



“You can’t just leave the group”- Challenged development of professional identity in teacher education

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to investigate the challenges that may be faced in teacher education and experienced by a young student teacher – during the development of a professional identity. In the study, case study research design was utilized. The participants were composed of 32 volunteer student teachers who were selected using convenience sampling method. The study period lasted 18 months, and the data were collected via an observation and in-depth online interview. The data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis method. The results revealed that learning activities were often based on group work; however, developing an individual professional identity could be challenged by the interests of the group, and could be experienced as a difficult but potentially successful liberation process that could be influenced by several factors.

Keywords: professional identity, professional development, teacher education, learning activities

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to find one common definition of the concept of development of professional identity, but many suggestions are presented in the research literature. A review (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004) on research into teachers’ professional identity concludes that the relatively many articles in the field do not agree on the definition of the concept of professional identity, and the authors suggest that more attention should be paid to the role of context in professional identity formation and what counts as professional in teachers’ professional identity (p. 126).

The context for development of professional identity is located many places—on campus, online, at teaching practice schools, at other workplace schools, or even in memories of childhood schools. All these contexts of critical incidents (Gholami, Faraji, Meijer, & Tirri, 2021) may contribute to the development or transformation of a teacher’s identity. Furthermore, many learning activities on campus may contribute to the creation of professional identity among student teachers, such as narratives about school and teaching practices (Pulvermacher & Lefstein, 2016), collective dialogues (Assen, Koops, Meijers, Otting, & Poell, 2018) and narratives from workplace learning (Leeferink, Koopman, Beijaard, & Gonny, 2018). On campus, the student teachers often work in groups, collaborate and discuss teaching and learning, and share experiences and reflections in relation to these matters. Ramsaroop and Petersen (2020) find that being able to collaborate with others is an essential competency among teachers. Moreover, research has found that collaboration and groupwork contribute to better learning outcomes than more individual-oriented teaching does (e.g., Fung & Lui, 2016). Likewise, the opportunity to practice argumentation in groups with other students has a positive impact on the learning outcome of science content knowledge (Larrain et al., 2018), and students who cooperate use significantly more “time on task” than students who compete or work alone do (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Context, both relating to space and to fellow students and educators, plays a role in student teachers’ development of professional identity.

Like personal identity, professional identity is coherent and continuous (Wryan et al., 2003), and one can, for example, point out the time in the personal history when the specific profession was chosen or significantly changed. Although professional identity can be understood as “the individual’s self-conception as a professional subject” (Eteläpelto et al., 2014, p. 648), it can also be emphasized and established in social-professional interactions (Billett, 2006) and depends on previous professional experiences and personal stories (e.g., Lamote & Engels, 2010; Loughran, 2006). As it is established in interaction with the group of professionals, the goal may be to become part of this group; however, even when this goal is reached and the student becomes a full member of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the development of the professional identity continues. Therefore, professional identity can be understood as a product of an education, a participation in

practice and a process that may have begun long before the education was commenced, and it is constantly challenged and recreated (Heggen, 2010; Nortvig, 2017; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009).

As is the case with the personal identity, which can be defined as double movements of inclusions and exclusions (Stone, 2009), the professional identity may develop through such patterns because it develops along with the personal identity: Professionals are professional in a unique way. Antonietti, Confalonieri, and Marchetti (2014) state, “Although the development of professional identities is an individual process, self-representations are rooted in social experiences, in others’ expectations” (p. 286). Professional identity looks different from person to person and depends on age, gender, social background, experiences, and so on; at the same time, it takes part in the common identity of the group of professionals (Nortvig, 2017).

Each student in Denmark spend a lot of time on campus in classrooms with teacher educators and fellow students, and attention here is paid to both learning how to teach and learning what to teach. The student teachers are usually positioned and/or position themselves as students more than teachers to be, and even when they participate in teaching practice at schools, they work in groups with other students, and they are seldom encouraged to take responsibility for teaching a class alone. Thus, one might be curious about whether the development of an individual professional identity may be challenging not only while working as a new teacher (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) and due to praxis shock (cf. e.g. Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013), but also while the students are on campus.

The present study takes place in a messy, multifaceted, COVID-19-restricted everyday setting where student teachers are to become teachers through a process that is many-sided and difficult to control. Teaching is “much more complex than rocket science” (Laurillard, 2012): Although educators can choose the learning resources and design the learning activities, the learning outcome is always unpredictable (McCarthy, 2018). The best students may quit, and even the most disengaged student teacher may turn out to be one of the most professional. Thus, the research question I try to answer is formulated as follows: How may otherwise uncommitted student teachers experience a sudden and successful development of professional identity? I start by presenting the methodological approach for generating the data. I then analyze the data through lenses of symbolic interactionism. Finally, I discuss and try to generalize the findings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In the study, case study research design, one of the qualitative methods, was adopted. Case study researchers are often concerned with this question (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and contrary to traditional conceptions of quantitative studies, qualitative researchers may argue that a well-chosen case can give a nuanced view of real-life situations and reveal more information than a randomly chosen representative one can (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). Accordingly, an individual context can provide comprehensive and in-depth studies of a particular phenomenon from many angles (Roald & Kjøppe, 2008).

Setting and Participants

Yusuf (nick name) is a young man with short black hair and a well-groomed beard. When he speaks, one can hear that he is bilingual. He likes to keep it a bit cool, preferring to take it easy and make jokes with his friends and the young women in the classroom on campus. During the first semesters, he was not highly engaged in the learning activities; his group always handed in assignments late, and it was clear that the group members did not work diligently to collaborate on quality projects. The three young men often cut the classes, and Yusuf’s groupmates were as disengaged from the learning activities as he was. However, when Yusuf showed up for the final oral examination, he was one of the best performing students. He knew the subject content in detail; his assignment was extremely well written, and he appeared as a professionally reflecting and experienced teacher. The researcher was his educator for more than a year. In this study, based on classroom observations as an evaluation of teaching through learning (McCarthy, 2018), as well as an in-depth interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2010) with Yusuf, the astonishing development of his professional identity was reported.

The participants of the study were composed of 32 students selected via convenience sampling method on voluntary basis for a period of 18 months, and the setting initialized the framing of the research question. The researcher was the internal examiner at the students’ final examination, and she conducted a one hour long in-depth student online interview at the end.

Data Collection Tool and Analysis of the Data

The data that were generated using an observation from in three settings as presented below:

Participant observation is a method that is often used among symbolic interactionism-inspired researchers (Blumer, 1969; Krogstrup & Kristiansen, 2015; Moeran, 2009), and it can be defined as a way for ethnographers to collect data in naturalistic settings, allowing them to observe and take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). The researcher’s role in ethnographic fieldwork can be arrayed on a continuum of degrees of involvement with and detachment from members of the social setting

(Bryman, 2012, p. 410), from complete participation to complete observation with different strengths and weaknesses as consequences. When observation is in focus, it may be more difficult to identify with the members of the social setting and experience the context from these others' position, while a focus on complete participation may challenge the ability to withdraw for a moment and take notes or write down reflections and keep the overall research question in mind. However, by shifting between participation while observing in the classroom setting and observation while participating in the interview, one may focus on maintaining the attention to both inside and outside perspectives.

As a supplement to and discussion of observations in the classroom, Yusuf was invited to participate in an online interview in a Zoom meeting. Because of the month-long COVID-19 restrictions, a lot of our teaching and the final examination took place here; thus, Yusuf was familiar with the setting. Moreover, he was accustomed to meeting with friends and family online, and he felt at home in this video conference ambience; he agreed to meet me here again. As he no longer had anything at stake with me education-wise, the researcher expected him to reflect on my questions and his learning process more freely and independently; however, interview interactions between people always affect the answers and the situation in general. Holstein and Gubrium (2003) highlight that an individual in-depth interview is not a neutral technique or a way to achieve unaffected answers from an interviewee (Tinggaard & Brinkmann, 2010, p. 30). Rather, a research interview should be understood as an interaction between people that leads to socially constructed and negotiated and context-based answers; thus, a researcher's active participation is almost always required.

The generation of data and their final analysis in this article are inspired by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1913, 1934). This theoretical position is concerned with describing the individual and its relation to others; it may also contribute to the analysis through discussions of the development of professional identity. To give a condensed presentation of some central ideas in symbolic interactionism, one might highlight that, according to Cooley (1992 [1902]), the self is not perceived until it is mirrored in others. Thus, a human being's perception of self is the perception of society's evaluation of the person. Cooley (1992 [1902]) defines this so-called looking-glass self as "the imagination of our appearance to the other person, the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (Cooley, 1992, p. 184). Thus, the looking-glass self can be perceived as the result of the interaction between human beings, and Cooley—and later Mead (1934)—understands the evaluation of self as a never-ending process where one always sees oneself as through the eyes of the other. This self-ing process (Robinson, 2007) recalls the Meadian coupling of I/me, where one is aware of the self while also being aware of the self as an object for one's gaze.

RESULTS

Below, the findings are presented based on the classroom observations and interviews. Utilizing a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 1994, 1995; Strauss, 1997), the data were coded, and categories were created during this process. The categories were then grouped and arranged in relation to the development of professional teacher identity, and a pattern of liberation process (Cross, 1971) appeared.

Pre-encounter: Being a lazy student teacher

For three semesters, 32 student teachers were taught by the researcher and another instructor. The students aimed to become teachers in religious education (RE). In Denmark, educated teachers usually have competencies to teach four subjects, so for this group of students, RE was one subject among several others. The subject of RE in teacher education in Denmark is preoccupied with world religions—with a bigger part of the time devoted to Christianity (74% of Danish people are members of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church). Moreover, RE is concerned with philosophy, ethics, religious and atheist beliefs and worldviews, and didactics and pedagogy in relation to teaching of these subjects. The students are introduced to both theory and practical methods in teaching RE, and they are encouraged to try them out for themselves and with the students in teaching practice.

In teacher education, students are usually encouraged to work in groups to collaborate, discuss, and reflect on the learning material and their experiences from practice, help each other, provide feedback, and so on (Fung & Lui, 2016; Larrain et al., 2018). However, groupwork can be a struggle for students if they are not interested in listening to other students' ideas (Ramsaroop & Petersen, 2020) or if they feel that they must take too much responsibility for the group. When Yusuf initially tries to explain how he would describe his development from the beginning of his studies to the present day, he says:

In the beginning, me and the other guys, we were like "let's take it slow—no stress." Some took it easy during all the modules... I pulled myself together in the end. But to begin with, it was like vacation in my head.

Being a member of a well-known group can be safe and easy, but even the best vacation must end one day, and this can be a good thing. Because the group members might also be among a person's friends, and they can all be a part of the same social environment, it is natural to see the group members as significant others (Mead, 1934), and accordingly, to mirror one's actions in their eyes. Yusuf highlights this as follows:

The others reflected and discussed, but I was the one doing the writing of it [the assignments]. It depends on the group how you can display your professional competencies and show what you are able to do. And that is a crucial factor. As a student, you can't just leave your group. You have common friends, education, subjects; you can't just tear yourself free.

Yusuf's group consisted of three young men who often went to the canteen to take a break when groupwork on campus was initiated as a common learning activity, and in the plenum discussions afterwards, they were accordingly silent. During the interview, Yusuf explains why groupwork is not always beneficial for all group members:

In our group, I did all the work. We always waited until the last moment. I wanted to give the others a chance to work too. But we always did it at the last moment, so the result was sloppy.

Later, he elaborates on how he imagines how he would potentially be judged in the eyes of the others if he were to leave the group:

Your surroundings affect you 100%—people in your group. Once you are in a study group, then it is not something you can leave. It has to do with your reputation too: "He just left our group because he is... he is a nerd." There can be a lot of bad talk, slander.

Yusuf understands "a nerd" as a student teacher who studies very hard, and in this case, strives to become a teacher. However, in Yusuf's group, it appears that it is better to be a lazy student and let the vacation continue. Accepting being a nerd would mean that the young person is on the point of leaving an identity as student and the group membership this implies. According to Stone (2009), identity is a movement between inclusions and exclusions from different groups; thus, shifting from a student identity to a teacher identity means that one must exclude oneself from the study group if the members are not following the same trajectory for professional identity development. This exclusion might be difficult, and as Yusuf frames it, "I think it would have been better if I had just been in a group with myself." This would have prevented him from needing to actively exclude himself from the group:

In the beginning, you think you can take it slow. But it becomes a dangerous habit. You do everything in the lazy way. It is difficult to break free. It happened to the others in my group: They are stuck, and they cannot get out of what they have built around themselves.

During the interview, Yusuf mirrors his former self and judges and reflects on his attitude toward his studies and his way of becoming a teacher. He frames it as follows: "In the beginning, I was very lazy, but the closer you get to the final examination, the more pressure you feel on your shoulders. [I realized that I had to study] all the stuff that I will need to know in my work as a teacher." Yusuf felt the student identity was challenged by the demand for a teacher identity to develop, and when the final examination was getting closer, two important things happened: He left the group to write the exam paper on his own, and he was hired as a substitute teacher at a public school nearby.

Encounter: Being a substitute teacher

When I ask Yusuf how he sees his transformation from lazy teacher student to where he is today, he highlights the job as a substitute teacher:

My job as a substitute teacher has had a huge effect on my studies! When I am a substitute teacher, I take over the teacher's lessons for a whole day. One day, I took over for an RE teacher who had not prepared anything for me to take over. Then I had to be creative and design the lessons myself... But when I entered the classroom and started teaching, I thought: Oh my God, I have made the right choice [to become an RE teacher]! I just found it so exciting, and I really enjoyed telling the stories and myths to the students...

During teacher education in Denmark, the students are in teaching practice at primary and lower secondary schools for several months, and they have to plan and teach the children while working in groups. Thus, the student teachers must negotiate their designs for learning and agree on the distribution of responsibility for specific teaching sequences and other matters:

In teacher education, during teaching practice, we are always in groups... It is completely different when you are alone in the classroom! When you are on your own... it is here you become... it is here you "get dressed" as a teacher!

Yusuf can point out almost the exact time and date of the moment he realizes that becoming an RE teacher is the right choice for him. In the classroom as the sole instructor, he takes over the role of professional teacher, and he feels that the role fits him. He steps into the role, tries out his ideas, and has the opportunity to encounter his way of being a teacher.

Mead (1934) defines participation in interaction with others as a distinction between game and play. He explains that the child learns what it may be like to be a mother by playing the role of mother, or the child may take on the role of a dog to experience the world as through the eyes of a family pet. The play is negotiated between the participating children, and the same sequence can be played many times if they choose to do so. Actions can be changed, roles can be switched the next day, and only imagination sets the limits. The context for a game is different: The rules in football are not to be discussed or changed. To participate in a game is to accept the rules.

To Yusuf, acting as a teacher during teacher practice recalls the Meadian concept of play: The actions in the classroom are planned in the study group before they are performed in the class, and if something goes wrong, the performance or activities can be evaluated and maybe redesigned and tried out in another class again. Nothing counts as real; there is always another to step in and take over if something goes wrong. However, contrary to Mead's understanding of the concept, individual teacher students cannot play or experiment with their individual way of being teachers because the study group's participants are allowed to play too, and the role must be negotiated accordingly:

In teacher practice, you are to plan everything together, and everybody has their own opinion of what would be a good thing to do. This is negative because you cannot try out your own thoughts about being a teacher. If the others want otherwise, you respect democracy.

Only when forced to act as a "real" teacher in the role of a substitute teacher is it possible to try out if Yusuf's way of being a teacher is compatible with the "game." Alone in the classroom, Yusuf realizes that he masters the rules for the game and that he is to be a professional part of it someday.

Commitment: Becoming a teacher

For the three semesters my colleague and I taught the RE students, Yusuf and his study group always handed in their assignments late, and they were never well written. Even if the group had split up, and Yusuf were to write on his own, I expected Yusuf's exam paper to be mediocre. Individual guidance is offered to the students both in connection to exam papers and continuously during the semester, but Yusuf chose to write without consulting me for more than five minutes during a coffee break. However, when I read Yusuf's exam paper, I was surprised: It was well written and interesting; topics and concepts were used with precision and relevance; and the didactic principles and method were genuinely presented, reflected, and used in the description of a learning design for children in a public school.

The COVID-19 restrictions in Denmark in December 2020 prohibited physical attendance on campus, so the oral examination took place in an online web conference (via Zoom meeting). Yusuf did not appear nervous; he offered very good performance that corresponded in quality to the written paper. He received an A as his final grade in RE. This was important to him and his way of seeing himself as a teacher, as illustrated in the following comment: "I would like to pass this exam and to get on... If I failed, I would think that I was no good in RE after all." Even if he had studied hard and had experienced being a teacher who knows the rules for and the game of RE teaching, a failed exam would have made him change this view of himself.

During the interview, Yusuf comments on the online examination as follows: "The situation [the oral examination] was a pleasant one. Pleasant and calm. I was very well prepared." Later, he elaborates:

It didn't feel like an examination. As a young person, you are used to having fun and pleasant talks in there [online web conferences]. This was not like an examination where you wait outside the classroom, talk to the others, and feel nervous. Now you are at home; that was very different.

A dominant category in the interview with Yusuf is the role of contextual space. According to Yusuf, campus is an educational space that calls for groupwork and student-like (maybe even lazy) behavior, whereas the school where Yusuf works as a substitute teacher is a space that calls for "real" teacher performance. In the middle of these two spaces is the teacher practice school, which is usually influenced by teacher education activities, such as groupwork with other students. The fourth space that emerges in the data is the online space of the oral examination in RE. This space is physically located at Yusuf's home, although the definition of the situation (Goffman, 1959) is that of a traditional examination. Even if Yusuf, the external examiner and I agreed on the definition of the situation, the safe space of home plays a role in the definition too.

An online space is always connected to at least one physical space, and as Dourish puts it (2006, p. 304): the technologically mediated world does not stand apart from the physical world within which it is embedded; rather, it provides a new set of ways for that physical world to be understood and appropriated. Technological mediation supports and conditions the emergence of new cultural practices, not by creating a distinct sphere of practice but by opening up new forms of practice within the everyday world, reflecting and conditioning the emergence of new forms of environmental knowing.

Other researchers agree that an impersonal online space, such as a video conference, can be transformed into a personal and meaningful place: "A space becomes a place when meanings, constructed through social interaction, cultural identities and personal involvement are supported and embedded into the environment" (Wahlstedt et al., 2008, p. 1024).

Outside campus settings in the online conference, Yusuf appears to feel free from the former role as lazy student in a study group. Online—at home—he is free to act as a serious "nerd" student teacher without seeing himself through the eyes of the group. Moreover, he can relate to his individual RE studies, and he is able to reflect as a teacher because of his experiences as a substitute teacher. Both teaching practice and space, especially a safe space, are important contextual settings for the successful development of professional identity (cf. Toman & Thifault, 2012); likewise, the safe space is important if the student is to speak, reflect and perform as a teacher-to-be (Nortvig, 2018).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some researchers in the field of symbolic interactionism (e.g., Davis, 1968; Haas & Shaffir, 1982; Shaffir & Pawluch, 2003) highlight that, in the transition from student to professional, a moral and symbolic transformation from layman to professional is simultaneously taking place. This is clear in the Yusuf case: Having left the group, he is allowed to be a nerd, and he can act as a teacher in his way alone in a classroom; he can feel “dressed like a teacher” and explore the rules for this game (Goffman, 1959).

My research question for the present study was how an otherwise uncommitted student teacher could experience and explain a sudden and successful development of professional identity. What I have found from the classroom teaching and reflections, participation in the examination, and the final interview is summarized below.

Yusuf framed the transformation process from being a student to becoming a teacher as a liberation from a specific study group because this context for working and studying allowed his looking-glass self (Cooley, 1992; Scheff, 2005) to be mirrored only by his fellow students and not, for example, by teachers at a school or by pupils. The physical context also played an important role in the transformation process. On-campus activities called for student behavior, while the online setting at home and in school liberated him and established an opportunity for individual reflection and acting like a teacher-to-be.

The transformation process was also a liberation from groupwork in general. In teacher education, groups are the basis for a large part of the learning activities. There is significant learning potential in group collaboration, and much research would plead for education to be based on groups, for instance, in problem-based learning, project-focused learning, and the like. However, when a professional education aims to encourage and support the students in their development of professional identity, the groups that the students are to participate in could advantageously be evaluated according to how well they support such development. Finally, student teachers should also be encouraged to work individually. If an individual professional identity is to be developed, contexts where this is in focus should also be highlighted. This could be done, for instance, by leaving the students alone in the classroom during teacher practice and allowing to play the role of a teacher and experiment before becoming one for real.

Reusing Cross' (1971) terminology for a liberation process, Yusuf might be seen to follow the same development from the pre-encounter that is dominated by lacking the status not only of teacher but also that of serious student (“nerd”). Encounter is reached when Yusuf takes over the RE teacher's lessons one specific day at a school. Here, he sees that he can take on the status and role of a real teacher, and he has a personal way of being a teacher. Finally, Yusuf experiences the commitment stage in the development of professional identity when he enters the online web conference at home, feeling free to express his teacher knowledge and individual professional reflections during the oral examination. This setting does not connote campus teaching and student behavior, but rather, a space for and an opportunity to imagine and try out his persona as a teacher-to-be. As Yusuf's educator, I found this a surprising transformation; however, to him, this development of a professional identity at almost the last minute was explained by Yusuf's self-description as “a responsible lazy person.”

FURTHER RESEARCH

Yusuf's case may be labeled extreme (Flyvbjerg, 2010), but it suggests that, in educational settings and contexts, groupwork can prevent students from starting to develop an individual professional identity while they are studying to become teachers. Further research is needed to determine whether this is true for a bigger proportion of students in teacher education or other educations, whether educational contexts can be created to support the development of an individual professional identity among students while they are students, or whether this is only possible in an authentic school setting when employed as a teacher or teacher substitute.

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