


A Dream of a School: Student Teachers Envision Their Ideal School

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Abstract

In this study, we examined how student teachers in their first year of a teacher education program develop insights of their ideal school and desired teaching by designing a model of a school that incorporated ideological, pedagogical, physical, and interpersonal aspects. Twenty projects of ideal schools were analyzed. The findings reveal that student teachers at their initial stages of teacher education, when exposed to dissonances at the boundary between different social worlds, can develop complex understanding if they are provided with contexts that allow such spaces. We conclude that teacher educators can exploit incidents of conflict and friction as learning opportunities and thus enhance deeper learning.

Keywords

student teachers, professional identity, critical thinking, ideal school, teacher education

In this article, we examine how student teachers in their first year of a teacher education program develop insights of their ideal school and desired teaching.

Our research focuses on the pre-stage of practice teaching where students participate in a course titled “At the Threshold of the Educational Practice” and are exposed, as observers, to different educational systems but do not yet experience teaching. They explore, through experiential learning, narratives, personal biographies, critical incidents, and reflection, “the teacher within them,” and discover their own belief systems, values, and perceptions about what it means to be a teacher and the type of school they would like to teach in (Sachs, 2001, p. 6).

The impetus for our study emerged from random conversations we conducted with students who were at their internship phase, where they were already part-time teachers in schools. Due to our roles as head of teacher education (S.L.) and lectures on the program (N.Z. and A.F.), we were interested to learn about students’ insights on the journey they had made in the 4 years of study and the courses that they felt were most influential in forming their initial professional identity. We found that the above mentioned course was noted with much appreciation in every conversation we conducted.

Much research has dealt with growing into the profession (Flores & Day, 2006), the transition phases from student to teacher (Lacey, 1977; Lortie, 1975; Veenman, 1984; Vonk, 1993), and even becoming a student teacher (Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007). However, there is scarcity of research on the pre-phase of practice teaching, the stage where students are exposed to declarative knowledge (the What) rather than procedural knowledge (the How).

Research has shown that learners view and interpret new information and experiences through their existing network of

knowledge, experience, and beliefs (Desforges, 1995; Fosnot, 1996; Leshem & Trafford, 2006; Richardson, 1997). They combine parts of their past, including their own experience in school and in teacher preparation, with pieces of their present (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Studies also reveal that prior experiences as pupils and former teachers who provide positive or negative models of teaching play a strong mediating role in the identities that new teachers bring into their first teaching experiences (Flores & Day, 2006). Based on these theoretical perspectives, we were interested to see how the learning that students experienced in this pre-practice course crystallized into a visualization of a desired school model that they had to design as their final assignment, and what principles, values, and visions underlie their model, as a stage in their professional development (Zur & Eisikovits, 2011). Thus, the research question that guided our study is as follows:

Research Question 1: How, if at all, does experiential learning of first year student teachers develop their perceptions of school and teaching?

This research contributes to previous research on student teachers development of a professional identity during teacher education and the role of teacher education programs.

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Theoretical Framework

Our conceptual framework for this research is based on theories that draw on the importance of prior life experiences on shaping the professional identity of student teachers and the process of effecting change in a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1996). These processes can occur in a framework of experiential learning whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984). These perspectives shed light on the initial phases of student teachers' learning processes and the dynamic nature of developing a professional identity.

Shaping Professional Identities of Student Teachers

Student teachers enter teacher education with established frame of references of good and bad teachers and models of effective and ineffective teaching, based on hours of personal experiences as pupils in schools (Kagan, 1992).

The process of growing into the profession entails the analysis of one's own beliefs and practices (Flores & Day, 2006). It involves the making sense and transformation of the teacher identity, which is mediated by their own beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher and the type of teacher they aspire to be (Sachs, 2001). Providing opportunities for reflection on experiences, beliefs, and values is one of the most important tasks in supporting student teachers' emerging professional identity from the beginning of teacher education (Anspala, Eisenschmidt, & Löfström, 2012). This echoes Dewey's (1938) contention that all significant learning is grounded in experience. But experience alone is insufficient. It is intentional thinking about that experience in search of meanings that can lead to future experiences that makes it educative (Dewey, 1933, 1938).

Sachs (2005) supports this notion and claims that forming professional identity is partly a negotiation between experiences and the meaning-making of those experiences, which might entail conflicting perspectives, beliefs, and practices and shifts in thinking about teaching (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Leshem, 2012). Novices enter teacher education with simplified images of students, teaching, and schools (Nolen et al., 2009). Encountering dissonances can challenge novices' conceptions and develop more complex understandings of one's own self.

This can also be enhanced through teachers' personal narratives or life stories (Kerby, 1991; Richardson, 1996; Volkmann & Anderson, 1998), which may reveal students' understanding of their professional identities (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). It is claimed that through writing or talking about oneself, the "self" is shaped (Beijaard, 1995). The initial focus on "self" is a necessary and a valuable stage in the formation of a professional identity. Thus, identity formation is an ongoing process, constantly evolving, where within various contexts, teachers learn professional characteristics

that are adopted by each individual differently, as the current lived experience is a result of the past and will lead to an imagined future (Dewey, 1934).

We found Dewey's contention mirrored in Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, which is a theory of adult learning. It explains how adults change the way they interpret their world. "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). It is a process of effecting change of a frame of reference. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. It encompasses cognitive, conative, and emotional components and is a result of influences of primary caregivers. We transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations are based. Self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformations that are more "fully developed . . . one that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective and integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163).

This needs practice in recognizing frames of reference and using imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective. Education that fosters critical reflectivity is learner centered and participatory. Materials reflect the real-life experiences of the learners, and learning takes place through discovery and the imaginative use of metaphors, critical incidents, life histories, and participation in social action (Mezirow, 1990). Thus, it is suggested that it is important for educators to create opportunities for learners within and outside the classroom to act on new insights so that learners can test and explore new perspectives (Taylor, 2008).

Method

Background

The teacher education program at the College of Education is an integrative 4-year program that enables candidates to gain a bachelor's degree and a teaching certificate. In the first year of teacher training, students from different disciplines, cultures, ethnic groups, and religions participate in a compulsory workshop of 5 weekly hours. There are usually seven groups in each first academic year, depending on enrollment. Groups are limited to 20 students to facilitate the dynamics of team work and teacher-student personal interaction. The aims of the workshop are to expose students to a variety of educational worldviews and dilemmas, to critically explore personal theories related to the above, to forge "team spirit," and to consolidate first steps toward a teachers' identity. In this framework, students are familiarized with different educational settings (schools) through actual visits to the schools. Students are encouraged to make links between theory and practice as observed in the different school settings and

hopefully begin to reorganize, reinterpret, and reconstruct a more informed personal theory.

The syllabus combines theory and practice by dealing with issues concerning education and educational concepts, schools and schoolings, and teaching and learning skills. In addition, students visit, as a group, with their pedagogical instructor, different educational systems such as democratic schools, special education schools, religious/secular Jewish and Arab schools, private/public schools, bilingual schools, professional schools, and more. The rationale for choosing these schools is to expose students to a wide spectrum of educational systems (something that usually does not occur when they are settled already in one school as in-service teachers). The assumption is that the exposure to different “outstanding” schools and a variety of teaching and learning styles would help them to reflect upon their own experiences and start reconstructing and formulating personal theories. Learning is conducted in the form of discussions, debates, analyses of case studies, personal narratives, simulations, outdoor activities, and reading materials.

In this study, we chose to analyze the final task of the workshop. The rationale for choosing this particular task is that it entails critical thinking, creativity, and consolidation of all the issues dealt with in the workshop. Following is a brief description of the task.

Students had to design their “Ideal School” from four different perspectives: ideological, pedagogical, physical, and interpersonal relationship, incorporating the theory and practice they encountered in the course. Schools had to be given a name, and students had to explain the conceptual underpinning of their choice. They also had to write a reflective account (meta-analysis) of the process of designing the school. Projects could be accompanied by conceptual maps, drawings, and models as visuals. Projects were conducted in pairs and students were free to choose their own partners.

Research Design

The aim of the study was to investigate how experiential learning develops student teachers' perceptions of school and teaching, as part of their professional development. It is grounded in the data collected from students' accounts describing their desired ideal school. Thus, the research adopted an inductive approach.

Twenty projects were analyzed pertaining to two classes out of six (These were the classes of N.Z. and A.F.). The study draws on inductive recursive cycles of close interpretative readings (Gadamer, 1982). In the first phase, each project was read multiple times by the three independent researchers (the authors) to obtain a holistic overview of emergent themes related to students' perceptions of school and teaching. In the course of reading, notes were written in the margins next to the points they meant to highlight to develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships.

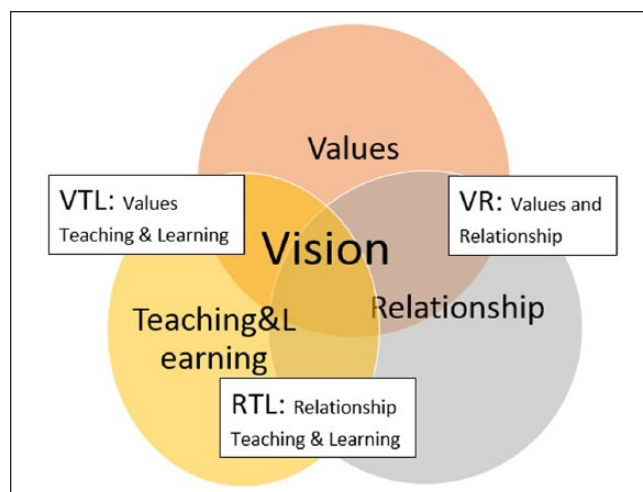


Figure 1. Leading concepts of ideal school.

Special attention was given to the language students used to describe schools and activities (metaphors, images). Discussions between the three researchers followed the readings to arrive at a synthesis of common ground categories and themes.

The next phase was to condense the data. Each theme was highlighted in a different color and then organized into conceptual categories. Quotes from the texts representing the categories were highlighted in the same color. Further sorting, verification, and refinement helped modify the categories and condense them to yield an analytic framework (Patton, 1990) in a form of a Venn diagram model (see Figure 1).

Ethical Consideration

A letter was sent to all students of the two classes asking permission to use their projects anonymously for research purposes. Participation in the research was voluntary. The research was conducted at the end of the semester after students had already received their grades in order not to cause any atmosphere of threat or bias. Twenty-five responses were received and the first 20 were chosen. Students are given pseudo names as alphabetical letters.

Findings: Students' Vision of Their Ideal School

The analysis of the school models created a conceptual framework illustrated by a Venn diagram (Figure 1), which serves as the main tool for the analysis of our empirical data. The model shows the three dominant concepts that students found to be the leading concepts of their ideal school: *values*, *relationships*, and *teaching and learning*. However, the synergistic concept is “Vision” and it underlies all other concepts. All students emphasized the importance of “The School Vision” as the constituent of the school’s complex system.

Three Main Categories—Values, Relationships, Teaching and Learning

The category of *values* pertains to humanism, multiculturalism, inclusion, and social issues. According to students' models of their ideal school, *values* seem to be fundamental for carrying out school *vision*. For example, when the *vision* is defined as "quality and modernization," students would wish to realize values such as "high quality education," "enhancement of technology orientation," and "equal opportunities for all" (as quoted in students' ideal school).

The *teaching* component relates to methods of teaching, the role of the teacher, learning environments, meaningful learning, and assessment. For example, the school vision that was built by X and peers is to develop optimistic mind-sets of pupils; they, therefore, emphasize values pertaining to this vision focusing on "enhancement of self-image" that can be achieved through meaningful learning.

Relationships address pupils, pupils and teachers, teachers as a community, teachers and parents, and the school as a social community. The concept of *relationships* is, almost always, interrelated with *values* and *teaching and learning*. This can be illustrated by X's school model. As we have mentioned, X believes in "developing an optimistic approach" among pupils. They will, therefore, encourage an interpersonal relationship between pupils and teachers. This could be achieved by regular personal meetings so that teachers could get to know pupils, could identify sensitive situations, and will be able to assist. This could enhance pupils' motivation and learning.

Interrelationship Between Categories

The analysis exposes interrelated categories where categories do not stand on their own but construe some sort of causal relationship. Following is an example of Y's school to illustrate the above.

Values and Relationships

The integration between the categories of values and relationships: The core value that Y chose is "empowerment of character." The school would aspire "to educate leaders who can control their future." Thus, the school will conduct seminars for people who went through meaningful experiences in life.

Values and Education

Student (Y) places two values in the center: "nurturing excellence" and "catering for special needs." She thus contends that excellence transgresses the boundaries of the classroom: "learning is ongoing and does not necessarily transpire solely in the classroom."

Relationships and Teaching and Learning

Z considers relationships as a prime aspect for achieving educational goals. "Teachers, therefore, need to devote time and effort beyond regular teaching hours." "They must be highly motivated and love the profession if they want pupils to succeed."

Integration of All Three Categories

The integration of all three categories does not exist in all the ideal schools. It can be found in schools that are planned around a leading vision. An example of such a school is A and B's school. A and B are Circassians, and their school vision is to encounter pupils from different cultures and endow educational values based on humanism and mutual respect. Thus, the curriculum will contain lessons on multiculturalism. The value of mutual respect will be evident in the relationship between teachers and pupils. Teachers, for example, will stay extra hours after teaching hours to conduct individual sessions with pupils.

Beyond the Model

How Central Is the Category of "Values" in the School Vision

The in-depth investigation revealed findings beyond the conceptual model. We found differences in suggestions for practical implementations of "values" in the schools. In some schools, the implementation seemed superficial and was expressed by using clichés; in others, implementation involved creative thinking and more complex ideas. For example, "environmental education" is one of the values prominent in most schools. However, when students find creative ways to implement it, it is always integrated with other aspects. D declares that her school chose environmental education as "a way of living" and indicates a variety of modes to implement it, by integrating "teaching and learning" and "relationships." For example, her school will have on its agenda every fortnight a meeting with the community in the school vicinity on topics of sustainability. This will build up the relations between school and community and enhance the importance of preservation of a healthy environment. In contrast, a less developed suggestion can be found in L's school. L believes in "preserving a healthy environment" and will therefore have "a special area in the school for recycling."

Another example is related to "multiculturalism." Many schools have included multiculturalism in their vision; however, schools that placed it as a central component in the school vision combined it with other values, such as relationships or teaching and learning to support and strengthen it. It is mostly evident in the dimension of relationships. Almost every scheme of relationship in the school has been seen

through the lens of multiculturalism and ways of implementation to enhance it.

Lets take M and N's school as an example of integrating values and relationships. M is Jewish and N is Arab. Their school emphasizes pupils' pride in their self-identity and social affiliation. This leading value is implemented by establishing an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance where conflicts are resolved by dialogue. The rule of thumb is that no conflict will disrupt the school as a community. Contribution to the community is an implementation of the leading value of the school vision and encourages pupils "to initiate and contribute to society. This enriches their inner world and also serves the community." The initiation and involvement starts from first grade and pupils collect clothes, toys, and food for the needy. N and M also believe that taking care of animals can develop responsibility, sensitivity, and a sense of belonging to a community. The school will have a "Petting Corner" where pupils will have the responsibility of taking care of the pets. The school also adopts a policy of "Round Tables" where pupils are an integral part of decision making to enhance their self-confidence and help them acquire skills that they can use later as citizens.

Another example of a school that is built around a leading principle is O and P's school. They believe in "a whole person in a whole society." Arabs and Jews study together (in Israel, Arabs and Jews would commonly have their own schools). Arab and Jewish assistants will be available. All pupils, from the first grade, will learn Arabic to break misconceptions about Arab Jews relationships and enhance solidarity. As part of the school's vision, the topic of co-existence will be a topic of research and growth.

They also believe that we have to strive to nurture curiosity, criticality, and questions concerned with our social identity, to strengthen dialogue and social accountability. They see society as a network of people that support each other to create and disseminate knowledge. Pupils will study 5 days a week where 1 study day is within the community doing all sorts of crafts to contribute to society and to their own personal development.

Character Education

Another aspect that appears in many of the schools is "character development." The difference between its implementation is expressed by its centrality in identity formation and how it is manifested in the school vision. So, according to D and F, for a pupil to be creative and responsible, the school needs to foster curiosity by providing the appropriate thought provoking environment. This entails rethinking of teaching and learning methods. Pupils' competence will be assessed by group projects and not by individual tests.

Morals and ethics are the leading values in K's school and are also an integral part of "character education." The school therefore has to practice what it preaches and educate its pupils to loyalty, respect, and morals. Educators are role models who consider their work a mission and see its

graduates not only as scholars but also as people of morals. They chose a verse taken from the *Book of Proverbs* of the Bible as the symbol of their school: *Apply thy heart unto instruction, and thine ears to the words of knowledge.*

Interpreting the Findings: Meaning-Making of Students' Perceptions of School and Learning

The study aimed at understanding how student teachers, at their initial stages of teacher education, perceive school and teaching as a stage of building their professional identity. The evidence revealed that the course provided space for students to be exposed to diverse and, at times, controversial educational worldviews, which provided fertile ground to promote critical thinking about experiences and frames of references.

The analysis also shows that students envision school as a synergetic system composed of social, educational, and pedagogical components that are interrelated and influence one another. They place "values" as the core component of school vision. Most schools stand out for their cultural, social, and relational sensitivity. Students emphasize affective factors related to pupils' well-being and environmental issues related to community involvement. Schools and teachers have a significant role in forming pupils' identity as autonomous thinkers and leaders of society.

As educators and leaders of the course, we should have been pleased with these findings. Students were engaged in introspection, meaning-making of experiences (Mezirow, 1990), reformation of held beliefs, and construction of new assumptions and learning (Olson, 1988). This endorses the view that "more learning is derived from reflecting on an experience than is derived from the experience itself" (Posner, 1996). This also aligns with the theories of student teachers' processes of learning, which underpin the conceptual framework of this study. Becoming a teacher means deciding how to adapt personal understandings and ideals to institutional demands (Carter & Doyle, 1996). The constant process of reconciling the personal and professional side of being or becoming a teacher characterizes the development of a teacher's professional identity (Alsup, 2006; Olsen, 2010). It is a process of analysis of one's own beliefs and practices that entails the making sense, reinterpretation of one's own values and experiences, and changes in perception. These may cause conflicts and emerge as tensions in the professional identity of student teachers. Warin, Massock, Pell, and Hargreaves (2006) describe such tensions as identity dissonance that may challenge the teacher's personal feelings, values, beliefs, or perceptions and become catalysts or trigger events that precipitate critical reflection and transformation (Mezirow, 1996).

However, the "ideal picture" triggered further and deeper delving into students' texts where we confronted a trend that was both troublesome and an eye-opener. We realized that some of the schools that we analyzed were based on superficial clichés. On one hand, students who, according to their

accounts, experienced tension and dissonance in their belief system arrived at levels of reflection and insights that they would not have reached otherwise. This is what A (Jewish student) and B (an Arab student) who worked as a team on the project wrote:

I understood the benefits of the project and my participation in the course. It helped me think outside the box. I was exposed to different worldviews through my work with M. I learned that dialogue can change viewpoints. This will help me in the future as a teacher in classroom management. I learned how to give constructive feedback and how to bring about an atmosphere of cooperation. (B Arab student)

In the process of doing the project I learned that I need sometimes to compromise. I learned so much about myself. I always knew that I am quite stubborn, but here I realized how dominant it is in my personality. However, I also learned to find spaces for compromise. (A)

On the other hand, students who experienced quite a stress-free relationship with their partners in the process of their project also acknowledged experiences of disagreement and an “out of the box” feeling; yet, the analysis shows that they were not really able to look at their perceived assumptions in a profound and critical way. They used sentences such as *I learned to open up . . . I felt good in spite of disagreements . . .*, which are more of the clichés that we mentioned earlier.

We have found that students who exhibited a strong intellectual and emotional motivation to develop a personal worldview avoided using clichés. During the process of designing the school, they experienced critical introspection into their own beliefs and assumptions, like O who says,

I am in education for a number of years now, but this is my first time I am thinking in a real profound way of my educational ideology. It is sort of a dialogue with myself. I also got stuck when I and my partner reached this point in the project. At this stage we met and started talking about principles and values and how we can bring them alive physically and pedagogically. The joint work provided a lens upon different points of view and how we can bridge the gap and arrive at some sort of understanding.

In the same vein, G says,

I learned so much about myself. I do not want to be just a teacher of a particular subject. I want to know each of my pupils, really know them! I hope to be sensitive to their needs and concerns. I also learned that team work is so empowering. It teaches you how to cope with differences of opinions, it helps you see things you have never thought of.

Students’ personal reflections reinforce studies that suggest the essentiality of critical reflection and a disorienting dilemma as a catalyst for change (Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, studies

that focus on the nature of reflection in relation to transforming learning found that students who critically reflect on “self, other, relationships, and context are more likely to be working towards being authentic” (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). This might explain the differences between students’ levels of meaning-making, where clichés regarding school vision demonstrated superficiality while linkages and synergy of ideas demonstrated complexity and, thus, deeper thinking.

Eisen (2001) investigated peer-learning partnerships and identified a “peer dynamic” and engagement in dialogue with others, which is seen as essential to transforming learning. It seems that the team work on the project enhanced reflection. However, discussions between pairs that represented some sort of dissonance, cultural (Jew/Arab), ideological (religious/secular), or skill (mature/novice) exhibited friction that stimulated them to reflect more profoundly on their frame of references and experiences. These were mainly the students who have not used clichés in their descriptions, but provided a more complex vision of their ideal schools.

Coda: Our Insights

The study sheds light on issues concerning the development of student teachers’ professional identity. It helped us understand how student teachers’ professional identities are shaped during a teacher education program.

In a study that reviewed 29 empirical studies to identify the foci of research on student teachers’ identity, it was found that most reviewed studies failed to describe challenges in research on student teachers’ identities. The author claims that “an idealized picture of findings and leaving the challenges and undesirable outcomes out, tend to lead readers to conclude that identity construction in student teachers is a largely simple and straightforward process” (Izadinia, 2013, p. 709). As a consequence, teacher educators and policy makers fail to recognize the challenges and complexities involved in student teachers identity formation. Thus, the role of teacher education programs to facilitate the promotion of student teachers’ professional development might be minimized (Izadinia, 2013).

Our study draws attention to a tendency of student teachers to use clichés to describe phenomena and to inform teacher educators of their learning and understanding. Being ourselves teacher educators, we would claim that this is sometimes ignored and provides an artificial picture of students’ professional development. We sought to identify features of the clichés that students used and realized that students’ perceptions differed in their level of depth and complexity of describing their ideal school.

The evidence shows that our students encountered multiple worlds (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) in the schools that they visited. This illuminated discontinuities between the multiple worlds and initiated learning and meaning-making, which they then exhibited in their models of the ideal school, yet on different levels of depth.

These notions accord with the theories of productive friction (Ward, Nolen, & Horn, 2011), which argue that field experiences can promote boundaries in which candidates reconcile norms and goals from multiple worlds. These conflicts stimulate them to reflect on their practice in ways that move them toward improving learning. Some students were not able to reach levels of synergetic conceptualization, whereas others could see the whole as greater than the sum of its parts and provide more complex visions.

As we consider teacher education programs to be a crucial factor in the development of student teachers' professional identity (Putnam & Borko, 1997; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998), it would thus help us and other teacher educators to design their programs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

It can be concluded that student teachers at their initial stages of teacher education, who are exposed to dissonances at the boundary between different social worlds, can develop more complex understanding and deep learning if they are provided with contexts that allow such spaces and teacher educators who identify opportunities for conflict and friction (Zeichner, 2010). This approach facilitates critical thinking that can promote depth of understanding and thus personal development and growth.

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