In Their Words, Through Their Eyes:
Novice Teachers Reflect on Teaching and Their
Preservice Education

by

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to my parents,
James Edward Heath, sr.
And
Thelma Neely Heath
Though possessed of little education themselves,
they never ceased to encourage and support me at every step of
this long journey.
For that, I am eternally grateful.
I only wish they could have lived to see the journey’s completion.
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This work would not have been possible without the contributions of the student teachers who so graciously volunteered their time, energy, opinions, and feelings during the course of this research. They will always have my gratitude, and I hope that I was able to help them in some way in return.

Also, this work (along with many other aspects of my life) would not have been possible without the encouragement, advice, and love of my wonderful wife, Margaret. She has been my diagrammer, sounding board, proofreader, and much-needed “reality check.” She remains, in every sense of the word, my inspiration.
In recent years, cries for reform in science teacher education have come from many directions. Teachers often leave the profession after a few years, and the teachers that stay are perceived as insufficiently prepared for the challenges they will face. One pervasive problem is that teachers themselves are rarely consulted in efforts to reform science teacher education. This study is an attempt to address that lack of input, by investigating the “lived reality” of prospective science teachers and trying to see the process through their eyes, to discover what they wanted and needed from their teacher preparation program, and to assess how well their preservice program met those needs.

During the semester of their student teaching, six prospective teachers were asked questions about their experiences and asked to reflect on their preservice education. The researcher continued to follow the progress of one of the cohort members through his first year as a full-time teacher with a series of interviews. The study revealed a number of skills and attitudes that the student teachers felt were essential to their success: a sense of “caring,” classroom management skills, organizational skills, and science content knowledge. Unfortunately, the study also revealed that the student teachers also felt that their preservice education did very little to help meet these needs. Also disturbing was
the fact that all but one of the student teachers had bad experiences with their cooperating host teachers.

The study makes a number of suggestions for improving teacher preparation. Field experiences need to be frequent, and varied, with extensive opportunities for reflection on those experiences. Also, teacher education programs should more closely integrate the three elements of preservice education: extensive field experiences, courses in education theory, and courses in science content. Student teachers need at least one mentor who is dedicated to their success, and is not in a position to evaluate them. The results of this study should provide affirmation to innovative teacher preparation programs, such as the UTeach Program at the University of Texas at Austin.
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