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Concerns of Teacher Candidates in an Early Field Experience

Sau Hou Chang
Indiana University Southeast

Abstract

The present study examined the concerns of teacher candidates in an early field experience. Thirty-five teacher candidates completed the Teacher Concerns Checklist (TCC, Fuller & Borich, 2000) at the beginning, middle and end of their early field experiences. Results showed that teacher candidates ranked impact as the highest concern, self as the second concern, and task as the least concern. The ranking of concerns remained the same across different developmental points of the field experience. The present study suggested that concerns were related to the nature of the field experience, but not to the developmental points of the field experience. Implications for teacher education program were discussed and directions for future studies were recommended.

Field experience was considered to be the most influential part of a teacher education program (Cruickshank, Armaline, Reighart, Hoover, Stuck, & Traver, 1986). The analysis of teacher candidates’ concerns showed the interaction between their beliefs and experiences (Poulou, 2007). Therefore, understanding teacher candidates’ concerns in a field experience, especially the early field experience, was particularly crucial to the success of a teacher education program. The present study investigated teacher candidates’ concerns in an early field experience of an elementary education program at a midwestern university. The early field experience was the first of the four field experiences before the student teaching of these teacher candidates.

Concerns-Based Stage Theory

Fuller and Bown (1975) proposed a model of teacher development which included a sequence of dominant concerns at various stages in the process of becoming an experienced teacher: preteaching, survival, teaching, and pupil concerns. This concerns-based stage theory suggested that teacher candidates would naturally move through these concerns as they progressed through their teacher education program to become experienced teachers. During the preteaching period when teacher candidates had never taught, they identified themselves sympathetically with students but were critical of the classroom teachers whom they were observing. During the student teaching period when teacher candidates had first contact with actual teaching, they were concerned about their own survival as teachers, such as class control, content mastery, and supervisor evaluations. During the teaching period when teacher candidates first became real teachers, they were concerned about the limitations and frustrations in the teaching situation, such as working with too many students, administering too many noninstructional duties, and lacking instructional materials. Later when teacher became more experienced, they were concerned about the social and emotional needs of students, the fairness to students, and the design of individualized content to students.

Subsequent and related research both challenged and substantiated the concerns-based stage theory that the survival, teaching, and pupil concerns followed a hierarchical pattern with advances through teaching experiences. Findings were divided in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. Basically, cross-sectional studies found that impact was ranked higher than self concern while longitudinal studies found that self concern was decreased overtime.

Cross-Sectional Studies on Concerns-Based Stage Theory

Campbell and Thompson (2007) studied the concerns of 1,121 preservice music education teachers from 16 institutions of higher education across four different points in professional development (introduction to music education, methods course, field experience, student teaching). They used a 45-item Teacher Concerns Checklist (TCC, Fuller & Borich, 2000), based upon Fuller and Bown’s (1975) concerns-based stage theory, to identify the self (survival), task (teaching), and impact (pupil) concerns. Results showed that at all professional development points, impact concern ranked the highest, followed by self concern, with task concern ranked the lowest. Field experience students were also found to hold higher levels of self, task, and impact concerns than did students in the other development points.

Also, Pilcher and Steele (2005) used the Teacher Concerns Checklist to compare the teaching concerns of 21 regularly certified first-year teachers, 21 Teach For America first-year teachers, and 18 Teach For America second-year teachers. They found that these three groups of teachers did not differ on self, task, and impact concerns. And all groups of practicing teachers showed higher impact concern than self concern.

The concerns-based stage theory suggested that experienced teachers exhibited higher impact concern than inexperienced teachers. However, the above cross-sectional studies showed that impact concern was ranked the highest regardless of teaching experiences (e.g., Campbell & Thompson, 2007; Pilcher & Steele, 2005). The move from self, task to impact concerns with advanced teaching experience was not supported.
Longitudinal Studies on Concerns-Based Stage Theory

In addition to the above cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies also challenged and substantiated the concerns-based stage theory. For example, Bray (1995) used the Teacher Concerns Checklist to compare the concerns of 50 traditional and 22 nontraditional teacher candidates at the beginning and the end of student teaching. Findings indicated that self concern diminished over the course of the student teaching semester, but impact concern remained the highest for all traditional and nontraditional teacher candidates.

Also, Smith and Sanche (1992) administered the Teacher Concerns Checklist to 125 teacher candidates at three development points during a four-month student teaching (the beginning of student teaching, the middle of student teaching, the end of student teaching). This study found that self concern decreased the most over time, but impact concern continuously ranked the highest throughout student teaching.

In a similar manner, Watzke (2007) used the Teacher Concerns Checklist to investigate developmental change of 79 beginning teachers across two years at six development points (the beginning of 1st year, the middle of 1st year, the end of 1st year, the beginning of 2nd year, the middle of 2nd year, the end of 2nd year). The researcher found that concerns for self and task decreased with gained teaching experience, but concern for impact ranked the highest across time.

In addition, Pigge and Marso (1995) used the Teacher Concerns Checklist to assess the concerns of 60 teacher candidates over a seven-year period (the commencement of teacher preparation program, the end of student teaching, the end of 3rd year of teaching, the end of 5th year of teaching). They found that self concern decreased and task concern increased with more teaching experiences, but impact concern ranked the highest at all development points.

The concerns-based stage theory suggested that self concern decreased with gained teaching experience, but impact concern increased with gained teaching experience. However, the above longitudinal studies only partially supported the concerns-based stage theory. The findings showed that self concern decreased with gained teaching experience, but impact concern remained the highest regardless of teaching experience (e.g., Bray, 1995; Pigge & Marso, 1995; Smith & Sanche, 1992; Watzke, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

Even though concerns of teacher candidates taking educational courses (i.e., Campbell & Thompson, 2007; Pigge & Marso, 1995) and student teaching (i.e., Bray, 1995; Smith & Sanche, 1992) were examined, little was known about the concerns of teacher candidates in an early field experience. An early field experience refers to the first field experience provided to teacher candidates before their student teaching. The aim of this study was to examine Fuller and Bown’s (1975) concerns-based stage theory with elementary teacher candidates in an early field experience of serving as individual tutors to struggling elementary readers and assistants to classroom teachers.

Research Questions

Two research questions were asked to examine the concerns-based stage theory. First, was there any difference between the self, task and impact concerns of teacher candidates in an early field experience? Second, was there any difference between teacher candidates concerns at the beginning, middle and end of an early field experience?

Method

Participants

The elementary education program at a midwestern university required 130 credit hours to graduate. Fifty-five of these credit hours were in professional education courses which required field experiences. These professional education courses were divided into four blocks, and each block required 60 clock hours of field experiences. Upon successful completion of these blocks, teacher candidates proceeded to the student teaching at the last semester of the program.

Thirty-five teacher candidates (five males and 30 females) with a mean age of 24.2 years old volunteered to participate in the present study under university guidelines for research with human subjects. These full-time teacher candidates were in the first block of the elementary education program, and enrolled in professional education courses (i.e., Child Development, Educational Psychology, Multicultural Education) that included their first field experiences. The early field experience involved tutoring elementary students and assisting elementary teachers in the classroom.

Survey Measurement

The Teacher Concerns Checklist (TCC; Fuller & Borich, 2000) was used because it reflected Fuller and Bown’s (1975) concerns-based stage theory and identified the self, task and impact concerns of teacher candidates across different points of field experience. The test-retest coefficients, ranging from .69 to .77, and Cronbach’s alpha coefficient alpha, ranging from 0.71 to 0.94 (Schipull, Reeves, & Kazelskis, 1995), showed that it was also a reliable instrument to be used.

The TCC was a 45-item self-report survey using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not concerned to 5 = extremely concerned). There were 15 items associated with each of the self, task and impact concerns. To determine the level of these three concerns, the mean of each of the 15 items was calculated.
Data Collection

Teacher candidates at an early field experience were given the Teacher Concerns Checklist at the beginning, middle and end of a semester. The survey was administered in regular classroom with permission from the instructor. Each teacher candidate took 10 minutes to complete the survey before the regular class started. To complete the survey, teacher candidates were asked to read each statement and ask themselves, “When I think about teaching, am I concerned about this?” With 1 as the least concerned and 5 as the most concerned, teacher candidates wrote a number in a blank line provided before each statement.

Data Analysis

To determine whether difference between teacher candidates’ concerns was significant at each developmental point, a 3 concern (self, task, impact) × 3 time (beginning, middle, end) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used. The level of significance for all statistical tests was set at .05 so that the probability of making a Type I error or concluding a non-existing effect was limited.

Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the scale scores (1 is the least concerned and 5 is the most concerned) for self, task, and impact concerns throughout the field experience. To answer the first research question whether there was any difference between the self, task and impact concerns of teacher candidates in an early field experience, the repeated ANOVAs indicated a main effect of concern, F(2, 33) = 22.96, p < .001, partial η² = .582. Further pairwise comparisons using a Bonferroni correction to adjust for inflated Type I error showed that impact concern was statistically significant different from task and self concerns (p’s < .001), and task concern was also statistically significant different from self concern (p < .05). Teacher candidates were concerned most with their impact on students (M = 3.04, SD = .85), their survival as teachers the next (M = 2.45, SD = .68), and the limitations and frustrations in the teaching situation the least (M = 2.26, SD = .50).

To answer the second research question whether there was any difference among teacher candidates’ concerns at the beginning, middle and end of a field experience, the repeated ANOVAs revealed no main effect of time, F(2, 33) = 3.1, p = .058, partial η² = .158, nor interaction between concern and time, F(4, 31) = .153, p = .96, partial η² = .019. Even though teacher candidates’ concerns decreased throughout the field experience (beginning: M = 2.68, SD = .67; middle: M = 2.58, SD = .67; end: M = 2.49, SD = .7), the differences were not statistically significant.

Since no statistically significant differences were found among the concerns across different developmental points of the field experience, the three mean concerns at the three development points were collapsed as three overall mean concerns. Table 2 presents the ranking of each concern, with 1 in parentheses as the highest concern and 45 in parentheses as the lowest concern. Nine out of the ten highest concerns were impact concern, and one was self concern. The three highest concerns were about the impact on students, i.e., “whether each student is reaching his or her potential,” “helping students to value learning,” and “challenging unmotivated students.” The highest self concern, ranking the fourth, was “doing well when I’m observed,” whereas the highest task concern, ranking the seventeen, was “too many standards and regulations set for teachers.”

In sum, teacher candidates ranked impact as the highest concern, self as the second concern, and task as the least concern. Such pattern remained the same across different developmental points of the field experience.

Discussion

The present study examined the concerns of teacher candidates in an early field experience. Two research questions were asked (a) Was there any difference between the self, task and impact concerns of teacher candidates in an early field experience? (b) Was there any difference between teacher candidates’ concerns at the beginning, middle and end of an early field experience?

To answer the first research question, the present study found that teacher candidates identified impact as the most important concern at the beginning, middle and end of the early field experience. Impact concern included reaching students’ potential, helping students to value learning, challenging unmotivated students, recognizing the social and emotional needs of students, meeting the needs of different kinds of students, and helping students to apply what they

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Teacher Candidates’ Concerns at the Beginning, Middle, and End of an Early Field Experience (N = 35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th>Beginning Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Middle Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>End Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Total Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Concern</td>
<td>2.54 (.61)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.45 (.74)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.36 (.71)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.45 (.68)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Concern</td>
<td>2.35 (.54)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.25 (.45)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.19 (.51)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.26 (.50)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact Concern</td>
<td>3.15 (.86)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.05 (.82)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.93 (.88)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.04 (.85)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2.68 (.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.58 (.67)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.49 (.70)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The range of the scale score of teacher candidates’ concerns is 1 to 5, with 1 as the least concerned and 5 as the most concerned.
learn. The finding that teacher candidates in early field experience were more focused on students than on their own well-being and their teaching performance was consistent with previous studies (i.e., Bray, 1995; Campbell & Thompson, 2007; Pigge & Marso1995, Smith & Sanche, 1992).

Fuller and Bown (1975) noted that teacher candidates would naturally move through self, task and impact concerns as they progressed through their teacher education program. However, Burn, Hagger, Mutton and Everton (2003) suggested that the linear view of teacher development was too simplistic. They advocated a high level of concern about students’ learning and an awareness of the complexity of teaching from the beginning of teacher candidates’ training.

In fact, the concerns-based stage theory may not have considered the effect of the nature of field experiences on teacher candidates’ concerns. Borich and Tombari (1997) suggested that teacher concerns were context dependent. It was the context of the early field experience of the present study that encouraged teacher candidates to focus on their impact on student learning. Teacher candidates devoted half of their field experience as individual tutors to struggling elementary students. It was a challenge to motivate struggling students to read and finish the tutoring materials. It was even a bigger challenge to receive immediate feedback from students. Such close contact with students prompted teacher candidates to be concerned more about their impact on students’ learning than their survival as teacher candidates or their teaching performance.

In addition, Borich and Tombari (1997) noted that the three stages of concern were not exclusive of one another, and teachers might have concerns predominately in one area and still have concerns of less intensity in one or both of the other areas. Even though impact was ranked the highest concern, that did not mean that teacher candidates did not have any self concern. The present study found that teacher candidates had a high self concern about doing well when they were observed. They also had a moderate self concern about appearing competent to parents, obtaining a favorable evaluation of their teaching, and receiving respect from children.

Task concern was ranked the lowest throughout the field experience. Task concern in the Teacher Concerns Checklist

Table 2
Ranking of Teacher candidates’ Concerns throughout a Field Experience (N = 35)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self Concern</th>
<th>Task Concern</th>
<th>Impact Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Doing well when I’m observed (4).</td>
<td>12. Too many standards and regulations set for teachers (17).</td>
<td>19. Whether each student is reaching his or her potential (1).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Whether the students respect me (18).</td>
<td>33. My ability to work with disruptive students (27).</td>
<td>22. Recognizing the social and emotional needs of students (5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Losing the respect of my students (20).</td>
<td>3. Too many extra duties and responsibilities (30).</td>
<td>36. Meeting the needs of different kinds of students (6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. Teaching effectively when another teacher is present (23).</td>
<td>6. Insufficient time for rest and class preparation (31).</td>
<td>43. Whether students can apply what they learn (7).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. My ability to maintain the appropriate degree of class control (25).</td>
<td>21. Having too many students in a class (32).</td>
<td>37. Seeking alternative ways to ensure that students learn the subject matter (8).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. My ability to prepare adequate lesson plans (29).</td>
<td>42. Working with too many students each day (37).</td>
<td>17. Diagnosing student learning problems (11).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Having an embarrassing incident occur in my classroom for which I might be judged responsible (34).</td>
<td>1. Insufficient clerical help for teachers (40).</td>
<td>38. Understanding the psychological and cultural differences that can affect my students’ behavior (12).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. That my peers may think I’m not doing an adequate job (38).</td>
<td>16. The rigid instructional routine (42).</td>
<td>39. Adapting myself to the needs of different students (14).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. What the principal may think if there is too much noise in my classroom (39).</td>
<td>10. Not enough time for grading and testing (43).</td>
<td>29. Understanding why certain students make slow progress (19).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Losing the respect of my peers (45).</td>
<td>40. The large number of administrative interruptions (44).</td>
<td>34. Understanding ways in which student health and nutrition problems can affect learning (24).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Number in parentheses is the ranking and number not in parentheses is the item number of the Teacher Concerns Checklist.
source included areas such as the restriction of too many standards and regulations, the inflexibility of the curriculum and the lack of public support for schools. Again, the nature of field experiences might also account for the low task concern. The tutoring materials of the present study were designed by two elementary teachers and the teacher candidates were assigned to implement the tutoring materials. Since teacher candidates were not held responsible for any administrative or clerical work, they exhibited low task concerns throughout the field experience.

To answer the second research question, the present study found that there was no difference between teacher candidates’ concerns at the beginning, middle, and end of an early field experience. Since the field experience lasted for a 15-week semester, changes in concerns might not be obvious in such a short time. Swennen, Jorg, and Korthagen (2004) also found that the concerns of teacher candidates did not develop much during the first year. They explained that teacher candidates might not have been fully engaged in classroom activities and teaching practices.

Implications for Teacher Education Program

Understanding teacher candidates’ concerns is invaluable to teacher educators who would like to design teacher education programs to promote professional development. If teacher education programs address the concerns of teacher candidates, they will not only meet the needs and increase the satisfaction of teacher candidates, but also eventually better serve our children and the society.

Since the present study found that teacher candidates exhibited impact concerns in their early field experiences, impact concerns should be addressed earlier before student teaching. Impact concern focuses on the areas such as social, academic, and emotional needs of students, the fulfillment of student potential, the tailoring of content to students, and the ability to relate to students as individuals. Watzke (2007) suggested that instruction at this stage was characterized by contextualized, intuitive, and adaptive practice.

One way to address the impact concern is to build a connection between theory and the early field experience. Teacher candidates often indicated the lack of practicality of teacher education courses (Beach & Pearson, 1998; Roth & Tobin, 2001). There had also been a gap between teacher education coursework and real teaching and learning in classrooms (Moore, 2003).

Building the bridge between coursework and practice is the responsibility of teacher educators. Reflection after practice was a more effective way of changing teacher candidates’ beliefs than reflection before practice (Tillema, 2000). First, teacher candidates are to be encouraged to use what they have encountered from their field experiences to understand the knowledge and skills they learn from their coursework. Personalized examples from field experiences are excellent way to understand various theories. Second, they could use what they have learned from their coursework to analyze their field experiences. Writing journal of critical events is an excellent way to reflect daily encounters with theoretical framework. Lin, Gorrell, and Porter (1999) stated that reflection allowed teacher candidates to integrate their own learning through an interaction between their beliefs and experiences.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2008) expected teacher preparation institutions to design and implement field and clinical experiences so that teacher candidates develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. The rubrics are “Clinical practice is sufficiently extensive and intensive for candidates to demonstrate competence in the professional roles for which they are preparing.” Since the requirements are generally stated, the number of hours and the nature of field experiences and clinical practice vary tremendously from institution to institution.

Another way to address the impact concern is to gradually expose teacher candidates to the teaching profession before student teaching. Teacher educators need to create such opportunities by collaborating with school districts. The exposure may include observing and assisting teachers in the classrooms, working with individual child and small groups of children, preparing lesson plans and teaching single lesson.

One more way to address the impact concern is to provide respective field experiences associated with different coursework. Teacher educators need to partner with classroom teachers to design field experiences that are closely related to the coursework. No matter whether student candidates are taking reading, math, science or social studies, related field experiences should be designed so that teacher candidates would be able to work on particular areas at one time. When teacher candidates do their student teaching, they would be able to integrate what they have learned from previous field experiences. Melnick and Meister (2008) suggested that field experiences exposing teacher candidates to different settings and contexts help them to mold their own beliefs and attitudes.

Limitations of the Study

Even though the effect size of the main effect of impact concern was high, there were some limitations of the present study. First, teacher candidates responded to a predetermined set of concern statements that might not reflect the complete range of concerns held by these candidates. Second, the coursework teacher candidates took when they did their early field experiences might also influence the concerns of teacher candidates.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The present study found that teacher candidates in an early field experience ranked impact as the highest concern, self as the second concern, and task as the least concern.
Future studies could investigate whether these teacher candidates have different concerns at different developmental points of the teacher education programs, or whether teacher candidates at different developmental points of the teacher education programs have different concerns. In addition to longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, it would be beneficial to explore the concerns of teacher candidates under alternative routes to certification, such as those who have already had college degrees and those who study part-time.

In fact, the concerns-based stage theory can be examined from a different perspective. First, qualitative studies are needed to identify a broader range of concerns not accounted for in Fuller and Bown’s (1975) concerns-based stage theory. Second, future studies could explore the factors affecting teacher candidates’ concerns, such as socio-economic status, cultural background, years of teaching experiences, gender, age, etc. Third, it would also be beneficial to do a cross-cultural study to examine the concerns of teacher candidates from different countries.

Conclusion

Teacher educators have strived to design teacher education programs to address the needs of our children and the society. However, little thought has been given to the needs of teacher candidates who are the agents of bringing changes to our children and the society. In fact, an effective teacher education program should not only build on the needs of children and the society, it should also take the concerns of teacher candidates into consideration. Understanding teacher candidates’ concerns is an enormous step towards a strong teacher education program, and addressing these concerns is the ultimate goal of teacher educators.

References


Sau Hou Chang is an Assistant Professor at Indiana University Southeast. Her research interests are in professional development of teacher candidates, reading of struggling readers, and application of cognitive psychology to education. E-mail: sauchang@ius.edu.

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