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## **Social values and the factors that influence students to become elementary school teachers**

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### **Introduction**

The history of education demonstrates how cultural, societal and vocational needs have all played a crucial role in shaping a nation's educational goals and policies. Differences between nations in key aspects of their educational systems suggest that countries vary in their definitions of schooling, and that differences in culture play a significant role in these variations. Schooling itself is a part of the culture of a country, and therefore what educational beliefs are held, how the curriculum is organized and what constitutes teacher preparation are all reflections of that culture (Cogan and Schmidt, 2000).

Teaching is a profession that affects the lives of every individual, and ultimately the strength and wellbeing of the whole nation (Smith, 1986). For this reason contemporary societies have high expectations of elementary schooling and expect much from teachers (MacLean, 1992). Many scholars believe that elementary school teaching reaches children at a stage when they are easily influenced (Ornstein, 1978; Parelius and Parelius, 1987), and according to Henry Adams, 'a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops'. A teacher is expected to be a possessor of knowledge, and able to hand this knowledge on successfully to children (Edman, 1968). People who love teaching are generally attracted by its spontaneous nature, and make the most of every teaching moment. The fascination of discovering new knowledge is another attraction (Parkay and Hardcastle, 1991).

Educators and policy makers often hold ethnocentric views about schooling. Such views must be challenged if we are ever to gain insights into or benefit from the experiences and perspectives of those belonging to systems or traditions other than our own. However there is little empirical evidence to confirm the influence of culture on education from the dynamics of the relationships between culture, educational policy, school curricula and what occurs in classrooms. If schools are to attain desirable outcomes, and if teachers are to meet society's expectations, much depends on the selection of those who are employed as teachers.

This paper reports on research to understand those factors that have influenced students in choosing to major in elementary education at Pennsylvania State University and the University of Cyprus. The main hypothesis explored here is that there are differences in these factors varying from country to country, as the cultures themselves vary. An understanding and comparison of these factors, in relation to the local educational systems and social situation, could help improve the selection of the teaching force in both countries. This research mainly focuses on three factors. Intrinsic factors are associated with the act of teaching itself, and with those values that students hold for themselves. An inborn talent for teaching, a love of children, and an interest in the teaching/learning process are examples of intrinsic factors. Extrinsic factors include benefits that are attached to the teaching profession, including vacations, immediate employment, short working hours, and salary. Alternate factors include interpersonal influences and academic ability.

In the United States of America admission standards for entrance to the elementary education major tend to be both lax and inappropriate (Eltis, 1987; Mornane, et al., 1991; Parelius and Parelius, 1987). It is widely believed that teacher education programmes attract a range of less qualified students and that teachers have always scored poorly on standardised scores of achievement and academic ability (Parelius and Parelius 1987). In order to be admitted into the elementary education major at Pennsylvania State University, the only academic requirement is to have a grade point average higher than 2.5/4. The selection procedure for students in Cyprus is very different. In order to be accepted onto the elementary education major at the University of Cyprus, students have to compete with approximately 2,500 to 3,000 candidates in the competitive University Entrance Examinations. Out of these only 150 of the best candidates are admitted onto the course each year. These students comprise the top 5% to 10% of candidates wishing to follow the elementary education major (Papanastasiou, 1989).

#### **Method**

The overall sample for the study consisted of 335 students. The sample from the University of Cyprus comprised 176 out of a total of 300 third and fourth grade students, or 58.7% of those studying. Of the 300 51% were third graders and 49% fourth graders. A total of 159 students from Pennsylvania State University completed the questionnaire. Of these 37% were third graders and 67% fourth graders. Unlike students in Cyprus, who are all admitted to their majors when they enter the University, students at Pennsylvania State University are formally admitted into elementary education only when they are juniors. The questionnaire was administered to all students that were enrolled in certain elementary education classes, which were selected randomly at the two universities.

Data was collected using a questionnaire with a scale that ranging from one to five. The questionnaire was designed by the investigators, and was based on a framework related to the intrinsic, the extrinsic and the alternate factors. The final version of the questionnaire included 19 questions, of which 16 asked for opinions from the students regarding their reasons for choosing to major in elementary education, and three questions asked about demographic factors. The questionnaire in the US was written in English, while the one in Cyprus was translated into Greek.

#### **Analysis**

Factor analysis was used to identify factors that could be used to explain the reasons for students choosing this particular major. For the appropriateness of using such technique, the Barlett test of sphericity=2126.8 ( $p=0.00$ ) and the KMO=0.828 was used: these values support the choice of factor analysis.

Based on the selected five factors - variety of benefits, internal motivation, status of the profession, interpersonal influence, and academic ability - we compared the two groups of students from the US and Cyprus to determine whether they each gave different values to them. The t-test was used to detect differences in means between students in the US and Cyprus.

## Results

Students' responses were factored using the principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Five factors were retained, accounting for 68.4 per cent of the variance. The rotated factor loadings are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix**

Questionnaire items	F1 Variety of benefits	F2 Internal motives	F3 Status of the profession	F4 Inter-personal influence	F5 Academic ability
Teachers earn high salaries	0.60				
Teachers have long vacations	0.78				
Teachers are employed immediately after graduation	0.73				
Teachers have many job possibilities	0.66				
Teaching is a secure job	0.81				
The teaching profession includes many fringe benefits	0.75				
I love teaching		0.88			
I love the teaching/learning process		0.83			
I love working with young children		0.83			
I believe I have an inborn talent for teaching		0.75			
Teaching is a high status profession			0.81		
People in other occupations value teachers			0.75		
A relative has encouraged me to become a teacher				0.89	
My parents have encouraged me				0.79	
Teaching is an easy academic major to get into					0.76
Teachers get promoted easily					0.71
Variance	31.4%	13.9%	9.2%	7.7%	6.3%

Source: Papanastasiou and Papanastasiou, 1997

The first factor (F1) was the most important, accounting for 31.4 per cent of the variance in the five factor solution. The items with high loadings concerned students' ideas about job security, long vacations, salaries, immediate employment after graduation, and fringe benefits for teachers. This factor was called 'variety of benefits'. The second factor (F2) accounted for 13.9 per cent of the variance and included items describing internal beliefs such as: 'I love working with young children', 'I love teaching', and 'I have an inborn talent for teaching'. This factor was called 'internal motives'. The third factor (F3) accounted for 9.2 per cent of the variance and items with high loadings dealt with

students' perceptions about the status of the profession. The fourth factor (F4), 'interpersonal influence', accounted for 7.7 per cent of the variance and consisted of items referring to the students' receiving encouragement from their families. The last factor retained (F5), 'academic ability', accounted for 6.3 per cent of the variance, and concerned students' ideas about the ease of becoming a teacher and advancing within the hierarchy of the profession.

A comparison between US and Cypriot students, based on these five factors, is presented in Figure 2. From the results shown in this table it is clear that there are differences in the responses of students enrolled at the two universities. The students from Pennsylvania State University strongly disagreed that items under the factor 'variety of benefits' had influenced them in choosing the elementary education profession, while students in Cyprus strongly agreed with these statements. In other words Cypriot students were influenced by long vacations, by the fact that teaching is a secure job, and a profession with many fringe benefits, and finally that they are employed immediately after graduation. Statistically significant differences were found in all questions included within the 'variety of benefits' factor.

The second result from these findings shows that students from Pennsylvania State University indicated that they strongly agreed that they had chosen the elementary education major because of internal motives, while students from the University of Cyprus merely agreed with this statement. This difference in the responses from the two Universities was statistically significant for the factor, and for each of the questions included in the factor. This suggests that students in the US were more strongly influenced by their love of teaching and working with young children, and by their perceived inborn talent for teaching, than students in Cyprus.

It seems that both groups are uncertain about the factor 'status of the profession', which includes questions on teaching being a high status occupation, and people valuing teachers, although there are statistically significant differences for the items and for the factor between the two groups. The US sample tended towards disagreement with these statements, with the Cyprus sample leaning towards agreement. The same conclusion can be reached for the factor 'interpersonal influence', which is not statistically significant for the two groups. It seems that neither group, in general, have strong opinions in either direction. The US sample leaned towards disagreement with this statement, and the Cyprus sample leaned towards agreement. Finally for the factor 'academic ability', both groups had strong positions, both agreeing that teaching was not an easy academic major to get into, and that teachers did not get promoted easily.

**Figure 2: Descriptive statistics and t-test values on five factors**

Factors	Groups	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	p
Variety of Benefits	US	3.38	0.56	25.17	0.00
	Cyprus	1.79	0.57		
Internal Motives	US	1.42	0.39	-11.86	0.00
	Cyprus	2.19	0.75		
Status of the Profession	US	3.26	0.88	5.82	0.00
	Cyprus	2.71	0.84		
Interpersonal Influence	US	3.00	1.13	0.68	0.50
	Cyprus	2.92	1.17		
Academic Ability	US	4.05	0.63	-1.88	0.06
	Cyprus	4.18	0.65		

\* 1 = strongly agree  
5 = strongly disagree

Source: Papanastasiou and Papanastasiou, 1997

### Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that there are major differences in the responses from students at the University of Cyprus and at Pennsylvania State University.

‘Variety of benefits’ was the strongest factor influencing students from the University of Cyprus to major in elementary education. This was not the case for students from the US, who were most influenced by the factor ‘internal motives’. This might be because the extrinsic aspects of elementary school teaching positions are so rewarding in Cyprus that most people associate the teaching profession with those factors (e.g., high salaries, guaranteed employment, fringe benefits). Therefore, when choosing a profession, this sample of students tends to place a greater emphasis on these extrinsic aspects of the teaching profession, and less emphasis on the intrinsic aspects of teaching or on their personal interests. On the other hand, teachers’ salaries in the US are generally not relatively as high as in Cyprus, and elementary education students are not all guaranteed teaching positions immediately after they graduate from the University. This is why students from the US sample strongly disagreed that they were influenced by these factors. As a result, those students that eventually do choose to enter this major report that they are truly and intrinsically interested in it, since the extrinsic benefits are not high. Furthermore, the students from Penn State University disagreed that they had entered the major because of the security of the profession, or because they would be employed

immediately after gaining their teaching degree. Teachers in the US are not guaranteed a job after graduation. These are not, therefore, considered to be motivating factors for US students to enter the teaching profession, compared to students from Cyprus. Students in Cyprus are guaranteed employment after graduation, while their teaching position is also secured after two years of teaching. It is reasonable for Cypriot students to strongly agree that they have entered the elementary school teaching major because of job security.

Students from Pennsylvania State University tend to disagree with the statement that they entered the major because of the status it holds. This is expected, and the low status of the profession is reflected in the relatively low salaries that teachers are paid throughout the US. On the other hand students from Cyprus lean in the other direction, and tend to agree with the statement regarding the high status held of the profession.

A further difference in the responses of the two samples was that students from the University of Cyprus were more highly influenced by their parents to choose the elementary education profession in comparison with their US counterparts. The reason that Cypriot parents were more influential on their children's choice of majoring in elementary education could be because of their focus on the extrinsic benefits offered to teachers - such as high salaries, long summer vacations, and guaranteed immediate employment. These parents might believe these aspects of the profession to be beneficial for their children, especially since there are so many Cypriots with university degrees who cannot find good employment. In general the family in Cyprus is very close, and its members influence each other. In contrast, teachers in the US are not offered such relatively high salaries as Cypriots, neither are they guaranteed employment. The family is not as close as in Cyprus, and the culture of the country leads to a more individualistic approach. This may be another reason why students in the US were not influenced by their parents to enter this major.

Both groups indicated that they strongly disagreed with the statement that they entered the elementary education major because of their inability to enter the major of their choice, or the inability to finance their own studies in another major. The t-value for this construct was not significant since the responses from both samples were so similar. This response was expected from the Cyprus sample. If a student has done well enough in the entrance examinations to enter the elementary school teaching major, they could probably enter any other major with ease. From the sample of students that was used from Pennsylvania State University, it turned out that the majority of the students had relatively high GPAs while they were in high school. One could assume, therefore, that the GPA for their studies at the University would be high as well. Consequently, they would have had no problem in entering any major as far as their academic ability was concerned. Studying at the University of Cyprus is free. Therefore, financial reasons could not be considered as an obstacle to choosing another major. At Penn State University there is a fixed and standard tuition fee that all students have to pay regardless of their major, so similarly financial reasons could not be considered as a barrier to the student choosing another major rather than elementary education. In conclusion, intrinsic factors were more influential for students at the Penn State University, while students at the University of Cyprus were also greatly influenced by extrinsic factors. Students from Pennsylvania State University strongly disagreed that they had been influenced by extrinsic factors. However, it is quite discouraging to observe that the students in Cyprus give so much emphasis to the extrinsic benefits of the profession rather than to the intrinsic ones. One

would expect that providing attractive extrinsic benefits to potential teachers would attract the most qualified individuals who also love the profession to enter the major.

Cyprus after independence was an underdeveloped country, and many students struggled in the past to gain attractive jobs in order to step up to a higher socio-economic status. Teaching was one profession offering such a step. Even today, student teachers know that after graduation they will earn a relatively high salary. Cypriot society perceives students entering teaching as lucky, and parents usually put intense pressure on their children to become teachers. In the US the status of the teaching profession is less attractive, with relatively lower salaries. Students are influenced by the different values held by different societies.

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