



Identity expectations in early childhood teacher education: Pre-service teachers' memories of prior experiences and reasons for entry into the profession



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Given high attrition amidst teachers, we study pre-service teachers' identity expectations in a Canadian context.
- We examine how students base reasons for entry into profession on prior experiences.
- In addition to school memories, students referred to memories of home and prior work.
- Reasons for entry involved past teachers, personal convictions, and imagined students.
- Idealized identities relied on expectations with emotional overtones.

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ABSTRACT

In the context of preparing early childhood teachers for a field with high attrition rates, this Canadian study examines pre-service teachers' identity expectations. Pre-service teachers wrote biographical narratives describing memories that influenced their reasons for choosing the teaching profession. Fifty-three narratives were analyzed. Implications from the study's findings suggest that teacher educators: 1) attend to the emotional dimensions of pre-service teachers' memories and identities; 2) help pre-service teachers access and articulate their tacit expectations about teaching; 3) address the image of the teacher as role model; and 4) attend to the political aspects of a prospective teacher's convictions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives

In the context of high levels of attrition amongst new teachers (Ingersoll, 2012; Jalongo & Heider, 2006), the purpose of this paper is to explore the identity experiences of pre-service teachers through a form of Pinar's autobiographical curriculum method, *curre* (1975/2012). Specifically, we examine how prospective teachers link their memories of prior experiences to their reasons for entering the profession. Embedded in the pre-service teachers'

reasons for entering the profession are expectations about one's future teacher identity. In this sense, we explore how prospective teachers' memories of "who they were" are linked to their vision of "who they wish to be". We consider what these findings reveal about pre-service teachers' identity expectations and the implications this has on teacher education programs.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Context

Teacher attrition is a global problem, notable across a range of countries, especially within the first few years of a teacher's career (Ghamrawi & Jammal, 2013; OECD, 2013; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In North America, an estimated 50% of new teachers in North America leave the profession within the first five years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2012; Lewkowicz, 2013). In the United Kingdom, 20% of

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teachers leave within the first three years. Teacher attrition rates grow as high as 60% in Dubai (Ahmed, 2011). In Canada, two years after graduating from college-level early childhood education, only 50% of graduates are working in childcare and preschool; after five years, 40% remain in the sector (Beach, Bertrand, Forer, Michal, & Tougas, 2004). Quebec, the province in which this study takes place, is recognized for its progressive, government-funded, \$7-a-day childcare program and yet, graduates of early childhood education are not staying in the fields of childcare or preschool (Miller & Ferguson, 2003). Difficult working conditions, minimal support and inadequate preparation have been attributed to the rise in teacher attrition (Jalongo & Heider, 2006); however, a new wave of literature which seeks to understand this phenomenon has shifted its gaze towards the subjective experience of new teachers (Haggarty & Postlethwaite, 2012; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). Novice teachers find significant tension in their professional identities as they face new realities (Rippon & Martin, 2006) and contend with unanticipated insecurities and vulnerabilities (Fottland, 2004). It appears that the idealism and optimism of the pre-service teacher often turn into negativity and hopelessness when the teacher enters the actual field (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The question remains: What can teacher educators do to better prepare prospective teachers?

The focus in early childhood and elementary teacher education in Western society has traditionally been on the child's development (Cannella, 1997; Soto & Swadener, 2002). In this paper, we attend to the subjective experience and identity development of the early childhood teacher candidate. Given that the alarming rate of attrition can be, at least partly, attributed to new teachers' expectations not being met in reality (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), we focus on how prospective teachers' expectations for the teaching field often originate from their own prior experiences (Lortie, 1975). Specifically, we examine how two aspects—memories and reasons for entering the field—affect the pre-service teachers' identity expectations.

1.2.2. Theoretical framework

The conceptual framework for this study intersects teacher identity studies with the curriculum approach of *currere* (Pinar, 2012), which is a life history and memory approach.

Teacher identity is an elusive area of study. Many general theories are posited. Gee (2001) described identity as a “kind of person” within a particular context” (p. 99). Teacher identity has also been described as standing “at the core of the teaching profession” (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178), a framework through which teachers develop their ideas on “how to be”, “how to act” and “how to understand” their work and their place in society” (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Identity can be viewed as a resource through which people “explain, justify and make sense of themselves in relation to others, and to the world at large” (MacLure, 1993, p. 311).

In terms of the *development* of one's teacher identity, various approaches have been examined: identity as shaped (Flores & Day, 2006), identity as built (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), identity as unstable (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Maclean & White, 2007), identity as multifaceted, as an ongoing process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Mitchell & Weber, 1999), identity as involving both the individual and the context (Flores & Day, 2006; Zembylas, 2003), identity as shaped by discourse (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), identity as a continual reinvention of the teaching self (Mitchell & Weber, 1999), and identity as formed through teachers' narratives about themselves (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Given our focus on the subjective experience of the prospective teacher, it is important to point out the dynamic nature of teacher identity in all of these definitions.

While research on teacher identity has proliferated in the last decade, more overt attention to identity development is required in teacher education programs (Chong, Ling, & Chuan, 2011) and, in particular, on the prospective teacher in early childhood education programs. Izadinia (2013) reviewed 29 empirical and peer-reviewed research studies, international in range, on pre-service teachers' professional identities. Overall, pre-service teacher identity in these studies was described as encompassing seven areas of self-perception: cognitive knowledge, confidence, teacher voice, relationships with students/colleagues/parents, sense of agency, self-awareness and critical consciousness. These areas of self-perception were described as being shaped and influenced by the pre-service teachers' educational contexts (i.e., university teacher education programs or practice teaching sites), learning communities (i.e., small groups of student teachers, communities-of-practice), and prior experiences (i.e., memories of one's unique life history). While these three areas are overlapping, the current study focuses on the third area, prior experiences, as a critical aspect underpinning the developing teacher's identity.

The strand of curriculum studies known as *currere* (Latin for ‘to move’, ‘to run’) focuses on the subjective experience and critical self-examination of the teacher (Pinar, 2012). The *currere* approach emphasizes understanding more than instrumentalism, for instance: “Why have I become a teacher; what are my motives ... and what relation to my psychic life do they bear?” (Pinar, 1975, p. 402). The first step is regressive: “One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present” (Pinar, 1975, p. 21). The next steps are progressive and analytical, to juxtapose the remembered past, the present and the imagined future: “How is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?” (Pinar, 1975, p. 26).

In line with Pinar's question of “Why have I become a teacher?” motivations of pre-service teachers have been studied on an international scale in order to address the “difficulties in attracting and maintaining effective teachers” experienced in many countries including Australia, the UK and Turkey (Richardson & Watt, 2006, p. 28). In their survey of 1653 pre-service teachers at three universities in Australia, Richardson and Watt (2006) found that the socialization influence of “positive prior experiences of teaching and learning” was an important motivating factor (p. 51). Career motivation has been categorized into three forms: intrinsic (e.g., the belief that one is meant to be a teacher), extrinsic (e.g., financial and job security) and altruistic (e.g., making a social contribution) (Bastick, 2000). Bastick noted that metropolitan countries, such as Canada, the U.S., the U.K., and Australia, emphasize intrinsic and altruistic forms of motivation whereas studies from developing countries, including Jamaica (Evans, 1993), Zimbabwe, the Camerons and Brunei Darussalam (Yong, 1995) emphasize extrinsic motivations. In Turkey (Yuce, Sahin, Kocer, & Kana, 2013) and Malaysia (Azman, 2013), extrinsic and altruistic motivations were the predominant reasons for entry. While connections with prior experiences were not addressed in all of these studies, the authors concur that all three forms of motivation impact an individual's reasons for entering the teaching field.

Olsen (2008) interviewed first-year students from a California university about their motivations for entering secondary teacher education. He reported on six reasons for entering the teaching field. The first three reasons were specific to the pre-service teachers' experiences as women: having early experiences of playing teacher, being influenced by female family members who were teachers, and choosing a career compatible with motherhood. The other three reasons were: having a talent or capacity that suited them to teaching (e.g., ability to explain things), experiencing success in the specific subject they were planning to teach, and sharing a desire to work with and make a difference for youth.

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