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Constructing configurations to capture the complexity and uniqueness of beginning teachers' professional identity

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the complexity and uniqueness of 45 beginning teachers' professional identity, an important perspective that is usually not an explicit part of induction programmes. Data were collected in four workshops designed to support beginning teachers in reflecting on personal and contextual aspects that influence (the development of) their professional identity. Based on these reflections, portraits of each teacher were constructed. Five overarching identity themes emerged from these portraits: Classroom management, Students learning, Workload, Collaboration and Standing up for oneself. All themes were visualised into a configuration consisting of personal and contextual aspects, arranged according to three foci: focus on oneself, on students, and on team/organisation. The configurations differ in their magnitude but do justice to the unique and complex nature of each teacher. Constructing configurations is a promising way for understanding what really matters in beginning teachers' professional identity development and helping them deepen their reflection.

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on aspects that played a relevant role in the development of beginning teachers' professional identity as part of a three-year lasting induction programme in the Netherlands. The Netherlands has no mandated structures or programmes for the induction of beginning teachers. Nevertheless, all schools provide some kind of induction for beginning teachers, varying from very limited such as familiarising them with the ins and outs of the school and helping with questions, to very extensive with, for example, an extensive mentoring programme and systems of peer support (Kessels 2010). With governmental support, induction programmes have become increasingly common in the Netherlands over the last decade (Helms-Lorenz et al. 2020). In line with this national initiative, a programme was designed that consisted of several professional development activities next to measures taken by schools that support beginning teachers' well-being and growth into the profession (cf. Feiman-Nemser 2012; Ingersoll and Strong 2011). Induction programmes often attend to rather 'general' teaching deficiencies in coping

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with a challenging context within one school (i.e. coaching the beginning teachers to increase their teaching skills and support their social-emotional well-being) (Beijaard, Buitink, and Kessels 2010; Britton et al. 2003; Kelchtermans 2019). The identity perspective taken within this study implies a different theoretical and practical approach in coaching beginning teachers across different school contexts (cf. Kessels 2010). Beginning teachers explicate their individual identity issues while discussing different school contexts. Both scholars and practitioners argue that teachers' learning is intertwined with teachers' professional identities, i.e. who teachers are, believe they are, and want to be as teachers (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004) making their professional learning both complex and unique. As Garner and Kaplan (2019) formulated '*the prevalent, linear, process-production conception of teacher learning needs to be replaced with theoretical perspectives that capture its complex, dynamic, and personal yet contextualised, nature* (p. 7)'.

The aim of this study is two-fold: providing insight into the broad range of what beginning teachers focus on from a professional identity perspective and giving identity work a legitimate place in supporting beginning teachers' growth into the profession. Identity work is an important process in negotiating, regulating, and maintaining a coherent sense of self (Crafford et al. 2015). The emphasis in identity work is on one's professional self-understanding. In this process, personal interests, experiences, values, and beliefs regarding one's professional self are reflected on in connection with situational or contextual aspects of one's work (Alsup 2006; Arvaja 2016). Identity work can serve as an important support for many beginning teachers' growth into the profession. Against this background, we developed four identity workshops for beginning teachers, strongly based upon theoretical notions regarding professional identity.

In beginning teachers' professional identity, the interplay between the personal and contextual in becoming and being a teacher is critical to teachers' sense of self (e.g., Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). Experiences arising from this interplay may promote or hinder professional identity development depending on the internal or mental processing and sense-making of those experiences. Experiences that impact identity development need to be subject to reflection and dialogue with other people about the meaning of these experiences, so that they can contribute to teachers' construction of a realistic and positive professional identity. The teachers who participated in the workshops were encouraged to report on their experiences arising from ways in which they reconcile with or integrate relevant personal and contextual aspects regarding these experiences in their professional identity. Our data consisted of their reflective notes on and dialogues about relevant aspects based on their experiences. We successively constructed short individual 'identity portraits' from these data sources, labelled the themes that emerged from analysing the portraits, and reorganised the themes and related aspects into configurations across all the participating teachers. The question was whether reconstructing the workshop data into configurations makes it possible to capture both the complexity and uniqueness of beginning teachers' (emerging) professional identity. Eventually, identity configurations may serve as a tool for reflection in identity work with teachers, which goes far beyond the common tools that provide knowledge and skills or give instruction that is also important for becoming and being a teacher. Configurations may help beginning teachers to understand their unique learning processes by comparing the interplay of the personal and contextual aspects of their professional identity to those of their peers.

2. Theoretical background

Professional identity results from the complex interaction between teachers' personal backgrounds, characteristics, knowledge, views, attitudes, norms and values, and requirements set by teacher education programmes and schools, including widely accepted standards for the teaching profession in general (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004). This makes teachers' professional identity both a product and process (Olsen 2010). Identity as a product is reflected in teachers' professional self-concept at a certain point in time in different work situations, making the identity of a teacher multifaceted. Identity is also a process under influence of new experiences causing changes in the identity of a teacher, no matter how small, which means that teachers' professional identity is not fixed but dynamic. This view on teachers' professional identity implies that learning or growing in the teaching profession is a complex and personally coloured identity-making process that should be attended to in induction programmes.

Teacher induction: a challenging context for professional identity work

Induction is a process of initiating new teachers into their new roles as teachers and members of the school organisation. Beginning teachers' induction period covers a crucial phase in view of their further careers. In this period, they particularly form their professional identity, construct a professional practice, and decide to stay in the profession or leave (Feiman-Nemser 2001).

Although there is an increase in identity work in initial teacher education, this is only exceptionally the case in induction programmes (cf. Rogers and Scott 2008). Most induction programmes primarily focus on the knowledge and skills necessary for teaching competence and, if needed, on giving emotional support (Gold 1996); they often heavily rely on deficit ways of thinking about beginning teachers. The emphasis was and still is on instructional support, which also reflects a restricted view of teachers and teaching characterised by a focus on knowledge transmission. Consequently, there is hardly any attention to teachers' development of a professional identity. However, developing and sustaining a realistic and positive professional identity is a key element for an effective transition from initial teacher education to teaching during the first years of the career. The need to explicitly build identity work in induction programmes is increasingly supported by research on beginning teachers' experiences.

For example, Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok (2013) described several identity tensions of beginning teachers. These tensions pertain to:

- The role transition from student to teacher (e.g., still feeling like a student, but experiencing that students and colleagues expect a competent teacher);
- Giving support or attention to students (e.g., wanting to take care of students, but as a result not taking enough emotional distance);
- Beliefs about learning and teaching (e.g., own beliefs that deviate from those dominant in the school);
- Balancing between work and private life (e.g., feeling pressure to invest a lot in work and, through that, not being able to divide the available time and energy between care at home and school).

Tensions like these often remain hidden, especially when they are felt as very personal. Mentally and emotionally, such tensions can have a negative impact on one's perception and development of a realistic and positive professional identity (Van Der Wal et al. 2019).

Another example that impacts beginning teachers' professional identity pertains to how they position themselves amongst more experienced teachers, how they are recognised as newcomers with their own expertise, and how they adapt to the prevailing school culture (Zeichner and Gore 1990). Schools are micropolitical organisations that through agreements, forms of collaboration, and (in)formal leadership exert great influence on what is possible and realistic when it comes to negotiating and giving expression to the teacher one is or wants to be (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). Schools can be organisations where beginning teachers flourish, but also be organisations where they are kept small and seen as real beginners first having to learn to become competent in teaching before taking on other professional responsibilities, even though they can and want to. School cultures, how schools are organised, collaborations with colleagues, etc. can be leading, demanding, and restrictive for beginning teachers but also provide valuable guidelines for the further development of their positive professional identity (cf. Clandinin and Huber 2005), depending on the extent to which these contextual features coincide with the teachers they are and want to be.

Not only colleagues, also students are very critical reality definers for beginning teachers (Beijaard 1995). In their relationships with students, teachers strive to be 'a certain kind of teacher' by enacting their personal ideals, professional values and goals that are directly related to their inner motives regarding teaching (Flores and Day 2006; Korthagen, Attema-Noordewier, and Zwart 2014). For example, being negatively judged by students or not being able to establish a good relationship or bond with them can be devastating for teachers' professional self-esteem, confidence, and well-being. This triggers intense emotions like discomfort, uncertainty, powerlessness, anger, frustration, and vulnerability (Hargreaves 2000; Zembylas 2003). On the other hand, emotions like joy and satisfaction occur when interactions with significant others go well, which fuels feelings of being a successful teacher.

Based on the examples above, it seems obvious to pay attention to teacher identity work in induction programmes. The need for this challenges current induction programmes. Beginning teachers are probably better off with the support of their professional identity development than providing them with additional knowledge and skills relevant to their teaching practice (cf. Schaefer, Long, and Clandinin 2012). Research shows little to no effects of this latter type of support on beginning teachers' professional development. Some studies indicate some positive impact of induction (and mentoring) on specific teaching aspects, for example, regarding classroom management and specific teaching behaviours like asking questions (see the review study by Ingersoll and Strong 2011). However, the impact of induction programmes on student achievement appears to be less clear or ambiguous (e.g., Glazer et al. 2008; Kessels 2010). Similar conclusions are drawn about the impact of induction programmes on teacher attrition and retention (Long et al. 2012). Through research on teachers' professional identity and ways in which they construct this identity, it has increasingly become clear that it is particularly teachers' identity that fuels their learning and development. Not only in initial teacher education, but also in induction programmes it is important to be well aware of not only working with teachers that we have to equip with knowledge and skills, but that we primarily work

with people who also (can) struggle with identity issues, often accompanied by (intense) emotions, as what we learn from the stories told by early career teachers themselves about their decisions to stay in the profession or leave (e.g., Schaefer and Clandinin 2019).

Identity work with beginning teachers

All schools, though differently, provide resources for their teachers' further professional learning and development, but most professional development programmes they follow ignore the support needed for the construction and sustaining of professional identities (Vähäsantanen et al. 2017). It is, therefore, crucial to find settings in which teachers can reflect on their professional identities, such as in induction programmes for beginning teachers. In general, and particularly for beginning teachers, professional identity work might be a deep sense-making process enabling them to (re)define, craft, maintain, and strengthen their perceptions of who they are and what they find relevant in their work, as well as to negotiate a meaningful relationship between their (emerging) identity and their work (Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi 2020). Identity work requires from participants to process their understanding of themselves as professionals, which is also an emotionally challenging process. Dealing with emotions, either pleasant or unpleasant ones, is inherent in identity work and have a bearing on the expression of identity and the shaping of it (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Nichols et al. 2017).

The identity work reported on in this study took place in four school-transcending workshops with a focus on tensions in beginning teachers' professional identity; relevant perceptions of their teacher role, the role of significant others in their work environment and their tasks as teacher, including their perceptions of the interaction between these aspects; and story-lines of their professional growth.

Research questions

We were primarily interested in the experience-related personal and contextual aspects teachers brought in, reflected on, and discussed in the identity workshops, including goals they set themselves based on that. This study is an attempt to unravel this information without losing sight of the underlying complexity and uniqueness. The following research questions will be answered:

- (1) Which identity themes emerge from the workshop data and which (both personal and contextual) aspects relate to these themes?
- (2) Which configurations, per identity theme, can be made that do justice to both the complexity and the uniqueness of beginning teachers' professional identity?

3. Method

Participants

As part of their induction programme, 67 beginning teachers in their first or second year of their career were invited to participate in the workshops; 45 teachers (19 males, 26 females) attended all four workshops. The drop-out rate was relatively large. Some

reasons the teachers gave to drop out concerned not willing to decline their lessons to visit all four identity workshops or not perceiving the value of thinking about one's professional identity. Yet, not only highly motivated teachers remained, since a considerable number of participants were sent to the workshops by their schools as part of their induction programme.

The 45 teachers came from 13 secondary education schools in the Southern part of the Netherlands. All subjects (Languages, Arts and Sciences) and grade levels of secondary schools were represented. Participation was voluntary; all beginning teachers were informed about the aim of this study and gave their consent to participate.

Identity workshops

The identity workshops carefully constructed from theoretical perspectives not only supported the teachers to thoroughly reflect upon both personal and contextual aspects of their professional identity, they also resulted in rich qualitative data of a narrative nature collected during the four school-transcending identity workshops of about 180 minutes each at different moments in the school year.

The teachers were divided into three groups guided by two teacher educators per group. During each workshop, the teachers were asked to (individually) reflect on aspects of their professional identity with help of diverse assignments (see [Table 1](#)). All assignments, although different in form, had in common that they triggered the teachers to explicate their professional identity. Reflection outcomes were thoroughly discussed, alternately in small peer groups ($n = 3$) and plenary ($n = 15$). After discussing, the teachers wrote down their newly acquired insights about their professional identity in personal notebooks. At the end of each workshop, they were asked to formulate a personal learning goal to explicate what to focus on in the in-between periods of the identity workshops.

As shown in ([Table 1](#)), the first workshop aimed at introducing the topic of professional identity by reflecting upon possible tensions between the personal and contextual of one's professional identity with a frequently used and validated questionnaire developed by Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok (2013). The main part of the second workshop was based on a 'theme centred interaction'-exercise ('TCI-exercise', see ([Figure 1](#)); Schneider-Landolf, Spielmann, and Zitterbarth 2013) not often used in research, but frequently used in mentoring practices in order to detect personal key values in challenging situations, such as the situation that is troubling teacher #39: '*one student tried to hug me*' (see the explanation of the TCI-exercise in [Table 1](#)). In the third workshop, the 'TCI-exercise' was applied again. Now beyond analysing situations (workshop 2), the teachers were asked to detect a feasible balance between conflicting perceptions on three elements within the situation. In the fourth and last workshop, the teachers reflected upon their professional development during the year they participated in the identity workshops by means of drawing and explaining a storyline (see [Figure 1](#)). The storyline method is a specific method for collecting narratives about the impact of relevant events that occurred during a certain period (see Beijaard, Van Driel, and Verloop 1999). Each instrument yielded to reflective notes about both personal and contextual aspects relevant to the teachers' professional identity. All teacher's writings (i.e. answers given in the assignments, reflective notes, and learning goals) were collected in a personal notebook. ([Table 1](#)) gives an overview of the kind of data collected.

Table 1. Description of each workshop and overview of data.

Identity Workshop	Aim and description	Data collected	Excerpt of teacher's note
1	Explaining the aim and organisation of the four workshops, creating a safe environment, recognising identity tensions by filling in Identity Tension Questionnaire (Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok 2013).	<i>Answers to three open-ended questions after completing questionnaire:</i> 1. What is the most recognisable situation in the questionnaire? 2. How are you coping with this situation at the moment? 3. With regard to the situations described: what do you need the most for your development? <i>Formulated learning goal:</i> My learning goal is:	<i>teacher #36:</i> 1. Balance between work and private life. 2. By consulting the leader of my team: he gave many tips how to organise my time. 3. Reflecting about my work and self-image. Through more experiences, I will learn to act routinely. <i>Learning goal:</i> Balance in time spent between work and private life.
2	'Theme Centred interaction'-exercise: Three elements in a challenging situation are visualised in the angles of a triangle: 1. Perceived role of the teacher ('Me') 2. Perceived role of all persons ('We') 3. Perceived task ('It') The perceptions are discussed by defining boundaries for each element. Then the teacher must determine a personal key insight of the situation.	<i>Notes TCI exercise:</i> The filled-out boxes by using the TCI-template (see Figure 1). <i>Formulated learning goal:</i> My learning goal is:	<i>teacher #39:</i> Me: I do not want students to touch me. We: Part of the teachers wants to keep (physical) distance. Another part is getting too close. It: Teaching students in a nice and safe environment. Central: I must explain my students what I expect and allow them to do. <i>Learning goal:</i> How do I set my limits on physical contact with my students (high fives; hugging); I want more (physical distance) than my colleagues.
3	TCI-exercise: Searching for a balance between (conflicting) perceptions on the three elements (role teacher, role all persons, and task) in a challenging situation. Redefining perceptions or formulating intentions to change behaviour to realise that balance.	<i>Notes TCI exercise:</i> The filled-out boxes by using the TCI-template (see Figure 1). <i>Formulated learning goal:</i> My learning goal is:	<i>teacher #50:</i> Me: Do not sacrifice too much spare time to do things according to my standard. We: Challenge yourself. Activating teaching methods. Differentiation. It: Well-prepared lessons. Being a good mentor. Good is Good. Coping with perfectionism. Central: Balance between work and private life. <i>Learning goal:</i> Good is good enough. Not everything has to be perfect. So, I do not have to sacrifice my spare time.
4	Retrospection: Reflecting upon professional growth by means of a storyline.	<i>Drawn and explained storyline (see Figure 1)</i> <i>Answers to four open-ended, evaluative questions:</i> 1. What is your growth as teacher in the past year? 2. Who stimulated your growth? 3. What has been stimulating your growth? 4. What did you do yourself to grow?	<i>teacher #64:</i> 1. Feelings of safety: I found my position in school. 2. Mainly my coach; team leader and colleagues, as well. 3. Many meetings + feedback of coach (sometimes team leader or supervisors own schooling) 4. Acting vulnerable: be open for feedback and moments of learning.

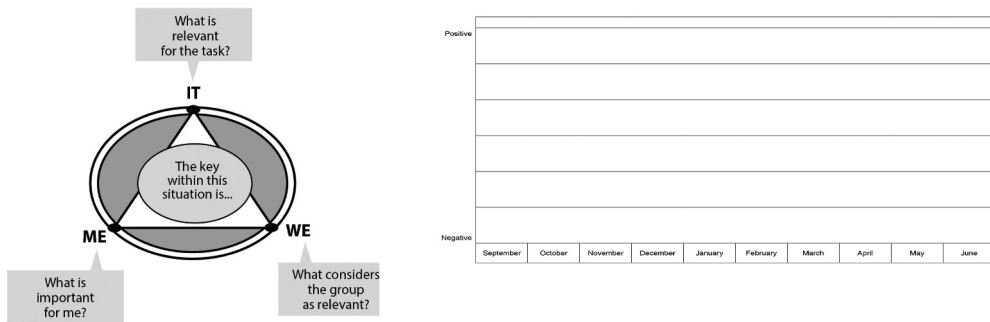


Figure 1. Forms used in the workshops: TCI-exercise (workshop 2 and 3) and storyline (workshop 4).

Analysis

The assignments resulted in a diversity of teachers’ notes about different or similar (challenging) situations (see Table 1). Some notes concerned a shallow reflection, whereas others reached a deep reflection and some notes were rather brief, while others were relatively elaborate.

The narrative-like data were analysed in line with the distinction that Polkinghorne (1995) made between *narrative analysis* and *analysis of narrative*. Narrative analysis is aimed at creating stories from the workshop data by compiling the teachers’ notes resulting into portraits of the teachers. These portraits were needed to perform the analysis of narrative. In our study, analysis of narrative is aimed at detecting overarching identity themes (within the portrait) and constructing per theme a configuration. (Table 2) explains the different foci in analysing. The complete data analysis consisted of four steps.

First, for each teacher, the separate notes were merged into one portrait based upon interpretation and re-interpretation in such a way that a coherent whole originated (cf. Leeferink et al. 2015). Original notes were included in the portrait to validate its meaning. The first author constructed 20 portraits, all checked for their accuracy by the second

Table 2. Explanation of foci in narrative analysis and analysis of narrative.

Focus	Description
<i>Narrative analysis: creating portraits</i>	
Notes	Original writings of the teacher as response to the assignments
Portrait	A coherent whole composed by the researchers by merging the teacher’s notes (see Appendix A for an example of a portrait)
<i>Analysis of narrative: detecting overarching themes and constructing a configuration</i>	
Preliminary theme	Topics found in the portraits established inductively (e.g., ‘cooperation with students’ and ‘problems with explicating classroom rules’)
Overarching theme	Recurring main topic in the portraits, found by ‘summarising’ preliminary themes (e.g., classroom management)
Fragments	Text parts in the portrait; (e.g.: ‘discussing the interaction’, ‘interaction with colleagues went well’, ‘helping each other’)
Aspect	A group of content-related fragments (e.g.: <i>the role of communication</i>)
Node	Groups of related aspects are visually ordered as <i>nodes</i> . Overarching theme is taking as central node and first layer of nodes consist of ‘focus on oneself, focus on students’ or ‘focus on team/organisation’

author. These portraits were found to be accurate except for details in wording and sometimes ambiguous interpretation of a single teacher's note. The first author adjusted the 20 portraits and constructed all other portraits likewise (see [Appendix A](#) for examples).

Second, themes were searched for to group the 45 portraits (cf. Leeferink et al. 2019; Van Der Wal et al. 2019). The portraits were examined to identify preliminary themes in an inductive way, for example, 'cooperation with students' and 'problems with explicating classroom rules'. During the analysis, the first and second authors closely worked together. The first author took the lead in formulating the preliminary themes, that were carefully checked by the second author. The few instances of slightly different interpretations of themes were compared and easily resulted in interpretations on which they both agreed.

Third, correspondence in the preliminary themes was searched for in order to combine them into overarching themes by the same two authors together (Leeferink et al. 2019). For example, 'relationship with students', 'cooperation with students', 'order', 'class climate', 'problems with discipline', and 'explicate classroom rules' were summarised by the overarching theme 'Classroom management'. In all, five overarching themes could be formulated: (1) Classroom management, (2) Students' learning, (3) Workload, (4) Collaboration, and (5) Standing up for oneself.

Fourth, each overarching theme was visualised as a configuration in line with the configurative analysis of Leeferink et al. (2015) who mapped activities and experiences of beginning teachers during their process of transforming personal workplace learning experiences into experiences of learning. Inspired by their visualisations, we created the configurations to map personal and contextual aspects of professional identity (see [Figure 2–6](#)).

Per theme, fragments of the teachers' portraits were openly coded. Fragments about either the person or about the context were selected and put into one column in an Excel file: referring to the person oneself or referring to the person's context (Bowen 2006). Fragments with comparable content were grouped and labelled as 'aspects' of teachers' professional identity as illustrated in ([Table 3](#)).

For creating the configuration, 'nodes' were used to order the aspects in a visual way. Taking each overarching theme as a central node, aspects were ordered in three layers around the central node. The *first* layer of nodes pertains to (1) focus on person self, (2) focus on teachers' students, and (3) focus on team/school's organisation. The second layer of nodes or *second-order* nodes concerned the personal and contextual aspects. Teachers' original notes from their personal notebooks were used to illustrate these aspects.

Table 3. Excerpt of excel file to label portrait' fragments in aspects*.

Person		Context	
Aspect	Fragment	Aspect	Fragment
<i>Perfectionism</i>	#2: teacher is a perfectionist #21: all tasks should be properly executed	<i>Process oriented</i>	#2 teacher is aimed at students' development #38: students must collaborate
<i>Self-confidence</i>	# 35: reassurance through meeting with team leader #37: teacher is confident	<i>Product oriented/outcomes</i>	#3: students must perform as well as possible #5: students must work on their tasks

* = This excerpt is part of the 'Classroom management' theme

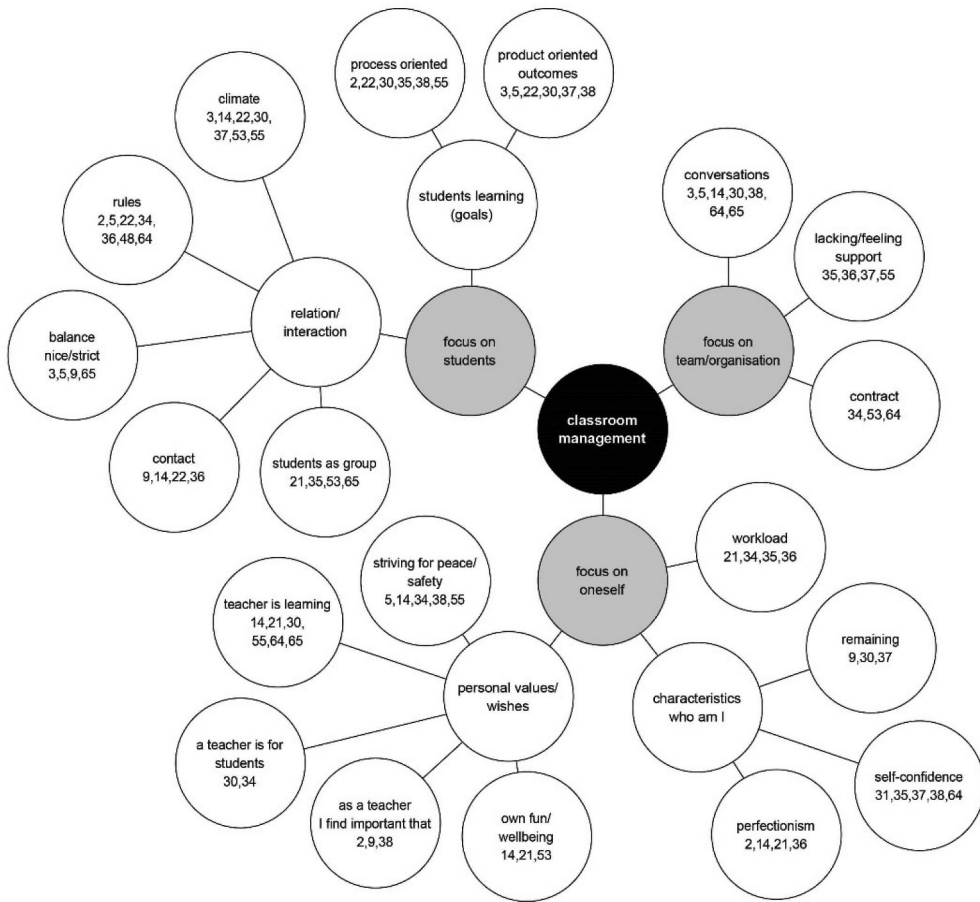


Figure 2. Configuration of classroom management.

Some second-order nodes (especially in the theme of Classroom management) could be further distinguished into *third-order* nodes (third layer of nodes). For example, within the theme 'Classroom management' (see Figure 2), a teachers' note was #14: 'I want to have fun with my students'. This note was included in the third-order node ('own fun/wellbeing') as part of the second-order node of 'personal values' and as part of 'focus on oneself'. The visualisation process was strengthened by an iterative process of going back and forth through the portraits, the Excel file and the teacher's original notes (Miles and Huberman 1994).

4. Results

Classroom management

In this study, a rather complex classroom management configuration is found (see Figure 2). The 'focus on oneself' is divided into three second-order nodes. Two second-order nodes relate to the core questions distinguished in professional identity theory, namely: 'who am I?' (i.e. personal characteristics) and 'what do I want' (i.e. personal values/wishes).

The aspects grouped in the third-order nodes linked to 'personal values/wishes' especially seem to be mentioned from a 'submissive perspective': 'the teacher is learning', #14: *'I am still learning'*, 'striving for peace/safety', #5: *'Keeping a comfort zone that fits me'*, 'a teacher is there for the students', #34: *'a teacher should support: I gave my students a hand'*. Just a few aspects labelled as 'personal values/wishes' refer to a more equal or dominant position towards students, for example, about having fun oneself as a teacher or about what the teacher self finds important. The second second-order node 'who am I' is divided into third-order nodes such as 'perfectionism' and 'self-confidence'. The third second-order node contains aspects pointing to perceived workload.

Within the 'focus on students', many aspects are arranged in the second-order node 'relation/interaction'. Within the next layer, one third-order node refers to 'students as a group', #21: *'in upper grade the classes are fun'*. Other third-order nodes refer to the content or type of 'contact' with students, #22: *'I want to avoid discussions about rules with students'*. Many aspects in the 'relation/interaction'-node concern 'rules', #34: *'I have to be explicit about the rules and expectations'*, or 'class climate', #35: *'How do I keep order without disturbing the class climate?'* Finally, one third-order node includes aspects referring to the identity tension 'being nice or being strict'. The other second-order node within 'focus on students' is labelled 'students learning (goals)'. Some aspects are related to students' outcomes of learning, #30: *'students should learn declarative and procedural knowledge'*, whereas other aspects point to the learning process of students, #30: *'students should work independently'*.

The 'focus on team/organisation' includes no third-order nodes. One second-order node points to 'conversations' about classroom management, #5: *'I often talk with colleagues about feeling safe'*. Some aspects refer to 'lacking or feeling support', #35: *'there is little coming out from my team'*. Three teachers' portraits refer to their 'contract' (i.e. status of the permanence of their job).

Students' learning

The configuration of Students' learning is relatively simple with no third-order nodes; aspects are parsimoniously arranged in few second-order nodes (see [Figure 3](#)). Most aspects are linked to 'focus on students'. Two second-order nodes are much related: 'beliefs what students should/could do', #11: *'students learn from each other and are able to make their own choices'* and 'accountability', #46: *'I am being judged on students' grades'*; #22: *'I will create a learning environment in which class climate and productivity/outcomes are high'*. The third second-order node refers to classroom management, #2: *'I am searching for a balance between the social-emotional [classroom management] level and cognitive level'*.

The 'focus on oneself' is prominently represented within this theme. One second-order node includes beliefs, such as beliefs about oneself as teacher or about what one has to do as a teacher, #33: *'Together with my students, I learn the subject matter but I also grow as a person'*; #11: *'I give tools to my students and I take up a role as a mentor'*. The other second-order node includes aspects referring to personal characteristics or feelings, #11: *'I am too enthusiastic about designing education'*; #2: *'I have to learn to enjoy that lessons are going well'*.

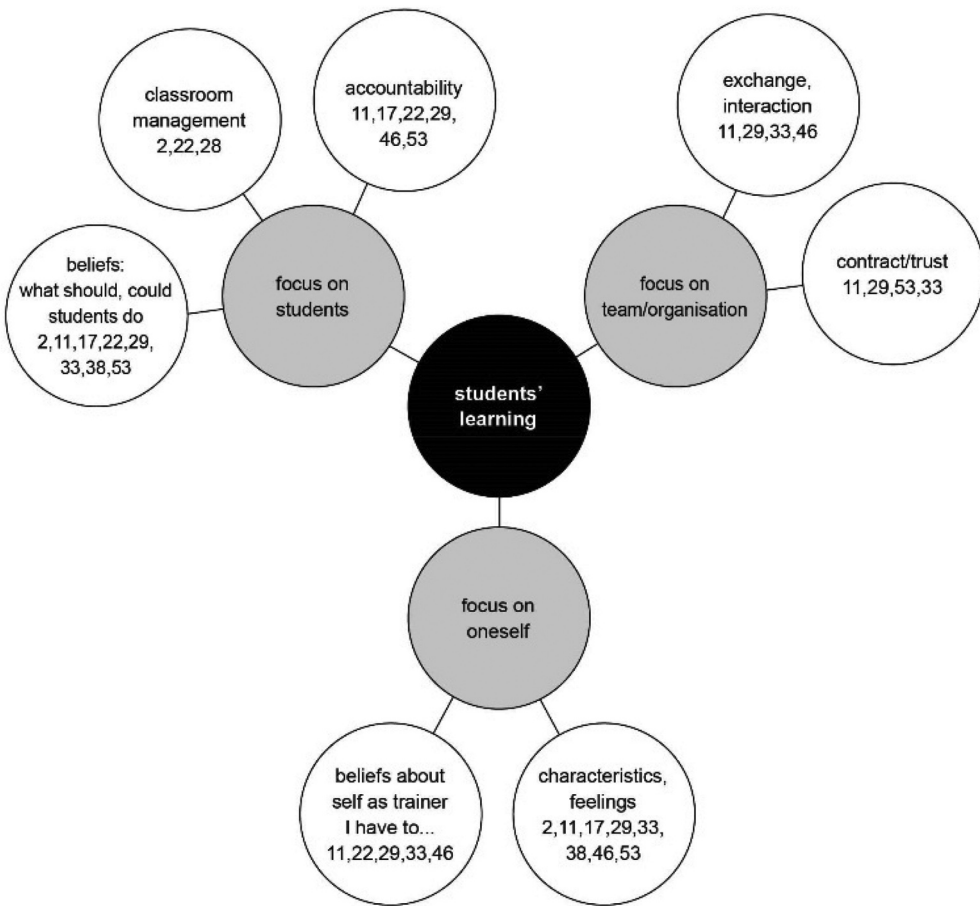


Figure 3. Configuration of students' learning.

Relatively fewer aspects are present within the 'focus on team/organisation'. One second-order node includes aspects directing to the exchange of ideas or interaction between colleagues, #29: *'Personalising new ideas/perspectives, talking about experiences'*; the other node refers to the trust felt in the organisation, #33: *'My school leader expressed he needs me for school innovation'*.

Workload

Many aspects of the Workload configuration are organised in five second-order nodes concerning the 'focus on team/organisation'. The number of nodes within 'focus on oneself' is also high (see Figure 4). Two second-order nodes pertain to identity issues like searching for a balance between work, study, and private life, and setting or maintaining limits on the amount of work- or job-related activities. Aspects arranged in another second-order node seem to indicate that teachers have to accept the situation, #7: *'I have to accept who I am instead of applying abilities that do not fit me'*. Related to this second-order node is the second-order node that refers to personal characteristics,

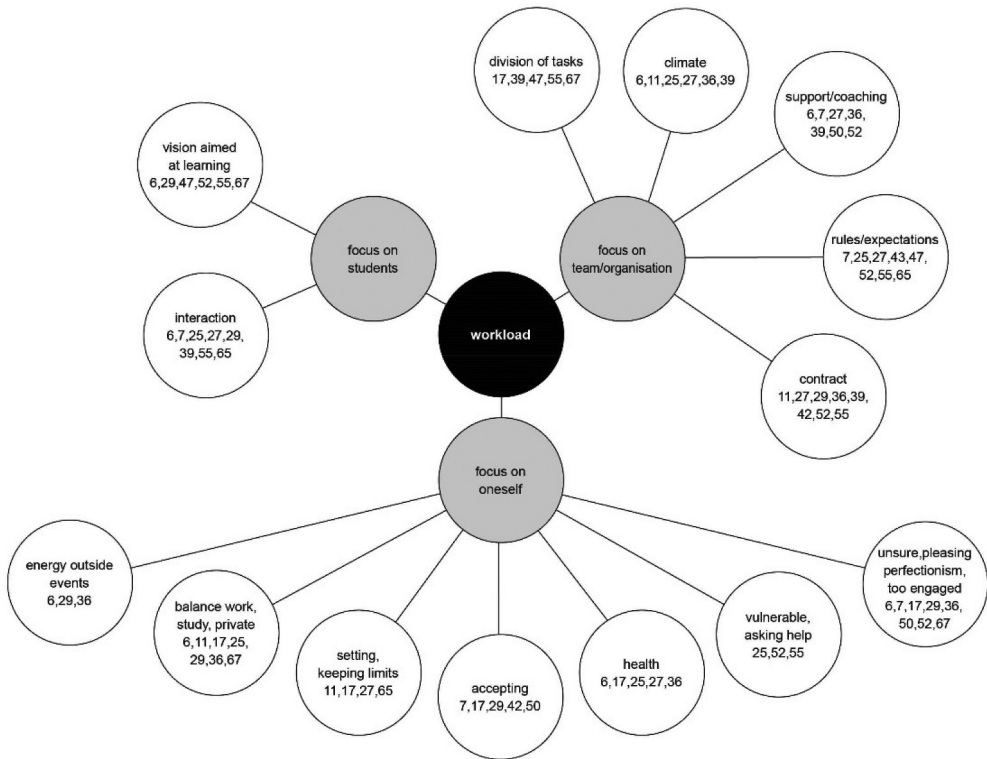


Figure 4. Configuration of workload.

such as being a perfectionist, #50: *'you have to show the best of yourself'*, or wanting to please everyone, #17: *'To do everything well for everybody'*. Another second-order node is about asking for help instead of changing feelings of workload, #25: *'I learned to be vulnerable and to ask for help'*. Two other second-order nodes are a bit different in nature. The first one includes aspects pointing to teachers' physical health, #17: *'I don't sleep at night'*. The second one clusters aspects that refer to the energy or joy teachers received from outside lesson events, such as making a journey #36, buying a house #29, and fun during a school camp #6.

The 'focus on team/organisation' includes five second-order nodes. One second-order node refers to the kind of tasks and the (unfair) division of tasks within the team, #47: *'colleagues are exaggerating what they are doing'*. A second node includes aspects of organisational climate, i.e. the way colleagues work with each other, #11: *'it takes a while before you feel safe and secure within the team'*. Related to 'climate' is the second-order node 'feeling support or being coached' in the team or in the school, #39: *'Through school coaching and a course about mindfulness I have a better relation with two students'*. Many aspects refer to 'rules or expectations' that teachers feel the school or colleagues are imposing on them, #52: *'the school aims at outcomes'*; #42: *'school is taking opposite decisions to protect their image'*. Aspects of the influence of getting a permanent job are included in the second-order node 'contract'.

Two second-order nodes are discerned as part of ‘focus on students’. One is referring to the (difficult) interaction with students or classroom management, and the other one is referring to students’ learning.

Collaboration

Obviously, many aspects of this configuration relate to ‘focus on oneself’ and ‘focus on the team/organisation’ (see Figure 5). ‘Focus on students’ contains only one second-order node in which all aspects refer to the way of interacting with students, # 36: *I have to search for proper ways to interact with my students*’.

Within ‘focus on team/organisation’, eight second-order nodes are distinguished. Two third-order nodes (‘typifying climate’ and ‘insecurity’) relate to the second-order node ‘climate’. This second-order node and the second-order nodes ‘appreciation’, ‘lacking or feeling support’, and ‘communication’ all seem to refer to ways of interacting within the school organisation. To mention some examples, #64: *the social pressure to help each other is high*’ (type of climate); #55: *My learning is stimulated by the positive comments from colleagues and school leaders*’ (appreciation); #27: *One meeting with my mentor was very bad*’ (lacking/feeling support); #43: *I am now discussing with my colleagues how we together give direction in*

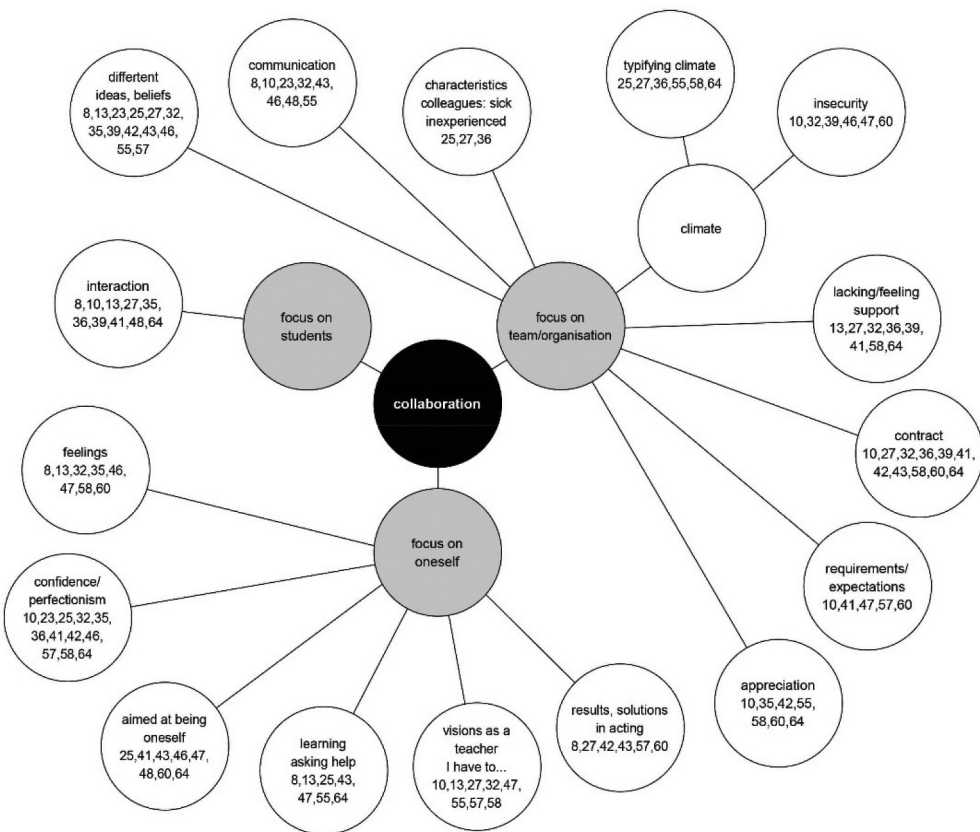


Figure 5. Configuration of collaboration.

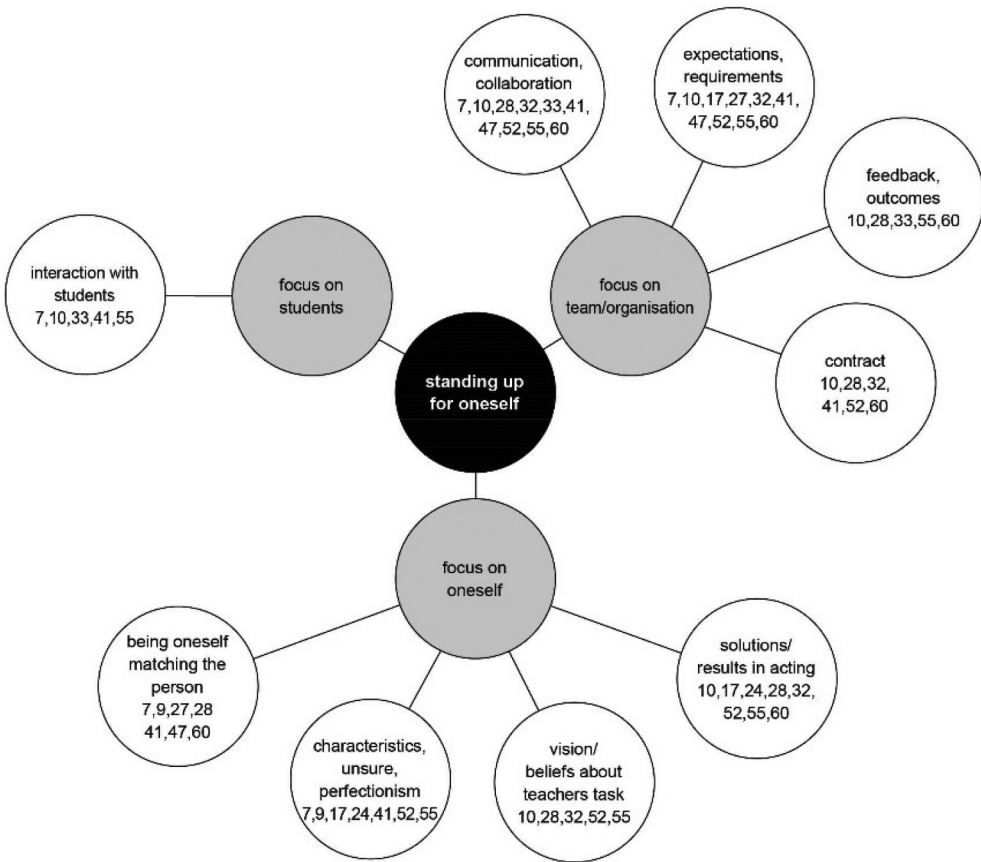


Figure 6. Configuration of standing up for oneself.

our co-teaching' (communication). Two other second-order nodes concern aspects referring to external requirements or expectations, #47: *'The school wants to demonstrate that most aspects of the program are realised'*, and aspects referring to a contract (#36: *'I got the opportunity to expand my working hours'*). Finally, two second-order nodes include aspects of 'characteristics of colleagues', #58: *'enjoyable colleagues at the Christmas party'*, or 'differences in ideas and beliefs', #8: *'I keep strict to school rules, whereas my colleagues do not'*.

The six second-order nodes that are part of 'focus on oneself' seem to diverge more than the second-order nodes distinguished in 'focus on team/organisation'. Most aspects are found within the second-order node of personal characteristics such as being a perfectionist or feeling insecure, #32: *'I have to keep faith in myself'*. One second-order node concerns the teacher's feelings, #47: *'I am feeling as if I have been thrown into the depth of the ocean while colleagues keep me swimming'*. Another second-order node refers to the vision of the teachers, #10: *'I have to shape students into full-grown humans'*. Again, another second-order node seems to aim at 'being oneself as a teacher', #43: *'I want to be myself as member of our teachers' team'*. Two second-order nodes may be interpreted as searching for a solution for a (undesired) situation such as 'learning or seeking help',

#55: *'I took the initiative in asking for support'*, or presenting *'solutions in acting'*, #60: *'I am setting aside my wishes for a team spirit'*.

Standing up for oneself

Few aspects of this configuration relate to 'focus on students' and are all referring to ways of interacting with students, #7: *'My authority is being questioned by my students'*. 'Focus on oneself' includes four second-order nodes of which three seem identity-related issues ('Can I be authentic?'; 'What kind of teacher am I?'; 'What do I have to do?') and one behaviour related ('How should I cope with the situation?'). One second-order node concerns being oneself or whether the school organisation matches the person, #27: *'I stick to my own rules that are based upon my own values'*. Another second-order node is about 'personal characteristics' such as insecurity, perfectionism and pleasing others, #41: *'I must deliver quality, I do not want to let anyone down; I want to do my job very well'*. The third second-order node includes the beliefs of the teachers about their task (#52: *'I have to raise my students to be ready for the society'*). The second-order node referring to 'solutions or consequences in acting' seems to be two-folded. On the one hand, teachers more or less seem to accept a situation by mentally putting aside their concerns, #60: *'Instead of doing everything myself, I have to learn not to be involved in everything'*. On the other hand, teachers really do not take up some tasks anymore, #24: *'Dare to give up tasks or leave them for other persons, take your rights'*.

'Focus on team/organisation' includes four second-order nodes. One node includes aspects pointing to 'communication and/or collaboration', #10: *'How and when can I put limits upon the demands of my colleagues'*, or more positively formulated, #33: *'I want to take part into school development through improving the way we talk within our organisation'*. Another second-order node refers to 'expectations or requirements' imposed upon the teachers, #55: *'I voluntary take upon different activities, because I like doing so, but also because I want to meet the collegial expectations about my functioning'*. A third second-order node pertains to feedback in the form of an appraisal received or to realised outcomes, #33: *'At the end of the year, my school leader gave me a grant to participate in a professional development course: he needs me to innovate the school'*; #28: *'My students passed the exams rather well'*. Finally, the second-order node 'contract' refers to job agreements, #41: *'during the year I was told that there was no opportunity to convert my temporary job into a permanent one'*.

Considering the five configurations

Each configuration was based upon teachers' portraits stemming from a diversity of reflective notes written by the teachers in their notebook. Classroom management made up the most complex configuration. Remarkably, many aspects focused on the person of the teacher (i.e. focus on oneself). The focus on students is not restricted to the relation with students, but also to learning goals that the beginning teachers want to realise with their students. Collaboration is another complex figuration. Within the focus on team/organisation many nodes are discerned, but they seem much related to each other (kind of interaction within the organisation, the role of colleagues and external requirements). As in the configuration of Classroom management and Workload,

relatively many second-order nodes of the configuration Collaboration are distinguishable regarding focus on oneself. The configuration Students' learning seems the simplest one: there are not so many aspects and just a few second-order nodes within each focus. Also, the configuration of Standing up for oneself consists of relatively few aspects. In three configurations (Workload, Collaboration, and Standing up for oneself), the aspects hardly are related to 'focus on students' and when they do, they mainly refer to ways of interacting with them.

Looking at the original teachers' portraits ($n = 45$), the theme Collaboration is most often found in these portraits, closely followed by Classroom management (in 20 and 19 portraits, respectively). The theme Students' learning is least deduced (in 10 portraits); this theme is always mentioned in combination with other themes. Specific patterns of mentioning themes could not be deduced.

During the data analysis, it became clear that although some beginning teachers face the same theme, their personal or contextual aspects may differ. Next to that, teachers with different themes refer to similar personal or contextual aspects. For example, two teachers' portraits (#36 and #50, see [appendix A](#)) adhering to the theme of Workload are about teachers who acted as perfectionists in aiming at perceived high educational standards (focus on oneself). Both teachers took much time in preparing their teaching, but for different reasons related to focus on team/organisation. One teacher (#50) perceived her school to demand this kind of perfectionism, whereas the other teacher (#36) experienced no support in her school resulting in an uncertain search for designing her own lessons. Two other examples (#32 and #39 see [Appendix A](#)) pertain to the theme Collaboration. One teacher (#32) wanted to implement a new teaching method, but her colleagues did not. The second teacher (#39) differed from her colleagues in the process of building a positive, safe relationship with students, but in the end, the teacher was feeling insecure herself within her team. Fragments from both portraits were clustered into the same second-order node (feeling support from colleagues), but because of a different focus on oneself the impact on the teachers was very different: the first teacher (#32) was feeling secure and implemented her own teaching method, whereas the second teacher (#39) was feeling insecure and she explicated many doubts within her notes. To conclude, within the four portraits mentioned above, similar personal and contextual aspects were found, but the *specific* combination of the aspects led to different concerns or behaviour. To illustrate the unique combinations of aspects and different foci, the individual configurations of teachers 36 and 50 are depicted in ([Figure 7](#)).

5. Conclusion and discussion

The data collected in four identity workshops were captured in five different configurations, each representing a specific identity theme. Within each configuration, a variety of personal and contextual aspects could be distinguished doing justice to both the complexity and the uniqueness of beginning teachers' professional identity. Although the theme Classroom management is often mentioned as the main concern of beginning teachers (e.g., Evertson and Weinstein 2006), in the current study, it appeared that Collaboration as overarching team seems to be equally important. This is also in line with research by Van Der Wal et al. (2019) who discerned 'interaction with colleagues' as a thematic tension for beginning teachers. Students' learning as a theme is least deduced

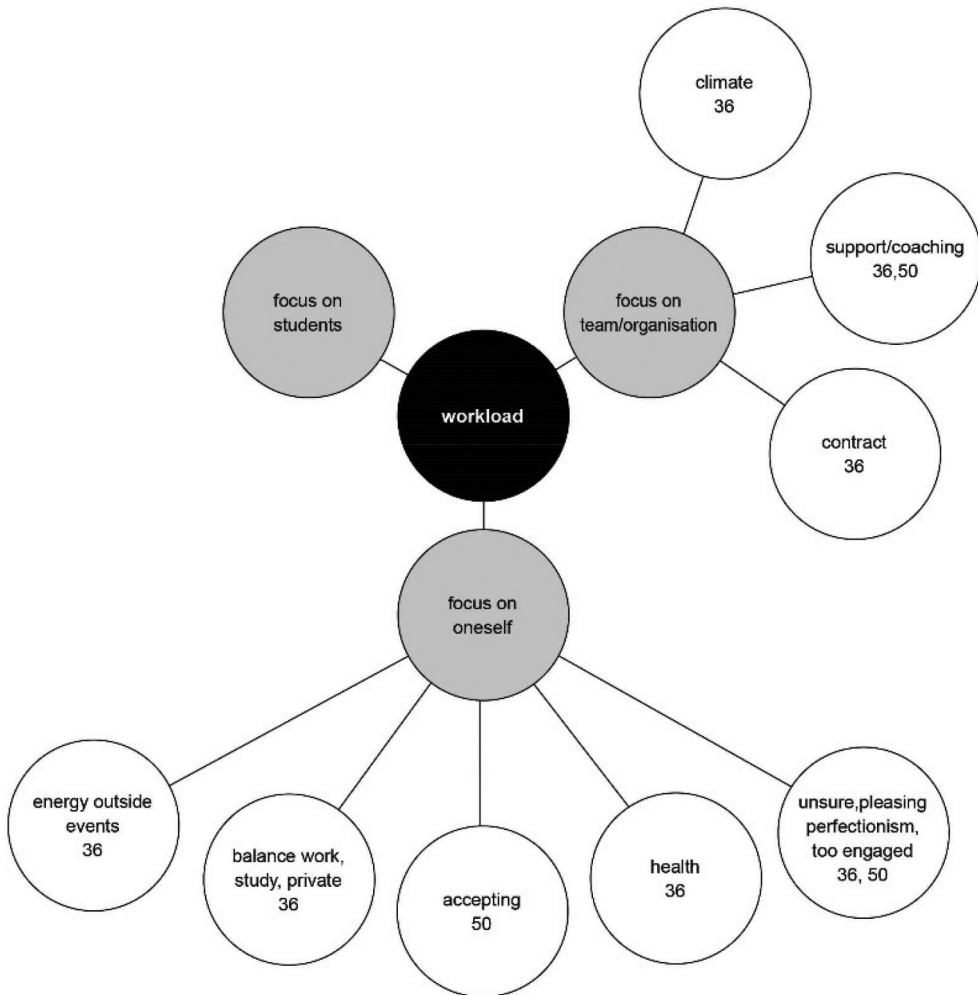


Figure 7. Configuration of workload of teacher #36 and #50.

(cf. Leeferink et al. 2019). Induction programmes traditionally focus on immediate, pranging concerns of beginning teachers, such as issues related to daily routines such as keeping order in the classroom or how to explain the textbook's content, rather than issues related to collaboration with colleagues or students' learning. Beginning teachers may furthermore experience establishing good relations with their students or colleagues as prerequisite for being able to think about aspects related to other themes such as students' learning or standing up for oneself. The school's support they receive may strengthen this (see also the introduction).

All configurations consist of three foci: focus on oneself, students, and team/organisation. The five configurations differ in complexity: the configuration Classroom management is rather complex, whereas Students' learning is rather simple. The complex picture of Classroom management makes clear that reflection on Classroom management encompasses more than a reflection on behavioural measures aimed at ways of

interacting with students (cf. Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, & van Tartwijk 2006). Thinking about Classroom management also needs considering teachers' personal characteristics, beliefs and values (see Figure 1), or the ways they appraise or evaluate the importance of interpersonal situations for their well-being (Van Der Want et al. 2015). Within the Workload configuration, the personal aspects related to the focus on oneself refer to a rather 'passive' or 'tense' attitude of the teachers and two second-order nodes relate to identity tensions (Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok 2013). Especially within Workload, teachers refer to rather stressful aspects without taking action, i.e., standing up for oneself. The second-order nodes of Standing up for oneself include many aspects that refer to a rather indirect way of standing up: with help of appraisal, good outcomes, or the prospect of a permanent job, it is easier to stand up for oneself. Some configurations include more personal second-order nodes, while other configurations concern more second-order nodes bound to others. This skewness in kind of aspects is visible in the configurations of Workload and Collaboration. It seems as if beginning teachers attribute the pressure of workload to themselves and troubling collaborative activities to other persons. In constructing a realistic, constructive professional identity, personal and contextual aspects need to be (more) balanced.

Theoretical, methodological and practical outcomes

Theoretical consensus exists that constructing a professional identity requires from a teacher to reconcile personal factors – such as personal background, characteristics, knowledge, beliefs, views, attitudes, norms and values – with contextual factors, – such as requirements, standards or expectations from teacher education institutes, schools, and society (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004). The configurations we found justify this conceptualisation of professional identity as a complex and unique learning process. Both *within* each configuration and *across* all configurations, a diversity of aspects is identified that *could* be relevant for teachers in constructing their professional identity. Together the configurations have the potential to cover the complexity or versatility of becoming a teacher. Since personal and contextual aspects within and across themes are different for each beginning teacher (see Figure 7), the configurations have also the potential to do this for the uniqueness of that process.

The configurations are constructed in an iterative, interpretative way. Starting from reflective notes of 45 beginning teachers, the question remains whether the data collection is representative for *all* beginning teachers, especially, since we concluded that each professional identity construction is a highly individual and unique process. The current study raises interesting issues for new studies using configurative research methodology about how to construct the most reliable and valid configurations for beginning teachers. Examining alternative ways of data collection, judging about the impact of group's composition and considering the role of different background variables such as gender, age and educational background are relevant issues in constructing robust configurations. Once established representative, valid configurations, research may aim to identify possible interaction patterns of personal and contextual aspects: can different patterns of personal and contextual aspects be identified and explained? Do these patterns *within* and *across* the configurations fit 'clusters' of teachers within the whole group of beginning teachers? The current study inspires executing new methodological studies that, in

the long term, will help to better understand professional identity development of beginning teachers.

For coaching practices at schools, each configuration might be a valuable reflection tool for a discussion about whether the (beginning) teachers recognise themselves in the configuration or how they wish to position themselves within the configuration of the group (cf. Akkerman and Meijer, 2011). In addition, the configurations together may help the beginning teacher to find related aspects across the themes, for example Standing up for oneself and experienced Workload.

This study supports our idea that identity work is important to include in induction programmes to support teachers' growth into the profession (see Introduction). Professional identity construction is a personalised process, so identity work needs tools that help beginning teachers to become aware and, more importantly, *explicate* their personal characteristics and professional ideas in their functioning and growth as a teacher. Furthermore, identity work can help beginning teachers to realise that themes that are less mentioned (Students' learning and Standing up for oneself) are important. In line with Schelfhout et al. (2006), we think that teaching is all about enhancing student's learning. Besides, beginning teachers should learn to negotiate about their professional identity (see Introduction). Finally, in identity work, it is important to acknowledge that 'Classroom management' embraces more variables than just 'behavioural' ones, as demonstrated by diverse aspects found in this study. Through including identity work in induction programmes, beginning teachers receive support at (identity) issues that are relevant in their current and future functioning but are hardly discussed during their jobs.

Limitations of this study

The research method we used started with notes in response to different identity assignments (see Table 1). All assignments were designed to convert identity tensions into learning (cf. Pillen, Beijaard, and Den Brok 2013). Other identity assignments that focus more on strengths or positive experiences of beginning teachers, may have led to different portraits that, in turn, affect the configurations. In addition, the portraits are based upon teachers' personal notes coloured by their perceptions. The portraits could be adjusted to include data collected with other instruments such as interviews with the beginning teachers oneself, or with significant others (students, or team/organisation) of the beginning teacher. Also, observations, both inside and outside the class, enrich the teachers' portraits and may affect the configurations. It would be interesting to replicate the study with other beginning teacher cohorts and/or in other countries to see whether different teacher populations would lead to different configurations.

The diversity in teachers' notes was large. Some teachers wrote a number of notes sharing the same focus (i.e., 'focus on oneself'); other teachers notes were related to two foci ('focus on oneself' and 'focus on students') within one theme (Classroom management), or teachers' notes were linked to two themes instead of one theme (e.g., both to Classroom management and Students learning). Some teachers wrote down many notes, whereas others did not. Some notes contained deep reflections, other notes were hard to interpret. Consequently, also the portraits were diverse.

The present study is mainly focussing on the configurations found for a (representative) group of beginning teachers. The configurations of one teacher, nor

specific combinations of personal and contextual aspects within the theme of one teacher are not yet examined. As mentioned before, searching for patterns or specific combinations of aspects may require other data sources that result in data on, respectively, both person and context, as well as on the interaction between person and context.

Conclusion

During identity work, themes of beginning teachers were visualised in configurations of personal and contextual aspects relating to three foci: focus on oneself, focus on students and focus on team/organisation. With help of configurations, both the complex and unique features of professional identity development can be captured at the same time for both research and coaching purposes. Constructing configurations has the potential of being a promising way to better understand what really matters to beginning teachers: some results confirm previous findings, yet new insights also appear. Identity work in induction programmes is relevant, since the construction of a professional identity is a very personalised process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A. Examples of teachers' portraits

#32:

This teacher mentions 'having different educational ideas' as the most recognisable identity tension. To cope with this tension, the teacher wants to improve her interacting with her colleagues. In many reflective notes, she is referring to the role of communication: '*discussing the interaction*', '*interaction with colleagues went well*', '*helping each other*', '*clear and honest communicating about limits I am facing*'. The teacher's image of a teacher is in line with her notes. She considers a teacher to be a supportive person, who cooperates with students and colleagues. She perceives that the profession is all about trust in one another. The teacher self is also searching for signs of confirmation or feelings of trust from others. '*To have somebody who I can trust and who can give me back-up*'. In her storyline, she describes a negative experience caused by a conflict about constructing an exam with a colleague. Following this conflict, the teacher feels she is standing all alone. In the middle of the school year, she seems to have to acquire a grip on her planning. As for highlights in her development, she mentions a confidential meeting with a student (at the start of the school year), letting go of her graduates, a study trip, and the message that her temporary job is changed into a permanent one at her school (at the end of the year).

#36:

This teacher mentions 'balance between work and private life' as the most recognisable identity tension. She describes that her school forms an 'open organisational climate'. This means that the teacher has to search herself for her rules and routines in interacting with her students. She notes: '*Being a teacher is a rather lonely job*'. She also notes that she spends much time in preparing her teaching because of her perfectionism. In learning goals, she formulated, and in a meeting with her team manager she described, the focus is on time-management. Yet in other notes, she is searching for proper ways to interact with her students that match her as a person. Highlights in her professional development are the periods of leaves, a journey to India, and an official job expansion. A negative experience is occurring at the end of the school year: she is struggling with her health. Based on all her notes, the teacher seems to be more confident in the preparation of her teaching (growth at a cognitive level), but it is unclear whether the teacher is feeling more secure at a social level.

#39:

This teacher mentions 'balance between teaching related and non-teaching related activities' as the most recognisable identity tension in her job. Yet most notes seem to refer to the difference between the teacher and her colleagues. '*My predecessor was very cuddly*' '*I do not want that students touch me*'. The teacher is searching for a safe environment for her students, but she herself does not feel secure in her team of colleagues '*Unfortunately, the security <within the team> is not always guaranteed*'. With help of coaching at her school and a course 'mindfulness', the teacher restores her bond with two boys in her class. At the same time, she receives the message that her temporary job is extended. The teacher is feeling well then. Soon after that, then she faces an insecure relationship with a colleague. Before working together, this colleague is negative about their cooperation as co-mentors of students. At the end of the school year, the teacher seems to be

thrown back to her feelings at the start of the year: she keeps perceiving the school as an unsafe environment.

#50:

This teacher mentions 'workload' as the most recognisable identity tension. Each of her notes is referring to the high standards the teacher sets for herself or to the high demands she feels her school is imposing on her. The teacher enumerates: 'I feel *good about myself when I did it alright*', 'I cannot do it *halfway*', 'I want to *prepare my lessons very well*', 'You have to *show the best of yourself*', 'You have to *present yourself very well*', 'I have to *meet all the expectations in the best possible way*'. She describes a positive consultation with the leader of her school team as an influential moment in her development. After that consultation, the teacher seems to accept that not everything has to be perfect. 'It *gives rest*'. The teacher has faith in the upcoming lessons for the next school year. The learning goals of the teacher are becoming more sophisticated per Identity Workshop: Workshop 1: 'I cannot *perform halfway*.' Workshop 2: 'I want to *be satisfied with my activities*'. Workshop 3: 'Good is *good enough. Not everything has to be perfect*'.