SUPPORTING TEACHER RETENTION AND DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TEACHING POSSIBLE SELVES

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It is a challenge of pre-service teacher education programs to prepare beginning teachers for many of the difficulties they will face in the teaching profession inside and outside of the classroom. The possible selves literature from psychology provides a lens for understanding how to help teachers sustain action towards successful classroom practice. In this paper, I will describe how possible selves is distinct from a similar construct, teacher vision, and outline recommendations for teacher education based in the possible selves literature that are absent from the teacher vision literature.

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Introduction

Enabling teachers to succeed is a challenge that faces the educational system. Teaching itself is a difficult, complex task that requires a large amount of expertise (Lampert, 2001; Lampert et al., 2010). Teachers are situated in a difficult environment that poses many challenges. One of the ways that the difficulties of the teaching profession manifest themselves is through teacher turnover and attrition. Teacher turnover is highest for beginning and highly experienced (usually retiring) teachers and attrition is found to be the highest during the first five years of teaching (Singer & Willet, 1988; Murnane, 1984). In particular, public schools serving high-poverty and/or low-achieving students are more likely to have higher turnover (Hanushek et al., 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Additionally, it is often the best teachers that are likely to leave teaching (Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1989).

The goal of teacher education programs can be thought of as helping teachers transition from pre-service to in-service teachers by preparing them have a long and successful career. An often overlooked aspect of pre-service teacher education is developing an identity as a teacher. In particular, a large part of the transition to becoming a successful classroom teacher includes developing a teaching identity and the practices associated with that identity. In contexts outside of teacher education, such as weight loss and academic achievement, identity-based interventions have been able to affect self-regulatory behavior (Oyserman et al., 2006; Murru & Martin Ginis, 2010). Given the difficulty associated with persisting in the teaching profession, this literature can help us discover new ways to improve teacher education and ease the transition from pre-service to in-service teacher. In the following section, I will review the literature on possible selves and identity-based interventions and discuss how this literature can supplement current research on teacher vision.

Theoretical Background

Possible selves is one way psychologists view the self-concept. Possible selves are a type of self-knowledge that "pertains to how individuals think about their potential and their future" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). As with the dynamic self-concept (Markus & Wurf, 1987), individuals are thought to have multiple possible selves. Some possible selves relate to the people we aspire to be, sometimes referred to as positive possible selves. Other possible selves represent our feared selves, or negative possible selves. Possible selves link identity and motivation together because goals and fears are represented as part of the self-concept. Using this construct can also help us understand changes in actions or practices because “development can be seen as a process of acquiring and then achieving or resisting certain possible selves” (p. 955), which intimately relates possible selves with motivation and self-regulatory processes.
The construct of teacher vision is very similar to teaching possible selves. Hammerness (2006) defines teacher vision as “a set of vivid and concrete images of practice” and as “images of ideal classroom practice” (p. 1). She also explains how vision affects teaching practice:

Vision shapes the way that they feel about their teaching, their students and their school and helps to explain the changes they make in their classrooms, the choices they make in their teaching, and even the decisions they make about their futures as teachers. (Hammerness, 2006, p. 2)

In this way, vision guides the decisions teachers make.

A teacher’s vision is similar to teaching possible selves in many ways. First, both talk about future, possibly achievable selves or roles. Both constructs are seen to have a large impact on the actions that individuals take. However, teacher vision differs by only representing the positive or ideal teaching practice, while possible selves can be both positive and negative. Additionally, an individual is thought to have multiple possible selves, beyond just positive and negative, whereas teacher vision is conceptualized as a singular coherent view of teaching practice. For example, teaching possible selves could include images of practice that are vastly different depending on the context they are working in, but teacher vision would not explain these “inconsistencies.”

Oyserman et al. (2006) assert that possible selves are more likely to be achieved (i.e. sustain self-regulatory action) if they are connected to social identity, linked to concrete strategies to achieve them, cognitively accessible, and balanced between positive and negative. Possible selves that are incongruent with important social identities are less likely to be created and maintained (Oyserman et al., 2006), making possible selves are more achievable when they are connected to social identity. Social identity may include group membership based on race or ethnicity, but may also include professional affiliation. Individuals are also more likely to apply behavior towards a possible self when they have strategies to achieve them, and when those strategies are cued by the context (i.e. the possible selves are cognitively accessible). Finally, both positive and negative possible selves are important for obtaining desired outcomes, but recent research indicates that having balanced possible selves may not be optimal in all contexts. Oyserman and Destin (2011) show that the fit between context and valence of possible selves plays an important role in planned behavior. They argue that in success-prone contexts, positive possible selves and in failure-prone contexts, negative possible selves are more likely to lead to desired self-regulatory behaviors than positive possible selves in failure-prone contexts.

With respect to pre-service teacher education, Hammerness (2006) suggests that teachers have opportunities to surface their visions initially and continually reexamine their vision throughout their teacher preparation program. Pre-service teachers’ visions are somewhat vague, disconnected from the subject matter they will teach, and inconsistent. Commonly, teachers begin pre-service teacher education programs with a vision for instruction that is largely traditional and based on their experience in schools. In the reform context, teacher preparation not only needs to help teachers clarify their existing vision, but it should also challenge teacher vision and provide new possibilities of ideal teaching practice. Hammerness (2006) also argues for the importance of equipping teachers with tools and strategies to manage the gap between their current teaching practice and ability and their vision.

Implications for Teacher Education

Three main differences between the implications from the possible selves literature and the teacher vision literature are discussed below in terms of recommendations for teacher educators.

Congruence with Social Identity

In the possible selves literature we see the importance of relating teaching possible selves to social identity. With teacher vision we do not see explicit mention of ideas related to shared identity. With respect to teaching, various social identities may come into play. Racial and ethnic social identities of teachers may seem relevant to teaching depending on the student and teacher populations found in the school. Social identities related to the teaching profession, such as associating with reform teachers or
teachers concerned with social justice. Each of these social identities may be congruent or incongruent with teaching possible selves.

Ideally teaching possible selves would be congruent with all social identities that are relevant in teaching. In the case of teaching possible selves being incongruent with a teacher’s racial and ethnic social identities, Oyserman et al. (2006) suggests trying to increase the congruence between possible selves and social identity instead of attempting to disconnect teachers from social identity. Teacher educators may wish to be aware of the different social identities pre-service teachers identify with and attempt to show congruence between these identities and the teaching possible selves they are developing.

Teacher educators can also attempt to relate teaching possible selves and social identities about the teaching profession. Teacher education may already support these links because pre-service teachers often take the same classes and share similar visions. Teacher educators can also help pre-service teachers develop professional social identities in tandem with teaching possible selves by exposing them to professional organizations. Even mentor-student teacher relationships could be leveraged to develop affiliation with reform or other teaching groups.

Incorporating Both Positive and Negative Possible Selves

One significant difference in implications is in considering positive and negative possible selves. In the case of possible selves, a balance (or a context-dependent emphasis) of negative and positive possible selves is ideal. In the case of teacher vision, we only see teacher educators developing ideal visions, or positive possible selves. Because teaching can be considered a failure-prone context, negative teaching possible selves are a useful tool in teacher education.

Pre-service teachers have pre-existing ideas of what good and bad instruction looks like from their experience as a student, which are not likely to give pre-service teachers an example of a reform vision of teaching. Mathematics teacher educators often take part of their mission as helping teachers become familiar with reform teaching and possibly developing a vision of teaching that is consistent with reform principles. Developing new visions is also supported by the possible selves literature, but it may not go far enough.

Teachers are rarely given opportunities to clarify negative or feared visions of teaching. For example, teachers may initially have a positive vision of teaching that incorporates elements teacher educators would hope would not be part of the vision after a teacher preparation program. One could imagine that teachers’ vision might include using clear lectures to change student ideas. Without explicitly considering feared visions of teaching, this element may stay associated with positive visions of teaching.

Two mechanisms might be able to explain how developing negative teaching possible selves could lead to more successful teaching practice. Having a clear negative vision of teaching may change teacher noticing (Sherin 2001, 2007) by enabling teachers to notice elements of teaching practice in their negative vision. Teachers may also interpret these practices as something they do not want to do. Additionally, teacher reflection on practice may be influenced. A teacher may focus reflections on elements that are explicit in their visions, whether positive or negative.

Strategies for Achieving Possible Selves

Both constructs examine the need for concrete strategies linked to possible selves or visions, and in the case of teachers this is often conceptualized in terms of strategies to allow teachers to move from their current teaching toward their ideal practice. However, the teacher vision literature does not emphasize that the strategies should be explicitly tied to the vision and be made cognitively accessible, as with the possible selves literature. In addition, making sure that teachers are aware of the entire trajectory of growth toward their vision is not emphasized.

As teacher educators, we often focus only on progress that we would like our teachers to learn by the end of the program, rather than the progress we would like them to make through their beginning years of teaching. Making sure that teachers have concrete strategies for achieving their possible selves could include learning progressions for teachers or progressions of teaching practices that extends beyond...
teacher preparation programs. These learning progressions should be explicitly tied to teacher vision as well.

Strategies for achieving teacher vision could be seen as strategies for responding to challenges and dilemmas teachers face. As was mentioned in the beginning of the paper, teachers face numerous challenges in the classroom as well as outside the classroom, particularly in low-achieving schools. Having strategies to achieve possible selves can be seen as having strategies for overcoming the specific obstacles that arise when attempting to enact teacher vision.

References


