Focus on Identity Development: A Proposal for Addressing English Teacher Attrition

SARAH HOCHSTETLER

Abstract: Placing teacher identity work (e.g. thinking critically about what it means to be a teacher) late in the curriculum of education programs could contribute to the high attrition rate of secondary English teachers. This article argues for more attention to teacher identity development early in candidate coursework to better prepare them for the realities of the classroom and promote their success in the profession.

Keywords: English, teacher education, teacher attrition, teacher identity

I recently received an e-mail confirming that Tim (not his real name), a bright young man in my writing methods course, decided to leave the English education program. This student’s exit brought the total number of teacher candidates who chose to drop the major that semester—just months prior to student teaching and graduation—to three. I mentioned the news to one of my colleagues who said she wasn’t surprised; this particular student was enamored with the material, not the idea of teaching the material. My confused look likely prompted her explanation. She said that when Tim was in her literature methods course the previous semester he showed great enthusiasm for the texts and regularly made insightful comments about character analysis and plot structure. But when the focus was on teaching the texts, he often verbalized his inability to connect with the idea of being a teacher and not just an admirer of the content.

Tim’s decision to leave the major only reinforces my growing concern that students who choose to pursue a degree in English education often don’t fully understand what it means to be a teacher of English until the final semesters of their preparation program. It’s likely that Tim initially chose to be a teacher of English because he enjoyed the subject and excelled in it. Perhaps it wasn’t until he was in his methods courses, where the focus was theory and practice, that he realized what being a teacher of English at the secondary level fully entailed. Though I was happy to hear Tim could graduate without any further coursework, I was disappointed that he had come so far in the major only to be overwhelmed or let down by the reality of being a high school English teacher. It’s far better that Tim and the other students realized that English education wasn’t a good fit for them prior to student teaching when their weak instruction or disinterest might have negatively affected their classrooms. Yet I can’t help but feel our preparation program is flawed in that it allows students to progress nearly to the end without directly addressing misconceptions about teaching English through opportunities to build a strong teacher identity.

In this article I draw on my experiences as a teacher educator at a Midwestern university with a long history of training English teachers to propose one method for better preparing students for a successful career as a secondary English teacher. I argue that a framework that encourages student thinking about teacher identity early in a program’s curriculum could reduce the number of students entering the methods courses—and the field—with false impressions about what it means to be an English teacher, thus increasing students’ chances for success. More specifically, a program with a foundation built on identity development will better prepare students for both the general and content-specific challenges the students may encounter once in the classroom and can affect English teacher attrition in the methods courses, in the program as a whole, and in the profession. One way to do this is to require an introductory course to

Sarah Hochstetler, PhD, is in the English Department at Illinois State University, Normal, IL.
English education with an emphasis on teacher identity development.

Misconceptions about the field of education and the teaching of English are not unusual. Some sources point to English education programs themselves as responsible for these erroneous beliefs because the programs do not actively address misconceptions. A common criticism of English-teacher preparation is that the courses are disconnected from the realities of the everyday classroom; students are sometimes presented with conflicting or competing conceptions of what is involved in day-to-day teaching (Bullough 1987; Kelly 2004; Levine 2006). In the four years I have worked with English education candidates I have found patterns in what they report about teaching and what I know to be true, confirming the disconnect between candidate perceptions of teaching English and the reality. Although not all of the misconceptions or realities I share here are the rule, they hint at situations and contexts students don’t consider or aren’t traditionally exposed to until late in their preparation programs. This is especially true at institutions such as my own where students don’t meet with English education experts until the methods courses, or during their senior year. A typical college’s program of study begins with content area and teacher education courses followed by the methods course(s) and student teaching. It is in these later courses where discussions about learning and pedagogy are content-specific, meaning they go beyond basic educational topics and explore subject matter particular to secondary English.

Common Misconceptions

English education candidates are often surprised to learn that, depending on the context, some secondary students need instruction in very basic reading and writing skills. The candidates assume students mastered those literacy acts in elementary or middle school and become frustrated by students’ weak comprehension abilities or struggles with sentence-level construction. Candidates may anticipate challenges with students’ reliance on formulaic writing, for example, but may not consider that their student population could include mainstream students with low literacy levels.

Another common belief candidates have expressed is that English is limited to reading and writing. It might not be until students enter their methods courses that they fully comprehend the expanse of English, that the English language arts include reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing (NCTE/IRA 1996). Further, candidates might not realize until they are on the job market that English teachers are the ones responsible for speech classes in the secondary schools. This is true of students earning teaching certificates in the state of Illinois, where “speech” is included under the umbrella of English.

Candidates sometimes assume they will have agency in ways they might not, including the power to bring any text into their future classrooms. Districts’ predetermined programs of study and budget constraints may prevent teachers from fully controlling the curriculum in their own classrooms and candidates might not see evidence of this until student teaching. Although there are schools where teachers have more choice in developing curriculum, novice teachers in these schools are often discouraged from including nontraditional texts or assignments until they have amassed more instructional experience. This lack of agency can be disappointing for a teacher candidate who sought out education as a career choice because of its perceived promise of autonomy.

Another misconception is that teachers have fewer work hours than other professions. A number of students enter education programs thinking a career as a teacher will be a better choice than, say, an accountant, because the work day is over by 3:00 and teachers have many weeks of vacation a year. The “easy” schedule is a myth for many teachers, especially for teachers of English because of the reading and writing assignments and grading unique to the content area. Experienced teacher and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) president Carol Jago (2005) points to mismanagement of the “paper load” as prominent among English teacher complaints. This is not to say that teaching is a poor career choice for those drawn to the schedule. However, a student wanting to become a high school English teacher solely because of the attractive hours will surely be disappointed.

A final myth about teaching that students have reported in my methods classes is about the availability of jobs for English teachers. Many students assume that the need is high, given the population of baby boomers who are retiring. Although one 2006 study points to job security as one of the advantages students cite to a career in secondary English (Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn 2008), the recession that began in 2008 makes job security in most fields a thing of the past, including jobs in education (Lubly 2010). Recent graduates confirm this trend in our region.

Given these examples of skewed beliefs held by some English education candidates, and the potential gaps in teacher preparation that may unknowingly perpetuate these misconceptions, it is no wonder novice teachers are overwhelmed when they begin teaching. If candidates enter the field with such misguided views of secondary teaching and English and weak understandings of the field, they are bound to find their work more challenging than their peers whose preparation programs addressed these issues through a focus on identity development.
Teacher Attrition

High teacher attrition rates should be a major concern for instructors and administrators in teacher preparation programs, regardless of content area. First, teacher turnover impacts secondary students directly. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF 2003) report “No Dream Denied,” for every teacher who leaves the classroom, a new and likely inexperienced teacher takes their place, negatively impacting the quality of teaching and learning. Linda Darling-Hammond’s (2000) research on teacher knowledge and student achievement also points to the impact of teacher experience on the classroom, suggesting that in some cases teachers with fewer than five years of experience may not be as effective in the classroom as those with more experience. Further, education programs have an obligation to prepare future teachers for professional success, and the statistics imply that in some ways the programs are failing. Another NCTAF (2002) report indicates that nearly one-third of novice teachers leave the classroom after three years and close to 50 percent leave after five years. Disparities in preparation, in addition to professional frustrations (e.g., pressure to teach to the test), are partially responsible for these numbers (NCTAF 2002).

The attrition rates for secondary English teachers are difficult to identify because of a lack of English teacher-specific research on attrition, a finding supported by Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn (2008) in their article, “What We Know about ELA Teachers.” However, what Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn were able to determine about this group’s attrition rate is that novice English teachers are leaving the classroom for reasons similar to those of other new teachers. Many new teachers leave the profession because of low salaries, lack of support, and poor working conditions (Ingersoll 2001, 2002; NCTAF 2002, 2003). Increase in teacher accountability is a more recent contributor to the large numbers of teachers leaving the classroom (Hirsch 2006).

In addition to causes of noncontent area-specific teacher attrition, statistics, Scherff (2008) found that lack of support and increased demands of special education requirements contributed to English teacher dissatisfaction. The addition of high-stakes reading and writing assessments for secondary students adds to the weight on English teachers as those primarily responsible for literacy education (Burns 2007). Pressures to teach to the test and focus on grammatical and mechanical correctness in the context of writing appear as a “nonnegotiable part of teaching high school [English]” (Roskelly and Ryan 2007). These content area-specific factors surely contribute to English teacher dissatisfaction. Further, McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) highlight areas of concern identified by novice teachers of English that include balancing the workload, classroom management, and autonomy. Though McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca do not cite these topics as reasons beginning teachers leave the classroom, they are areas that new teachers of English find discouraging and therefore could contribute to English teachers feeling disillusioned enough to leave.

Mistaken beliefs may be a significant contributor to the high teacher attrition rate. McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca (2005) found through case studies of beginning English teachers that the disconnect between the myths about being an English teacher and the reality of the English classroom likely contribute to low retention. Making space in a teacher education program for thinking about teacher identity is one way to address these misconceptions and thus better prepare students for a career in secondary English education. As Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn (2008) suggest, preparation programs must be more proactive in addressing the issue of attrition.

Teacher Identity

The education and methods courses within teacher preparation programs tend to focus on the acquisition of quantifiable data, such as knowledge of historical information or skill sets necessary for developing lesson plans. Although this knowledge is certainly necessary for teacher candidates to learn, the focus on the quantifiable is not surprising given the accountability measures (e.g., NCATE standards) present at the teacher education level. What is lost in this focus, however, is the consideration of teacher identity. Among the participants in Janet Alsup’s (2005) study of teacher candidates and teacher identity, those who had a strong sense of their personal identity and its connection or disconnection with their professional identity were able to successfully transition into the profession” (25). Britzman (1994) reports a case study that explores how one student teacher considered her struggle to “negotiate and invent” her teaching identity. She states, “This is the work of carving out one’s own territory within preestablished borders, of desiring to be different while negotiating institutional mandates for conformity, and of constructing one’s teaching voice from the stuff of past, that is, student experience” (54). Teacher candidates who enter the field without the opportunity to formally process the transition from student to teacher and private person to public by building a professional identity are, as Alsup implies, more likely to flounder. For example, a teacher who isn’t confident of whether she can handle basic classroom management will likely enter the classroom less sure of herself, potentially causing other daily teaching trials to seem more overwhelming.

Development of personal identity is especially important for English teacher candidates specifically because
secondary English teachers are often seen as responsible for the affective and attitudinal education of secondary students in ways that other content area teachers are not. It’s sensible, to an extent, to expect English teachers to be self-assured because the work that these teachers facilitate in the English classroom requires discussion of social issues through reading and writing that could very well challenge a teacher’s sense of self. For example, a teacher who has not yet developed awareness of their professional and personal self in the English classroom may find it unusually difficult to respond to a student’s argument against a controversial issue that the teacher supports.

A teacher candidate needs space to consider the divisions and intersections between the parts of self that shape one’s identity and how those divisions and intersections affect a candidate’s work in their future English classroom. Robillard (2008) gets to the heart of this struggle when she quotes English education major Krista Fanning’s writing in her advanced composition course: “When you teach, you give more of yourself than any other profession. You give your talent, your time, your mind. You subject your opinion to criticism by those very minds you are trying to guide. You can love a piece [of literature], and try to teach it, but your class can shoot it down. . . . I’m not ready for that. Before you teach, you have to be sure of what you love. . . . I am not ready to have my opinions torn down. I’m still forming them” (722). This excerpt, where Fanning articulates how the personal and professional will collide in the English classroom, is an example of the identity work pre-service teachers should be doing in preparation for a career in the classroom. It’s also interesting to note that this quote was taken from an article Robillard wrote about her own teacher identity being tested.

In writing this article I argue for creating a space early in English teacher preparation programs for students to write about, talk about, and otherwise think about teacher identity. This identity work could help address teacher attrition at a variety of levels by asking students think about the field of English education (e.g., misconceptions, understandings, and expectations) and themselves as teachers of English prior to their methods classes. As Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn (2008, 195) explain, although preparation programs can not change the realities of the classrooms, “we can do more to prepare pre-service teachers for them.” Further, Alsup (2005, 26–27) suggests that “teacher educators can make the induction phase of the new teacher easier through assignments . . . leading to the development of a holistic teacher identity.” If students aren’t invited to do this work on identity before entering the classroom, they risk potential failure.

REFERENCES
