

## **Becoming a Professional: Experimenting with Possible Selves in Professional Preparation**

**By Matthew Ronfeldt & Pam Grossman**

### **Introduction**

Entering professional practice requires that novices construct identities that fit into that world; part of the role of professional education is to help novices craft these professional identities. During the transitional time represented by professional education, students negotiate their images of themselves as professionals with the images reflected to them by their programs. This process of negotiation can be fraught with difficulty, especially when these images conflict (Britzman, 1990; Cole & Knowles, 1993). As they adapt to new roles, novices must also learn to negotiate their personal identity with the professional role, even as they navigate among the different images of professional identity offered by their programs and practitioners in the field. In this article we draw on the work of Hazel Markus and others on the development of possible selves to investigate the opportunities novices have to encounter, try out, and

evaluate possible selves in the process of constructing professional identities. We use data from a study of the preparation of teachers, clergy, and clinical psychologists to illustrate the relationship of possible selves and professional identity, and the role that professional education might play in supporting the development of professional identity.

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## **Background**

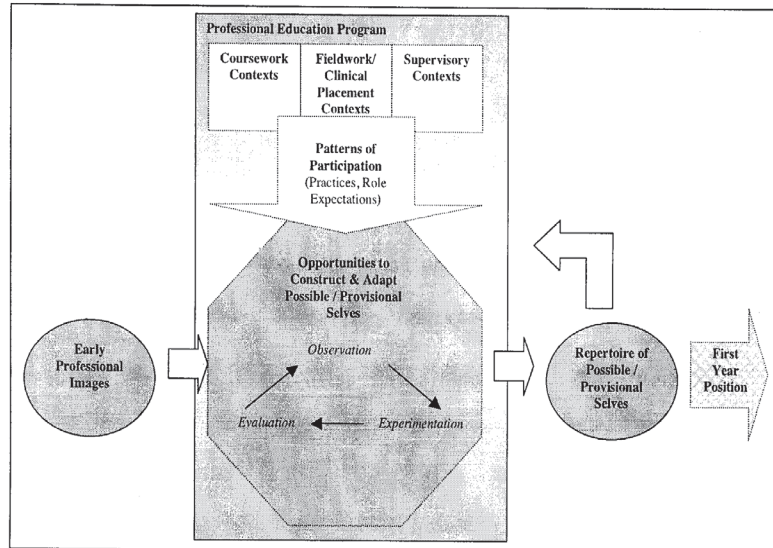
The literature on novice teachers' transitions into student teaching and the first year describes this experience as plagued by disillusionment, failure, loneliness, and insecurity (Britzman, 1990; Cole & Knowles, 1993; Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995; Rust, 1994). Left unresolved, such transitional issues can discourage new teachers from remaining in the profession and may contribute to the low retention rates of teachers in the first five years of teaching (c.f. Darling-Hammond & Schlau, 1996; Ingersoll, 2001). However, these challenges to early professional socialization are not unique to teaching. Kaslow & Rice (1985), for example, describe clinical psychology internships as a time of "professional adolescence" marked by personal and professional stress and identity transition. A central issue across professions is that novices are expected to act the part before they fully grasp or identify with new roles, which has important implications for professional acceptance and effectiveness (Goffman, 1959; Ibarra, 1999).

Given how pervasive the challenges are, one would expect professional education to play an integral part in helping novices to transition into their new roles. However, literature on teacher socialization generally characterizes coursework as having relatively little influence over socialization at best (Zeichner & Gore, 1990), and as counterproductive at worst (Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995). Fieldwork is often considered the most influential component of professional socialization in teacher education. Yet fieldwork tends to perpetuate the status quo within the placement sites (Britzman, 1990), and often runs counter to the goals that professional education programs may have, heightening the dissonance experienced by novices (Wideen et. al., 1998; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985).

## **Conceptual Framework**

Building on the work of Hazel Markus and colleagues (Cross & Markus, 1991; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus, Mullaly, & Kitayama, 1997), we explore the role of possible selves in the crafting of professional identity. As individuals engage with the practices, people, and role expectations that compose a given culture, they develop what Markus & Nurius (1986) deem "possible selves." Possible selves are "the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Within this framework, possible selves serve as incentives for change and as touchstones for evaluating current selves.

Developing this line of research further, Ibarra (1999) introduced "provisional selves" to elaborate how specific possible selves may be appropriated and rejected as people transition into more senior roles within a business culture. She found that novices adapt to new roles through an iterative process of observation, experimentation, and evaluation. As people observe others in the professional role, they generate a repertoire of potential identities; they experiment with provisional



selves by putting them to practical tests; they then evaluate the effectiveness of their enactments based on their own and others' perceptions.

While Ibarra's work concerns role transitions among in-service professionals in business, her model may also apply to pre-service professional education since it too involves role transitions—from being a student to becoming a professional. Viewed through Ibarra's framework, professional education is a place to begin the iterative cycle of adaptation by providing opportunities to observe, experiment with, and evaluate provisional selves as an explicit part of crafting a new professional identity.

Because of their relationship to one another, we use the terms possible selves, provisional selves, and professional identity somewhat interchangeably. In Markus & Nurius's (1986) original framing, possible selves refer to future self-concepts. Only some of these self-concepts are actually tried out. For our purposes, we define provisional selves as those possible selves that are actually tried out in professional education. In line with Ibarra's findings, we argue that, through experimentation with provisional selves in professional education, novices determine which possible and provisional selves are helpful in adapting to new roles. Initially these provisional selves are temporary solutions for meeting the expectations that come with new roles; over time, some become integrated into professional identity. In this definition, we borrow from Ibarra, who describes professional identity as the "relatively stable and enduring constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role" (pp. 764-765).

We also emphasize the centrality of "practices" to professional identity. As Miller and Goodnow contend, "The concept of *practice* recognizes that the acquisition of knowledge or skill is part of the construction of an identity or a person" (1995, p.

9). Novices do not take up all strategies that they encounter. Some *ways of doing* in classrooms can represent *ways of being* that run counter to who they want to become as professionals. As such, novices may define their possible selves in terms of the practices in which they want to engage. In this sense, the choice of which practices to appropriate and which to reject helps define professional identity.

Many people, including some faculty and students we interviewed, assume that some aspects of professional identity cannot be developed, but rather inhere in the personalities of individuals, leading to claims that teachers, clergy, or therapists ‘are born, not made.’ While we acknowledge that personal and professional identities are interwoven, we suggest that professional education—by structuring opportunities to encounter, experiment with, and evaluate possible selves—can support novices in crafting and sustaining professional identities.

### **Study Design and Methods**

The data in this article are drawn from a larger study of the teaching of practice in the preparation of clergy, teachers, and clinical psychologists (c.f. Grossman, Compton, Igra, Ronfeldt, Shahan, & Williamson, 2009). Our data include case studies of two teacher education programs, three seminaries, and three clinical psychology programs. We sampled programs that had strong reputations for the quality of their professional preparation programs. All eight programs were at the graduate level; at the teacher education institutions, we observed both elementary and secondary teacher preparation programs. We visited each program at least twice, observing in classes, interviewing students, faculty and administrators, and running focus groups. Across visits, we spoke with 120 instructors, 269 students, and 16 administrators. Because our focus was on the teaching of practice, we over-sampled what are generally called “methods” or more practical coursework, including subject-matter methods classes in teacher education, homiletics in the clergy, and clinical interviewing and assessment classes in clinical psychology. Again, we sampled course instructors that had strong reputation as teachers, according to both students and other faculty members. We also followed students into their field experiences, whenever possible. More recently, we focused in on the experiences of four clinical psychology and four teacher education students, conducting ongoing observations and interviews throughout their first year of preparation, probing specifically the issue of professional identity (Ronfeldt, 2006).

This analysis focuses primarily on data from student focus groups and interviews with students, but also draws on faculty interviews and field observations of coursework and fieldwork. Across the multiple focus groups and interviews included in this analysis, we spoke with 29 students in clinical psychology, 42 students in teacher education, and 15 students in the clergy. In focus groups, we asked students explicitly about the kind of professional they hoped to become and about the kind of professional they believed their programs wanted to prepare. We also

asked them about some of the most significant influences on their development as a professional. With regard to the eight novices that we focused on more recently, each quarter we asked them to specifically discuss the kind of professional they hoped to become and feared becoming. At each site, we tried to talk with students who were both at the beginning and towards the end of their preparation program. We analyzed focus groups and interviews for insights into the kinds of possible and provisional selves that students were constructing in professional education, and how these might be linked to experiences within programs. We categorized such comments according to whether they represented desired or feared possible selves. We also examined the data for evidence of the sources of these possible selves.

We also analyzed fieldnotes of our observations of courses and fieldwork. Our analyses of these data focused on explicit opportunities to experiment with provisional selves. In our analyses of coursework, we focused primarily on what we are calling “approximations of practice” (Grossman et. al., 2009) in which novices enacted facets of practice. These included simulations of practice, role plays, etc. Finally, we examined what novices said about their opportunities to experiment with provisional selves during field experiences.

We begin our discussion of findings by exploring the repertoire of possible selves that novices developed and the dimensions of professional preparation that may have contributed to this repertoire. We then examine opportunities for novices to try on and evaluate provisional selves, and what these opportunities may mean for the development of professional identity.

### **A Repertoire of Possible Selves**

Students enter professional education with a tentative set of possible selves from which to draw. As work on the “apprenticeship of observation” in teaching (Lortie, 1975) suggests, prospective teachers enter teacher education with multiple, albeit partial, images of teachers. The same is true for prospective clergy, who generally have had prior experience with clergy members throughout their lives. Those who plan to become therapists may also use their experiences in therapy to imagine the kind of therapist they want to become. These images provide an initial touchstone for the development of professional identity. Many of the participants in our study explicitly identified prior teachers, clergy, or therapists who inspired them to enter the profession in the first place.

Once they enter professional education, however, novices encounter a much wider range of possible selves through both coursework and field experiences. Those in our study paid careful attention to the models of professional identity they encountered in their programs, including their instructors, supervisors, and mentors in the field. As one rabbinical student commented about the plethora of possible models:

I think the most powerful thing I’ve learned is that there are so many possible

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ways to be a rabbi, and to be a good rabbi. And I think that comes from a whole number of different things we've been exposed to at school. One is just the rabbis that we get exposed to in terms of the instructors that we do get exposed to. ... Our field work of various kinds all really give us that kind of exposure that you can see models in congregations of different rabbis that are successful in very different sizes, different population, different economic structures... (Focus Group, KRS, 2/2004)

Students encountered possible selves—both feared and desired—when observing and interacting with different people and contexts during their professional education. They mentioned university instructors, practitioners in clinical placements, and even community leaders as presenting both desired and feared possibilities. Students also referred to coursework activities, presentations, discussions, readings, and videos as presenting images of possible selves. When asked about people that represent the kind of professional they hope to become, students often identified course instructors and advisors as positive models. In describing what they admired about their instructors, students primarily attended to disposition, manner, and values. They highlighted their instructors' compassion, charisma, integrity, nurturing, humor, openness, commanding presence, commitment, and care. All of these might be seen as aspects of personal identity, as much as professional identity, and in fact, novices saw their instructors as examples of how personal identity can be at the core of professional identity:

I think one of the strongest lessons that I've learned... is that we are the text that we teach, and that the first thing that—and probably the primary thing—that people will take away from their interactions with us is *us*, and how we interact with them. And the integrity, the consistency, the values that we portray and that we live are the most potent lesson that we have. (Focus Group, KRS, 2/2004)

While students articulated aspects of manner, disposition, and values as foundational to the professional identities of the instructors they admired, they focused less on *how* these qualities were used as instruments for professional practice. They expressed admiration for an instructor's charisma, for example, without identifying how it was used to captivate and inspire learning in others. In concentrating so intently on personal manner, students often conflated professional identity and personality. Aspects of manner, for example, are an important part of professional identity, as a tool for professional practice, but are not sufficient. Being charismatic, for instance, can help motivate learners, but charisma alone will not ensure that students learn.

That students failed to make the connection between these personal qualities and professional practice may reflect the fact that they generally had few opportunities to observe faculty in the role of practitioner. For example, Quise, a clinical psychology student, viewed her advisor and instructor, Dr. Winetraub, as representing the kind of clinical psychologist she hopes to become. She explained, "I think part of it is that she is a really good balance between being confident in her ability to work, in her competence as a therapist, but also she is very self-disclosing about her vulnerabili-

ties and her perceived weaknesses” (Interview, CPP, 5/2007). When asked if she had observed Dr. Winetraub during a therapy session, Quise admitted she had not, adding, “She’s good about [balancing confidence and vulnerability] with the class. And I see her as being good about that in supervision too. The problem with therapy is that you don’t get to see a lot of real therapy done. It is weird trying to learn a skill and not ever really watching experienced people doing it” (Interview, CPP, 5/2007).

When novices do not actually see instructors in practitioner roles, the possible selves they encounter are always partial. Thus, clinical psychology students who claimed their instructors were “fabulous psychologists” were often making an inference based on what they imagined rather than what they observed. Even in teacher education, where students observed course instructors in a teaching role, it was quite a different role than K-12 public school teaching. What professional education students did not necessarily encounter in their university instructors, then, were images of professional identity at work in the actual roles they will enter.

However, when students across professions did have opportunities to observe their instructors enact practitioner roles, they described such experiences as exceptionally useful. At Grace Seminary, for example, students had the opportunity to plan daily worship services for the seminary with experienced instructors/ministers. This experience gave students an opportunity to observe their instructors enact the roles and responsibilities of ministers while working in partnership with them. One of the students commented about these instructors:

For me, both of [the instructors] are real, in what they teach; and what they teach is exactly who they are in every context that they’re in. And so they’re modeling everything that they teach, and that’s what, as a pastor and a person that’s in ministry, that’s what you’re going to be asked to do also. (Focus Group, Grace Seminary, 3/2004)

In this instance, students were able to see their instructors both as “pastors” and as “a person that’s in ministry;” because they were able to work alongside their instructors, the relationship between personal and professional identity was more transparent.

In teacher education, our fieldnotes and interviews included many examples of instructors demonstrating model lessons during university coursework, generally with teacher education students enacting the role of K-12 pupils. An important advantage to these model lessons was that they allowed instructors to model principles and practices advocated by the program, including ones rarely encountered in fieldwork. Furthermore, students appreciated that instructors could pause model lessons to explicate their choices, in their role as teacher, and to answer questions along the way. These opportunities to observe instructors in the practitioner role had great potential for exposing novices to desired possible selves, as long as novices perceived the experiences as authentic representations of practice. However, students sometimes complained that these models felt staged or inauthentic. Some teacher education students, for example, suspected that demonstrated practices that were



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possible with motivated graduate students would not work in their K-12 classrooms. Hence, many students turned to fieldwork opportunities to observe practitioners at work with ‘real’ clients, pupils, and congregants.

During interviews, novice teachers frequently mentioned cooperating teachers as sources of possible selves. Sometimes, these were desired selves. As Meg explained:

Like we had summer field placements, and I was in a group with a teacher, a leader, who the kids loved and trusted so much. And I was like, ‘Okay, I know that she’s what I want to do [sic].’ I’m going to watch this person ... and see what she does and how she speaks to them, and I am going to do that. I mean, not exactly the same way, but I’m going to use what she does. And so I would sit and I would listen to her talk to the students, and what she said, and how she addressed them. (Focus Group, Riverdale, 8/2006)

Because Meg wanted to become a teacher that establishes trusting and caring relationships with her own students, she was drawn to and studied someone who embodied this type of teacher. For Meg, developing one’s own professional identity was partly a process of observing others who represented desired selves while they were engaged in professional work. In this way, Meg construed a caring possible self not just in terms of disposition but in terms of *how* such a self is expressed through interaction and communication in classroom practice.

In reflecting on their observations of cooperating teachers, novice teachers recounted some desired possible selves. More often, however, they described encounters with feared possible selves. They spoke of teachers who seemed uncaring, burnt out, mean, rigid, robotic, disrespectful, and authoritarian. Often their displeasure with cooperating teachers existed, at least in part, because of the disparity between their program’s vision for the kind of teacher they should become and what they observed in the field. Even amidst the more positive examples they encountered, novices rarely described cooperating teachers who exemplified the kinds of practices and ways of being promoted in their coursework. As Melanie described, “[Our program] wants us to have democratic classrooms and democratic kids. In watching the teacher that I’m with every day ... she reads kids’ grades out loud, and she calls [on] the smart kids, and she says, ‘Oh, who do we think has the answer? We know Ellie has the answer.’ And I’m cringing” (Focus Group, Riverdale, 8/2006).

Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that identifying feared possible selves is helpful; by working to avoid them, people are able to move closer to their hoped-for selves. Assembling a wide repertoire of possible selves can then support the development of professional identity. In fact, some research has demonstrated that it can be developmentally helpful to have counter-veiling feared selves to offset expected selves in a particular domain (Cross & Markus, 1991; Oyserman & Markus, 1990). In this spirit, one novice rabbi described how he used both feared and hoped for selves that he encountered in constructing his own professional identity:

I’m kind of beginning to model my rabbinate ... on what I’ve seen—the good,



but also the bad...I told [my mentor] that I wanted to become a rabbi based on the rabbi I didn't like, from one congregation ... Part of it is you do see what's out there, and you analyze what's out there and you really take what you want. And that's the good of saying, 'This is what I don't want to be and this is what I do want to be.' (Focus Group, KRS, 2/2004)

While a wide and balanced repertoire of possible selves may be desirable, novice teachers described a somewhat lopsided repertoire. Encounters with feared selves during fieldwork pervaded the data from teacher education, in contrast to our other two professions. Moreover, student teachers reported relatively few encounters with desired selves in the field, especially ones that reflected the images promoted by their coursework. This imbalance represents an on-going challenge for teacher education that is focused on preparing teachers as change agents.

As novices encountered a range of practitioners, they began to catalogue both desired and feared selves to piece together a makeshift image of the kind of professional they hoped to become. But untested images of what may be possible were not enough to prepare novices for new roles, even when these images included specific strategies and ways of interacting with others. It is one thing to have a clear and elaborated vision of a possible self and quite another to actually enact that vision. The novices we interviewed described opportunities to actually try out and evaluate provisional selves as critical to their development of professional identity.

### **Provisional Selves: Experimentation and Evaluation**

And I think that one of the best ways to learn how to gain the trust [of students] is to watch other people do it, and then do it yourself and not just observe but actually then put it into practice. (Meg, Focus Group, Riverdale, 8/2006)

As Meg explained, novices needed more than observations to develop a sense of professional identity, they needed opportunities to enact the role of professional, to "actually put it into practice." This was consistent with Ibarra's description of early professional identity as "provisional constructions that must be revised with experience" (p. 783). These provisional selves allowed novices to function—often clumsily—in new roles, as they tested out their emerging conceptions of the professional they hoped to become.

Across the professions we observed, university coursework provided relatively limited opportunities to experiment with new roles and to try on versions of professional identity. Ironically, in professions that are characterized by ongoing interaction with other people, opportunities to experiment with and receive feedback on the more interactive aspects of practice were especially rare. When students did have coursework opportunities to try on the role of the professional, these were generally in the areas of planning or assessment, such as planning a sermon in seminaries, doing a sample diagnostic assessment in clinical psychology, or planning lessons and assessing examples of student work in teacher education. While these activi-

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ties did require students to enact parts of professional role, they provided limited chances for novices to react to the uncertainties inherent in interactive practice.

In teacher education we observed a number of model lessons that included more interactive dimensions of teaching, but the instructors generally taught the lesson, while novices enacted the role of K-12 pupils (c.f. Williamson, 2006). While some novices found value in being in the pupil role, they rarely had opportunities during coursework to experiment with enacting the teacher role themselves. And where they did have such opportunities, there was experimentation but little evaluation. In one literacy methods class, for example, students used read-aloud strategies to teach their peers who served as pupils. In these lessons, novices had a chance to try out provisional selves; however, they received minimal feedback from their peers. Without meaningful feedback, novices could not be sure that the provisional selves they intended to enact were actually conveyed to others. This may be especially important in relational practices where professional success depends upon the response of clients, congregants, or students to the professional. In some cases, instructors did include assignments for novice teachers to try out program-endorsed practices and principles in their field settings. But instructors generally did not get to observe students directly as they performed so their evaluations were constrained by what novices later chose and failed to represent.

Compared with teaching, we observed more coursework opportunities for novices to experiment with—and receive feedback on—provisional selves during interactive practice in clinical psychology and the clergy. In the worship planning seminar at Grace Seminary, mentioned above, students had ongoing opportunities to help plan and lead services for the seminary community with an experienced team of ministers/instructors. Students, faculty, and assorted guests served in various roles—as preacher, liturgist, scripture reader, etc.—and each chaplain’s assistant took primary responsibility for the planning and scheduling of one week of services at a time. The worship team met once a week to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the most recent services and to refine their plans for upcoming services. This “approximation of practice” (Grossman et al., 2009) provided opportunities for students to enact the different components of the chaplain’s role in a setting that was quite authentic. Yet because this was designed as a learning opportunity, students were also allowed to experiment with ways of enacting the role that may not have been possible in church settings. As one student commented,

I think for me it has been a really good experience to be creative with worship and to have the flexibility. I know whenever I went back to my home church over Christmas break, I wanted to do all these new and inventive things that I’m able to do here, and yet the reality of ‘this is what we always do, this is what we need to do, we need to sing this type of stuff.’ (Focus Group, Grace Seminary, 3/2004)

This student described the ability to try on a provisional self that might be impossible in the context of his home church.

While they appreciated the approximation of practice as an opportunity to experiment with provisional selves, students also appreciated the opportunities for immediate feedback built into the worship experience. One student used the opportunity to focus on writing his own liturgy, explaining, “And the other thing is that because it’s in partnership with Paul and Richard and Marie, I may write something, and there’s maybe a phrase that’s a little funky and I get feedback on that” (Focus Group, Grace Seminary, 3/2004). As he realized, this kind of feedback on practice will be less frequent as he enters solo practice. Being able to encounter, enact, and evaluate provisional selves all within the same setting was a special opportunity for developing professional identity. The same experts that introduced specific desired selves were there also to observe and evaluate this student’s efforts to enact them along the way. Since they were familiar with how an effective performance looks, they could provide especially useful feedback.

Across our sites, clinical psychology incorporated the greatest number of opportunities for students to experiment with and evaluate provisional selves during interactive dimensions of practice. In one clinical psychology course, students frequently engaged in role-plays with peers—one student acting as therapist, the other as client. They were required to videotape these “sessions” and then study the videotapes, alone and together in class. While role plays provided multiple opportunities to enact the role of therapist, they also provided opportunities for self-evaluation and feedback from others. An advantage to this pedagogy was that, as they studied the principles and practices together, instructor and students were able to provide informed and more consistent feedback on one another’s enactments.

Many students focused on these video role-plays as important experiences for trying on and revising a new professional self. For example, watching video of role plays taught one first year student the importance of matching a client’s affect: “From watching [the video], the biggest thing I probably learned is that I smile an awful lot. And I’m smiling now. But I just didn’t realize it and I just realized how inappropriate that can be in certain times” (Interview, CPP, 1/2006). Another student from this program commented that she learned to “sit with silence in a therapy session” from her experience doing video role plays: “I think I felt anxious in the beginning and felt like I had to rush to kind of fill space or fill a voice, or ask a question, when maybe it was okay to just kind of relax and do another reflection statement or just sit with the silence” (Focus Group, CPP, 6/2004). Dealing with this same challenge, another student said she had to intentionally abandon aspects of her prior professional identity in order to develop a new one. She explained, “I’m coming out of 10 years of sales, so for me, quiet is dead time, and my goal isn’t to let you come up with your ideas but to tell you what I want you to do . . . And so that’s something I’m having to learn is the quiet and the letting them talk” (Focus Group, CPP, 6/2004). When asked how she learned to do this, she again identified the video role-plays as an opportunity to experiment with a different professional self, one that is comfortable with silence.

Role-plays also offered opportunities to experiment with a range of provisional

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selves. In one role play exercise, the instructor asked students to experiment with being a confrontational therapist, a possible self that is often feared by new therapists. Before having students try out this approach, she had them observe video examples of more confrontational therapists in action, including one that demonstrated the therapeutic value of being confrontational. Afterwards, students tried on a more confrontational persona with one another. As a result, students were pushed to experiment with and to develop dimensions of professional identity that might otherwise be left unexplored. As the instructor explained, this role play “gives people who are nice a sanctioned reason to not be nice” (Observational Fieldnotes, CPP, 10/2005).

The novice clinical psychologists we observed had many opportunities to experiment with interactive dimensions of role in a variety of role-plays during coursework. Most role-plays were structured to incorporate evaluation, including self-evaluation of videotaped sessions and feedback from peers. As a result, novices have had an opportunity to try out and refine provisional selves in these interactive roles even before they began to work with real clients. However, as we explore next, clinical placements were the primary site for experimentation and thus crucial in the development of professional identity.

### **From the Classroom to the Field:**

#### ***Experimenting with Professional Identity***

Many students described their fieldwork as having the most influence on professional identity development because of the extensive opportunities to experiment with professional role, including numerous opportunities to engage in interactive dimensions of practice. For example, from early in the first year of her clinical psychology program, Amanda anticipated that she might struggle with being judgmental as a therapist. She commented, “If you have someone come in and [she] says, ‘I’m pregnant but can’t stop drinking,’ I mean how do you sit there and [not] say, ‘How the hell did you become a mother?’” (Interview, CPP, 10/2006). In one of her very first courses, Amanda acknowledged feeling somewhat judgmental during a role-play when a peer in the “client” role discussed using drugs. Even so, Amanda explained that it is important to acknowledge that others have different morals and “therapy is not where I should be standing on my soapbox” (Interview, CPP, 10/2006).

For Amanda, her practicum work with substance abuse patients was an important setting for putting her feared self to a practical test: “What I’ve learned the most regarding just working with that type of population is just having like empathy and when they tell you something really disturbing, kind of just like rolling with it and not having this look of shock on your face when they tell you something” (Interview, CPP, 4/2007). Her experimentation in role gave Amanda practice with and confidence in being a non-judgmental and empathic therapist.

Amanda’s case demonstrates the power of successful experimentation with provisional selves in developing professional identity. However, there are many

expectations and constraints within clinical settings that make it difficult to experiment with a range of provisional selves at all, let alone to do so successfully. Such roadblocks in clinical settings seem especially problematic in the preparation of teachers. During fieldwork in both clinical psychology and clergy, novices generally felt comfortable experimenting with provisional selves advocated by their programs. In teacher education, however, students often struggled in their efforts to enact program-endorsed provisional selves, particularly with regard to their identities as social justice educators or change agents. One student explained, “So it’s very hard. I see a very large gap between what we see as the role of the teacher in our [university] classes to what the role of the teacher is in the actual classrooms of the high schools here” (Focus Group, Riverdale, 9/2005). Another student commented:

But most of the time in the classroom, I feel like everything that I’m learning at [the university], it’s a completely different world. Like I’m in the classroom and I’m telling kids to ‘sit down,’ and you know ‘you can sharpen your pencil only in the morning.’ And I think, ‘Am I teaching [for] understanding?’ (Focus Group, Riverdale, 9/2005)

Students in both teacher education programs talked about the difficulty of reconciling the identities they are being encouraged to take on at the university, with the realities of the schools in which they’re placed. As one student said,

They’re very progressive in the way that this program functions, so I feel like when I go into my classroom, like into an urban public school, I feel like sometimes that it’s very disconnected from what actually happens ... And you see how things actually are and that’s not to say that it’s not great to learn more about educational philosophies and feel better educated about what you’re doing so that you can speak intelligently about it ... But in terms of what we’re actually going to be doing, it’s a nice framework from which to look at it, but the student teaching is just so much more important and so much more attached to reality, I think, than what we do in class. (Focus Group, Riverdale, 9/2005)

Another student added, “We’ve been sent out on a mission to go out and change the world with teaching, but ... the program is not really teaching [me] to be that *real* teacher and actually dealing with the issues at hand in these urban public schools” (Focus Group, Riverdale, 9/2005). These students seemed to suggest that the possible selves they develop in teacher education may be useful for viewing, understanding, and critiquing, but not working in, actual classrooms. Perhaps even more worrisome was their tendency to dichotomize the possible selves imagined by the program from the image of the “real teacher” who must function in urban classrooms.

But how do encounters with these contradictory possible selves in the university and field influence the development of professional identity? And how is this tension negotiated during student teaching? To explore these questions more deeply, we describe the experiences of Alfred and Johnny, two teacher education students from the same program.

**Alfred and Johnny:**

***Negotiating Desired and Feared Selves in Student Teaching***

Alfred, a first year teacher education student, articulated the conflict he experienced between the professional identity as agent of change, advocated by his program, and the realities of his school placement. As he explained: "I mean, there's a lot of good stuff that [our course instructors] are showing us but it seems to conflict with what I'm seeing in the classroom. I don't know. The classroom where I'm in right now, for instance, they're using the [mandated] basal reading ... So it's pretty much just you open a book and you just lead the lessons" (Interview, Oceanside, 1/2007). Although one of his possible selves was that of a social justice educator who was willing to be critical of the status quo and to work for social change, a large part of his experimentation during student teaching involved "playing by the rules" especially in terms of sticking to the district-mandated curricula and pacing plan: "Honestly, like this time around, to me it's just to get familiar with being in the classroom and being identified as a teacher. You know, being here in the morning, following a scripted curriculum, so I just want myself to be familiar with that" (Interview, Oceanside, 2/2007).

Alfred was sensitive to the fact that he was a visitor in someone else's classroom, and felt it was important to honor the established norms and procedures of his cooperating teachers, especially given that his pupils would seek consistency. Moreover, Alfred viewed sticking to the mandated curricula and pacing plan as an opportunity to learn about the "reality" in schools so he could help his students succeed within it. Even as Alfred tried out and succeeded with what he called an "adequate" or "no frills" provisional self, he always maintained a strong identification with his program's social justice stance. He viewed student teaching and the first couple of years of teaching as "probationary" where "I will do what they tell me, and just that." Afterwards, Alfred said he plans to "whip out the social justice agenda" (Interview, Oceanside, 11/2006). With more experience and job security, Alfred plans to institute more of the principles and practices promoted by his program, but in a way that works within the system: "There is a different take on reality [in this program], and a different reality in the [local] schools. We can't go in there to change the world. We are a cog in the system, but can effect change as a cog. We need to keep an open mind to these realities in schools" (Fieldnotes, Oceanside, 11/2006).

In order to negotiate these tensions in student teaching, Alfred mostly played by the rules while experimenting in the margins. During our observations, for example, he incorporated some program-endorsed strategies, including a math activity influenced by socio-cultural approaches he learned in math methods, and a science lesson influenced by inquiry approaches from science methods. In both cases, he had doubts that he had successfully enacted the practices that he and his program envisioned. Furthermore, as his cooperating teachers did not themselves utilize or specialize in many of these alternative approaches, Alfred was left to experiment primarily on his own. In both instances that we observed, Alfred received little to no

feedback or guidance on his efforts to try out these more alternative approaches. Towards the end of his student teaching, we asked Alfred what he felt most prepared for as he entered full-time professional work. Alfred returned again to the theme that seemed to frame his entire first year of professional preparation:

I feel very prepared in making, in teaching the curriculum and not necessarily making it my own yet but that's something that I want to do later on. But definitely, if I just came in and I grabbed the [mandated textbook] teacher's manual ... I feel fairly confident that I could follow what I see in the book and have no problem whatsoever. But, you know, it's with time that I want to move away from there and just put into play everything that I've been seeing the past year. So I guess as a standard teacher, you know, uh...(pause) no frills, just go in and do what I have to do. Yeah, I think I'm there now but to really fully become the social justice educator that they were preparing us to be, that's going to come with some time. (Interview, Oceanside, 4/2007)

In negotiating these conflicting possible selves, Alfred spent most of his student teaching experience enacting the teacher expected of him in his placement schools rather than the teacher expected by his program. He had practiced, succeeded, and become confident in a provisional self as a “no frills” or “adequate” teacher who can deliver the mandated curricula and follow the rules in schools. While he understood the limitations of this professional identity, and still hoped to enact his program-endorsed social justice identity down the road, this remained a possible rather than a provisional self as he entered his first year of full-time teaching.

The critical importance of finding opportunities to enact the possible selves developed at the university was illustrated by the experiences of Johnny. Johnny had two very different student teaching placements. From very early in his program, Johnny viewed his emerging professional identity in terms of relationship building. He believed if students did not relate to him as teacher then they would not relate to the material. Being able to relate to students establishes “credibility in what [teachers] are teaching and preaching” (Focus Group, Oceanside, 10/2006). This, he argued, requires taking the time to get to know all students personally.

While his coursework and some early field observation helped him to develop this possible self, his first student teaching placement challenged this emerging professional identity. He was placed in a classroom where he felt his cooperating teacher did not always treat his students with respect and often had contentious relationships with them. Johnny found it difficult to build caring relationships in this environment, as students seemed to resist his efforts. In fact, he found himself becoming more confrontational with students than he liked.

Later, Johnny reflected, “I experienced so much conflict during those times. It was because I was confronted with this thing that I didn't want to become and yet I felt myself in that environment, this toxic environment, becoming that person” (Interview, Oceanside, 5/2007). The powerful context of student teaching had Johnny enacting and, in the process, becoming an explicitly feared self. Because



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of these initially painful student teaching experiences, Johnny had begun to doubt the viability of the teacher he, and his program, hoped he could become—one that builds mutually respectful and caring relationships with students.

Johnny was next placed with a cooperating teacher who specialized in building classroom community. By being able to observe and then experiment with building positive professional relationships - in ways endorsed by his program - Johnny had more success in enacting his desired self. As a result, he came to identify more strongly with and to embody this desired self:

I think in my approach to classroom management that I am getting closer to that ideal. In the relationships that I'm creating with my students, and that I continue to create on a day-by-day basis, is bringing me closer to that ideal—where there really is that mutual respect. Where they really understand where I am coming from to the point where we can really dig into learning and being excited about that. (Interview, Oceanside, 5/2007)

Looking back on the first year of his program, Johnny highlighted the importance of these opportunities to try out desired and feared selves in developing his professional identity:

I think there are times when I have had to reconsider what it means to be an authority figure in the classrooms. Yeah, you can't come in and be their best friend. At the same time you can't come in and be a tyrant. But students need to know that there are those boundaries and limitations. Which I'd known before, but it's the same thing as watching something done on videotape or reading it in a book versus actually seeing it modeled for you and doing it yourself. So, before having gone through the experiences, I'd only heard about it or seen it on TV. I hadn't experienced it myself. (Interview, Oceanside, 5/2007)

Johnny's case illustrated the importance of opportunities, particularly successful ones, to experiment with desired possible selves in the context of professional education. While ultimately his first placement helped him better understand the kind of teacher he wanted to be, by experiencing his feared self, without the subsequent opportunity to experiment with a desired self, he may have concluded that this professional identity was not possible; Johnny may have opted to leave the profession, rather than risk evolving into the "tyrant" he feared becoming.

### **Implications**

Students encounter multiple possible selves in their professional preparation, many of which they experience as contradictory. From professors, field supervisors, practitioners, and other experiences, they begin to construct a repertoire of possible selves—both feared and desired—that might contribute to their professional identities. Coursework provides some opportunities to grapple with and experiment with these possible selves, in part through opportunities to try on the professional role in approximations of practice. The best example of this was in the role plays we

observed in clinical psychology, where novices had regular and sustained opportunities to experiment with the role of therapist and to receive feedback on their efforts. However, much of this experimentation necessarily occurs in the more authentic settings of the field placements. Unfortunately, real constraints in congregations, schools, or clinics make enacting some possible selves more difficult than others and may even cause novices to enact versions of their feared selves. As a result of these contradictions and tensions, novice professionals must try to reconcile who they want to become with who they are expected to become in particular settings. We argue that professional education could play a more central role in helping novices navigate these contradictions and tensions in constructing, experimenting with, and evaluating provisional professional identities.

As mentioned above, these tensions were greatest in teacher education, in which the university was explicitly trying to prepare novices to serve as change agents. Since the programs are preparing professionals for visions of schooling that are rarely found in most urban settings, students may develop images of possible selves that are difficult to enact in their student teaching placements. Given the bleak realities of many urban schools, encouraging alternative visions of teaching can be helpful. One teacher education student commented that encountering more theoretical and “radical” images of what is possible in teacher education is not necessarily “false preparation” because, “I think the theoretical approach is encouraging you to be a motivated and principled teacher.” At the same time, novices did not have many opportunities to actually enact these alternative visions of professional identity, limiting the chance that these identities will take root and develop. As Hargreaves and Jacka (1995) argue, “Initial teacher education may increasingly be a process of soft seduction into images and practices of teaching that prepare new teachers neither to adjust to the unchanged realities of the schools in which they will begin their paid teaching careers, nor to develop the intellectual understanding and political skills which would enable them to critique and challenge those realities” (p. 58).

Novice teachers may indeed experiment with alternative provisional selves down the road, perhaps—as Alfred anticipated—after they have their own classrooms, more experience, and job security. However, many studies suggest that the status quo in schools may overpower such efforts at experimentation and instead promote accommodation (Britzman, 1990; Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Rust, 1994). Moreover, finding a work context that simply allows experimentation may not be enough for a possible self to become a part of professional identity. Our study suggests that *successful* experimentation may be necessary, and that this generally requires modeling, guidance, and feedback from others.

We argue for more intentional structuring of opportunities to observe, experiment with, and evaluate possible selves during teacher education that specifically support novices in negotiating the chasm between the ideal and the real. In trying to help novices adapt to new roles, teacher education could give novices more opportunities to observe experienced professionals who embody the alternative

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images promoted in university coursework while successfully navigating the constraints in today's schools, using both real and virtual classrooms as examples (c.f. Cochran-Smith, 1991; Coleman, 2006, [gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/quest/collections/sites/coleman\\_amelia/](http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/collections/quest/collections/sites/coleman_amelia/)). Teacher educators could also provide more concrete opportunities for students to experiment with what it might mean to enact the practices advocated by teacher education under less than optimal conditions. In one math methods course we observed, for instance, the math educator had students examine the district pacing plan and look for opportunities to probe for student thinking within those constraints.

Through approximations of practice, such as the workshop planning seminar at Grace Seminary, teacher education can create opportunities that may not otherwise exist in "real" practice settings—ones for trying on, evaluating, revising, and succeeding with alternative provisional selves. George Hillocks's workshop approach to preparing English teachers (Hillocks, 1995), in which he and his students essentially took over an urban classroom for a month to co-plan and co-teach writing, represents an excellent example of an approximation that allows students to experiment with provisional selves advocated by the program while getting immediate feedback in an authentic school setting. Such approximations of practice can also be designed to provide immediate feedback from experienced professionals and to encourage and even require some forms of experimentation that novices may otherwise neglect, as was the case with role playing confrontational therapists in clinical psychology.

Finally, as the cases of Alfred and Johnny suggest, teacher educators could better utilize fieldwork as a context to experiment with and evaluate program-endorsed provisional selves in ways that successfully adapt to real constraints in schools. Developing assignments that require novices to try out certain practices in the field and then bring the results of these experiments back to the universities can provide novices with a strong and continuous support system for trying on and refining provisional selves. Teacher education could continue to develop its efforts to require students to videotape, or otherwise document their experimentation in ways that allow ongoing feedback from instructors, supervisors, and peers who can encourage and tune future experimentation so that it may lead to success. This is particularly important because we suspect that early successes in enacting provisional selves provide the conditions under which professional identity can take hold and flourish. By intentionally supporting novice teachers in trying out and evaluating their emerging identities in both coursework and fieldwork, professional education can provide early opportunities to craft identities based on the images of the teacher they want to become, in ways that can function given the realities of urban schools.

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