

A longitudinal study of the development of the professional identity of student teachers

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Summary

The development of teachers' professional identity has been defined as "an on-going and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences" that have been influenced by personal, social and cognitive factors (Flores & Day, 2006).

From the viewpoint that identity consists of meanings formed from moments and situations with relevance for the individual and by being hierarchically organised from the individual's self-conception (Haamer, 2012), student teachers can be viewed as "developing selves", gradually developing an understanding of one's professional self, based on interactions with significant others and the environment (Lauriala & Kukkonen, 2005).

In the current paper, based on interviews ($N = 13$) carried out at the end of a longitudinal study, we present an overview of the development of the professional identity of student teachers who have finished a five-year long teacher training programme. The aim of the study was to examine the meanings and beliefs behind student teachers' teacher-identity formed in interaction with the surrounding environments, including the experiences from their studies at university. As memory enhancers, we used metaphors that the students had used during their studies, and also data from earlier data collections. In the current paper we try to answer the following questions: How do students who have finished their teacher training studies interpret their teacher identity formation throughout their studies? What kind of teacher identity do student teachers wish to strive toward based on their perception of the ideal teacher? Which factors during the training period have influenced student teachers' conceptions the most?

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We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine the interview data and the model by Beijaard, Verloop and Vermunt (2000) to analyse the metaphors. The model entails foundations for the formation of teachers' professional identity by teachers' conceptions of themselves as either subject matter experts, pedagogical experts, or didactical experts (usually combining those three). In order to gain a better overview of within-group differences and similarities in development, we used cluster analysis based on the Euclidean distance.

It appears from the interviews that subjects reported naïve conceptions of teaching while entering the teacher education programme, relying mostly on their personal school experience. In their descriptions of ideal teachers, those learning to become subject teachers, mostly stressed aspects associated with the subject matter and teaching the subject matter, whereas future class-teachers were more focused on relationships with pupils and the learning process as a whole. The ideal for a subject teacher was a well-respected teacher, looked up to by the pupils. The ideal for a class-teacher was an energetic, happy and flexible person who would serve as a good role-model for the children. Interview subjects associated the image of an ideal teacher first and foremost with the classroom and only two of the student teachers incorporated expectations toward co-workers and the school as an organisation into their teacher ideal.

Student teachers' ideals have been influenced by their previous teachers as role-models, images of ideal situations, where one wishes to find oneself in the future as well as common understandings of the norms and expectations put on a teacher. Evaluations of the distances between the current self and the ideal self differed by between four and eight points on a ten-point scale. The closest to their ideal self according to their self-report were the students who also reported the highest self-efficacy scores in the group.

When comparing metaphors given by the student teachers at the beginning and at the end of their studies, we found that the conception of a teacher's role has become more diverse. The number of one-dimensional metaphors had decreased, whereas the number of hybrid metaphors had gone up. The changes apparent in the metaphors coincide with the interviews, as all the subjects reported that their views had changed during their studies. The student teachers asserted that the metaphors from their bachelor-years to a large extent reflected their personal experience as school children and their ideal teachers as well as the focus on subject matter training during their first years as students. The changes are evident in master-level students' conceptions about the role of the

teacher and hence also the metaphors are accounted for by a clarified understanding of teacher's role during the subjects of teacher education as well as the influence of the pedagogical practice. Based on the interviews, it can be said that stressing the importance of pedagogical expertise in most of the metaphors can be accounted for by the content of the teacher training courses. In accordance with earlier studies, pedagogical practice has the most important role to play in the formation of the identity of the future teacher.

Comparing the results from the cluster analysis and the interviews, it appeared that certain attributes of our research subjects seemed to occur as repeating patterns, from which four profiles of teacher identity formation emerged: *the self-efficacious*, *the experienced realists*, *the identity-searchers*, and *the doubtful*. These clusters embody different teacher identities and it is important to understand these because novice teachers consequently enter the profession with different orientations. The orientations will require different support, especially the identity-searchers and the doubtful.

Based on interviews, we can say that people entering the teacher education programme represent different backgrounds and motives. Some have very explicit goals of becoming a teacher already at the very beginning, others have started with different subjects at university and entered the teacher education programme only later either by chance or through rational considerations (need for a profession, easier curriculum, secure job and pay, etc.). As development and change occurs mainly through self-awareness and self-knowledge, more attention toward self-reflection abilities as well as the skills necessary to analyse one's conceptions, beliefs and competencies will help support the formation of a more adequate image future teachers have of themselves and also to notice one's possibilities for development. Hence, guiding future teachers toward a more conscious and informed analysis of their professional identity should be one of the aspects stressed more in teacher education.

Keywords: teacher education, identity, professional identity