Investigating the Development of Possible Selves in Teacher Education: Candidate Perceptions of Hopes, Fears, and Strategies

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Introduction

Strengthening professional identities is central to teacher professionalism, effectiveness, and quality (Avalos, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Bransford et al., 2005; Johnson, S., Berg, J., & Donaldson, M., 2005; Kagan, 1992). While preparation programs play an integral role in supporting pre-service professional identity development (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 2007), there are limitations that impede the preparation process. Limitations included an often a-theoretical understanding of pre-service teacher professional identity development (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Dyer, 2012; Grossman & Ronfeldt, 2008; Korthagen, 2004; Olsen, 2008; Zeichner & Conklin, 2004; Zeichner, 2005; Zhao, 2011) and insufficient empirical evidence informing teacher preparation pedagogy (Boyd et al., 2009; Hoban, 2007; Korthagen, 2004; Zeichner & Conklin, 2004; Zeichner, 2005; Zhao, 2011).

The current study was designed to ameliorate identified research gaps by applying a theoretical framework that emerged from the psychology of personal growth (Wurf & Markus, 1991) and has only recently been applied to teacher preparation. 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). The theory of possible selves was used as a tool to glean the voice of teacher candidates, a recognized void within teacher education reform (Korthagen et al., 2006), and gather insight into teacher candidate identity development. The theory of possible selves prompted holistic perspectives and provided insight into the dynamic mosaic of influences that shaped identity development and strategies to improve teacher education pedagogy.

Research Questions

Hamman et al. (2010) explored candidate possible selves and uncovered four salient categories of hopes and fears: "interpersonal relationships," "classroom management," "instructional strategies," and "professional qualities" (p. 1359). This study investigated further the four categories using a previously unapplied component of the theory of possible selves to teacher education: strategy development. Strategy development was recognized by Oyserman and Fryberg (2006) as necessary for the achievement of hoped-for selves and the avoidance of feared selves. The second guiding research question explored candidate-suggested teacher education strategies for each salient category (Hamman et al., 2010). Overarching questions included:

1. How do candidates describe and develop hope achievement and fear avoidance strategies in regards to previously identified salient possible selves (Hamman et al., 2010)?
2. How do candidate-identified strategies inform teacher education?

Methodology

The theory of possible selves, as proposed by Marcus and Nurius (1986), served as a framework for all interviews conducted with thirteen candidates and recent graduates from a private university in the Midwest. The researcher utilized results from previous applications of the theory to teacher education and extended findings by employing the strategy development process (Ibarra, 1999). The two-stage study first explored participant self-strategies and then investigated participant suggested strategies for the improvement of teacher education. Participant's proposed strategies related to the previously identified salient teacher selves: future interpersonal relationships, instructional strategies, classroom management, and professionalism (Hamman et al., 2010).

The inquiry process began with the selection of thirteen volunteer participants (Creswell, 2013). Stratified purposeful (Creswell, 2013) selection was utilized to select participants based on their placement in program. Participants were in their final sequence practicum course prior to student teaching, student teaching, completed student teaching, job seeking, or in their first year of teaching. Creswell (2013) recognized that this strategy "illustrates subgroups and facilitates comparisons" (p. 158). Participants were also selected based on established criterion (Creswell, 2013) such as certification (elementary or secondary), academic involvement, and gender. Participants were either currently enrolled or alumni of the researcher's employing institution. Creswell (2013) recognized both the benefits and limitations of such a "convenience sample" (p. 158). The methodology "saves time, money, and effort, but at the expense of information and credibility" (p. 158). However, Male and Murray (2005) recognized the benefit of convenience sampling to promote teacher educator professionalism and self-study research. In order to increase credibility of data and eliminate ethical issues related to an unbalanced sense of power current students of the researcher were removed from quota sampling (Creswell, 2013).

Candidates were interviewed twice in the span of six months to explore context and external experiences (Stake, 1995). Contextual insight was further achieved through the application of purposeful stratified selection. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) recognized that "the logic of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding" (p. 104). Teacher candidates enrolled in the final senior level sequence course (student teaching), successful completers of student teaching, and alumni novice teachers were intentionally selected to closely reflect percentages represented in Feistritzer's (2011) research on the national statistics of traditional teacher education program graduates within the United States. Cohen (1988) defined the reliability of a sample size as "the closeness with which it can be expected to approximate the relevant population value" (p. 6).

Semi-structured interviews drove data acquisition. The theory of possible selves framed the interview structure and additional probing prompts were intended to promote the organic nature of conversation. Application of researcher "constructivist listening" assisted in gaining episode insight (Weissglass, 1990, p. 357). Interviews were transcribed verbatim but because a linguistic analysis was not the focus of the research, false starts and extraneous language were removed.

To ensure an accurate understanding and promote clarity the researcher initiated a member checking process. Transcript excerpts were entered into a summary framework. The summary framework disaggregated transcripts under the four salient categories as described by Hamman et al. (2010) and the essential components of the possible selves theory: hopes, fears, and strategy development. Participants were provided the framework overview and asked to review for accurate interpretation. Once interview notes and member checking feedback were reviewed and catalogued, the coding process began.

Two theoretical frameworks (Ibarra, 1999; Korthagen, 2010) were used to structure coding directives and the analysis process. Two peer reviewers ensured accuracy of coding directives until 100% coder-consensus was achieved. Transcripts were coded utilizing directives and initial coding focused on organizing ideas (Creswell, 2014). The taking apart of data was accomplished through what Stake (1995) identified as the "direct interpretation of the individual instance and through aggregation (coding) of instances until something can be said" (p. 74). The "data analysis spiral" (see Creswell, 2013, p. 183) and constant comparative process (Stake, 1995) was used for further comparing, condensing, synthesizing, and interpreting of data. The data were organized into major codes and sub-codes, and emerging patterns were interpreted.

Discussion of Research Themes

The theory of possible selves as proposed by Marcus and Nurius (1986) posited that knowledge gained from the analysis of possible selves provided "an interpretive framework for making sense of past behavior, it also provides a means-ends pattern for new behavior" (p. 955). Over eighty patterns were generated across all categories. Synthesized patterns resulted in six overarching themes. The subsequent themes addressed Marcus and Nurius' two claims. While the theory of possible selves' framework relied upon future projections, resultant dialogue prompted self-reflection and means-end processes. The following is a discussion of the six themes represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Possible Selves Method Generated Me-Reflection and Means-Development
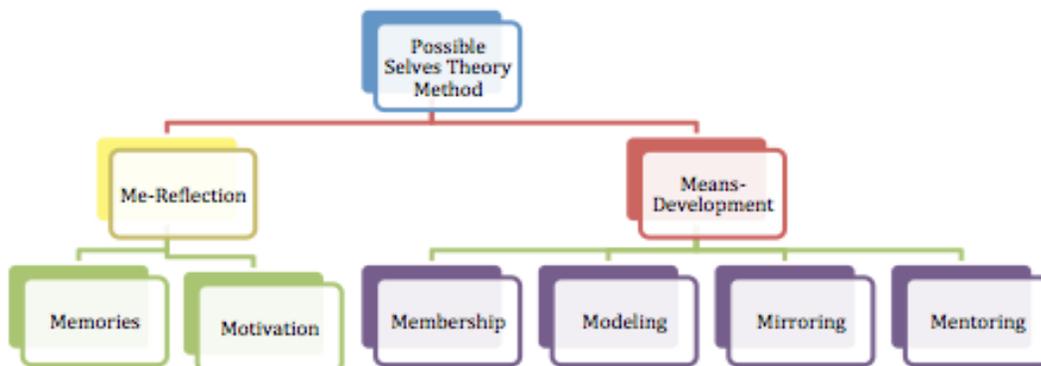
Theme One, Memories: Future Thinking Provided Opportunity for Past Reflection
Participants' past experiences emerged throughout the interview process and across all research questions. Interviews revealed influential interactions with past mentors, peers, students,

teachers, teacher educators, and family members. Identified interactions were noted as having influenced participants' hopes, fears, and the strategy development process.

Theme Two, Motivation: Participant Hopes, Fears and Strategies were Motivated by a Desire to Ensure Achievement of Future Students
All participants shared one common motive across all patterns for research question one, and the majority of participants emphasized the same motive in response to research question two. Every participant articulated more than one strategy that was motivated by ensuring future student achievement. Such student-centered dispositions spanned across all participants despite grade or subject certification and placement within the teacher education program. Participants reported that student achievement was the motivation for collegial interactions, differentiated lessons, reflection, and future professional development. The majority of participants also identified building rapport with students as central to the achievement of future selves related to classroom management.

Theme Three, Membership: Future Self-Strategies are Dependent on Membership within Educational Communities
Participant strategies often relied upon future collegial interactions or the idea of membership within future educational settings. Membership strategies were developed across all categories: interpersonal relationships, instructional strategies, classroom management, and professionalism (Hamman et al., 2010). Participants planned to establish membership within an educational community by participating in collegial collaboration and supporting colleagues in their professional pursuits.   Participants believed collegial support would contribute to personal professional goals and promote student success both behaviorally and academically.

Theme Four, Modeling: Teacher Educator Modeling Influenced the Development of Possible Selves
While participants identified several criteria for teacher educator quality, the majority of participants valued teacher educator modeling of both effective and affective traits. Participants suggested effective traits such as effective instructional strategies, instructional decision-making, and a personal knowledge of the school culture and climate. An additional component also emerged: modeling of affective traits. Teacher educator affective traits were identified by all participants and were noted as influencing professionalism in three ways. First, participants connected teacher educator support to a student-centered orientation and recognized the contribution of such to their own student-centered views of knowledge and learning. Second, teacher educator collaborative modeling through cross-faculty projects and participation in professional organization influenced participant perspectives on future collegiality. Last, participants identified affective attributes such as caring, adaptable, and passionate as an essential component of teacher educator quality.

Theme Five, Mirroring: Observation Played a Minor Role in Future Self-Development
Ibarra's (1999) iterative process recognized that an initial step to self-achievement involved observation of influential others. However, across all analysis for each research question the strategic suggestion to mirror observed behavior was limited.   Only 13% of participants suggested this strategy across all patterns for research question one and 15% for research question two. Moreover, while observation was mentioned it was seldom suggested in isolation or solely for personal self-achievement.

Theme Six, Mentoring: Intentional Clinical Mentoring Experiences Impacted Self-Strategies.
Two teacher education program policies were noted to facilitate intentional clinical mentoring experiences. First, participants identified program policies that emphasized intentional placements within a variety of clinical settings. Diversity of placements was recognized as beneficial in that it exposed participants to a myriad of mentors, teaching styles, and students and was reported to ease fears related to future interpersonal relationships and professionalism. "The seven practicums in general helped me, all the people that you meet and all the professionals that you meet. And having to go and be prepared and meet with seven cooperating teachers".

Second, intentional interactions with clinical mentors were supported by university established practicum evaluations. Participants connected evaluations to the assurance of critical conversations with and feedback from clinical mentors. Such opportunities were cited as aiding participants in the development of an effective reflective practice, influencing perceptions of selves, and enhancing participants' ability to develop strategies for the achievement and avoidance of selves.

Contributions to the Study Teacher Education

The theory of possible selves, as proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986), linked possible selves to increased motivation and to the promotion of change, "both the momentary changes associated with variation in the content of the working self-concept, and more enduring changes" (p. 966). While findings could potentially prompt enduring change within teacher education, the purpose of the study was to enter the often-neglected perspectives of teacher candidates into the arena of teacher education course development (Korthagen et al., 2006), and add to the limited body of knowledge regarding candidate identity development and teacher educator pedagogy.

Past researchers have attempted to frame characteristics of identity development within chronological contexts (e.g., Fuller & Bown, 1975; Kagan, 1990), but such stage theories oversimplified the complex and dynamic nature of identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Gee, 2000-2001; Olsen, 2008; Watzke, 2007) and neglected the myriad of influences that shape professional identity development. The theory of possible selves was applied to prompt participant perspectives on the internal and external influences that shaped their personal professional development. Candidate possible self-perceptions both affirmed and yielded new understandings of professional identity development and effective teacher education pedagogy.

Affirmations of the Current Research
This study affirmed areas of research related to candidates' professional identity development and the application of the theory of possible selves to teacher education. The following is a description of the four identified affirmations of current research.
- Teacher preparation and teacher educators influenced professional identity development (Boyd, Grossman, Loyd, & Wyckoff, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Grossman & Ronfeldt, 2008).
- Clinical mentors shaped candidates' reflective practice (Freese, 2006; Hamman, Lechtenberger, Griffin-Shirley, & Zhou, 2013;).

- Observation played a limited role in candidates' professional identity development (Beijard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006; Lortie, 1975; Pinnegar et al., 2011; Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010).
- The theory of possible selves prompted participants to make explicit implicit beliefs and motives (Markus & Nurius, 1986), a necessary step in altering misconceptions and promoting professional identity development (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

New Understandings from the Study

New data emerged from this study that added to research on both candidate professional identity development and teacher educator pedagogy. First, *secondary participants' strategies emphasized attributes of and limitations to professionalism.* Discrepancies in perceptions, preparation, and professional identity development of secondary versus elementary certified candidates are noted in research (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Hamman, Wang, & Burley, 2013; Watzke, 2007). A quantitative study conducted by Hamman, Wang, and Burley (2013) noted a difference in level of professionalism among those seeking elementary and secondary-level certification. "Participants who were soon to become elementary-level teachers appeared to be professional and to be learning to teach to a greater extent than did their peers seeking secondary-level certification" (p. 229). Such results were shared with other research that noted divergent perspectives between elementary and secondary level candidates in regards to professionalism. Brookhart and Freeman's (1992) review of the literature and Watzke's (2007) longitudinal study of 79 participants revealed that student achievement was the overarching concern of educators; however, there were noted differences in perceptions of care, professionalism, and student interactions between elementary and secondary-level educators (Book & Freeman, 1986; Wilson & Cameron, 1996).

Similar to Brookhart and Freeman (1992) and Watzke (2007), all participants emphasized professional dispositions motivated by student achievement. However, unlike findings that noted a neglect of professionalism among secondary participants (Hamman, Wang, & Burley, 2013), secondary participants in this study articulated almost three times more strategies than elementary participants in the category "future professionalism."

In addition to a numerical comparison of identified strategies, other discrepancies between elementary and secondary participants were noted. Secondary participants' strategies emphasized independent research and the acquisition of content knowledge, while elementary participants reported that they were more likely to utilize trial and error to achieve selves related to future instructional strategies. Furthermore, while elementary participant strategies relied on future collegial support and collaboration for the achievement of selves, secondary participants reported past experiences with isolation and expected this to hinder future selves. Secondary participants also noted regular observation of ineffective instruction in their area of content certification at both the high school and college level. While past studies noted limited levels of professionalism among secondary participants, current findings suggest that secondary participants regard highly future professional selves; however, external influences such as limited observation of modeled effective instruction and disconnected membership within school communities may hinder secondary participants' achievement of professional selves.

Second, *participants held a limited understanding of strategies to establish a strong sense of membership*. The 30% attrition rate of educators within their first three years (Darling Hammond, 2003), and the revolving five-year turnover rate for urban teachers specifically (Peske & Haycock, 2006), spurred researchers to explore contributing factors (Avalos, 2011). While low salaries and student discipline were noted, administrative and collegial support was essential to attrition prevention (Ingersoll, 2001; Feiman-Nesmer, 2003). Though strategic patterns across several categories relied upon collegial support or membership within professional settings, findings from the current study identified a possible program preparation gap. Participants neglected to identify strategies to facilitate effective professional membership, resolve conflict, and ensure administrative support. This is of particular concern as conflict within future educational settings was one of the most noted fears when discussing future "interpersonal relationships." While Korthagen et al. (2006) noted nine principals to improve teacher preparation, there was no mention of the incorporation of skills to successfully navigate interpersonal relationships within future educational communities.

Third, *teacher educator affective traits shaped participants' professional identity development.* Strategies to promote membership and combat conflict may not have been addressed during participants' preparation; however, all identified a factor that shaped perceptions of collegiality and professionalism: teacher educators. Korthagen et al. (2006) noted that "Learning about teaching is enhanced when the teaching and learning approaches advocated in the program are modeled by the teacher educators in their own practice" (p. 1036). While strategies valued teacher educator modeling of instructional strategies, all participants also emphasized affective modeling of professional dispositions.

Teacher educator modeling of affective traits emerged as a theme across all categories and participant interviews. Traits such as rapport building, collegiality, care, adaptability, and a passion for knowledge were noted to influence each component of Korthagen et al.'s (2006) framework for the improvement of teacher preparation. While Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) investigated the impact on effective and affective in-service teacher traits on P-12 student achievement, a recent search for research related to teacher educator affective traits yielded no results.

Implications for Professional Practice
The following implications are examined at the theoretical and practical levels of significance. At the theoretical level of significance, findings were reviewed in connection with literature on identity development and the theory of possible selves. At the practical level of significance, the major findings are discussed in terms of implications for teacher educator professional practice. Implications were based upon the data collected and analyzed concomitantly with research gathered throughout the review of literature.

Theoretical Level of Significance
The findings of this study corroborate the emergent body of research investigating possible selves theory and the impact on professional identity development of pre-service teachers (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Fletcher, 2000; Hong, 2011; Hamman et al., 2013). Products yielded from application of the theory of possible selves are closely tied to the cognitive study of self-identity. Exploration of possible selves linked to what Markus and Nurius (1986) called "affective cognitive structures" or "self-schemas" (p. 955).

Research findings support the utilitarian, investigative, and evaluative qualities of the theory of possible selves for teacher identity development explorations.

First, the theory of possible selves provided a useful framework for the facilitation of future oriented thought. Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that a future oriented perspective should not be neglected. Though future selves have not been "verified or confirmed…it is entirely possible that this variety of self-knowledge also exerts a significant influence on individual functioning" (p. 955). Furthermore, "selves" framed participants' strategic visions for his or her future professional practice. Such vision statements, also referred to by some as "anticipatory reflections" (Conway, 2001; Freese 2006), are noted as essential to professional identity development (Hammerness, 2003; 2005) and are the foundation upon which leadership skills are built (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009). The research design prompted candidates to not only articulate vision statements but to establish action plans for the achievement of aspirations.

Second, data gleaned from individuals' future possible-self disclosures provided perspectives of past and present contextual influences. Markus and Nurius (1986) posited that possible selves served as antecedents or glimpses into one's personal history. Findings support this claim. Though prompted to focus on future selves, all participants discussed past experiences that shaped self-perceptions and influenced the strategy development process. Participants' future-oriented thoughts appeared rooted in past contextual exposure and experiences.

Last, possible selves provided an "evaluative and interpretive context for the current view of self" (Markus & Nurius, p. 955). Participant perceptions of future selves allowed for the evaluation of motivational and self-regulative influences upon goal attainment. Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that future selves represent possible "motives by giving specific cognitive form to the end states, to the associated plans or pathways for achieving them, and to the values and affect associated with them" (p. 961). The primary motive of participants within the current study was to ensure student success. While such affective dispositional issues were noted during an analysis of strategies, perspectives on candidate knowledge and skills were also gleaned from either stated strategies or noted gaps within participant responses. For example, participant articulation of collegial conflict resolution strategies and knowledge of appropriate professional protocol was neglected in the majority of interviews.

Past identity development research within teacher education has either relied upon concerns (e.g., Fuller & Bown, 1975), goals (e.g., Hammerness, 2003; 2005; Pinnegar et al., 2011), or attempts to establish a developmental or stage theory (e.g., Fuller & Bown, 1975; Kagan, 1990). Results from the current study may support an understanding that the identity development process was neither simple nor chronological, but rather a complex and dynamic process impacted by internal dialogue and external influences. The theory of possible selves prompted holistic perspectives and provided insight into the dynamic mosaic of influences that shape the professional identity development of future teachers, thus supporting the utilitarian, investigative, and evaluative qualities of the theory of possible selves in the exploration of teacher identity.

Practical Level of Significance
Teacher educators have faced the challenge of equipping candidates with varied backgrounds, interests, and teaching styles for increasingly diverse classrooms within a culture of shifting technology-induced demands (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005) and changing global and

national initiatives (CAEP, 2013; Zhao, 2011). The teacher preparation task was compounded in complexity due to research gaps related to candidate identity development and effective teacher education pedagogy. Findings from this study addressed these previously identified obstacles. Analysis of participant strategies revealed influences that shaped professional identity development and suggestions to enhance teacher educator pedagogy. Perspectives gleaned provided three practical implications for teacher educator practice.

First, the evaluative nature of the theory of possible selves generated insight into participants' knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Participant articulated and neglected strategies revealed gaps in knowledge and skills. Identified gaps included the use of assessment to support data driven decision making, building classroom community through student-to-student connections, understanding the role and importance of administrative support, collegial conflict resolution strategies, and appropriate professional protocol. Stated strategies revealed participant generalizations regarding the inflexibility, disengagement, and stagnant professionalism of in-service teachers. Such derogatory perceptions combined with the previously identified knowledge gaps could impede future professional relationships. With research noting the vital role of administrative and collegial support in preventing attrition (Ingersoll, 2001; Feiman-Nesmer, 2003), misconceptions should be addressed and strategies introduced to aid candidates in securing professional networks.

Such efforts would support findings related to participant perceived needs. Participant strategies across all categories were heavily reliant on support from and membership in future professional settings. This insight addressed the second practical level of significance for this research. Findings afforded the opportunity to assess participant needs. In addition to membership, identified needs included the incorporation of practicum debriefing discussions, embedded classroom management content, and intentional interactions with effective mentors. Participants valued practicum evaluative tools for the facilitation of mentor conversations.

Disaggregation of data revealed differences in needs between elementary and secondary candidates. Secondary participants desired differentiated case studies, activities, and examples that were relevant to their area and grade level certification. Additionally, secondary participants desired insight into teacher educators' personal philosophies and suggested faculty and mentor articulation of metacognitive processes that drove instructional decision-making. This is of particular interest as the majority of secondary candidates reported an often-obfuscated connection between content and methods courses and reported limited opportunities to observe effective instruction within both university content courses and practicum experiences.

Last, findings raised awareness in regards to teacher educator practice and program initiatives. Lesley et al. (2009) recognized that teacher education is influenced by a "hidden curriculum" (p. 43). The "hidden curriculum" referred to the contextual, ideological, interactive, and quality factors that influenced candidate professionalism. While findings supported an overall positive assessment of preparation quality, a commonly held perception noted in research (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992), analysis of self-strategies allowed for the investigation of teacher education's "hidden curriculum." Participants contributed the personal attainment of several professional qualities to the attributes exhibited by teacher educators such as the use of effective instructional strategies, personal knowledge of the school culture and climate, and modeling of affective traits.

While participant responses revealed the overall quality of teacher education faculty, one area of program neglect was identified. Participant strategies that addressed "program structures and practices" emphasized the provision of collaborative opportunities; however, research strategies were often neglected. The only mention of research skills arose among participants who were exposed to a newly implemented program initiative, the student teaching presentation. Strategies in this instance served as a "bellweather" that provided insight into contextual shifts and changes within the teacher education program (Hamman et al., 2013, p. 224).

Conclusion

Application of the theory of possible selves to teacher education served as an effective tool to understand candidates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions, aided in the identification of participant needs, and allowed for an appraisal of preparation program effectiveness. Findings served to inform teacher educator practice and provided insight into preparation influences on professional identity development. Embedded use of this reflective framework within preparation programs may serve to motivate and regulate candidate actions and create adaptive learners who take ownership of professional development beyond the teacher preparation program.

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