

Becoming a Teacher as a Hero's Journey: Using Metaphor in Preservice Teacher Education

By Lisa S. Goldstein

Becoming a teacher is hard work. A sizable body of research indicates that student teaching internships or other field-based practica are a particularly difficult part of this process. Many preservice teachers have misconceptions about the work of teachers and teaching (Cole & Knowles, 1993); when they begin their field placements they often feel disillusioned by the contrast between their idealized images and the realities of the profession. As they experience the myriad challenges of classroom life, preservice teachers often call into question the ideas and skills

they were taught in their university coursework (Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1981). Further, the numerous stressors linked with student teaching — expectations, role clarification, conformity, time, evaluation, assignments, peer discussions, feedback (MacDonald, 1993) — contribute to making field experiences arduous and overwhelming.

One of our tasks as teacher educators is to create educational contexts and opportunities that support and sustain our students as they navigate these difficult times. One successful strategy toward this end is the use of metaphor (Bullough, 1991; Bullough &

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Stokes, 1994; Carter, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Dickmeyer, 1989; Marshall, 1990; Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn, 1989; Stofflett, 1996; among others). In this article, I share the results of a recent study that explored the ways in which the hero's journey metaphor offered support to a cohort of preservice elementary school teachers during their first field placement experience. Because "the hero is a universal ideal that helps people think about their lives in a more profound and creative way" (Noble, 1994, p. 30) and because the hero's journey's emphasizes transformation and growth, the hero's journey is an appropriate and potentially powerful metaphor for nascent teachers.

This study revealed that the hero's journey metaphor was helpful to the students in a range of ways. However, I also found that many participants who enjoyed thinking of their experience as a hero's journey were resistant to the image of the hero. I will describe the benefits my students experienced as a result of using the hero's journey metaphor as a way to view their field placement experience, examine the contradictions in the students' responses to this metaphor, and conclude by discussing implications of these findings for teacher education program development.

Using Metaphor in Preservice Teacher Education

For several years I taught an elementary classroom organization and management course at a large research university in the Southwestern United States. In conjunction with this practicum course, which met weekly and covered topics such as classroom environments, discipline, lesson and unit planning, professionalism, and so on, my students would spend 20 hours per week as interns in elementary school classrooms (grades 1-5) in a socio-culturally diverse urban school district for a period of 10 weeks. Concurrent with this practicum and internship, the students were enrolled in four other methods courses.

This was always a demanding and difficult semester for my students: they faced the daunting task of transforming themselves from college students into professionals as they simultaneously learned teaching strategies and dealt with the practical and logistical challenges of field placements. In an attempt to support my preservice teachers during their challenging internship semester, in the Spring of 1999 I elected to modify my classroom organization and management class to take advantage of the power of metaphor. Because metaphor allows preservice teachers to "create meaning in ambiguous, complex situations" such as those commonly found in classrooms (Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn 1989, p. 52), I expected that metaphor would offer my students a powerful way to understand their field experiences and to explore their roles in those experiences.

The body of scholarship on the role of metaphor in teacher education indicates that metaphor can be a useful tool for supporting novice teachers (Bullough, 1991; Bullough & Stokes, 1994; Carter, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Dickmeyer,

1989; Marshall, 1990; Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn, 1989; Stofflett, 1996). Metaphor is seen as “a means for assisting beginners to articulate who they think they are as teachers” (Bullough & Stokes, 1994, p. 220) and as a way to help preservice teachers to “grasp intellectually systems that operate in ways quite mysterious to [them]” (Dickmeyer, 1989, p.152). Because metaphor impacts the way we perceive situations and events, it can be used to redescribe reality (Provenzo, McCloskey, Kottkamp & Cohn, 1989) and “to encourage reconceptualization of problem situations” (Marshall, 1990, p. 129) such as those encountered by preservice teachers in their field placements.

Although the literature clearly highlights the contribution metaphor can make to preservice teacher education, the research also indicates that the challenge of finding their own working metaphors can be very difficult for some students (Bullough, 1991; Bullough & Stokes, 1994). Further, Grimmitt and MacKinnon (1992) suggest that the process of developing metaphors “might . . . appeal only to the more linguistically inclined student teacher” (p. 434). These limitations might compromise the potential impact metaphor offers.

In order to make the most of the power of metaphor and to sidestep these limitations, I offered my students a pre-selected metaphor. I elected to modify my practicum course by incorporating the metaphor of the hero’s journey, a frequently occurring trope in Western literature and film, both because of the inherent power of the theme and because of its strong parallels to the process of becoming a teacher. Class sessions and course assignments linked to the hero’s journey metaphor were spread across the semester, and efforts were made to link the metaphor to the central academic content and professional skills presented in the course.

Teacher Education and the Hero’s Journey

Using the hero’s journey with preservice teachers allowed me to draw not only on the power of metaphor, but also on the broad and deep power of myth. Joseph Campbell, the scholar most readily associated with modern interpretation of mythic themes, argues that myth carries the human spirit forward, offering symbols, themes and images that enable and support growth and transformation, in contrast to other kinds of stories and experiences that cause fear and limit growth (Campbell, 1949). Given that the driving purposes for modifying my classroom organization and management course were to reposition the semester’s experience in ways that would combat negativism, provide inspiration and support, and enable the students to see themselves as successful student teachers, using the mythic hero’s journey metaphor seemed like an ideal solution.

The hero’s journey unfolds following a set pattern (Campbell, 1949, p. 245-246). The hero is called to awaken and to begin her journey. She¹ meets a helper who encourages her to go forth and who gives her tools and gifts to assist her on her journey. Then she proceeds to a threshold where she leaves behind her previous life

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and enters new realms of experience. At this point the hero meets a presence who guards the passage into the new realms; she must successfully negotiate with this gatekeeper in order to gain entry and continue on her journey.

Once she passes over the threshold, the hero enters a period of initiation where she meets unfamiliar forces, some of which threaten her and some of which offer magical aid. Successful negotiation of these trials leads our hero to personal transformation, growth, and illumination. The hero then returns to the world to share what she has learned.

Even in this brief description, there are many parallels to the teacher education process. Although some have always wanted to be a teacher and others felt a call later in life (Ayers, 1995), as the deadline for declaring the education major or applying to begin the professional development course sequence approaches, the student responds to the call to awaken and embarks upon her journey to become a teacher. She begins her specialized methods coursework, where she meets helpful professors and teaching assistants who offer her encouragement, knowledge, teaching skills and other tools necessary for success in the field.

Next the student proceeds to the threshold of her field placement classroom, where she encounters her cooperating teacher, a presence who guards the passage; each hero must negotiate her relationship with the threshold guardian in order to gain entrance to this new realm of experience. The threshold guardian plays a crucial role in the hero's journey: the student cannot begin her initiation until she has crossed the threshold.

Unlike the ever-helpful ally or the always-dangerous dragon, the threshold guardian is generally a complex character with motivations and behaviors that are often unclear and unstable. For preservice teachers the cooperating teacher can appear both as friend and foe, be supportive or intimidating, easy to approach or challenging, and often takes on all these personas (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Graham, 1999).

Once she has crossed the threshold, the student begins her initiation period. In her placement classroom the student encounters unfamiliar forces of all kinds; she must find new allies, face a range of trials, and call on her inner resources and her untapped strengths in order to be successful. The close connections between student teaching and the hero's initiation period are explored in great depth in literature focused on student teaching as a rite of passage (Berman, 1994; Eddy, 1969; White, 1989).

For student teachers, there are many potential allies on this journey: other student teachers, the children in the placement classroom, the children's parents, the cooperating teacher or other teachers on the faculty, the principal, the fieldwork supervisor. However, these people also have the potential to be dragons, testing and challenging the preservice teacher. And, as is the case for all who embark on a hero's journey, often the fiercest dragons will be found within the student herself.

Facing dragons — external and internal — is the heart of the journey. Successfully battling the dragons and enduring the trials are the source of the

transformation that is the reward of the hero's journey: in teacher education our hero begins as a college student and ends as a novice teacher, ready to go out into the world and share what she has learned.

I felt that using the hero's journey as a metaphor for their first internship semester would offer my students an alternative way of thinking about their experience, perhaps providing a more positive perspective. This study was designed to allow me to determine if using the mythic hero's journey as a metaphor could reposition the challenges of the fieldwork experience, thereby serving as a source of support and encouragement to these students during this difficult yet essential professional transformation.

Using *Star Wars* in Teacher Education

Although the hero's journey is a well-known mythic theme, I felt it necessary to discuss the hero's journey with my students in the context of a familiar story. I opted to use the *Star Wars* trilogy of films — *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977); *The Empire Strikes Back* (Lucas, Brackett & Kasdan, 1980); and *The Return of the Jedi* (Lucas & Kasdan, 1983) — as a mediating force to help the students see and forge the connections between the mythic hero's journey cycle and their nascent teaching lives.

I chose *Star Wars* for many reasons. George Lucas, creator of the *Star Wars* galaxy, very deliberately crafted the trilogy using the standard mythic figures and themes of the hero's journey: he stated, "I wanted to take all the old myths and put them into a new format that young people could relate to" (Lucas, cited in Bouzereau, 1997, p. 27). Joseph Campbell buttresses Lucas's claim, stating "*Star Wars* is a very old story in a very new costume" (Campbell, 1988, p. 179). *Star Wars*, familiar and easily accessible, formed a natural bridge between the ancient hero's journey cycle and the contemporary culture in which my students' teaching experiences take place.

Using the *Star Wars* films in this study allowed me to avoid one of the problems discussed in the research literature on the uses of metaphor in preservice teacher education. Using film as a vehicle for illustrating and communicating the hero's journey metaphor was a way to broaden the appeal of thinking non-literally about the process and experience of becoming a teacher beyond those linguistically inclined student teachers in the cohort, thereby avoiding the limitations mentioned by Grimmett and MacKinnon (1992).

Finally, the decision to use the *Star Wars* films to connect my students to the hero's journey theme was also a decision to connect them to me. Gleefully and effortlessly quoting from *Star Wars* films at every opportunity, I am what my sons call "a *Star Wars* geek." My deep knowledge of *Star Wars* enabled me to see the connections between Luke Skywalker's journey and that of my students, and my deep passion for these films enabled me to convince my students to trust me long enough to try something unexpected in our practicum class.

Rethinking the Hero

It is important to note that it was “the hero’s journey” and not “the hero” that was presented and offered to the students as a metaphor for their experience. Students were encouraged to think of the process of becoming a teacher as a hero’s journey, but they were never encouraged to see themselves — or any other teachers — as heroes; the term *hero* has many troubling associations.

In the world of comic books and cartoons, a hero is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. I did not want my students to feel any sense that they would be expected to live up to some unreachable expectations or standards. Further, I was worried about the stereotypical image of the hero/superhero as an independent, solitary figure. Applying this vision of the hero to teaching would communicate to the preservice teachers an image of the teacher as an isolated individual, someone who closes her classroom door and works alone in an insular setting.

Another potential problem with linking the term hero and the teaching profession is that hero is commonly used — particularly in films and in the popular media — to describe super-teachers who go above and beyond the normal expectations of their jobs, or to describe savior-teachers who rescue their students from administrative cruelty, gangs, poverty, or ignorance. I did not want my students to envision their professional lives along these problematic and unreasonable lines.

My hope was that the students would remain focused on the journey aspect of the metaphor, rather than on the hero aspect. However, I suspected that it might be impossible to offer the hero’s journey as a metaphor for the teacher education process without implying that the students on this journey were heroes. So I took preventive measures at the outset and attempted to draw an alternative portrait of the hero that students could build on when envisioning themselves on a hero’s journey.

Using *Star Wars* helped alleviate some concerns about using the term hero in relation to the process of becoming a teacher. One of the enduring beauties of the *Star Wars* trilogy is the particularly flawed and imperfect character of its central protagonist. Luke Skywalker — impatient, impetuous, immature — is on a hero’s journey, yet still he makes mistakes, gets scared, and needs help as he journeys toward his future. It was this particular spirit of the hero’s journey that I hoped would sustain and support the students in the cohort as they began their professional lives. Like Luke, they would make mistakes, get scared, and need help on their journeys toward their future careers and, also like Luke, they would succeed despite their apparent weaknesses.

Although it is considered the classic scholarship on the subject, I avoided the work of Joseph Campbell (1949) when teaching the introductory lessons about the hero’s journey metaphor because it reinforces the stereotypical representations of the hero. Instead, I drew heavily upon Kathleen Noble’s (1994) feminist reinterpretation of the hero in an effort to interrupt those stereotypical images. Noble points

out that the term hero has a different meaning in myth than in everyday usage. She states that the heroes of mythology are known

... for their great capacity for life and for pursuing higher goals. They are expected to develop their resilience, autonomy and self-reliance, and to approach the challenges in their lives with intelligence and creativity, and to act with integrity in all endeavors. Their quests challenge them to roam in the inner or outer worlds in search of new knowledge and to use that knowledge to serve their fellow creatures. (Noble, 1994, p. 6)

This working definition of hero is well aligned with my aspirations for my students and for their professional lives, and portrays a vision of teaching that is worthy of pursuit.

Study Procedures

Data for this study comprised several of the papers and activities assigned as course requirements in my classroom organization and management class in Spring 1999. As an initial assignment in the course, students watched the *Star Wars* trilogy films using a guided viewing packet I developed for this study in order to help them attend carefully to Luke Skywalker's hero-journey. The packet was organized around the stages of the hero's journey and drew on the image of the mythic hero developed by Kathleen Noble and discussed extensively in class.

Each section of the viewing packet — call to awaken, initiation, allies/helpers, trials/dragons, and transformation and return — had space for note-taking, a set of questions designed to focus the students' thinking about the details of the films in specific relation to Luke's hero's journey, and a set of questions designed to structure students' reflections on their own lives as aspiring teachers. My intent was that thinking about Luke's experiences would become a springboard for examination and reflection of the students' lived experiences and would therefore shed light on their own hero-journeys.

As the semester progressed and field placements began, students often mentioned Luke Skywalker and other *Star Wars* characters in class discussions. Questions that had been raised in the viewing guide or in our initial discussions of *Star Wars* and the hero's journey, scenes from the films that had been highlighted as representations of important moments in Luke's hero journey, and new insights, connections, parallels, and "a-ha!" moments were brought up by students on a regular basis. The students' field placements were revealing new meanings in the films and, more importantly, it seemed that the films were helping the students make sense of their experiences in the field.

The students wrote two papers for the course that were linked to the hero's journey theme. One paper focused on their call to awaken; in this assignment students were asked to reflect on and discuss their decision to become a teacher. The other hero's journey paper was centered around the students' initiation process;

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intended as an opportunity for the students to consider and begin to interpret their experiences over the semester, this paper required students to discuss the various allies and dragons they encountered, to detail the trials they weathered, and to describe any transformations that may have occurred. The viewing packets and both of these papers were data sources for this study. In addition, data were drawn from one free-write done in class intended for formative evaluation of the course and of the study, and the students' comments on an informal summative evaluation tool which covered the course as a whole.

Participation in this study was open to all students enrolled in the class; all of the students in the cohort — 14 Anglo females in their early to mid-twenties— elected to participate in the study and had their papers and evaluative materials considered as data for this project.²

Finally, students were given the option of participating in focus group discussions held 6 months after the completion of the course: at this point in time the students had almost finished their student teaching placements and were able to look back on the ways that the hero's journey metaphor contributed to their professional experiences after the study ended. Nine students participated in these focus group discussions. To accommodate their schedules, I held three different focus group sessions, each of which covered the same topics and issues.

Manual and computer-assisted data analysis strategies were employed to examine and code all of the student writings. First, I read and coded all students' responses to each assignment in the order in which they were completed — I read all the viewing guides, all the call to awaken papers, all the freewrites, then all the initiation papers and informal course evaluations. My goal here was to develop an overall sense of the progression of the class's experiences, attitudes, and perceptions over the duration of their field placement and to identify general themes common to all the participants. Next I looked at each individual, reading the complete portfolio of data written by each participant. This analysis strategy revealed the development of each preservice teacher's thoughts, concerns, and attitudes over the course of the field placement period and enabled me to engage in case and cross-case analysis.

As I read and re-read these data, I used sticky notes to mark any statements that (1) directly addressed the hero's journey metaphor, (2) discussed or critiqued the utility of the word hero, (3) drew connections between the hero's journey metaphor and the students' lives or experiences in their field placement, and (4) mentioned characters or constructs from the *Star Wars* films. My next phase of analysis involved engaging in repeated readings and considerations of the marked entries, looking inductively for any patterns in the data. I developed working interpretations of these patterns, and attempted to warrant them with evidence pulled from the data set.

The patterns I had identified and my working interpretations of those patterns were used to generate the central questions posed to the focus groups. Rooted in Pamela Moss's work on the use of the hermeneutic circle in warranting knowledge

claims (Moss, 1994), the focus groups played a central role in shaping the next phase of my data analysis.

Moss describes the hermeneutic circle as a means for arriving at interpretations of data “that seek to understand the whole in light of its parts, that privilege readers who are most knowledgeable about the context. . . and that ground those interpretations not only in textual and contextual evidence available, but also in a rational debate among the community of interpreters” (Moss, 1994, p. 7). This process involves an iterative cycle that begins with an initial interpretation of the data, followed by critical dialogue among a group of knowledgeable individuals committed to an “ethic of disciplined, collaborative inquiry that encourages challenges and revisions to initial interpretations” (Moss, 1994, p. 7). The participants in the focus groups served as my community of interpreters, testing and challenging my working interpretations of their experiences. Focus group discussions were audiotaped, transcribed, and used as an additional data source.

Following the focus group meetings, I returned to the data searching for evidence confirming and disconfirming my revised interpretations. Going back into the data with this focus, looking specifically for particular issues, allowed me to uncover relevant information that I had overlooked in my earlier readings.

Once I felt confident that I had constructed a trustworthy and believable account of the situation, I began to write up my findings. I invited the participants to read drafts of this manuscript, hoping to continue the hermeneutic process of input, feedback, critique and re-interpretation. Unfortunately, none of the participants were able to continue participation; the new school year had begun and most of them were busy facing the challenges of their induction year.

Findings

The hero’s journey metaphor, looked at in isolation, served all of the students well. However, I found that in the specific context of this study the hero’s journey never existed in isolation. I had assumed that it would be possible to separate the hero’s journey from the image of the hero, but the data indicate the students did not perceive the metaphor in this way. Students’ connection with the hero’s journey metaphor forced them into an inevitable relationship — comfortable or uncomfortable — with the term hero.

For some students there was no distinction between being on a hero’s journey and being a hero; they were part of the same metaphorical package. These students took strength from thinking about themselves as heroes, and found the hero’s journey metaphor to be beneficial to their experience. As Amber said, “I like thinking of myself as a hero on a journey. It gives meaning, purpose, and humor to my life.” For other students, though, the connection between the hero’s journey and the hero image was not seamless. These students encountered cognitive dissonance: they loved the hero’s journey metaphor, but did not like to think of themselves as heroes.

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Being on a Hero's Journey

As I had hoped, structuring my classroom organization and management course around the theme of the hero's journey had a positive impact on the individual preservice teachers' experiences. Most fundamentally, asking students to write about their calls to awaken and their initiation experiences led them to reflection and discovery. Although any reflective writing activity might have had the same beneficial effect (Cole & Knowles, 1993; Gore & Zeichner, 1991; Schon, 1983; van Manen, 1977), the students' comments suggest that the hero's journey allowed them to see their own lives from a different angle and to make new connections. For example, Jane said:

Writing the papers on why I decided to become a teacher and on the dragons and allies really was very helpful because I had never thought about any of that before.... I couldn't believe that I had gotten that far without thinking about why I wanted to be a teacher. I mean, I never ever thought about it. And that was really beneficial to me.

Many of the participants expressed similar sentiments, grateful both for the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and for the structure offered by the hero's journey framework. In her initiation paper handed in at the end of the semester, Ashley wrote the following:

As the semester comes to a close, it is nice to reflect back on what transformations I have made. [In my viewing guide] I wrote about Luke, "After his Jedi training he had discipline, faith, deeper understanding, dedication, and powers of mind control. He had a noble purpose." Likewise I feel my training and quest has instilled in me stronger discipline, faith, understanding, and dedication.

Along similar lines, some participants found that using the hero's journey as a metaphor for their teacher education experience led to powerful personal insights. Thanks to the hero's journey, Micki wrote, "I have found strengths in myself that I never knew existed and weaknesses that aren't as weak as I had perceived them to be." Amber, too, had a new understanding of herself at the end of the semester. Considering the contributions made by the hero's journey metaphor, she explained:

The true purpose and gift of this process [has been] to really look at myself as a person and as a teacher.... Viewing this venture as a heroic journey has enabled me to work for what I want and what I believe in.... Through this process I have come to learn that my greatest ally is my own zeal for teaching and my greatest dragon is my own self-doubt. I had no idea that these two parts has been at work all along. This has not only been a journey to teaching, but more importantly, a journey to myself.

Other students used the image of the hero's journey as a source of "inspiration and momentum" (Alexis), as a way to "get my thoughts and emotions back on track" (Erin), or as a reminder that "I am learning things all the time and not to get too frustrated when I'm not perfect" (anonymous course evaluation).

The students' end-of-course evaluations displayed a great deal of enthusiasm for the hero's journey metaphor. Here are several of the students' anonymous responses to the question, "*When I teach the course next year, should I continue to use the hero's journey metaphor as an organizing theme? Why or why not?*":

Definitely! The hero's journey that the [*Star Wars*] characters go on is so similar to ours. It is a fun and exciting way to look at this process.

Yes, it is a fun but meaningful way to help students cope with the pressures of the [professional development sequence course] block. You should continue to use it.

Yes, I think the connection is helpful to many people. I think it is so unique and I really felt like you shared so much of yourself with us.

Yes — it applies well to the journey of becoming a teacher.

Yes, because it was helpful for me to view my last year of school as a journey. It made me realize that I am learning things all the time and not to get too frustrated when I'm not perfect.

The hero's journey metaphor was powerful for the students. I had hoped that it would provide support and encouragement during a difficult semester, and the data indicate that it did so.³

Being a Hero

A small number of students reported drawing directly on the hero image as a source of support and strength. Christy told her focus group that she had been nervous before an interview for a teaching position; in order to calm down she recalled telling herself, "I am a hero and I can do this. I need to go in there and be confident and be a hero."

Alexis also found strength in her image of herself as a hero. In recalling her experience receiving pointed critical feedback from her cooperating teacher, Alexis wrote, "I appreciated her for that because, after all, I am a hero. I believe my ability to handle this type of feedback made me feel more heroic."

Amber used the hero image to put her classroom struggles into perspective. She wrote:

My last observation time was very chaotic and stressful for me. I thought to myself how horrible it was going and then I thought to God to give me strength. Then HERO popped into my mind and I smiled. Suddenly it seemed not so stressful and almost laughable.

It is not clear whether the students were drawing on Noble's powerful and inspirational understanding of the term hero or on more stereotypical images. Regardless, the idea of being a hero offered these particular students strength, confidence, resilience, and perspective when they needed it most. So, despite my concerns about the term hero, some of the students found it useful.

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Noble's feminist reinterpretation of the hero made an important contribution to the students' experience in our course and in their field placements. In contrast to the solitary figure of the hero, Noble's view highlights the crucial importance of allies. She writes:

Many of us grow up believing that heroes must accomplish their goals by relying solely upon their own wits. . . . But a careful reading of these tales reveals that heroes are aided by allies at critical junctures all along the way and that without such help their quests could not possibly succeed. (Noble, 1994, p. 109)

When presented in this light, the hero's journey metaphor can be a way to create connections rather than reinforce isolation.

This image of the hero as an individual linked closely to network of allies resonated strongly for the students. Candy, a focus group participant, reported that thinking of themselves as a group of heroes on a transformative journey "always cheered everybody up" and allowed each student to offer and request support as needed. Further, Christy reported that the hero's journey metaphor offered a form of shorthand communication among the group: "We all had this same knowledge base and started at square one so it was really easy to describe how you were feeling." Using Noble's feminist definition of hero allowed for the development of community among the students, thereby avoiding the problem of forced isolation and independence that I had associated with the term.

Not Being a Hero

Although the students found the hero's journey a useful metaphor that enriched their thinking about themselves and their experiences in their first practice teaching placement, the data revealed a strong undercurrent of discomfort with the word hero. For example, one student who wrote in her anonymous course evaluation about the ways in which she benefited from the hero's journey metaphor concluded the evaluation by stating, "However, I never really considered myself to be a hero." Another student wrote: "I liked the hero metaphor but I don't necessarily feel like a hero."

I explored this curious tension further in the focus group discussions. I was confronted by tremendous contradiction: on one occasion Christy stated "I was totally agreeable with the [hero's] journey... but I never thought of myself as a hero," and then minutes later told a story of calming her pre-interview jitters by telling herself telling herself, "I am a hero and I can do this." Although Christy's inconsistency was the most notable, almost all of the focus group participants expressed satisfaction with the hero's journey metaphor and ambivalence about the word hero.

As we talked about the hero's journey in class throughout the semester, we returned frequently to Noble's vision of the mythic hero. All of the focus group participants recalled our class discussions about the difference between Noble's

understanding of the word hero and the typical definition of the term, and were able to describe those differences. But it appeared that our classroom discussions about these nuances of meaning did little to counteract the cumulative effect of a lifetime of experience with the word. Carrie made a statement that summed up the situation well: "It's hard to get past that stereotype of what a hero is."

The most obvious concerns with the hero label were related to gender. As Christy said:

This image of a hero, really, stereotypically, is a male. With a sword. Strong, fights for the heroine, wins. So it is really hard after being bombarded with that image for your entire life, to think Oh, I'm a hero. I'm 5 foot 1[inch]; blonde hair, female, I don't have any weaponry [pause] I think that's what's hard for me. I think I'm not a hero. A hero has to be some ripped guy who is killing people.

Despite my efforts to use Noble's work to undercut the stereotypes, the hegemony of macho male heroism perpetuated by popular culture was robust and powerful in my students' thinking about the hero's journey.

I believe that my decision to use *Star Wars* as a bridge between my students and the hero's journey metaphor contributed to this problem. Although it could be argued that Princess Leia, the only female character of any importance in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, is on a hero's journey, the films' central focus is on Luke Skywalker and his transformation from a frustrated farm boy on a dusty planet at the outer rim of the galaxy to Jedi Knight and galactic leader. Had I used *The Wizard of Oz* or another hero's journey film that features a female in the hero role, I might have been better able to disrupt the association of images of the heroic with typical male behaviors.

In responses that typify the loss of strength and self-confidence that accompany females' adolescence (Pipher, 1994), some of the preservice teachers in this study felt "too ordinary" to be heroes. These responses appear to be shaded by self-doubt and uncertainty:

I'm too ordinary and just like every other teacher in the school... why should I be the hero? (Carrie)

Hero is just something that seemed too strong of a word for what we were doing.... there are so many people doing it that it doesn't seem heroic because you're not standing out. And heroes are thought of, in my mind, as people who are standing out because they're doing something amazing. (Jane)

For me a hero is like someone who saves lives, or gets the Congressional Medal of Honor. (Micki)

Along similar lines, Erin suspected that the pleasure she and her classmates took from teaching disqualified them from heroism: "I wonder if we can't look at the hero part because we all chose education for ourselves, not for the kids we're going to teach. So that's kind of a selfish reason; you can't really be a hero while you're being selfish."

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Research by scholars examining the lives of young women offers some insight into these attitudes and beliefs. For example, Mary Pipher's work on adolescent girls' loss of clarity and vitality would suggest that my participants — all females in the tail end of their adolescence — were unable to accept an image of themselves as powerful and competent, and so they rejected hero as a result (Pipher, 1994). In contrast to Pipher's view, Carol Gilligan and her colleagues (Gilligan, Lyons & Hanmer, 1990) point out that maintaining connection and relationship is a crucial part of the social world of adolescent women; perhaps my participants presented themselves as "ordinary" and "not standing out" from their fellow teachers in an effort to maintain a sense of shared experience and community.

Another explanation for their resistance to the label hero relates to my participants' lack of professional experience. As novice teachers, my participants may have felt unready for the leadership and visibility heroism seems to demand; perhaps they hoped that rejecting the term hero would provide them the safety and anonymity they desired.

The participants' inexperience may have contributed to their resistance to the term hero in another way, namely, allowing them to hold unchallenged, mistaken impressions of teachers' working lives. In her book *Eve's Daughters: The Forbidden Heroism of Women*, Miriam Polster (1992) points out that "women's quiet but profoundly courageous acts simply go unremarked, submerged in a subsidiary world of attachment and service" (Polster, 1992, p. 9). This may have been happening at the preservice teachers' field placement sites. Preoccupied with successfully navigating their own experiences in the field, the participants may have been very unaware of the depth and intensity of the commitment brought to the classroom by their mentor teachers, all of whom were female.

The preservice teachers in this study who loved being on a hero's journey but disliked the term hero may also have been influenced by society's negative images of teachers and teaching. Although these women were actively pursuing careers in teaching, they nevertheless saw teaching as unspectacular work. The participants positioned teaching as a profession too mundane and common to warrant association with heroism. Further, many of the participants in this study had been challenged and criticized by their family and friends when they elected to pursue a career in teaching, because the low pay and low status afforded to our profession made it seem an unappealing, poor choice. These preservice teachers may have internalized these negative messages about teaching and therefore were not able to apply the word hero to a teacher.

Comments made in the focus groups reflect the preservice teachers' resistance to seeing teaching as a profoundly demanding and significant profession. For example, Carrie said, "It seems like it's almost just a conceited kind of a label. 'Yeah, I'm HEROIC, what are you?' You feel silly, kinda. Too small to be saying that." Jane echoed that sentiment, asserting, "It's just hard to call yourself a hero. I mean, you feel heroic if you get through a lesson?" And Micki argued, "I'm just

a regular person and this is what I have chosen to do with my life.... I just don't think of myself as doing this great thing. And I don't think of teaching as such a noble profession. I just like being around kids all day long."

My participants' discomfort with being a hero was not surprising: I too had concerns with the word hero and with the idea of heroism in teaching. What I found surprising, however, were the understandings of teaching and teachers that informed their resistance to the term hero. To this group of preservice teacher education students, teachers were ordinary and teaching was no great thing.

Implications For Teacher Education

Despite my participants' discomfort with the word hero, the data indicate that using the metaphor of the hero's journey helped support my students as they navigated the challenges of their field placement experience. The hero's journey metaphor offered these preservice teachers guidance and encouragement, allowed them to tap into hidden strengths within themselves, helped put their frustrations and setbacks into perspective, and provided them with membership in a community of support and encouragement.

Although the commonplace hero-imagery of western culture was hegemonic and difficult to overcome, the preservice teachers were able to disrupt at least one of their preconceptions about heroes. Their ability to incorporate Kathleen Noble's feminist view that "heroes are aided by allies at critical junctures all along the way and that without such help their quests could not possibly succeed" (1994, p. 109) allowed them to move through their field placement experience as part of a community of supportive allies.

This suggests that the hero's journey metaphor works on two levels: it simultaneously offers support to each individual and offers means for the creation of a network of personal and professional connection within the cohort group. A hero's journey-inspired teacher education program could be a way to prepare students for collective action, for running classrooms and schools in egalitarian ways, and for engaging in equitable forms of communication, but only if the stereotypical male image of the hero can be minimized.

That my participants loved the hero's journey but did not love the idea of being a hero illustrates that even a powerful metaphor offers only partial connection. Teaching is a complicated endeavor and teachers are required to fill many different roles in their professional capacity; no single metaphor could perfectly capture all facets of a teacher's experience. This is an important reminder to teacher educators hoping to use metaphor with their students: because no metaphor is going to be a perfect fit, it is important to give preservice teachers space and flexibility as they think figuratively about their work with children.

Though I intended to keep our metaphorical focus on the hero's journey and away from being a hero, I see now that this was an unrealistic expectation. Once the

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students bought into seeing themselves as being on a hero's journey, they inevitably cast themselves as heroes. Although most of my students found the hero role uncomfortable, this does not mean that the hero's journey metaphor should be discounted entirely as a tool for teacher education.

Although my explicit goal in incorporating the hero's journey metaphor into my classroom organization and management course was to support and sustain the students during a notoriously challenging semester, I also saw the metaphor as a means for enriching their thinking, broadening their understanding of teaching, and enhancing their sense of what they were capable of achieving personally and professionally. Using the students' discomfort with and disconnection from the hero metaphor as a starting place for inquiry and critical reflection would be a way to encourage the students to think more deeply about themselves and probe and question their underlying conceptions of themselves as teachers.

I believe that my participants' resistance to the term hero is the aspect of this study that has the most to contribute to teacher education. Their comments offer powerful insight into the ways in which a typical group of preservice elementary teachers think about themselves and about the profession of teaching. Knowing that preservice teachers may view teachers and teaching in ways that downplay their importance and minimize their significance suggests that teacher education coursework and field experiences must be structured and organized in ways to shift these perceptions. Maxine Greene offers useful words of guidance as we begin this process:

All we can do is speak with others as passionately and eloquently as we can; all we can do is to look into each other's eyes and urge each other on to new beginnings. Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each one stirs to wide-awakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility. (Greene, 1995, p. 43)

Modifying assignments to include more opportunities for dialogue and deep reflection; creating reading lists that balance attention to nuts-and-bolts practical issues with opportunities to engage with challenging, powerful, and beautiful ideas; restructuring field experiences to nurture more meaningful commitments in the relationship between the preservice teacher, the cooperating teacher, and the university fieldwork supervisor; and reorganizing taken-for-granted institutional arrangements and creating new partnerships are all viable options.

Preservice teachers must learn to see teaching as a moral and intellectual endeavor of the most profound importance. There are innumerable ways to accomplish this, and each teacher educator and teacher education program would need to work diligently to create new possibilities for their students. Perhaps the hero's journey metaphor can play a role in this process.

Notes

¹ Because all of the participants in this study were women, I will use the female pronoun when discussing the hero.

² Students were assured that their decision to participate or to abstain from participation in this study would not affect their workload for the course, their grade, our evaluation of their work, or their future relationships with the university. All of the students enrolled in the cohort chose to participate in the study; all of the data are presented here with the students' permission.

³ In order to accommodate changes in our teacher education program, I stopped teaching the Classroom Organization and Management course after this study was completed. Had I continued with the course I would have taken my students' advice and used the hero's journey metaphor as a central feature of the class.

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