

# Shaping and Reshaping of New Teachers' Identities

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## Abstract

Research in mainstream and language teacher education has underlined the importance of understanding teacher identity. This paper presents the main findings of a long-term study on the professional identity of teachers in the early years of teaching. It analyzes the main influences in such a way that the identity of new teachers are shaped and reshaped over time. Through their own perceptions, analyzes of the school culture in which they work and the student's point of view, it shows the interaction between contextual, cultural and biographical factors that influence their teaching practice. Teachers' personal, professional histories and pre-service training in addition to cultural issues and school leadership, emerge as more powerful mediating effects (compared to previous literature) in determining the types and relative stability and instability of the professional identity that teachers develop in the early years of teaching and thus the types of teachers they become and their effectiveness.

*Keywords: shaping, reshaping, teachers' identities, contextual factors*

## 1. The importance of identity in becoming a teacher

Vonk has identified two special stages in teacher professional development: threshold and career development. The threshold period consists of the first year of teaching in which new teachers face the entire teaching responsibility for the first time and they face the famous "transition shock". The career development phase is characterized by the acceptance of the first teachers by students and their peers. During this period, new teachers tend to focus their attention on improving skills,

methods and competencies (Vonk, 1989). Similarly, Lacey (1977) distinguishes three stages in the process of becoming a teacher: honeymoon, crisis and failure or overcoming. Until the original teachers did not meet their expectations (and the needs of the school), they entered the (re) rediscover phase of themselves when teachers tried to cope with the customer requirements.

It is clear from these studies that dealing with the needs of teaching and its inherent tasks requires a

continuous analysis of one's own beliefs and practices. The first few years of teaching can be seen as a two-way struggle, in which teachers try to create their own social reality by trying to make their work fit their vision (Day, 1999, p. 59). However, some previous studies have clearly identified the importance of identity as an intermediary force between the structure and the teacher body (Giddens, 1991). We then understand identity as a continuous and dynamic process that requires meaning and (re)interpreting our own values and experiences. Basically, becoming a teacher involves the formation of teacher identity, a process described by Sachs (2001a) as being open, negotiated and changed. She said: 'For teachers, this is mediated by their own experience in and out of school as well as their own beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher and the type of teacher they aspire to' (2001a, p 6).

## **2. Socialization and identity**

Lortie (1975) argues that the experience of "socializing prediction" during school time has a strong influence on the process of becoming a teacher. He refers to his own personal inclinations, which are at the center of what he calls the process of 'socialization'. In contrast, other studies have emphasized that initial workplace experience is important in socializing teachers, primarily structural elements such as the classroom ecosystem and rules and school regulation (Jordell, 1987). Bullough (1997) argues that in the midst of the diversity of stories becoming teachers and studying the content and form of the story, two conclusions about the importance of education appearance: previous experience and beliefs were central to shaping the story, as the context of becoming a teacher '(page 95).

## **3. Emotions and identity**

Teaching is demanding and, best of all, involving the use of both daily, intensive and extensive emotional labor (e.g. smiling outside while feeling anything other than inner happiness) and emotional work allows teachers to manage the challenges of teaching classes that contain students with a variety of motivations, personal history and academic competencies. However, too much of the former led to a relaxation with the complexity of teaching and learning, and the loss of student confidence; and investing too much in one's own emotions can lead to personal injury, inadequate feelings of not being able to entice people into learning at all times.

## **4. The study**

This article discusses the professional identities of the 14 new teachers reshaped and reshaped during the first 2 years of teaching in different environments, through the interaction of personal, professional industry and context. It explores their (supposedly) assumptions and values about teaching and becoming a teacher that has been challenged in two school settings and how professional and cultural environments influence to them.

All teachers work in high schools (children 10 - 15 years old). As a result of the teacher recruitment policy and teacher surplus, they taught in schools that were very far from home (an average of 250 km), in their second year, they required them to work (and live) in a very different and unknown regions of the country. A brief look at the characteristics of schools shows that they work in rural and isolated areas, located in very poor catchment areas, where the dropout rate is high. Rural schools, medium, small and the vast majority of their staff are young.

The purpose, timing needs and overall process of the research project were explained to all teachers. Schools are selected based on the following criteria: type of school (rural, urban and suburban) and size (large, small and medium). Results from previous research (Flores, 1997) and official data (specifically the characteristics and locations of schools) obtained from local educational agencies are the two main sources of information for the purpose. It is a 5-year course consisting of 4 years of full-time study at university and 1 year of teaching practice in a school. All teachers teach for the first time and their subject is English. Nine of them are female and five are male teachers. Their age ranges from 22 to 28 years old. The majority of them changed schools at the end of the first year of teaching due to national policy. All were followed in their second year of teaching to further examine academic progress and professional development in their new school setting.

#### **4.1. Data collection and analysis**

A combination of sources and data collection methods was used. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews with new teachers (at the beginning and end of each school year). For more detailed information about school culture and its impact on teacher development, a questionnaire was also given based on preliminary findings from the first interviews. Questionnaires are administered to all staff at each school. Students (n = 891) are also required to write a short essay in which they describe the ways in which their teachers change (or do not change) over time. The annual report, an official document that the teacher must write at the end

of each school year, which requires the approval of the school board, is also used as a data source. It provides access to the new teacher's view of their experience at school until it reflects an overall assessment of their work in each school year. At the end of the study, all new teachers were also required to write a report in which they looked back on the first two years of teaching and reflected their experience, and assessed their involvement in the project.

All interviews (lasting about an hour and a half each) were recorded and verbatim. Copies have been returned to participants for accuracy checking and for additional comments and / or additional information. During the analysis, an inductive method was used and the subjects were essentially identified as they emerged from the data. The general principles of "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) have been applied. The data analysis process is carried out in two stages: vertical analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which each interview of the respondents is analyzed separately. A second phase is then carried out through comparative or horizontal analysis (cross-case analysis). During this period, constant method of comparative analysis' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to search for common patterns as well as differences.

This process is done repeatedly and adjustments in the coding process are done as needed. A case file is also kept for each respondent over a 2-year period and an overall analysis was made at the end of the study. This allows for checking topics and regularity as well as contrasting patterns both in each teacher's account and on the teacher's responses. A lot of data is generated from reports and four interviews are conducted with each new teacher over a 2-year period. The discussion of

all results derived from data collected over time is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the experience of new teachers as first-year teachers and second year because of their views on teaching and their own as teachers in two teaching contexts and their implications for (re) building their identity over time.

## **5. Findings**

Data are presented in three main influences on the construction, deconstruction and restructuring of their professional identities: (i) teaching context (analysis of learning process, socialization and development). Expertise in both classroom and cultural practices and school leadership and their impact on teachers' identity restructuring in changing teaching contexts); (ii) initial teacher training and teaching practice (in which we consider the incentives to enter a teaching qualification and the teacher's overall evaluation of their formal professional learning experience as well as their meaning to the formation of their identities); (iii) previous influences (examining teacher's past experience as a student).

### **5.1. The impact of contexts**

#### **5.1.1. Classroom practice**

The process of learning from first-hand teaching experiences has affected new teachers' understanding of their teaching and their identity as teachers and how they behave professionally. In general, they report that their interaction with students in the classroom creates a more defensive and caring attitude for their teaching, both in pedagogical strategies and at an individual level. These lead to increasing confidence and a more positive assessment of their performance. They seem to be starting to

become aware of themselves as teachers of control.

Once they graduate, the first teaching experience is to realize that teaching requires more than they expect, that they lack the knowledge to take on all the tasks and tasks they need. They do not feel supported at school another crisis of identity. Teachers identify a range of learning situations related to their daily teaching practice. The novelty and variety of tasks performed, involving curiosity regarding their new professional settings, is called a challenge by new teachers who are eager to learn. Their new roles and take on their new responsibilities as full-time teachers. I think the most outstanding experience is dealing with so many diverse activities and with students. I have faced a lot of situations and I have to adapt to them and learn from them (NT5, Interview 3, Beginning Year 2) I think I'm a little stricter this year (to become less strict at the end of the year) than last year. Last year I had to deal with disciplinary issues because I was too flexible with them [students] from the beginning of the year and then it was too late to solve the problems. (NT14, Interview 3, Beginning year 2) At first, I had a stricter attitude towards students because of my experience from last year. But then I realized that they are different and my relationship with them is very different now. (NT4, Interview 3, Beginning year 2) Concerns with student control in the classroom have led to a shift from a more focused and student-focused approach to more teacher-directed and task-focused teaching, in which habits prevail, despite the broader and constructive view of teachers when they talk about good teaching and becoming a teacher at the beginning of their first year. The tension

between the (ideal) belief in good teaching and the (practical) practice is well illustrated in the following quotes:

Sometimes I forget that I'm an educator and I focus on the content that will be mentioned and on the curriculum. This is relevant to the students, because whenever I try to organize another activity, they take advantage of that and they do everything around. And then I didn't feel like doing it again, so I lectured them and the classes became boring. I feel unmotivated students are not responding to my teaching and I start working on a routine and I become a boring teacher (NT5, Interview 3, Beginning Year 2)

Teachers (4 of 14), according to their own perceptions and student perceptions, have improved over time and become, in many ways, better teachers. In general, they become less strict in relationships with students and more flexible in classroom activities. In other words, a student-centered process and process perspective is common, in which students' ability to meet students' needs and ability, diversity and motivation are exhausted. They are increasingly concerned with the pedagogical and ethical aspects of their work. To quote two of them:

I have changed the way I deal with students. Now I try to have a closer relationship and I try to move around the classroom, so they can feel they are supported. I try to follow the way they solve spreadsheets (NT13, Interview 2, End of Year 1)

### **5.1.2. The effects of school culture and leadership:**

There is a clear consensus among new teachers on the strong impact of the changing teaching

context on the "experience language" learning process (Doecke, Brown, & Loughan, 2000). However, this happens primarily in isolation (especially in the second year of teaching) with increasing focus on the classroom environment. In their accounts, they emphasize that they learned while doing 'and' by performing tasks' in their requests.

You learn to do things by doing them. (NT1, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

I think you learn how to perform all your essential tasks as a teacher by actually doing them. (NT13, Interview 2, End of Year 1)

Now I don't talk as much as last year to some of my colleagues, because of the problems I encountered last year. It was the first year I taught and at first I trusted everyone, then I realized that I had to organize everything by myself (NT11, Interview 3, Starting Year 2).

Learning is increasingly becoming a lonely process as identity becomes bound (by culture). Less important is associated with colleagues as influencing factors in workplace learning. When this was the case, the participants mentioned young colleagues, former colleagues at the university and colleagues teaching the same topic. The lack of support and guidance from school leaders (the head teacher reported the lack of a referral program) and from colleagues led to the emergence of idyllic coping strategies when they were redundant.

Most teachers have reported on the ways they become socialized in school culture by applying its rules and values. Using the concept of "social strategy" (Lacey, 1977), most of them, according to their own account, tend to adopt the "strategic compliance" attitude as time goes by. When they become aware of how schools operate, most of them claim that they have accepted a "step back"

and a more compliant attitude (Lacey, 1977). They describe how they begin to adhere to the rules and values of the workplace, despite the fact that they do not fit their own beliefs and values. Conservatives and adherents emerge in their accounts as their identities, replacing their initial enthusiasm and, in a sense, their proactive attitude (emphasis on the head). This change is described as a gradual process as they know how schools (and their peers) work. Individualism, low morale and commitment among teachers, the existence of "vested interests" and excessive bureaucracy in teaching are topics that teachers mention to explain to teachers the loss of ideal, the appearance of habit and the sense of "giving up".

As for your work at school, the best thing you can do is "do what others do", I mean, that's how things work. I am aware of the people who have tried to resist the odds and I mean, when you work in a school like this without organization, they can do anything whatever they want, there's too much pressure on you, even in bureaucracy and teachers are peers who don't support each other, they just criticize your work and they don't work in teams ( NT12, Interview 4, End of Year 2). A minority (4) did not follow these patterns. Two teachers in one case despite their negative perceptions of culture and school leadership still maintained their enthusiasm and optimism. Interestingly, both gave an intrinsic motivation to participate in teaching. They claim that they are still committed to teaching as a career, in that they think they can make a positive contribution, especially for the benefit of their students. The need to adapt to different contexts and to become more flexible in teaching at the pace and learning needs of students are key issues in their account. Despite everything, my self-motivation is still there, although I have more difficulties. But I

think improvement is possible, you can't create an idealistic idea and pursue that idea forever, I mean, you have to adapt to the different contexts that I want to come up with, but I realize that it is not just dependent on myself I want that change to happen. But I know that I can change something for my students and I can see the results of my efforts. And that is all I need to feel that change is possible, that there are good things in teaching, which is a positive attitude in teaching even though there are many things against you (NT11). , Interview 4, End of Year 2) Two other teachers seem to have "restored" their idealism and optimism lost in their second year of teaching. They emphasize that the less positive experience in the first year of teaching (and their teaching practice) has made them feel dissatisfied and frustrated. However, teaching in a different context is a very positive and rewarding experience, especially due to student motivation, commitment and achievement and a positive awareness of school culture and leadership.

Not surprisingly, teachers in schools with supportive leadership, information and encouragement and effective working relationships among staff are more likely to reveal positive attitudes toward with the teaching. However, personal biographies also play an important part in explaining both the similarities and differences between teachers, and especially how they perceive their teaching and learning experience in both different schools.

## **5.2. Initial teacher training and teaching practice**

Teaching is not the first choice for most teachers involved in research. In general, the teachers involved in this research project were divided into three main categories: (i) those who decided

to become teachers because they considered teaching a stable and safe job (10 of 14); (ii) those who enter the profession due to unrelated teaching reasons (destiny 'or how to expand the subject knowledge) (2 teachers); and (iii) people who teach because they feel a strong personal commitment to being a teacher (2 teachers). In other words, most teachers have cited external forces (employment opportunities and the influence of other important people 'such as former teachers and relatives who are teachers) to enter. Only two teachers mentioned personal factors inherent in teaching (desire to teach and work with children).

Teaching is purely a personal choice. I do not know whether the fact that I am always a good student will affect my choice. I often helped other students and I often taught my cousins to check and she was able to pass because of me, she said. Since then, my motivation to become an even stronger teacher, I have always liked to teach a lot. I enjoyed watching my teachers teach and the only thing that came to mind was 'I want to be like them someday!'(NT7, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

However, five teachers reported that teaching was a very positive experience. They enjoyed their work, especially because of their good relationships with students and the supportive atmosphere at the school. They also emphasize the autonomy and freedom of teaching and teamwork among students and supervisors as positive traits in their teaching practice: It was a positive experience. I realize what a teacher must do, in terms of teaching, but also extra-curricular activities. Our supervisors have provided the support we need, but at the same time, we have the freedom to teach what we consider to be the

best. One of my supervisors told us that she was there to help us, but teaching is our job (NT11, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

Becoming a teacher is not just about knowledge. It is about paying attention to the needs of students, and at the same time, trying to improve their knowledge and skills as a teacher, you are a student's study guide but you also will take care of them. I mean, you have to pay attention to the students' backgrounds and try to understand their behavior (NT11, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1). Taking care of students and helping them solve their own problems are also important characteristics in describing their roles. The personal element of teaching that is also appreciated by teachers as teachers (as a result of their teaching practice) is a rewarding experience. Interestingly, teachers feel personally committed and eager to participate in teaching and recognize the influence of 'other important people' (former teachers and / or relatives who are teachers too) evaluate highly their training in university and practice teaching in school. They also report that positive experiences when students have given them a broad understanding of their role as teachers. As previous research has demonstrated, the role of internal motivation needs to be taken into account in efforts to promote teacher recruitment and maintenance (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Kyriacou, Hultgren, & Stephens, 1999).

### **5.3. Prior influences**

Previous experience when students seem to play a strong intermediary role in the identities that new teachers bring into their first school teaching experience. Former teachers, who provide positive or negative teaching models, are also considered an important socializing factor (Knowles, 1992; Nimmo, Smith, Grove,

Courtney, & Eland, 1994). Looking back at the school days, the participants recalled both the negative and positive episodes that marked their lives as students. Most of them refer to the teachers they admire and, in some cases, those who have influenced their career choices. Flexibility, motivation and fairness regarding their individual characteristics (teacher as a person) are regular features in their accounts.

There are a few teachers who have a great influence on me. They are extremely competent, but they know how to talk to students, they are very easy to talk with toys, they look at students like them, and they do not judge them by their face or social background. . (NT10, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

In both the negative and positive cases described earlier, 'apprenticeship observation' (Lortie, 1975), in which new teachers observe many teaching styles, appears to have played an important role in how they build identity, shape, in some cases, how they respond to real situations as new teachers.

Perhaps the experience of my former teachers in high school education helped me behave my way, because they did exactly what I was trying to do now. In fact, there is a Chemistry teacher that I admire a lot and I try to follow as a model. (NT4, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

When you're teaching, you always remember your own experience as a student, I mean when I was in class, I always remember the classes I used to have. (NT14, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

About the classes, I tried to create an image of what was wrong when I was a student and I tried

to change that. I mean, now I try to do the opposite of what the bad teachers did during my schooling. (NT8, Interview 1, Beginning Year 1)

## **6. Conclusions**

Research has emphasized the strong interaction between personal history and the contextual influence of the workplace. Teachers working in collaborative cultures are more likely to develop and show a positive attitude toward teaching. This corroborates previous work that has shown the link between 'natural' and 'spontaneous' cooperative relationships and culture, and provides more meaningful and supportive development opportunities for new teachers (Cole, 1991; Williams, Prestige, & Bedward, 2001) and the effects of workplace conditions on teacher morale, commitment and retention (Weiss, 1999). However, the main role of personal biographies in mediating teachers' practice meaning and their beliefs about themselves as teachers and in reshaping the teacher's identity also appears.

The identity of new teachers in this study has been strongly personalized at the beginning of their teaching career, but has been destabilized by the negative school context and culture where they work.

The meaning, values, images and ideals of the meaning of a teacher to whom they teach are challenged and, for many, teaching becomes more frequent, governs more rules and less creative. The influence of the workplace (positive or negative perceptions about culture and school leadership) plays an important role in reshaping teachers' understanding, in facilitating or hindering study and develop their career, and (re) build their career identity. Although there is a strong connection between personal biography



and a sense of identity stability, it is clear that in most cases, if not all cases, history is mediated by context.

The findings suggest that the relatively weak influence of pre-service programs can be strengthened by a stronger focus on experience opportunities and reflecting individual profiles and cultural contexts of schools. In addition, touch processes need to focus on teachers' development of identity building through exploring links between personal biographies, classroom reflection practices, student feedback, and support colleagues and increase awareness of continuing professional development in supportive school cultures.

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