

**'Choosing some teacher cardigans':
Teacher identity in year one of an
undergraduate early years teacher
education programme**

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Abstract

This study of a group of first year undergraduate student teachers seeks to explore the development of their professional identity as beginner teachers during the initial stages of their three-year programme. The stimulus for the study was an apparent struggle students experienced with their development of a learner identity in Higher Education, alongside visualising themselves as teachers operating in the classroom. Questionnaires and naturally occurring data linked to a module involving reflection and developing agency as a learner, were collated and analysed using a grounded theory approach. Interviews were analysed using Atlas ti and codes used to identify emerging themes. Findings indicated that it is important to discuss teacher identity in the context of existing identities students demonstrate as these are challenged on the journey to becoming a teacher. Initially, students focus on their outward appearance, hence the title 'choosing some teacher cardigans', as they emphasise the importance of looking like a teacher, at this stage of their identity development. The complexity of this journey is apparent, as is the need to examine identity development as an integral part of Initial Teacher Education.

Keywords

Identity; student teacher; placement; school; concept builder.

Background

The focus of this paper is how first year student teachers begin to develop a professional teacher identity. The context for this study is a three-year undergraduate BA (Hons) Early Years Education degree with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) in a newly established English University. The programme is recently validated and the students are the first cohort studying on this degree, although a similar programme has been in operation since 2008.

The area of teacher identity outlined in this paper formed a small part of a wider team action research study: 'Developing students, developing staff' and arose from a staff team concern around transition into higher education and the mismatch of student and staff expectations across all early years programmes. Staff expected students to develop agency and organisation, whereas students expected to be 'spoon-fed' and have more direction in their use of time and resources. Increasingly, students commented on the challenges faced in reading and researching independently and expected a much more transmissive mode of learning in face to face sessions, indicating difficulties in establishing a learner identity.

It was these concerns that initiated this action research, including issues that students were having in what Wenger (1998) describes as 'crossing the boundary', moving from a school based community into multiple, overlapping 'communities of practice'. For this group of students these include being members of an early years cohort, a wider student group and a student teacher

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community, situated within a specific school context. Each community has different expectations, rules and knowledge associated with them, which students need to assimilate to be successful. During this 'crossing of boundaries', identity is challenged, beliefs and values questioned and potentially developed. In the school context this means that student teachers need to develop what can be termed a 'teacher identity', the focus for this paper.

The university in this research is founded on the 'widening participation agenda' (HEFCE, 2006). The on-entry for 2010 data indicated a proportion of students could be described as what Leese (2010) refers to as 'new students', namely first generation engaging in higher education, including mature students (15%) and a number of local students who choose to reside at home (33%). It could be argued that these 'new' students face greater challenges in meeting expectations of HE (Biggs and Tang, 2007) and require a different approach from tutors from the traditional types of practice. The staff tutor team were keen to develop their practice in order to meet the needs of these students. They wanted to identify appropriate approaches to support student learning, underpinned by their beliefs in social constructivism and the theories of Vygostky and Bruner (Smidt, 2010, 2011). Staff therefore, looked to provide opportunities for students to engage in group problem solving and discussion, peer review and reflection, in order for students to be involved in the construction of their own learning.

Literature Review

Learning to teach is a complex process involving the examination of personal values and beliefs as well as subject knowledge and pedagogical practices. This notion that belief systems and identity are inextricably linked is noted by Twiselton (2007:500) as she posits 'how teachers conceive their role is synonymous with why they believe they are in the classroom.' In order to teach successfully, it can be argued that student teachers need to develop a sense of what it is to be a teacher and a teacher identity (Chong, 2011). Indeed as Sachs (2005:15) notes;

'Teacher professional identity then stands at the core of the teaching profession. It provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. Importantly, teacher identity is not something that is fixed nor is it imposed: rather it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience.'

If we ascribe to this view, that identity is fundamental to being a successful teacher, then it is an area which is worthy of attention in ITE programmes, as identified by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009). A key aspect of the study being reported here was that there was an overt attempt to bring this idea of teacher identity to the fore for ITE students; to explicitly engage them in examining their own identity and identity development. The aim was to enable them to develop as practitioners with a sense of beginning teacher identity but with an awareness that this would need to be examined regularly through reflection.

An aim of the programme in which this research is situated is that student teachers become reflective professionals, capable of analysis and critique, as well as facilitators of learning in the early years setting. Our hope is that they become capable of independent thought, rather than unquestioningly accepting and implementing change. In order to achieve this, it could be suggested they need to be secure in their own values and beliefs about education and their identity as a teacher in the twenty-first century, to be what Twiselton (2007) describes as a 'concept builder' capable of understanding the concepts needed for children to become successful, proficient learners. This is the ideal, rather than the other two categories which she

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describes prior to this category; she argues that students may move through categories of 'task manager' i.e. having a specific product oriented approach rather than a focus on learning, and 'curriculum deliverer' or those who see learning situated within a 'given' curriculum, rather than seeing learning as the development of conceptual thinking. Part of this research was to examine whether, in terms of identity development, students moved through these categories or whether they viewed their teacher identity development as a more holistic, conceptual process. Twiselton's research (2007) was based on students' teaching of English at a time of significant curriculum change and very specifically focused on their development relating to this subject area. This process of possible movement through her categories resonated with our programme aims. We wondered if it might have a broader application in students' overall development of identity and therefore it became a lens through which we analysed and categorised our data. It could be suggested that these categories link with themes identified in the literature surrounding identity development. The idea that identity will be managed through a series of tasks could link to the notion of 'agency' (Danielewicz, 2001). Whereas seeing identity in a wider sense could link to the idea of 'context' and the belief that identity is ever changing could link with the belief that reflection is significant in identity development. The theme of identity being fluid, changing, evolving and impacted upon by a range of factors is evident throughout the literature (Watson, 2006; Chong, 2011) and indicates the complexity of identity formation for more experienced teachers (Nias, 1989), let alone student teachers at the beginning of their teacher identity development. As Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) highlight, this shifting identity is frequently career long, involving constant 'reinvention' of self in order to cope with changing contexts and roles, in what Maclure (1993: 313) describes as a 'continuing site of struggle'. This is supported by Flores and Day (2006: 220) who explain identity as 'an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re) interpretation of one's own values and experiences... the (trans) formation of the teacher identity.'

From the literature cited in Beauchamp and Thomas (2009), it is evident there are a number of interrelated factors which impact on teacher identity development. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) refer to the significance of stories and experiences, which students bring with them and develop further. Hargreaves (2001) highlights emotion as a powerful influencing factor in the process of creating a teacher identity. Whilst Luttenberg and Bergen (2008) suggest that, through reflection on practice, identity will be shaped as students reflect on personal values about what is good for children. Additionally, contextual factors, such as fitting into the school environment and the nature of the children and the influence of school based colleagues, all impact the development of teacher identity (Smagorinsky et al., 2004). Day et al., (2006) refer to a sense of agency, which empowers teachers to move ideas forward and possibly transform the context within which they work and thus further impact on identity. Finally, Lauriala and Kukkonen (2005) discuss the importance of 'self' in terms of current identity, an externally mediated identity and a longer-term ideal self-identity or the type of teacher they aim to be. These studies, however, focused on the development of teacher identity at the point of entry into the profession, whereas the focus for this study is the beginning of initial teacher education, pre-profession stage. If, as Hammerness et al (2005:383) note, 'developing an identity as a teacher is an important part of securing teachers' commitment to their work and adherence to professional norms' then it is worthy of attention and further exploration during an ITE programme. The multiple factors outlined need to be examined as part of student teachers' on-going development in relation to exposing and reflecting on identity development.

Aims and research question

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As noted above, the main aim of this aspect of the research was to explore first year student teacher's developing professional identity and experiences, which support this development. As teacher educators with an awareness of Twiselton's categories (2007) of task manager, curriculum deliver and concept builder; the key questions we wished to explore were:

- Did students move through these categories as learners themselves in developing a teacher identity?
- Did these relatively young pre professionals have a sense of their identity as a teacher?
- What were the key influencing factors, which impacted on this?
- Did beginning as a student teacher make students engage with an examination of themselves?

Research Design

The research reported here is action research, 'developed to investigate and solve a problem or issue' (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006); in this instance the notion of developing identity in student teachers. An interpretivist approach to research was deemed to be appropriate as the project emerged from a collective desire among university staff to support their students and a view that developing a dialogue would enable better understanding in the future. Linked closely to the notion of constructing learning, interpreting qualitative data in the form of interviews, questionnaires and analysis of naturally occurring data best suited the needs of the project. It enabled us to draw responses from the students, allowing staff reflection and discussion around the findings.

Cohen et al., (2007:78) acknowledge 'there is no single blueprint for planning research. Research design is governed by the notion of 'fitness for purpose'. The purposes of the research determine the methodology and design of the research'. With this in mind, data collection methods evolved as the project progressed and findings were analysed. Validity and reliability issues were considered and triangulation of data sources used where possible.

Methods

Initially, we planned data collection in the form of interviews and questionnaires. We identified naturally occurring data: student reflections and discussions from lectures, seminars and taught module sessions. The interviews and questionnaires took place prior to students' first three-week placement experience in schools. QTS student data from one campus was singled out for collection and analysis for this initial paper. To ensure anonymity, seven students were interviewed from a campus group of twenty-seven by a research assistant from outside the team. This process minimised issues associated with the student/tutor relationship, providing more reliable, valid data. The interviews, once transcribed, provided a rich data source.

Following placement, a reflective grid entitled 'feeling like a teacher in the making' asked the students, during a university session, to comment on the way their experiences supported their feelings of teacher identity. Students were asked to reflect on their identity as beginning teachers before university, during placement and then post placement. This produced large quantities of raw data and decisions on how best to sort, order and analyse this were complex. We decided to use a grounded theory approach, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (cited in Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is a method of analysing qualitative data by coding the information gathered into emerging themes, which are revisited and rearranged until no new themes emerge. The theory emerges from the data: 'grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998:12). We believed that this enabled us to approach the analysis

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with greater objectivity. Data analysis of the seven interviews was undertaken using Atlas ti and codes were used to collate emerging themes. Additional coding of the reflective grids allowed for triangulation of the data, giving credence to any conclusions drawn (Cohen et al., 2007).

Ethical issues regarding student participation, privacy and anonymity were carefully considered and followed university guidelines. The project and rationale were explained to students, permissions sought and it was made clear to students that they could withdraw at any time. Clearance from the university ethics committee was obtained. In terms of the naturally occurring data to be used for research purposes, this was made clear to the students so that they could withhold it from the study if necessary.

Findings

For the purposes of this paper, analysis focuses on the seven QTS interviews and the twenty-seven 'Feeling like a teacher' grids. The significant issue that appeared to be emerging centred on the initial struggle for students in developing a learner identity in HE, as well as a teacher identity. The importance of placement in developing this teacher identity was crucial. The perceptions of others, based on the student's outward appearance, looking and acting like a teacher seemed to be important. Positive, supportive experiences on placement enabled students to grow in confidence and feel more like a teacher.

Interviews pre-placement

When asked the question 'to what extent do you feel like a beginner teacher?' student responses focussed on the importance of placement as the key context in which they would feel like a beginner teacher. The majority of students referred to the fact that they felt more like beginner learners in HE rather than beginner teachers.

'Oh gosh. I don't even feel like a beginner student at the moment'
(QTS Interview, 4).

'I feel more like a learner now because I haven't been on placement yet, but as soon as I get on placement I think I'll feel like a proper student teacher'
(QTS Interview, 6).

'I think when I start placement I'll probably feel more like a beginner teacher'
(QTS Interview, 1).

At this point in their development students appeared to be struggling with their identity as a learner in HE and were predicting placement would enable them to develop a teacher identity. In terms of Twiselton's categories (2007), student responses demonstrated a variety of approaches to management of their learning and development. Two students indicated that it was important for them to manage their learning and progression on the programme in order to gain the qualification. This would indicate their professional standing to others.

'I want to get the status'
(QTS Interview, 6).

'I'm very focussed by results.... I'm very driven by results... There's nothing wrong with being driven by getting good grades'
(QTS Interview, 5).

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It could be suggested that the above responses indicate at this point that these students are motivated by outcomes and as such could be termed 'task managers' (Twiselton, 2007), driven by a sense of agency.

Overall, from the interviews, there was little evidence of student identity developing in relation to curriculum delivery (Twiselton, 2007). One student outlined how her ideas about children's learning were being challenged through University sessions. Perceptions about how the curriculum works were being exposed and beliefs about acceptable practice challenged. This seems to show that the student was moving beyond beliefs about managing tasks to seeing the curriculum as a more holistic experience for children.

'I enjoyed the dancing dressing up one. That was interesting to see how you can use music to sort of teach children about other things. You don't always have to be sitting in front of a desk and dictating stuff to them'

(QTS Interview, 2).

One student in particular demonstrated a more reflective approach throughout the interview. It could be argued this student was making clear links between previous experiences with children, university presented material and their own developing pedagogy.

'I'm really interested in learning through play. I love that... last year I went to Sweden to a kindergarten and basically they just had play. They don't go to sit down at desks and study until they are six.... They were learning, they were playing and learning. I learned loads.... I believe a lot that children learn through playing. I think that's a very vital thing'

(QTS Interview, 6).

'Feeling like a teacher in the making grid' post-placement task

Analysis of these grids supports the notion that placement is the key factor in developing teacher identity for ITE students. The reflections on the grids seem to indicate that prior to placement students were concerned with their outward appearance, in that they felt they needed to look like a teacher.

'I had to get some teacher cardigans'

(Student ,A).

'I dressed like a professional'

(Student ,B).

Students realised that, as professionals there were expectations about their own knowledge and behaviour that would need to be addressed.

'...more careful with my actions and language'

(Student ,C).

'Still feel as though more knowledge is needed'

(Student, D).

'I am more careful when I go out and things that I put on social networks'

(Student, E).

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Retrospectively, students commented on their concerns prior to placement regarding their ability to operate in the teacher role.

'Still feel I am not ready to teach a class'
(Student, D).

'Doubting myself, questioning whether I was good enough'
(Student ,F).

'I have a bit more knowledge but was still nervous – didn't really feel like a teacher yet'
(Student ,G).

Students acknowledge that during placement their teacher identity developed more significantly than on entry or during university placement preparation. What appears to be significant was taking on the role of the teacher and being treated like a teacher by other members of staff and the children.

'I started to feel a bit more like a teacher as I was given more responsibility and could see myself in the setting'
(Student, H).

'I felt like a teacher on placement. I felt very confident and I think that this showed in my performance'
(Student, E).

'... as children call you Miss and ask for help you feel more like a teacher'
(Student ,I).

'I loved placement and it made me feel like I could really be a good teacher when I was on placement. The teachers at the placement made us welcome and told me to act as if I was a teacher so this made me feel more like a teacher'
(Student, J).

It was apparent from responses, where students had positive experiences in school their confidence had grown and consequently they felt more like a teacher. Trustworthy, responsible, reliable, being a role model, knowledgeable, confident are all words used by the students to express their development as a teacher.

Discussion

In terms of exploring first year student teacher's developing professional identity and identification of the experiences which support this development, the findings would seem to suggest a dual identity battle exists between HE learner and teacher identity. They are challenged on two fronts, trying to make sense of their experiences in two contexts, switching roles between the self as a learner in HE and the teacher role in supporting children as learners. Maclure's (1993) 'continuing site of struggle' would seem to be an appropriate description of the process, coupled with the constant 'reinvention' of self, noted by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009).

These initial findings suggest that placement is viewed by the students as the key learning experience which will, and does, impact on their developing teacher identity. This group of students reported a positive impact on viewing themselves as teachers, through engagement in placements, where they were enabled to take on the holistic role of 'teacher', alongside being treated as a teacher by staff and children. Where schools allowed them to be referred to as Mr, Mrs or Miss, this appeared to be significant in developing a teacher identity. Taking on the whole role of the teacher gives a breadth of experience to support student's developing ideas of 'how to

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be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' (Sachs, 2005). Linked to this idea of being addressed in an appropriate way, a number of students highlighted the need to also have the outward appearance of a teacher, such as dressing like a teacher. They made comments such as: 'I had to get some teacher cardigans' and 'I dressed like a professional.' This would seem to imply the importance of fitting in with the expectations of society in terms of what a teacher should look like. Additionally, evidence relating to whether these relatively young pre professionals have a sense of their identity as a teacher, suggests that for this group, there was a sense of confidence around working in the classroom prior to placement. A number had extensive experience of working in settings on previous childcare courses and data seemed to indicate confidence in the classroom. However, this was not necessarily related to teacher identity, as they also reported feeling 'worried', 'unsure', 'nervous' and 'unprepared' for taking on the teacher role, or 'not feeling like a teacher'. This illustrates the complexity of the ongoing process of developing an identity as a beginner teacher as noted by Flores and Day (2006). As teacher educators we need to be aware of this and actively support student engagement in this dynamic process. As the literature indicates the process is on-going, fluid as well as involving constant transformation and reinvention of self, for more experienced teachers (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009; Flores and Day, 2006; Nias, 1989). It could be argued this is even more challenging for those at the beginning of their journey towards being a teacher, as their identity at this point is very fragile. As noted above, for this group, the strongest influencing factor impacting on their developing teacher identity was placement; specifically, a placement which placed trust in them as a beginner teacher, where they were allowed to demonstrate responsibility, reliability and being a positive role model. This type of placement then supported the students in developing knowledge and confidence in their ability as teachers. The research seems to imply that beginning as a student teacher does make students engage with an examination of themselves as a learner and teacher.

Regarding Twiselton's categories (2007) we acknowledge that the links are less clear or relevant to the themes emerging from the data. However, the data would seem to suggest that initially some students do demonstrate the characteristics related to being a task manager, in that they are motivated by outcomes, rather than viewing identity development in a more holistic sense. As ideas were challenged through university sessions, some students seemed to move towards seeing the curriculum in a more holistic sense (curriculum deliverers), while others, from the outset, exhibited a more complex vision relating to concept building around their own identity development and the developing relationship between pedagogy, practice and self.

As teacher educators working directly with these students, the examination of their teacher identity has enabled a dialogue with students to be established. Conducting the research has raised our awareness of the complexity of their identity development and enabled us to support and tailor learning directly to their needs. We acknowledge that this might be different for each group of students and is therefore a limitation of the study. Whilst it would appear to be important to expose the process of identity development during ITE, generalisations should not be made, as developments must be designed with individual groups in mind. We acknowledge that the data is limited due to the small number of students involved; however, it could be argued that the process is an important part of securing future commitment to their work (Hammerness et al., 2005).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this process of exposing teacher identity as an explicit component of ITE enables student values and beliefs to be surfaced, discussed, challenged and developed. It is important to

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recognise that students already have an identity about themselves as a teacher which we need to acknowledge and develop through programme activity. Through this process, identity change is inevitable and students can be supported in a journey which is complex, messy and fluid. At a time where identity is very fragile, students need emotional and academic support in order to develop a stronger identity that is accepting of change. Therefore we should be more explicit in creating an on-going dialogue around the idea of developing teacher identity, ensuring University and placement experiences are intertwined and cohesive. This exposure and discussion, regarding identity, will continue as part of the on-going dialogue and data collection, as we support this group of students developing teacher identity, throughout the rest of their course. We consider it important to maintain this process of identity examination in order to develop thoughtful, reflective teachers.

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