Students’ voice: The hopes and fears of student-teacher candidates

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Abstract: It is widely claimed that learners interpret new information and experiences through their existing network of knowledge, experience, and beliefs. Research on professional identities of teachers highlight the impact of biographical factors such as teachers schooling experiences, motivations for entering teacher education programs, their initial teacher education experiences and contexts of professional practice, as influential of “construction, deconstruction and reconstruction” of teachers’ professional identities and the kind of teachers they become. The study investigates teacher education candidates’ hopes and fears concerning their future career as teachers. An open-ended questionnaire was distributed to 90 candidates in a teacher education college. The qualitative analysis identifies the domains of candidates’ hope and fears. The findings reveal that candidates expressed more hopes then fears. Their hopes and fears correspond with qualities of the “good teacher” and effective teaching. The study can support the development of prospective teachers towards expertise in teaching and assist program designers and educators in strengthening education programs by catering for students’ needs, taking into consideration their hopes and concerns.

Subjects: Curriculum Studies; Secondary Education; Teaching & Learning - Education

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
What is the best teacher education, and how can we make sure that programs cater for prospective teachers’ needs, are key issues that colleges and universities around the world are struggling with. Our study responds to this concern by trying to investigate candidates’ existing network of knowledge, experiences, and beliefs taking into consideration their hopes and fears prior to entering teacher education. Learning to teach requires a journey into the deepest recesses of one’s self-awareness. Thinking about the future people elaborate their needs, motives, hopes, desires, and fears into more specific motivational goals, behavioral plans, and projects. Thus the study provides perspectives on candidates’ perceptions and values about the profession and how they wish to fulfill them using future orientation theories, so that areas of instruction can be strengthened and education programs can be modified.
1. Introduction

It is widely claimed that learners interpret new information and experiences through their existing network of knowledge, experience, and beliefs (Desforges, 1995; Fosnot, 1996; Huberman, 1993; Richardson, 1996). This also acknowledges that beginner teachers' experiences are shaped by what they bring to the experiences, including their images of themselves as teachers that have been derived from their encounters as learners (Kagan, 1992; Leshem & Trafford, 2006; Löfström & Poom-Valickis, 2013). Learning to teach requires “a journey into the deepest recesses of one’s self-awareness where failures fears and hopes are hidden” (Kagan, 1992, p. 137). Research on professional identities of teachers highlight the impact of biographical factors such as teachers schooling experiences, motivations for entering teacher education programmes, their initial teacher education experiences, and contexts of professional practice, as influential of “construction, deconstruction and reconstruction” of teachers’ professional identities and the kind of teachers they become (Flores & Day, 2006). Hagger and Malmberg give further emphasis to the links between past and present experiences by highlighting the fact that those who study to become teachers find it difficult to disengage from their own experiences (Hagger & Malmberg, 2011).

This study adds to existing knowledge on teacher development by investigating teacher education candidates’ hopes and fears concerning their future career as teachers. While research on teacher education spoke of past events that influence their beliefs about teaching, this study investigates their future orientation in order to learn about their present beliefs as an important factor in setting goals for attainment to assist them in moving closer to their ideals (Hammerness, 2003). The underlying assumption is that hopes for the future and goal setting direct human actions, stimulate people to greater effort, affect strategies for implementation and connect with motivation (Seginer & Lens, 2015). This notion is endorsed by Zaleski and Przepiórka (2015) who claim that the more important the goal, the stronger the motivation to achieve it. The motivation and attitude that pre-service teachers bring with them before entering teacher education has been acknowledged as influential in the development of students and then when they become teachers (Aksu, Demir, Daloglu, Yildirim, & Kiraz, 2010; Thomson & Palermo, 2014). Understanding and addressing issues of teachers’ vision could play a central role in ensuring that more and more new teachers learn to hope rather than only hope to learn (Hagger & Malmberg, 2011).

There is also no evidence of the extent teacher education programs take into account candidates’ fears (Harkins, Forrest, & Keener, 2009). However, understanding the fears teacher candidates possess is a topical issue, as it can strengthen areas of instruction and thus there may be less teacher turnover and more retention in the education profession. It is thus important as early as possible to generate knowledge about goals that might promote motivation and enhance well-being and also concerns which might undermine motivation, and hamper well-being (Hagger & Malmberg, 2011).

2. Future orientation and teacher education

Future orientation regards the future, as reported by the person, in images and thoughts about the future (Nuttin & Lens, 1985; Seginer, 2000; Trommsdorff, 1983). Without thinking about the future there are no goals, and there is no concern for future generations (Seginer, 2009). Thinking about the future provides the ground for setting personal goals, exploring future options, making plans, and commitment. Zimbardo and Boyd (1999), proposed a theory of time perspective which considers orientations to the past, the present, and the future as a basic dimension of human functioning. They argue that experiences from the past can influence actions in the present and expectations for the future. A future perspective allows people to overcome immediate drives and impulses and helps to give value to more distant and more important goals (Mello & Worrell, 2006).

Hence, future orientation guides human behavior in many respects such as, issues related to school, career choice, marriage and family. Research on employment reveals that thinking about the future shapes the future employability of the person (Strauss, Griffin, & Parker, 2012). Cognitive representation of the future is reflected by coping with questions related to the ways we hope to live our life. For example, what do I want to do? What can I be? These guiding questions contribute to self-regulation.
The importance of a future time perspective has also an important role in academic engagement and performance (Brown & Jones, 2004). This link is also proposed by Simons, Vansteenkiste, Lens, and Lacante (2004), who claim that having a deep future time perspective is associated with a deep conceptual thinking and more intensive persistence and so, future-oriented students are more intrinsically motivated and are more likely to employ deep approaches to their studies. Thus thinking about the future and the motivation to achieve the goals leads to behavior that supports these aspirations and hopes. Hopes include aspirations, desires, and goals to achieve, while fears include things which we want to avoid (Malmberg & Norrgard, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Both hopes and fears shape the behavior to fulfill goals or avoid situations that are not perceived as pleasing. This is also reinforced by Dunkel and Kruger (2015) who contend that future orientation reflects a pattern of behavior dominated by a striving for future goals and rewards.

This echoes Markus and Nurius (1986) theory of possible-selves which provides insight into the manner in which past experiences and current contexts might influence how individuals anticipate their future during life-phase transitions such as preparing for new career (Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, & Bunuan, 2010). Possible-selves are derived from an individual’s social context and from what is valued or perceived to be valued within specific social experiences (Ibid.). Hamman et al. (2010) suggest that examining teachers’ views in terms of possible-selves provide understanding on their identity in the present, and also on their identity in the future. They support their claim using Markus contention (Markus, 2006, p. xii) that “Knowing how people think about themselves currently is of some help, but knowing what they hope and fear should refine this understanding [because] possible-selves are not applied as frames after experience; rather they are used in the ongoing constitution of experience” (Markus, 2006, p. xii). They also suggest that possible-selves are like a self-schemata stored in long-term memory and resemble the dynamic nature of identity. Thus teacher’s possible-selves can change by attempting to become what one values; for example, being an effective teacher (Hamman et al., 2010). This notion is reinforced by Yeager and Dweck who claim that students’ mindset can be changed and doing so can promote resilience and academic success (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Much research on prospective and novice teachers has concentrated on teacher anxieties and concerns rather than on their aspirations (Conway & Clark, 2003). This stance, as claimed by Conway and Clark, is puzzling and might provide a distorted picture of understanding teacher development. They contend that attention to both hopes and fears affords the opportunity to present a more balanced and expansive view of prospective teachers’ concerns and anticipation about learning to teach, and thus provides a helpful lens with which to understand and support the development of prospective teachers (Conway & Clark, 2003).

Early studies on models of teacher development propose a three-stage model moving outward from concerns about self, changing to concerns about task, and culminating to concerns about students (Fuller, 1969). Hawkins (1974/1967) termed this development as moving from the “I” to “It” to “Thou.” In a review of 40 research studies on professional growth among pre-service teachers, it has been proposed that beginning teachers appear to be intensely concerned with the self as teacher (Kagan, 1992). The concern about self is a stage to be passed through on the way to a concern with pupil learning and a necessary and valuable stage in the construction of a “professional self” (Conway & Clark, 2003). Other studies grouped the concerns into two distinct stages, the survival stage focusing on personal adequacy, classroom practices, planning, and organization, and the second stage focusing on promoting students’ learning (Watzke, 2007). Another view of teachers’ hopes and concerns relates to social and cultural aspects as counter to personality aspects (Conway, 2001; Hagger & Malmberg, 2011).

It is assumed that hopes and concerns of teachers are related to social and cultural aspects in the way they perceive the “good teacher” and “good teaching”. Studies on teachers’ self-efficacy have shown relationships between their level of concerns and teacher self-efficacy (Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999). Thus, although there is no one prescribed model for teacher education programs, learning
about student teachers hopes and fears can enrich our understanding of how they can be assisted in their developmental journey toward expertise in teaching (Conway & Clark, 2003). This conceptual understanding guided the research design that is described in the following section.

3. Methodology
The study is part of a longitudinal study which follows student teachers’ hopes and fears at different stages, from the entry phase (before acceptance to the college) to graduation (fourth year of study). The article presents the first phase of the study where participants are not yet registered students, but applicants who are taking an entrance exam as part of the admission process.

3.1. Participants
The participants of the research consisted of a purposive group of 90 candidates who applied for studies at a teacher education college in Israel which grants a Bachelor’s degree and a teaching certificate (B.Ed., BSc). Most of the candidates (60%) were under the age of 25 and female (60%). The majority (62%) applied for disciplines in the humanities and social studies, while 15% applied for math and sciences, and 23% applied for English as a foreign language.

3.2. Process of study
Candidates who sat for an entrance exam were asked, at the end of the exam, if they would be willing to answer a short open-ended questionnaire about their hopes and fears regarding their future as teachers. They were informed about the purpose of the research, its voluntary basis, and anonymity. In order to avoid any threat or bias, it was also made clear that the questionnaire was not part of the exam and their responses would have no effect on their application or results of the entrance exam. The researchers were not present in the room. They guided the facilitator of the exam to administer the procedures of distributing and collecting the questionnaires. All candidates (N = 90) responded to the questionnaire.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part related to demographic questions such as: gender, date of birth, discipline of study. The second part contained two open-ended questions as follows:

People often think of their future career and express their thoughts by talking about hope and concerns.

(1) Describe your hopes in regard to your future career as teachers. You may write about experiences, feelings, and critical events related to your hopes.

(2) In the same way describe your fears about your future career as teachers.

There was no time limit for completing the questionnaire and participants were invited to write as many hopes and fears as they wished.

3.3. Process of analysis
The approach to analysis was inductive using qualitative content analysis (Creswell, 2013) of candidates’ responses to the questionnaire. All demographic details of the participants were quantified (gender, date of birth, and disciplines). Both hopes and fears were counted to indicate the ratio between them. All hopes and fears were copied (manually) by the researchers to create two separate texts. Hopes were read first by two independent researchers in order to obtain a sense of the overall data and to identify emergent themes. Themes were then compared and discussed by the two researchers in order to arrive at common grounded categories.

The next stage entailed further reading and refinement of the categories identified. The same procedure was conducted with the text of fears. The degree of agreement between researchers was substantial and consistency of codes developed was 90%; however, data which seemed to be
outside the agreed conceptual categories (Patton, 1990) prompted further examination and saturation of categories especially, in the analysis of fears, where themes were divided into more subcategories. The themes and categories of hopes and fears are presented in a diagram (see Figure 1) and explained in the next section of findings.

4. Findings

As mentioned earlier, candidates were asked to respond to an open-ended questionnaire where they had to write about their hopes/expectations and concerns/fears related to their teaching profession, in order to assist both teacher education program designers and students to enhance professional excellence.

The evidence reveals that out of 742 statements, 501 (68%) statements relate to hopes and 241 relate to fears. The analysis of hopes can be divided into two main categories: who the statement refers to, and the topic and content of the statement.

(1) The analysis of the first question is based on future orientation where respondents refer to themselves (self), the other (an addressee of their hopes) and the general public (society in general). Following are examples, as articulated by the respondents, to illustrate the first question.

‘My hopes are to be a successful teacher and be loved by my pupils’; ‘I would like to find just the right path for me as an educator and succeed in it’ (self).

My hope is to reach the hearts of my pupils through my teaching so that they can believe in themselves and their abilities; I would like be there for them, help them, support them and motivate them to succeed (the other).

I would like to be able to educate them to be good citizens; I would like to be a change agent, education needs to change. I would like to increase the number of pupil who graduate high school and gain their matriculation; my hopes are to bring about equal education to all (society in general).

While in most findings on future orientation, teenagers relate to the self and avoid mentioning the other or society, in our study the majority of hopes related to the other. For example:

‘My hope is to succeed to reach every child, to be a significant adult for them and to make...
them feel safe’. ‘My hope is to make pupils know that I am here for them. I want each one of them to do the best they can’.

None of the participants related to any other person in school or outside school. Out of 501 hopes, 454 related to the other and only 32 hopes related to the self, and 15 to the public. The reference to the public included the Israeli society.

Regarding fears 186 statements out of 241 related to self. Following are examples of some statements:

I am afraid that I will not be a good enough teacher, I am concerned that I will not have enough didactic knowledge, I am concerned about how I will be received by the school staff.

Forty-five statements referred to the other:

I am afraid that my students will not be able to cope and will drop out, I am afraid that pupils will not like school and blame it on me.

Ten statements referred to the public:

I am concerned about prejudices and disrespect towards the teaching profession.

(2) The analysis which relates to the content revealed three aspects: emotional, educational, and social.

5. The emotional aspect
The emotional aspect included hopes about themselves and about the imaginary future pupil. As for themselves, candidates hoped to be respected by their pupils and be seen as significant and meaningful. In respect to the other, they hoped to be able to support pupils in different aspects in school and outside school. They would like pupils to feel safe in their company. We chose not to include in this category statements that referred to learning but only to emotions towards the other such as described in the following quote:

I would like to be a teacher who helps and supports, a teacher who understands and is always there for you. I would like to see the pupils as my little brothers back at home. I want them to trust me, I want to be able to see each one of them and be available when needed.

6. The educational aspect
The learning/educational aspect related to their professionalism and the love of learning. Here, the candidates referred both to themselves and to the pupils. They hoped to be proficient in their area of teaching, to be interesting and also have the sensitivity to identify their pupils’ competences. The “self” aspect expressed hopes to enrich pupil’s knowledge and learning experiences, for example:

‘I hope to improve their achievements’. ‘I hope to have control the discipline in my classes, to be relaxed and teach with full self-confidence’.

There were differences between candidates of different disciplines. Almost all candidates of the sciences hoped to motivate pupils and make them love the learning of the subject, for example:

‘I really wish to pass on my enthusiasm to my pupils. I want them to appreciate physics and one day they will remember me as one of the most influential teachers who challenged them. I hope that one day they will go to university and major in it. It is very important for me that they love mathematics.'
Candidates of the humanities did not mention the love for the discipline, they related more to the others than to themselves.

7. The social aspect
The social aspect included the participants’ attitude towards the educational system in the Israeli society and social values. They hoped that through their educational practice they will be able to initiate change in the educational system, to enhance the number of high school graduates and to contribute to a more egalitarian society, as illustrated:

‘The goal is to make progress towards equality in society’. ‘I would like to be able to educate for values such as, mutual respect, tolerance for the other, dialogue...’ ‘I believe that society is built upon education and this is why I want to invest in education. Change will evolve from that’.

8. Fears
The analysis of “fears” revealed three main categories: emotional, cognitive, and school (teaching). The emotional aspect can be divided into two subcategories of “self” and “student”. The cognitive can be divided into three subcategories: “self-didactic”, “self-discipline” and “student.” The category of school is focused only on the “self.”

9. Emotional
The evidence shows that the emotional aspect to be the most significant in participants’ relation to fears. This aspect is divided into fears about “the teacher himself/herself” and to “the teacher-student emotional relationship.” The comments in the “self” category reveal fears concerning burnout, intolerance from pupils, and obstacles in meeting goals; for example,

‘I am afraid that if I happen to encounter critical circumstances, I will not be able to lift myself’. ‘I am afraid I will not be able to utilize my capabilities to the fullest extent’. ‘I am afraid the pupils will not like me’. ‘I am afraid I will not set a good role model for the pupils’. ‘I am afraid I will not be able to handle the parents’. ‘I am afraid pupils will not accept my creativity’.

The emotional aspects associated with the pupil, highlight the inability to understand pupils’ stress and anxieties and thus fail to establish a meaningful and sincere relationship, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

*I am afraid I will not be able to help the pupil with their problems...’ I will not be able to understand the pupils...’ I will not have a good relationship with the pupils...’ I will not be able to be more than just ‘a teacher’.

10. Cognitive
Comments related to Self-didactic express fears concerned with didactic issues such as inexperience and load of work, for example:

*I am afraid my lessons will not be interesting, I am afraid I will not have sufficient teaching skills to deal with the complex work of teaching, I am afraid I will not be able to enthuse pupils and love the subject of my teaching.

Comments related to Self-discipline express fear of dealing with discipline problems due to lack of authority and inability to set clear borders. For example:

*I am afraid of disorder and disrespect. I do not want to be one of those teachers who are afraid of their pupils or are threatened by their pupils’ feedback.

In the pupil category, candidates raised issues such as failure to deal with underachievers or pupils at risk and pupils’ dropout, for example:
I am afraid that pupils will have lots of difficulties to cope with the learning material and this would be my failure…I am afraid that pupils will not achieve high grades...

11. School

The school category emphasizes issues related to the school as an organization which fails to cater for its teachers, or does not “see” its teachers, for example:

I am afraid of mediocrity and not having space to act according to my frame of mind. I am afraid to feel lonely in this complex system, I am afraid that the system will ‘clip my wings’ and destroy my enthusiasm and creativity.

The following section interprets the findings in light of future orientation theories and the “good teacher”.

12. Discussion and conclusions

The study investigated hopes and fears of candidates of a teacher education college. In light of the relationship between future orientation, motivation for goal attainment and development of students (Thomson & Palermo, 2014), we asked candidates to tell us about their hopes and fears regarding their future career as teachers. We found that candidates expressed more hopes than fears, a finding which corresponds with previous research on future orientation (Seginer, 2009). The analysis pointed at two main categories related to hopes: who the hopes are addressed to (self, the other, pupil, or society) and the content of hopes (emotional, educational, or social).

The category related to the addressee reveals a process of change as observed in research among adolescences in Israel who were asked to indicate future hopes and fears. They related mostly to themselves, lesser, if at all, to the other, and hardly to the social dimension (Seginer, 2009). However, while adolescences are concerned mainly with the self, in our study when candidates relate to educational career, the reference to the other and society increases. This can be attributed to age and profession, as most of the candidates are in their mid- or late 20s; and the profession of teaching, by its nature, is based on processes of relationships between students and teachers. Thus the choice of and the success in the teaching profession demands high awareness of the other (Chin & Young, 2007; Heinz, 2015; König & Rothland, 2012).

The analysis of hopes exposes three categories: emotional, educational, and social. The emotional category includes aspects of “seeing the pupil” and the motivation to provide support, trust, and security. The educational category includes hopes concerned with pedagogical excellence and teaching competences, while the social aspect highlights mainly hopes related to the educational system at large. All the three aspects correspond with research on the “good teacher” (Bland & Sleightholme, 2012; Devine, Fahie, & McGillicuddy, 2013; Läänemets, Kalamees-Ruubel, & Sepp, 2012) teaching motivation (Fokkens-Bruinsma & Canrinus, 2012; Taimalu, Luik, Volti, & Kalk, 2011; Watt & Richardson, 2008), and becoming a student teacher (Malderez, Hobson, Tracey, & Kerr, 2007). Thus both candidates and teachers hope to develop meaningful relationships with their students and meet both their cognitive and emotional needs (Rots, Kelchtermans, & Aelterman, 2012; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009).

The notion of relationship has played a pivotal role in research on teacher education in general and student teachers’ conceptions of teachers and teaching in particular (Malderez et al., 2007). The teacher as a “knowledge base” of the profession has been replaced with a much more holistic view of the teacher as an agent in educating children whose practice “remains forever rooted in personality and experience” (Goodson, 1994; Kagan, 1992, p. 163). Students at all ages attribute importance to the personality of the teacher and particularly to the teacher’s attitude towards the students (Hativa, 2003). It seems that the candidates’ experiences and their prior conceptions of teaching and school, influence their hopes and expectations to become such teachers for their future students (Seker, 2015). In addition, research has demonstrated the importance of teaching
commitment for teacher retention (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Tait, 2008). Teachers who have better relations with students experience lower stress, greater job satisfaction, and greater sense of efficacy and commitment, because they experience greater well-being (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011).

In the same vein, the categories that emerge from the analysis of fears (emotional, cognitive and school) correspond with candidates’ conceptions of effective teachers as mentioned above. Candidates assume that good teachers know their students, are sensitive to their emotional and instructional needs, are knowledgeable, and know how to conduct good lessons. However, they are concerned that they would not meet these needs and qualities. As far as school support is concerned, their fears reflect the reality described in many of the studies on novice teachers where the collegial climate in a given school context may not live up to the idea of school that novice teachers hold (Flores & Day, 2006).

Studies in psychology show that thinking about the future contributes to behaviors that foster motivation (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). By thinking about the future people elaborate their needs, motives, hopes, desires, and fears into more specific motivational goals, behavioral plans and projects (Seginer & Lens, 2015). Being aware of the hopes and fears cause the person to set goals, to understand their value and importance, and to plan how they can be achieved. Therefore, studies show that future orientation has a positive effect on academic achievement (Seginer, 2009; Seginer & Lens, 2015).

12.1. Conclusions
The first phase of our comprehensive longitudinal study illustrates that candidates expressed more hopes then fears. The evidence shows that their mindset at the stage of candidature is quite positive. They possess a mental picture of the teacher they would like to be, on the basis of past experiences. Hopes and fears are expressed through the emotional, cognitive, social, and school aspects. These aspects are embedded in contexts which move from the individual/self to the school and then to society at large. From a broader perspective, candidates’ hopes and fears correspond with qualities of the “good teacher” and effective teaching as evidenced in the literature on teacher education.

Research on professional identity of teachers usually do not address discourses of future-oriented reflection (Conway, 2001). This is also noted by Urzúa and Vásquez (2008) who termed it “reflection for action” (p. 1936). They emphasize the importance of acknowledging candidates’ experiences as a lens through which they can “imagine the kind of teacher they want to become and to use to their formative years as a means to project a designated sense of self as a teacher” (p. 1944). Our findings as represented by hopes and fears project candidates’ “reflection for action” and their “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The future orientations that candidates expressed through their hopes and fears, are only indicators of candidates’ mindsets (Dweck, 2012) at a transition phase of entering a new career (Hamman et al., 2010). However, they have important implications to teacher education programs. Higher education institutions heavily influence the development of possible-selves as contexts for their elaboration, for example, information and guidance for education or career plans (Rossiter, 2003). Thus, enquiring about candidates’ hopes and fears regarding their future as teachers reveals their perceptions and values about the profession and how they wish to fulfill them. They represent what one would like to become (i.e. hoped-for selves) and what one wants to avoid (feared selves) and can act as road maps to pursue goals and to avoid undesirables (Frazier, Hooker, Johnson, & Kaus, 2000). This also accords with the psychological aspect noted by Yeager and Dweck of the impact of students’ mindsets on their resilience in the face of academic and social challenges (Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

Conway and Clark (2003) suggest that aspirations hopes and goals should be incorporated into a model of teacher development to emphasize elements of the forward looking prospective and future-oriented nature of teachers’ actions and reflection (Conway, 2001). As teacher educators and program designers, we can build on this knowledge to understand and support the development of
prospective teachers towards expertise in teaching (Conway, 2001). Furthermore, areas of instruction can be strengthened and education programs can be modified to cater to student teacher’s needs, taking into consideration their hopes and fears (Wash & Freeman, 2014).

The next stage of our study is to investigate hopes and fears of students in their fourth year, when they are just at the threshold of entering the profession as teachers and to compare the characteristics of hopes and fears at the beginning and end of the teacher education program. Due to limitations of anonymity, we cannot follow the same students, however, the aim of the study is to investigate the process of development of hopes and fears at different stages of the teacher education program in general, and thus this factor would not interfere with our study. Hopefully, we will be able to further investigate students after their first year of teaching, when they are already teachers in the field, and compare our data from all three stages, guided by our conceptual framework of future orientation and teacher education.

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