

## **Observation in Learning to Teach: Forms of “Seeing”**

**By Lily Orland-Barak & Shosh Leshem**

When asked to convey his account of the observation experience during practice teaching, in the context of a university teacher training program in Israel, Sandy, a first year student teacher (teacher candidate), wrote the following entry in his portfolio:

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*I feel sorry to say that the idea of sitting in a class is not that useful. We have already spent 12 years in school and now when we go to school again we feel that everything is familiar and nothing is really being added ... We have seen teachers for 12 years and now we are exposed to the same situation ... we are not learning or gaining anything new from the teacher.... (Sandy, January, 2004)*

Upon first reaction, the above entry might disappoint many of us who strive to create observation contexts and tasks that allow for making meaningful connections between students' perceptions of teaching as former pupils and their new roles as prospective teachers. Moreover, knowing that Sandy's entry was recurrent in other portfolios, and given the fact that it was written in the context of an observation task, his remark raises serious questions about the impact of observation on prospective teachers' sense making of their teaching experience. Put bluntly, if the value of observation for learning to teach were to be assessed

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by this recurrent entry in student teachers' portfolios, we would probably have to seriously reconsider its allocation as a component in practice teaching.

Having entertained the possibility of *doing away with observation* there is, nevertheless, significant evidence to support its value for learning to teach in practice teaching (Buchmann, 1989; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Mazor, 2003; Weade & Everston, 1991). The above seemingly discrepant attributions (the perceived *meaninglessness* of the experience of observation as expressed in Sandy's entry and attributions of observation as a *meaningful* experience) have challenged us to examine, as the title of this paper suggests, how "seeing" in practice can constitute a site for learning to teach. Specifically, our qualitative inquiry inquired into the meanings that student teachers attribute to observation in practice teaching, as reflective of their learning from the experience.

### **Observation as 'Seeing' in the Context of Practice: Theoretical Perspectives**

*The epistemic superiority Kessels and Korthagen give to (visual) experience is corroborated by Gilbert Ryle's analysis of seeing as an achievement verb (Ryle, 1980). The very use of such verbs indicates success...According to Ryle, verbs like know, discover, solve, prove, perceive, see and observe are, in an important sense, incapable of being qualified by adverbs like erroneously and incorrectly. (Kvernberk, 2000, p. 360)*

The theoretical rationale for the value of observation as integral to learning to teach can be grounded in the above assertion. As Ryle reminds us, seeing in practice is inherently constructive and, as such, it is regarded as a particularly worthwhile learning opportunity in professional learning and in teacher education. Margaret Buchmann's work (1989), for example, reminds us of the potential of seeing as connecting *old* to *new*, as student teachers *see* teaching practices that are already familiar to them during observation. Their sense making from "seeing" such practices is, thus, strongly directed and constructed by their assumptions about teaching, from years of being pupils themselves and watching teachers (Buchmann, 1989). Buchmann's claim finds support in Schon's (1983) argument of the relationship between seeing and knowing: As practitioners bring their repertoire of past experiences, images, examples, understandings and actions, they are able to 'see' and make sense of new situations.

Kvernbekk (2000) describes this kind of seeing as "seeing as" in practice, defined as identifying similarities and differences between past experiences and new observed situations encountered. "Seeing as" allows practitioners to have a feel for new problems and situations and becomes a form of observation that goes beyond sensory perception (Kvernbekk, 2000). Taking a more Aristotelian perspective, Kessels and Korthagen (1996) advocate a view of observation as geared to

the development of teachers' practical wisdom through perceptual experiences of concrete particulars. Thus, observation is mostly associated with perceiving in and awareness of a particular situation, leading to appropriate courses of action (p. 359). The job of the teacher educator is, then, to help students observe in order to "see" in the sense of perceptual practical wisdom. This common sense/perceptual mode of observation can be referred to as "seeing in" practice, which is situation specific and guided by students' subjective perceptions of personally relevant classroom situations.

"Seeing in" practice is often contested with the counter argument that it might limit itself to the physical look and characteristics of that which is being observed (Soltis, 1966). As Kvernbekk, quoting Ryle, contends, this kind of seeing in observation might tend to connote with "perception recipes" or knowledge of the look of a thing or simple seeing.

Arguing for the value of conceptual seeing in practice, Kvernbekk (2000) claims that observation is primarily a theory-laden undertaking. Although there is a sense in which we are visually aware of the same thing, any kind of interpretation would be profoundly different because the perceivers bring different knowledge, experiences and theories to the same seeing. Drawing on Hanson's concept of "seeing that" (1958) and following Suppe (1977), Kvernbekk argues that the product of visual observation is a record of what has been seen "to be the case." Observation as "seeing that" in practice is, by nature, influenced by the theories that we accept and are able to observe. Thus, students need to learn to recognize phenomena and become aware of differences between indirect fact perceptions and direct ones, and make judgements accordingly (Kvernbekk, 2000).

The learning value attributed to perceptual and conceptual modes of "seeing" in context, underscore their significance as integral to the practice teaching experience (For an outline of the notions of "seeing as" "seeing in" and "seeing that," see Appendix 1). Programmatically, it challenges teacher educators to design observation approaches and activities that allow for associating perceptual experiences with conceptual understandings. From a research perspective, it invites us to inquire into the nature of student teacher learning as prompted by such observation tasks and activities-the focus of the present study.

### **Context of the Study: The Teacher Education Program**

The teacher education program is a two-year academic program within the Department of Teaching at a major university in the north of Israel. The program offers undergraduate students the possibility to undertake a teaching certificate parallel to their third year of study in their disciplinary area. The participants in the study were 30 junior student teachers, all of which were in their second year of a teacher training bachelor's program. . All student teachers had been exposed to classroom teaching and observation during the practice teaching component of student teaching in the first year. Altogether, students spent one day per week in the classroom for a 5 hour

period. It should be mentioned that in the framework of practice teaching, students are expected both to observe lessons and to teach at least eight lessons during the year.

### **The Observation Task:**

#### **Perceptual and Conceptual Dimensions of Seeing**

The observation task described in this study was given to the group of 30 student teachers of English upon entering practice teaching in their second year of training. Each student was asked to submit ten observation entries throughout the school year. Sandy's entry, quoted at the outset of this paper, was prompted by the observation task which read as follows:

*Observation is an integral component of the practice teaching experience. Yet we know very little about what student teachers actually learn from the observation experience. Thus, your contribution to our understanding of its value is imperative. Please, complete the phrases below following the lessons you observe. Make sure you mention the grade level you are observing.*

*I was surprised to discover... and I have learned that...  
I have changes my mind about...because...  
I was reinforced to find that ... therefore...  
I was reminded of.... and that has made me think...*

The above task, framed as open phrases for completion, can be positioned within personalistic and reflective orientations to seeing in practice, stressing personal meaning making and connections between students' perceptual experiences (what they see and discover) and their conceptualizations of such experiences (what they learn, discover and reconstruct). The framework of open questions also speaks to observation systems that are context responsive (Weade & Everston 1991, p. 42) and draw on "narrative systems" (Everston & Green, 1986) of recording and documentation. These are open by nature, with no preset categories, and aim at detailed description, identification and comparison of observed phenomena, processes, and of generic principles deriving from specific situations (p. 43). Evidence of learning from observation tasks of this type is, thus, personal, emergent, and assessed formatively in relation to the students' self progress.

Acknowledging the open nature of the learning outcomes that would be expected from the personalistic and reflective orientation to the observation task, and drawing on the three interrelated dimensions of "seeing" (Kverbek, 2000), our inquiry aimed at identifying evidence of students' learning through the idiosyncratic connections that they exhibited between perceptual and conceptual dimensions of "seeing as," "seeing in," and "seeing that" in their narratives of observation.

### **Method**

Our inquiry focused on the meanings that student teachers attribute to the

experience of observation in practice teaching and on how these meanings can be interpreted as learning experiences. Drawing on inductive, recursive cycles of close interpretative readings (Gadamer, 1982), our study examined novices' sense-making of their experience of observation, as exhibited in their entries.

The 10 entries submitted by the 30 student teachers yielded a pool of 300 entries (each around 2 pages long). The narrative entries integrated elaborations of the various stem sentences. These were compiled into 30 files. Each file was read by two independent researchers, to obtain a holistic overview of emergent themes related to students' sense-making of the experience of observation. The independent readings were followed by conversations between the two researchers in order to arrive at a synthesis of common grounded categories of "forms of seeing." These categories pertained to making connections at pedagogical, practical and educational levels. The connections identified were: Making assertions, making assumptions, triggering thinking, gaining insights and being reinforced. The grounded categories were identified through the language used by students to describe their learning.

The next stage entailed further verification, extension and refinement of the categories identified. The hermeneutic cycles of close interpretative readings entailed recursive processes of formulating conjectures as data was examined and triangulated across and within cases (Patton, 1990). The process yielded the construction of an analytic framework for analyzing the entries at levels of making connections at pedagogical, practical and educational levels of "seeing in observation."

### **Forms of "Seeing in Observation"**

Upon first holistic reading, we identified a strong sense of "not having learned much from observation" as conveyed through the narratives. In-depth content analysis (Patton, 1990), however, surfaced the different forms of seeing elaborated in earlier sections: "Seeing as," "seeing in," and "seeing that." Categories of "seeing as" included insights that were gained and new understandings about teaching and learning that were triggered and articulated as the result of the experience. Categories of "seeing as" included initial understandings, ideas, and suppositions that were supported, discarded, or enriched as a result of observation. Categories of "seeing that" entailed relationships between behaviors assumptions, insights and assertions that were established as a result of observation. Each of these forms of "seeing" alluded to practical (activities, classroom management), educational (roles, values, attitudes, dispositions and relationships), and pedagogical (curricular decisions, lesson organization, rationale for choice of strategy) aspects of teaching. For illustrative examples of the different forms of 'seeing' identified in the content analysis, see Appendix One.

In the following section we portray selected cases which illustrate students' attributions of learning and "no learning" as revealed in their accounts of observation. We first explore illustrative cases of observation as a "no learning experience". We then focus on accounts of observation as "a learning experience."

### **Observation as a 'No Learning' Experience**

Let us return to Sandy's entry at the outset of this article:

*I feel sorry to say that the idea of sitting in a class is not that useful. We have already spent 12 years in school and now when we go to school again we feel that everything is familiar and nothing is really being added ... We have seen teachers for 12 years and now we are exposed to the same situation ... we are not learning or gaining anything new from the teacher.*

The strong sense of not having learned much from the experience of observation, as illustrative in Sandy's account, was predominant in many of the students' entries. In particular, this was evident in their accounts of observing teaching situations which, in their eyes, added nothing new to their repertoire of teaching. They also attributed little or no learning value to those activities in which they observed the teacher conducting exams or checking homework-which were regarded by them as activities where no teaching and learning is involved. Following are some examples.

Observing a 12<sup>th</sup> grade class preparing for their matriculation exam, Paul concludes his experience in the following manner: *"As a matter of fact, I did not learn anything special from today's observation. However, I liked the good sense of humor the teacher had."* Similarly, Orit claims that she didn't learn anything because *"there was an exam"* and there was nothing "new" that she didn't know before. Laila also contends that *"nothing was learnt or taught because they [the pupils] were only checking homework."* She writes: *"I wasn't surprised at anything; nothing made me think or caught my eye that I should report about."* Beatrice reports that she *"didn't find anything unusual that [she] would like to tell about... there was nothing 'new' that [she] hadn't seen before..."*

Like Beatrice, but providing a longer narrative account of observing a topic that she had previously been exposed to, Terry writes the following: *"I didn't feel I had learned anything new in this lesson because the whole lesson was devoted to grammar practice, the past simple. The teacher wrote down exercises on the board, the pupils copied them and they worked on the exercises individually. The teacher checked the exercises with the pupils. There wasn't any "teaching" in this lesson, it was only practice. In addition, the 'past simple' is something I feel very confident about and I'm sure I can teach this subject properly."*

Focusing on a topic that she claims to have already "learned" concerning the teaching of reading, Kari notes: *"I didn't feel that I learned anything new in this lesson. I think this is because I understand the teacher's strategy. There was nothing new or unfamiliar to me in this lesson."* With a similar focus on observing the teaching of reading, Nurit contends: *"I didn't feel I had learned anything from this lesson because it was a lesson on reading comprehension. I know how to teach this kind of lesson. There was nothing new to me."*

The above cases illustrate students' strong sense of "no learning" from those experiences that were seen by them as routines or activities that are part of a teacher's procedural expected repertoire. These were also experiences that did not confront them with any striking discrepancies or gaps between what they said they already knew about teaching and what they saw. Turning to our theoretical perspectives of *seeing in practice*, these illustrations support what Kvernbekk (2000) (quoting Ryle) defines as "perception recipes," "simple seeing." In stating that they *understand the teacher's strategy, that they know how to teach this kind of lesson, or nothing unusual or new happened*, students categorized the teaching practices "as members of a known class of objects" (Kvernbekk, 2000, p. 360). In doing so, they did not elevate their seeing beyond the perceptual level which prevented them from formulating connections at a more conceptual level. This eventually led them to claim that they *'did not learn anything'* from their observation.

## Observation as a 'Learning' Experience

### **"Seeing as": Identifying Similarities and Differences**

"Seeing as" in observation would suggest that as student teachers make sense of the experience of observation, they engage in identifying similarities and differences between past experiences, images and actions, and the new observed situation (Kvernbekk, 2000). Thus, "*seeing as*" in practice, goes beyond mere sensory perception, and is directed, recognized and judged by previous experience and knowledge. As the following cases illustrate, examining emergent gaps and discrepancies between known and observed, seemed to have led students to gain new insights both at pedagogical levels of curricular and strategic decisions, as well as at educational levels of re-examination of roles and values.

Eva, for example, gains pedagogical insights as she learns from the discrepancies that she experiences when she observes a grammar lesson—what she sees is discordant with her view about teaching and learning grammar. Eva believes that pupils don't like grammar lessons: "*I asked the teacher whether she enjoys teaching grammar or not, because it seemed to me that pupils hate it.*" Eva is surprised to learn from the teacher that her pupils enjoy learning grammar: "*I was surprised to find out, that the pupils did enjoy studying grammar, even more than something else!*" This leads her to seek explanations for the discrepancies on the grounds of what she sees in practice: "*Apparently, grammar is easier for them, because it is structured and governed by rules. The pupils are given a formula and they just have to work according to it. The process does not require much thinking. They have to apply the rules and this is done automatically after some practice.*" "Seeing as" in observation, thus, made Eva restructure her pedagogical conception about teaching and learning grammar: "*The teacher was right. I have changed my mind about pupils and grammar.*"

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Examining similarities and differences between educational agendas and roles, Elena's experience of observation confronts her with an educational conflict: She was "amazed to see" that "when the principal of the school came into the teachers' room to announce something, no one paid any attention to him or to what he was saying." Elena, who is a newcomer to the country, 'sees' the experience 'as' counter to her own cultural values and upbringing. As she tries to make sense of what she sees, she explains: "How can you expect pupils to respect you as a person and as a teacher if you yourself do not respect others while being an adult and a teacher?" Her question unveils the strong educational views that she holds about the teacher as role model on the one hand, and how these collide with what she 'sees', on the other hand. In fact, Elena devotes a major section of her entries to value-laden educational issues. In another entry she is disturbed by the "lack of respect," this time, from the pupils towards their teachers: "I was surprised to see that pupils treat teachers with lack of respect as if we were their peers." Elena's "seeing" surfaces her implicit educational principles about the teacher-pupil relationship: By her own codes of behavior, treating a teacher like a friend is considered disrespectful. Confronting gaps as she examines differences and similarities, leads her to articulate her vision of what it means to become a teacher: "For me, becoming a teacher always meant something more than just a place of work or something I do because I have to..." Indeed, the gap that she 'sees' between her educational principles and the incidents that she observed has quite a strong impact on her, leading her to ponder about her future as a teacher: "I do hope it [the experience of observation] won't stop me from doing what I love... ."

From a more practical standpoint, Sami attributes 'learning' from observation when he feels that the observed lesson helps him make practical connections between what he knows and what he sees: Reporting on an activity the teacher uses to teach 'Wh questions', he is encouraged to see how a strategy he had learned during his training is implemented in a real classroom: "the teacher asked the pupils to write a dialogue using 10 questions... this reminded me of what we learned about dialogues, that they are a good way for practicing the interrogative form, it is more challenging and stimulates thinking... I am happy to see how it works in the classroom."

In general, we noticed that learning from observation was strongly shaped by the opportunities that students identify for drawing similarities and differences between "known in theory" and "observed in action."

### **"Seeing in": Developing Practical Wisdom**

Observation as 'seeing in' associates with the perceptual, practical wisdom gained by student teachers as they observe particular, concrete, classroom situations. 'Seeing in' differs from 'seeing as' in that the former is linked with perceiving, becoming aware, and articulating assertions and new courses of action related to a particular situation observed. By nature of their survival novice stage, student



teachers are strongly concerned with the practical, managerial aspects of teaching at their initial stages of training. As the following cases show, “seeing in” was reflected in the insights that students claimed to have gained at these practical levels of activities and classroom behavior.

Consider Irena’s case. Focusing on the teacher’s actions in the classroom, Irena gains fresh practical insights about the teacher’s role in introducing new language: “...in order to practice new vocabulary taught, the teacher does not necessarily have to be in control all the time. In doing a communicative task to practice the new words learned in the previous lesson, I noticed that the teacher stood aside and helped only when a pupil asked for help when he was not sure about a particular word, for example.” Irena is surprised to discover that “when pupils are rendered autonomy they do not consider it as threatening.” She further explains the new insight gained by asserting that “when pupils are given the option to choose the subject they are much more motivated....” While initially she had thought that autonomy was threatening, she now realizes that pupils might be more motivated to learn if they are rendered the freedom of choice. Irena’s observation enabled her to identify gaps between prior conceptions and observed behaviors and establish new links between them, to articulate a rationale for the pupils’ and the teacher’s action, and formulate an educational and pedagogical principle about autonomy and motivation.

Ruth observes how teamwork is organized in an eleventh grade class: “The pupils in this class work on a new project in which they have to work in groups. Each group has to write a detailed essay about ‘Humor.’” Her observation triggers the articulation of an assertion about the assets of group work: “...I have learned that working in groups enables the pupils to express themselves, and also collaborate as members in a team....” “Seeing in” reinforces her initial perception of teamwork as a strategy in her classroom: “I always thought that teamwork is a successful teaching-learning strategy....” It also triggers prior observations of team work in other classes “I was reminded of my other practicing school where the teacher also used teamwork,” leading her to begin elaborating a practical insight about team work: “if structured properly, team work can be especially beneficial for improving pupils’ oral skills and proficiency in general.”

The above examples illustrate experiences of “seeing in” as they translate into formulations of practical and pedagogical insights and ideas about the use of particular strategies and curricular activities. Some of these insights were often integrated with theoretical understandings, leading to tentative conceptual assertions of certain observed behaviors as illustrative of a larger series of cases. We regard these as cases of “seeing that” in observation.

### **“Seeing that”: Interpreting beyond the Particular Case**

Observation as “seeing that” in practice attends to the value of conceptual seeing or of visual observation as a record of what has been seen ‘to be the case’ (Kvernbekk,

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2000). As such, “seeing that” is mediated by the theoretical, conceptual frameworks that students bring to observation, leading to new connections between the conceptual and the perceptual. “Seeing that” is, thus, regarded as a more sophisticated form of seeing, one which widens perspectives to interpret particular observed behaviours as cases of wider phenomena, leading to making judgements accordingly (Kvernbekk, 2000). The need to encourage students to move from perceptual to conceptual learning is strongly grounded in the literature of reflective practice in teacher education. In learning to become a reflective teacher, prospective teachers are expected to acquire competencies that transcend technical thinking about ‘what to do in the classroom’ and engage in establishing relevant connections between theory and practice through reflective tasks (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). In the process, they would learn to become attentive to practical, ethical, critical, and transformational aspects of the experience of learning to teach, to construct more informed and integrative understandings about their roles and practices ( Bullough & Knowles, 1992; Eisner & Powell, 2002; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007; Van Manen, 1991).

Notice, for example, Hagar’s elaboration of the teacher’s curricular choices: *“This teacher uses a good book which all the students have, but most of the time she only gives them activities from the book.”* Hagar’s conjecture is that *“it must be easier for the teacher to follow the book.”* Reflecting on the situation and linking it to theoretical notions of diversity in teaching, she articulates a pedagogical concern: *“...given the importance of diversifying teaching methods and its connection to what we know about enhancing pupil motivation, it makes me wonder whether it would be more pedagogically appropriate for the students, to be exposed to material beyond the book every now and then, or is it better for them to follow the organized and logical sequence of the book?”*

We also identified a few assertions that evidenced students’ revised theoretical conceptions about pedagogical strategies, educational roles and dispositions as a result of observation. Notice, for example, Nurit’s account of the teacher’s behavior while giving instructions: *“The class was supposed to write a quiz on parts of speech. As we have learned, giving clear and concise instructions is crucial to the success of the task, yet the teacher started giving instructions which were so vague and incoherent that students started shouting and complaining that they did not understand what she wanted from them.”* Drawing on what she has learned, Nurit expects an experienced teacher to be competent in managing explanations and instructions. She is, therefore, confronted with a situation that is somehow dissonant to what she would envision. This is further reinforced as she continues her account: *“Suddenly the teacher changed the task completely and asked for something else. This was still not clear... I asked the teacher how come she did not manage to explain clearly what she wanted the pupils to do (for the quiz). The teacher replied that she herself didn’t know what to require. She thought about a simple dictation but all of a sudden changed her mind...”*

As she reflects on the gaps that she perceives between what she knows about

experienced teachers' behavior and what she sees in action, she interprets and judges the particular observed situation as a case of "lack of professional responsibility." She further connects the experience to personal beliefs and theoretical understandings, contending that "It seems that it is not enough to master a large repertoire of ideas, activities and innovative teaching methods. Expertise is not just knowing what to choose as the right activity at the right time or even be able to pull out the right strategy automatically. It is not that Dina [the observed teacher] does not know how to give instructions. I think it is just that she does not care enough to be prepared ... I learned that true expertise has also to do with values, care and educational and professional integrity and responsibility."

The above cases speak to Kvernbekk's (2000) view of observation as being, by and large, conceptually driven. Identifying gaps and experiencing perplexity engaged both, Nurit and Hagar, in going 'beyond the perceptual,' as they connected between theoretical frameworks and personal experiences. This transformed 'simple seeing' into 'conceptual seeing,' or 'seeing that.'

The above illustrative cases of "seeing as," "seeing in," and "seeing that," illustrate how some students learned as a result of surfacing gaps between 'envisioned' and 'observed.' In their accounts of these experiences they made judgments, articulated educational assertions, gained new understandings, formulated educational principles, drew educational implications and began articulating new, personal theories of teaching and learning.

## **Observation as a Site for Learning:**

### **Putting it All Together**

Our analysis of student teachers' entries yielded a challenging finding: When relating holistically to the entire experience of observation, student teachers were inclined to attribute little learning value to the experience of observation. However, content analysis of students' entries revealed that despite their negative expressed attributions, they also exhibited evidence of learning at multifaceted practical, pedagogical and educational levels. This evidence suggested that observation, indeed, constituted a site for making assumptions, for taking a stance, for articulating new insights, for triggering connections in teaching and learning, and for confronting educational beliefs.

How do we, then, make sense of the considerable discrepancy between students' expressed meaninglessness from the experience, and the learning outcomes evidenced in their observation tasks? To address this challenge, we turn to two interrelated themes in learning to teach: Novices' learning from practice teaching and approaches to observation as shaping processes and outcomes of learning.

### **Novice's Learning from Observation**

Student teachers hold high expectations from their practice teaching experience (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Author, 2007). Students' strong perceptions of the fundamentality of practice teaching for learning to teach challenge us, teacher educators, to constantly examine the structure of our practice teaching component as a setting for learning. Very often, although observation is traditionally regarded as a crucial aspect of the practical component, it is not always consonant with student teachers' perceptions of its potential benefits. For example, very often students write that there was 'nothing new' in the lesson observed and therefore did not learn much. What lies behind that assertion? Consonant with their novice stage, they are worried that nothing 'special' 'challenging' or 'surprising' occurred during the lesson to make it a valued learning experience. But this does not imply that students are not learning, because repetitive experiences may be activities through which teachers learn implicitly (Eraut, 2004).

Furthermore, what students often perceive as "*no observed real teaching*" is rooted in their rigid thinking as novices preoccupied with performance. Thus, "seeing" devoid of any personal involvement in the action itself (i.e., actual teaching) becomes a rather tricky opportunity for promoting novices' learning. This might explain student teachers' frequent expressed sense of uselessness of the observation component in practice teaching, as conveyed in many entries.

### **Helping Students 'To See Beyond'**

Sandy's final exclamation mark note: "*I think you need to teach us how to observe!*" urges us to consider Kessels and Korthagen's assertion that it is important to prepare students with the necessary competencies (1996) for "seeing in practice." Furthermore, as Kvernbekk (2000) would contend, we should be "*helping them learn to see beyond what everyone sees; to widen their vision and make it more flexible through seeing with theory*" because "*seeing is ... learned in practice*" (pp. 369-370).

What can teacher education programs do to help students *see* in practice? The findings of our study point to several directions. For one, the finding that students learned from those observed situations in which they encountered gaps, discrepancies, and dissonance between the *envisioned* and the *observed* suggests the need to structure observation tasks that encourage students both to identify gaps as well as to *articulate how surfacing these gaps contributed to their learning*. To address this dimension we suggest maintaining the use of prompts for structuring observation. We extend, however, their scope by including a more guided framework of questions for identifying a particularly meaningful gap during observation, encouraging students to explain what they have learned from the experience. For example, the prompt *I was surprised to discover that...because I had initially*

*thought that...* could be further developed through questions such as: *How do you explain this change in the way you see it now? What led you to see things differently?* Other examples would include:

*I have identified a gap between what I knew about ....and what I saw ...This is important for me because ...*  
*The gaps that I have identified have led me to think differently about...*  
*The gaps that I have identified have led me to act differently (for example)...*

In addition, our findings also imply a need to develop more contextualized questions for each student according to the idiosyncratic features of the context of observation. Such questions would push for identifying different and/or similar kinds of gaps in various observed scenarios of classes, teachers and pupils (Guillaume & Rudney, 1993; Grossman, Smagorinsky & Valencia, 1999). For example, Nurit could be encouraged to systematically explore how the inconsistencies that she experienced between her belief about professional integrity and her perception of lack of responsibility plays out in other classes. How does her initial assumption evolve as she moves from class to class? What observed behaviors remain the same? And, how do different observations of classes extend her understanding of the notion of professional responsibility?. In a way, we are suggesting that, in addition to a common content core of tasks, the observation component in teacher education be treated differentially, to allow space for attending to the specific experiences that emerge in each context and for each student (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006; McKenna, 1997; Tillema & Smith, 2000; Wang, 2000).

The different forms of “seeing as,” “seeing in,” and “seeing that” identified in the study suggest the need to help students to make connections between the different forms of seeing, in an effort to conceptualize experience at higher levels of “seeing that.” Specifically, we propose thinking of questions that challenge the articulation of insights about the uniqueness of a particular observed context (seeing in) alongside similarities and differences across contexts (seeing as); in an effort to encourage student teachers to conceptualize these articulated insights as ‘cases of’ (Shulman, 1986) or “seeing that.” Providing students with questions that raise their awareness of the learning value of dissonant experiences, might help them to distinguish the learning potential intrinsic in the multidimensional, simultaneous, immediate and unpredictable teaching reality (Doyle, 1977) of the classroom situations they observe, which they often fail to *see* as meaningful experiences.

### **Observation as Participation:**

#### **Beyond Personal Reflective Approaches**

Extending our initial task to include the above elements, challenges the highly *individualistic reflective* nature that characterized our observation task, devoid of dialogical opportunities for systematic problematizing and articulation of evol-

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ing insights from observation. This would imply an approach to observation as enmeshed in the action itself, engaging *both* the teacher and the student teacher in reciprocal dialogue and scrutiny of both the student teachers' observations of teaching and their mentor teachers' observations of their own teaching (Bruner, 1986; Engestrom, 2001; Karon, 1995; Semeniuk & Worrall, 2000; Yerushalmi & Karon, 1999). Practically, this would imply designing tasks and activities that trigger dialogues between the mentor and the student teacher.

More than a decade ago Weade & Everstone (1991) contended that questions about what can be learned from observation had never been more timely or consequential. They also reminded us that "*charting new directions for observation, however, is like honing a double edged sword. Explorations of what can be learned by looking also reveal the limits of looking. But both kinds of knowledge contribute to understand of what it means to observe and the ways observation can contribute to the improvement of schooling*" (p. 37). A decade later, Weade and Everstone's contention still seems to hold true. We know very little about how observation as a context for learning advances student teachers' professional knowledge development. Sandy's request to "*teach them how to observe*" corroborates a well established argument: When observation is conducted for observation's sake only, it is unfortunately reduced to little more than random or accidental perception (p. 39).

The findings of our study encourage us to further explore this argument regarding conditions for learning from observation. They challenge us to put to test new programmatic routes in our teacher education programs to transform experiences that are often perceived by student teachers as of little learning value into meaningful opportunities for making new sense of learning to teach.

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### **Appendix One: Emergent Themes of ‘Seeing in Observation’**

<i>Forms of ‘seeing’</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Practical pedagogical and educational connections</i>	<i>Example statements</i>
‘Seeing as’: Identifying similarities and differences	Identifying similarities and differences between past experiences, images and actions, and the new observed situation.	Being reinforced about initial ideas and suppositions about teaching and learning. Discarding and enriching insights about teaching and learning as a result of observation.	The lesson was about conditional sentences. This reminded me of my pedagogical grammar course where we learned about Six Types of conditionals. I think that it is good to teach the students these structures.  I have learned that this topic (child abuse can be taught at this level, while previously I discarded it as being inappropriate for this age group.
‘Seeing in’: Developing practical wisdom	Perceptual, practical wisdom gained while observing particular, concrete, classroom situations. Insights gained about activities and classroom behavior.	Connecting perceptual experience to concrete behavior and courses of action in a lesson,	I learned that unexpected things may happen to teachers in class, and that lessons don’t always go according to plan. Therefore, teachers should always have an alternative lesson plan.



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<i>Forms of 'seeing'</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Practical pedagogical and educational connections</i>	<i>Example statements</i>
			<p>Whenever the teacher uses the 'sun of associations' technique to introduce new vocabulary, the pupils remember the words better. Therefore, I think it is a very good technique for the long term memory of the pupils.</p>
<p>'Seeing that': Interpreting beyond a particular case.</p>	<p>Understanding observation experiences as a record of what has been seen to be the case. Widening perspectives to interpret concrete behavior as cases of wider phenomena. Making judgments accordingly.</p>	<p>Gaining new insights, triggering and articulating new understandings about teaching and learning. Establishing relations between concrete classroom behavior, educational and pedagogical assumptions, insights, and assertions.</p>	<p>When the teacher gave positive reinforcement, the pupils were motivated to listen and participate. I learned that the teacher's role is not only to teach but also to be aware of pupils' behaviors and feelings.</p> <p>I was surprised to find out that exactly the same lesson can work for one class and completely fail for another.</p>