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## Learning in the Practicum: Shaping Professional Identity in Initial Teacher Education\*\*

### Summary

This study considers the role of the practicum in supporting professional identity development in the initial stage of teacher education. Employing an interpretative paradigm and a qualitative methodological approach (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), data were collected from a purposive sample of student teachers ( $n = 6$ ) in the first year of study, using individual semi-structured interviews and episodic documents. The findings show that emerging teacher identity was informed but also challenged by the participants' engagement with pupils, other teachers and visiting tutors. Collectively, these influences effected shifts in the participants' constructs on teaching and prompted change in their perception of themselves and others as teachers. The study provides for an improved understanding of teacher growth in the first stage of career development. By so doing, it makes a valid contribution to the discourse on initial teacher education to better inform teacher educators and policy makers in relation to teacher professional learning.

**Keywords:** practicum, teacher education, professional learning, professional identity

### Introduction

Interest in teachers' professional identity began to develop from the late 1980s, primarily in Europe, North America, Australia and to a lesser extent, the UK (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggest

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that this was partly due to a reaction against an emerging discourse of teacher learning as an objectified, linear process which does not take into consideration the role of the teachers themselves, their contexts and how they make sense of their professional lives. Perhaps more significantly, if the nature of professional identity is a key determinant of a teacher's sense of efficacy, motivation and effectiveness (Sachs, 2005), then consideration of the factors which play a part in its construction must be worthy of serious consideration.

Whilst the acquisition of teaching competence is undoubtedly important, Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2007) and Dall'Alba (2009) suggest that professional identity is not only an epistemological process, but also an ontological one, in which an individual actually engages in a process of self-transformation to 'become' a teacher. The value of research which adopts this more holistic perspective can help individuals understand this process of transition, the influences upon them and the challenges and opportunities they encounter.

Understanding teacher identity is not straightforward however and one of the first challenges is trying to find an adequate definition of the phenomenon (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Olsen (2008) refers to identity as a label, used to describe a sociocultural process in which a teacher negotiates their professional growth and development. Others (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004) agree, suggesting that the social and professional contexts which individuals inhabit have a significant influence upon how teachers perceive themselves and others. Clandinin et al. (2006) refer to these contexts as "the landscapes past and present" (p. 4) which contribute towards the development of the professional self.

With these perspectives in mind, this study focussed on the practicum experience of a group of student teachers in the first of a four-year primary teaching programme. The study explores how the placement schools and their engagement with host teachers, pupils and tutors, influenced their perception of themselves as teachers and their emergent sense of professional identity.

## **Literature Review**

### **The dialectic self**

Interest in the importance of identity to teacher development goes back to the work of Mead in the 1930s (Mead, 1934/1962). He suggested that an

individual's sense of self, and therefore their sense of identity, rather than being fixed, is a relational phenomenon, dependent upon context, environment, place and time. Therefore, identity emerges within a social setting in which we learn to take on the role of others and begin to see ourselves from the others' perspective. Mead (1934/1962) suggests the concept of the 'I-Me dialectic' to help understand these phenomena. The 'Me' is the phenomenological understanding of a person within a given socio-historical context in relation to their age, gender, profession or role; an example being 'teacher'. The 'I' is the personal or individual self which responds to the concept of the 'Me' thus establishing a reflexive, interactive process or 'dialectic' which can affect change in either or both. Exemplifying this idea, Beijaard (1995) suggests that a teachers' sense of self in terms of feelings of adequacy/ inadequacy (the 'I') is often reliant upon teacher/pupil relationships and how pupils perceive them as teachers (the 'Me').

An obvious site for shaping a teacher's identity is the workplace (Leeferkink, Koopman, Beijaard, & Schellings, 2019). Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson and Fry (2004) point to the importance of the practicum as providing a forum which can either promote or detract from the sense of agency and identity which emerges. In addition, Kelchtermans and Hamilton (2004) suggest that the practicum can also make a significant contribution to the development of the values, attitudes and dispositions characteristic of practicing teachers.

Alongside context is the influence of other professionals (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Friesen and Besley (2013) suggest that when there are shared similarities with others in defined social groups social identity emerges. Whilst either social or personal identity may become more salient under different circumstances, they also suggest that, in similar fashion to Mead's (1934/1962) 'I-Me dialectic', personal and social identities also interact to the point where the characteristics of one may be adopted by the other.

For pre-service teachers, "they are creating their world while also being shaped by it" (Cooper & Olson, 1996, p. 83) and so their professional identity is fluid and this can lead to tension. Reynolds (1996) agrees and proposes that for early career teachers, the natural inclination is to 'blend in' and be recognised as a 'good teacher', reflecting whatever norms are apparent at the time. Because of this, the importance of exposure to a diversity of experience is important to allow teachers to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their teacher identity within different contexts (Coldron & Smith, 1999).

### The dialogic self

The literature considered to this point has focussed on a range of dialectical positions on identity development. Wegerif (2008) adopts a more dialogical stance emerging from the post-modernist thinking of Bakhtin (1981) and suggests that identity is more the product of differences in perspectives which may be incompatible and which do not need to be synthesised.

MacLure (1993) adopts a similar stance, suggesting that commonality of characteristics does not necessarily suggest commonality of meaning as teachers may experience their environments in completely different ways. The value of MacLure's work is that, whilst not underestimating the importance of context, it addresses the importance of the individual's unique interpretation of their context, their agential and reflexive reaction to it and the subsequent influence of that on the formation of their identity.

Amalgamating both Modern and Postmodern perspectives, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggest that, 'being someone who teaches', or 'teacher identity' cannot be seen as an end point, but instead should be defined "as an ongoing process of negotiating and interrelating multiple I-positions in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is maintained throughout various participations and self-investments in one's (working) life [sic]" (p. 315).

Their model of teacher identity suggests three continua: multiplicity and unity; discontinuity and continuity; social and individual. Within each continuum, moves the 'I' (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986; as cited in Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 311) which can be typified as being both unified and multiple; continuous and discontinuous; and individual and social. This dialogic conception of teacher identity in which multiple and sometimes conflicting 'I' positions are recognised, is helpful to understanding how student teachers construct their identity as they mediate the transition from 'pupil/student' to 'student teacher' to 'teacher'.

To support this identity transition, Ryan (2005), underlines the importance of 'systematic', 'epistemic' and 'methodological' reflexivity through which teachers not only reflect inwardly on their beliefs, practices and behaviours, but also outwardly, in relation to all the interpersonal, social, cultural, and other forces they encounter. Lay and McGuire (2009) agree and suggest that there is a developmental trajectory which moves from introspective 'reflection' towards critical thinking and ultimately, 'reflexive practice' which leads to a more critical stance, challenging existing ideas to affect change and improvement.

### **The ontological self**

Beyond the importance of context and dialectical and dialogical interactions, Mutton, Burn and Heggar (2010) emphasise the transformation of the individual in terms of becoming a teacher in terms of disposition, attitude and approach to their professional learning and development. This reflects of the work of Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2007), who suggest that knowledge determined as essential for teaching professionals cannot be removed from practice within given social, historical, cultural or political contexts. Knowledge and practice therefore become ingrained within the core professional identity and ‘being’ of the individual as they progress through their unique professional journey.

With these dialectic, dialogic and ontological positions in mind, the purpose of this study was to explore the range of influences on the professional identity formation of a sample of student teachers during their first practicum.

### **Methods**

Through asking open-ended questions, seeking views and perspectives, examining contexts and eventually deducing meaning (Crotty, 1998), the purpose of the study was to understand the range of influences upon the professional identity development of a sample of undergraduate student teachers in the first year of their teacher education programme. As such, a qualitative, interpretative research design, embedded within a co-constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2000) was employed.

### **Context of the study**

The study took place in Northern Ireland where teaching is well regarded and where recruitment or retention problems are not as apparent as in other jurisdictions in the UK (Hagan & Eaton, 2020). The discourse on teacher education is that teaching is a complex, value-laden activity which is culturally and contextually sensitive and which is dependent upon the forging of effective relationships across a range of different dimensions (Cochran-Smith, 2004; La Paro et al., 2018). The participants were in the first of a four-year programme for prospective teachers wishing to specialise in primary education. As the