Becoming a teacher: Coordinating past, present, and future selves with perspectival understandings about teaching

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher identity and teaching conceptions interacted as twin developmental processes.
- Conflicts between theory and practice or between one's ideals and reality were useful.
- Views of becoming new teachers and what teaching would entail grew more realistic.
- Learning to teach flowed from situated perspectives on teaching.
- Continual shifts in inward and outward foci accompanied preservice teachers' growth.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study is presented of how students preparing to become teachers conceptualized teaching and developed their identities as teachers. Findings were that contextualized momentary switchings between student and teacher perspectives accompanied participants' understandings about teaching and their negotiation of the process of becoming a teacher. Dynamic processes involved in constructing conceptions of teaching and self-as-a-teacher unfolded across three semesters, culminating in a more professional identity at program's end. The study contributes to teacher preparation research by making connections among aspects of professional development and suggesting a model of learning to teach, grounded in participants' situated perspectives on teaching.

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1. Introduction

The status of being a preservice teacher brings with it a dilemma: Is the individual a student or a teacher, or both or neither, at different times? Calderhead (1991) claimed that learning to teach may include multiple and complex forms of learning because various areas of knowledge growth occur at the same time. Feiman-Nemser (2008) also implied such complexity by conceptualizing what is involved in learning to teach with four broad themes: learning to *think, know, feel,* and *act* like a teacher. Although several models or theories describing teacher development have been presented over the past three decades (e.g., Berliner, 1988; Fuller, 1969; Huberman, 1989; Nias, 1989; Ryan, 1986; Sprinthall, Reiman, & Thies-Sprinthall, 1996), models focusing on preservice teachers' learning to teach seem few. Levin (2003) pointed out the lack of coherent theories of teacher development despite the heuristic value of different models from different theoretical perspectives. However, two representative models of preservice teachers' learning to teach, suggested by Hollingsworth (1989) and Kagan (1992), have enjoyed wide acceptance and share common themes. Both suggested that preservice teachers' prior beliefs play a critical role in determining how much knowledge they acquire in teacher education programs and how this knowledge is interpreted. Both discussed that preservice teachers shift their attention from class control to student learning as their teaching experience increases. Also, both models were theoretically grounded in cognitive and information processing perspectives (Levin, 2003).

Increasingly, educational researchers have recognized the importance of considering sociocultural influences that impinge on the individual. Wanting to contribute to the work on preservice teachers' learning to teach, we looked to Greeno and Van de Sande's (2007) conception of perspectival understanding. In this view,

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human cognition is inherently based in perspectives, and one's knowing and understanding is always situated in activity. Taking a perspectival view, we explored preservice teachers' teacher identity development as an ongoing process of changing understandings about teaching. We were interested in how such changes were enacted in their interactions with their teaching context moment to moment.

There seems no argument that teacher education should contribute to the development of the professional identity of teachers, but it is not clear which aspects are relevant and to what extent these aspects are integrated in such identity development. Whereas some studies have connected teacher identity to teachers' conceptions or images of the self (Knowles, 1992; Nias, 1989), other studies have emphasized teachers' roles (Volkmann & Anderson, 1998) or reflection in teacher identity development (Maclean & White, 2007; Walkington, 2005). With respect to the relationship between beliefs about teaching and teacher identity, Mayer (1999) claimed that teacher identity is based on core beliefs about teaching and what it means to be a teacher, and that these beliefs are continuously reshaped in the process of becoming a professional teacher. Additionally, Korthagen (2004) stated that teachers' professional identities influence their beliefs about teaching as well as their teaching actions.

Acknowledging the influence of these perspectives and that the development of one's conceptions about teaching is vital to becoming a teacher (Kelchtermans & Hamilton, 2004), we were curious about how preservice teachers come to think, know, and feel like teachers during teacher preparation. Two research questions guided us: (1) how do preservice teachers develop a teacher identity during teacher preparation?; and (2) how is the evolution of a teacher identity related to preservice teachers' conceptions of teaching? We saw connecting these two developmental processes experienced throughout teacher preparation as affording a way to achieve a more integrated understanding about preservice teachers' learning to teach.

1.1. Self and identity

Research on identity issues has been carried out from multiple disciplinary perspectives, beginning with work in philosophy and psychology. The construct has become increasingly central to the work of researchers in the field of teaching and teacher education. We begin with a brief introduction to the construct of identity broadly construed.

Based on Mead (1934), Nias (1989) distinguished between a *substantial self* (formed in one's early years, influenced by family and immediate culture, and generally resistant to change) and *situational selves* (multiple selves that respond to social encounters by incorporating beliefs and values). As Rodgers and Scott (2008) claimed, *identity* seems closer to situational selves, and distinguishing between the two makes the *self* the meaning maker and *identity* the meaning made, with both evolving over time. Although the relationship between *self* and *identity* is still unclear, *identity* itself is generally defined as referring to who or what an individual is perceived by him/herself and by others (Beijaard, 1995). According to Rodgers and Scott (2008), contemporary conceptions of identity share four basic assumptions: (a) identity is formed within multiple contexts; (b) identity is formed in relationships with others and involves emotions; (c) identity is shifting, unstable, and multiple; and (d) identity involves the construction and reconstruction of meaning over time. Of these aspects, contexts and relationships constitute external influences on identity formation, and stories and emotions act as internal meaning-making aspects. As for the time dimension, a useful approach comes from Markus and Nurius (1986) who described

how changes in identity occur over time as well as in the present, as an individual makes use of memories of past selves and imagines a future self to construct a particular present self.

Gee (2001) clarified how identity can be contextual, relational, multiple, and shifting by categorizing four ways of viewing identity: Nature-identity (N-Identity), Institution-identity (I-Identity), Discourse-identity (D-Identity), and Affinity-identity (A-Identity). N-Identity is a way of looking at "who I am" based on nature, and it indicates a state (e.g., I am an identical twin), whereas I-Identity represents a position within an institution (e.g., I am a student at the University of Texas). The third perspective, D-Identity, is a matter of one's individuality coming through in how one talks or is talked about by other individuals, and is constructed in the flow of interactions with others, not by nature or institutions (e.g., "She tells the funniest stories when describing her student teaching"). Last, the source of A-Identity originates in an affinity group made up of individuals who share similar interests across contexts and is acquired through participating in or sharing specific practices as a group member (e.g., an online bookclub reading Johnston's *Choice Words* fan). According to Gee, these four identities are interrelated rather than forming discrete categories, and should be seen as different aspects of how identities are formed and sustained. Woven together to represent an individual as he/she acts within each context, one of these four identities can nevertheless predominate in a given time and place. Thus, identity is not a fixed attribute and but an "ongoing process" of changing from context to context and even moment to moment in interaction with others (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Gee, 2001).

More recently, these postmodern perspectives on identity have been extended in Akkerman and Meijer (2011) dialogical approach by considering three dimensions to identity: *unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous*, and *individual and social*. Building on Hermans' (1996) Dialogical Self theory, the authors claimed that identity should be characterized along all six seemingly opposite, but simultaneously true, dimensions.

1.2. Teacher identity

Aligning with recent conceptions of identity, professional identity is also open to continuous redefinition through negotiating one's self as a social being. One's professional identity is especially related to dealing with professional functions and includes roles, abilities, and values that lead one to commit to a profession (Korthagen, 2004; Maclean & White, 2007). Tickle (2000) pointed out that two aspects, others' expectations and socially accepted images and what teachers themselves value as important, seem intermingled in their professional identity. Similarly, Borich (1999) claimed that teachers' sense of self-identity includes their sense of self in relation to others in professional environments, and it is acquired by accepting professional roles, responsibilities, or obligations as a teacher.

Acknowledging that function and identity are intertwined aspects of what it means to develop into a professional (Walkington, 2005), Mayer (1999) claimed that teacher identity should be distinguished from teachers' functional roles: a teaching role refers to performance required as a teacher, whereas a teaching identity is a personal characteristic encompassing how one identifies with being a teacher or how one feels as a teacher. He also asserted that a fully professional teacher engages an intellectual dimension in addition to "doing the job" of teaching. Core beliefs about teaching, representing the intellectual dimension, encourage teachers to engage in ongoing change in their professional identity as lifelong learners.

Extending Mayer's (1999) claims about the interrelationship between teachers' beliefs and their teachers' professional identity