



“Trying on teaching for fit” – Development of professional identity among professionals with multiple career opportunities



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The present study offers insights into the Teach First programme.
- Teach First candidates explore future possible identities through identity play.
- Initial motivation for becoming a teacher impacts professional identity development.

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1. Introduction

Many young professionals are likely to assume an exploratory attitude towards their working life rather than to endorse traditional notions of careers as long-term or lifelong commitments (Ibarra, 2005). While earlier employment patterns were based on long-term perspectives and mutual loyalty, today's employment is often based on mutually recognised win–win situations and short-term goals (Savickas et al., 2009). Instead of a single occupational choice, the task of career construction has become a continuing responsibility for many people. Individuals in the current labour market must be flexible, maintain employability, and maximise their own work opportunities (Caza & Creary, 2016; Krejsler, 2006; Savickas, 2012). Because a career choice might be a step towards other careers, professional identities will be constructed and re-constructed. A study by Roness and Smith (2010) indicated that this trend in professional identity exploration also applies to student teachers. In their study, 24% of student teachers reported

ambivalence towards teaching as a career, and reported having chosen teacher education to obtain various options on the job market.

Also, in many countries the teaching force is increasingly unstable, with low retention rates among beginning teachers (cf. Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). Tiplic, Brandmo, and Elstad (2015) reported that 33% of beginning teachers in Norway (2006–2011) left within the first five years in the teaching profession. Furthermore, Ingersoll et al. (2014) found that, in the US, teachers' attrition rates have been increasing since the 1990s. Similarly, Kyriacou and Kunc (2007) observed that many beginning teachers in the UK left the profession early in their careers.

Weiner and Torres (2016) suggested that new teachers' shifting beliefs regarding teaching as a career is reflected in the introduction of alternative teacher education programmes. In the global educational landscape, neo-liberalism has resulted in private actors gaining a greater importance (de Boer & Jongbloed, 2012). Teacher education has undergone rapid changes, particularly focusing on preparing teachers' competitiveness regarding international achievement tests (Waldow, Takayama, & Sung, 2014). Teach First (TF) programmes are among the key agents in this dynamic (Scott, Trujillo, & Rivera, 2016). These programmes offer young professionals the opportunity to explore the teaching profession, while also undergoing training in competencies relevant for other careers.

Alternative teacher education programmes, such as TF, have been established in numerous countries worldwide responding to worries about teaching quality and allowing for quick teacher recruitment (Blumenreich & Gupta, 2015; Straubhaar & Friedrich, 2015). These programmes are announced as time-limited activities aiming to develop skilled teachers and leaders through training as class leaders. The majority of TF programmes are

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organised under Teach for All (TFAll), an umbrella organisation currently covering 39 member countries (<http://teachforall.org/en>).

TF programmes recruit high-achieving graduates with no previous teacher education and place them in teaching positions in schools for two years. The programmes provide candidates with a unique and diverse set of competencies (e.g., teaching skills and leadership competencies) to choose from when designing their career trajectories, either as teachers or in other vocations. TF thus provides an arena where candidates can purposefully explore two kinds of profession: a teacher in a school, and a leader in a company.

As individuals enter a profession their present identities might be challenged, fuelling an identity development process (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; van Rijswijk, Akkerman, Schaap, & van Tartwijk, 2016). Research and theorising on identity development suggests that this process is not necessarily linear, but rather moves in waves of exploration and adaption (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). For TF candidates, it seems particularly relevant to view the professional trajectory as non-linear, as they may not maintain the teaching profession as a career endpoint. These candidates are, maybe provisionally, trying out a possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) as a teacher, which they may or may not pursue further in their professional life. The concept of possible selves represents a self-knowledge concerning how individuals think about their potential and their future. Markus and Nurius (1986) describe possible selves as “the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves that we could become and the selves that we are afraid of becoming” (p. 954).

The aim of the current study is to explore how individuals with multiple career opportunities experience and evaluate teaching as a profession, and further, how their experiences and evaluations impact their professional identities as teachers. We utilise the concept of identity play (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), i.e., the process in which people actively explore possible professional selves. Specifically, we focus on identity play in terms of individuals' provisional, yet active, exploration of a teacher self, as they meet the work context of TF. Through the process of identity play our candidates' possible selves might be shaped and elaborated and may also be changed when faced with school realities.

We argue that studying TF candidates offers a valuable and unique insight into the process of exploring professional identities. The obligation to teaching in TF is temporary, and TF is also marketed as a leadership training programme, thus providing an arena for exploration of identities as teachers, as well as leaders. This opportunity to explore makes Teach First Norway (TFN) an interesting research context for studying identity play.

2. Professional identity development

In identity research, identity has been defined in a multitude of ways, including as a sense of self (van Rijswijk et al., 2016), a malleable story (Danielewicz, 2001), or in terms of narratives that people create to explain themselves (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Sford & Prusak, 2005). Central to these definitions is the notion that identity refers to the self-definitions or meanings that individuals attach to themselves (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Brown, 2015). Identity construction is the process individuals go through to define who they are. According to Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) identification is the key outcome of this process, pertaining to the extent to which individuals internalise a given identity (e.g., a professional identity as a teacher) as a part of their self-definition. Positive feelings towards an identity signal a match and may lead to an internalisation of the identity as a

partial definition of self (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

It is widely acknowledged that people have multiple identities (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Rodgers & Scott, 2008) varying in centrality and importance, and to what extent they are provisional or lasting (Baumeister, 2010; Burke & Stets, 2009; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Ibarra, 1999). Research on identity development in work settings, commonly referred to as identity construction (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) and identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Pratt, 2012), builds on a notion that individuals form, strengthen, and revise their identities to construct a self-understanding that is coherent and positive (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). In research on identity construction or identity work, an important part of the identity-development process is identity validation (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, 2012; Pratt et al., 2006), including perceptions of and subsequent assessment of identity threats (Petriglieri, 2011), adapting identities to external demands, and having those identities validated or not validated (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006).

However, not all identity development processes are associated with a rational, logical, and means–end orientation where individuals engage in regulation and adaption to a desired professional identity. Some identity development processes are based on exploration and discovery (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Pratt, 2012).

To better understand the identity-development process, Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) introduced the notion of *identity play* as a complementary metaphor for identity work. Identity play is defined as “the crafting and provisional trial of immature (i.e., as yet unelaborated) possible selves” (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 13). When individuals interact with their context, they develop “possible selves” – who an individual would like to become (desired self) and who an individual avoids becoming (feared self; Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The notion of *possible selves* thus defines identity as future potentials. The purpose of identity play is to explore the future possibilities that may be attractive to an individual (Brown, 2015; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Pratt, 2012). In identity play, people will “invent and reinvent” themselves (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 14) through experimenting with possible selves (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Pratt, 2012).

Identity play takes place on the threshold between reality and imagination – that is, in people's thoughts about possible selves (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Possible selves are individualised, but also social (Markus & Nurius, 1986), emerging from social comparison (e.g., I can be a teacher, like my brilliant maths teacher in upper secondary school [cf. Lortie, 1975], or I can become a successful entrepreneur) and emerging from categories made available by the context and the social experiences of an individual. Thus, a teacher possible self would be based on values and standards about teaching provided by society (Beijaard et al., 2004) and the perceptions of teaching formed from our own experiences and the observations of our teachers (Flores & Day, 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009; Lortie, 1975; Stenberg, Karlsson, Pitkaniemi, & Maaranen, 2014).

Among young professionals with multiple career opportunities, the range of possible professional selves might be considerable. An earlier study of TFN (Nesje, 2016) investigated candidates' motivations for teaching in addition to their general career motivation, identifying participants' motivational profiles. Based on the Factors Influencing Teaching (FIT)-Choice Scale (Watt & Richardson, 2007), candidates reported their beliefs and values related to teaching. In the present study, we build on these motivational profiles and construe these as expressions of the candidates' possible teacher selves.

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