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Using the Concept of Teacher Possible Selves as a Springboard to Teacher Satisfaction and Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This article uses an autoethnographic lens (Ellis et al., 2011) to present the concept of teacher possible selves and invites past, present, and future English as a Foreign Language teachers to apply the concept to themselves. Specifically, teacher possible selves offers three perspectives on how language teachers see themselves as professionals: actual self, ought-to self, and feared self. Then, the question asked is how these teacher possible selves may affect teaching effectiveness and satisfaction. Personal histories, current teaching conditions, student perceptions, teacher education programs, and changing educational trends serve as sources of teachers' perceptions of possible selves. Additionally, the literature on teacher possible selves suggests that teachers base their self-assessment on categories such as pedagogical skills, socio-affective skills, personality, and professional outlook. The concept of teacher possible selves is particularly important regarding teachers who are currently discouraged and disoriented due to the difficulties they experience being in the profession. Creating positive visions about oneself can serve as a motivation and a guide on what steps teachers can take to improve their current situation. This paper suggests relevant strategies.

Introduction

From 1820 to 2020, the percentage of adults worldwide who have at least some formal basic education has increased from less than 20% to more than 85% (Ritchie et al., 2023). To provide

this education, a large number of teachers have been and continue to be required. Indeed, teachers constitute an essential ingredient in quality education (Agatha, 2015), as they play a crucial role in enabling student learning.

However, education systems around the world seem to be experiencing difficulties in preparing and retaining quality teachers (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Van den Bore et al., 2021; Weiss, 1999). These difficulties stem from a wide variety of overlapping factors including the financial well-being of education systems and of the country in which the education systems are situated, education policy, the attractiveness of the teaching profession, and the changing landscape of teaching (Blanco, Bostedt, Michel-Schertges, & Wullner, 2023).

The current paper uses autoethnography, a qualitative research approach, to explore the concept of teacher possible selves as one part of the puzzle for attracting people to the teaching profession, encouraging them to stay in the profession, enhancing teacher development, and laying the foundations for successful education programs in which students, teachers, and other stakeholders thrive. Autoethnography involves researchers' reflections on their own personal experiences, taking into account their understanding of factors in the larger context. Subjectivity, rather than objectivity, is highlighted.

The current paper took shape when the first author did a study of teacher possible selves in a doctoral module on second language acquisition taught by the second and third authors. They felt that the first author's study was of good quality, and more importantly, they believed that the topic of teacher possible selves would offer valuable insights and tools for teachers. This fits with the authors' focus, following Dewey (1916), on the practical application of theoretical concepts, rather than allowing theory and research to remain solely in the academic realm, cut off from the supposed end users, i.e., students, teachers, and other stakeholders.

The paper begins by explaining the concept of teacher possible selves and the factors that influence teachers' self-images. The three possible selves (i.e., actual, ought-to, and feared) are examined through an autoethnographic approach, with the authors describing and systematically analyzing their personal experiences. Next, the paper looks at the relationship between possible selves and teacher effectiveness and suggests strategies for increasing teacher effectiveness and satisfaction.

Theoretical Background

Many theories from psychology, sociology, and other fields have been used to understand teachers' motivation to teach and the quality of their teaching. These theories include Humanistic Psychology (Rogers et al., 2013), Behaviorism (Skinner, 1972), and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers' self-image is thought to play an important role here. Safrijal, Dewi, and Darwin (2020) defined self-image as how people assess themselves, their abilities, and their potential. They further explained that those with high self-esteem have higher motivation and job satisfaction, allowing them to stay in their profession.

Self-esteem and people's expectations of themselves are connected to self-concept (Mbuva, 2017), which Markus and Nurius (1986) theorized as possible selves. Markus and Ruvolo (1989) explained that "imaging one's own actions through the construction of elaborated possible selves achieving desired goals may directly facilitate the translation of goals into intentions and instrumental actions" (p. 213).

This paper is guided primarily by Kubanyiova's (2012) Language Teacher Conceptual Change (LTCC) theoretical framework. Related frameworks include Self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), Balance Theory (Heider, 1946), and Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957). LTCC is based on Dörnyei's work which focused on L2 learners with Kubanyiova adapting it to language teachers. Specifically, the LTCC framework emphasizes that the ways in which language teachers approach their teaching are shaped by their cognitive representations of their actual, ought-to, and feared selves in relation to their job as language instructors. The actual teacher self is operationally defined as language teachers' images of the quality of their current teaching. The ought-to teacher self refers to language teachers' images of who they should become. The last vision of the self, which has no student equivalent in Dörnyei's work, is the feared teacher self which represents an image of who teachers could become if they did not live up to their standards for what good language teachers think and do.

Four criteria teachers use when categorizing their possible selves are: pedagogical knowledge, socio-affective skills, personality, and professional outlook. Pedagogical knowledge includes knowledge of classroom management and teaching methods, learning environments, assessment, lesson planning, and adapting to individual student characteristics (IIEP Policy Toolbox, 2022). Socio-affective skills refer to the capabilities of teachers to empathize and communicate with students. Meanwhile, personality is a collection of patterns of attitudes, feelings, behaviors, and habits that make a person distinct from others. Lastly, professional outlook (Boamah et al., 2023) pertains to the people's view of their profession, including what they see as likely changes in the profession.

Language Teacher Possible Selves: Actual, Ought-to, and Feared

The next three subsections provide some details on three teacher possible selves: actual teacher self, ought-to teacher self, and feared teacher self.

Actual Teacher Self

The actual self is the representation of the attributes that language teachers believe they currently possess and display, i.e., teachers' perceptions of what they actually do in their everyday teaching. Data that teachers might use to form these perceptions can come in many forms. These include their students' performance on formal assessments and classroom activities. Stakeholder feedback can also be important. For instance, even if students do not complete formal evaluations of teachers, the level of student engagement in classroom activities sends signals to teachers about their relative competency as teachers. Other stakeholders include students' family members. Especially in the case of K-12 students, family members may have both formal and informal means of communicating their evaluations of teachers.

Additionally, those above teachers in the education hierarchy, such as heads of departments and school principals, often do evaluations of teachers, which are communicated to the teachers. The third author, who chairs a department at a comprehensive university in the Philippines, is tasked to regularly observe teachers in their classes and render feedback regarding their competence evaluation results. During one-on-one meetings, emphasis is placed on the qualitative feedback students provide. This complements class observations in which

teachers' actual selves are mirrored. Doing this exercise allows Author 3 to reflect on her actual teacher self. In other contexts, such as in Singapore, teachers in public schools are ranked in comparison with other teachers at their school in one form of teacher assessment (Ministry of Education Singapore, 2020). The views toward the teaching profession of teachers' families and the general public (Everton et al., 2007) can also influence teacher self-image.

Peers also provide data to teachers on the level of their professional skills. For instance, various methods have been developed in which teachers assess and attempt to improve each other's teaching. These methods include learning circles (Hemelein & Anderson, 2020) and action research (Edwards & Burns, 2015). Such teacher peer learning methods sometimes use technology to provide data. For example, teachers can videotape each other when they are teaching.

In the final analysis, how teachers see themselves is determined by the teachers themselves. Tools for teacher self-reflection have been developed to aid this process (Farrell, 2021). For example, teachers are encouraged to do regular reflections before, during, and after lessons and then to process these reflections. Critical friends (Chien, 2021), i.e., trusted mentors, can aid in this processing. However, Chien noted a potential stumbling block, one that is frequently mentioned in discussions of improvements in education: lack of time, in this case, time for interaction with critical friends.

One last point about teachers' actual selves, a point relevant to all three selves: how people view themselves can vary over time (Lawrenz, 2022). In addition, Lawrenz also noted that personality traits are not static and may change with age and time. These changes in views and personality traits can be due to accumulated experiences and depend on how the world around teachers is interpreted and internalized.

Ought-To Teacher Self

The ought-to teacher self is defined as the teachers' images of future selves that they would like to attain (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Cuddapah & Stanford, 2015; Ribas, 2012; Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009; Singh et al., 2021). Elsewhere in the literature on teacher selves, the term "ideal" has been used instead of "ought-to," e.g., Cuddapah and Stanford, (2013). In this paper, "ought-to" is used as it seems to suggest more feasible goals than does "ideal." One aspect of the ought-to self pertains to self-competence beliefs (Arens et al., 2011), i.e., the feeling of being capable and in control. As to relationships with students, many teachers desire to possess the following socio-affective attributes: being caring, enthusiastic, nurturing, loving and being loved by students, friendly, and patient (Cuddapah & Stanford, 2015; Ribas, 2012; Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009). The above characteristics have been highlighted in the literature on teacher selves but should not be considered as a consensus of views on teacher characteristics. Instead, the ought-to teacher self varies from teacher to teacher, due to the fact that there are different factors affecting different teachers' beliefs and perspectives.

An example of how perspectives can differ as to what constitutes characteristics teachers feel they ought to embody involves student-centeredness (Florkowski et al., 2022). Elements of student-centered learning include frequent use of small group activities, increased student talk, and greater student choice as to what they learn and how they learn. However, not all teachers aspire to facilitate student-centeredness. While student-centeredness is perceived as the way to go, at least among many academics, teacher-centeredness often prevails in many classrooms (e.g., Muganga & Ssenkusu, 2019). Part of this resistance to student-centeredness is due to the

belief that teachers are content experts who need to share what they know with students rather than facilitators who bank on students independently and in groups developing new knowledge based on previous knowledge and experiences (Keiler, 2018). The first author of this paper, herself a university language educator, has observed divergence among colleagues as to whether to go student-centered or teacher-centered. For example, she has heard some lecturers say they are too old to adjust and that they see nothing wrong with sticking with the traditional way of teaching in which teachers are the sole authority in the classroom. Some also maintain that since teacher-centered methods have been working for them for many years, they do not see the need to change what they have been doing. Based on Konakli and Akdeniz (2022), to reduce resistance to change, proposed changes should promise benefits to individuals, be clarified to reduce anxiety-provoking elements, and provide a working process for achieving the changes.

Feared Teacher Self

The feared teacher self represents an image of who teachers worry they could become if they stray too far from their principles as to what constitutes quality teaching. The feared teacher self portrays what teachers would not like to become. For example, some teachers do not want their classrooms to be frightening to students or boring and to take on other characteristics that these teachers believe are un conducive for learning (Sahakyan et al., 2018). Similarly, many of the same teachers fear that, in terms of their relationships with students, they might become impatient, humorless, impolite, insensitive, unhappy, pessimistic, and disrespectful (Rahmati et al., 2018; Ribas, 2012). Sahakyan et al. (2018) also stressed that teachers care about other people's perception of them since not living up to the community's expectations is part of what they fear.

According to Lacoé (2016), many teachers believe that a safe environment is a prerequisite for productive learning. A safe environment can be defined based on Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis, which states that negative emotions, such as stress, anxiety, boredom, and lack of motivation, create a psychological filter that reduces students' ability to absorb comprehensible input and use it to enhance language acquisition. This is why some teachers strive not to be a source of negative emotions by being patient, respectful, and sensitive towards their students. Also, as students may find too much predictability to be boring and, thus, cause low student engagement and misbehavior (Xie, 2021), teachers may aim to sprinkle their classes with some surprises and occasional changes.. Furthermore, patience is needed inside the classroom since classes are often multicultural and students have different capacities of comprehension (Borkala, 2022).

Avoiding becoming the feared teacher self is challenging since many factors affect teachers' attitudes towards students inside the classroom. Looking back, the first author, in her early years of teaching, had a resolve to be a patient teacher who showed care for her students by being sensitive to their needs. However, there were moments when she lost or nearly lost her cool, most especially in cases when students remained noisy and unruly even after a series of warnings. In other cases, she observed colleagues who could become upset over even the faintest whisper by a student. de Ruiter et al. (2020) stated that students' disruptive behavior during classroom events can elicit strong emotions in teachers. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders may frequently be noncompliant (Hecker et al., 2014), making it difficult for teachers to carry out their lesson plans Caldarella et al. (2021). Thus, even if teachers do not want to reprimand or punish their students, it can be avoided at times.

Also, in her days as a high school student, the first author encountered one language teacher who she feared becoming. That teacher's overly strict disciplining and the way she pushed students to compete against one another instead of cooperating created a stressful environment, which led students to dread entering that classroom. Therefore, whenever as a teacher, the first author did anything to resemble that past teacher, she immediately sought to avoid repeating those behaviors and to remediate what she had done. While strict disciplinary measures may initially elicit compliance, empirical evidence suggests that overemphasizing strict discipline can have detrimental long-term consequences. These consequences may include declining student motivation, reduced engagement in learning activities, and increased anxiety levels. This negative impact can be mitigated when strict discipline is coupled with cultivating positive and supportive teacher-student relationships (Salanti & Sanger, 2024).

Relationship of Possible Selves to Teaching Effectiveness

Several scholars have discussed the powerful role of possible selves in teaching and teacher development, asserting that possible selves have important implications for the quality of learning experiences facilitated by teachers for their students (Hamman et al., 2010; Horn et al., 2008; Kubanyiova, 2009; 2012; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). For example, the possible selves concept could help struggling teachers envision what they would want to become as teachers and what they would want to avoid becoming. In addition, the concept may prompt school administrators to consider how school rules and policies shape teachers' expectations and behaviors (Hamman et al., 2010).

The actual self or the qualities that teachers believe they currently possess are tied to the term self-efficacy, which is one's "capability to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). Studies suggest self-efficacy may help in teacher effectiveness in terms of teachers' willingness to transfer the skills they learned from in-service training to the classroom, their competence in using varied teaching methods and alternative instructional materials, and their ability to respond to challenging circumstances (Allinder, 1994, Eden & Kinnar, 1999; Guskey, 1988; all cited in Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003).

Additionally, the socio-affective qualities that form part of teachers' ought-to self-concepts have been found to affect teachers' willingness to teach in classes with serious classroom management issues, as found in a study by Low et al. (2019). To teach effectively, especially with students who pose classroom management issues, entails affective factors, including desire, dedication, and determination (Korb, 2012, as cited in Low et al., 2019). Meanwhile, Yeung et al. (2014) proposed that instructors with higher ought-to self-concepts were more likely to employ a variety of teaching approaches than teachers with lower or intermediate ought-to self-concepts. Furthermore, Hammerness (2004) claimed that teachers' visions - their ought-to selves - play a significant role in teachers' lives and work. Specifically, she suggested that teachers' visions of the teachers they should be can help explain why and how they may choose to change their practice and even whether or not they elect to remain in the profession.

An example would be the second author who challenged himself to be his ought-to self by teaching a course on the language of communication mostly for seniors. He had never taught such a course before but was passionate about improving communication. The second author enjoyed developing the course, which included, among other concepts, expressing gratitude and asking deep questions. An example of expressing gratitude was "What is something in the past 24 hours that you are grateful for and why?" (Achor, 2011). An example of a deep question

was, “Who was a person who was a major influence in your life? Was their influence beneficial?” (Duhigg, 2024).

In terms of the feared teacher self, to make sense of their fears and the images of what they do not want to become as teachers requires critical reflection. Reflective teachers are able to deepen their understanding of themselves in regard to their emotions and beliefs and even challenge and refine their teaching practices and philosophies (Suphasri & Chinolkul, 2021). To conclude this section, teacher possible selves can be a powerful tool for helping teachers surface and interrogate their beliefs, as well as to imagine and elaborate pathways to promising new practices.

The Role of Social Forces in Teacher Possible Selves

Much of the literature on teacher possible selves focuses on the internal thinking of individual teachers. However, it may be worthwhile to consider the role that social forces play in shaping teachers’ views of their actual, ought-to, and feared selves. An example of social forces can be seen in the great pressure many language teachers face to “teach to the test,” i.e., drill students with exercises based on the skills needed to do well on high-stakes exams, such as university admissions exams (Imsa-ard, 2021). This leads to what is known as negative washback effect, sapping the joy from teaching and learning (Ali & Hamid, 2020) and pushing teachers to become their feared selves.

Another social force making it difficult for teachers to be their ought-to selves arises from large class sizes, with 50, 60, or more students per class (Adamu et al., 2022). If teachers’ vision of their ought-to selves includes developing personal relationships with individual students, large class size makes this difficult and makes it easy for teachers not even to learn their students’ names, let alone familiarize themselves with important background information on each of the members of their class, a problem multiplied many times over for teachers with multiple classes.

A third way that the social element impacts teachers’ visions of their possible selves can be seen in the maxim that “Teachers teach the way they were taught.” Lortie (1975), in a classic work in the sociology of education, talked about the power of the average 18-year-old’s 13,000 hours of classroom observation to shape their view of what it means to be students and teachers. Will new teachers base their view of their ought-to selves on these observations, or will these observations form teachers’ visions of the feared selves that they are determined not to become?

One more example of how the winds of social context impact teachers’ self-perceptions can be seen in some of contexts in which the second author has taught. Early in his career, he taught English to mid-career professionals in China not long after the country’s education system had resumed following the end of the Cultural Revolution. His students were very keen to learn, friendly, very appreciative of their teachers, and willing to try any learning methods their teachers wished them to use. In this context, being his ought-to self was easy for the second author.

Fast forward several years, and the second author was teaching English at an urban high school in the U.S. with a number of students who were “too cool for school,” (Jamison et al, 2015), i.e., they saw a negative correlation between being admired by peers, on one hand, and

participating in and succeeding at academic activities. For example, the second author had observed a teacher at another high school and admired the way she maintained a light comic banter with her class, all the while focusing on the content to be learned.

However, when the second author tried to achieve this ought-to vision along the lines of the teacher he had observed, the reception was frosty, pushing him in the direction of his feared-teacher self. This was similar to what Ergunay and Adiguzel (2022) found when investigating how beginning teachers' visions changed due to classroom management problems. Teachers who envisioned their ought-to selves as caring morphed into the authoritarians of their nightmares. This result coincides with the findings of earlier studies that the first year of teaching is a challenging period, which can cause many changes (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Are these changes caused by the social context in which teaching is being done or is the cause inadequate support for new teachers (Chaney et al., 2020)?

Conclusion

This article looked at the concept of language teachers' possible selves, namely their actual, ought-to, and feared selves. This concept has important implications for pre-service and in-service teachers, and even for teachers who have retired and are reflecting on their careers. Teacher self-evaluations are both unique to each language teacher as well as shaped by the contexts in which teachers have studied and taught.

Two implications of the teacher possible selves concept merit highlighting. First, language teachers should be introduced to the concept of teacher possible selves and periodically given time to discuss their evolving views of their actual, ought-to, and feared selves with fellow teachers at various stages of their careers (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020) and with others above and below them in the education hierarchy. Indeed, students might find it very eye-opening to see their teachers as flesh-and-blood human beings who experience a range of feelings. Furthermore, such student-teacher discussions could prepare language students to consider their own student possible selves, as suggested by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009).

Second, it is vital for language teachers to have what Dweck (2016) called a "growth mindset." She explained that "Individuals who believe their talents can be developed (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset" (paragraph 2). The opposite of a growth mindset is a fixed mindset, i.e., believing that people's qualities are innate and, therefore, unlikely to change, even if people try. To operationalize a growth mindset, to enjoy the satisfaction of moving toward what they envision to be their ought-to selves, teachers need both opportunities to participate in professional development and to teach in social contexts that seek to change for the better. For example, in some contexts, language teachers have to teach all day and then do professional development, while more fortunate teachers are released from teaching duties to focus solely on professional development (Bubb & Early, 2013). Furthermore, teachers can play a role in advocating for such changes (Jacobs & Crookes, 2022).

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