Teaching Youth: An exploration of generational-trait vision in pre-service teachers

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Educational research has long recognised a need for inquiry into the assumptions pre-service teachers entertain regarding the profession of teaching. This interest is perhaps best explained in terms of a desire to ensure that pedagogically unsound assumptions are not carried into professional practice. This paper reports on an exploratory study undertaken with 27 trainee secondary school teachers, to investigate assumptions about generational traits and the possible consequence of such beliefs for teaching/learning. This is an area that has not previously been investigated in the research, yet as the paper explains, notions about generational characteristics and generational differentiation are rife in society and the ascription of negative traits to the youth generation (the clientele of the secondary education system) is common.

The findings of the study, reported in the paper, are that participants did indeed harbour assumptions of traits pertaining to the youth generation, that many of these assumptions went against the grain of good teaching philosophies and that it was likely that these assumptions would inform and influence classroom practice. On the basis of the findings of the study, the paper argues for the need for teacher-educators to address candidates' assumptions regarding generational traits.

Introduction

Educational research has exhibited a sustained interest in the assumptions held by trainee teachers in regard to their intended profession (for example, Joram & Gabrielle, 1998; Anderson & Bird, 1995; Carter, 1994; Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Wubbels, 1992; Kagan, 1992; McDiarmid, 1990; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984; Yamamoto *et al*, 1969). This attention can largely be explained in terms of concerns that trainees may hold and eventually take into practice assumptions that are pedagogically unsound. As examples of the type of research undertaken, Holt-Reynolds (1992) discovered that some pre-service teachers harboured inflated expectations about student

capabilities, while McDiarmid (1990) found that some teacher trainees maintained a transmission model of teaching/learning and were obdurate to other representations endorsed by teacher educators.

Researchers into trainee teachers' assumptions tend to argue that teacher-training programs need to monitor for perceptions which may be enabling or disabling to good teaching, and, of course, encourage the former and discourage the latter (for example, Anderson *et al*, 1995; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Pajares 1992; Hollingsworth, 1989).

To date, the research into pre-service teachers' ideas about the nature of their practice has not considered the existence or effect of assumptions about generational traits. This appears to an oversight because notions of generational traits are prevalent in society and, like everyone else, trainees will have been exposed to the discourse of generational representation. Teaching is often cast in terms of 'schooling the next generations', so it is difficult to accept that assumptions trainees may hold about these generations are unimportant.

While generational representation rests on the claim that traits are inherent to a generation (baby boomers are 'selfish', for example, and their parents' generation was 'square'), characteristics are ascribed. Generational representation is a matter of social construction.

Of interest to this paper is the social construction of youth. The fashion industry and advertising would indicate that youth is highly prized. (So would the volume of solicitations from people describing themselves as 'young at heart' in the lonely hearts columns of newspapers!) However, the traits assigned to the youth generation tell a different story. Without question, the youth generation is represented more negatively than any other generation. How often it is that in the gap between 'wise' elders and 'innocent' children is positioned troublesome youth! The 'problem' of youth is part of the history of generational representation. Plato took the time to denounce youth and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (111.111.50) includes this lament:

> I would there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting.
>
> (Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*)

In more recent times, it has been pointed out (Gillis, 1981, Pearson 1983, Frith, 1984, White, 1991, Pyvis 1991, Stockwell, 1992, McAllister, 1994) that youth generations continue to be predominantly positioned as 'less' than adults, as deficient in skills and attitudes and as threats to society. To the analysts of youth's representation, even 'adolescence' (often used interchangeably for 'youth') carries negative connotations. For example, Griffin (1993:16) points out that the 'father' of adolescence, G. Stanley Hall

drew on the pre-Darwinian law of recapitulation (which recognised a developmental progression from non-human species through supposedly 'barbaric' races to the pinnacle of white men) to define adolescence as a 'primitive' life-stage preceding adulthood.

It has been suggested (see, for example, Sheleff, 1982) that the main reason for the mainly negative characterisation of the youth generation is generational power relations. In this conceptualisation, the old fear being supplanted by the young. They fear the loss of the world they know. They resent the young and envy them.(Ironically then, Sheleff and his ilk counter negative stereotyping of youth with negative stereotyping of older generations.) Grossberg (1992) even argues that it is this collective hostility and fear of youth that actually enables the younger generation to recognise and articulate its alienation and difference.

In Shakespeare's day, perhaps youth 'began' at sixteen, but now membership of the youth generation is usually attributed earlier. (The 'end' of youth has traditionally been signalled through various social transitions including taking up full-time employment, getting married, taking out a mortgage and so forth.) Griffin (1993) suggests that the arrival of the secondary school played an important part in re-ordering societal views on the commencement of youth. It is certainly obvious today that youth and youth culture are strongly associated with the years of secondary schooling. (This is evident in educational discourse, for example, in values education targeting 'youth culture' such as graffiti and in bans placed in some schools on various activities or dress associated with youth culture. The idea that secondary schools are prominent sites for youth and for 'bad' youth culture is a staple of popular culture, too.)

While the boundaries between child, youth and adult are not sharp (precisely because they involve societal rites of passage), it is evident that one group who professionally encounter the youth population are secondary school teachers. Green (1993:90) has urged secondary school teachers to recognise that older generations are alienators of youth and that their beliefs about generational traits may contribute to oppressive classroom practices. What then of the assumptions about age cohorts that may be held by trainee secondary school teachers?

Consider too, the expectations of teacher educators. As much as there could be agreement in this body on the main pre-requisite for teaching, surely the demand would be for a favourable disposition towards the clients of the educational endeavour. How might secondary school teacher trainees' perceptions of the generational traits of youth undermine their endeavours to value the human beings in their classrooms?

As a first step in addressing the absence of research into pre-service teachers assumptions concerning generational traits, an exploratory study

was conducted into secondary school teacher trainees' assumptions about the youth generation. One aim of the study was to ascertain what assumptions were held. Another aim was to endeavour to establish if and how assumptions about youth's traits may impact on the approach taken to teaching.

The study involved semi-structured one-hour to one-and-a-half hour individual interviews with 27 pre-service secondary school teachers, four months before they were due to graduate. The trainees were fourth year university students at a Western Australian university, completing a one-year Graduate Diploma in Education. They had undertaken twelve weeks of teaching practicums. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late thirties, but the majority were in their twenties and the mean age was twenty-four. Their teaching areas were diverse, incorporating majors in English, Mathematics, Science Physical Education and Social Science. (The participants were in roughly equal numbers from the various teaching areas.) Students in the program usually take a major and a minor teaching area, though some may choose a second major. This study chose participants according to their major area of study only, but it would be worthwhile to consider the situation in relation to minor teaching areas as well. The structure of the teaching program in which these trainees were enrolled incorporated a shared unit as well as curriculum units specific to teaching areas.

The semi-structured interview format was chosen as the best means of identifying assumptions about generational traits. Structured interviews, questionnaires and focus group investigations for example, were rejected on the basis that they could impose perspectives. Similarly, observation or participant observation were eliminated as methods because the students were operating largely in a lecture environment. To the extent that interview questions were set in advance they were determined by the endeavour to ascertain what assumptions, if any, about youth were held and whether and how any such assumptions might influence teaching practice. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants and later transcribed. Notes were also made to assist the researcher in the interviews. The interviews were analysed using a thematic approach, that is, the interview data was examined for recurring themes and patterns.

The same initial questions were asked of each participant (though follow-up questions varied according to the flow of discussion). Though undoubtedly desirable, there were no follow-up interviews, due to an advance agreement acknowledging that the participants were on a tight working schedule to graduation. The participants were advised that the study was exploratory and was 'to do with teacher-student relationships'.

Process and Findings of the Research

Participants were first asked to describe who it was they would be coming in contact with in classrooms. (The interviewer suggested that participants imagine him to be from Mars and to have no knowledge of Earthly practices!)

A follow-up question asked was; are there any characteristics that you would see applying to the students as a whole?

Various characteristics were identified, but this discussion will focus only on responses pertinent to the issue of assumptions of generational traits.

All the participants identified being young as a collective characteristic. In most responses, this was simply put as 'they're all young', but there were variations such as 'bunch of adolescents', 'teenagers', 'all boys and girls' and 'all kids'.

After some general discussion about the various characteristics they had identified, the participants were asked whether 'young people, like the ones you describe, have any habits or peculiarities that make them different from other generations'.

The response was 100 per cent affirmative.

Participants were then asked to identify the 'features that you think make these young people different from other generations'. Here, answers varied. To give some idea of the representative break-up however, traits provided by more than one respondent included 'wild' (4), 'free' (3), 'rebellious' (7), 'anti-authority' (2), 'troubled' (4), 'confused' (4), 'developing' (3), 'lazy' (4), 'apathetic' (3), 'immature' (7), 'irresponsible' (3), 'idealistic' (3), 'risk-taking' (3), 'sex and drugs' (4), 'healthy' (4), 'motivated' (2),'violent' (2), 'carefree' (5), 'easily led' (4), 'frustrated' (2), 'happy' (3), 'disrespectful' (3), 'delinquent' (2), 'computer-literate' (2), 'dissatisfied' (2), 'eager to learn' (5), 'enthusiastic' (4), 'fit' (2).

Nearly three quarters of the participants (20) stated in various ways that young people had particular needs. Peer approval, identity and attention were identified as needs germane to young people.

The next question asked of all participants was; do you think in your teaching practice you will give any consideration to these distinguishing features?

Four students answered in the negative, the rest in the affirmative. (The minority basically made the same point, which was that teachers should, as one remarked. 'try to ignore youth culture and not draw attention to it in the classroom')

Those who answered in the affirmative were asked to describe 'what area of your teaching practice will be most influenced by what you know about the youth generation'.

Seven of the participants responded that the influence would be in the area of classroom discipline. (References to classroom 'control' were included by the researcher as 'discipline'.) Six of these seven had provided a majority of negative defining features of youth. (Traits they predominantly associated with youth included, for example, 'immature', 'rebellious', 'lazy', 'anti-authority', 'violent', 'dis-respectful', 'easily-led'

The participants who saw discipline as the area of their teaching that would be influenced by generational 'traits' tended to favour fairly authoritarian 'responses':

> 'I think you've got to go in and be very firm. Kids today lack discipline. I think, too, that you've got to set a moral tone because they lack moral values.'
>
> 'At that age, they're rebellious. They want to stir you up. They're different to us, so there is no point in being soft and trying to get them to like you. They're not going to, anyway. It's not in their nature at this point.'
>
> 'I'm a bit worried, because young people don't have much respect for things. One of my supervising teachers said 'don't smile until after Easter' and I think that's how I'll survive.'
>
> 'I don't think you can treat them like adults. You can't always reason with them. They're going to listen more to what their mates say. So, I guess I'll keep the atmosphere fairly formal.'
>
> 'I'll have to keep them under control, won't I! Not turn my back on them too often. Think of ways to keep the hormones subdued!'
>
> 'Well, I know that today's youth expect so much more. They expect to be entertained and amused constantly. Obviously, their attitudes are going to affect how I go about my job.'

Three of these seven participants also made reference to adapting their teaching practice to meet what they perceived as age-related needs. For example, this was said:

> 'They're going through a lot of emotional turmoil at that age. The Year 9s especially seem to be right in the thick of adolescent angst. When I teach I'll have to make allowance for this problem they have.'
>
> 'Depends on the year level, really. I have to be much firmer with the lower classes. I have to keep them on track or they don't get anything done. Unless I get them quiet—by making them line up outside, no talking (above a whisper), seating plan, girls only to collect equipment, etcetera- then they don't get anything done. The really young ones don't take much responsibility for themselves and basically they'll only work if they're pushed to, so this approach is the only one that works with them.'

The awarding of a majority of negative characteristics to youth did not always lead participants to authoritarian 'responses'. For example, one participant who identified passivity and apathy as characteristics of youth described her intended classroom role as 'entertainer, font of all knowledge, guide, inventor and innovator of exciting ways to pass on knowledge'.

Another trainee who emphatically described the features of the youth generation as 'lazy, troubled, rebellious and victimised' advised that his 'response' would involve being 'friendly but firm'. A question is how well his classroom management will work when the desire to be friendly is married with such a vision of the student body. Similarly, another candidate who labelled young people 'cynical, often delinquent and generally dissatisfied' stated that he would seek to 'overcome these problems' by building his approach to teaching around 'being personable and acting as a confidant and friend'.

Most of the rest of the participants who had agreed that their teaching would be influenced by the features they recognised as characterising youth concentrated on approaches to interpersonal relationships and on pastoral care. Several made mention of the need to 'listen'. Others spoke of making the effort to be 'sympathetic' and 'showing them that they can trust you'. There were recurring comments about the problems of adolescence and the need to accept and acknowledge this 'developmental' stage in teaching performance. Said one trainee, whose comments were fairly representative:

> 'Young people go through a lot of hassles. They're in that storm and stress period and they can feel pretty mixed up. They also feel things more deeply. We have to make an effort to understand and we have to show them we care. They're at a time of life when things are uncertain and they're not sure about themselves so we have to set an example. We've got to be a stable influence for them, so my approach is to always try to be consistent.'

As a general tendency, participants who supplied a majority of positive attributes for youth, or who focused on 'needs', or who provided a fairly even balance of negative and positive definitional features for youth were inclined to the pastoral care 'responses'.

Participants were asked what 'knowledge about the youth generation' they had acquired from course instruction and materials. Trainees tended to the view that the subject of youth usually emerged in the context of discussions or readings about 'how students learn'. In other words, 'how students learn' was often predicated on knowledge claims about youth. Also, the answers to this question often indicated that different ideas about youth were apparently being picked up from different subject areas. While the question of how students learn was generally addressed by reference to particular needs, these varied somewhat according to subject areas. For

example, two trainees mentioned that in Physical Education they had learned about 'the needs of adolescents' specifically that during adolescence young people 'may lack confidence in themselves'. One of these participants added that low confidence was especially a 'problem for girls in adolescence'. Another 'need' identified as emanating from Physical Education instruction was 'the need to challenge our authority'.

Social Science and English teacher trainees spoke of learning about needs generated by class, race, ethnic and gender (although not age!) discrimination: 'In English we were told that young people need to be made gender-aware.'

Mathematics and Science trainees uniformly advised that the subject of youth was not covered in these areas. Said one: 'I didn't learn anything about young people and I've got to teach them!'

What was intended as the final question put to participants was: has there been any discussion in class about your or any other student's assumptions about what young people are like?

Responses varied. Approximately half of the participants (13) thought there was some exploration of these kinds of assumptions.

For these students, one final question was put: did you find that your assumptions about young people were challenged or confirmed by such discussion?

Five students agreed their views had been challenged. In each case, the point made concerned their discovery of the complexity of problems wrought by adolescence. Four students said their views were confirmed. Each mentioned 'the problems' that youth have to bear. The other students answered in the negative.

Conclusion

The study discussed in this paper was exploratory only. What it found was that the pre-service teachers who participated did harbour assumptions about young people 'as a kind' and that most of the participants were intending to act on their assumptions in their classroom practice. The results of this inquiry suggest a need for further examination of pre-service teachers' assumptions about generational traits.

The inquiry indicates that teacher educator programs do need to identify and address student teachers' assumptions concerning generational traits In regard to the training of secondary school teachers, this seems particularly important because of the largely negative stereotyping of the youth population in society. It is not pedagogically sound to have teaching practice influenced by unexamined assumptions about the generations being taught and it is a particular concern if those assumptions involve hostile or fearful characterisations of young people.

There is scope too, for investigation into what diversity of images of young people (and children and adults) are produced in teacher education programs. Do trainees receive mixed messages about the 'nature' and 'needs' of children and youth? Should discipline areas acknowledge to students the representational work they do or do not do? Should teacher educators be aware of different or competing representations of youth portrayed in other disciplinary areas? It is important too, to establish whether representations that emerge in educational discourse significantly impinge upon assumptions about generational traits already maintained by trainees. For example, do teacher education programs need to treat the 'problems' of adolescence with more diffidence and even some scepticism? If teacher trainees are aimed at 'schooling generations' then it seems important that they are made aware that the traits they may see as defining of generations are problematic social constructions that perhaps sometimes work against the interests of their clients.

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