

Transitioning from Student to Professional: Preservice Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

The ongoing focus on dispositions demonstrates the need for teacher educators to help preservice teachers develop from self-as-student to self-as-teacher. Our qualitative study examined preservice teachers' perceptions as they transitioned from university students to teaching professionals in a field experience program prior to student teaching. Main findings of preservice teachers' perceptions about their transition reflected three interrelated themes that link their professional growth to their dispositions and teacher self: (a) nascent understanding, (b) professional capacity, and (c) emergent identity. Within these three themes, attributes of the performance self, relational self, and professional self are described to support the relationship to dispositions and teacher identity. Teacher educators' understanding of preservice teachers' thinking during the field experience component of their preparation can inform faculty how to better structure and orchestrate learning experiences that will best contribute to the development of their emerging competence, professionalism, and teacher identities.

Transitioning from Student to Professional: Preservice Teachers' Perceptions

The ongoing national discourse on dispositions warrants a continued focus on the affective dimensions of the complex process of learning to teach (Billet, 2009). As Hollins (2011) has indicated, assuming responsibility for one's role as a professional is an important dispositional component of a teacher's effectiveness, suggesting that teacher education programs must intentionally coordinate learning and teaching responsibilities for preservice teachers by helping them to shift from self-as-student to self-as-teacher (Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

Preservice teachers enter their preparation programs with preconceived notions about teaching that are strongly influenced by their own experiences (Fajet, Bello, Leftwich, Mesler, & Shaver, 2005). These preconceptions can enhance or impede learning and ultimately influence preservice teachers' interpretations of their observations and experiences during their initial contact and interaction with students, teachers, and other school personnel (Kagan, 1992). Additionally, the development of dispositions becomes more complex when education programs impose their own value systems on aspiring teachers rather than helping them to foster their own moral and ethical dispositions (Borko, Liston, & Whitcomb, 2007). As Shin (2012) suggested, preservice teachers need time to dialogue about dispositions and to self-reflect about their thinking as a means of promoting their professional growth. In response to Shin's proposal, our study examined preservice teachers' perceptions of their growth and transition from university students to teaching

professionals in a field-based practicum prior to student teaching. A better understanding of preservice teachers' perceptions of their emerging dispositions before student teaching may inform teacher educators how to design clinical experiences that help prepare them for the realistic demands of the profession.

Conceptual Framework

Dispositions in Education

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that encompasses dispositions, self-regulation, and teacher identity and illuminates preservice teachers' perceptions of their field experiences and emerging dispositions. Since the notion of professional dispositions is somewhat nebulous, greater clarity is needed due to the multiplicity of definitions and labels (Ripski, LoCasale-Crouch, & Decker, 2011). Providing clarity for an educator preparation program can help guide expectations and knowledge and skills for its preservice teachers in learning how to respond socially and professionally in an educational setting. Dispositions are described as a set of prescribed behaviors or practices that may be aligned with a set of standards or expectations (Thornton, 2006, p. 54). For example, in the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) Model Core Teaching Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013) dispositions are defined as "habits of professional action and moral commitments that underlie the [teaching] performances" (p. 6). Aligning expectations with standards is one way to provide preservice teachers with a personal compass that can be used for self-assessing their actions and behavior. According to Thornton (2006), "dispositions are habits of mind including both cognitive and affective attributes that filter one's knowledge, skills, and beliefs and impact the action one takes in the classroom or professional setting" (p. 62). When an individual embraces this perspective, the choices that are made as a professional are inculcated and reflected through actions and words. While the descriptive language used to define dispositions may vary, "teacher behavior, teacher characteristics, and teacher perceptions" are common threads (Wasicsko, 2007, p. 54). Despite the varying definitions, dispositions are viewed by many as critically linked to student success and a necessary professional expectation (Hallam, 2009). This means that it is especially important for preservice teachers to demonstrate a pattern of behavior that reflects a tendency to meet a program's professional expectations. Therefore, aspiring educators must be provided with authentic experiences that will influence their routine practices and effectively guide their professional decisions (Dottin, 2010).

The dispositions literature also includes multiple lexicons of similar traits with different labels. For example, Sherman (2006) suggested that "dispositions are most clearly associated with personal characteristics, ethical conduct, and relational aspects of teaching" (p.47). In this study, we use this definition to operationalize our conceptualization of dispositions. Personal characteristics may include traits such as responsibility, punctuality, and organization; ethical conduct may suggest honesty, fairness, and confidentiality; and relational aspects may include caring, respecting, encouraging, and culturally responsiveness. In addition to these characteristics, classroom demeanor, such as personal actions and behavior that prevent a student from being cognitively present or civil to others, has also been identified as a disposition (King, Hiber, & Engley, 2007). Teaching requires daily interpersonal interaction such as responding to students or colleagues. Therefore, preservice teachers need to demonstrate a professional and culturally responsive approach when communicating with others. As O'Day, Goertz, and Floden (1995) asserted, this demeanor may influence the interactions and responses in a setting or situation, and ultimately affect a teacher's cognitive and affective learning. Also, dissonance that may exist or

emerge between an individual's dispositions and those of the respective context may have a negative outcome. For example, a field-based environment in an authentic school context provides an opportunity for particular preconceptions, demeanors, actions, and behaviors to surface while preservice teachers enact various aspects of teaching, including interacting and communicating with students and other professionals, that are not evident in a university classroom.

Research clearly indicates that preservice teachers must develop the necessary dispositions to respond effectively when confronted with instructional or situational challenges. While other studies have focused on various aspects of teacher dispositions such as the importance of working collaboratively in groups (Radencich et al., 1998), fostering positive dispositions (Major & Brock, 2003), addressing the moral dimension of dispositions (Sherman, 2006), describing dispositions in practice (Thornton, 2006), developing dispositions through mentoring at-risk youth (Garza, 2012), defining behaviors within the preservice field experience class such as tardiness and dress, (King et al., 2007), and "teachability" (Page, Rudney & Marxen, 2004), this study specifically examined preservice teachers' perceptions of their personal transition from the "self-as-student" to "self-as-teacher" (Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

Self-regulation and the Development of Professionalism

While students often struggle in their transition from secondary to post-secondary learning environments, embracing a professional role presents an additional challenge (Randi, Corno, & Johnson, 2011). One key component of preservice teachers' developing professionalism is self-regulation. Self-regulation is defined by Senler and Sungur (2012) as a habit of mind that "activates and sustains cognitions, behaviors, and affects" (p. 2). As with other valued teacher dispositions, understanding and assessing self-regulation is a complex venture as each teacher candidate brings his or her own culture, course work experiences, personal history, and world view to the classroom. Research has shown that there is a high degree of correlation between self-regulation and motivation (Benbenutty, 2007) and between self-regulation and academic achievement (Zimmerman, 2000). This is important because teacher self-regulation is a critical and essential disposition (Arsal, 2010) that encompasses the commitment to the profession (Hollins, 2011; Wiseman, 2012). When programs provide preservice teachers with a clear definition of expected dispositions, they can self-assess their own behavior and begin to realize whether teaching is the right profession for them.

Endedijk, Vermunt, Verloop, and Brekelmans (2012) explained that because most teacher education programs now require extensive field experiences, self-regulation of learning is even more important for preservice teachers because it fosters the ability "to understand and control our learning environments" (Schraw, Crippen, & Hartley, 2006, p. 111). Individuals must believe that they can problem solve through a thoughtful process that involves thinking about course learning, reflecting on that learning, and taking appropriate action (Endedijk et al., 2012). This involves "a combination of cognitive strategy use, metacognitive control, and motivational beliefs" (Schraw et al., 2006, p. 116). This helps preservice teachers to develop the ability to deconstruct their experiences, and to examine critically their developing beliefs about the dynamics of teaching to foster their professional growth. Cognition refers to the ability to interpret and remember information through problem solving and critical thinking, a construct that may be conducive to teachers' perseverance in teaching all students (Pendergast, Garvis, Keogh, & University, 2011).

Chong, Low, and Goh (2011) further noted that beginning teachers often struggle with the complex demands of teaching because of a primary focus on the self, and this perspective can limit the development of a deeper pedagogical perspective. This is especially true when a student is

experiencing personal challenges. Instead of becoming invested in new learning and growing as a teacher, the individual is trying to survive the moment. This confirms Kagan's (1992) finding that preservice teachers mainly focused on their own behaviors and performance rather than how their behaviors and choices impact their students' attitudes and learning. For example, King et al., (2007) noted that over 90% of preservice teachers rated the wearing of professional teacher clothes as an important determiner of professionalism, while Fajet et al. (2005) reported that preservice teachers focused predominantly on the affective domain (personal characteristics and relationship building), and less on the cognitive domain (what teachers need to know and be able to do). As Thornton (2006) explained: "Although important, these characteristics are minimal expectations of behavior and fall short of capturing true dispositions" (p. 55). Randi (2004) believed that preservice teachers need to move beyond a work oriented, task accomplishment definition of self-regulation to a learning-oriented volitional style so that they can think critically and problem solve in the classroom while facilitating learning for their students rather than just focusing on their own teaching performance. This can be facilitated by faculty taking a deliberate role in providing authentic opportunities for preservice teachers to demonstrate their dispositions at an early stage of their career.

Building upon this notion, Kramarski and Michalsky (2009) conducted a study of self-regulation of learning in concert with structured experiences to enhance preservice teachers' pedagogical development. Results indicated that when the learning environment is coupled with self-regulation of learning, professional growth is enhanced; however, preservice teachers' perceptions are narrowly focused with much of the emphasis still on themselves and their own performances as teachers. Teacher educators need to guide preservice teachers' shift from teacher-centered to a student-centered focus. Orchestrating educational opportunities to facilitate self-regulation of learning may be an approach to help preservice teachers develop a deeper understanding of the importance of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for teaching and learning.

Teacher Identity

As preservice teachers engage in coursework and clinical experiences that build important knowledge and skills for their future careers, they gradually develop a sense of themselves as teachers and negotiate interactions and responses with others in professional settings. This emerging perception of teacher self relates to the concept of teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Friesen & Besley, 2013). Day and Kington (2008) explained, "Identity is the way we make sense of ourselves to ourselves and the image of ourselves that we present to others" (p. 9). This self-awareness is a critical aspect of personal growth and validation for a future professional career. Stark (1991) encouraged teacher education programs to help teachers see teaching as "being" rather than "doing" (p. 307). Reflecting on their actions and interactions helps preservice teachers to focus on their personal qualities and how they contribute to their professional development.

Gee (2000) defined identity as "being recognized as a certain 'kind of person' in a given context" (p. 99). He also explained the interplay between knowledge, identity, and interaction with the world and others. The notion of teacher identity involves an emotional, psychological, and social complexity because it is shaped by personal and contextual factors in the learning environment (Tran & Nguyen, 2013). Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) also described characteristics of identity, such as the fluid process of identity formation that is in constant flux and is mediated by the interaction of the individual and context. For example, classroom episodes can help a preservice teacher to observe theory in action and not fully understand the effectiveness

of its application. This superficial learning is key to an emerging teacher identity because the preservice teacher recognizes the enactment of effective praxis. Further research by Day and Kington (2006) indicated that identity is an amalgam of the professional, situated, and personal sub-identities that compete and sometimes conflict with one another.

Furthermore, Olsen (2008) framed teacher identity as both a process and product that is built on complex interactions among incoming perceptions and ongoing experiences. Sutherland and Markauskaite (2012) noted that a teacher's identity includes "a sense of his/her relationship with and within the profession" (p. 748) and is developed through engagement with communities of practice (Wenger, 1999). Similarly, the work of Musanti and Pence (2010) with practicing teachers also showed the important interwoven nature of identity and teachers' knowledge construction.

In another study, Merseth, Sommer, and Dickstein (2008) indicated that the developing teacher identities of their subjects, who were graduate students at an Ivy League institution, were "influenced by the personal identities they bring to the learning to teach process" as well as their experiences (p 90). Preservice teachers' values and beliefs add another dimension that is sometimes negotiated as teacher identity develops. How these elements of teacher identity coalesce within an individual is not well understood, nor have they been systematically developed in instructional approaches and teacher education curricula (Sutherland & Markauskaite, 2012). This is in part because preservice teachers have difficulty articulating their own identity construction (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Addressing aspects of preservice teachers' identity may be a way for teacher educators to foster their development of and an understanding of dispositions during field experiences.

Methodology

In this interpretive study, we used constant comparative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) to examine preservice teachers' perceptions in one field-based preparation program designed to acclimate them into the school setting before their student teaching practicum. Our study was guided by the following questions: (1) What are preservice teachers' perceptions about their transition from student to professional? (2) What do preservice teachers' perceptions reveal about their growth and development as professionals?

Participants

Participants included 63 undergraduate preservice teachers who were seeking secondary teacher certification. Among these, there were 38 females (2 African American, 7 Latinas, and 29 White) and 25 males (1 African American, 3 Latinos, and 21 White) from different content certification areas. All were enrolled in a pre-student teaching field-based practicum at a large southwestern university. Purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2003) was used to identify the participants. This means that the inquirer "purposefully selects individual participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research question" (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). Examining participants' perceptions while engaged in an authentic setting provided an opportunity to collect rich data conducive to answering the research questions.

Context

Participants in this study were enrolled in a clinical practicum the semester immediately before their student teaching. They represent three cohorts of students who completed the practicum at the same site over the course of three different semesters. The practicum site was an ethnically and

economically diverse public high school near the university, and the practicum was conducted two full days weekly for a 15-week semester. All participants received instruction from two university instructors for half of each day. One faculty member focused on pedagogy, such as classroom management, instructional strategies, and assessment, while the other focused on literacy in the content areas. The other half of each day included participants' collaboration with a cooperating teacher in their content area. The same two faculty members taught all three cohorts of participants. The practicum was conducted at an established clinical field site and some of the high school teachers at the school may have collaborated with participants from each of the three cohorts. Participants' clinical activities included interacting with students, assisting with daily classroom routines, conducting instruction, light grading, and participating in tutorials. At least one university instructor was present at the practicum school site at all times during the required field experience in order to scaffold the experience by observing participants' clinical practice, providing feedback, and helping participants solve problems.

Data Collection

Data source included reflection responses from three different cohorts of participants at the end of three different semesters, approved by the university's institutional review board. The reflections, completed by all participants in class on the last day of field experience, included questions such as: (1) In what ways do you think you transitioned from student to professional? (2) What did you do to facilitate learning for yourself besides submitting assignments? (3) How has the block field experience prepared you as a future teacher? (4) What did you discover about yourself through the mentoring experience? (5) What do you think you gained/obtained from the mentoring experience? (6) How well do you think you made connections with students throughout the semester?

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative data reduction strategies in order to manage, categorize, and interpret data to identify themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As a way to enhance credibility of our themes, we first independently sifted through the reflections using open-coding strategies to reduce the concepts and identify their properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process enabled each of us to gain a familiarity with the richness of preservice teachers' thinking. When the coding was complete, the data were grouped into categories; then through constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we independently sorted and further reduced the categories with descriptive statements taken from questionnaires. The next phase of data analysis involved a joint comparison of the initial codes and categories. We discussed the initial codes, questioned our preliminary categories, and then again independently, using constant comparative analysis and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), sorted and placed the data into themes. "Axial coding relates categories to subcategories, specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and reassembles the data to give coherence to the emerging analysis" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). This process allowed for modification to our initial categories and further analysis of the data for deeper meaning. The final phase consisted of a comparison of our themes followed by a discussion in relationship to the research questions to identify the final three themes. By analyzing responses of three different cohorts of preservice teachers to the same questions in different semesters, we were able to identify consistent patterns across a larger data set, and this helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

A field experience component before student teaching provided preservice teachers with opportunities to engage and interact with students and their peers, to collaborate with other professionals at a high school setting and to foster dispositions and their emergent teacher identities (Wyss, Siebert, & Dowling, 2012). Our study examined preservice teachers' perceptions during the field experience before student teaching in order to describe the transition from thinking like a student to that of a professional. Our data suggest that preservice teachers' perceptions fall into three themes that reflect their professional growth and development that are interrelated and connect to their dispositions as developing teachers: (a) nascent understanding, (b) professional capacity, and (c) emergent teacher identity. The first part of each discussion below presents our definition of the theme, followed by example comments and description that support the relationship to dispositions and teacher identity in relation to the attributes of the self.

Nascent Understanding

Nascent Understanding refers to participants' perceptions of their emerging professionalism that focus on their own behavior and actions as students within a teacher preparation program. Acting, talking, and dressing in certain ways are included in these students' early understanding of what it means to be teachers as they "try on" the professional demeanor. The majority of preservice teachers' comments such as "making sure my attire is presentable is something I focus on a little more than before," and "it is important to look professional and act professional," are perceptions that represent professionalism at its most basic level. These perceptions are in concert with findings noted by King et al. (2007) and reflect a focus on appearance and behaviors within their control (Kagan, 1992) and a lack of understanding of the impact of these behaviors as part of their developing teacher identities. Importantly however, these statements indicate students' willingness and commitment to changing their behavior (Hollins, 2011). This finding is in concert with research (Frederiksen, Cooner, & Stevenson, 2012) that suggested providing preservice teachers with authentic experiences in a school setting supports their change in dispositions.

Preservice teachers' perception of how grooming related to a professional identity may have been influenced more by the class expectations and not the school's faculty dress code or the appearance of school faculty. While this may have challenged their attitudes toward grooming, expecting appropriate grooming practices from preservice teachers provided them with an opportunity to embrace or reject one aspect of professionalism. However, preservice teachers' response to the expectation reflected their attitudes and what they valued as part of what it means to be a professional. In other words, the positive change in their behavior reflected a professional ethic that has the potential to be transferred from one setting to another (Johnston, Almerico, Henriott, & Shapiro, 2011). As Chong et al. (2011), asserted, "becoming a professional involves both external realisations and personal conceptualizations" (p. 51). However, will preservice teachers continue to value the importance of grooming as one aspect of professionalism as they become integrated into a different school culture with varied attention to grooming?

Preservice teachers also expressed the importance of punctuality and time management, another aspect of teacher performance that reflects their understanding of the value of self-regulation (Kagan, 1992). Preservice teachers' statements about their regular attendance also demonstrated a more limited point of view towards the more complex behaviors and attitudes experienced by teaching professionals. Participants realized the need to reset priorities: "There is little to no social life when in preservice block." They understood that self-discipline was needed for regular attendance as they commented on this notion with statements such as, "I was here every

day, even when I did not feel my best” and “I learned that showing up for class was very important.” Preservice teachers realized that there was a need to shift their priorities to meet educational responsibilities (Benbenutty, 2007), and these comments convey a move towards self-regulation (Senler & Sungur, 2012). This is in line with research that supports the need to help preservice teachers recognize that teaching is not just about performance but that dispositions, work, and context also contribute to a professional identity (Chong et al., 2011).

Additionally, preservice teachers’ comments reveal that they view organization and preparation as critical components of their transition from student to professional. “I made sure I was always prepared to learn” and “I stayed on top of upcoming assignments,” are comments that demonstrate a shift in deliberate thinking (Sherman, 2006; Senler & Sungur, 2012). However, these preservice teachers are still focused on their student role with an emphasis on completing tasks and their own performance rather than understanding the importance of the tasks and how the tasks help develop their teaching competence.

On the other hand, some preservice teachers transitioned to a richer understanding of the importance of organization and preparation as part of their teacher responsibilities, indicating greater maturity as affirmed by Aarsal (2010). For example, one preservice teacher expressed, “I became more aware of all the things you have to do as a teacher to become an effective teacher,” and another stated, “The block has helped me to realize the extra time it takes to be an effective educator.” While these comments focus on aspects of performing like a teacher, they also reveal the critical role field experience assignments and expectations can play in the development of teacher dispositions and identity, also noted by Dottin (2010). As Schultz and Ravitch (2013) affirmed, addressing teaching as professional practice must be explicitly addressed in teacher preparation programs so that preservice teachers can analyze and understand the process while learning to teach. This aspect is important to point out because teachers need to prepare and be present regularly for their students. Being knowledgeable is essential, but preparation and the ability to orchestrate instruction to affect student learning and success daily is also critical (Kagan 1992).

The focus for most preservice teachers was predominantly on the self as a student in transition (Kramarski & Michalsky, 2009), rather than on the self as a teacher (Holt-Reynolds, 1991). Understanding the self-focus of emerging adults can refine the lens for teacher educators as we focus on professionalism as a necessary first step in teacher development. Preservice teachers’ acceptance of the need to look and act like a teacher—performing like a teacher—is a necessary, but not sufficient, step.

Professional Capacity

Professional capacity refers to preservice teachers’ understanding of personal affective aspects (e.g., attitude and enthusiasm) and behavioral aspects (e.g., verbal interaction with students, peers, and teachers) that contribute to the development of the meaningful relationships and interactions with students that Sherman (2006) posits are integral to development of effective teaching. An aspect of this phase includes the participants’ perceptions of affective factors they attributed to professionalism. One participant acknowledged the importance of the affective dimension by citing the importance of “being personable and outgoing,” and another stated, “we are role models and we set the positive example to our students. This includes being respectful, courteous, enthusiastic, and well behaved.” While these comments still focus on the self, preservice teachers expressed at least a superficial acknowledgement of the effect of their behaviors on learners and conveyed a level of confidence that is helping to shape who they want to be as future educators.

In addition, these comments reflect a positive attitude that they perceived as a key aspect of their preparation for a classroom setting.

Sometimes affective dissonance may influence dispositions toward students and self-growth. One participant noted, “Dealing with the negative attitudes of my students first hand was a lesson in overcoming frustration while trying to reach students.” This statement reflects a commitment to learning and self-growth as a future teacher without guidance from the instructor (Bogges, 2010). However, it acknowledges a difficulty common to teachers while also reflecting the development of greater competence and a transition from thinking like a student to thinking like a future teacher. As a result, the transfer of this thinking to future contexts may be possible given the indication of successfully learning how to negotiate challenging encounters (Randi et al., 2011). Structuring field experiences to help aspiring teachers become problem solvers when confronted with authentic teaching challenges has the potential for professional growth that may be transferred to another similar context (Dottin, 2010).

A final aspect of this theme consisted of preservice teachers’ awareness of how their interaction with students, peers, and other professionals contributed to their growth as future educators. One participant stated, “I learned how to talk to students as an adult instead of a peer,” and another expressed, “I did learn a lot about interacting with students, however I feel like I grew as a professional by learning how to interact with high school students.” These comments demonstrate a more complex level of maturity and reflect an understanding of the need to set boundaries with students while still maintaining a genuine relationship. The interaction with students fostered a sense of competency related to pedagogical knowledge. The participants viewed their verbal interaction with students as a way of acting professionally, much in line with InTASC (Council of Chief State Officers, 2013) principles. They were aware of the need to alter their conversation as one participant noted, “I think more about what to say and what not to say.” However, this notion extended beyond the classroom context, as another participant expressed, “I’m much more aware of my behavior and the situations I put myself in both inside and outside the classroom.” Participants’ professional voice emerged through reflective thinking and conveyed the importance of negotiating their actions, as suggested by Sockett (2009). This conscious awareness of a professional language and image emerged from some of the preservice teachers. This finding supports the notion that explicit conversations about the influence of professional practice on student learning needs must be explicitly addressed throughout the teacher preparation program (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013).

Most preservice teachers seemed to have a broader sense of their professional role that encompasses not just appearance and behavior but also includes the importance of one’s attitudes, treatment of others, and the effect one’s actions have on others. Although a more outward focus is reflected in these comments, the recognition that what one does and says matters is still a very basic but enhanced level of understanding of the teacher’s role.

Emergent Teacher Identity

Finally, our data analysis revealed a theme related to identity construction. *Emergent teacher identity* refers to preservice teachers’ developing awareness of themselves as educators and characteristics of a more professional self. Preservice teachers’ reflective statements such as “I took ownership of teaching as my profession,” and “I put on my teacher hat,” indicate movement toward claiming teaching as an identity rather than merely a future job. As preservice teachers taught and learned alongside mentor teachers in the field experience, the context provided a space where interaction with faculty and students helped to frame their new educator persona (Gee,

2000). Thus, the context and interaction within this school setting served as a step in the process of shaping these preservice teachers' emerging sense of professionalism, a perspective that will continue to evolve and develop as they progress in the profession as supported by Beijaard et al. (2004).

One aspect of developing a teacher identity, the shaping and reshaping of one's values and beliefs about teaching and how students should learn, also emerged, but not without challenges. The disequilibrium that results from the complexities of teaching experiences are important elements in identity growth as Cook (2009) notes, and preservice teachers' comments reflect this notion. For instance, one primary challenge was overcoming perceived internal limitations such as fear or shyness. One preservice teacher stated, "I was a little intimidated but students actually spoke with me and wanted to get to know me," and another said, "At first I was timid when it came to getting up and interacting with the class." These comments are in concert with the mental and affective aspects that Cook (2009) ascribes to the dissonance of becoming a teacher and that Karlsson (2012) frames as "emotional teacher identity formation" (p. 134). For some preservice teachers who faced these challenges, however, overcoming the perceived limitation led to greater confidence and sense of identity as noted by one student who stated, "I improved my teacher-student relationships. There was an intimidation factor at the beginning but as I got to know the students, they responded well to me. I feel I related well to the students, after my initial shyness." Our findings, similar to those of Koeppen and Davison-Jenkins (2007), acknowledge preservice teachers' struggles and growth in professional dispositions. These challenging experiences seemed integral to the sense of becoming a professional through interaction with others.

For others, struggles in the field experience contributed to a different type of disequilibrium related to the external context, such as learning how to work with diverse students. "I feel that it was hard for me to make a real life personal connection...because I feel that we come from 2 different worlds," commented a preservice teacher. Another conveyed that the mentor teacher's style limited her pedagogical growth: "I had a limited interaction because the class was teacher focused and I only interacted when I was helping students." These comments show a direct link between the classroom experience and the emerging sense of teacher identity in spite of, or perhaps because of, the tension between preservice teachers' expectations and the reality of the context. The personal struggles occurred in an authentic teaching environment and preservice teachers expressed a perspective that aligns with a professional identity (Merseth et al., 2008); this is very much in line with Sexton's (2008) research that indicates preservice teachers must negotiate their developing identities as they experience first-hand teaching challenges in various contexts. "Working in the classroom and working beside the teacher to help the class you got the feeling that you were not a student, that you had power, and could take charge of the class," is a comment that aligns with the notion that the social context of the field experience directly influences identity development. Interacting and engaging with others in an authentic classroom setting fostered a sense of who preservice teachers wanted to be and who they thought they wanted to be. As one expressed, "I found a passion for teaching that I didn't know I had. I began to feel like a teacher, and it changed my attitude and how I carried myself." The sentiment reflected in this comment is in concert with research that supports the role emotion plays in shaping teacher identity (Karlsson, 2012) and, as Lortie (1975) suggested, strengthening their attitudes toward teaching.

The context of the clinical experience seemed to positively influence the majority of preservice teachers' beliefs about professionalism (Halvorsen, 2014). Comments such as "I discovered that I am willing to work hard for another individual who needs me," or "I discovered that I really care about the success of my students both academically and socially, or "I also confirmed that I am

finally in the “right” profession for me,” convey willingness to assume a professional role that focuses more outwardly on their impact on students and thus reflects an emerging teacher identity, as supported by Friesen and Besley, (2013). Therefore, preservice teachers’ initial field experiences must be designed to provide authentic interaction with students and professionals and problem-solving opportunities that will challenge their own beliefs about teaching and self.

While these preservice teachers still have much to learn, they have started a process of identity construction that is complex and will continue to evolve as they gain experience, as expressed by Beijaard et al. (2004). Their initial perceptions document an important shift in behaviors and attitudes that embrace a developing teacher identity related to a nascent understanding of the dynamics of teaching. However, with experience they will begin to understand how the social, cultural, and political aspects of their teaching context will influence and challenge their teacher identity. The authentic school context coupled with pedagogical and affective experiences propelled a shift from being like a teacher to being a teacher.

Limitations

Our study is limited by the number of participants in one educator preparation program at a large public university although reflection responses were obtained from three different groups over three consecutive semesters. Participants in other preparation programs and geographical areas might encounter a different set of circumstances that may influence the design of the field-based program and the experiences in the respective high school setting. While our findings add to research illuminating preservice teachers’ perceptions about professionalism and growth in field-based programs, caution should be taken when generalizing the conclusions from this study due to the small sample size and interpretation of the findings.

Concluding Thoughts

Examining preservice teachers’ perceptions during the early clinical experience component of their preparation program may inform teacher educators about the successes, inner tensions, and challenges aspiring teachers experience as their self-perceptions shift from that of student to professional. This understanding may help teacher educators more intentionally facilitate this transition by guiding reflection and experiences that develop “habits of mind” (Thornston, 2006) to guide preservice teachers’ actions and responses as teachers (Senler & Sengur, 2012). Our findings add to the extant research on dispositions by illuminating the voices of preservice teachers and how they perceived themselves as professionals during a pre-student teaching field experience.

First, the majority of preservice teachers in this study recognized and acknowledged the need to negotiate their appearance and self-regulate their behaviors to successfully fulfill responsibilities in a new role. We suggest that instructors orchestrate dialogue at different times throughout the clinical experience about the meaning of professionalism and guide students to hold each other accountable for grooming and other professional expectations. Including a mid-term self-assessment of expectations will also provide an opportunity for reflective thinking about the self and feedback will help to develop their teaching attributes in a supportive setting. This process may help the authentic experiences in the classroom foster the inculcation of norms of behavior that are conducive to effective professional ways of doing and acting (Dottin, 2010).

Second, it is important to help preservice teachers develop a professional stance by challenging their assumptions (Alsup, 2006), supporting them as they experience disequilibrium, and providing explicit opportunities for them to articulate their emerging teacher identities. This means that teacher educators need to be aware of preservice teachers’ “starting point” (Stenberg, Karlsson,

Pitkaniemi, & Maaranen, 2014, p. 205) in their professional development to scaffold their learning as they build competence and their teacher identities begin to emerge. This developing professional identity may be enhanced through varied experiences and reflection about those experiences while participating in dialogue and collaboration in a professional teaching and learning community (Hollins, 2011). Structuring such dialogue around problem solving classroom issues while focusing on student learning may help preservice teachers attain the metacognitive skills (Schraw et. al., 2006) that will facilitate the shift from self-focus to student focus (Kagan, 1992).

Third, examining preservice teachers' perceptions during the field experience component of their preparation can inform teacher educators how to better structure and orchestrate learning experiences that will help preservice teachers to move from merely completing assignments toward greater competence and professionalism. For example, we suggest that course assignments should be directly connected to classroom experiences so that preservice teachers gain understanding of theory and pedagogical concepts resulting from their interactions with students, peers, mentor teachers, and faculty. Also, requiring preservice teachers to include explicit connections to theory and pedagogical concepts in their reflections on classroom experiences might be a way to gauge their growth and development and provide the instructor with data to adjust the curriculum. The feedback that teacher educators provide to assignments and reflections can also help preservice teachers think more critically about their experiences over time, as Randi (2004) suggests, and develop agency as teachers (Beijard, Meijer, & Verloop 2004). Preservice teachers must understand how pedagogical practice looks and sounds like in the classroom to be able to explain the experiences that impact self-learning and student success.

Further research is needed to understand in more depth the relationships among preservice teachers' developing perceptions of themselves as professionals, the link between self-regulation of learning and dispositions, emerging teacher identity, and how these develop as a result of clinical experiences. Additional research with a more diverse and larger sample size is also needed to address the influence of various contexts and factors on teacher development. For example, how does field-based experience vs. student teaching influence preservice teachers' perceptions of their transition to professionals? What are graduate vs. undergraduate preservice teachers' perceptions of their growth and development? How do gender, age, or ethnicity influence preservice teachers' perceptions of their transition to a professional role?

While our findings revealed three themes related to dispositions and teacher identity, participants' initial perceptions of their transition to a professional and growth as a teacher are predominantly internally focused. This means that we as teacher educators are challenged to help preservice teachers shift their focus outwardly to their responsibilities to students and the impact their actions and interactions have on their students' learning and development. "They must be mindful of their own dispositions and how these affect classroom tone, influence children's dispositions, and ultimately influence children's learning opportunities" (Da Ros-Voseles & Moss, 2007, pp. 92–93). Thus, the challenge is to move preservice teachers from nascent awareness and behaviors to a more complex and dynamic view of the dispositions needed to be an effective educator.

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