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A study of student teachers' reflections on their beliefs, thoughts, and practices

By

M. Mahlios, D. Engstrom, G. Soroka, and D. Massengill Shaw

Abstract:

The purposes of this study were to identify critical events that student teachers encountered and to investigate how the interaction between the characteristics of student teachers and their school environment influences their role-assumption strategies. Twenty-seven student teachers (15 elementary and 12 secondary) in three midwestern communities provided data in the form of prepared journal guides, classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires. Analysis of the data over several phases led to a refined theory of beginning teachers' role-assumption strategies. Perhaps the most significant finding from this study is that the interaction of an individual's needs and perceptions of the salient characteristics of the school and classroom environment results in unique, understandable, and adaptive patterns of behavior aimed not just at the goal of developing competence but at that of contributing to improved school practice. Implications for teacher education, supervision practices, and future research are discussed.

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A study of student teachers' reflections on their beliefs, thoughts, and practices

Student teaching is the beginning point of induction into the teaching profession. As student teachers experience the induction process, they begin to respond in varied ways to the demands and expectations of becoming a teacher. These responses, as part of the socialization process, address the role of teacher in general but take place within the context of a specific set of individual characteristics, institutional constraints and relationships with others. Role negotiation is not a passive process. Rather, students develop strategies as they negotiate their role. These are known as "role assumption strategies" (Lacey, 1977). Specifically, teacher socialization is "the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge – in short the culture – current in groups to which they are, or seek to become, a member" (Lacey, 1977, p. 13). Research on teacher socialization has focused on influences of teacher candidates before they enroll in the teacher education program, influences during the preparatory program, and during their first few years of teaching (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Another body of research has investigated the role of beliefs when learning to teach (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Too often studies in this area can be characterized as yielding only artifactual data on novice teachers' professional development. Future research needs to go beyond simplistic conceptualizations of socialization and add to our broader understanding of the complex process of becoming a teacher. A richer, dialectical approach to research should provide a more comprehensive framework from which to view the complex interaction that occurs between

an individual and environment during the socialization process. Such research should account for beginning teachers who fit the norm as well as for those who do not. Finally, additional research is needed to examine, refine and integrate the developmental socialization models that have already been produced and verified empirically. Research on beginning teachers, in general, has started from the assumption that student teachers are passive recipients of teaching knowledge, professional behaviors and skills rather than active agents in their own socialization. In an effort to address some of these issues the present study was designed to answer two questions.

1. What significant teaching/schooling events are encountered by student teachers?
2. How does the interaction between characteristics of individual student teachers and their school environment influence role assumption strategies?

Literature Review

The theoretical framework for examining teachers' beliefs was Zeichner and Gore's (1990) theory of teacher socialization. This theory holds that an individual becomes a participating member in the society of teachers through a process that is influenced by pre-training experiences as a pupil, formal pre-service teacher education and in-service years of teaching. Academic analysis alone is insufficient for encouraging personal responses to beliefs; teacher candidates become socialized into the profession during the practice teaching component. Meaning is derived through social interaction between persons and modified through a largely internal process of interpretation. Becoming a professional teacher is an interactive, dynamic and interpretive process between the meaning making of novice teachers in relation to the context of their teacher education program and the context of their actual practice. This theory of teacher socialization promotes coalescence and coherence between thought and action.

The influences of three stages of teaching careers are important to understanding teacher socialization literature (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). The first stage is before teacher candidates enter the teacher education program. The second stage occurs while they are enrolled in the preparatory program and the third and final stage is during the first few years of in-service teaching. Pre-training influences may be categorized as evolutionary, psychoanalytic and apprenticeship of observation. The evolutionary explanation, although typically ignored by scholars, emphasizes a set of predispositions displayed in various degrees by all teachers. Second, the psychoanalytic view, focuses on the quality of prior relationships the teacher candidates had as children with their parents and teachers. Third, the “apprenticeship of observation,” a term coined by Lortie (1975) highlights the years the teacher candidates spent as pupils. Earlier role models and mentors play a powerful role in the development of preservice teachers.

The second stage, preservice teacher education, also has three major components. First is the general education courses required of teacher candidates outside of the school of education. A global trend appears that attending college results in a liberalization of values, reasoning of moral issues, and increase in cognition (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Second, is the methods and foundations courses presented by teacher educators. These classes appear to have little influence on preservice teachers (Ashton, 1991; Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). Third is the field-based experience. Little is known about the quality of these experiences and the components within them that relate to socialization outcomes (Gold, 1996; Howey, 1996).

There is little question that the third stage, in-service years of teaching, influences teacher socialization. Some of the identifiable factors are pupil-teacher ratio, resources, time, pupil

knowledge and behavior, teaching colleagues and evaluators. Much is to be learned about how the specific characteristics form the teacher's socializing process (Gold, 1996).

A number of studies have shown the resilience of the pre-service teachers' beliefs; their strongly-held ideas significantly affect what and how they internalize the content of the teacher education program (Author, 2005; Britzman, 1991; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Zeichner and Tabachnick, 1981). Findings from this line of research have indicated that teacher education programs and university preparation have minimal overall impact; pre-service teachers appeared to align their opinions with the prevailing university culture though later surveys reflected no true change in beliefs. The pre-service experiences appeared to provide a veneer-type layer that for the most part evaporated during in-school work. Bullough, Knowles and Crow (1992) and Butt and Raymond (1987) asserted that these held beliefs of pre-service teachers influence how teachers think, act and view the teaching experience. More recently, Richardson and Placier (2001) wrote, "What we see expressed in the current studies of teacher education is the difficulty in changing the type of tacit beliefs and understanding that lie buried in a person's being" (p. 915). Too often, ideas and views of pre-service teachers have been ignored (Carter, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, Kagan, 1992). Pajares (1992) stated that the lack of consideration of pre-service teachers' beliefs may be one possible cause for outdated and ineffective teaching practices. Consequently, he recommended that their beliefs should be recognized, valued and acted upon by teacher educators.

Method

Participants

Twenty-seven student teachers (15 elementary and 12 secondary) in three Midwestern communities participated in the study. From these, six were selected for follow-up interviews.

Students in this sub sample were stratified on school level (elementary/secondary), but not age, gender, experience, teaching area, background or school assignment characteristics. It was assumed that these differences might contribute to the possible identification of theoretical categories, properties and linkages among them. All participants participated voluntarily.

Research Methodology & Data Sources

The research methodology employed combined elements of stimulated recall (Peterson, Swing, Stark & Waas, 1983), observation, and case study/ethnographic techniques (Merriam, 2001). Data were gathered from a structured journal guide, field notes, classroom observations, a questionnaire and interviews.

Journals were designed to facilitate recall of significant events in the student teaching experience that students encountered and to assist them in reflecting on the personal/professional meaning these events held for them (Appendix A). These journal guides were the source for the initial set of data gathered and produced approximately 1200 useable entries. All events were then examined for discrete thought units yielding 1098 useable thought units for subsequent analysis. Initial analyses of the thought units followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1998) and yielded fourteen subcategories (see Table 1) that were subsequently subsumed under seven larger context variables (Zeichner & Tabachnick 1984) in two major divisions (social context and instructional context variables). A content analysis technique (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) was used to identify how the needs of students were related to context variables, students' perceptions of role behavior, and the social strategy engaged in by students during their teaching.

Observations of classroom teaching were conducted for each of the 27 students in the study. The observation procedures generally followed a clinical supervision model, in which additional knowledge of each student was obtained through post-observation conferences. Observations were conducted for approximately an hour per week for each student teacher. The researchers also conducted weekly seminars with the students in the sample that allowed for the gathering of additional data on the variables examined.

Interviews (appendix B) were conducted with six students, one elementary and one secondary, at each of three social strategy levels as defined by Lacey (1977) to validate need, context, perception and social strategy variables. Through model testing, relationship among the variable structures and the structure underlying their linkages was sought. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and coded. In addition, students were administered a questionnaire (Appendix C) that sought additional self-report information on the context variables.

All data were gathered during one academic year, coded and arranged into the four major variable categories (needs, context, perceptions, and social strategy) described above. Analysis of the data over several phases led to a refined substantive theory of role assumption strategies based upon the earlier work of Gehrke and Yamamoto (1978) who articulated a basic theory of teacher role personalization.

Results & Discussion

Four sets of factors are suggested by the data to account for the way student teachers interpreted the events of their student teaching experiences and fit these into their teaching role expectations and behaviors. The factors are: 1) needs, 2) context variables 3) perceptions and 4) social strategies. (insert Figure 1 about here). The four categories are seen as being interrelated and to an extent sequential; the model begins with internal aspects (needs) and progresses toward

behaviors (social strategies) based on both external and internal factors. Basic needs of the student teachers were evidenced in their efforts to make sense of their classroom experiences. These classroom events were divided into two general classes: events that were consistent with their pre-student teaching expectations and those that were inconsistent with their expectations (dissonant events). The student teachers' perceptions of their instructional settings led to the fourth category, social strategies. The social strategies were seen as the means by which the student teachers could bring dissonant perceptions of the classroom into a cognitive framework consistent with their view of reality or seek changes in the environment that was more consonant with their views of teaching. What follows is a description of the results and a discussion of the four factors.

Factor 1: Student Teachers Needs

Useful in interpreting the results of this study, were four need categories described by Gehrke and Yamamoto (1978): respect, liking, belonging and competence. Each of these four needs was exhibited by the teachers in this study. Student teachers indicated the need for respect with a statement such as "I'm glad she (the substitute teacher) looked at me as a teacher and not just a student teacher." Another student teacher wrote about the lack of respect he felt: "Student teachers are still looked upon by the students as just that – temporary help! I have found that my class does not take me totally seriously." The need for liking was evident in statements such as, "In a way it is nice to know a child feels free to come up to me and talk," and "It (a student stopping by) makes me feel like some of the kids really do like me as a person." The third need, the need for belonging, was more evident than the previously mentioned needs. The desire to belong and feel a part of the school setting were indicated by statements like "The principal sat down and just started talking about football and asked how everything was going. He made me feel very comfortable and like a regular member of the staff." "I really felt professional when we

were working together” said one participant. Another student wrote, “Other teachers are interested in how I’m doing in the classroom. Everyone is very close. It’s neat.”

Consistent with Gehrke and Yamamoto’s findings, the need for competence was by far the most pervasive of the four needs evidenced. The student teachers expressed this need with comments like, “My reading group went well—I was really pleased with myself.” “I felt honored the sub left a note saying what a good job I’d done. Having the whole classroom, I felt like a million bucks.” Gehrke and Yamamoto (1978) pointed out “...the need for a sense of competence is one supported by the fulfillment of the first three needs, but is not limited to them” (p. 4-5). This view is one supported by the comments made by the students in this study. A fifth need category evident from the data (but not noted by Gehrke & Yamamoto earlier) was the need to “make things better.” The number of occurrences of this need suggested to the researchers that it serves as an important driving force in student teachers’ decision making processes. The need to “make things better” was evident in statements such as, “We are here for the students and need to consider the students’ needs before our own wishes.” Students were genuinely interested in improving their school settings, helping students learn to the best of their ability and to give their talents to society. These student teachers felt that they had contributions to make and the world would become a better place because of their activity in it.

These five major motivational needs appeared to be important forces behind student teacher attempts to make sense of what they observed and encountered in their student teaching experiences. The major events and the context of these events were a second area of investigation in this study.

Factor 2: Context Variables Influencing Student Teachers' Actions

Two sets of context variables (social & instructional) were identified through analysis of the thought units expressed in the student teachers' journals. The first set included five social context variables that were adapted from Zeichner and Tabachnick (1984). They were school ethos and tradition, teacher culture, student culture, parental expectations, and materials constraints, plus a sixth variable "self as teacher" that also emerged from the data. The second set of variables was identified from the data and termed Instructional Context Variables and included planning and teaching, which incorporated instructional strategies, and discipline/classroom management.

Table 1 summarizes the seven context variables. Of the 1098 code able thought units, 435 or 40 percent of the items, were related to instructional strategies and discipline/classroom management. Student culture and teacher culture each accounted for 17 percent of the items. Self as Teacher accounted for 10 percent of the items; school ethos and tradition 8 percent and material constraints and parental expectations 6 and 2 percent respectively. A brief overview of the three most salient context variables is described below followed by additional interpretation.

Planning and teaching. These data suggest that student teachers reflected most on instructional strategies followed by discipline and classroom management. The student teachers appeared to have directed most of their energies toward understanding the nature of instruction and ways of manipulating the environment to improve learning settings. Such a focus reinforced the idea of the student teachers' need for competence as a primary driving force.

Teacher culture. The student teachers evidently felt the influence of other professionals and their cooperating teachers to be important context variables, although they appeared to be secondary to the need for a sense of instructional competence.

Student culture. Understanding the student culture also accounted for a large percentage of the thought units in the student teachers' journals. This seems consistent with student teacher needs to be liked and respected. More likely, however, this reflected their need for competence. Most of the items in this category had to do with the student teachers' desire to get to know their students and to understand their learning characteristics as a means to tailor instruction.

Additional analyses indicate that material constraints did not seem significant to the student teachers in this study. This may have been due to the generally well equipped and staffed schools that characterized their placements. District and building level concerns appear to be more significant to the student teachers than the material constraints of the classroom settings. Scheduling problems, playground procedures, lunchroom policies and other such concerns regularly gave student teachers reasons to question whether student and teacher needs were being met.

Another noteworthy aspect of the findings was the extent to which student teachers consciously reflected about themselves in their roles as professional educators. The student teachers often reflected on why they entered the profession, what the future held for them as teachers, and how they would be able to manage their personal lives to keep up with the many demands of teaching. It was clear from many of the journal entries that student teachers were entering the field because they believed they had abilities that they wanted to share. They also expressed concern about lack of employment opportunities, low pay, long hours and wondered how long they could maintain the idealism under such conditions. In general, however, their tone was upbeat and they expressed a commitment to contribute their best efforts.

Factor 3: Student Teachers' Perceptions

The student teachers' emerging perceptions of themselves and their teaching settings

were seen as resulting from efforts to satisfy needs within the context of teaching assignments. The four teacher perceptions described by Gehrke and Yamamoto (1978) were evident in data collected through journals, interviews and observations. The four perception categories are concept of self, the role ideal, problems, and perceptions of others.

When a teacher education program or actual teaching situation conflicts with their emerging perceptions of themselves as teachers and especially when one or more of the needs are unmet, optimal development of their teacher role is lessened. The student teacher then must renegotiate their perceptions and thereby create a unique teacher-self that is influenced by others but still “a creative product unlike any other” (Gehrke, 1987, p. 20).

Factor 4: Social Strategies

Lacey's (1977) social strategy categories were used as a means of conceptualizing the behaviors of student teachers in relation to the other variables in the model. Journal entries were examined for evidence of Internalized Adjustment (IA), Strategic Compliance (SC), and Strategic Redefinition (SR). Internalized adjustment (IA) is when the individual complies with the constraints, typically because the individual believes the constraints of the situation are for the best. Strategic compliance (SC) occurs when the individual outwardly complies with the constraints of the situation but internally experiences reservations about the constraints. Strategic redefinition (SR) implies that change occurs when individuals who lack power enable or cause people with power to change their interpretation of what is happening in the situation.

Analysis of the journals yielded evidence of all three strategies. Table 1 displays occurrences of each strategy. Also indicated in Table 1 are two other entry categories. A No Action (NA) category was formed to account for entries where the student teachers encountered cognitive dissonance, but did not express dissatisfaction or indicate that they would change or

redefine the situation in any way. The no action category suggested to the researchers that the students had encountered something unexpected and learned from the encounter. A Description (DES) category was used to denote the items descriptive of the school setting, student teachers' views, actions of others, and classroom experiences. No dissonance was indicated in the items placed in the Description category. Many times students described things that they enjoyed or learned that were already consistent with their existing perceptions and expectations of schooling.

An analysis of the dissonant and non-dissonant thought units indicated that 760, roughly two thirds of the items, fell into the description category. This suggested that most of the significant student teachers' experiences were consistent with their existing perceptions. Just under one third, 338 items were dissonant. The majority of these items (42%) fell into the no action category, which indicated that the students were learning new things and had not yet formulated opinions that were firm enough to be expressed in their journals. The remaining 58% of the dissonant items were codeable using the Lacey categories. Twenty one percent were coded as individual adjustment in which the students conformed to situations or expectations and felt they were for the best although they did not necessarily like or agree with them. Strategic compliance was the strategy employed in 98 (29%) of the coded dissonance items. The existing district/building level policies, the teacher culture, and planning and teaching were the three context variables where most of the compliant strategies occurred. It was evident that most student teachers felt that they did not have the power or energy to change many things in their school settings. The final Lacey category of strategic redefinition was evident in only 17 (8%) of the dissonant items. Student teachers confined most redefining efforts to planning and teaching activities. It is not surprising that efforts to redefine situations would be related to classroom teaching situations. They need to be competent in teaching situations, to make the learning

environment better and the need for respect seemed to be the most compelling reasons underlying redefinition efforts. An additional reason may be related to the amount of control available to the student teacher in classroom instruction. The need for belonging in the school setting helps explain why students made few significant efforts to redefine other context variables—particularly those relating to teacher culture, school ethos and tradition.

The individual journals of the students were examined to determine if students had preferred social strategies. Students used a variety of social strategies in various settings; however, some acted in ways that exemplified one of Lacey's IA, SC, and SR social strategies. Three of the student teachers were selected as exhibiting various social strategies and attempts were made to identify connections among needs, contexts, perceptions and social strategies to illustrate the proposed model.

Amy—Evidence of Individualized Adjustment

Amy taught a fourth grade classroom in a suburban setting. Her classroom was in an open environment with opportunities to plan with other teachers as a part of an instructional team. Amy came into her student teaching assignment with a good deal of confidence. She felt competent and indicated:

I wanted to go in and have them be able to depend on me and not have to tell me every single thing they wanted me to do. So I think that I took the initiative a lot and wasn't afraid to ask questions....

Amy's view of the context variables in her teaching assignment was positive in most regards.

Of the other teachers she said:

My opinion was respected...and if my idea wasn't one that appealed to them they wouldn't subtly say, well now that's no good, they would tell me how they felt and what they

thought worked...when someone else would throw something out they would treat that person the same way. I think the situation I was in was really unique. There were five really dedicated to their job. It was not an eight to five job for them. It was their life, their career, they were really dedicated and they worked well together....

Amy also enjoyed working with the students and felt that the students enjoyed and benefited from their work with her. The material constraints of her school setting were minimal.

Amy's perception of her school setting was positive. She had a positive perception of her own skills and abilities and these were reinforced by the other teachers and other professionals around her. The classroom setting was identical to how she imagined she would operate her own classroom—it would be open, free-flowing and students would be able to make many choices. Problems were perceived to be manageable. Her confidence in her ability to address problems was reflected by her statement that “You can subtly get things changed around no matter who you're working with I think.” She conceded that while policies of principals or school districts could limit teacher's flexibility, she did not perceive this to be true in her setting. Amy felt that the cooperating teacher afforded her sufficient freedom to make choices. Amy indicated that “We had a really good relationship. She was never domineering...I didn't feel like I had to follow any of her procedures at all. I felt like I was an equal to her.”

The predominant social strategy that Amy employed was one of internalized adjustment. An example of this was: “I was leery of team-teaching settings. I preferred self-contained teaching. Now however, my outlook has changed. I really am impressed with the planning and sharing that is possible. I'm excited to give it my best shot.”

Amy's use of this particular strategy is not surprising in that there generally appeared to be a high degree of consistency between her own views and those held by her cooperating teacher and

the other professionals in her teaching environment. There were few things for her to disagree with, comply with, or redefine due to the openness and freedom that characterized the setting.

Laura—Evidence of Strategic Compliance

Laura student taught in the social studies department of a large inner city high school. Laura exhibited a mixed set of needs at the start of her experience, but appeared to develop a sense of competence over the course of her teaching. In a number of ways Laura exhibited strong needs for liking, belonging, and respect. Some of these needs are evident in her statements below:

Lack of competence – “You know I had forgotten a lot of my history and I needed to relearn all of it while I taught it and I thought, oh my god, I’m just stupid.” “Well I guess I’m going to look like some unrealistic student teacher who is all wet behind the ears and make a fool out of myself.” “[You] know, I had somebody even comment that they really enjoyed my classes, that I could bring things close to their level... I had very little if no discipline problems.”

Liking—“I had a couple students who had personal problems and came to me and that really made me feel good.” “I didn’t want my cooperating teacher to be totally offended by me and hate me.” “(A student) said, ‘Well I’m going to miss you.’ And I thought, ‘Oh my god.’ I could have cried.”

Laura generally regarded the context variables within the student teaching setting in a negative manner. The school ethos and traditions were not to her liking; they were too traditional. She had difficulty feeling like she belonged. The teacher culture was distinctly negative for her. She indicated the following about members of the social studies department: “No one seemed concerned at all about multicultural [or] gender fair, anything. That really drove me nuts at first. I talked to my cooperating teacher about [these issues]... and he didn’t seem to care.”

She described some students as "... extremely apathetic and had very short attention spans." "For the most part the kids that I worked with didn't care what was going on. I gave a small quiz... I had over 70 kids fail and that's at 51 percent being a D minus."

Material constraints affected Laura's teaching in that she had to deal with rather large classes. She stated, "It was really hard to do a whole lot of individual work when you had 34 kids in a class." She felt that the school size in general had a negative impact on her instruction.

Provisioning of classes was also a problem. She described some of her classroom materials:

Everybody always told me how hard it is to get materials and I realized after I was there that it is almost impossible sometime to get new materials, and they're using materials that are ancient and a map that is 30 years old hanging on the wall, about ready to fall apart. They've tried quite a few years to get a new one and still don't have one.

The context variables within Laura's school were viewed as less than desirable. Laura's perceptions of herself were a mixture of competence and insecurity. She felt secure in her view that the department needed to become more culturally and socially aware. Yet she feared that she would appear foolish to others if she spoke up for her views. In many respects the content that was taught in her classroom setting was different from her ideal, however, in other respects she would select many of the same methods employed by her cooperating teacher. She perceived the source of most of her problems to be caused by factors outside herself. She believed that other professionals in her setting saw her as an inexperienced newcomer who would soon lose her idealism. Her comments suggested that she did not have a strong sense of belonging, nor did she express much respect for the views of her colleagues.

A dominant characteristic of Laura's socialization strategy was to keep her negative feelings about her setting from her co-workers. The following example illustrates how Laura employed a social tactic of strategic compliance.

I found out that getting materials into the text book does not automatically mean that it gets into the classroom. The men [teachers] made fun of 'women's' contributions' section of the book. I don't think they would pay attention to the rebuttal of a student teacher.

Laura's tendency toward a strategy of compliance could be explained in part by a strong need to remain liked by her peers even though she felt that their approaches and beliefs may have been less effective or noble than her own. Her need for liking was reflected in her final comments about her cooperating teacher's evaluation of her.

Yes, and he gave me a very good recommendation. A lot better than I thought it would be. I downgrade myself a lot and I'm not one who can take praise easily. If they say, you're doing a good job, I'd say "Well, oh yes, I could do better." You know I don't take compliments very well. But I felt really good afterwards.

Overall the context in which Laura worked was seen by her as overwhelming and she felt that her efforts at possible changes would be ineffective or thwarted.

Sarah—Evidence of Strategic Redefinition

Sarah student taught in a middle school special education class in an urban setting. She came to her student teaching experience with a great deal of confidence. Sarah explained, "I was ready for student teaching. I was excited and ready to feel like part of the faculty. "I went in as a professional not as a brand new person wondering what was going on."

One of Sarah's expressed needs was having a sense of belonging. She was new to the community and was feeling "isolated from everything." She noted how much she enjoyed the

spirit of the faculty at school gatherings, that she was made to feel a part of the community and that it eventually felt good to be accepted by the students as their teacher.

Sarah's need to maintain her sense of competence was a recurring theme. In a number of instances she encountered difficulties with the context of her student teaching setting. The school ethos and traditions had appeared to have neither a positive or negative influence. Despite her liking the spirit of the teachers, the teacher culture had a negative influence. She strongly questioned her cooperating teacher's lack of advance planning. She wrote:

We spent several moments (in just the first two days) with nothing planned and sometimes nothing to do. I tried to think of things to do— but often we didn't have the materials. ...I felt we weren't earning our respect—and we were cheating the students.

While she was dissatisfied with her own classroom situation she was encouraged by the extra time others spent preparing outside of class. Sarah indicated that:

I feel very proud to be working with people who are serious about education! I admire and want to follow their model! My decision to teach and my own attitude and values were reinforced by these teachers' actions.

On other occasions she described a few teachers as being rude and acting very unprofessionally. She questioned whether the principal truly supported the special education program, but she did not feel her personal effort to improve the setting would be supported.

The students in her mental disabilities classroom were characterized by short attention spans, frequent misbehavior and being sent to the principal's office. Some received detentions, one was given an out of school suspension. She indicated that a few had particularly poor attitudes and had behavior to match.

On a least two occasions Sarah found herself on the defensive trying to justify her work with students to parents. On both occasions she indicated that she felt she handled herself well and had helped the parents gain a better understanding of their child's work.

Material constraints impacted on Sarah's work from the standpoint that her class was overenrolled.

I don't like having so many students—It gets to be a weird situation... I don't like it!

Today I feel like I probably didn't teach a thing...No one (well some do) works independently. They all demand attention and some legitimately need your attention often...I just feel I could do so much better with half as many students.

Sarah continued to maintain a positive view of her skills and abilities and drew support from another student teacher and friends that she visited occasionally. Sarah was very much concerned about being made to look inadequate and disliked that feeling that the cooperating teachers' disorganization and lack of planning would reflect badly on her.

There were a number of things that Sarah wanted to change about her classroom setting. Problems she encountered in her classroom were the "non-caring" students, classroom overcrowding, lack of planning, and lack of classroom structure. In particular, she felt a need to provide students with a more structured learning environment, and also felt there was a need for more emphasis on reinforcing students' positive classroom behavior. She perceived the source of the classroom's problems to have been caused by others, primarily the cooperating teacher. Although she liked the cooperating teacher as a person, she perceived her to be unsupportive professionally. This lack of support had one positive outcome—freedom.

In a number of instances Sarah exhibited several strategic redefinition strategies. In one case she instituted a new positive reward system that she felt "...changed a lot of the way we did things. It changed a lot of attitudes." Sarah gave some of the background about the change:

I was dissatisfied with the present system and when I discussed it with my [cooperating teacher] she also thought it was less than adequate—that she was keeping people after school and the same people all the time and the ones who were behaving got no reinforcement whatsoever because all the time was being spent on negative behavior.

Sarah's efforts to redefine a major aspect of the classroom's operating procedure were effective. It grew out of her dissatisfaction with the classroom setting, her need for competence, and the freedom to act that was afforded her. The new system helped her to feel that she was making a positive contribution to the students' education and probably helped her to feel competent in a situation that was, in her view, a "poor excuse for education."

Conclusions

The two research questions stated earlier may be partially answered by the findings from the present study. Regarding question one, it appears that the school context student teachers encounter during their initial teaching experience is similar and yet different from what it is generally thought to be. Rather than being preoccupied with discipline matters, student teachers in this study were principally concerned with planning and teaching, then management issues, followed closely by student and teacher subcultures. The significance of these factors for students, however, derived from the relation of events - context variables - to student teacher needs and resultant perceptions and the social strategies employed. Regarding question two, then it seems clear that students' role assumption behaviors are, in part, a function of the complex arrangement of self-in-context actively seeking to meet personal and professional needs. As we have seen, any

given repertoire of behaviors is functional, purposeful and appropriate to the extent that they enable the beginning teacher to move closer to a sense of professional competence. There are many routes, many degrees of and definitions of competence for teachers. The paths selected may be better understood and facilitated if the elements and their linkages are viewed as an integrated system, even though the frame for relating the elements is multi-perspectival and transitory (Bullough, Knowles & Crow, 1992; Goffman, 1974).

It further appears from this study that the interaction of an individual's needs and perceptions with the salient characteristics of the school/classroom environment results in unique, understandable and adaptive patterns of behavior aimed not just at the goal of developing competence but contributing to improved school practice. Typologizing students by the behavior patterns they display at any given time is held to be unwarranted. Rather, it appears that an individual will adopt a particular strategy as a function of need disposition at a given time in relation to the context in which they operate, and the perceptions they hold on self-in-context.

Implications

Little is generally known about professional socialization processes. A review of socialization processes (Zeichner & Gore, 1990) has guided our thinking about this process, yet few, if any such studies have afforded an adequate explanation for the unique approaches engaged in by individual teachers. This is especially true at the student teaching stage, when the unique and complex environment of the student teacher's experience is taken into consideration and when the student is viewed as an active agent, aggressively seeking to provide shape and meaning to the initial teaching experience. This nonfunctionalist, interactionalist notion of professional socialization affords a possible explanation for the varied social strategies engaged in by the students in this study and adds support to Gehrke and Yamamoto's (1978) observations that: "Each

unique environment affects the role personalization of the teachers in it. No role is enacted in a vacuum” (p.10). Simply stated, the role behaviors of student teachers are enacted in unique patterns as a function of the interaction of their needs, contexts for teaching, role perceptions/perspectives and social strategies available to them.

Teacher preparation programs presently suffer from, among other things, over simplified notions of how beginning teachers engage, and provide shape and meaning to, their professional development. Rather than assuming that students are passive and indifferent on such matters, teacher educators can be more effective in maximizing the growth of students by more formally accommodating the multiple dimensions of the socialization process and by including appropriate contributions of students into their decisions about their teaching and development. Through reflective analysis of self, critical events, contexts, perceptions and behavior patterns, students and their supervisors/mentors can more carefully construct induction experiences that may lead to more desired growth. On balance, teacher educators continue to overlook the contributions that student teachers can make formally to their own development (Yonemura 1982) and need to design programmatic mechanisms for incorporating students' contributions to their individual growth.

Results of the present study not only provide general support for a model of role personalization (e.g., Gehrke & Yamamoto, 1978) but point to a means for identifying unique strategies within the student teaching setting that students follow as a function of the unique juxtaposition of elements within it. Such knowledge needs additional verification, through research, in order for applications to supervision models and teacher education program designs to be made.

Figure 1. A Model of Role Assumption Strategies

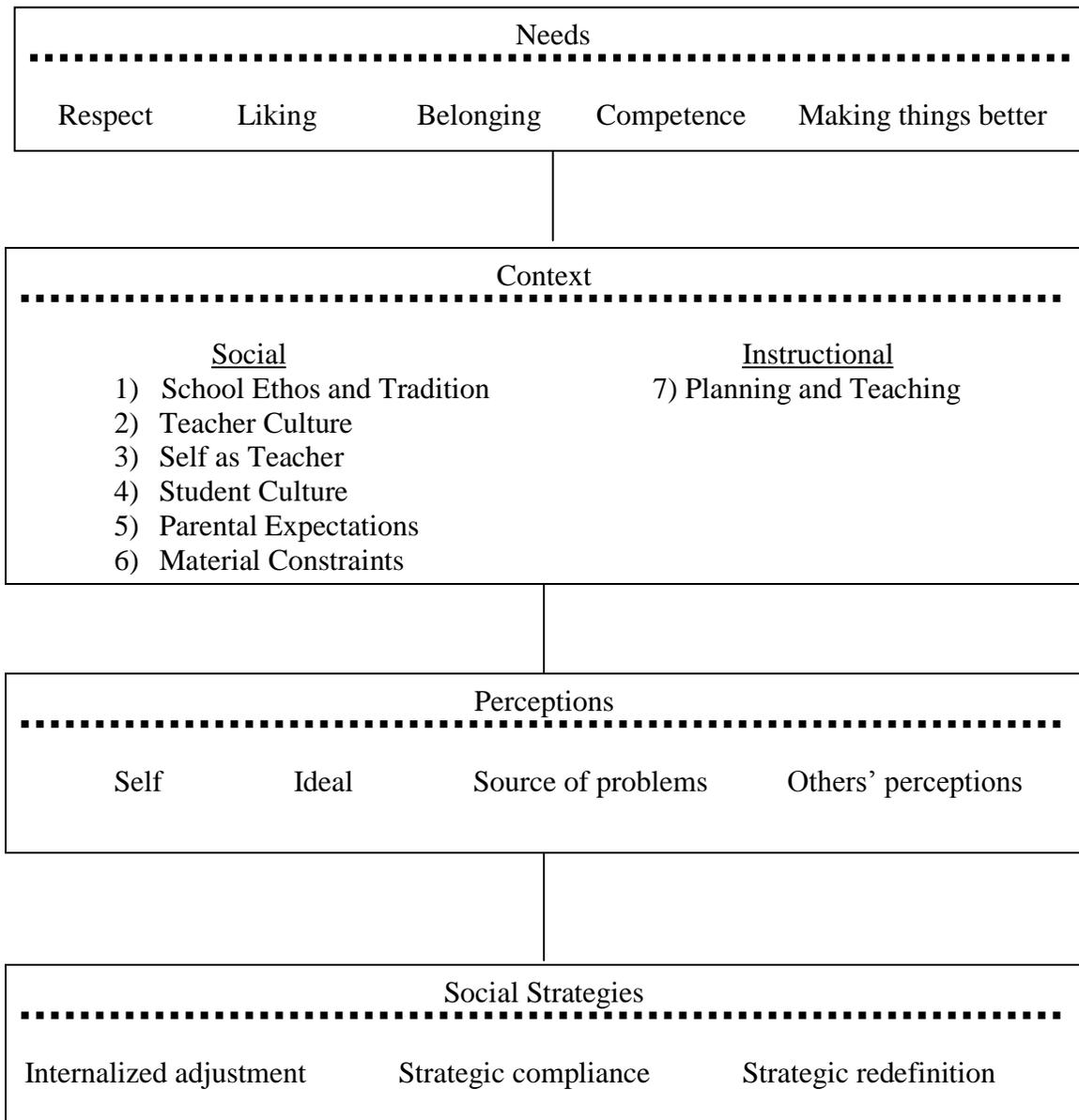


Table 1. Context Variables

	NA	IA	SC	SR	SUB-TOTAL	DES	TOTAL ^a
<i>Social</i>							
1) School Ethos and Tradition--							
District/Bldg Level Concerns	5	9	22	1	37	49	86 (8)
Teacher Education Program	2	1	1	0	4	2	6 (1)
2) Teacher Culture--							
Other Professionals	13	5	19	1	38	87	125 (11)
Relations w/ Cooperating Teacher	6	7	10	1	24	36	60 (5.5)
3) Self As Teacher--							
Knowledge of Self	10	3	4	0	17	44	61 (5.5)
Professional Concerns/Attitudes	5	2	1	0	8	9	17 (1.5)
Time Management	9	4	3	0	16	8	24 (2)
4) Student Culture--							
Relations with students	14	5	0	1	20	45	65 (6)
Student/Learner Characteristics	21	13	4	2	40	85	125 (11)
5) Parental Expectations--							
Relations with Parents	2	0	5	0	7	19	26 (2)
6) Material Constraints--							
Classroom Setting	5	2	5	1	13	28	41 (4)
Curriculum	1	3	4	2	10	17	27 (2.5)
<i>Instructional</i>							
7) Planning and Teaching--							
Instructional Strategies	27	11	16	16	70	237	307 (28)
Discipline/Classroom Management	22	6	4	2	34	94	128 (12)
Totals	142 ^b (42)	71 ^b (21)	98 ^b (29)	27 ^b (8)	338 ^a (31)	760 ^a (69)	1098

Note: NA=No Action; IA=Internalized Adjustment; SC=Strategic Compliance; SR=Strategic Redefinition; DES=Description.

^a The frequency of each context variable, percentages from the total (N=1098) are in parentheses.

^b The frequency of each social strategy category, percentages from the subtotal (N=338) are in parentheses.

Appendix A

REFLECTIVE JOURNALS

One of your assignments during your student teaching will be to maintain a “reflective journal” about your experiences surrounding student teaching. The entries that you make in your reflective journal will be more than description of events and issues. The journal will also be a tool to use in examining the meaning of significant events. The insights that you gain about yourself by reflecting on your thoughts and actions of others in the school environment will help facilitate your growth as a professional educator.

The journals will be completed and submitted on a weekly basis to your student teaching coordinator. You will be expected to complete a minimum of two entries per week. It is anticipated that you will need to devote about one hour to each journal entry. Set aside two days per week for your journal writing; for example, Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Note in your journal the date of your entry, review the steps outlined below and then start writing. The three steps that you will follow are to 1.) identify topics of interest; 2.) describe the situation and your relationship to the topics or events; and 3.) to explain the meaning that these events have for you in regard to your present and future teaching practice. Each step is described in greater detail below.

STEP1: Identify significant topics. Begin by relaxing and thinking over the events of the past day(s). Think about things that may have either had positive or negative consequences and were of some importance to you. Brainstorm for a few moments and list the significant events, actions, issues or problems in your journal. List five or more topics that you feel have been most noteworthy. In the past, students have addressed such topics as classroom management, curriculum development, instructional planning, program and student assessment, teaching

methods, the school environment, and interactions they have with others in the school setting.

While these topics are mentioned to suggest some areas that you might examine, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. You are free to select other areas related to your teaching assignment—including events that may have occurred outside of the school setting. You may find that as you think about topics that are important to you, you may have already listed the topics in earlier journal entries. Topics may be repeated as often as you wish. In all, spend about five minutes brainstorming your list of items.

STEP 2: Description of the Topics. Examine your list of topics and select three that seem most important to you. You will describe each of these three topics in greater detail. Devote a short paragraph to describe each event. For the item you have selected as most important you should give as many details as you can. Describe what occurred, who participants were, what the nature of your involvement was, and what feelings and thoughts were present.

STEP 3: Reflections on the Meaning of the Event In this final step look as objectively as you possibly can at one event that you described in Step 2 above. Reflect on the ideas and beliefs you feel may have guided your actions and thoughts saying whatever is on your mind. Don't hold back any intuitions, guesses, wild ideas, or images that may have been part of your thinking process. As you explore thoughts and beliefs that guided your feelings and action to ask yourself some of the following questions:

- 1) How and why did I decide to act in the way that I did?
- 2) Why did a particular strategy or approach work as well or poorly as it did?
- 3) How was what I did different from or like what I had hoped would happen?
- 4) How was what someone else did like or different from what I had hoped would happen?

- 5) How has this event changed my beliefs about teaching/education?
 - 6) How will this event affect my beliefs about teaching and learning and the way that I act in the classroom?
 - 7) What new meaning have I gained from this experience?
 - 8) How would I change the situation or environment to make things better?
- Why do I think this change will result in an improvement?

Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) How would you describe yourself as a student teacher?
- 2) What is the role of student teachers during their student teaching experiences?
- 3) How was adjusting to student teaching alike or different from other learning experiences you have had?
- 4) What is it about your teaching style or approach to teaching that helped you to do the things you have done?
- 5) How did being a student teacher affect the changes you made or wanted to make in your school setting?
- 6) You made changes or decisions about (describe 2-3 entries). What enabled you to take the action you took or make the decision you did?
- 7) You did not make changes in the following setting. What prevented you from taking action?
- 8) What factors in the school setting had the most impact on your decision making process?
- 9) Pretend that you were planning to take students in your class on a field trip to a museum as a way of supplementing the unit you are teaching. You are informed by the school administration that there are not enough funds to conduct the trip. What would you do in this setting? Describe any thought you might have about possible courses of action and the one that you would favor most.

10) Pretend that you have just received an exciting new computer program that you feel every student in your class should do as part of the unit you are teaching this week. The only problem is that you only have one computer in your school. What possible courses of action would you try to solve this problem and describe the one that you favor most?

11) What is the most significant change you would put into effect at your student teaching site? Tell how you would go about implementing your suggestion. Consider the setting of your teaching. What would enable/restrict your ability to implement your ideas?

12) In general how satisfied were you with your student teaching experience?

Appendix C

STUDENT TEACHING SETTING

Please check the appropriate categories for each question. Answer according to your general impressions and beliefs as a result of your student teaching experience.

1. Did the school give teachers directives or suggestions regarding?

	<u>Directives</u>	<u>Suggestions</u>	<u>None</u>
Curriculum	_____	_____	_____
Record Keeping	_____	_____	_____
Class organization	_____	_____	_____
Parent contacts	_____	_____	_____
General discipline	_____	_____	_____
Pupil evaluation	_____	_____	_____
Teaching strategies	_____	_____	_____
Learning problems	_____	_____	_____

2. Did the cooperating teacher give you directives or suggestions regarding?

	<u>Directives</u>	<u>Suggestions</u>	<u>None</u>
Curriculum	_____	_____	_____
Record keeping	_____	_____	_____
Class organization	_____	_____	_____
Parent contacts	_____	_____	_____
General discipline	_____	_____	_____
Pupil evaluation	_____	_____	_____

Teaching strategies	_____	_____	_____
Learning problems	_____	_____	_____

3. Was your class?

_____ self-contained	_____ secondary
_____ team-taught	_____ elementary
_____ open-space, team planning	_____ both
_____ departmentalized	_____ ability-grouped
_____ semi-departmentalized	

4. In general, how would you place the setting in which you did your student teaching?

Answer as you believe the cooperating teacher viewed the classroom.

Check which of each pair better describes the classroom:

open _____ traditional

group focus _____ individualized

teacher tells students _____ students make many choices
what to do

free flowing _____ pre-scheduled

5. Check which of each pair better describes how you would like to operate

our own classroom:

open _____ traditional

group focus _____ individualized

teacher tells students _____ students make many choices
what to do

free flowing _____ pre-scheduled

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