

## PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE ROLES OF THE TEACHER IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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**Abstract.** The paper analyzes university students' preparation for performing teacher roles at school. It discusses data from a study conducted among university students of pedagogical programs at universities in Bulgaria and Portugal. The conceptual framework of the study is Mezirow's transformative learning theory. It is based on the understanding that university students, similarly to adult learners, transform their referential frames through critical reflection on the hypotheses underpinning their interpretations, beliefs, and points of view. Research data reveal some of the components within the frames of reference that students use to perceive the teaching profession. The study outlines the benefits of implementing educational drama methods in future teachers' education for the development of critical thinking and change of attitudes to the profession.

**Keywords:** *transformative learning, education, teacher preparation, educational drama.*

### Introduction

Modern schoolteachers perform a multitude of different roles. In the technological age of digitalization and multifarious sources of information, they are expected not only to provide knowledge but most of all, to contribute to student socialization and personal development. Teachers have a transformative function in society – they contribute to changing people, social environments, and relationships. To perform their role as drivers of change, they have to be able to change and develop themselves. Teachers require preparation and specialized training to cultivate a mindset of constant self-challenge. The transformative teacher must undergo a course of transformative training at university to acquire skills for critical thinking and reflection, enabling a broader view and perception of the world, the students, and the professional mission.

Transformative learning is an educational approach with growing popularity over the past years as a model of adult teaching and learning. Presuming university students are adult learners, this model is entirely applicable to university teacher-preparation programs. Transformative learning stimulates critical thinking and active student reflection during the process of learning, together with a high degree

of emotional engagement. The implementation of drama methods in the education of university students during their preparation for school practice facilitates transformative learning. Educational drama allows students to explore and become aware of behavioral inhibitions, prejudices, and stereotypes in their perceptions of pupils, as well as limiting beliefs and, conversely, liberating strategies – thereby enabling them to transform their expectations, perceptions, and attitudes toward their future profession.

Targeted drama and theatre methodologies – such as active engagement, embodied presence, and both individual and collaborative creative processes– support students’ personal development and foster an understanding of the discipline’s relevance in shaping professional identity and attitudes aligned with a renewed vision of schooling and the teacher’s role in promoting real-life learning experiences.

### **Essence and Educational Projections of Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning is a theoretical concept developed by J. Mezirow (1997). It is a distinct descriptive model for adult teaching and learning with a strong orientation to practice and achieving change as a learning and teaching goal. Change as a key learning goal in adult education involves meaning transformation. In the learning process, previous interpretations serve as a basis to form new, reprocessed concepts, which prompt subsequent actions and social experience. This may occur purposefully, consciously or unconsciously, incidentally, under the influence of different life events. Transformative learning challenges existing and established beliefs and perceptions of the world and human relationships, through the prism of which we perceive and evaluate what happens to us and around us. These structures of meanings, beliefs, and ways of perception form as a result of social learning (observing others’ models of interpretation) or at school, by acquiring social and cultural norms comprising what is commonly understood as or considered right and what a particular way of behavior means. The system of rules for action and meaning evaluation under the concept of transformative learning is called a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). The frame of reference is a comparatively stable system of expectations, beliefs and values used to interpret and evaluate meanings and experiences in people’s lives. By learning, we manage to enrich and broaden our frames of reference – to acquire new meanings or to reprocess and transform the existing schemes of interpretation through the reconstruction of experience and the creation of new points of view for evaluating the life world.

The frame of reference has two dimensions: habits of mind and point of view. Habits of mind encompass broad, abstract perspectives that filter, shape, and set limits on the life world of individual experience, sometimes skewing or misinterpreting it. The habit of mind comprises a set of propositions, conclusions, predispositions, influencing the way we interpret the meanings of a specific experience (Mezirow, 1997: 17). There are different types of habits of mind,

including ideological and sociolinguistic; psychological, e.g. self-esteem, personality traits, introversion, extraversion, etc. (Fleming, 2018). Habits of mind manifest through points of view, which include behavior-shaping expectations, beliefs, and attitudes. Mezirow provides the example of ethnocentrism as a habit of mind – the predisposition to perceiving people who do not belong to one’s group as being of a lower standing. A point of view ensuing from this habit is the complex set of feelings, beliefs, evaluations, and attitudes experienced toward specific individuals, such as homosexuals, social welfare beneficiaries, people of color, or women (Mezirow, 1997). Habits of mind are more resilient than points of view. Points of view are subject to frequent change due to reflections on everyday problems or observations of other people’s conduct. Particularly when we try to find an explanation for actions deviating from our understandings or we provide feedback to others, we change our point of view. It is comparatively easier to adopt another’s point of view than to acquire another’s habit of mind.

Mezirow’s concept of transformative learning is based on Dewey’s theoretical premises of reflexivity and Habermas’ critical theory. Mezirow upholds his understanding that frames of perception transform through critical reflection on the propositions underpinning interpretations, beliefs and habits of mind or points of view. We can become critically reflexive of the propositions made when we learn to solve problems instrumentally or when we engage in communicative learning (Mezirow, 1997: 7). The concept of communicative learning finds ground given Habermas’ idea that learning can be: instrumental, impressive, normative and communicative (Habermas, 1984; Mezirow, 1997). Instrumental learning aims to improve performance by acquiring better manipulation and action in different environments. Impressive learning aims to create a specific impression on others and to secure the necessary impact. Normative learning aims to assert group values and rights regarding behavior. In comparison, communicative learning aims to achieve an understanding of the meaning and the significance of the communicated. Instrumental learning allows for testing the truth of the statements empirically. Whereas communicative learning involves the comprehension of aims, values, beliefs and feelings, and is therefore less susceptible to empirical checks. In communicative learning, learners must become critically reflexive regarding the propositions behind their intentions, values and feelings (Mezirow, 1997:6).

Regarding pedagogical knowledge, it is noteworthy to answer the question about how the frame of reference changes and how learning can affect the point-of-view transformation. Mezirow specifies four learning processes (Mezirow, 1997:7):

- 1) Broadening the existing point of view
- 2) Creating new points of view
- 3) Transforming the point of view
- 4) Transforming the habit of mind

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A fundamental premise of the transformational learning theory is that change occurs when learners experience discomfort and the existing frame of perception becomes inadequate for the interpretation of the problem at hand. It is necessary to develop critical awareness that the existing frame of reference used for world perception and others' behavior is ineffective and malfunctioning, i.e., not sufficient, so that a reasonable explanation of the learner's situation can be provided. Transformation results from the search for the causes of the inadequate functioning of the frame of reference in individual experience, for new propositions and beliefs, and actions stemming from them to be undertaken from the position of a changed and broadened frame of reference. Critical thinking and critical reflection are key mechanisms for adjusting the frame of reference. They can be triggered incidentally and unconsciously or, e.g., through a purposeful teaching activity. High change productivity occurs through the recognition of the meaning and the purposeful undertaking of actions for change. The conscious change is facilitated by a well-structured learning process that creates a situation stimulating dissatisfaction with extant beliefs and limiting thinking. This is an approach for objective reformulation of the frame of reference, when the learner is prompted toward critical thinking by propositions made by another person (a teacher, a mentor, or an expert). Mezirow posits that it is the teacher's responsibility to help learners accomplish their aims in a way that makes them more autonomous and socially responsible thinkers. Assistance for accomplishing a specific short-term objective may involve instrumental learning. Accomplishing long-term goals, however, requires communicative learning (Mezirow, 1997:8) – active interaction, discussion, and communication designed to trigger change of attitudes.

An essential aspect of the teaching role (of the lecturer or the university teacher) is the selection of appropriate methods and the creation of a learning context enabling learners' autonomy to explore their behavior and become aware of the restrictions delimiting their points of view. The most commonly used methods and techniques involve case studies, role-playing, moral dilemmas, and elements of social situations, which do not require a single correct answer. The transformation of a frame of reference begins by prompting a situation of confusion, an emotional feeling of helplessness or difficulty in choosing a solution or a course of action. Thus, a necessity of a new point of view and courses of action emerges.

There is high potential for transformative learning in teacher education through applied theatre and drama in training. Through interactive, drama-based methods, learners are gradually engaged in role-played scenarios, activities, and experiences that are often unfamiliar to them. They are placed in situations of confusion that challenge their assumptions and habitual reactions. Their own experiences—as well as those of others—become subjects of inquiry and reflection, leading to constructive changes in perceptions, attitudes, and interactions. „Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of

others to assess reasons justifying one's assumptions, and it requires emotional openness as well as critical reflection" (Mezirow, 2000:10).

A role-play, improvisation, or dramatized scenario – within the context of training future educators – can create this sense of discomfort, students report, which in turn prompts critical analysis and awareness of their own perceptions. The first step in transformative learning is becoming aware of one's own beliefs and limiting understandings. The second step is critical reflection on the identified problematic beliefs by asking oneself questions, such as „Why do I believe in this?“, „What makes me think of the student in that way?“, „What evidence is there to prove me right?“ The third step is a dialogue and discussion with other university students and teachers about these beliefs (attitudes), which prompts the discovery of other perspectives and possible points of view on the situation. The fourth step involves experimenting with new roles and courses of action, which includes trying out different behavior, adopting a new way of thinking, and behaving in a different context and situation. The final, fifth step in the process of transformative learning is incorporating the new understandings (beliefs, attitudes) in one's real-life behavior. At this stage, we aim to transfer the knowledge gained in the lecture hall into students' everyday lives, providing reinforcement and practice in new situations.

The university teacher or the tutor of a learning group (e.g. social psychological training, drama groups or sessions for skill development) through their behavior prompts a transformation of the thinking models. Interaction with the other group participants serves as a mirror of stimulating change in the frame of reference.

The implementation of drama for the development of communicative and other social skills in teacher preparation is a common practice in foreign language teaching. Previous research confirms the benefits of drama methods implementation for developing a wide range of skills which teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need – initiative, flexibility, empathy, creative and critical thinking, and communication, among others (Eckersley, 2016).

Drama-based formative approaches engage participants in the development of personal and professional competencies, activating them physically, emotionally, and cognitively. These structured experiences foster both individual and collective dimensions of the teaching–learning process, while promoting respect for others and cultural diversity. As a result, the knowledge constructed becomes more enduring, consciously assimilated, and pedagogically significant (Barbosa&Hardalova, 2023).

Authors' research data from a study conducted among university students from Bulgaria and Portugal outline students' attitudes toward transformative learning and their readiness to cope with the teaching role.

### **Methodology**

The research aims to explore the opinions of university students from different educational and cultural contexts on their readiness to perform the professional role

of schoolteachers by emphasizing the transformative learning attitude during their teacher preparation at university. Research indicators refer to some of the key components in transformative learning: an attitude toward the teaching profession, becoming aware of teacher expectations, and perceiving the teacher's role in the modern school.

The study sample comprises 135 university students divided into two subsets of students from the BA Programs of Education at universities in Portugal and Bulgaria. Eighty-four students are from the School of Education – Polytechnic of Porto (ESE), whereas the other fifty-one are from the Faculty of Education at Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski” – Bulgaria. Ninety-five percent of the participants are female, while 5% are male, which corresponds to the specializations profile. Women predominantly work in the teaching profession, both in Bulgaria and Portugal, which explains the predominance of women in university programs of Education. Research participation is voluntary with express consent from the students.

Participants' age profile shows a predominance of university students between the ages of 18 and 25. They form 72.8% of the total number of participants in the study. Participants between 26 and 30 years of age form 5% and those over 30 years comprise 22.2% of the sample. There is no significant variation in the age structure of university students in the two subsets in Portugal and Bulgaria.

From June to September 2024, a quantitative study was conducted using a survey questionnaire. To collect empirical data, the authors developed an online questionnaire to be completed anonymously by the participants. The questionnaire comprises 19 questions grouped in four clusters:

- Questions on the demographic profile of the study participants – age, sex, nationality, university program;
- Questions on the students' perceptions about the role of the teacher in the interaction with students;
- Questions on students' confidence in their readiness to perform the various roles expected from a teacher.
- Questions on students' needs for additional training in skills required for the teaching profession.

Questions about studying students' attitudes to and perceptions of the teacher role are of three types: closed, open, and four-item Likert Scale questions. The questionnaire data were processed using descriptive statistics – a measure of central tendency and frequency distribution. Data from open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis.

## **Findings**

Students of Education in both subsets demonstrate a distinctly positive attitude toward the teaching profession and are aware of the great responsibility a teacher has. A predominant belief is that a teacher has various means of influencing the

students, and many things at school depend on the teacher. According to the opinions of 92% of the university students, the teacher’s communicative skills determine, to a large degree:

- Students’ facilitated understanding of what they learn
- Students’ finding what they learn worth the effort
- Students’ acquisition of lasting knowledge
- Students’ feeling comfortable in class
- Students’ building of positive relationships with each other
- Students’ enjoying the learning process
- Students’ becoming more active class participants
- Students’ motivation to further their education at a university level
- Students’ sharing more with their teachers and exhibiting increased trust toward the teacher
- Students’ becoming active citizens

Students’ evaluations of their attitudes to the role of the teacher along a four-point scale show high sensitivity toward the teacher’s behavior and ability to influence the psychological atmosphere and learning comfort in class (Table 1). The mean values are high in the positive part of the scale and close to the maximum level of the evaluation ranking. The teacher’s ability to create a learning environment where students feel comfortable and predisposed to trusted communication ranks highest.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics*

Item	Mean		Std. Deviation	
	BG	PT	BG	PT
Students feel comfortable in class.	3.804	3.784	.4990	.4803
Students build positive relationships with each other.	3.451	3.541	.8559	.8438
Students enjoy learning.	3.490	3.489	.7035	.8123
Students become more active class participants.	3.667	3.724	.5164	.5204
Students share more and confide in the teacher.	3.706	3.786	.6097	.7218
Students become active citizens.	3.176	3.218	.9101	.8913

Response variations are very small, and there is no significant deviation in university students’ perceptions in Bulgaria and Portugal. Findings highlight university students’ recognition of the importance of teacher-student communication in shaping class atmosphere, student relationships, and motivation for development. The teachers’ skills in building partnership relationships require unconditional acceptance of students’ individuality and overcoming some

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stereotypes and biases in interpersonal perceptions. The feedback and reflections of the Portuguese students also bear witness to this:

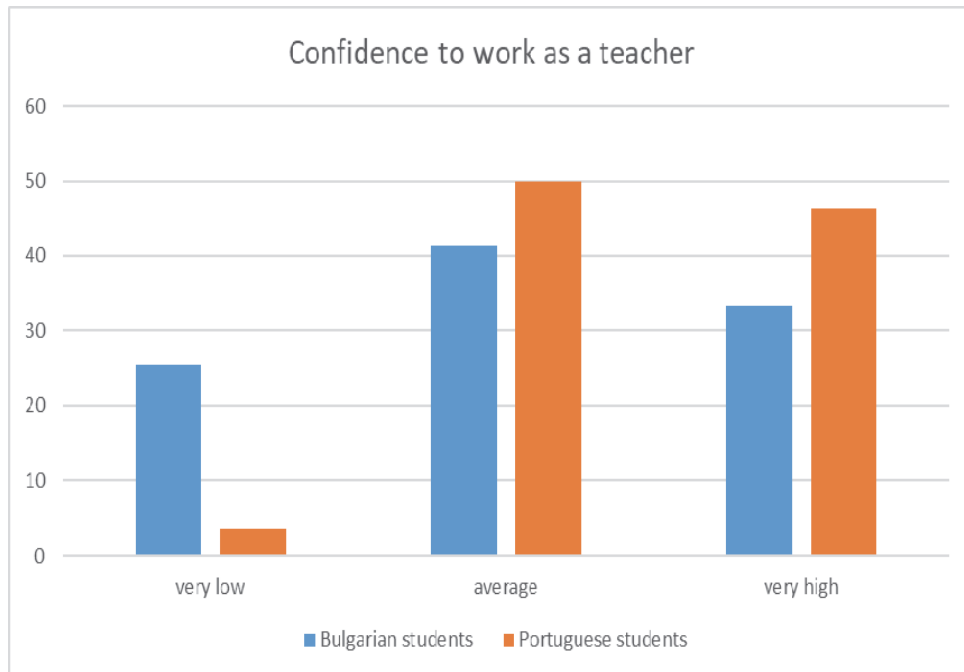
*„When I entered that room, I would immerse myself in that little world where I could be myself.“*

*„My classmates were very receptive, in my opinion — each in their own time and in their own way — but somehow, we all knew that that place, with those people, was safe.“*

*„The most remarkable moment for me on this journey was when the teachers spoke to me about the ‘here and now’ phenomenon. It was transformative. Even before knowing it was a concept, I had already felt it. These classes made me dive headfirst into it — I would completely forget any external problems or situations.“*

Many students express confidence that they will successfully cope with their teacher’s roles. Comparatively, confidence among Portuguese students ranks much higher (Fig. 1), which may be justified by their involvement in a greater number of practice-oriented activities. The course unit Dramatic Expression/Theatre is part of the first-year curriculum of the Bachelor’s Degree in Basic Education at the School of Education in Polytechnical Institute with 67.5 contact hours over one semester.

Survey data shows that students from both countries have had practical sessions for training different skills, as well as educational drama sessions.



**Fig. 1.** University students’ confidence to work as teachers

Data show that approximately half of the students demonstrate a high degree of confidence. This forms a good foundation for transformative learning, for boosting confidence through self-knowledge and triggering critical thinking about the coping level. Transformative learning may serve to meet students' learning needs identified during the study. A significant portion of university students respond to the question: „What else do you need to feel confident and prepared for your work as teachers?“ by specifying learning activities involving a high degree of interaction and practice-based skill development:

- Practice-based case studies and tasks (71% of all sample participants);
- Communicative skills training courses (72% of all sample participants);
- Drama methods workshop practice (61% of all sample participants).

These results are entirely in line with the essence of transformative learning. University students recognize the necessity for learning through experience and emotional reflection on the work of a teacher.

## Discussion

University students' perceptions of the teacher role are realistic. They match the features of the commonly accepted teacher image in society – burdened with many expectations – competent, positive, caring, responsible for their job, etc. The perceptions of the teaching profession are stereotype related. It is a common belief that young teachers are not experienced enough, although they communicate well with the students and build relationships of trust easily. University students have a similar understanding in their frames of reference, and this is only natural. From the perspective of university education, the frame must be broadened to enable authentic awareness of one's teaching role beyond the limits of the commonly accepted and standardized image.

One of the biggest surprises for the primary and elementary education students at the School of Education of the Polytechnic Institute of Porto is that they have 67.5 hours of mandatory in-person training in drama and theatre already in the first year of their studies. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning helps to understand many of the obstacles that arise when drama and theatre is introduced into educational process. The journey students go through—from statements like 'Theatre isn't for me,' 'I'm a reserved and shy person,' 'I don't like being exposed,' to 'I didn't know I loved doing theatre,' 'I didn't know theatre could be like this'—testifies to the transformations they experience. And furthermore:

*„The work developed throughout the course unit taught me that Dramatic Expression is much more than performance: it is listening, empathy, and presence. Through games, activities, and reflections, I learned to value the body as a vehicle for communication, the importance of the collective, and the transformative power of art in the educational context.“ (student at Primary School Pedagogy Program)*

*„I learned through the body, through gesture, through gaze, and through presence. And that taught me more than many theoretical contents. I realized that*

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*dramatic expression is not 'theatre to show to parents'; it is a language of personal and collective development. As the teacher said, if this unit were only theoretical, we would arrive in the classroom not knowing how to do, because all the knowledge would be in our heads and not in our bodies. And in education, that is vital." (student at Primary School Pedagogy Program)*

Drama-based methodologies provide appropriate and supportive conditions for personal and collective growth, facilitating transformative learning. By fostering emotional engagement, critical reflection, and collaborative interaction, these methods help participants challenge existing assumptions and develop deeper understanding. Through improvisation and spontaneous expression, drama encourages self-awareness and empathy, allowing learners to explore new perspectives within a safe and supportive environment. Consequently, drama-based approaches are well-suited to educational settings that aim to promote critical thinking, creativity, and meaningful personal and social growth.

University students in Bulgaria and Portugal recognize the importance of effective teacher communication in achieving good results in education. They are determined to establish positive relationships with students and, through communication, to foster their personal development. They are still not confident about whether they will manage to cope with behavioral issues in the classroom. Bulgarian university students admit they do not feel confident in communication with children with special educational needs. University students, overall, feel satisfied with their academic experience at university and consider that it provides them with the required qualifications. They regard learning as most useful when it is practice-oriented. For the development of communicative skills, the majority of university students find role-play and educational drama to be the most valuable tools.

*„I felt that the use of improvisation and the development of spontaneity contributed to us feeling increasingly at ease as the classes went on, becoming aware that it's okay to make mistakes".*

*„I discovered that I am more creative, more open, and more capable of engaging than I thought. That I can work well with others, even when barriers arise — like when I ended up in a group with only Erasmus students, which initially scared me, but turned out to be a surprisingly positive experience".*

*„What pleases me most today is seeing how much this classes helped us, as a class group, to become more united and spontaneous, without fear of communicating through words or through our bodies — and also how much it helped me personally“.*

Critical reflection and dialogue among participants in the process of transformative learning require emotional maturity, awareness, boldness to confront (one's point of view or that of others), empathy, and readiness to collaborate and communicate in a group. Furthermore, transformative learning raises awareness and emotional competence and frees resources to challenge

oneself for change. The training facilitator takes on the role of a guide and catalyst for new experiences, selecting appropriate metaphors and methods, and creating a supportive and creative environment that encourages learning through discovery. It is his/her responsibility to provide learners with the opportunity to think independently and to perceive the deeper meaning of learning communication. Critical reflection in interactions with others enables learners to effect change and expand their thinking beyond current frames.

### **Conclusion**

In the process of their learning, university students in Education need to become aware of their strengths and limiting beliefs regarding the roles of the teacher. Transformative learning, as a result of using appropriate drama techniques and theatrical methods that involve a high degree of emotional, physical, and cognitive engagement, has the potential to change the model of teacher education in higher education institutions. Thanks to a supportive and creative environment and enhanced interaction among students – where they are encouraged to interpret roles, recreate dramatic situations, develop monologues and dialogues, and address personal, social, ethical, political, and other dilemmas – both communication skills and the ability to reflect within the learning process are significantly developed. Transformative learning assisted by the tools of educational drama can change the model of learning in teacher preparation at institutions of higher education. The increased student interaction in role-playing practical situations leads to increased self-knowledge and reflection in the learning process. Educational drama places students in a situation to experiment with new behavioral patterns and to demonstrate different points of view in interpreting what is happening. This stimulates a shift in attitude toward the role of the teacher and expansion of one's frame of reference. Conducting training sessions focused on self-awareness, creative self-expression, and active reflection makes students more confident in their ability to face future challenges in the classroom. It also provides them with universal educational resources to foster personal and collective development and transformation.

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