

## Get in the Teacher Zone

### A Perception Study of Preservice Teachers and Their Teacher Identity

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#### Introduction

Teacher attrition has been a global concern for many decades, with teachers leaving the profession at a higher rate than those entering. The largest group effected by this attrition issue is the beginning teacher. (Hong, 2010). In fact in the United States 30-50% of new teachers leave the field within the first five years. Many studies have been conducted to find out why this is occurring year after year and the themes of “demographic characteristics and school contexts” (Hong, 2010,p.1531) often surface. Interestingly, although these themes are popular reasons, neither of them truly clarify how teachers identified with their classroom or daily school experiences, how they internalized the external conditions, or how they perceived themselves as educators. These thoughts need to be investigated to determine if they actually impact the final decision to leave the teaching profession (Hong, 2010).

Hong (2010) researched the retention issue further and reported that in fact “such a career decision tends to be closely associated with

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the teacher's own sense of self and identity as a teacher" (p. 1531). The strength of this identity appeared to be the foundation needed to handle the other issues addressed as reasons for the low beginning-teacher retention rate. He felt it was therefore "essential to focus on the continuously developing teacher identity, which may lie behind the dropout phenomenon" (p. 1531). If this is true then the four real questions teacher preparation faculty need to ask are,

- Are students creating their teacher identity when they establish education as their major of study?
- Are students delaying the creation of their teacher identity not until they enter student teaching or perhaps enter the field as new teachers?
- How can faculty pinpoint the timeframe of engagement in this teacher identity process?
- How can faculty help build the strength of teacher identity for future resiliency in the field?

Becoming a teacher is a long journey through coursework, development of pedagogy, and field experiences. Timostsuk and Ugaste (2010) reported that "learning to teach—like teaching itself—is always the process of becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one was doing, and who one can become" (p. 1563). Therefore it is logical that different courses and experiences impact a student and their development of a teacher identity. Bandura (1997) defined perceived self-efficacy as beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Parker, 2002, p. 935). This relates directly to the field work a pre-service teacher encounters. A minimal amount of hours during method courses do not allow them to see the real picture and "execute" the pedagogy they are learning. It is not until the field work is intertwined into their coursework do they feel that teacher identity process begin. In fact Schmidt (2012) documented that researchers (Clift & Brady, 2005; Richards, 1999) found that "...field experiences that are specifically integrated with method courses have potential for influencing preservice teachers' beliefs and practices" (p. 34). A practicum course with 90 hours of field work embedded into its curriculum can allow this transition to occur. It is therefore this writer's belief that this is the time to focus on the transformation process.

### ***Teacher Identity***

It is important to begin with pinpointing a definition of teacher

identity. Teacher identity has been defined as “an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences that may be influenced by personal, social and cognitive factors” (Flores & Day, 2006, p.220). This definition clearly demonstrates that the teacher identity development occurs over time and truly has no ending point. The constant experiences a teacher has can cause shifts or alterations in this identity both positive and negative. This is similar to how Timostsuk & Ugaste (2010) defined it as “the person’s self-knowledge in teaching-related situations and relationships that manifest themselves in practical professional activities, feelings of belonging and learning experiences” (p. 1564). With all these definitions what is not identified, is the starting point of this process. If it does begin in the teacher preparation program is it during coursework, in the field or both? Perhaps we can consider that, “the preservice teacher learns to reflectively build a praxis for teaching that acts as a personal and theoretical knowledge base.” (Moore, 2003, p. 33). If this is true then this is a more relative definition and preservice preparation is the beginning point for the development of teacher identity. Preservice preparation is a long process and it needs to be investigated where this development begins, and when do the students reflect and internalize their experiences to create the foundation of this professional teacher identity.

### Theoretical Background

#### ***Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)***

#### ***to Zone of Proximal Teacher Development (ZPTD)***

Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was created with child development as his focus. In *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Vygotsky defined ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). It specifically describes how cognitive growth transpires in children with the help of adults or proficient peers. Warford (2011) studied this definition of ZPD and contemplated how that could be related to adults, specifically preservice teachers. From his studies he created the term Zone of Proximal Teacher Development (ZPTD). He defined it as “...the distance between what teacher candidates can do on their own without assistance and a proximal level they might attain through strategically mediated assistance from more capable others (i.e. methods instructor or supervisor)” (p. 253). He felt strongly that if the Vygotskian way was applied in teacher preparation programs it would

lead to conversations between preservice teachers and teachers in the field, qualified as the “adults or capable peers.” These conversations could be the cognitive growth through pedagogy and how to create connections in the field. These early conversations could be considered scaffolding, allowing preservice teachers to begin the cognitive transition from student to teacher, and eventually the beginning of a professional teacher identity. This scaffolding can occur between the preservice teacher, faculty and mentor teachers. The setting for these conversations should be both in the field and the classroom to allow experiences to be reflected upon and internalized. This is because “...a Vygotskian approach to teacher development sees the education of teachers as situated learning” (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011, p. 1551). Pre-service teachers need the field component added to make the cognitive growth from student to future teacher. It gives them that opportunity to reflect on the process and use the experiences toward development of their own teacher identity.

Warford (2011) classified the ZPTD into four categories that mirror those areas of ZPD for children. They included; self-and teacher assistance (stages I & II), internalization (stage III), and recurrence (stage IV). For this paper we focused on stage IV, recurrence, because it is best explained as the “theory into practice” stage. In this stage preservice students are conducting “...the process of accommodating new information into a conceptual understanding” (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011, p. 1552). This stage seemed to be the perfect match to the practicum courses we offer at the university. The preservice teachers are required to take two practicum courses that meet as a three credit campus class and have 90 hours of fieldwork practice imbedded into the coursework as well. They begin in the first practicum with foundations focusing on classroom management and lesson plan development and move into the second practicum focusing on diversity, assessment, unit planning and standard based classroom components. All of these topics are addressed in the classroom and then experienced in the 90 hours of fieldwork. All of their assignments are field based and require the link between coursework and field to complete them successfully. This is the time in the program when students begin to conceptualize all the pedagogy and theory and interact/react to it in the field. They internalize these experiences and use them to begin development their own sense of teacher identity.

This teacher identity and Vygotsky’s ZPTD are a seamless transformation from student to preservice teacher. Van Huizen et al. (2005) supports this when they stated, “From the Vygotskian perspective, the overall aim of a teacher education program is best conceived as the development of professional identity” (p. 275). These authors do not believe the entire process occurs in the teacher education program but it certainly begins

there. The results of this study therefore reinforced Warford (2011) philosophies that a ZPTD could occur in a teacher preparation program. It also confirmed that the first practicum course was the pivotal time to help students begin their transition and teacher identity.

### Purpose

“We consider that initial training was an important time for students to begin to create a solid teacher identity that would support and sustain them in their future profession” (Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010, p. 1563).” This study was created to analyze this philosophy on a deeper level. When does this occur? Are students creating their teacher identity when they establish education as their major of study or not until they enter student teaching? What happens when these students begin their practicum experience and begin substantial field work?

“There is some evidence that coursework and practice have differential impacts on personal and general teaching efficacy” (Erdem & Demirel, 2007, p. 575). At this university, the first time coursework and practice truly come together is during the practicum courses. Students take a variety of method courses in the initial semesters of the program but there are only 30 required hours conducted in the field. These hours are generally observational and do not become a time for application until the practicum semester. It is at this time that they are required to complete 90 hours of fieldwork where they are teaching lessons, working with diverse learners and engaging in the daily routine of the teacher they are assigned to. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if the practicum one course was the time when the impact Erdem and Demirel (2007) addressed actually occurred and perhaps is the pivotal time for the development of the teacher identity. The authors were looking to see if the data came back determining if the field component of practicum had an impact on the teacher identity of a student, and if it did whether it was positive or negative. Our aim was therefore to determine if the completion of a 90 hour practicum experience was the first time education students began to contemplate themselves as teachers. Was there a pivotal shift from coursework completion to development of teacher identity?

### Research Method

#### ***Participants***

We selected the practicum one students, and administered a pre- and post- survey, since this course is the first one to make these connections.

We believed they would provide the most significant feedback for the teacher preparation. 124 students were issued both the pre- and post-survey but only 102 responded to both so we focused on those.

### ***Analysis***

A survey was administered twice to the students who enrolled in the practicum one course, once before entering the course (8 question pre-survey) and once after completing the course (16 question post-survey). While many of the questions were descriptive or demographic in nature, there were 4 questions that pertained to the aim of this study.

Statistical methods were used for one survey question. For Question 8, a paired-sample T-test was used to statistically determine if students were more likely to rate themselves as “Extremely effective” at teaching in the classroom after completing the practicum course as compared to before entering the course. Please note that since not all students entered their identification information, we were only able to match 57 of the survey respondents across the pre- and post-surveys in order to run the statistical analysis. This was relevant when specifically addressing this Question number 8 only.

For two post-survey questions, Question 12 and Question 13, open-ended responses were grouped into categories based on common themes. This qualitative approach allowed us to use these common themes to induce certain conclusions about the students’ experiences.

The final survey question related to the aim of this study (Question 16) asked students to rate their satisfaction level with the practicum experience. Although no statistical methods were used for this survey question, the overwhelming satisfactory response was important in inferring an overall perception of this practicum coursework.

## **Findings and Conclusions**

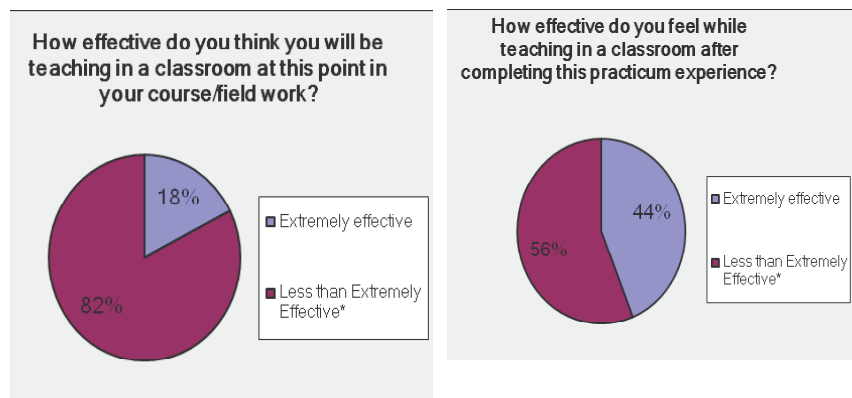
Though the pre-survey asked 8 questions and the post-survey asked 16 questions, we focused on 4 specific questions that related to student perceptions of their practicum experience. We focused on those because they were the questions most relevant to the ideas behind teacher identity. Question 8 asked the practicum students their perception of their effectiveness as a teacher in the classroom. Because not all students entered their identification information, we were only able to match 57 of the survey respondents across the pre- and post-surveys in order to examine the results of this question. Prior to entering the 90-hour practicum course, 18% ( $n=10$ ) of the students surveyed thought they would be “extremely effective” at teaching in the classroom at that point

in their course/field work. However, after completing the course with practicum experience, 44% ( $n=25$ ) of the students believed they would be “extremely effective” at teaching. This represented a statistically significant difference between their pre-survey perception ( $M=0.1754$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ) and their post-survey perception ( $M=0.4386$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ );  $t(56)=-3.60$ ,  $p=0.001$ . Figure 1 illustrates these results, which suggest that the practicum course with embedded fieldwork helps to improve the confidence with regards to a future in the teaching profession, and helps strengthen a professional identity that is still under construction. We only analyzed the matched pairs; we used the pair-sample T-test which looked at those pairs specifically.

Question 12 delved deeper into the field component of practicum. We only received 98 respondents who answered this question. Ninety eight of the 102 respondents posted a non-blank response; the non-blank responses were not counted in the denominator. When asked to describe their most rewarding experience in the field following the practicum, 31% ( $n=30$ ) of respondents replied that it was helping their students learn and seeing the students’ breakthrough moment when they had learned the concept that was taught. In addition, 27% ( $n=26$ ) of respondents mentioned that the real-world, hands-on experience was their most rewarding moment. These two responses, combined with the next two most cited responses (spending time working with students and working with a real teacher), confirm that the field work was a helpful

**Figure 1**

*Perceptions of Classroom Teaching Effectiveness Pre and Post Practicum*



\* This response combines the following responses (Very effective, Moderately effective, Slightly effective, and Not at all effective)



experience that had a positive impact on growing their confidence as well as their teaching efficacy and identity.

<i>Describe your most rewarding experience in the field</i> (n=98)	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Helping students learn and seeing their breakthrough moment	30	31
Real-world teaching; hands-on experience	26	27
Spending time working with students	20	20
Working with a real teacher	10	10
Practice with ELL Students	6	6

We shifted to the college classroom in Question 13 because we wanted to see the connection between the field and the coursework. For this question 91 of the 102 respondents posted a non-blank response; the non-blank responses were not counted in the denominator. When asked to detail their most rewarding experience in the course classroom, 26% (n=23) of respondents expressed that it was the relationships and collaboration they built with their fellow peers, while 24% (n=22) responded that it was receiving direct classroom feedback from the professor. These two responses substantiate the hypothesis that the field work experience (whether with peers or with their professor) helped to begin the development of their professional identity.

<i>Detail the most rewarding experience you enjoyed in the FAU course classroom</i> (n=91)	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Relationships and collaboration with peers	23	25
Receiving classroom feedback from professor	22	24
Overall learning experience	16	18
Classroom discussions	11	12

Finally we wanted to look at an overall perception, whether positive or negative, about the practicum experience as a whole since it was the first time these students experienced this type of course. In Question 16, a large majority of students surveyed (85%, n=87) were extremely satisfied with their practicum experience.

## Discussion

We focused on those 4 specific questions because we believed the responses to those questions would be the most revealing about the



development of teacher identity. The most significant one selected was Question 8 because it asked the students their perceptions about their teacher effectiveness before and after their practicum experience. This clearly linked to teacher identity because it pertains to how they felt about themselves as teachers. The data indicated a statistically significant positive difference between their pre-survey perception and their post-survey perception. Bennett (2013) supported this when he stated, “clear self-image and ownership of an emerging professional identity” (p.55) are necessary for preservice teachers to move from teacher preparation programs into the workplace. After their practicum experience these students had a sense of ownership leading them to feel more effective in the field classroom.

Delving deeper into this fieldwork lead us to analyze Question 12. As indicated the students that responded mentioned that it was helping their students learn and seeing the students’ breakthrough moments when they were teaching that were truly rewarding experiences. In addition, 27% ( $n=26$ ) of respondents mentioned that the real-world, hands-on experiences were also rewarding moments. These rewarding experiences are the actions that shaped these positive perceptions and thoughts of being a teacher. Timostsuk & Ugate (2010) also found this to be true in their study of professional identity of preservice teachers. He concluded that “students fear of failure before starting teaching practice was soon replaced when they sensed support from pupils and began to identify themselves as real teachers” (p. 1567). These preservice teachers cannot begin to see themselves as real teachers until they are experiencing these breakthrough moments and hands-on experiences with real students in the classroom. These two responses, combined with the next two most cited responses (spending time working with students and working with a real teacher), confirm that the field work was a helpful experience that had a positive impact on growing their confidence as well as their teacher identity. Okhremtchouk, et al. (2015) supports this when they found that “practice is the only way to produce effective classroom practioners” (p. 335). It is the idea that preservice students are suddenly viewed as the teacher by their colleagues and students that impacts how they begin to identify themselves.

The fieldwork is clearly essential but we believe it has to also do with the link back to their teacher preparation. Question 13 asked to detail the preservice teachers’ most rewarding experience in the course classroom, 26% ( $n=23$ ) of respondents expressed that it was the relationships and collaboration they built with their fellow peers, while 24% ( $n=22$ ) responded that it was receiving direct classroom feedback from the professor. Based on these responses, it appears that although

the preservice teachers feel more confident in the development of their teacher identity they still value the collaboration and connections they have with their peers and professors. In fact, Timostuk & Ugate (2010) reported that “a perceived successful application of teaching methodologies produced deeply positive experiences” (p. 1566). They still link the knowledge and support from the teacher preparation program to guide them through the growth and development from preservice to teacher.

Finally, we focused on the positive practicum experience as being another link to teacher identity. Teaching is considered an emotional profession and “emotions, play a complex role in the formation of teacher identity” (Zembylas, 2005, p. 936). Most preservice teachers connect with the positive experiences they have in the field. This was identified clearly in Question 16 when a large majority of students surveyed (85%,  $n=87$ ) were extremely satisfied with their practicum experience. Beltman (2015) found when they surveyed preservice teachers that, they felt very emotionally positive during their fieldwork and these experiences would help them be successful in the future creating a positive and happy environment for themselves and their students.

It should also be indicated that most of the students that completed our survey can be documented as enrolling in the next level practicum course, moving toward the completion of their teaching degree.

### Future Implications

With the constant changes occurring in the educational system such as standardization and new measures of accountability, it is essential that beginning teachers enter the profession with a strong teacher identity. Teachers need to be able to answer the question, “Can I be who I am in the classroom?” (Timostuk & Ugaste, 2010, p. 1563). This answer cannot falter or waiver every time the beginning teacher encounters a new mandate. Timostuk & Ugate (2010) firmly believe that “initial training was an important time for students to begin to create a solid teacher identity that would support and sustain them in their future profession” (p. 1563). If the beginning teachers have a strong teacher identity that was created and developed in their teacher preparation, specifically in practicum, they are more likely to stay grounded as the changes occur. “Clarifying the process of professional identity development during teacher preparation could be very helpful for better preparing new teachers for the challenges of their first year” (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011, p. 767).

After this study we believe that we have pinpointed when this begins, so therefore it is time to offer suggestions on how to help guide this

process. The question becomes “How can our teacher educators prepare pre-service teachers that can support the academic progress of pupils whilst simultaneously rethinking their own professional activity?” (Timostsuk & Ugate, 2010, p. 1563). The answer begins with connections. Students need their faculty to help them see how the pedagogy they have learned in their method courses can be applied successfully in the field. “Much like residency for medical doctors, teacher education should function on an apprenticeship model” (Okhremtchouk et al., 2015, p. 336). If we look at practicum and student teaching the residency model truly applies. The students have 180 hours in the field during their two practicum experiences and then over 600 hours in student teaching to practice their craft and develop themselves as the teacher they want to become.

Specifically, the coursework and design of the practicum course needs to be centrally focused on transitioning from a student to a future teacher. “The implication is that the teacher education environment must give careful attention to the conditions that can ensure a fruitful interaction of practice and theory, action and reflection, all geared to developing a professional identity” (Van Huizen, et al., 2005, p. 282). I often tell my students that the shift has begun and they are one-quarter college student required to complete assignments but three-quarter teacher using their field experiences to build the foundational piece of their teacher identity. They need to take every negative and positive experience from the field and internalize them. These experiences will help them begin to develop their teacher identity, who they want to be in the classroom. This clearly links back to our original claim that teacher identity is “an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one’s own values and experiences that may be influenced by personal, social and cognitive factors” (Flores & Day, 2006, p.220).

Most of all, the preservice teachers need that earlier discussed scaffolding during their practicum experiences so they can practice it more accurately during student teaching and moving forward into the teaching profession. The faculty should engage in discussions with the students about these experiences and how they are reflecting upon them. These preservice teachers require the ability to “recognize their beliefs about teacher and teacher identity as multifaceted and malleable and to embrace the uncertainty and possibility of practices that transgress what is and evoke what might be in the school” (Conkling, 2004, p. 12). As one student answered to a particular question in our post-survey, “this is a learning process. Get in a teacher mode, once you leave the experience you see yourself as a teacher not as a student.” Therefore, these authors would like to continue studying ZPTD (Warford, 2011) and how

the first three stages in his theories could be linked to other components of the teacher preparation program. It is the belief of these authors that if these links can be developed between stages and areas of the teacher preparation program, the program can be better developed to build the strength of the pre-service teacher and retain them in the field.

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