



Professional identity of teacher educators in the digital era in light of demands of pedagogical innovation

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Innovative pedagogy requires ICT implementation in teachers' professional development.
- Teacher educators (TE) reexamine their professional identity in an ICT context.
- TEs' professional identity mostly consisted of the "being" mode of existence.
- TE institutes' support is vital to develop TEs' professional identity as innovators.

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ABSTRACT

The study examines teacher educators' perceptions regarding pedagogical innovation. 27 semi-structured interviews were analyzed using three modes of existence composing their professional identity with regards to pedagogical innovation: being, the conceptual component; doing, the practical component; and having, the environmental support component. Findings show that the "being" component is the dominant mode of existence and is strongly connected to construction of professional selves. Also, demands of the digital era compel teacher educators to re-examine their professional identity vis-à-vis technology-integrated teaching. Institutional support was vital for professional identity construction. Findings assist in understanding professional identity construction of innovative teacher educators.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Teacher educators in an era of change

Teacher education in the information era is a complex endeavor, as teacher educators' role is constantly changing, from being the major source of knowledge to being a role model and mentor for pre-service teachers, thereby laying foundations of the future of a society, which itself is continuously under transformation (Niess, 2015; Van der Klink, Kools, Avissar, White, & Sakata, 2017). Hence, the role of teacher educators requires equipping pre-service teachers with the knowledge, skills, competencies and dispositions required to transform education in order to meet society's changing needs. This may require not only ICT knowledge and skills and the

implementation of ICT in teaching, but also developing a contemporary technology-enabled curriculum, thereby utilizing design competencies that assist students to become 21st century teachers (Bower, Highfield, Furney, & Mowbray, 2013). This is especially challenging in an era of transition, in which most teacher pre-service education programs fail to prepare future teachers to feel confident in innovation-oriented settings, e.g. programs embedding the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching (Banas & York, 2014; Istenic Starčič, Cotic, Solomonides & Volk, 2016).

Reforms in the education system may lead to change in teacher education systems. This requires change in educational perceptions as well as in the professional identity of educators (Hargreaves, 2003). Recruitment of teachers and receiving their support for promoting educational reforms in schools is vital, as the teacher is a key figure for any form of success (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 1999). The responsibility for the training and accreditation of teachers is first and foremost in the hands of the colleges of education. In these colleges, the teacher

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educators are the ones who expose student teachers to educational changes, and help them to plan, construct and implement pedagogical innovation: to learn about novel pedagogical tools, including technology-based devices and platforms, and implement them in their teaching, to recognize and adapt themselves to changing needs of diverse student populations, and to examine the adaptation of reforms to teaching and learning processes through working with students (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Hence, teacher educators serve as an anchor for educational innovations and reforms. The success of many programs depends on the viewpoint of teacher educators regarding change resulting from their implementation, as well as their training of teacher students to pursue innovative pedagogical practices (Lambert, 2007).

1.2. Pedagogical innovation in teacher education

Innovative pedagogy is needed as a means to actualize the vision to adapt the education system to the 21st century. This is currently a concern in the education milieu, engendering a trend to introduce extensive implementation of innovative pedagogy in schools. The goal is to facilitate students' preparation for new challenges posed by the 21st century (Larson & Miller, 2011). Innovative pedagogy is defined as a planned set of educational activities that presents new ideas in a defined context aiming to extensively improve the ability to learn within a situation of interaction. Ideally, the process of knowledge construction should be anchored within a learning activity that is project-based and focused on authentic real-life problems (Fullan, 2007). Demands from teachers in light of the need for 21st century skills include: creating a curriculum that is relevant to optimal functioning in the 21st century, which focuses on students' interests and on developing future skills; teaching, learning and evaluation processes that are knowledge-based, using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which will highlight the student as the focus of the process, will create motivation for learning and will emphasize active learning and diversity, as well as accessibility to a variety of resources (Fullan, 2013; Kozma & Vota, 2014).

The concept of "quality pedagogy in an innovative environment" emphasizes the interrelations between the pedagogy and the changing learning environment (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Lefwich, 2013). The approach that considers pedagogy as innovative even if it does not present high levels of innovation in all school areas may lead to a conceptual breakthrough, according to which innovation and change by their very nature are not absolute concepts, but rather they involve relative and gradual processes (Goldstein et al., 2012a).

Another theory concerning innovative technology-supported teaching methods describes ten types of pedagogies with the highest potential to affect teaching and learning in the next decade, such as MOOCs ((Massive Open Online Courses) and Crowd Learning. The term "optimal pedagogy" is also used in this context, referring to high quality pedagogy that leads to meaningful learning (Henderson, Beach, & Finkelstein, 2012; Linn & Hsi, 2000).

In the national program "Israel moves to a Higher Grade" innovative pedagogy is employed to create meaningful learning. The student is encouraged to raise questions, gather information resources, process information and create new knowledge that is relevant to his or her personal world and in the context of life in the digital era of the 21st century. The goal of this meaningful learning is to develop high order thinking skills, creativity and self-learning, to facilitate personal growth and social involvement, while strengthening the teacher as an educational leader of novel pedagogy (Barak, 2010).

This trend has not skipped colleges of education, in which teacher educators strive to influence preservice teachers to pursue

their role as leaders. In order for this to occur, they need a robust professional identity to be able to boost the influence of their actions within the organization, among colleagues, and within the working environment (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, pp. 732–755). Positive beliefs and attitude regarding the integration of technology and its usefulness, as well as ICT literacy, promote technology acceptance and implementation of innovative ICT-based pedagogy (Prestridge, 2012; Sadaf, Newby, & Ertmer, 2016). Hence, the construction processes of teacher educators' professional identity have implications for the promotion of pedagogical change and reforms, and have a unique significance due to the connection between the teacher's identity and his or her professional activities within the educational institute (Sachs, 2001).

1.3. Construction of teacher educators' professional identity

The discussion on innovative pedagogy and professional identity demands the definition of the term "identity". Identity" is considered the sum of components through which the individual defines him or herself (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), and is reciprocally related to the perception of professional belonging (Davey, 2013). Professional identity is the image with which the individual refers to himself as a professional, and is composed of the set of expectations developed by the individual regarding themselves and their abilities, based on their experiences and personal background, as well as on others' expectations – all of which guide their behavior (Lasky, 2005).

The concept of identity has been studied extensively in various disciplines, such as philosophy, sociology and psychology, all linked to education and relevant for studies of professional identity of educators and teacher educators. For example, in psychology, Travimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) address the notion of personal identity versus social identity. In their studies, they state that various and possibly diverse types of personal and social identities may exist. Moreover, they conclude in one of their studies that self-representations of personal and social identities are stored in separate cognitive structures; hence, they should be examined separately. Another example is Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory (SIT), which presents a social-psychological perspective. Social identity is defined as the aspects of an individual's self-image that originates from the social groups to which the individual feels he or she belong.

Current research regarding professional identity in teaching has broadened and deepened, and has become a focal point for research discourse in education (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Rodgers & Scott, 2008, pp. 732–755; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). Recent popular approaches focus on identity as a multi-faceted phenomenon, which develops throughout life and professional experience (Maalouf, 1998; Renninger, 2009; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Professional identity is perceived in some cases as a personal set of traits, values, social roles, interests, physical characteristics and history (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). The "personal self", which refers to the sum of personal information on the individual, is distinguished from the "professional self", which refers to the sum of information on the individual focusing on his or her professional functioning. Professional identity is therefore defined as the individual's sense of belonging to the profession and the identification with it (Tickle, 1999). It develops and is influenced by the environment as well as by economic, cultural, political and historical forces (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, pp. 732–755). It is shaped within interaction of the professional with him or herself, as well as with their social, cultural and professional environment (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Although there is no one clear definition of professional identity, four major characteristics have been identified: professional identity as an ongoing process of interpretation of experiences and

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