

## Who am I? Where am I Going? And which Path should I Choose? Developing the Personal and Professional Identity of Student-Teachers

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**Abstract.** The formation of a professional identity is an important stage in the teacher's professional development. The process of professional identity construction begins with teacher training studies. As part of the learning program in the first year of an academic college training process, the college offered a course entitled "Personal Professional Identity". The present study investigated student-teachers' attitudes, at different training stages, concerning the contribution of their occupation with "personal professional identity" to the construction of their professional identity as future teachers. The study employed mixed methods research, using both quantitative and qualitative data-collection tools. Findings indicated that in the first and second years student-teachers gave greater weight to the contribution of different aspects in the course for the construction of their identity, in comparison to students at the end of their training who tended to minimize the contribution of the course. The paper suggests possible explanations for the emergent findings and recommends possible ways to enable the process of personal professional identity building of the trainee teacher over the years of training.

**Keywords:** constructing personal/professional identity; teachers' professional identity, teacher-training; student-teachers.

### **Introduction**

The concept of an "identity" is based on three W questions - responses that a person gives to three substantive questions: Who am I? Where am I going? And which path should I choose? These three W questions elicit information concerning an individual's goals, values and beliefs and their assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses and their self-image (Vignoles, 2011). Scholars have proposed various definitions of "identity". One popular definition is "an organized summary of information, rooted in observable facts concerning oneself, which includes such aspects as traits of character, values, social roles, interests, physical characteristics and personal history" (Bergner & Holmes, 2000). The anthropologist Margaret Mead (Mead 1934, in Korthagen, 2004) and the psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) both saw personal identity as something

that develops over the years in socio-cultural contexts and is influenced by those contexts. It is founded on interaction with the environment and internalization of social roles. Given the understanding that the individual lives and acts in a social environment and that this environment provides meaning for their actions, the construction of such an identity is seen as a continuous process involving interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences (Kerby, 1991). Professional identity constitutes one dimension of an individual's personal identity and answers the question: Who am I as a professional? In the context of teaching, teachers ask themselves: Who am I as a teacher? What sort of teacher do I want to be? How do I envisage my role as a teacher? (Korthagen, 2004). Teachers may experience tension between the different components of their identity since they are exposed to the expectations of varied stakeholders: students, parents, colleagues, school leaders and superintendents (Warin et al., 2006). The tension between personal and professional identities may mean that the teachers have a sense of dissonance as they try to navigate between the different objects of their work (Boyd & Tibke, 2012).

The term "teachers' professional identity" has been studied in different theoretical conceptualizations, and through different research methods. Although there is no agreed definition of this term, Beijard et al. (2004) pointed to four characteristics of teachers' professional identity:

1. An individual's identity development processes are not universal, rather they are particular and they are structured through a context-dependent continuous, dynamic process as a response to experiences while providing interpretation to those experiences.
2. A professional identity is an element that should be intentionally developed. The personal knowledge that teachers bring with them to their teaching posts, their beliefs and values alter through their experiences as teachers in the school culture.
3. Identity is not a matter that awaits exposure rather it is the result of a process of providing meaning and the individual takes an active part in the construction of their professional identity.
4. The development of a professional identity is not a linear process, for example from the state of a student to the state of being a teacher rather it is an interpretative process that is continually being re-examined. At least at the inception of their teaching career, teachers' professional identity is composed of sub-identities linked to different contexts within which they act (for example, the identity of a learner, the identity of a teacher). It is important that these sub-identities should co-exist in harmony and not be in conflict.

Research has shown that the behavior of the teacher in the classroom and the pedagogic decisions that they make depend on their self-awareness. In other words, they depend on the teacher's perceptions, basic assumptions, beliefs and values by which the teacher is guided (Stenberg, 2011). The teacher's consideration of questions of identity creates self-understanding, allowing them to make decisions and to perform conscious choices (Kelchtermans & Vanderberghe, 1994). Moreover, professional identity constitutes a major

component in the teacher's professional development. It advances the teacher's philosophical perception (Mockler, 2011) and constitutes a fundamental element in the teacher's commitment to their profession, their efficacy and abilities and improves the teacher's willingness to cope with change and reforms and to implement innovations in teaching and even enhances their satisfaction with the profession (Day et al., 2006).

The process of professional identity construction already begins during teacher-training (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). During this period the teacher's professional identity grows and develops from the student-teacher's initial beliefs and covert theories concerning teaching. Student-teachers beginning their training usually arrive with clear beliefs and perceptions concerning teaching and learning, and the teacher's role and they have a clear image of the ideal teacher (Feinman-Nemser & Remillard, 1996; Beltan, et al., 2015). These perceptions stem from their own experiences as school pupils over several years and from their observations of teachers from the perspective of a pupil (Schempp, Sparkes & Templin, 1999). In the main, these beliefs do not fit present day perceptions of teaching and learning. Research has also shown that student-teachers tend to see teaching from a pupil's viewpoint, in the context of their own understanding as learners and not from the viewpoint of the teacher (Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite, 2010).

Pete Boyd indicates that one of the challenges in teacher training arises due to the uniqueness of student-teachers' identity. They develop their identity simultaneously as both "learners" and as "teachers" and the students are committed at the same time to learning-to-teach and teaching-to-learn (Loughran, 2006). He suggests that training programs should be seen as an "interplay", combining knowledge, identity development and practical wisdom (Boyd & Bloxham, 2014).

Fuller & Bown (1975) proposed a model of teacher development based on analysis of subjects that concern the teacher (Three-Stage Concerns-based Theory) in which they describe the development of motivation from "inside-out"; meaning first the teachers are concerned about subjects associated with themselves, at the next stage they become concerned about subjects relating to the teaching task, and finally they deal with subjects relating to the pupils.

This professional identity, which Flores and Day (2006) call "pre-teaching identity" is polished and refined through reflection and the student-teachers develop more complex and sophisticated understanding of their work as teachers through their experiences in formal learning and through their practical work in schools and classrooms (Beijaard et al., 2004). Some scholars argue that professional identity is constructed through interaction with the environment and as part of the individual's experience in the profession. In the construction of professional identity, actions, experimentation and work in the field with the target community and with the professional community all play central roles (Kirpal, 2004).

Some researchers argue that, in their first year in teaching, teachers do not have sufficient opportunities to develop a robust professional identity that would allow them to cope with the challenges they face. They therefore argue that a personal professional identity should be prepared in advance during teacher-training (Korthagen, 2004). Helping student-teachers to acquire a professional identity during their training could allow them to examine to what extent the teaching profession is appropriate for them (Schempp, Sparkes & Templin, 1999). One of the challenges in the construction of identity is to deal with exposure to subconscious aspects so that they become overt and conscious (Webb, 2005). Different researchers have suggested a variety of ways to assist this process, including involving student-teachers in dialogs, use of metaphors, imagination and reflection (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), writing autobiographies, representation through paintings (Beltman et al., 2015), and structured discussions concerning contradictions that exist in the field (Olsen, 2008) etc.

In light of these insights, the Academic College of Education and Teacher-training introduced a learning program for student-teachers in their freshman year. This program includes several core courses, including a course entitled "Personal-Professional Identity" that provides an opportunity to challenge the perceptions that student-teachers brought with them to the college and expose them to different teaching methods than those that they experienced as pupils. Additionally the program employs a Gradual Experience Model (GEM), gradually familiarizing the student-teachers with different teaching components based on the student-teacher's encounters in the field: observations, peer teaching, individual teaching sessions and teaching in small groups (Reichman, 2016).

The "Personal-Professional Identity" course establishes the subject of the student's professional identity development as a planned and intentional process and it includes intensive work on the substance of the teaching profession, on the concept of "being a teacher", on the inner, personal-professional identity of the teacher (the "why"), and the characteristics of the teacher and their role and deals less with the behaviors and skills of the teacher (the "what").

The "personal professional identity" course was conducted as a workshop, was taught once a week in a regular learning group including up to 23 students, and involved active participation and experiences in the sessions, the students read learning materials and presented written assignments. The introductory sessions involved activities intended to create a safe space in which to nurture trust and a sense of affiliation to the group in order to facilitate non-judgmental discourse, free from stereotypes and willingness to become acquainted with others. During the course, the students write personal narratives that allow them to conduct personal learning about the reasons for their choice of the teaching profession, and to examine the links between their childhood, youth and education and the manner in which they perceive the teacher's role. The personal narratives that emerged from shared discussion in the group, open new broader horizons for

observation of the student's personal profile and the profiles of others. The characteristics of a meaningful teacher figure that influenced the students can be understood from the student-teachers' stories of their personal memories, research texts and films dealing with the image of teachers that influence their students. The different activities in the course offer the students a space in which they look inwards on themselves, examining the strategies they use to cope with various situations, while developing their awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and examining the implications of these characteristics on their teaching.

### **Methodology**

The research examined student-teachers' attitudes at different stages of their teacher-training studies, concerning the contribution of their participation in the "Personal-professional identity" course during their freshman year of studies in an academic teacher-training college to the construction of their professional identity as future teachers. The research used mixed methods, employing qualitative and quantitative data-gathering and evaluation tools (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). Integration and cross-checking of the data from the different tools permits profound understanding and describes a comprehensive picture of the student-teachers' attitudes at different points over the training period, regarding their work on personal-professional identity.

Student-teachers (N=183, including 154 women and 29 men) responded to questionnaires that included both open and closed questions. The structured questionnaires were administered to all student-teachers in Year 1 at the beginning and end of the academic year. At the beginning of the year, the questionnaires examined the student's background details, motivation for the choice of teaching and perceptions of learning-teaching. At the end of the year in addition to these fields, the questionnaires examined the student's attitudes concerning the contribution of the "Personal-Professional Identity" course and different aspects of the course to the construction of their personal and professional identities. The questionnaire included 15 closed questions and 4 open questions relating to their view of the importance of the course and another part of the questionnaire contained statements relating to the achievement of the course's goals. The students' responses were marked on a Likert scale of 1-5, where 1=strong disagreement and 5=strong agreement.

Additionally individual in-depth interviews were held with students at different training stages (Year 1, Year 2 and end of the training). In order to attain a representative sample of the student-teacher population for the interviews, a random stratified sample was selected, including approximately 10% at each stage of the training: 18 students from Year 1, 12 students from Year 2 and 18 students at the end of the training period. The researcher maintained ethical rules throughout the research (maintaining participants' rights, receiving their informed consent to participation in the research and maintaining confidentiality).

### **Research questions**

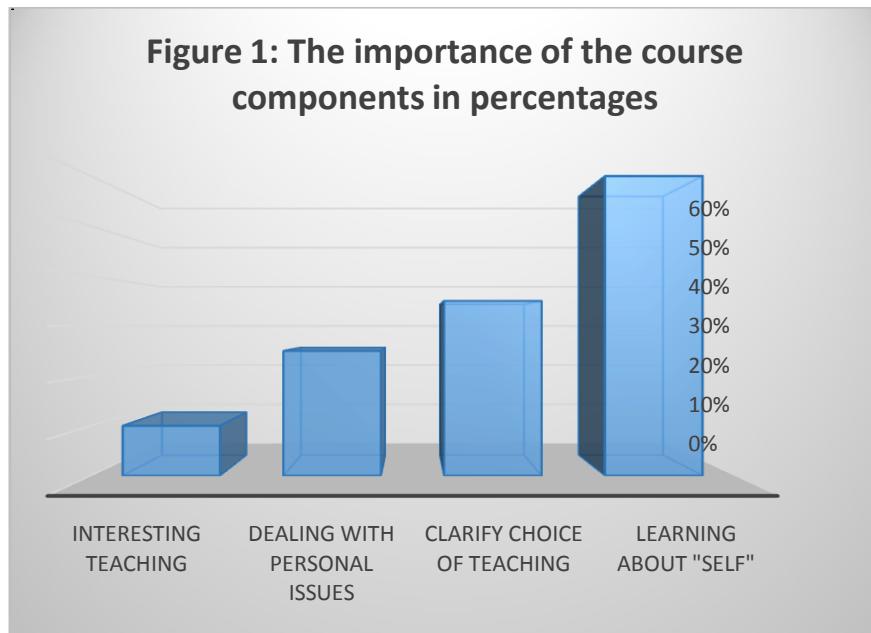
1. What attitudes do freshman student-teachers hold regarding the course dealing with the subject "Personal-professional identity" taught in Year 1 of a teacher-training course?
2. What attitudes do Year 2 student-teachers hold regarding the consideration of the subject of personal-professional identity at the beginning of their training process?
3. What attitudes do student-teachers hold at the end of their training period regarding the consideration of the subject of personal-professional identity at the beginning of their training process?

### **Findings**

*Attitudes held by Year 1 student-teachers regarding the consideration of personal-professional identity at the beginning of their training*

#### **Graph 1: Responses to the question: "Why was the Personal-Professional Identity course significant for you?"**

The graph shows the students' reasons why the "Personal-professional identity" course was significant for them. The reasons mentioned at the highest frequency were 'learning about myself' (60%) and the "opportunities given by the course to clarify the suitability of teaching and consolidation of a professional identity" (35%). "Dealing with personal issues" was also mentioned (25%) (including: "opportunity to express myself", "thinking about coping strategies for different situations", and "development of ability to reflect, familiarity with the 'other'"). In addition, the student-teachers noted the encounter with an alternative and interesting teaching method as a reason for the course's significance for them.



**Figure 1: The importance of the course components in percentages**

**Table 1: Percentage of student-teachers who agreed to a strong extent –very strong extent with statements relating to the course's goals**

Statement	% of student-teachers who agreed to a strong extent – very strong extent
I had an opportunity to clarify my attitudes concerning my choice of teaching	49
I had an opportunity to clarify my strengths and weaknesses	61
After the course I know myself better	61
As a result of the course I understand the reasons that I came to study teaching	54
The course contributed to my understanding of the link between my perceptions concerning teaching and my past experiences	58

Table 1 shows that the student-teachers tended to agree to a strong – very strong extent that the course allowed them to clarify their strengths and weaknesses and to get to know themselves better. It also emerged that a large proportion of the student-teachers agreed to a strong – very strong extent that the course allowed them an opportunity to clarify their attitudes concerning their choice of teaching and helped them to understand the reasons for their decision to study teaching. It was clear that the course contributed to their understanding regarding the link between their past experiences and their present perception of teaching.

The responses of freshman student-teachers in the interviews supported these quantitative findings. The interviewees reported that the “Personal-professional identity” course contributed for them in the following fields: Approximately 55% of the students related to the ***development of their self-awareness***. In their words:

In the personal identity course I learnt to look at myself in the mirror, I saw things of which I had previously been unaware. I also dealt with things that I was aware of and tried to understand them. The course is important for people who work in education, who communicate with other people and can sometimes be hurt by them. When you know yourself and are aware of your different parts, there is a chance that it will be easier to work with children, perhaps you will be hurt less (Source 4).

In the personal identity course I learnt who I am and learnt to accept myself ... sometimes I feel that it is difficult to talk about myself, but I studied in a setting that required my self-examination and I even spoke about myself, something that I usually could not do easily. Also, when you speak with others about yourself, it's an opportunity for others to get acquainted with you and come closer to you; and it's also an opportunity for me to get to know others and come closer to them (Source 12).

There were some respondents who felt that ***clarification of their choice of the teaching profession*** (approximately 40% of the student-teachers) was the contribution provided by the course:

[I] see the relevance, It's a preliminary process, where each one digs within their inner self and decides whether they have made the right choice. I am most satisfied with my decision (Source 1).

I received the answers to those questions for myself in the course, whether I am fitting for teaching, I was able to organize things in my mind, to understand why I had gone for teaching (Source 7).

Other students (approximately 40%) mentioned the ***clarification of attitudes concerning "what sort of teacher do I want to be?"***:

The course on personal identity activates thought as a future teacher: what do I want to do and how do I want to do it. You see the importance in practice, you enter into the mind of the teacher, each lesson on identity is really meaningful. It develops your thinking, each lesson we learn and think about things in different ways and connect the activities to teaching, and that is amazing (Source 5).

The course on personal professional identity is excellent. It contributes to your professionalism as a teacher. Relating to yourself for example, examining which teachers were significant for you ... and that advances your ability to act as the model for imitation that you would like to be for your pupils" (Source 4).

The student-teachers also noted the ***attentiveness and empathy for others*** in the course (approximately 25% of the students):

I reached very deep insights about myself in the course. For example, the matter of attentiveness: I look back retrospectively on cases in my life where I listened in a not so good way. It led me to change. I am now happy with the way that I pay attention and I am changing it ... we learnt about empathy, the correct and incorrect way to empathize. It's a course that influenced me most because I learnt how to pay attention to what is happening around me, to the pupils; to be more alert, and when there is some sort of difficulty, to take care of it (Source 16).

In the interviews some of the interviewees related to ***the development of pride in the teaching profession*** (approximately 25%):

In the program in Year 1, I received something very important – I received myself. In the personal identity course I understood that I felt embarrassed to be learning to become a kindergarten teacher, I was ashamed of myself and before my environment, and at first my studies were very difficult for me. I wrote about this and talked about it ... and over the year I began to understand that I was actually working with children in early childhood, that I would influence their future and so this is actually a very wise and important profession ... Today at the end of the year I am happy with these studies ... now I

am proud to be a kindergarten teacher, something that I was ashamed to admit at the beginning of the year (Source 13).

### **Attitudes held by Year 2 student-teachers regarding the consideration of personal-professional identity**

The Year 2 students tended to note that the "Personal-Professional Identity" course was a significant and relevant course for the continuation of their studies and their work in teaching, and related to the following fields in which they felt that the course had contributed to them

#### **(1) The development of self-awareness** (50% of the students):

I especially remember how the matters that I was exposed to in the personal-professional identity course occupied me all day and even all week, those things made me think for a long time about myself (Source 5).

I especially remember the personal identity course; I really liked that course. It made me ask myself questions that I would not have considered, to put myself at the center and to think what I had brought with me. It led me to think, even after the lessons, and also in relation to things that were not mentioned in the lesson – for example about myself as a mother – why was I doing particular things, what did I think motivated me to take particular directions? (Source 7)  
Considering your personal and professional identity is important and most meaningful, it helped me to understand the substance of my choice and myself and that allows me to do better and more complete work (Source 11)

[Having an] identity helps me to shape my personality as a teacher (Source 3).

#### **(2) Developing self-confidence and shaping personality** (25% of the students):

The course was excellent. It strengthened my self-confidence, showed me how to construct my personality (Source 3)

In that course, I worked on my self-confidence. I feel now that my self-confidence has increased due to the course, today two years later I feel confident, I was not like that at the beginning of my studies (Source 8)

#### **(3) Understanding aspects of the teacher's role** (25% of the students):

In the professional identity course I understood that as a teacher, and in general as a human being, there are limits to my ability to solve problems. I learnt to distinguish between identification and empathy, I can understand someone who has a difficulty, to try to help them but I understand that the work itself should be done by the pupils or persons who are having difficulty by themselves, I cannot do it instead of them and I am not supposed to identify with them. I am not supposed to solve the problem for them, they must want to do so themselves, and they must do the work to solve the problem alone. I

can suggest a way, a method and from there the person must continue to progress. This is new learning of which I was not aware before (Source 10)

**(4) Awareness of attentiveness** (25% of the students):

I took the matter of attentiveness – how to react to the pupils, how to show them that what they say is OK and important (Source 1)

It [the course] shaped my personality as a kindergarten teacher. I know what it is to listen and not to hear, I will take this with me to the kindergarten (Source 16).

**Attitudes held by student-teachers at the end of the training process regarding the consideration of personal-professional identity at the beginning of their training (Rafaeli, 2011)**

At this stage, very few of the students talked about the advantages of the Personal-Professional Identity course. They felt that the course had contributed to them by offering them a place where it was possible to share and receive support from the group:

The professional identity workshop encouraged us to talk about feelings, fears, things with which we are less comfortable. It really helped us. We all arrived as new, it was a sort of support group where we saw that things were difficult for all of us and we were all afraid, it helped us to cope with the fears. This was the way in which we got to know girls from other streams (Source 15)

Most of the students noted the problematic nature of the discussion of professional identity at an early stage of their training, for example:

[I] don't remember a lot about the program. It was not really relevant for me. I think that these courses should be performed in Year 4, during the practicum. It would speak more to me today, because my personal identity is being formed now, when I am a teacher in the field and I have ideas and opinions ... In year 1 you don't really know what your identity is (Source 7).

Your professional identity doesn't really crystallize if you are not actually exposed to the field. Identity is formed when you are in the field. [In Year 1] it is more theoretical, for example discussing what is professionalism in my opinion, in theory. [I] don't see the contribution of professional identity as a theoretical course, it does not contribute (Source 2).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Student-teachers at the beginning and middle of their training indicated that they saw the consideration of the issues of personal and professional identities at the beginning of their training was significant and it was something that contributed to their professional identity. It seems that the course allowed the student-teachers to conduct dialog with themselves and to reconsider aspects of

their identity. Student-teachers in Years 1 and 2 noted that learning about their "self" through a continuous process over the course helped them to become more aware of themselves and offered an opportunity to clarify their weaknesses and strengths. In this way they were able to know themselves better (Vignoles, 2011). In addition, clarification of attitudes regarding the choice of a teaching career developed their awareness of the considerations involved in their choices (Kelchtermans & Vanderberghe, 1994).

Discussion during the course about the image of the "ideal teacher" led to exposure of covert beliefs and perceptions that the student-teachers had brought with them to the teacher-training program, and this helped them to understand the connection between their considerations as learners in the past with their growing perceptions of teaching in the present (Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite, 2010).

It also emerged that the student-teachers who learned in a group with their peers, experienced a dynamic group process and the group interaction helped them to recognize the "other". It therefore seems that assisting the students in their construction of their personal-professional identity through a "Personal-Professional Identity" course achieved its goals. Among the student-teachers studying in Years 1 and 2, dealing with the issues of personal and professional identity was experienced as something that prompted inner observation and awareness. The reflective skills that the student-teachers developed at the beginning of their training influenced the process of the formation of their professional identity as teachers for the future (Korthagen, 2004).

However, student-teachers who were at the end of their training indicated the problematic nature of putting such studies concerning identity at the beginning of the training. They felt that the lack of real practical experience in the classroom at the beginning of their training reduced their ability at that stage to experience the course as something relevant for their teaching work. They argued that at later stages of teacher-training, practical experience becomes more continuous with intensive encounters with pupils and at that stage their behavior in class surfaced their beliefs regarding teaching. They had to make pedagogic decisions and these processes challenged the beliefs and values that guided them. In their opinions, it would perversely be advisable to examine aspects of personal and professional identities, when the student-teacher is engaged intensively in the education and teaching field and in light of the practical and theoretical knowledge that was built up during the training. This attitude is in line with research in this field that indicated that professional identity is constructed through interaction with the environment and in professional experience (Kirpal, 2004). In the construction of a professional identity, practical work, experience and work in the field with a target population and with the professional community play an important part.

While student-teachers in Years 1 and 2 felt that the contribution of different aspects discussed in the course for identity construction in Year 1 had a strong impact, student-teachers at the end of their training tended to think that the

cycle of influence of the course and its contribution to them as restricted. It seems that, over time, they forgot details that they discussed in the course and as part of their training process, new layers of experience and activity in the education field were added that set new challenges and dilemmas before them (Fuller & Brown, 1975).

It is therefore recommended that work on the subject of personal-professional identity should be conducted continuously throughout all the years of the student-teacher's training. Integration of the "Personal-Professional Identity" course over all the years of the training should ensure continuous and coherent development of what is learnt in Year 1. At the end of the training process and until their induction as novice teachers, a course of this kind can constitute a process of closure, to evaluate the process that the student-teachers underwent in training.

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