



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th – June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Teachers Reflect on Their Identities as Former Students and Future Teachers

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research was to describe the educational experiences of 49 preservice teacher candidates enrolled in educational courses. Theories of teachers' beliefs and qualitative constructivist epistemologies framed the study. The preparation of preservice teachers is an important area of research. Two primary questions guided this qualitative research: 1) How do preservice teachers describe their experience as students? 2) How do preservice see themselves as teachers? Data were collected over the course of one college semester. The following themes emerged following inductive data analysis. As a student, I was procrastinating, lazy, uninterested, and extroverted. As a teacher, I want to be a leader, knowledge imparter, impact others, and inspire students.

Keywords: teacher identity; ideals; narrative; qualitative research.

1. Introduction

Teacher identity is an important research focus. Insights into how teachers think about their past and future role as teachers promises to be a fertile area of research. This research should highlight important didactic and practical insights into how new teachers think about the role as teachers. Reflection is an important asset in teacher candidates. Furthermore, looking at how teachers think about their role as teachers can be an avenue for teacher education programs to introduce sustainable training programs aimed at improving the professional growth of young teachers. Significant to this effort is to investigate the introspective nature of role identity of teachers. However, it would be a little naïve to think of a monolithic view of teacher identity, since we do not know how preservice teachers describe their experience as students and relate it to their future identities as teachers. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to explore the identity of preservice teachers and how they relate that to the future identity they want to have as teachers in practice. Two primary questions guided this qualitative research: 1) How do preservice teachers describe their experience as students? 2) How do preservice teachers see themselves as teachers? Participants were asked to respond to the following prompts: As a student I was ____, and as a Teacher, I want to be ____ . The statements of the participants were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). More of the procedural aspects of this study will be fully explained in the methodology section of this discussion. The framework underpinning this study is theories of teacher beliefs and qualitative constructivist epistemologies. The findings from the investigation are discussed in the results section of this article.

2. Literature Review

There is not a paucity of research when it comes to research on teacher identity. In fact, the incremental interest in teacher identity formation has gained significant momentum across the spectrum of different veins of research studies (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). First, higher education institutions have recognized the critical role research on teacher identity has played in the professional approaches to teacher education (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Furthermore, those who work in the preparation of new teachers should take a closer look at results from research on teacher identity and teacher thinking as important constructs with regards to teaching and teachers. Researchers have identified several key factors contributing to the development of an identity as a teacher, proposing that teacher identity in the classroom is influenced by age, gender, and education along with the sociocultural and economic dynamics of the institution (Danielewicz, 2014; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Li, 2020; Olsen, 2008). This suggests that perhaps this construct is fluid and influenced by multiple variables.

Other scholars who have researched this topic have indicated that the development of teacher identity is an ongoing process. Beijaard et al. (2004) conceptualized it in transitional dimensions from student to teacher. However, how is teacher identity constructed? Researchers tend to agree that teacher identity is influenced or scaffolded in social venues, giving room to broader interpretations of this construct (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Interestingly, other scholars have detected the role of affect or emotion in a teacher's identity as an important influencer in identity construction by teachers. This suggests that emotion plays a significant role in what a teacher may consider when thinking about ideals on identity (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). However, others have placed identity in self-awareness (Freud, 1961). This gives rise to the notion that identity is a process of self-analysis, something preservice teachers are asked to do as a result of being engaged in reflection during field practicums (Gee, 2000; Sachs, 2005). Furthermore, this has led researchers to examine cultural context in constructing the development of identity. Social psychologists suggest that identity is socially constructed, thereby, suggesting that individuals are influenced by the ecosystem they interact with (Erikson, 1959; Moshman, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978).

Another area of research is teacher thinking, especially when thinking is related to visions of teaching. Metaphors and preservice teachers are a significant corpus of research, which has resulted in several qualitative narrative studies on the impact metaphors have on their thinking. Starting with the

seminal work on metaphors by researchers Lakoff and Johnson (1980), researchers have argued that metaphors are important because they are a window into the thinking of people, in this case the teacher candidate. The work by researchers on metaphors in preservice teachers by Brown et al. (2005) illuminates their role as mediating knowledge of teaching. Other significant research conducted by Patchen and Crawford (2011) and Stylianou et al. (2013) on preservice teachers elucidates the fine line between teacher thinking and the reality of practice.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

We recognize that there are many lens to frame our study. Nevertheless, based on the research questions of our study, we framed this research within cognitive and sociocultural constructivist epistemologies. Two primary reasons contributed to the theoretical frameworks. First, we recognized that ideas about a corpus of knowledge can be influenced by the individual cognitive structures, and secondly, we felt that because students share experiences in a collective social milieu, constructivist principles have an impact on the ways these ideas about role identity are shaped (Charmaz, 2014, 2015; Lave & Wenger, 2001; Piaget, 1966; von Glasersfeld, 1989; Vygotsky, 1978).

However, the preparation of preservice teachers is a complex undertaking, since individual's professional growth can be influenced by many factors, such as social, cognitive, affective, and practical factors. Therefore, it can appear limiting the scope of teachers' identity to a fewse only one theoretical framework. Social and cognitive constructivist perspectives on teachers' knowledge creation help guide professors and practitioners to model the best practices aimed at scaffolding our understanding of teachers' growth and development. However, researchers can integrate additional knowledge of theories that can prove helpful in navigating the complexity surrounding teachers' identity, and indeed, the seminal work on metaphors by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggests that metaphors can help in this task because they can simplify complex ideas, and therefore, can be utilized as frameworks in constructing teachers' knowledge and teachers' identities.

Because the thinking of teachers is also connected to practical knowledge in terms of how preservice teachers envision their teaching and how they relate this construct in terms of real experinces, researchers have encouraged colleges and universities in investigating how new teachers arrives at this knowledge of teaching and learning (Thomas & McRobbie, 1999). This soul searching work by professors and practitioners alike is essential if we have any hope to make positive changes in how pre-service teachers construct their identity as teachers, because as some scholars have indicated, teachers do not change their views about teaching from the time they enter their teacher preparation programs. We need to positively channel those pitfalls and misconceptions new teachers have now before they enter their teaching profession (Byra & Coulon, 1994).

2.2 Research Questions

The research was guided by two main questions:

1. How do preservice teachers describe their experience as students?
2. How do preservice see themselves as teachers?

The phenomenon of this research was understanding how preservice view themselves and their identity as students versus their identity as future teachers. This research followed prior efforts understand teacher identity development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were a group of teacher education preservice teachers enrolled in two courses in education. Convenience sampling selection was used, based on the purpose of the study. The rationale of convenience sampling for qualitative research is to provide researchers the opportunity to collect data from the sample selected (Jupp, 2006). Additionally, researchers utilizing this sampling technique can gain specific understanding into the problem researched (Merriam, 1998).

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection took place during one university semester. Prior to the beginning of the study, the researchers explained the scope of the research and allowed the participants to ask questions. They were informed that they did not have to participate or complete the study once begun. Students did not have any questions. The participants were 29 female and 20 male student teachers. All were declared candidates to the teacher education program at attending a teaching institution in the United States.

Data were collected using the following prompt: As a student I was ____, and as a Teacher, I want to be ____ . All participants completed this prompt on paper at one time during data collection.

The point of the prompt was to have participants candidly answer the questions posited. We acknowledge that the questions have the potential to prompt negative experiences with idealized self-identities. This can be problematic since it can provoke polarized perspectives. However, the essence of the experience is that it has the potential to create a dichotomy, but instead it is how professors and practitioners alike can tap upon this knowledge to guide preservice teachers to measure idealistic visions of teaching from the perspective of the self against the actual reality of the situation. Preservice teachers may have idealized views of what the profession may be like or how they themselves will actually act in the future. Therefore, it is important to conduct this type of research emphasizing the ideal versus the actual.

3.3 Data Analysis

Following data collection, the two researchers looked at the data together in order to create a map of several congruent ideas categorized around repetitive patterns that were clustered into several themes. Thematic analysis could be interpreted as a stage or step-by-step approach to data interpretation, containing three distinct steps the researchers do in order to generate reliable findings. The six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006) provided the process of data analysis.

A qualitative inquiry such as this research requires that the study be well-seated within the theoretical research designs grounded in qualitative epistemology. We acknowledge that the rigor of the study is grounded within the systematic approach qualitative research offers, from data collection to data analysis to the presentation of the results (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Throughout the process of data collection and data analysis, we relied on our skills as instruments by carefully positioning ourselves as researchers. We looked at the data first individually, and then as categories of themes started to emerge, we reflected on them and argued to the purpose of our analysis, asking repeatedly if we were getting it right. We compared and contrasted our data analysis together, and then triangulated our findings with each other. Through this process, we arrived at a consensus from our individual assumptions we had originally from the data analysis. (Check & Schutt, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Denzin, 1978; Greene & McClintock, 1985; Merriam, 1998).

Once we achieved familiarity with the data, we moved into initial coding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is where we laid each piece of the puzzle together, which eventually gave structure to the final themes. This process has been called the building block of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of coding allowed us to provide the interpretation of the data by focusing on the semantic meaning of the language from data. Coding helped us to provide a brief overview of the themes. The final aspect of our thematic analysis moved us from coding to the actual themes. This last stage allowed us to capture something important from the data that was connected to our research questions. Our final stage revealed the following themes: As a student, I was procrastinating, lazy, uninterested, and extroverted. As a teacher, I want to be a leader, knowledge imparter, impact others, and inspire students.

The triangulated results emerged cogently and consistently with our individual and collective analysis. The initial codes were coalesced into categories, and then themes were developed from the categories. Thematic saturation of the data resulted from the multiplicity of our lenses of data inquiry. The more we analyzed the data, the more the categories clustered significantly around the major themes we discovered. No contrary evidence was found after multiple reviews of our data, meaning that the more we looked at the data, the same results came from it. This means that our analysis

achieved thematic saturation, and no new significant properties emerged from the categories of themes. Triangulation was achieved, not through multiple sources of data, but through multiple researchers reviewing the data.

4. Results

The results of our investigation provide a picture of teacher candidates who expressed their past and future visions of students and teachers. The first research question is answered by the following themes:

As a Student I was:

1. Procrastinator;
2. Lazy;
3. Uninterested;
4. Extroverted.

In theme one, students expressed they were a procrastinator. From our data analysis, the first major theme revealed that multiple teacher candidates express a sense of disinterest while they were students. Most of the participants wrote about procrastination as students. This is an interesting theme because it shows that the majority of these students were turned away from education as students. Participants wrote:

«I want to be diligent and prepared so that I can be the best I can be once I graduate and start»;

«my career. Right now, I have a record of procrastinating things that I want to break this semester»;

«yes, I was very negative as a student»;

«I tend to procrastinate, but still manage to be successful as a student».

Another participant wrote the following:

«I was procrastinating on the heavy side as a student, but aspiring to be successful. I was not involved. I did not care much about school».

The convergence of students' responses to the questions merged in another unified theme, Lazy. Many future teachers felt that they were not good students in secondary school or at the university. Some of their comments are as follows:

«I was lazy. For the past couple of years, I have been lazy, have not cared. I am trying to change that, so that I can be the best teacher/coach I can be».

«I was lazy. For the past couple of years, I have been lazy, have not cared. I am trying to change that, so that I can be the best teacher/coach I can be».

«I did not care about education. I did not care about school. I wanted to be left alone. I was not a good student. I did not do my homework. I was apathetic about learning».

Theme three describes the feeling of not being interested in education or schooling. The message portrayed here is one of detachment from schooling and education. Sample comments follow:

«I did not care about school, and I made sure every teacher I had known that except, Mrs____ I loved her class. I was not very serious about my education. Often I lacked the foresight to see the importance of a good education. I look back and I wished I would have applied myself».

«I liked a few classes. I did not like most of my teachers. I was highly unmotivated as a student».

The fourth theme was about recalling themselves as extroverted as students. One participant explained:

«I was extroverted, I enjoyed my peers. I wanted to be at the center of everything. I was popular. People looked at me. I liked being around people».

In answering the second research question, the following themes emerged:
As a Teacher I would Like to be:

1. Leader;
2. Knowledge Imparter;
3. Impact others;
4. Inspire students.

The first theme explains that the participants saw themselves as future leaders. For example, one wrote:

«I want to be a leader that turns kids into respectful adults to better the future».

This statement was repeated many other times by the participants.

«I want to be a leader and make a difference in a kid's life».

In the second theme, participants expressed the notion of the metaphor of knowledge imparter. This is interesting because it underscores the propensity of the majority of the teacher candidates to think about knowledge. One participant wrote:

«I want to be able to pour my knowledge of school and real-life situations into my students. I want to be the mentor or someone they could always come back to for advice and tips».

The third theme as a future teacher was that of making an impact in the lives of students. The majority of our teacher candidates felt that as teachers they would prioritize a positive rapport with their students in the form of making a difference in the lives of their students by impacting them. As one participant wrote,

«I want to have a positive impact on kids' lives. Coaches had the biggest impact on my life. I hope to have that same impact on someone and be a role model to someone».

Another wrote:

«I want to be fair and leave an impact on life, and a role model».

The last theme is reminiscent of the metaphor of someone who inspire students because participants expressed the desire to become involved in the lives of others (students). However, in this theme, there is the emphasis on being an inspiration. One participant wrote:

«I want to be someone who inspires someone. I was very outgoing and wanted to be involved in everything because you get out what you put in. I want to be the best that I can be. I want to inspire the little kids I will be working with. I want to inspire them to learn and be excited about learning».

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative research aimed at providing an overview of teacher identity via the past and present, by asking the teacher candidates to respond to two basic questions. Following a thorough review of

the data, recurrent patterns saturated from data analysis revealed some interesting findings. This section covers the discussion of the findings and conclusions.

Eight themes were identified in the findings, four answering each research question. For the first research question, participants reflected on how they viewed themselves as students. For the most part, participants reflected negatively on their past experiences, see things they wanted to change going forward as teachers or things they were currently changing in expectation of their careers as teachers. They noted procrastination or negative attitudes that clouded their student attitudes and behavior. However, there was one theme where they talked about extroversion as it related to the social context of education and being with their peers.

For the second research question, participants talked about the ways they wanted to influence their future students when they become teachers. For some, they realized that their own backgrounds as students were in opposition to the kinds of teachers they wanted to become. However, their aspirations of the teachers they want to be speak to the positive way they could interact with future students. Both of these themes can contribute to ways teacher preparation programs can prepare students to be the types of teachers they want to become.

Interpreting the themes that emerged from our study has a twofold meaning. First, we want to be cautious skeptics about making more than what each theme stands for. It is important that while the teacher candidates in our study analyzed their scholarly experiences in a frank way, the images that are portrayed suggest the existence of many ideals about teaching. Indeed, we argue here that most likely those ideals or visions about teaching will change as a result of experiences since those are unavoidable. We concur with some researchers who have suggested that identity is a dynamic process because teacher development is ongoing and dynamic (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard et al., 2004; Maclean & White, 2007). The second point we want to make from the results of our qualitative study is to let our data not be silent and proactively realize that our student teachers will change.

Furthermore, we need to validate those experiences since they are important from the standpoint of capturing teacher emotions and ways to represent them. We feel that emotion plays a significant role in our candidates' projection of their future role as teachers. We believe that our teacher candidates are not unique in their assessment of their role as future teachers and that those experiences have been instrumental in shaping current views about identities.

Finally, we feel that the results of our study underscore a more important aspect of conducting qualitative insights into teacher identity because we can help new teachers to have positive learning experiences that guide their professional development as teachers. Teacher education programs must be cognizant of the role identities play in the formation of a teacher attitudes and behaviors. Teacher education programs have an important role in shaping the professional identity of new teachers by gaining a better understanding in the design of pedagogical practices aimed at informing teacher education programs (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

The participants in our study through their responses to two prompts offered several important insights into their conceptualization of past and future ideas about who they would like to be as teachers. Secondly, our study's main findings would suggest that it is important to view teacher thinking and ideals of identity formation as important milestone experiences researchers can utilize to have a better understanding of what programs, professors, and practitioners can do to help new teacher candidates to develop their professional growth as teachers.

We think that the major contribution of this study lends toward a better understanding of the nature of teacher and teacher education. We wanted to highlight the importance of qualitative research such as ours to contribute to the complexity of research on teacher thinking and knowledge. We believe our study indicates how complicated the morphology of teacher identity is, underscoring that we need additional study likes this one to bridge theoretical knowledge with the practical applications to teaching.

Only by investing in the preparation of new teachers can we improve our knowledge of teaching and learning. Narrative-based research can help unfold important knowledge that teacher preparation programs can use to better support how preservice teachers create their identity as teachers. Additionally, narrative research can enhance collaboration between scholars and practitioners alike to better create curriculum and practicum that can benefit the preparation of new teachers.

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