

Chapter 9

Supervision Dialogues in Teacher Education: Balancing Dis/continuities of the Vocational Self-Concept



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Dear Ms. X,

During my internship, especially last week, I was confronted with the fact that my classroom management problems for a large part are connected to the way I am as a person. By nature, I am very conflict avoidant. I do not like arguments (I cannot remember the last time I had an argument, even with my girlfriend), I always search for the positive and try to keep things peaceful. I know this about myself.

What I have noticed is that I find it very difficult to adjust my behavior when I am in front of the class. I must not be myself at that moment, but have to act according to my role as a teacher.

I can implement small corrections, but what I really have to learn is to correct in a big way, as a part of my role as a teacher. Every time when I have to act like that I notice something in me revolts.

The question you could ask of course is: Why is something in me revolting? Is it being afraid of being disliked? Maybe, but I also think it has to do with the question that always rises whether my correction/(played out) anger is justified at the moment.

Do you recognize the problem of conflict management (it wouldn't surprise me if it did) and do you have suggestions for me how to deal with it?

Regards, John

For John, a student teacher in a 1-year, post-master, teacher education program at a Dutch research university, development as a teacher is hard. He encounters problems in his teaching practice that he relates to perceived personal characteristics. He notices that how he sees himself does not correspond with what he thinks being a teacher means or should mean. He reflects on what he needs to learn and wonders why he finds showing particular behavior difficult.

This original email illustrates a student teacher's thinking about his *teacher identity*, that is his "image-of-self-as-teacher" (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017), which generally

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is understood to be dynamic, shifting over time, because of internal and external factors such as emotions and life experiences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009) and definable for teachers' professional behavior. Accordingly, researchers argue that student teacher development should involve making sense of oneself based on teaching experiences and observed characteristics next to acquiring skills and knowledge (e.g., Rodgers & Scott, 2008; van Rijswijk, Akkerman, Bronkhorst & van Tartwijk, 2018).

Teaching experiences are known to elicit reflections aimed at answering identity questions such as: Who am I? How do I tend to act in practice? Is there a match between my actions and the demands of the profession? (Alsup, 2006). Differences among these reflections have been referred to as professional identity tensions, that is, conflicts between personal desires and beliefs and what is considered relevant to the teaching profession (Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013). Professional identity tensions are related to a sense of discontinuity in student teachers: a lack of temporal coherence in the understanding of one's self. Sensed discontinuity has been known to lead to anxiety and research shows that people try to re-establish continuity for reasons of general well-being and self-confidence (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Caspi & Moffitt, 1991). Because teacher education characteristically includes experiences that are confronting and challenging for student teachers, it is likely that sensed discontinuity is a normal part of student teacher development (Ahonen, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

John, in his email to his supervising teacher educator, shares his concerns about a tension typical to the profession: having to act as a classroom manager while feeling this does not match his desire to avoid conflicts. He asks his teacher educator to reflect on his predicament and to help him deal with it. His request resonates appeals emerging from research: Teacher educators increasingly are called upon to support student teachers in how they make sense of themselves as teachers (Meijer, 2011).

Teacher educators are expected to engage student teachers in a reflective discourse that includes analyzing past experiences and exploring future expectations (Conway, 2001) and to help them resolve tensions (Hammerness et al., 2005). Yet, research up to now provides limited clues as to how student teachers and teacher educators could deal with tensions in supervision dialogues. In this chapter, we first conceptualize student teachers' personal sense making processes and the tensions therein and subsequently explore how tensions are addressed in supervision of teacher education practice.

Past Perceptions and Future Expectations of Student Teachers

Previous research has shown how general beliefs about the teaching profession and/or convictions about what it takes to be a good teacher influence student teacher development (e.g., Alsup, 2006). Important, in light of teacher identity, is what student teachers believe about themselves in relation to the profession. To conceptualize these beliefs, we use the *vocational self-concept*: “[t]he constellation of

Table 9.1 Past perceptions and future expectations in the vocational self-concept of student teachers

	Type	Definition
Past perceptions	Consistency related to characteristics	Perception of the past that reflects certainty and confidence about specific characteristics and abilities
	Consistency related to experiences	Perception of a specific experience with teaching, with other professional experiences, and/or as a student.
	Lack of experience	Perception of the past that indicates no sufficient or no relevant experience with teaching.
	Problems of the past	Perception of negative characteristics and problems that reflect weak teacher conduct.
Future expectations	Confidence	Expectation indicating clarity and certainty of future characteristics and professional conduct as a teacher and indicating confidence in a continuous development.
	Development	Expectation indicating probability of anticipated characteristics and professional conduct as a teacher and indicating a phased nature of the developmental trajectory.
	Goals	Expectation indicating pursued characteristics and professional conduct, without specific information about what it will take to reach these goals
	Challenges	Expectation problematizing the feasibility of acquiring required characteristics and carrying out professional conduct, and the developmental trajectory toward this.

self-attributes considered by the individual to be vocationally relevant” (Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, & Jordaan, 1963, p. 20). To illustrate: John, in his email, explicates that he has started to doubt the value of his conflict-avoidant nature because he has noticed that he needs to correct unwanted behavior while teaching. He is triggered to reconsider the relevance of his self-attributes and engages in sense making about himself as a teacher, an ongoing internal and reflective narrative about teaching experiences and the consequent relevance of personal characteristics for the profession (Ezzy, 1998; Hermans, 2002).

Sense making is temporal in nature: past perceptions, an individual’s selection of appropriate past events, and future expectations determine its course (Polkinghorne, 1996; Zittoun et al., 2013). In previous empirical research on 35 profiles of student teachers, we identified four types of past perceptions and four types of future expectations included in the vocational self-concept of student teachers (van Rijswijk, Akkerman, Schaap, & Tartwijk, 2016). These are detailed in Table 9.1.

Past perceptions that reflect *consistency related to characteristics* or *consistency related to experiences* and future expectations that reflect *confidence* and *development* contribute to a sense of temporal coherence within student teachers. For instance, a student teacher might say: “I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. I played school with my younger sister at an early age, and I feel my enthusiasm for instruction will benefit my development as a teacher.” These past and future references point to what has been theorized as *sensed continuity*, that is coherence in the

sense of one's self over time which is identified as an important drive in development for humans (Sani, 2008; Zittoun et al., 2013).

Past perceptions that reflect a *lack of experience* or *problems* in the past and future expectations that reflect *goals* or *challenges* include perceived problems and attest to a lack of temporal coherence within student teachers. For instance, the quote "I know I can be very impatient, and I will have to change that in order to be a teacher. I feel this will be a struggle, and I do not know if I will like it" indicates perceived challenges regarding development as a teacher. A match with the profession is not evident, and expectations emphasize uncertainty about if and how one will succeed in development as a teacher. Caspi and Moffitt (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991) showed that people try to re-establish continuity if they experience discontinuity to avoid feelings of anxiety and insecurity.

Student teachers also have been found to combine references reflecting discontinuity with references reflecting continuity, thus expressing an ambiguous sense of dis/continuity toward development as a teacher (van Rijswijk et al., 2016). Consider this statement, for example: "Because of my work as a travel guide, I know I can explain things quite well; but doing this in a group of 30 15-year-olds will be tricky for me." In this example, the student teacher combines a past perception reflecting consistency related to experiences (former employment as a travel guide that helps her to act in a certain way) with a future expectation reflecting a challenge (expected difficulties when doing this as a teacher in a class setting). Likewise is this statement: "I have had some problems communicating with others because of my bluntness, but I'm sure this will not be a problem when I deal with students in the second grade because I will make sure to think before I speak." In this example, the student teacher combines a past perception reflecting problems in the past (problems with communicating because of bluntness) with a future expectation reflecting confidence (this will not be a problem when teaching).

Continuity and Discontinuity in Supervision Dialogues

Teacher education programs increasingly include instruments that provoke intrapersonal dialogues about teaching experiences within student teachers; for instance journals (e.g., Korthagen, 2001) and portfolios (e.g., van Tartwijk, van Rijswijk, Tuithof, & Driessen, 2008). Moreover, teacher educators engage with student teachers in supervision dialogues, using strategies to evoke reflection on development as a teacher and discussing teacher performance and professional demands (cf. Beijaard & Meijer, 2017) as well as self-attributes and their vocational relevance (cf. Alsop, 2006). Consequently, teacher educators become partners in student teachers' sense making. Student teacher and teacher educator participation and contribution in supervision dialogues are not isolated or independent from each other. Each contribution to a dialogue is modified in relation with the other partner's contribution (Lyra, 1999).

Supervision dialogues can be expected to include different intentions when it comes to supporting student teachers' sense making in the context of teacher education. On the one hand, supervision dialogues can be seen as functional for discussing sensed continuity in student teachers for reasons of well-being (Sani, 2008). Exploring a sense of continuity seems appropriate as it has been found to enhance self-efficacy and positively contributes to enduring challenging developmental trajectories (cf. Zembylas, 2003). Elaborating on skills and capitalizing on personal qualities (Korthagen, 2001) can serve to explore sensed continuity.

On the other hand, supervision dialogues can be expected to include intentions toward exploring sensed discontinuity to acknowledge and tackle tensions during teacher education, avoiding a so-called "practice shock" upon entering the profession (e.g., Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & van Tartwijk, 2003). Unraveling tensions, identifying effective and non-effective teacher behavior (Meijer, 2011), or assessing the persistence of negative characteristics (Murray, Swennen, & Shagrir, 2009) can serve to explore sensed discontinuity.

We assume that teacher educators and student teachers both are committed to exploring sensed continuity as well as sensed discontinuity in supervision dialogues. A positive, confident attitude toward development as a teacher (i.e., sensed continuity) is highly valued for further professional development (Onafowora, 2005). It also is considered beneficial, for reasons of resilience, to be aware of possible challenges or tensions (i.e., sensed discontinuity) that can be part of development as a teacher (Hargreaves, 2005; Johnson et al., 2014).

In the remaining part of this chapter we will analyze in what way student teachers and teacher educators explore both sensed continuity and sensed discontinuity in supervision dialogues as they both can be expected to be functional for dealing with tensions in student teacher development.

Exploring Issues of Dis/continuity in Supervision Dialogues in Teacher Education

For this chapter, we studied 42 supervision dialogues that were audio-recorded in a post-master, 1-year teacher education program at a Dutch research university. We purposefully selected and analyzed problems of the past-type references ($n = 118$) and subsequent responses of both student teacher and teacher educator in those dialogues. We focused on problems of the past-type references (i.e., perceptions of negative characteristics and problems that reflect weak teacher conduct) because these are expected to trigger a discussion of discontinuity as well as attempts to re-establish continuity.

We selected dialogues of six teacher educators with different student teachers, distributed over the first and second practice period of the 1-year program and of a formal and informal (e.g., not related to a portfolio) nature.

Analysis of the problems of the past-type references showed that student teachers and teacher educators both contributed to outweighing and contrasting issues of discontinuity in three ways. Consequently, these processes were described as balancing with time, balancing with content, and balancing with salience. Following, the three processes are described and illustrated with quotes from the supervision dialogues. In the quotes, the contributions of the teacher educator are in italics. All names are pseudonyms.

Balancing with Time

Balancing with time refers to the student teacher and teacher educator together discussing issues of dis/continuity by accentuating specific perceptions of the past in relation to expectations of the future, or vice versa. For example, teacher educator Anna complimented student teacher Michael:

I really like the interaction with students when you teach.

That is usually the case in my lessons. If we talk about new information, I really let the class do it, I am only facilitating. However, that is dangerous, it could be that not all students cooperate. I could improve that.

Yes, but you can also apply it in smaller groups. What you are doing is very good, just expand it a little.

For me teaching is not about theory, and sometimes I lack some coherence in my lessons.

But, I feel I can teach well.

Yes, and the principal of your school agrees, I can tell you.

In this sequence, the student teacher introduced discontinuity, contrasting the positive appraisal of the teacher educator and indicating that further development as a teacher still was needed.

Balancing with time also appeared when a student teacher and teacher educator reflected on developmental progress. For instance, teacher educator Wilma and student teacher Shirley discussed the difficult task of setting limits in relation to an appraisal of her development as a teacher:

How do you value your growth as a teacher? Do you think you are becoming more "teacher-like?"

Yes, especially as a counselor, and because I have fun with the students. At first it was more about surviving, and I still feel that anxiety somewhat. But I am liking teaching more and more. My biggest point of interest still is being consequent and knowing better what I tolerate or not in class.

Yeah, knowing your limits.

In general, I know them, but then something happens, and every situation is different.

As such you're doing ok you know.

Yeah, but then you start to doubt and you are inclined to react too softly, instead of firm.

And then it goes farther than you would like, I get it.

I have to take some steps, but I notice teaching is becoming easier. Also preparing lessons.

So, I still like teaching a lot.

In this sequence, Shirley reflected on her achievement as a teacher up to now, and she marked the change she had gone through by emphasizing that the phase of

surviving is something of the past. Also, at the end of this sequence, Shirley returned to her realized development as a teacher, accentuating that teaching was getting easier. Shirley argued that problems still occurred but had decreased already, with which the likelihood of prior and expected progress of development as a teacher was highlighted.

Balancing with Content

Balancing with content refers to the student teacher and teacher educator discussing issues of dis/continuity by elaborating on other self-attributes. In the sequence of Wilma and Shirley discussed previously, we also can find an example of balancing with content. Student teacher Shirley extended her progress in development as a teacher by elaborating on preparing lessons and the progress made on that account. By doing this, Shirley included pedagogical skills in the constellation of self-attributes relevant to teaching.

Similarly, teacher educator Bianca and student teacher Zoe discussed teaching in the second practice period.

I will be expected to teach lessons of 70 minutes, that will be a challenge. But, the pedagogical concept of the school (Montessori MvR) ensures that the students are used to organizing their work themselves. That will be nice, I hope.

That's exciting. Do you picture yourself succeeding?

Yes, it is going to be all right. I'm someone who likes to be well prepared, and now I'm going to make sure that I have a good relationship with the students in my classroom.

Although the student teacher and teacher educator acknowledged that the new situation could include difficulties, confidence in development as a teacher was accentuated, and the student teacher elaborated on what she knew she could do to deal with the difficult situation. Other examples of balancing with content were student teachers and teacher educators discussing a successful relationship with individual students to counterbalance problems with classroom management, and stressing difficulties with teaching students in the upper classes to contrast an easy relationship with younger students.

Balancing with Salience

Balancing with salience refers to the student teacher and teacher educator together discussing issues of dis/continuity by exploring the relative worth of self-attributes and/or intentions by elaborating on their weight in light of other self-attributes and the demands of the profession. For instance, in the dialogue of teacher educator Jeff and student teacher Jessica:

I was allowed to teach my first lesson, but I thought classroom management was very bad. *You will need some tools for that. All in all, it was quite ok for a first lesson, wasn't it?*

My mentor thought so, but I was disappointed because it didn't go as well as I hoped for.

Can you let that go, because it will happen more often this year?

Yes, but it will be very hard; I really hold it against myself.... Wednesday I will be teaching this class again. It is really good that my mentor has confidence in me, there is a safety-net.

Jeff at first attempted to downsize ("it was quite ok for a first lesson") the severe judgment of Jessica ("classroom management was very bad"), after which Jessica elaborated on her own disappointment despite her mentor's positive feedback. Jeff then asked about the persistency of her appraisal of experiences, and Jessica acknowledged that this could be problematic for the future. Jessica related the perceived problem in this sequence (poor classroom management) to her habit of holding poor behavior against herself. In the support of her mentor Jessica seemed to find courage to continue her development.

Balancing with salience also appeared when student teachers and teacher educators discussed developmental progress. In the supervision dialogue between teacher educator Matt and student teacher Steven poor classroom management was discussed.

Do you recognize it? Or do you disagree? Because that is important of course.

Well, I do recognize it when you're saying that I do not experience it [disruptions in classroom MvR] as problematic enough. My threshold is quite high; I never get angry actually. A lot should happen for that.

Yes, I also wonder about your threshold. You do not have a problem with not being taken seriously by students. If a student would treat me like this, he would have a problem. You remain very friendly and calm.

In this example Matt hinted that Steven's characteristics of being "very friendly and calm" were hampering his teacher behavior. By relating the problems with classroom management to personal attributes, the need to strive for a profound change was highlighted. Although addressing positive characteristics typically imply continuity in student teacher development, in this case discontinuity was emphasized.

Balancing with salience also appeared in supervision dialogues that focused on intentions toward teaching. Teacher educator Wilma and student teacher Victor discussed the nature of the teacher role.

I am really confronted with the barrier that I really do not see myself in such an enforcing role.

Yes, I get that. But you really have to teach it to yourself, that is your role.

But my motivation for teaching was my disliking of such enforcing teachers, to do it differently.

Yes, but in order to be not that kind of teacher you have to be able to act like it....It is a matter of taking the lead. You have a lot going for you.

Yes, I can do it, I'm convinced of it.

Yes, me too. But at the moment you give the students too much freedom. Students also like it when you provide clarity by setting limits.

In this example, Victor stressed that enforcing behavior was problematic for him, not because he could not do it, but because he really did not like it. In this sequence, student teacher development was somewhat extended through "You have a lot going

for you” and “Yes, I can do it” and consequently continuity was implied. The teacher educator concluded, however, that at the moment this problem had to be solved. The argument that students also liked setting limits seemed to scaffold this statement.

In sum, in balancing with salience student teachers and teacher educators reflect on the importance of specific attributes and/or intentions for development as a teacher, thus including a normative perspective on the vocational self-concept by foregrounding one self-attribute over the other.

Discussion

In this chapter, to better our understanding of how to deal with tensions in teacher education, we discussed with what processes student teachers and teacher educators explored both sensed continuity as well as sensed discontinuity in supervision dialogues. We analyzed 118 sequences surrounding problems of the past-type references in 42 audio-taped supervision dialogues in a 1-year, post-master, teacher education program. We identified three types of processes. Common to the processes was that both student teachers and teacher educators contributed to outweighing and contrasting issues of discontinuity, and consequently the processes were referred to as balancing.

The processes identified in this study are illustrative to how student teachers and teacher educators address tensions in student teacher development in supervision dialogues. Furthermore, the processes disclose how the three core aspects of student teachers’ sense making (i.e. temporality (Zittoun et al., 2013), self-attributes and their relevance to the vocation (Super et al., 1963)) can be identified in supervision dialogues. As such, the processes assist supervisors and student teachers in addressing *teacher identity* in supervision meetings, while acknowledging its dynamic and variable nature and attending both to beliefs of the student teacher about him or herself in relation to beliefs about the profession (cf. Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Specifically, balancing with time is illustrative to how the progress of identity development itself can become a topic in supervision dialogues as reflections on different past and future instances in development are included (c.f. Zembylas, 2003). Balancing with content shows how the complexity of the teaching profession can be discussed by acknowledging different and complementing self-attributes (c.f. Stokking et al., 2003). Balancing with salience illustrates how different beliefs about what it means to be a good teacher can be discussed (c.f. Murray et al., 2009).

We propose that applying the balancing processes explicitly could assist both student teachers and teacher educators, because the processes enable a better understanding of the nature of student teachers’ unique sense making patterns. Future research should then be directed at exploring issues such as identifying sensed dis/continuity in student teachers and considerations associated with confronting student teachers with professional identity tensions in supervision.

Future research also is needed to better understand how intentions of both student teachers and teacher educators determine how sensed dis/continuity is addressed in supervision dialogues. For instance, intentions could lean toward examining current problems in view of avoiding a practice shock and consequently initiate the process of balancing with salience. However, intentions also could pertain to sorting out problems in teaching practice for reasons of immediate problem solving and thus initiate the process of balancing with content. Opposing intentions in supervision dialogues could result in misunderstandings and/or trigger resistance, potentially threatening the safety of the learning environment for student teachers (Bronkhorst, Koster, Meijer, Woldman, & Vermunt, 2014). Moreover, resistance ultimately could undermine exploration of the equilibrium between continuity and discontinuity in long-term development as a teacher.

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