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Early teacher identity development

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Abstract

This study considers how a teacher trainee interprets, evaluates and continuously collaborates in the construction of her own early identity development. Drawing on data collected from a single teacher trainee, the study examines the way in which the understanding of teaching, teacher practices and career plans are shaped throughout a practicum process. Multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted in the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years. Both during the interviews and in before-and-after discussions of observations, the focus was on the participant teacher trainee's personal and professional history, teacher education experiences, past and current work with children, perspectives on teaching and her school, and future career plans.

1. Introduction

Human beings have the ability to influence their own lives and environment, but they are also shaped by the environment they live in. As part of society, teachers experience many opportunities to both change themselves, and to be changed by the influences around them. The students they teach, the preservice preparation and in-service professional development they receive and sometimes the profession of teaching as a whole are important factors in shaping their identity.

Before we focus on teacher identity itself, a general analysis of the concept of identity which has different meanings in the literature is crucial. What these various meanings have in common is the idea that identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon. Identity development occurs in an inter-subjective field, and can be best characterized as an ongoing process, a process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person and being recognized as such in a given context (Gee, 2001).

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Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) state that professional teacher identity has emerged as a separate research area in the last few decades. Educational researchers, they contend, have made use of two sciences, namely social sciences and philosophy, to understand the concept. The first defines identity as a part of the social context the person lives in. Here, the concept of self develops with communication with others, during which the self learns about the roles of others. Personal history, social interactions and psychological and cultural factors all influence identity formation (Cooper and Olson 1996). In this phenomenon, in addition to the social context, another important aspect is the continuing development of identity, which is believed to have place throughout one's lifetime. Therefore, as Zembylas (2003) puts "identity is not a pre-existing, stable element that becomes disciplined through discourses and practices of emotion".

According to Pennington (2002), teacher identity can be studied in two different orientations. The first originates from social psychology, and provides perspectives on teachers' *social identity*. On the other hand, the second results from the teacher education literature, and provides perspectives on teachers' *professional identity*. For Pennington, both of these orientations can serve as a basis for a consideration of teacher identity.

Sachs (2005) defines professional teacher identity concisely as follows:

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. (p. 15)

The elements of professional identity listed as "how to be, act" and "understand" compose not only the occupational identity of teachers, but their personal identity as well. This view also emphasizes that identity cannot be taught or acquired because it is innate and the only source of change is experience.

It is clear that student teachers' undergo a shift in identity due to the range of experiences they gain in the process of becoming a teacher. In addition, student teachers may continue to face identity shifts throughout their career because of interactions within school and broader communities (Beauchamp, Thomas; 2009). The study in hand is an attempt to define the transition a teacher trainer has gone through. Living with her student identity for over 20 years, Dila found herself in the position of a teacher with her new identity. How was she going to assume the role of a "teacher"?

2. The Study

2. 1.Participant

This case study was carried out in the context of a four-year teaching programme in Turkey. Teacher training programmes in Turkey integrate subject-specific (English Language Teaching) and pedagogical/teaching components throughout the entire four-year programme. Teaching in their third and fourth years, students have teaching practise in state primary and high schools. The participant in this study was a 21-year-old female student in her 3rd year. The study was started on February 26, 2011.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

In order to collect data, we used reflective journal writing as the method for capturing the thoughts of our student teacher whom we will call as "Dila" from now on. Dila wrote her reflective journal after her observations of school life and my classes (See Appendix). From the spring term of 2011, continuing through the spring term of 2012, still in progress at the time of writing, Dila and the researcher regularly observed each other teaching at their respective institutions, a school and a university. At the end of each observation, both researcher and trainee teacher wrote journal entries, which were the basis for explorative interviews which form the basis of this study.

Reflective journal writing, in other words, narrative research has been an effective tool in data collection in teacher identity studies. The study of teachers' narratives, which can be called as the stories of teachers' own experiences, is increasingly being seen as crucial to the study of teachers' thinking, culture, and behaviour (Connelly & Clandinin, 1987, 1999; Carter, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1998). This type of research has been found to be valuable since teachers are in the best position to know themselves, their lives, their teaching and of learning. This is why reflective journal has been used to gather data about Dila's teacher identity development. In order to best explain herself in her journals, Dila was first given training on how to use the reflective journal and her first three observations and the journals written for these observations were not included in the study because of the reliability issues.

3. Results

Historically, the teaching of young children has been perceived as 'women's work' in Turkey and is arguably a gendered activity. Dila might have been affected by this perspective, because after her first teaching experience, she was combining her roles as mother and teacher, and that the former role would be distinctive feature of her teacher identity. When asked "What does teaching mean to you?" she replied:

"I just realized that teaching is not just teaching and watching your students to learn, actually … teaching is mothering, I think. Yes, exactly. Teaching is mothering. OK, I don't know how being a mother feels like, but it must be the same. I guess, what I felt in the classroom was exactly the same with what my mom felt when she looks at me….To love somebody very much, to feel proud when they utter just one word, and always to think for them. I have been thinking about extra activities to be used in the classroom, for example (Laughing). Maybe it is because my students are too small but when I hear "what is your name?" from them, I want to applaud them (Laughing). I guess this is love. That's why I have just realized that teaching is not just teaching but beyond that."

According to Galea (2005) this attitude of female teachers occurs a result of their definition of themselves through their dual social roles as mothers and teachers. Or as Weber's (2011) conclusion "Much of this socialization that produces caring mothers also creates female teachers with the goal of nurturing their students."

When Dila was asked about herself as a teacher, how she images herself in the classroom, her reply regarding her teacher identity was "*I knew right from the day I chose this department (Faculty of Education) to study, that I was gonna be a perfect teacher. I am going to be a loved and respected teacher. It has always been a great idea to think about children who are waiting for you to teach them. There is just one thing I can say about Dila as a teacher…. Even years later, I know for sure that I will say to myself "Thank God, I've been a teacher*"

Surprisingly, this commitment to teaching has increased gradually over the time that I observed her as a student-teacher. There were times when she was so decisive and telling me "*You'll see! I'll leave the job, if I cannot teach X English. (Giving the name of a student who performed really low that day and*

seemed not interested in the class at all) " During her teaching, it was easy to observe her commitment to her prospective job and her student learning. This commitment is reflected in her enthusiasm for teaching.

Dila attaches great importance to an instructional approach that encourages pupils to learn from each other, to solve problems independently, and to cooperate. She has a strong student-oriented view.

Dila's self-efficacy increased throughout the observations. Her belief in her abilities to succeed as a teacher in specific situations seemed to increase with practice. After a period of 6 or 7 weeks- she started believing in what she was doing and she started uttering sentences like "It is just perfect to be able to teach something. Someone learns something just because of you. You become useful. Even when you're no longer with them, you leave something with them, and knowing this is invaluable. I think, it is the teachers that the society needs the most."

Another aspect of her teacher identity which changed during the study was her understanding of classroom discipline. As a novice teacher who did not do any teaching, Dila was at first focused more on classroom discipline. However, this changed slightly as time progressed. For her, after the 2011-2012 Fall semester it became less important if her students were making noise in the classroom, if they were obedient or not. The noise in the classroom became less of a threat for her classroom management skills.

One of the issues that Dila discussed in our interviews was the effect of sharing the same environment with her "future colleagues". She stated that it was an important factor in her professional identity development. "Being with other teachers", she says, "you feel like you are one of them. It's cool. For the first time in my life I felt like a teacher".   As Lamote and Engels (2010) conclude, "The social interaction with members of the future professional group makes students explore their perception of the profession further to adjust it based on new information."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Referring back to their own studies, Beauchamp & Thomas, (2006; 2007), state that a full understanding of identity in general, and teacher identity in particular is important to support the formation of teacher education programs. It has to be stated though, that it is not possible to understand teacher identity only by observing a single trainee for two years; however, this can still shed light on the possible challenges teachers face. My aim is not to generalize the results for all language teachers, which I know is not possible, but rather to enhance my own knowledge of "teacher identity" and therefore become better able to assist my other students. This suggests a greater need to focus more effectively on identity in teacher education. The more we know about teacher identity -the phases and the reasons of identity development- , the better we can design our teacher education programs.

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Appendix A

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Formula D-I-E-P

D – Describe objectively what happened
      • Answer the question, "What did I do, read, see, hear etc?"

I – Interpret the events
      • Explain what you saw and heard;
      • Your new insights;
      • Your connections with other learning, your feelings etc;
      • Your hypotheses; your conclusions
      • Answer the question what might this mean?

E – Evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of what was observed
      • Make judgments clearly connected to observations made.

Evaluation answers the question, "What is my opinion about what I observed or experienced? Why?

P – Plan how this information will be useful to you
      • What are your recommendations? (Be concrete)

Consider: In what ways might this learning experience serve my in my future?

Formula … D–I–E–P

D – Describe objectively what happened –
Answer the question, "What did I see and hear?"

   I – Interpret the events – explain what you saw and heard. (Your new insights; your connections with other learning; your feelings; your hypotheses; your conclusions.)
   Answer the question, "What might it mean?" or "What was the reason I did this activity?"

   E – Evaluate the effectiveness of what you observed/learned – make judgments clearly connected to observations made.
   Evaluation answers the question, "What is my opinion about what I observed or experienced? Why?"

P – Plan how this information will be useful to you
What are your recommendations? (Be concrete.) Consider: in what ways might this learning experience serve me in my future?

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