



Becoming an educator in and through the arts: Forming and informing emerging teachers' professional identity



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Insights from the student teacher experience of arts education are presented.
- Arts education informs part of a complex emerging teacher identity development.
- The importance of practical and reflective arts experiences is highlighted.
- Student participatory arts experiences inform values and approaches to teaching.
- Arts experiences broaden student teacher candidates' professional identity.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines student experience and identity formation within an arts education module (involving music, drama and visual arts) on an initial teacher education programme in Ireland. Student reflections ($n = 106$) and interview data ($n = 33$) are analysed to explore the complex nature of becoming an arts educator within a general-education model. Using student voice, findings are presented through a series of dualisms to problematise teacher development and identity-building in and through arts education. Findings reveal the importance of practical and reflective arts experiences to shape emerging teacher identities but also to inform the values and approaches to teaching the arts in schools.

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1. Introduction

Teacher education has undergone significant changes both in policy and practice in recent years. Ireland has responded to these changes quite rapidly including significant landmarks such as the establishment of a teaching council, restructuring of institutional provision, lengthening of degree programmes and a new prominence of postgraduate provision in the last number of years (Coolahan, 2007; Galvin, 2009; Government of Ireland, 1992, 1995, 2001, 2002; Hyland, 2012; The Teaching Council, 2011). Alongside these changes, there has been a growing body of research internationally and nationally into the student experience of teacher education with particular focus on pre-service teacher identity and

self-efficacy (Alsup, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Cobb, 1996; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Deegan, 2008; Haniford, 2010; Korthagen, 2004; Lopes & Pereira, 2012; Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Sugrue, 2004). This article seeks to contribute to this developing discourse with a particular focus on the student experience of arts education (music, drama and visual arts) within teacher education programmes and more specifically within initial primary (elementary) teacher education in Ireland. An examination of where the teaching of the arts fits into the views of pre-service general-education primary teachers is put forward to uncover some of the complexity involved in shaping arts educator identities within an overarching emerging teacher identity frame.

Arts Education, akin to teacher education in Ireland has also seen significant changes in recent years. On a macro level, the two government departments with responsibility for Education and the Arts jointly signed the *Arts in Education Charter* (Department of Education and Skills & Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2013). The Charter aims to promote and develop arts

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education and the arts in education amongst children and young people through an integrated and collaborative approach across government departments, education agencies and arts organisations. At university level, there is an increased call to interrelate and integrate across subject disciplines within teacher education courses (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). Therefore, the findings of this study are presented here within the context of systemic change both within teacher education and arts education in Ireland. It is hoped that the study will provide educationalists, academics and policymakers with insights into teaching and learning in arts education. In addition, the research presented highlights the significant value of hearing and seeking to understand the student voice within teacher education.

Primary schools in Ireland involve eight class levels which span the age ranges of 4–12 approximately. Arts Education within the primary curriculum in Ireland is one of six identified key areas encompassing the disciplines of visual art, drama and music (Government of Ireland, 1999). This curriculum is to be delivered in all Irish schools by generalist teachers and so teacher education programmes provide courses to all student teachers in arts education. There is currently a significant gap in research regarding arts education within teacher education in Ireland. The research presented here is the first of its kind nationally to investigate student perceptions and values of the arts, and student emergent identities as pre-service teachers engaged with the arts.

2. Student teacher identity: being and becoming

The formation of teacher identity for student teachers begins long before their entry into teacher education courses. Values, assumptions, perceptions and beliefs about teachers and teaching are established largely based on student school experiences. While these preconceptions are often simplistic in nature and ignore the complexity of the teaching profession (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Korthagen, 2004; Sugrue, 2004), they form an important beginning in identity construction as part of teacher education.

Within arts education, prior knowledge and experience of the arts further adds to the multi-faceted development of this emerging teacher identity. Pitfield (2012, p. 440) stresses the importance of, “prior experience in shaping the student-teachers’ particular standpoints about the subject and in reconciling what must be taught with what they are able to teach and what they are happy to teach”. It has been well researched that teachers’ beliefs about the arts, prior experience of the arts and self-efficacy in teaching the arts has important consequences for how it is taught in schools (Collanus, Kairavuori, & Rusanen, 2012; Greene, 1995; Kenny, 2014; Kokotsaki, 2012; Pitfield, 2012; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Sefton-Green, Thomson, Jones, & Bresler, 2011; Winters, 2012). For instance, Mills on writing about music education for generalist student teachers, claims that it is vital for students to practically participate in music-making in order to build confidence to teach music in schools (Mills, 1991). This research study examines pre-service teacher’s first year of engaging with arts education within their teacher education degree to explore their developing relationship and emerging teacher identity with the arts. How the students’ emerging identity is influenced by developing a relationship with the teaching of arts is also of interest here.

Much has been written about student teacher identity within a sociocultural framework (Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijgaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Boston College Evidence Team, 2009; Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Alsup (2006) refers to “situated identities” where the interface between oneself, others and their environment shape an identity development that continually transforms due to

changing contexts. Rodgers and Scott (2008) similarly put forward a discussion on teacher identity development that is dependent upon and formed in relationship to others, within varied contexts with particular social, cultural, political, and historical influences that continue to shift and reconstruct over time. To provide a more nuanced term for this standpoint, Beauchamp and Thomas use the term ‘shaping’ in relation to identity development to acknowledge “the role of the self and external forces in the dynamism of identity” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). This study takes up this socio-cultural lens of inquiry to teacher identity research and broadens its use to arts education within the field of teacher education.

The theoretical framework used to conceptualise this study and analyse the data draws from key writers such as Dewey (1897, 1934), Greene (1995, 2001) and Eisner (2002). Learning through experience is core to the Deweyan philosophy. Dewey also espouses to the construction of knowledge within a community of learners which is relevant to this study in examining student learning within groups. Maxine Greene building on the work of Dewey argues for knowledge to be constructed through aesthetic experience highlighting the potential for transformation in this process (Greene, 1995, 2001). The arts are viewed as a medium through which one can “release the imagination”, and she believes this release is as important for educators as the children they teach, claiming (1995, p.36):

Imagination is as important in the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of their students, in part because teachers incapable of thinking imaginatively or of releasing the students to encounter works of literature and other works of art are probably unable to communicate to the young what the use of imagination signifies.

Eisner (2002) similarly sees the arts as an integral facet of any education. Through arts experiences, he believes, “... education is a process of learning how to become the architect of your own experience and therefore learning how to create yourself” (2002, p.24). An examination of student engagement with arts education during their first year of their teacher education degree then draws on these writers to explore the distinctive contribution of the arts to informing students’ emergent teacher identities and approaches to teaching the arts in schools.

Underpinned by these theorists, the study puts forward arguments for meaningful, ‘real-life’ student engagement in the arts in order to inspire innovative and imaginative approaches to teaching in schools. This philosophical and ideological stance of engaging student teachers in arts experiences also underpinned the arts education course structure, content and delivery examined in this study. In this way, Mansfield (2007, p. 164) points out:

To avoid a merely pedestrian outlook in music, visual art, dance and drama education, we will need to offer beginning teachers a well-researched philosophical and critical theoretical framework for the arts in education ... ‘Being musical’, ‘being artistic’ become critical issues.

This idea of ‘being artistic’ resonates strongly with the concept of teaching as ‘becoming’. Within this understanding of identity construction through “knowledge-in-the-making” (Ellsworth, 1997), the research study reveals the importance of both practical and reflective experiences across the arts where “participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed” (Greene, 1995, p. 123).

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