



## Past perceptions and future expectations: Sensed dis/continuity at the start of teacher education



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Self-concepts of student teachers include a large variety of characteristics.
- Their sense of (dis)continuity shows variance in professional identification.
- The framework of (dis)continuity can be beneficial for adaptive supervision.

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### ABSTRACT

Because of pressing issues such as teacher attrition, we explored differences in student teachers' expectations and perceptions as they entered teacher education. Thirty-five narrated self-concepts of student teachers in a post-graduate teacher education program were studied. From these we identified four types of past perceptions and four types of future expectations.

Combinations of perceptions and expectations were found to be illustrative of three types of sensed dis/continuity in student teachers. The findings assemble into a framework that can be beneficial for researchers and teacher educators in diagnosing dis/continuities in the self-concept and consequent expectations about further development as a teacher.

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### 1. Introduction

Learning to become a teacher is often reported as a challenging and strenuous process (e.g. Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), amongst other things because it includes dealing with tensions or “competing demands within their teaching” (Freeman, 1993, p. 488). If student teachers fail to deal with such tensions, for instance when they have to be strict although they feel this does not match their personality, it has been found that they are more likely to leave teacher education or not enter the teaching profession (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). As qualitative and quantitative teacher shortages are a major problem in many countries around the world (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011;

UNESCO, 2013; Wang, Hall, & Rahimi, 2015), expanding the knowledge of how to support student teachers for entering and persisting in teaching is needed.

Research in this area so far has focused predominantly on typical tensions and coping strategies, common consequences for teachers and general suggestions for support in teacher education. Tensions have, for instance, been conceptualized as concerns (Fuller, 1969), dilemmas (Fransson & Grannäs, 2013), and professional identity tensions (Pillen et al., 2013). Others have found that tensions in teacher development pertain to both personal and professional aspects (cf. Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). From research on resilience in teachers, many researchers have concluded that teacher education should support student teachers in developing effective coping strategies needed to deal with challenges (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011; Johnson et al., 2014). Conway, and others, suggested that teacher education practice should include attention to anticipation, reflection, and learning opportunities that can arise from experiencing some form of crisis (Conway, 2001; Hammerness

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et al., 2005; Kelchtermans, 2009; Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001; Meijer, 2011).

The extent to which labels such as “challenging” and “strenuous” apply to all student teachers alike is yet unclear. Pillen et al. (2013) suggested that not all student teachers come across, and suffer from, challenging experiences equally. In this study we will investigate how student teachers identify with the profession when they enter teacher education, including their perceptions of prior experiences and expectations of themselves as teachers. We will study student teachers who enter a one-year, post-graduate teacher education program, in which they start teaching in a school immediately after an introduction week at the university for about 50% of the available time in the program. Accordingly, student teachers experience what it means to be a teacher in practice already at the beginning of teacher education program and are potentially confronted with tensions right away. Our focus is on the start of the teacher education program, as research on transitions in education and career has shown that the transition into a professional role evokes heightened reflexivity in individuals, which is aimed at solving conflicting ideas about oneself in light of the transitional goal (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2009; Webb & Warren, 2009). In line with research on career development we acknowledge that each student teacher enters teacher education with at least some ideas about him/herself as a teacher, as one starts to identify with a profession the moment one starts to think about this career option (Konstam, 2014; Savickas, 1997; Super, 1980).

## 2. Theoretical framework

In the following sections, we turn to adjacent domains such as psychology, neuropsychology and sociology in order to clarify why and how the construction of a self-concept as a teacher is considered essential for teacher development. We also elaborate on the narrative nature of sense making and address the concepts of continuity and discontinuity.

### 2.1. The self-concept

The unique way of being and acting of each individual is believed to be strongly influenced by his or her sense of *self* (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Leary & Tangney, 2003). Researchers from domains varying from psychology and career development to neuroscience recognize the notion of self as an important topic. Klein and Gangi (2010) stated, “Each of us has the experience of a unitary self, an ‘I’ that remembers, chooses, thinks, plans and feels” (p. 1). Mead (1934) introduced the notion of self as a mechanism that directs every individual’s actions. Rodgers and Scott (2008), in the *Handbook of research on teacher education*, considered the self to subsume teacher identity. In line with this, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) stressed that identity, although related to the personal dimension of the self, is also often viewed from the perspective of the profession.

The individuals’ concept of his- or herself has been identified as one of the most significant regulators of behavior (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Psychologists commonly define this *self-concept* as a sense of who one is, including personality characteristics (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Slotter & Gardner, 2014). Characteristics, or distinguishing qualities, can pertain to dispositional traits (“I am enthusiastic and creative”) and to perceptions about oneself stemming from interactions and relationships with others (“I am a colleague one can depend on”).

In the domain of career research, the Self-Concept Theory developed by Donald Super has been central in considering career development as a process of successively refining and applying one’s self-concept to the domain of work (Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, &

Jordaan, 1963). Super introduced the *vocational self-concept* and defined it as “[t]he constellation of self-attributes considered by the individual to be vocationally relevant” (Super et al., 1963, p. 20).

A person considers what is relevant to the self-concept by means of *sensemaking*. Hermans (2002) referred to sensemaking as an inner dialogue in which people negotiate what is characteristic for themselves. Ezzy (1998) conceptualized it as an ongoing internal and reflective narrative. In research on teacher development, several authors have argued that teachers make sense of who they are as teachers through actively and iteratively giving meaning to experiences that provide information about the self (Kelchtermans, 2005; Korthagen, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). The process of sensemaking as a teacher starts the moment a person considers a career as a teacher (Konstam, 2014; Savickas, 1997; Super, 1980). Each student teacher thus enters teacher education with at least a tentative self-concept as a teacher.

### 2.2. Perceptions of the past and expectations of the future

An exploration into the nature of sensemaking should include development in and over time because perceptions of the past and expectations of the future determine the course of sensemaking (Bruner, 1990; Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1996; Zittoun et al., 2013). Neurological research supports this, showing how memory and imagination are essential for decision making, behavior and one’s sense of self (Buckner & Carroll, 2007; Schacter et al., 2012).

By selecting appropriated past events people make sense of themselves in the present (Greenwald & Pratkanis, 1984; McAdams, 1993; McLean & Pasupathi, 2011). In other words, people consider what is relevant to the self-concept in a narrative process of continuous revision, relying on perceptions of past experiences and on past self-concepts (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007).

Likewise, the forecast about what may happen in the future, realistically or hopefully, will influence an individual’s sensemaking process (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1996). Making sense of oneself is always connected to what can eventually happen (Poli, 2010) or what is considered a possibility (d’Argebeau, Lardi, & Van der Linden, 2012). In the theory on Possible Selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) elaborated on this future-oriented aspect, accentuating the fact that ideas about the future, both positive (the self one would very much like to become) and negative (the self one fears to become), influence sensemaking narratives in the present.

Researchers focusing on the attitudes of (beginning) teachers have recognized the influence of the past and the expected future on becoming a teacher (e.g. Cole & Knowles, 1993; Conway, 2001; Hamman et al., 2013). Studies on the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), pre-conceptions (Wubbels, 1992) and beliefs (Mansfield & Volet, 2010; Pajares, 1992) have shown that past experiences significantly influence teachers’ ideas and acts. Accordingly, several researchers have stressed the importance of reflection and anticipation in teacher education to reduce the practice shock often experienced when entering the teaching profession (Conway, 2001; Korthagen et al., 2001; Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003). In this study, we aim to add to this body of knowledge on the attitudes of beginning teachers by exploring how student teachers differ in the way they perceive the past and expect the future while making sense of oneself as a teacher.

### 2.3. Continuity and discontinuity

The main motive when making sense of oneself is to establish a sense of continuity: realizing coherence in the understanding of one’s self over time (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991; Markus & Wurf, 1987; McAdams, 1993; Zittoun et al., 2013). A sense of continuity is

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