

Learning to Live Well as Teachers in a Changing World: Insights Into Developing a Professional Identity in Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT: Developing a strong sense of a professional identity as a teacher may be crucial to the well-being of new members of the profession. This article describes the initial results of a research project examining the development of professional identity in new teachers undertaken with recent graduates from teacher education programmes in two universities in Quebec. Twenty-one volunteers were interviewed after graduation and before beginning their first jobs about their image of themselves as professionals and their projections of a future identity in relation to a vision of an ideal teacher. Analysis of these interviews reveals that new teachers are tentative in their declarations about their professional identity and uncertain as to how they will reach their ideals. The results of the study provide insights into the increasing importance of the exploration and development of professional identity within teacher education programmes.

RESUME: Consolider l'importance de l'image professionnelle d'un enseignant peut être crucial pour le bien être des nouveaux venus dans la profession. Ce papier décrit les résultats initiaux d'un projet de recherche qui base son observation sur le renforcement de l'identité professionnelle chez les nouveaux enseignants. Ce projet a été entrepris par de nouveaux diplômés des programmes de formation pour enseignants de deux universités du Québec. On a interrogé vingt-deux volontaires récemment diplômés avant qu'ils ne commencent à exercer dans leur premier poste. Le questionnaire reposait sur l'image d'eux-mêmes en tant que professionnels et sur leur façon d'imaginer l'identité d'un enseignant idéal dans l'avenir. L'étude de ces entretiens révèle que les nouveaux enseignants sont hésitants dans leurs déclarations concernant leur identité

professionnelle et sont incertains quant à la manière d'atteindre leurs idéaux. Le résultat de l'étude apporte des connaissances sur l'importance croissante de l'analyse et du développement de l'identité professionnelle dans les programmes de formation pour enseignants.

Introduction

The changing world requires teachers to anticipate new roles in an attempt to keep up with constant diversification in society, development of knowledge and increases in access to knowledge. In a transforming world, teachers are experimenting with their roles, and recreating their professional identities in relation to the contexts that surround them - contexts that are shifting, sometimes in unexpected ways. Anderson (2005) suggests that adaptation to change is an obligatory part of teaching today:

The desire to be a teacher should be paired with a desire to learn as much about your calling as possible, to keep an open mind, and to be prepared to not only know everything you can but also to envision and produce the future of your profession. (p. 69)

Our thinking about the development of a teacher identity within the complex communities of a changing world draws on a range of theoretical perspectives. Research into the professional identity of teachers appears to be of recent interest, although teachers themselves have long considered the topic important. Korthagen (2004) writes:

From quite early on, it was customary ... for teachers to reflect on such questions as "Who am I?" "What kind of teacher do I want to be?" and "How do I see my role as a teacher?" all of which are essential questions when it comes to developing a professional identity. (p. 81)

Wenger (1998) has recently furthered our understanding of self-identity within communities of practice, elucidating the changing nature of professional identity as an aspect of belonging within the context of work environments. From another perspective, Fullan (2001) recognizes the need to understand educational change and its impact on participants in this change. His ideas have influenced our understanding of the ongoing adjustments that occur in teachers' identities. Schön's (1983) notions about reflection on practice inform the ways in which we consider the development and articulation of a teacher's identity. And Huberman's (1989) life cycle of teachers, with the designation of the early years as those of survival, lead to considerations of the experience of beginning practitioners.

Theoretical Framework

The development of a professional identity has been defined as "an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences" that may be influenced by personal, social, and cognitive factors (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) recognize the questions teachers ask as being very connected to their identities: "Who am I in my story of teaching? Who am I in my place in the school?" (p. 3). Such questions reveal how important identity is as an aspect of teacher knowledge. Huberman (1989) recognizes stages in the development of teachers, noting that those in their first few years are in a position of survival and discovery. Some of this discovery is about themselves. Featherstone (1993), in a similar manner, sees self-knowledge as "a major fruit ... of early teaching experience," a time she regards as "the struggle to understand and change the self" (p. 94); in her view, attention must be paid to the "complex and personal learning" of beginning teachers (p.109).

A professional who feels secure in his or her identity may find the process challenging but possible, maybe even exhilarating. A new teacher who has given little time or thought to this crucial aspect of his or her professional development may well find the challenges completely overwhelming. Yet Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005) make clear that "developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers' commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms of practice" (p. 383).

In teacher education programmes we often focus on what students need to know, and what they need to know how to do. This effort usually centers around highly specific information such as how to plan a lesson, how to manage a class, or how to encourage learning. However, as teacher educators, we are starting to realise that this is not enough. Recent research indicates that teacher education programs have not always been successful in aiding the transition from student to teacher (Boutin, 1999).

Several studies have shown that new teachers struggle with the development of a professional identity (Freese, 2006; Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Smagorinsky, Cook, Jackson, & Fry (2004). Riopel (2006) and Vanhulle (2005) both conclude that attention must be paid to the connection between success in beginning practice and initial teacher education.

As we teach our students to use a constructivist approach in classrooms, we also need to employ a constructivist approach to teacher education that would permit student teachers to build a personal sense and understanding of the world, along with a clear idea of how they see themselves interacting with students within that future world. We have previously considered this phenomenon in terms of imagination (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2006), while others have called it vision (Hammerness, 2006). Increasingly we are concerned with the establishment of professional identity as a key factor in living out this imagination or vision.

The study reported here therefore seeks to identify the ways in which new teachers develop their professional identities, and how self-knowledge helps them establish a level of comfort and a sense of accomplishment in their new roles. The results of the research will allow us to explore the second, and equally important aim of this study, which is to establish ways teacher educators can better prepare pre-service teachers to develop a strong sense of professional identity as an integral part of teacher education programmes.

We are interested in learning more about how new teachers envision themselves as professionals; that is, less about how they consider what they do, or should do, and more about who they are, or should be. We believe that the process of envisioning self- as-professional is a crucial stage in the development of an effective teacher. As Sachs (2005) has stated:

Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of "how to be," "how to act" and "how to understand" their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed; rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. (p. 15)

The Study

To determine the ways in which new teachers begin to develop a professional identity, we interviewed 21 recent graduates from secondary and elementary teacher education programmes in the Bishop's University and the Université de Sherbrooke during the summer before they began their first jobs in the field. By way of context, it should be noted that all teacher education programmes in Quebec are four year programmes. Students do not first complete an undergraduate

degree apart from education. They spend four years taking a combination of courses in both subject areas and pedagogy, and complete a practicum each year for a total of at least 700 hours in the classroom by graduation.

Participants in this study were chosen using a maximal variation sampling strategy (Creswell, 2002), as all graduates were invited to participate. Those who followed up by contacting the researchers and indicating their interest became part of the study. The research agenda includes the collection and analysis of a second set of interviews with the participants part way through their first year of teaching. The current article reports on the analysis and results of the first set of interviews and written reflections only.

Methodology

Theoretical and Conceptual Basis

In order to learn more about the development of a professional identity in new teachers, we chose to conduct unstructured interviews with new graduates in each of our programmes in teacher education. We believe that asking new teachers some of the questions listed by Korthagen (2004) – Who am I? What kind of teacher do I want to be? – will help us to understand their sense of self with relation to their chosen profession immediately following graduation and part way through their first year of teaching. This will then permit us to explore the process by which teachers develop this sense of identity in relationship to their professional roles. For ethical reasons we chose to begin the study once the participants had successfully completed their studies and were no longer students at our institutions.

Although pre-service teachers are often asked to write reflections on their experiences, they do this as part of an assignment, for a grade, which inevitably encourages a response designed to please the instructor. They are not often asked these questions orally. This study provided newly-graduated teacher volunteers with an opportunity to respond to open-ended questions about how they saw themselves in relation to their profession, in both written and oral formats.

We attempted to overcome the unavoidable bias of having university instructors interview former students (Fontana & Frey, 2005) by interviewing the students from the other university than the one in which we worked. The participants were informed of the purpose of the

study, and told that we were looking to gain information that would help us to improve the teacher education programmes in our universities.

Data Collection

Participants were first asked to free-write (paragraphs, notes, or even diagrams) on the topic of their professional identity as a form of warm-up to the interview questions. The taped interviews, consisting of ten questions, were transcribed and the information contained in the interviews was coded into themes and recorded on charts created for that purpose. Because the amount of data in this study is relatively small (fewer than 68 pages of transcriptions) it was decided to code and explore the data by hand.

Most of the questions required the creation of a chart with three columns, one for the answer to any yes/no questions asked, the second for a quotation that clearly answered the question for that participant, and the third for a category into which the answer fell. These categories emerged from the data based on our exchanges and discussions over how and why to code various sections of the transcripts. The possible categories were determined together by the researchers, but the analysis was done separately and compared later. In nearly all cases, the data were found to have been coded in the same manner. A sample of quotations and resulting categories for Question 2 follows (see Table 1).

Table 1. Question Two – “Has your image of yourself as a teacher changed during the programme? How would you describe this change?”

Quotation	Category
<i>I have more doubts now. Before I was no problem. Now I know I can teach but there are so many aspects to it. I want to help the ones that are having trouble but I have doubts. Will I be able to attain my own goals as a teacher?</i> (Participant 2)	Doubts

<i>I always thought I was a lot of fun, had the perfect equation: I could teach science and make it interesting. Now I see how planning and organization really play as much of an important role as enthusiasm and passion.</i> (Participant 3)	Role of the Teacher
<i>At the beginning I was very shy. I have become a lot more confident. Through taking courses with a prof you get a little bit of them and you say this person taught it this way so I'm going to try that. I am more comfortable in what I do and I became a risk-taker.</i> (Participant 9)	Confidence
<i>I know the limits and what's going to work and what's not going to work. I'm more mature now in the profession, more realistic. I think we are all in the profession to maybe change the world.</i> (Participant 18)	Naiveté to knowledge, Role of teacher

Results

Written Reflections

The written reflections revealed that participants were preoccupied with four different aspects of teaching: teacher roles and responsibilities, view of self, how identity development has occurred, and what is still in process in terms of developing a professional identity. These findings are clearly linked to notions of the “actual self,” the “ought self,” and the “ideal self” outlined in the work of Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005). It is interesting to note that the types of responses are quite similar, despite the fact that the request was very open – “Reflect on your identity as a teacher” – and the fact that the participants came from three different programmes in two different universities. The theme of teacher roles and responsibilities can be further categorized into the following three areas: responsibility for yourself, meeting the needs of students, and meeting

government goals. Participants indicated that they were anticipating taking part in the many and varied roles that teachers are expected to play. Some of the roles mentioned are teacher as role model, listener, caretaker, guide, problem solver, educator, psychologist, team leader, entertainer, classroom manager, supporter, and resource person. As well as the roles teachers play, participants chose to comment on the various qualities needed by teachers, such as nurturing, having passion about the subject, being honest, trustworthy, and knowing the boundary between friendship and teacher. Several commented on their perceived ability to make a difference, such as having confidence in students, and helping students overcome personal difficulties.

It appears that these new teachers have a clear sense of the many roles that teachers are expected to play, and are beginning to be able to identify strengths within themselves that are related to the expected roles of a teacher. However, strong identification with a capacity to carry out these responsibilities, the "ought self" of Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005), was not as evident. Many participants included comments indicating that they were nervous, unsure of the future, and anxious about fulfilling expectations.

Interviews

Analysis of the interviews indicates that while participants are clear about the influence of the teacher education programmes on their perceptions of teaching, and about the vision they had of the teacher they would like to be, many are uncertain how they will reach this ideal and successfully integrate into the profession. This paper includes an in-depth discussion of only four of the ten questions, due to constraints of space.

When asked whether and how the teacher education programme has affected their perceptions of teaching, the majority of participants indicated that their perceptions about teaching had been strongly influenced by the programme, and that it was the combination of both course-work and practicum that influenced their perceptions. They reported now seeing the profession as more complex than they may have originally perceived it, requiring many specialised skills that are not necessarily all related to the subject, such as mathematics, being taught. One participant was optimistic about being able to start off strongly:

At first I was thinking it was more experience that was creating the identity of the teacher, to have a lot of experience is to be a

good teacher ... that changed through courses at the university, I learned that you could start to be a good teacher, even in your first years of practice and then experience would enrich the knowledge that you have.(participant 19)

Despite the fact that most participants felt it was a combination of factors that led to their changes in perception about teaching, there were students who mentioned only the practicum or only course-work, in equal numbers, rather to our surprise. We had expected far more responses naming the practicum as the source of learning about the profession. The fact that equal numbers mentioned only the education courses may indicate that they wanted to please the interviewer, but may also reveal that, at this point in time, new teachers are able to reflect back on their education and see the importance of the theoretical information they were given. As is the case for the majority of teacher education programmes, we have attempted to create cohesive, coordinated, and integrated programmes that permit students to alternate field experiences with opportunities in university classrooms to discuss their observations with peers. We would like to believe that the participants' comments reflect a certain success in our approach. These findings show that, in general, students are strongly influenced by their teacher education programmes, both the university component and the practicum component. This demonstrates a clear potential for such programmes to provide opportunities for future teachers to examine the gradual emergence of their professional identity as they develop their expertise.

At the same time, participants were also careful to point out the limits to teacher education programmes. A common theme was the idea that it is impossible to learn all the necessary elements for effective teaching in a teacher education programme, a theme that was repeated in response to other questions as well.

I'm not sure you can be taught to be a teacher. The four years is not a waste of time but I'm not sure how it could be restructured to really get at what we need to get at. I'm not sure what needs to be included and what doesn't to teach someone to teach and I'm not sure that's even the point. It's kind of really fuzzy, even after four years.(participant 3)

This type of response appears to be a more carefully considered one than the frequently heard "We don't learn anything in teacher education," but it clearly illustrates the ambiguous feelings many student teachers, new graduates, and even teacher educators have toward their programmes.

Not one of the participants mentioned having learned about themselves in terms of who they were as teachers during their four year programme. Despite numerous opportunities to reflect on themselves and their own reactions to what they were learning and experiencing, the participants did not spontaneously articulate the idea that the teacher education programme permitted them to discover who they were as teaching professionals.

When asked about any changes in their self-image they could identify as a result of having completed the teacher education programme, which was the second question of the study, the majority of the participants stated that their self-image had changed, while two were not entirely sure, and two others felt that it had not changed at all. It is interesting to note that these last two were teachers who had taught before entering the teacher education programme. The specific change most often determined was an increase in self-confidence, which was mentioned by almost a third of the participants. Other changes mentioned included having gone through an identity shift, and moving from naiveté to knowledge, while others noted that they now have more doubts about teaching than when they first began, based on their new knowledge of the complexities of the profession.

In determining the different categories for the types of changes that the participants could identify in their vision of themselves as teachers as a result of the teacher education programme, we examined the responses for comments related to changes in knowledge of self or identity, as opposed to changes in knowledge about teaching. We created a separate category for the responses that included a reference to an increase in self-confidence because they were so numerous, but in a sense, it can be said that these responses were also referring to a change in identity, from a less confident to a more confident self. Fewer responses referred to a change in identity that was not directly related to an increase in self confidence, but there are definite connections between these two categories. Even for the participants who focussed on their increase in knowledge, there is an element of shifting identity, and certainly an indirect reference to an increase in self-confidence.

It appears that the programmes these new teachers followed have allowed them to begin the process of developing a professional identity, but while it is refreshing to hear their honesty, there is clearly a need to address the doubts and help new teachers channel their new self-knowledge in appropriate ways.

The response to the question "Do you have a vision of the kind of teacher you would like to be?" was a unanimous "yes." In determining categories for the descriptions of these ideals we looked at whether the participants expressed their visions in terms of their own personal characteristics, or whether they focussed on something else, such as their relationships with students or co-workers. We determined that approximately one quarter of the participants envisioned an ideal teacher in terms of personal characteristics, such as self-confident, inspirational, interesting, and energetic. Other participants defined the ideal teacher very clearly in terms of relationships with students.

The final categories in this section deal with the role of the teacher, either the impact the teacher has during the time the students are in the classroom, or the enduring impact of the teacher on students after classroom teaching. In a sense, these categories are related to building relationships with students, but the difference lies in the fact that the participants appeared to be more concerned with the impact of their actions or relationships, rather than the relationships themselves.

A fourth question asked participants what changes they might anticipate in their image of themselves as teachers over the course of their first year of teaching, and what might influence these changes. Almost all participants anticipated changes in their self image, although one participant answered that she did not anticipate any changes, but was easily able to list what might lead to changes. This was a difficult question for participants to answer, and several did so by listing what changes they might expect in terms of the way they will act or carry out tasks in the future, rather than changes in their image of themselves.

Two participants apparently viewed change as negative and responded that they hoped they would not change. Their responses indicate that they are already preoccupied with the cynicism expressed by more experienced teachers. It is disturbing to learn that a new teacher is entering the profession with the following sentiments: *I see so many teachers after 10 years – just bitter – so few teachers really love their jobs after 5 or 6 years* (participant 7).

We determined seven main categories of anticipated change in self-image on the part of the participants, despite the tendency on the part of the participants towards naming changes in actions and feelings, rather than self-image. Because of this tendency, the categories are related to anticipated changes in self-image in indirect ways. The most common category mentioned was self-confidence – that participants anticipated becoming more self-confident. We interpolated from these

comments that they would then have an image that projected self-confidence.

Three other categories were: belonging to my profession, being more efficient and proficient, and being more realistic about individual limits. The comments on the sense of belonging are interesting, as they indicate that new teachers may not feel as though they belong to the profession even after they have been offered a contract for the fall. This topic did not arise with the majority of students, but the fact that more than one raised the issue indicates that a certain amount of apprehension about being accepted into the profession by colleagues does exist. No doubt, such apprehension has an impact on the development of a strong sense of identity with the profession.

Several participants mentioned becoming more realistic in terms of their anticipated changes, which we coded as the following: realistic about limits, realistic about relationships, realistic about expectations, and realistic in an unspecified way. Other categories related to sensitivity and intuition, maturity and awareness, and an increase in knowledge.

Discussion: Insights for Teacher Education Programmes

While the participants were able to describe with accuracy the individual tasks and roles of a teacher, they appear to be unable to articulate a clear sense of what it is to be a teacher. They make links between what a teacher does and who a teacher is, but they also sense that carrying out the tasks is not, in itself, what makes one a teacher: *When you watch a teacher that has been there for 25 years, there's something that's there that I don't have and I know some day I'll have it* (participant 2).

The results of this study suggest a number of insights for teacher education. There is definitely a need, and an interest on the part of students, to include a component in teacher education programmes designed to raise the consciousness of student teachers about professional identity development. Teacher education needs to allow for the coming to see and coming to believe in ourselves in a future world – the step between envisioning something and believing it will come to pass is a critical one. It is clear that more research is needed into the process of developing a professional identity, rather than simply checking to see if it is present, as well as into ways in which we can integrate opportunities for this development as a part of pre-service teacher education.

The idea of change, and preparing new teachers for a world constantly in flux, needs to be made much more prominent in teacher education. Programmes need to be designed in ways to help student teachers to understand that constant change will be a part of their future careers, and that it is necessary to be closely in touch with current and future versions of their identities in order to be able to deal with this change. While we understand that the sense of a professional identity may always be somewhat tentative after completion of a teacher education programme, taking steps to heighten the awareness of identity development should make students more in touch with their changing identities. Certainly, as Ben-Peretz (2001) has pointed out, helping our students adjust to a changing world is a challenging but necessary aspect of the job of teacher educator at present.

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