop out rate in teaching. Related to this, Joseph and Green discussed the necessity of teacher education programs asking students to critically examine their motivations for teaching, since most teachers who drop out of the profession may do so for reasons other than losing interest in their content. They advise that the "realities of the teaching profession" be emphasized to students (p. 32). Because we are experiencing shortages of teachers in many geographic areas and fields of study, the disconnect with what students expect and what they find is worth examining further, as are the reasons that students do not choose education as a career choice.

### **Limitations**

This autobiography was given as a class assignment. There is no guarantee that students thoroughly reflected on their past experiences and influences. Also, the focus of this study was very small, limited to a certain group of students at a particular university, at a particular time. In analyzing the results, I might have considered race and gender, as well as certification type. I relied on verbal permission to use excerpts from the autobiographies, and an Institutional Review Board exemption was granted, as the study was considered classroom research. I found no studies which dealt specifically with social studies majors, and so the literature that I used deals with students in majors other than social studies, or education students in general.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The findings from these student autobiographies echo what is present in other studies of this type, which is that that early experiences play an important role in influencing students to become social studies teachers. As well, the roles of K-12 and postsecondary teachers and professors are extremely influential. I was not surprised by

any of the findings that I discovered, but was very interested to find that I agreed with many of their influences. I found myself reflecting on what influenced me to become a teacher. I fit the pattern of second career students, described by some researchers, as someone who loved the subject matter and also allowed me to have time for a family (Andrews & Hatch, 2002; Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006; Farkas et al., 2000). The family time factor was not mentioned by any of my students. I thought that this or some mention of a problem with a previous job might be mentioned by some in the alternative program.

As a teacher educator, one important implication of these autobiographies for me is that I must continue to find ways to encourage and empower my pre-service students to make the social studies “come alive” and relevant for their future students. The phrase come alive was used by nearly every student in describing the motivating factors behind an interest in the social studies. The purposes of making the social studies alive and relevant are not to influence students to become social studies teachers, although that may well be the result, but that liveliness and relevancy are ways to engage students in the discipline, thereby increasing student learning. The blending of content knowledge and pedagogy was repeatedly mentioned in describing exemplary K-12 and postsecondary teachers and professors. As well, proper and through advising of students wanting to enter education needs to occur, along with early and frequent field experiences, so that students can see the reality of teaching.

Although this exercise had great interest and value for me, I hope that the greatest benefits will be to my pre-service students and their future students. In terms of their own introspections, I hope that my pre-service students will recognize the impact of creating active learning opportunities and themselves as teachers on their future students. In reflecting on those factors that created or furthered their love of the social studies, they thought about those factors which they considered to be the qualities of good teachers. Hopefully, this will begin a process of reflection that will continue as the preservice teachers enter their classrooms and teach the lessons that will influence another generation of students.

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## Appendix A

### Social Studies Autobiography Assignment (Minimum 2-3 pages, typed)

Many educators believe that assessing your own prior experiences in social studies education and your beliefs about teaching are vital for professional development, growth, and transformation. One of the methodologies used in social studies education to assist in professional growth is the writing of a social studies autobiography.

Begin a process of self-understanding that specifically includes social studies and its place in your life, both in and out of school. Recall your experiences as far back as you can. Write your social studies autobiography in the form of a story that contains as much detail as you can recall. Thinking of your autobiography as a story may help you recall experiences that have significant social studies connections. It may also help you develop a broader understanding of how each of us is connected to others and to the world in which we live. Your autobiography should be both descriptive and reflective; include the meaning your experiences had for you.

The following list is provided to help you focus on what may prove to be some of the more interesting influences, which will help you make sense of social studies in your life as it relates to becoming a teacher:

- family experiences as a child, experiences with teachers, school experiences
- childhood hobbies, interests exposure to informal social studies settings, social studies topics and interests as hobbies for a relative or a friend
- family role models, positive teacher role models, negative teacher role models
- significant recent experiences and people

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