Resolving feelings of professional inadequacy: Student teachers' coping with distressful situations

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teachers associated distressful situations with professional inadequacy.
- Acceptance or postponing strategies were used to resolve professional inadequacy.
- Acceptance was conducted by modifying and lowering professional ideals.
- Coping skills were thought to be learnt in the future and not in teacher education.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Student teachers face various difficult situations during their teacher education. The aim of this study was to examine how student teachers perceive coping with distressful situations during their teacher training. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted. The results show that student teachers feel professionally inadequate, characterized by powerlessness, limited means of action and uncertainty. In resolving professional inadequacy, they use concepts connected to the social process of becoming teachers: modifying professional ideals, dependence on future colleagues and continuing to build experience. These concepts lead to acceptance and postponing strategies for learning from distressful situations.

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1. Introduction

Teaching is a task with important emotional aspects (Hargreaves, 1998, 2000). Student teachers are subjected to both positive and negative emotions during teacher education (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). Research into the development of teacher identity has paid attention to emotions as an integrated part of teacher identity development (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), and existing research has highlighted teachers' emotions and identity change (Reio, 2005; Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2003). Student teachers find themselves in situations during their education that may be emotionally positive or distressful. The latter is more likely to be troublesome. However, research focusing on coping with distressful situations during teacher education and the effect these experiences may have on teacher identity and learning to become a teacher is still scarce. This is important because student teachers need to be prepared for the difficult task of adjusting their identity, carrying out emotional work and beginning to teach (Richardson, Watt, & Devos, 2013). Also, research has previously shown that starting to teach is a lonely experience with little support (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010), and exploring the way in which student teachers cope with distressful situations could help to better prepare students for making the transition into the professional role as a teacher.

This study aims to examine how student teachers perceive coping with distressful situations during their teacher training. Taking their perceptions into account are not common in studies of student teachers' coping, and as such, we hope to contribute to the

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literature on student teachers' coping in learning to become teachers and thus attaining a teacher identity.

2. Student teachers' emotions and identity development

Student teachers use highly emotional language, including words such as "worry", "shock", "excitement", "love" or "panic", when describing their experiences during work placement (Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007). Timoštšuk and Ugaste (2012) showed that student teachers' emotions play a crucial part in the construction of a professional identity. In their study, several student teachers were uncertain of ever working as a teacher due to negative emotions such as fear, insecurity, disappointment, confusion, anxiety, sorrow, reluctance and hopelessness. When student teachers start teaching in the classroom, their emotional response is mainly focused on relationships with students and mentoring teachers, and not on the broader context of teaching (Flores & Day, 2006; Poulou, 2007; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). Role models are important, and student teachers want their supervisors to give them positive feedback and to confirm positive emotions they might show in relation to working as a teacher (Sumsion, 1998; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012).

Yuan and Lee (2015) found that student teachers' emotional focus was on themselves during initial teaching education, and when they reflected on and discussed teaching in university courses, they mainly viewed themselves as students, "without any involvement in teacher's real life" (p. 486). As a result of their work placement education, the student teachers identities formed through interaction with mentors, other school teachers, students and fellow student teachers (Yuan & Lee, 2015).

Student teachers seem to have trouble making the link between their learning, collaboration and responsibility as students, and considering these aspects in a work-life context (Abrandt Dahlgren & Hammar Chiriac, 2009). Learning to teach is a socialisation process that shapes and reshapes beginning teachers' identities (Flores & Day, 2006). Coward et al. (2015) described how work placement influenced student teachers' identity development. Identity is negotiated and renegotiated during work placement education. The importance of the student teachers' interaction with cooperating teachers and students will influence student teachers negotiation of a teacher identity (Coward et al., 2015).

In the educational program, student teachers experience emotional ups and downs during which their teacher identity development is influenced (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Teacher identity is created from sociocultural contexts and situated professional practice, and is a complex negotiation of teachers' experiences at schools and external factors, such as reforms (Darby, 2008; Lasky, 2005), and classroom practice (Flores & Day, 2006).

Teacher identity has previously been defined as having three characteristics. Firstly, teacher identity is fluid, dynamic and multifaceted. There is a focus on becoming rather than being static (Beijaard et al., 2004). Secondly, teacher identity involves negotiation with the context and situational aspects of an individual's work, and thirdly, teacher identity involves agency (Nichols, Schutz, Rodgers & Bilica, 2016; O'Connor, 2008). Moreover, teacher identity is reciprocal as "teachers' emerging identities not only influence their actions and emotions, but their actions and emotions influence their identity formation" (Nichols et al., 2016, p. 2). Hong (2010) broke down teacher identity into six factors: value, efficacy, commitment, emotions, knowledge and beliefs. Pre-service teachers tended to have naïve and idealistic perceptions of teaching.

The emotional content of student teachers' learning reflects the dissonance between ideals and reality, which could be used as a tool for expanding teacher identity development (Golombek & Doran, 2014), and positive emotions are important in creating and confirming the student teacher's developing identity (Kaldi, 2009). Student teachers have beliefs about the role they will play in students' lives. When their beliefs are challenged or compromised, this will affect their development of a teacher identity. How student teachers cope with distressful situations and the negative emotions aroused is therefore crucial (Yuan & Lee, 2016), and this study wishes to further explore coping with negative experiences, and the influence of coping strategies on student teachers development during teacher education.

3. Student teachers' coping

Coping is in this study referring to how people deal with problems that occurs in the person-environment relationship that create an internal or external need to alter, tolerate, reduce or amend the problem. Coping strategies is defined as strategies that make an effort to control the problem that occurs between the environment and a person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Whereas medical, health science, psychological and nursing research on coping is common (see Monat, Lazarus, & Reevy, 2007), research on student teachers' coping is sparse.

The need for student teachers to learn how to cope is often viewed through the lens of in-service teachers' coping strategies. In particular, beginning teachers' coping with the challenges of starting to teach has been used to understand student teachers' needs to learn effective coping strategies. For example, administrative leadership and hiring practices were found to be of importance for beginning teachers (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009), who receive little or no support after they have graduated and been hired (Le Maistre & Paré, 2010). Limited guidance together with few mastery experiences from teacher education can lead to emotions that range from helplessness to unrealistic optimism (Woolfolk Hoy, 2013). In the process of coping with the demands of school work, the talented creative teachers could come to find the teaching profession "frustrating, unrewarding, and intolerably difficult", which increases the risk of attrition (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009, p. 814).

Richardson et al. (2013) used the concept of self-regulation of emotions as coping with the emotional work of teaching for beginning teachers. They conclude that beginning teachers need to be prepared with skills and strategies to cope with the demands of achieving an emotional balance of the relational work embedded in teaching. Student teachers lack skills to "establish, negotiate and manage relationships" (Richardson et al., 2013, p. 249). Feelings of helplessness, anger and an awareness of shortcomings are expressed by beginning teachers. These emotions are typically coped with by speaking to people in their immediate surroundings or by trying to find a solution (Pillen, Beijaard & den Brok, 2013). Therefore, creating and reformulating the emerging teacher identity, and coping through self-regulation of emotions, is seen as important in teacher identity development. Student teachers utilize coping with regard to, for example, working with mentoring teachers and classroom management. Nevertheless, student teachers have been found to feel unprepared for teaching assignments (Akdağ & Haser, 2016; Paquette & Rieg, 2016).

Different coping strategies are adopted by student teachers to manage their emotions as they go through their education, and learning these coping strategies is a part of becoming a teacher (Caires, Almeida, & Vieira, 2012; Caspersen & Raaen, 2014; Paquette & Rieg, 2016). The coping strategies of student teachers include creating reasonable levels of acceptance and recognition within the practice school, positive supervision of mentoring teachers, growing skills and efficacy beliefs, and teacher certainty. Student