

# **The perceptions of graduate students regarding diversity and culture in the construction of teacher identities**

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## **Abstract**

*The discussions presented in this article arose from action research carried out with students in a Master's Program in Education. The questions asked in the study were: How do graduate students in Education, future specialists in the area, view the concepts of diversity and culture and, furthermore, what perception do the students have regarding the influence of these concepts on the construction of a professional teacher identity? Aiming to address these doubts, a qualitative study was conducted by way of an online questionnaire, specifically developed for this study which was applied to 13 students in the Master's program in Education. The answers obtained were analyzed with the IRAMUTEQ software package to assess the text data. The results show that the group under study believed that one of the greatest challenges to teaching, and thus to the construction of an identity, is how cultural diversity is dealt with in the school setting. Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct conceptual standards regarding diversity, culture and teacher identities.*

**Keywords:** teacher identities; diversity; culture; teacher training.

## **1. Introduction**

The discussions presented in this article arose from action research carried out in a graduate course called "Special topics in education: identity, diversity and adversity in teacher training". The locus of the study was the Master's Program in Education, focusing on Social Education, duly authorized by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) and the Ministry of Education (MEC). This

program aims to provide researchers, professors and managers solid knowledge in the area of Education, with a special focus on social education, addressing the various settings in which education takes place, to construct interfaces between formal and non-formal education, through the production of knowledge on educational processes, considering movements in society and their contradictions.

In this context, beginning with the formal introduction of graduate studies in Brazil in 1965, with the Sucupira Report (CES/CFE n° 977/65), *stricto sensu* graduate programs were organized to adjust to the concept of the university as an academically productive institution (Turnes, 2014).

Currently, more particularly in 2020, it is common to find in the scientific literature studies aimed at analyzing, qualifying, quantifying and classifying teacher training experiences, including curricular components of graduate programs (Veras et al., 2020), teacher training and experience in higher learning settings (Furlan et al., 2020), mapping of research conducted on basic education teaching (Scherer, 2020), and teacher qualification and the training of teacher researchers in *stricto sensu* graduate programs (Teixeira et al., 2020). It is important to point out that Graduate Programs initially sought to meet an urgent demand to prepare teachers for more significant academic participation.

In this regard, the questions that conducted this study may be stated as follows: how do graduate students in Education, future specialists in the area, view the concepts of diversity and culture and, furthermore, what are the perceptions of students regarding the influence these concepts have on the construction of a professional teaching identity?

In this context, we consider it important to reflect on how the concepts of culture and diversity are related in the construction of teacher identities, given that they may produce complex manifestations on various social levels, giving different senses and meanings to the activities of teachers and researchers. In addition, the relevance of this diagnosis of ideas may be justified if we consider the various facets and elements of the concept of teacher identity, of which diversity and culture are part, in either the individual constitution of the teacher or in a collective context, which are equally important in this construction. Thus, an understanding of how teachers and future teachers regard these issues is important to raise awareness regarding the role culture plays in constituting and understanding of what it is to be a teacher and their professional practice.

Identity may be understood a set of singular and exclusive characteristics which reveal how individuals understand themselves. These attributes are dialectically constructed, in both the individual and social domains. For Turner (1982), the social domain is related to the social identity, and is the process where an individual identifies with another in a socially categorized system, for example, in a profession. This social identification, which takes place on the collective plane, directly influences the constitution of self-identity, since the way a person is identified by others contributes to how he or she conceives him or herself.

In this regard, Dubar (2006) states that identity requires differentiation, but also entails generalizing. From this counter perspective, differentiation allows a person to be unique in relation to another, thus identity would be difference. In generalizing, the aim is to determine a point in common for a set of all differences. Here, it is assumed that “identification of and by the other” (Dubar, 2006, p. 9) is recognizing that individual and social identities are not opposites; they are intertwined.

In order to better understand the meaning of identity, it would be of interest to pinpoint the concept. Bauman (2005, p. 12), highlights the complexity of the concept, and believes that “it is fundamental to understand

the preeminent characteristics of a 'long transition' in order to identify social trends [...]". The author believes that with globalization, countless transformations take place at a rapid pace, particularly in relation to the construction of an identity, in a context which is called liquid modernity (BAUMAN, 2001). Thus, when we speak of identity, we must also highlight the temporariness of the construction.

Regarding the particular identity we aim to better understand, namely the identity of the teaching profession, Nóvoa (2000) affirms that this construction is intimately related to the training process, which is not confined exclusively to university training. This journey is also comprised of pre-professional learning, academic training, and professional experience *per se* (Tardif, 2002).

The teaching profession is one of the few that provides the opportunity of immersion in the future professional setting, before becoming a professional teacher, due to the years spent in school. Albeit this experience may be related to our perspective as students, from the outset we continuously construct ideas of school, teachers, students, teaching and learning. In many cases, the conceptions created during our first years of schooling are so strong and entrenched that if we were to become teachers, these ideas, and not our formal training, would be revealed in our professional practice. Thus, teacher identities start forming when our lives begin, either in school or from all other experience. Well before we enter the university or start teaching professionally, important traits of this identity gradually become part of our teaching repertoire. For example, Besutti, Redante and Favero (2017) were able to determine, for a group of university faculty, that the influence of family or memorable teachers determined the trajectory and the construction of their identities.

In Brazil, professional teachers are trained in higher learning contexts, and students either obtain a Teaching Degree in certain areas of study or graduate in Pedagogy. In the former, specific knowledge is acquired in certain areas or for a given school level in which the future teacher shall work, and Pedagogy training covers the fundamentals of educational science, didactics, and current teaching contexts, as well as both the theoretical and practical aspects of university level teaching. This period, as well as the pre-professional stage, reinforces or brings new elements to the construction of teacher identity. Dubar (2005) points out that university training has a significant impact on the construction of the professional teacher identity.

At the same time, professional experience equally contributes to the construction of teacher identity. This experience, no longer as a student but as a professional, makes important contributions to the construction of this identity.

Professional experience, in terms of teacher identity, passes through different moments of the teaching career. In fact, the expectations of teachers at the beginning of their career, from the moment they begin to up to 3 to 5 years of teaching (Tardif, 2002), are different than those at other moments in their professional careers. Initially, the recognition and consolidation, by others and by the teachers themselves, of being a teacher and being welcomed by the profession are important for the construction of a professional teacher identity. Also, teachers need to assimilate school contexts, work routines, interaction with other teachers, school management and other situations that are specific to the teaching activity.

Teachers develop professionally from the interaction between the subjective dimension (which corresponds to a teacher's self-image) and the objective dimension (which corresponds to the image others have or what is expected of you). These universes (subjective and objective) come face-to-face in the socializing process, where professionalism plays an important role in the construction of this identity (Dubar, 2005).

It is true that professional experience, added to the other moments of teacher training, progressively lead to the constitution of an identity which is provisional. Although certain elements of this identity may be consolidated, the social and historical context and the relations established over one's life make the professional teaching identity subject to reflection and change.

At this point we introduce to the discussion the production of cultural meaning and diversity in contemporary societies, as in the construction of teacher identity. Toward this end, we discuss the concepts of culture and diversity based on cultural studies, which are characterized by their interdisciplinary nature. The main authors here are Raymond Williams, Hoggart, and E.P. Thompson who, according to Hall (1996), were pioneers in addressing the complexity of the concept of culture.

For Moreira and Candau (2007), the meaning of the word culture has changed over time. In the 15th century, culture was associated with farming and livestock raising. In the 16th century, the notion of culture was studied from the perspective of the human mind, the cultivation of the mind, and only certain persons or societies were regarded as having a high degree of culture or civilization. In the 18th century, the classist nature of culture crystalized only for those European civilizations that were considered refined and learned. It was only in the 20th century that culture began including popular culture.

Culture is regarded as a web of meanings woven by humankind with a global meaning, which expands and guides peoples and continues as an endless web. Culture is forged by the systems of symbols of individuals in reciprocal interaction (Geertz, 1989).

From this perspective, the current shared notion is that culture is constituted by the history of a social group, manifested as "[...] an entire complex that includes the knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capacity or habit acquired by individuals as members of a society" (Laraia, 2006, p. 25).

Thus, "culture is the source of meanings present in the daily life of individuals. It is the wider concept of culture that breaks with the notion of culture linked to artifacts by placing daily practices alongside the arts" (Rossi; Marrero; Paluan, 2013, p. 3).

We recognize culture as an active referential in the lives of individuals, as well as its discussion in the development of teachers and researchers as co-participating subjects in the process of systematizing scientific knowledge, and as creators and disseminators of diverse cultural knowledge. In this regard, Fourquin (1993, p. 14) affirms that "culture is a substantial part of education; its source and ultimate justification; education is nothing outside from or devoid of culture".

The concept of culture is also addressed based on a term to which it is frequently associated - identity (Cucho, 2002, p. 175), since, "currently, the main interrogations regarding identity frequently refer to the question of culture".

Explaining how meaning is attributed to terms such as difference and diversity is pertinent to understanding the role diversity and culture play in the construction of teacher identities. Regarding diversity, Urquiza et al. (2014) propose that the most comprehensive expression be "cultural diversity", meaning "that which refers to the multiple manifestations of a group or society through their cultural practices" (Urquiza et al., 2014, p. 9). The authors explain that although many individuals and even dictionaries regard difference and diversity as synonyms, the distinction between the terms is highly relevant, since diversity is not only limited to a comparison between an "I" and an "Other". According to Gomes (2003), the concept of diversity is inherent to the level of relations endowed with cultural, political and historical values.

The notion of difference regards a “relation of otherness”, or between “Ego (I) and the Alter (the other)” (Urquiza et al., 2014, p. 11). The concept of difference entails contradictions, which are the conflicts between an “I”, when recognizing an identity. “Furthermore, diversity is part of the human essence: difference is a human characteristic. And differences also help preserve our identity” (MARTIN; SEGALLA, 2018, p. 23). In this regard, we believe that diversity is a property of human identity, driven by difference.

In this context, Hall (2006) carried out studies on cultural identity in the early 1990s, and the concept of identity was regarded, in his words, as a “cultural identity, which directly influences the construction of a subject’s identity”. Based on this, Hall presents three moments in history marked by three different conceptions of identity: the illuminist subject, the sociological subject, and the post-modern subject. According to Hall (2006), post-modernity fuels internal conflicts in subjects, which need to be resolved, and this process was defined by the author as an “identity crisis”.

In light of all the particularities regarding the concept of identity, particularly the identity of professional teachers, our aim was to investigate how graduate students regarded this issue, from the perspective of diversity and culture.

## **2. Material and methods**

This study adopted a qualitative approach, based on action research (Tripp, 2005). We conducted a survey among students enrolled in a Master’s course offered by the Graduate Program in Education. On the first day of class, the students were invited to take part in the study, highlighting its importance towards reflection and contributions during the remainder of the course.

Abiding by all the ethical aspects pertaining to research on human beings, the study applied an online questionnaire that addressed identity, teacher identity, diversity and culture. The questionnaire was applied to 13 students and the responses were analyzed by the IRAMUTEQ 0.7.2.0 program (*Interface de R pour les Analyses Multidimensionnelles de Textes et de Questionnaires*). This software is based on the R software allowing the comprehension of texts and the presentation of results in decreasing hierarchical order, statistics, Specificity Analysis and Factorial Correspondence Analysis - FCA, similarity analysis, and word clouds. Developed by Ratinaud and Marchand (2012), the IRAMUTEQ program allows for different types of statistical analyses of text corpora and individuals/words. Initially developed in French, this program began to be used in Portuguese in 2013. According to Camargo and Justo (2013), the IRAMUTEQ program produces different types of textual analyses, ranging from basic lexicography to multivariate analyses.

The responses of the graduate students underwent linguistic correction so as to optimize the data analysis by way of a content analysis technique, also considering the frequency of word repetition with the use of the software.

For the textual analysis of the questionnaires of this study, the IRAMUTEQ program was used for a specific type of data analysis that deals specifically with the analysis of the transcribed verbal material, i.e., the texts produced under different conditions such as written texts, interviews, documents, essays, etc. which are the sources traditionally used in Human and Social Science research (Nascimento; Menandro, 2006).

## 2. Results and Discussion

The results sample is comprised of the responses given by 13 graduate students between the ages of 21 and 49 (11 female and 2 male) with different academic backgrounds, as listed below:

**Table 1. Initial background of participants**

Subject	Background
Graduate Student 01	Bachelor's degree in Law
Graduate Student 02	Teaching Degree in Physical Education
Graduate Student 03	Teaching Degree in Physical Education
Graduate Student 04	Teaching Degree in Biology
Graduate Student 05	Teaching Degree in Geography
Graduate Student 06	Teaching Degree in Biology
Graduate Student 07	Education
Graduate Student 08	Teaching Degree in Physical Education
Graduate Student 09	Teaching Degree in History
Graduate Student 10	Teaching Degree in Letters Portuguese/Spanish
Graduate Student 11	Teaching Degree in Physical Education
Graduate Student 12	Teaching Degree in Letters
Graduate Student 13	Bachelor's degree in Administration

Source: study data.

It may be observed that the participants, who are enrolled in a course in the Graduate Program in Education, have degrees in various areas, including some who during their undergraduate studies had never been acquainted with aspects of teacher identity (Tardif, 2002). However, this does not allow us to infer that these graduate student did not have conceptions associated with teaching practice, nor with the concepts of diversity and culture.

In the questionnaire assessment, the software identified 84 segments of text. The total number of words used was 2,369 and, disregarding the repetitions, the words or forms were broken down into their roots, producing a total of 566 lemmas or words with the same lexical root.

In the analysis of the responses provided by the graduate students when asked to define "being a teacher", we observed 12 forms of text in 221 occurrences of words, 27 of which were active forms, with an average repetition of 4.6. We highlight the response of Graduate Student 5, who stated that a teacher should be "a professional whose mission is not only to convey knowledge but, above all, to contribute to the development of his or her students as critical citizens, aware of their role in society".

The statements that depict what the graduate students believed was needed to be a good teacher are presented in Figure 1 in a word cloud, showing the most frequent words highlighted in the center, namely 'knowledge', 'commitment', 'didactic', 'teach', and 'student'.

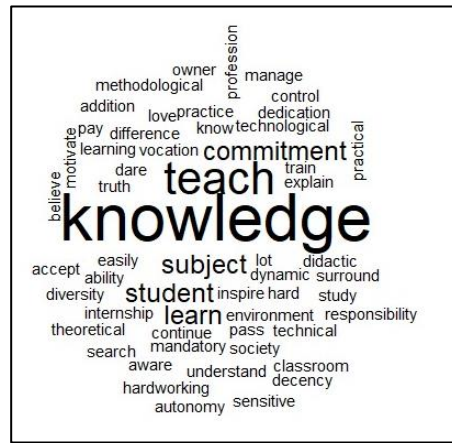


Figure 1. Word cloud “What is needed to be a teacher”

For the group under study, it was interesting to see the strong presence of the idea of the need for knowledge to be a teacher. This is an important trait in the constitution of the teacher identity, which breaks away from the common sense notion that being a teacher is a vocation or gift. In addition, there is the presence of the term “teach” corroborating that specific knowledge is intrinsic to the profession.

In the analysis of the responses regarding how the graduate students comprehended the concept of identity, the dendrogram in Figure 2 shows that the corpus was broken down into 3 divisions, two initial and then another. We considered words with a chi-square (X<sup>2</sup>) greater than 3.80, which reflects greater association of the TSs between the classes and stronger linkages (Camargo; Justo, 2013).

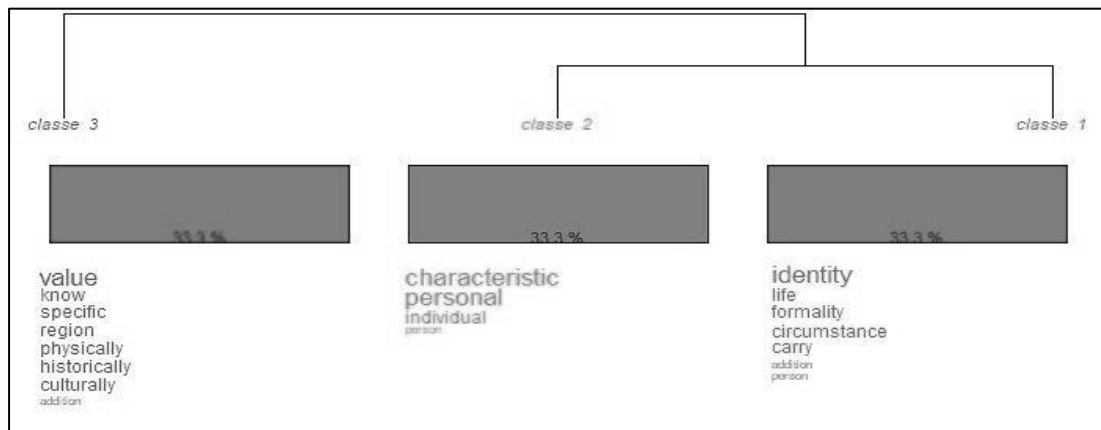


Figure 2. The conception of identity dendrogram

From these results, the classes were named as follows:

- 1) Identity from the cultural perspective, as a hybrid and flexible set of elements that form the cultural identity with the values of a people.
- 2) Identity from the social perspective; as a self-definition which is manifested and shared with members of a social group.
- 3) Identity from the psychological perspective, as the dynamic construction of one’s being, ones self-awareness.

Hall (2006) proposes a definition called “cultural identity” as aspects of identity that arise from our

“belonging” to ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious groups. The interlace between culture and identity can be heard in the statement of Graduate Student 10, who believed that the construction of identity “is linked to the culture an individual is part of”.

Graduate Student 9 declared that “identity is the social form individuals see themselves as”. This statement echoes the definition of identity from a social perspective and we thus perceive that “identity is never given, it is constructed and (re) constructed, with greater or lesser uncertainty, less or longer lasting” (Dubar, 2005, p. 104).

Ciampa (1987) addresses identity as a category of Social Psychology and regards identity as a metamorphosis in a continuous process of transformation, i.e., the provisional result of the intersection between one’s individual history. This process may be noted in the words of Graduate Student 5, who stated that identity regarded “the particular characteristics of an individual. Our psychological and physical marks”.

To further analyze the graduate students’ perception of teacher identity we used the software’s “Specificities and CFA” tool, using only the active forms of the words, selected by type, with a minimum frequency of 7. The words “professional” and “students” were the most frequently mentioned in the graduate student statements. Figure 3 illustrates the 3 groups of words distributed in the 4 quadrants.

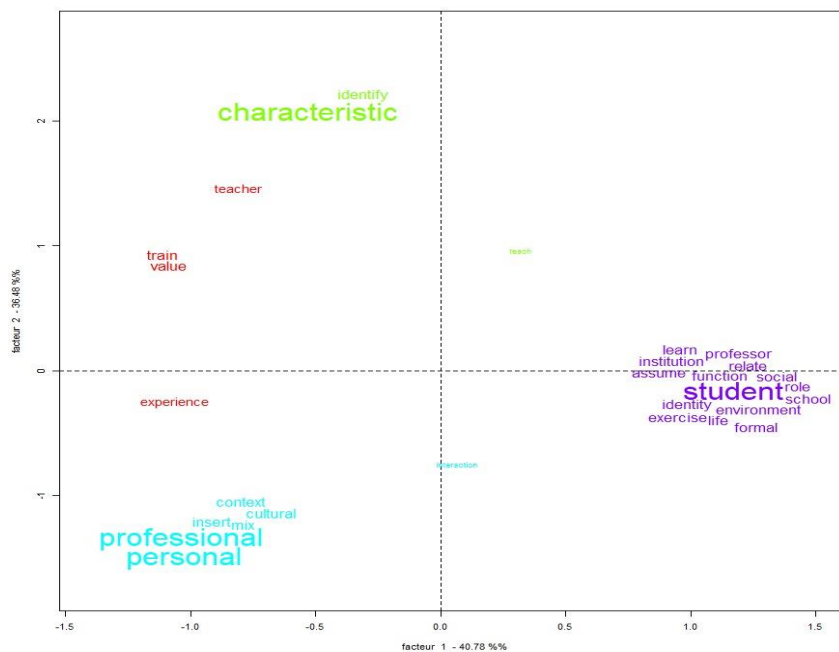


Figure 3. Specificities and FCA of teacher identities

This graph shows the forms on a plane, indicating the proximity of the groups of words in the text. However, it may be perceived that the group of words in the lower left quadrant are quite close to the words in the lower right quadrant, indicating that they appear more frequently and closer to each other in the graduate student statements. The following statements highlight this proximity: “The interaction of the teacher with the other students” (Graduate Student 11). “Teacher identities are generated from the principles and values that each professional carries, in other words, how they see themselves in their profession” (Graduate Student 4).



Figure 4 presents the similarity analysis and it is possible to identify that the large guiding axis of the graduate student statements on how diversity influences teacher identities is the word “culture”. Thus, “for good or for bad, culture is now one of the most dynamic elements – and the most unpredictable – of historic change in the new millenium” (Moreira; Candau, 2007, p. 20).

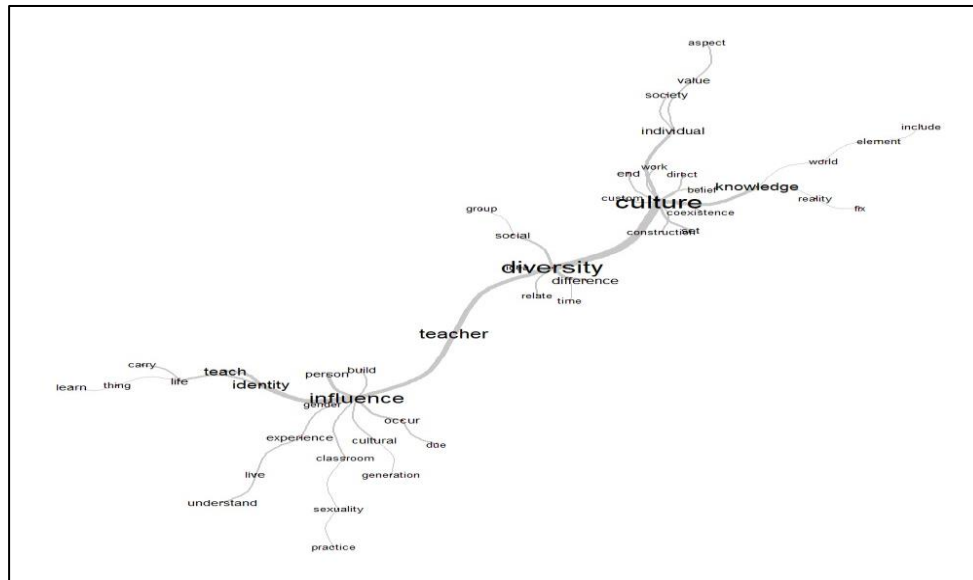


Figure 4. Similarity analysis of diversity in teacher identities

The corpus of text with the graduate students’ perceptions regarding the challenges and possibilities in teacher training and in teaching practice were divided into 3 classes. The first class (29.4%) held that teaching practice expanded the possibilities of overall development, as may be seen in the statements “when we graduate and enter the classroom we are confronted with a totally different reality, with lots of challenges” (Graduate Student 10). The second class (35.3%) believed that the lack of recognition was the main challenge to teaching practice, as stated in “during teacher training and practice several challenges are faced, such as the lack of motivation and recognition” (Graduate Student 12). The third and last class (35.3%) highlighted that the learning process in teacher training may help overcome the challenges of teaching practice, as revealed by Graduate Student 8: “I believe in learning new possibilities that will help overcome the challenges of teaching practice”.

Lastly, when questioned on diversity and identity in teacher training and practice, the dendrogram in Figure 5 shows that class 4 (21.4%) of the graduate students addressed the concept of “difference” when talking about diversity and identity in teacher training, and class 5 (21.4%) focused on the “student” when talking about teaching practice.

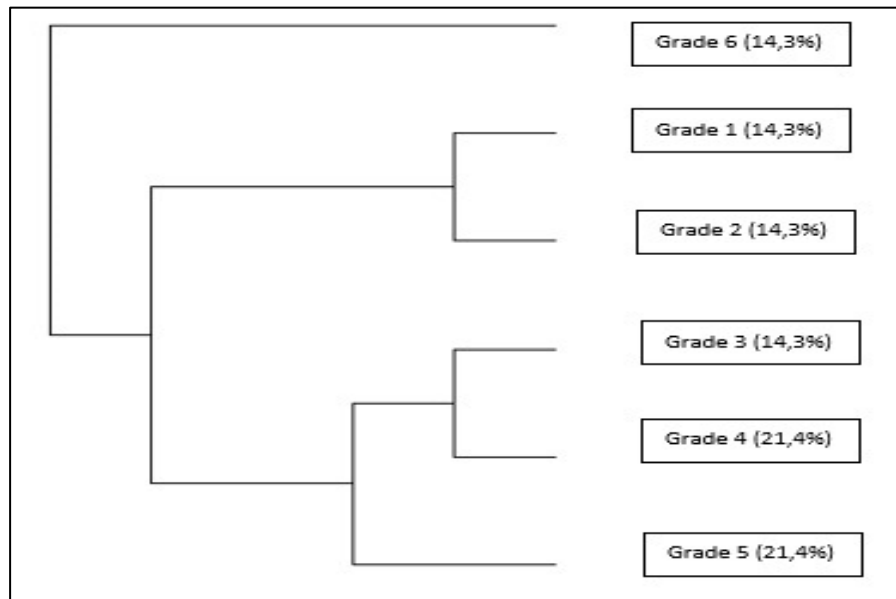


Figure 5. Dendrogram of diversity and identity in teacher training and practice

From this, it may be inferred that the graduate students participating in the study believed that diversity is associated to dealing with the various needs of the students, as per the statement of Graduate Student 9: “many teachers do not know how to deal with the issue of diversity in the classroom, not for a lack of empathy or even for trying to make it work; the issue is that many do not have adequate knowledge of how to deal with different types of situation”.

### 3. Conclusion

Knowing what future specialists in education think about teacher identities in a context of diversity and culture becomes relevant, since they are the subjects who will engage directly with teachers and managers of basic education, and indirectly in the training of other professionals. By knowing what they think, i.e., by being aware of their perceptions, better interventions may be organized and offered towards the initial and continuous training of teachers.

The group under study proved to be familiar with the concepts of identity and teacher identity, and manifested important traits regarding the teaching profession in their discourses. They stated that diversity in teacher training and teaching practice was related to culture, which is an important element to be considered in these domains. Furthermore, they highlighted the importance of teacher training that addresses the challenges of actual teaching with regard to dealing with cultural diversity in the classroom. The urgent need to deconstruct standard concepts of diversity, culture and teacher identities must also be pointed out. We conclude by proposing that future research consider the provisional characteristics of the issue when discussing the ample spectrum of human diversity.

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