

Critical Reflections of Pre-Service Teachers Regarding the Impact of a Special Education Practicum on their Professional Identity

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Abstract

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This study examines the impact of a special education practicum program on the perceptions of Israeli pre-service teachers (PSTs) regarding their professional identity development. The sample comprised of 30 PSTs, 15 Jewish and 15 Arab, attending a college of education in Israel. The study implemented a methodological approach that consisted of a qualitative analysis of the content of the PSTs' critical reflections, which were collected at two time points, i.e. the end of the 1st semester and the end of the 2nd semester. The results indicated that the special education practicum program contributed to the development of professional traits and teaching abilities of the participants, namely, to their ability to plan and teach successful and experiential lessons in an adaptive manner, and to develop an inclusive and beneficial class climate for both students and teachers.

1. Introduction

Numerous studies dating back to the mid-2000s have addressed the development of professional identity (PI) among pre-service teachers. Schepens, Aelterman & Vlerick (2009) explored this topic by examining two aspects: the demographic and personality traits that influence one's inclination to become a teacher, and the impact of experience and education on this journey. The preparation process for becoming a teacher seems to be a significant predictor of teachers' self-efficacy. Throughout this preparation phase, their professional identity evolves as a culmination of various interacting factors, both individual and collective in nature.

According to Tickle (1999), professional teaching identity (PTI) is defined as the sense of belonging and identification that teachers feel towards their profession. PTI comprises of two interconnected elements: the influence of prior experiences and the personal qualities. These elements can impact how teachers perceive themselves in their role, and how they are perceived by their students, colleagues, parents and other members of the community (Manor-Binyamini, 2001). PTI can influence in multiple ways the behaviour of the teachers, their work style, thinking processes, beliefs and expression (Altman & Katz, 2001). It can also influence the teacher's degree of work satisfaction, their sense of burnout and

attrition from the education system (Fisherman, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2009).

The objective of the current research is to examine the professional identity development of PSTs who participated in a practicum-training program as part of their special education formation at a teaching college located in Northern Israel. The uniqueness of the current research is that it examines PSTs from two different cultures and ethnicities in Israel: Jewish and Arab.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Professional Development in Teaching

Professional development is a result of the ongoing evolvement of the teacher's professional knowledge and skills (Bolam, 2002). As part of their profession, teachers are constantly required to broaden their professional knowledge, enhance their understanding of teaching and learning dynamics, and cultivate novel teaching techniques and abilities (Darling-Hammond (2005). One of the most critical elements in PSTs development was found to be their interaction with the mentoring teacher and the students, as well as the breadth of experiences offered to the PSTs by their mentoring teacher (McElwee et al., 2018).

Professional identity is an integral aspect of the overall individual identity, serving as the response to



the question, "Who am I professionally?" (Kozminsky, 2008). Research literature found teacher's professional identity to impact the teacher in various ways that include their work methods, thinking patterns, work satisfaction, the sense of burnout and other aspects (Altman, & Katz, 2001; Fisherman, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2009; Kozminsky, 2008).

According to Schepens et al. (2009), another factor that determines PSTs level of dedication to the teaching profession is the social support and partnership with the faculty members. Additional factors identified to predict the professional identity level are personality traits and the initial motivation. The study described examined the manner in which the input variables (such as personality traits and motives of student teachers) and process variables (such as support and the sense of readiness for the teaching profession) impact the PSTs' self-efficacy, dedication, and professional mindset upon completion of their studies (Schepens et al., 2009).

2.2. Training Pre-Service Teachers in Israeli Special Education

Israel is a diverse, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society (Al-Haj, 2012). The special education training in Israel is held in several types of institutions including education colleges and universities. In 2020, the Council for Higher Education published a training framework for future teachers that adheres to principles advocated in global literature. The framework includes the following: enhancing academic studies within specific disciplines; prioritizing practical hands-on experiences; establishing a common curriculum core for diverse training programs, incorporating teaching strategies tailored to students with diverse needs and varying socio-cultural backgrounds. Since special education is referred to as an academic discipline, students attending teacher training programs are required to complete courses in special education, especially due to the increased integration of special needs students into general education.

The special education program at education colleges in Israel spans four years. Throughout the initial three years, students engage in both academic coursework and practical teaching experiences. They delve into the teaching and learning methods tailored for students with special needs within distinct frameworks (designated for the ages of 6 to 21) as well as integrative frameworks. During their training, the students are exposed to various populations, including

learning disabilities, ADHD, behavioural disorders, emotional disorders, cerebral palsy and other developmental intellectual disabilities (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2021).

According to Assadi and Murad (2017), as part of the practicum training, the PSTs have the opportunity to develop an understanding of different facets of the education system, including the amenities, curriculum and the student population. They will also gain familiarity with textbooks, instructional materials, and teaching techniques employed across various subjects and disciplines. The practicum training will allow the PSTs to develop professional work habits, gain expertise in crafting well rounded and effective lesson plans, and deliver comprehensive teaching units.

The practicum programs in teacher training institutions are required to extend over the period of their three-year education, as per the Israeli Council for Higher Education and the Ministry of Education. Practicum programs are typically structured around two main concepts: spaced practicum (also termed "weekly practicum" or "regular practicum"), which involves pre-service teachers (PSTs) attending school classes once or twice a week for the entirety or part of the school year; and consecutive practicum (also referred to as "practicum work week"), where PSTs engage in teaching activities daily for a week or two. There can be up to two such periods over the course of one school year (The Council for Higher Education, 2020).

In Israel, PSTs undergoing the practicum training receive continuous guidance from a pedagogical instructor from the college as well as from the trainer. The purpose of this guidance is to educate the PSTs on the teaching profession, on the communication with the students and on identifying and acknowledging their various needs. The practicum is complemented by a pedagogical course offered at the college (Bracha & Hoffenbartal, 2021). During the practicum experiences, the PSTs are evaluated through several means. These include: a reflective digest (portfolio), observation lessons and the training teacher's evaluation.

The practicum program comprises of two special education training models: the concurrent model, spanning four years for regular PSTs, and the consecutive model, lasting one year and attended by PSTs holding a prior academic degree. Throughout their practicum, PSTs must allocate one day per week in the training classroom, where they conduct two lessons: a group lesson and an individual lesson. In

addition, PSTs are required to actively engage during the school day with other groups of PSTs in lessons led by the training teacher or other professional teachers.

3. Research Aim

The aim of the current research is to examine the short and long-term impact (after the first and second semestrial programs, respectively) of a special education practicum program on the perceptions of Arab and Jewish PSTs regarding their professional identity development. Both groups attended a pedagogical course accompanying the practicum program of the college. The course is taught in Hebrew and the practicum is conducted in Jewish and Arab schools, based on the ethnic-lingual affiliation and residential proximity of each participant.

4. Research Question

The following research question was formulated: do the reflections regarding the impact of the special education practicum program on the professional identity development differ between Arab and Jewish participants as well as between short and long-term periods (after the first and second semestrial programs, respectively)?

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Tools

In this qualitative research, the research tool is the thematic content analysis of the detailed critical reflections (identification of codes and themes), which were designed and composed by the PSTs in two time points, end of the 1st semester and end of the 2nd semester. The goal of this research was to provide an in-depth examination of the PSTs' perception regarding their professional identity development. The definition of reflection in the context of this study is the participant's description of past experiences and learning processes, with the ultimate goal of positively affecting their future actions. Such reflections are considered to provide a more reliable and deeper analysis than other qualitative research methods, such as surveys. The use of reflection in the context of teaching programs may shed a better light on the benefits of the training and the degree of personal and professional growth experienced by the participant (Castleberry et al., 2016).

5.2. Participants

30 PSTs (15 Arab and 15 Jewish) underwent the special education practicum training program during

the 2021-2022 academic years. The PSTs were in their second year, which is the only year during which they had practical training in special education. Prior researchers recommended that to establish a sound theory, studies should include between at least 20 to 30 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell & Poth (2018), in grounded theory studies, it is crucial to select participants who will have a significant contribution to the theory the study aims to establish and provide data that the researcher can use to establish their theory. This involves purposefully sampling a group of individuals who can offer the most insightful information related to the research problem being investigated.

6. Findings

The findings of the reflections are presented based on the themes that emerged during the reflection of 30 PSTs regarding their practicum experience.

6.1. A Short Practicum Experience

An analysis of the content regarding learning and personal insights derived after a short practicum experience in a special education classroom, yielded the following themes:

Theme 1: Concerns and Early-on Challenges

Some of the concerns were raised by the PSTs for whom the practicum was their first experience with special education and thus were unsure as to how to carry on with the students: "...I had many concerns... this is the first time I face a special education classroom" (R.S.).

Additional concerns regarded the code *ages of the students in the practicum classroom*: "... I was placed at an eleventh grade in high school. These are students studying for their matriculation exam, and it made me nervous..." (H.A.). Another code was the *type of disability* of the special education students: "...when I was told that the class population included students with learning difficulties and behavioral difficulties, I had a concern that I would not be able to face their disciplinary problems and teach them..." (R.S.). A different code within this theme was *the lack of knowledge of the learned materials and teaching methods in special education*: "... I did not know what they teach in special education, I was not sure how to prepare the lessons and how to teach... I felt that I was lost" (G.B.).

Theme 2: Personal Development

In all the reflections, the PSTs described a *sense of satisfaction and belonging to the field of special*

education. Here are some of their statements reflecting this code: "...the day-to-day work with students with special needs is both physically and mentally challenging, and yet fulfilling. The love they express towards me and their desire to include me is an amazing experience..." (M.A.). Another code was the sense of self-efficacy PSTs experienced following the practicum: "I learned that I need to believe more in myself, since I had proven to myself that I can teach the classroom well, instill confidence in the students and enrich their knowledge" (R.S.). The PSTs further indicated that they perceived the practicum classroom as a place that grants them a sense of inclusion, flexibility and patience towards the students in the classroom: "I felt that working with these children opened me to values such as love, patience, inclusion and acceptance of others, and most importantly, to seeing each student as the world and all that is in it." (A.S.).

Theme 3: Professional Development in Special Education

The PSTs described their ability to prepare learning materials and adapt them to the students: "I felt that by expanding my knowledge in the field of learning disabilities, I better understood the manner of teaching and knew how to adapt the learned materials to the students" (L.H.). Most of the PSTs further noted the ability to receive feedback and learn from mistakes. Here is an example of their thoughts: "... I worked very hard to implement all the notes I received in the first observation and do significant self-work. During the second observation, I was more prepared and implemented most of the feedback I received." (A.G.).

Theme 4: Learning from the Role Partners

All the PSTs described the inclusion and support of the staff: "... I was very nervous. I did not know how to teach a first test lesson via zoom. I immediately received a phone call from my pedagogical instructor and the training teacher. They explained everything to me and gave me tips on how to teach the lesson. I felt confident. I felt that I was not alone" (SH.M.).

Theme 5: Creation of a beneficial class climate

The PSTs perceived adapting the teaching methods to the students as a way to create a beneficial class climate: "... it is important to allow the students to be active in class by adapting the teaching methods to them." (R.S.). Some of the PSTs acknowledged the importance of a profound acquaintance with the students to create a beneficial class climate: "I was

interested in the students, and it was important for me to spend time with them... it was important to know of every difficulty, strength and talent. It really helped me to navigate the classroom" (H.SH.). The PSTs further noted the examination of the team's working methods as a way to create a beneficial class climate. According to one of the PSTs: "Sometimes I felt that I did not know how to react to them...I started examining certain situations, waiting to hear how the staff reacts to students when they are talking back or acting inappropriately..." (A.B.).

Theme 6: Perception of the teacher's role: personal skills

The PSTs perceived the teacher as possessing inclusion, patience and empathetic abilities towards the students: "In my opinion, one of the most important things about a teacher is that a good teacher has great patience. These students need a lot of love, patience and belief so that they can continue developing ..." (N.T.).

Theme 7: Perception of the teacher's role: professional skills

The PSTs described the teacher as having knowledge and proficiency in the learned materials and in teaching strategies: "A good teacher is a source of information for their students, and they lean on their teacher" (A.A.). The PSTs further noted that they perceive the teacher figure as having the ability to adapt the teaching to the students' abilities: "The teacher must create adapted learning materials and tests for the different lessons" (L.CH.). The PSTs additionally noted that a good teacher uses diverse and creative teaching methods: "An ideal teacher would take all of the old and tiresome teaching methods and step out of the box, be creative..." (SH.B.).

Theme 8: Relationship with the School staff - A Meaningful Positive Experience

All the PSTs expressed a sense of belonging and involvement in the classroom and in the school: "working with my training teacher is a true privilege. My communication with her was excellent from the start... the educational staff in school welcomes us with a smile each week. They encourage us and make us feel that we are part of the school... we feel welcome" (CH.Y.). A different PST described her involvement in the school: "...I was part of the special education staff meetings and took part in conversations with parents. I participated in class trips and helped the teacher in other classrooms as well. During the professional lessons, I helped other

teachers by handing out worksheets, helping struggling students..." (R.S.). The PSTs further noted the meaningful support from the staff: "each week I would personally consult with the training teacher regarding the lesson plan, including in receiving special tips to carry out the lesson in the most effective way" (L.CH.). Another aspect described by the PSTs is the learning and professional development following the relationship with the team during the practicum: "... I learned a lot from the training teacher on how to interact with the students..." (CH.Y.).

Theme 9: Relationship with the School staff - A Challenging Experience

Several PSTs described their conflicts with staff and their resolutions: "the relationship with the educational staff was also great, except for one unpleasant incident during one of my lessons. We resolved everything after the lesson, and it did not happen again" (A.B.). One PST described a difficulty communicating with the training teacher: "I had a difficulty communicating with the training teacher, up to a point of an interference of the pedagogical instructor. The teacher was busy and did not have time for me... After the interference of the pedagogical instructor, there was an improvement." (A.M.).

Theme 10: Relationship with the Classroom Students

All the PSTs described the profound acquaintance with the students and the creation of a personal relationship with them: "... without noticing and quite quickly, I connected with the students. I knew them beyond their names and began paying attention to small things that characterize them... during the semester, I felt them open up to me more and more..." (G.B.). Many PSTs noted their perceptions of the students' traits: "the classroom students were charming and filled with love. I still remember the first time they welcomed me to the classroom, with genuine smiles and kind, beautiful faces. These students have big hearts and are very smart. Once you love them, they sense it and love you back" (M.SH.).

6.2. A Year-Long Practicum Experience

An analysis of the content regarding learning and personal insights after a yearlong practicum experience yielded the following themes:

Theme 1: Personal Development

All the PSTs described the love and connection they felt to the students and to the profession: "... the

strong insight I had during the practicum was how important it is to feel connected to what I do, love it, live it and come to work with energies, curiosity and joy" (CH.Y.). Majority of the PSTs described their sense of satisfaction and self-efficacy following the practicum experience: "... sometimes I felt that the students came into the classroom with lowered spirits, and after experiencing success during my lesson, their spirits were high and they experienced happiness. This satisfied and motivated me to continue investing" (L.CH.).

Theme 2: Professional Development in Special Education

Most of the PSTs described the opportunity they had to become familiar with the world of special education students: "...during the semester I became acquainted with the students and their specific needs, both educationally and emotionally..." (S.A.). The PSTs further noted the adoption of tools and strategies for special education that will help them in the future: "I learned I had to repeat things multiple times and use diverse teaching methods and creativity. Sometimes progress is slow, but to witness them reaping the fruits of their labor is one of the most exciting things" (H.SH.). The PSTs additionally mentioned their ability to plan and teach adapted, successful and experiential lessons: "I learned the importance of lessons planning. I learned to come prepared to the lessons, think of all of the questions my students can ask so that the lesson will be adapted and successful" (K.P.).

Theme 3: Learning from Role Partners

The PSTs described the inclusion and support by the staff and the pedagogical instructor: "in the beginning of the school year, I wanted to quit due to the workload in the practicum, but the training teacher and the pedagogical guide did not give up on" (M.SH.). The PSTs further described the demeanor of the training teacher with the classroom students as a source for learning: "I really loved watching how the teacher conducts in class so that the students will succeed. I find it amazing that the teacher is able to adapt herself to the needs of each student." (S.A.).

Theme 4: Creation of a Beneficial Class Climate

The PSTs perceived the adapting of the teaching methods to the students as a way of creating a beneficial class climate: "I tried to step out of the box and change the teaching methods I was familiar with from my school days, by adding more group tasks and technological tasks that would make learning more

interesting and inviting for the students” (I.B.). Many PSTs noted the topic of adapting the learned materials according to levels as a way to of creating a beneficial class climate: “in the beginning it took me a while to know what is suitable for each student. Going forward, the more I learned about the students, the more I knew how to reach out to each of them differently” (A.G.). Other PSTs referred to the formation of a safe connection with the students as means to the creation of a beneficial class climate: “... each day I built my connections with the students and grew to know each of their qualities, who’s friend with whom, and what helps each of them relax when there is an outburst in the class...” (SH.M.). Other PSTs referred to the topic of setting clear rules and boundaries for creating a beneficial class climate: “I was able to lead the classroom and the students participated attentively in all of my lessons, due to the clear rules and boundaries I presented in the beginning of each lesson, without taking away from their motivation” (R.H.).

Theme 5. Perception of the Teacher’s Role: Personal Skills

The PSTs perceived the role of the teacher as possessing *inclusion, patience and empathy towards the students*: “*during the practicum I learned what a good teacher is. A good teacher has an open heart and has love for all the students*” (SH.B.). The PSTs further noted that the teacher figure is an individual with an ability to *establish interpersonal relationships with the students*: “*I see a good teacher as a teacher who has a personal relationship with the students*” (H.SH.).

Theme 6. Perception of the Teacher’s Role: Professional Skills

The PSTs perceived the teacher as having the *ability to increase students’ motivation and cooperation*: “*I believe that the teachers have the ability to teach students to love learning... I learned how important it was to empower special education students*” (L.CH.). Few PSTs described the teacher as having the ability to be *present and assertive in the classroom*: “*the teacher is a central figure in the student’s life and must therefore set a personal example to them. It is important for the teacher to have presence in the classroom and be assertive*” (H.SH.).

Theme 7. Relationship with the Educational Staff in Class and in School

The PSTs mentioned the *significant support they received from the staff*: “*I have established deep and personal relationships with the staff members. I had*

the honor to work with a training teacher of great stature, who was also my friend and supporter” (Y.B.). Some participants mentioned the sense of belonging and involvement in the classroom and in the school: “... the moment I entered the classroom, I was welcomed with a smile and a hug from the students and the amazing staff” (SH.M.).

Theme 8. The Relationship with the Classroom Students

Most of the PSTs described their *profound acquaintance with the students* and the formation of a personal relationship with them: “*the students in the practicum class were my reason for smiling each Monday morning. I was close to each of them... they saw me as a friend and older brother, with clear boundaries and mutual respect*” (A.M.).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

The current study investigated the short and long-term impact (after the first and second semestrial programs, respectively) of a special education practicum training program on PSTs from Israeli Arab and Jewish cultures, as determined through the content analysis of their perceptions regarding professional identity development.

According to the findings, differences were found between the two time points in the professional development of PSTs during their practicum experience. Specifically, the findings indicated that the PSTs’ professional development was more significant following the longer practicum period. This gap was evident in several parameters. By the end of the first semester, the PSTs used mainly technical terms such as preparing and teaching learning materials, to describe their learning and personal insight acquired after the practicum. However, at the end of the second semester, the PSTs described other aspects, such as: adopting tools and learning strategies in special education; teaching adaptive, successful and experiential lessons; and adapting their teaching to the various levels of the students in the practicum classroom. Furthermore, by the end of the first semester, the pre-service teachers primarily discussed their capacity to develop personalized and educational approaches for special education students, whereas at the end of the second semester, they emphasized the significance of understanding their students’ inner world.

Another difference that was observed between the two time points focused on the trainer. At the end of the first semester, the PSTs discussed their learning

experiences after receiving feedback from both the traininer and the pedagogical instructor. However, by the end of the 2nd semester, their attention shifted towards observing the trainer's interactions with students in the classroom as well as the collaborative efforts with fellow pre-service teachers (PSTs) during the practicum, recognizing these as valuable learning opportunities. These findings verify our hypothesis and are in accordance with prior research literature indicating that PSTs benefit more from actual practical experiences during the practicum and from a positive interaction with the trainer, rather than from technical and theoretical aspects (McElwee et al., 2018; Schepens et al., 2009).

Another issue noted by the PSTs in their reflections was the creation of a beneficial class climate. At the end of the first semester, the PSTs emphasized the importance of significance familiarity with the students, described the methods implemented by staff in the classrooms and even the instances where they sought the guidance of the training teacher or class aide. However, by the end of the second semester, the PSTs detailed actions they independently took to foster a positive classroom environment. These actions included: adapting their teaching to the different levels of students in the classroom; forming a secure bond with the students; enforcing clear rules and boundaries during the lessons; and even implementing theories learned in college within the practicum setting.

These findings verify our hypothesis and are in accordance with prior research literature indicating that the exposure of PSTs to special needs children at the outset of their training allows them to experience with interactions with both students and colleagues, while applying theoretical and academic skills acquired during their studies. The practicum aims to provide PSTs with real-life experiences to enhance their future capabilities as teachers and contribute to their professional development in the field of special education though practical experiences rather than academic studies alone (Schepens et al., 2009).

During the research, the PSTs additionally described their perceptions of the role of the special education teacher. In terms of personal skills, in both semesters, the PSTs described the teacher as possessing attributes of inclusion, patience and empathy towards the students. The difference observed between the two semesters focused on the shift from focusing on the students' emotional world to the importance of establishing personal

relationships with the students. In terms of professional skills, whereas at the end of the 1st semester, the PSTs described the teacher's role as possessing expertise and proficiency in the learning materials and teaching strategies, at the end of the second semester, their attention focused on the teacher's presence and assertiveness in the classroom, as well as their capacity to enhance student motivation and cooperation.

These findings are in line with prior research literature, according to which the PSTs' understanding of the teacher's role evolves throughout their training and is influenced by their skill development and application of acquired knowledge abilities. As their learning progresses, their perception of the teacher's role shifts in alignment with their professional and educational growth. In the early stages of their studies, the PSTs focus on the emotional aspect of teaching. As their learning advances, they gradually begin shifting their focus on other professional attributes. This finding is in accordance with the recommendation to introduce PSTs to practical training at the outset of their training, to enable them to grasp the intricacies of their role and develop a clearer understanding of their professional role (Assadi & Murad, 2017).

Finally, the PSTs described their relationship with the students in the practicum classroom. At the end of both semesters, the students discussed their profound understanding of the students and the personal relationships they formed with them. The primary distinction identified between the two semesters was that at the conclusion of the first semester, the PSTs characterized the students based on their initial perceptions of them, while at the end of the second semester, they reflected on the need to say goodbye to the students who became quite meaningful to them. These findings indicate that the PSTs experienced a more notable progress in their professional identity at the end of the 2nd semester as opposed to the end of the 1st semester, following the practicum.

8. Research limitations and future directions

The research took place at one academic Jewish college where both Jewish and Arab PSTs were enrolled in the Special Education program. Therefore, there is a need to conduct research in other teacher training institutions and explore the professional growth, self-efficacy, and perceptions of the role of Special Education teachers among PSTs who have completed their practicum training. Moreover, at the time of data collection in the current research (the academic year of 2021-2022), the Covid-19 pandemic

was still raging. As a result, the PSTs experienced remote teaching and learning in light of quarantines and lockdowns that took place during their first semester. Thus, we consider that it is important that the research be conducted again when PSTs undergo a yearlong physical practicum in the classrooms.

Authors note:

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