



The experienced newcomer - The (trans)forming of professional teacher identity in a new landscape of practices



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' identity is (trans)formed in the encounter with the new field of teaching.
- Both diversity and unity exist in what different communities mean for teachers' learning.
- Both organised and non-organised learning opportunities contribute to teacher learning.

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1. Introduction

Extensive migration is part of today's world. In recent years, many countries have received an increased number of refugees and immigrants. Thus, there is a great demand for teachers of a second language, and this also applies to the adult education sector. This study focuses on how professional teacher identity is formed when experienced teachers begin to work in the sector of second language education for adults. More precisely, it deals with how they encounter the teaching practice of Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA). In the Swedish context, where this study is located, LESLLA teaching is part of the educational system of Swedish for Immigrant (SFI). There is study track 1, which is designed for people with no or little previous education. This track has a slow rate of study. It consists of the A and B courses, which have the development of the Swedish language as a general goal, although instruction in initial literacy is given too, either in parallel or included in the language courses. The school can also choose to give literacy instruction in the students' mother tongue as well as in Swedish (The Swedish National Agency of Education, 2012).

In Sweden, new LESLLA teachers are often accustomed to

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teaching other groups of learners. Even though only 35% of all SFI teachers are formally qualified as SFI teachers, 70% of them have a teaching degree (The Swedish National Agency of Education, 2017). Still, LESLLA teaching is a new and challenging field to them. Unlike their students, the teachers, generally, have not experienced what it means to learn print literacy as an adult and there is often a lack of a mutual, oral language in the communication between the teacher and the learners (Bigelow & Vinogradov, 2011). In her outline of a LESLLA teacher knowledge base, Vinogradov (2013) points out that LESLLA teachers are seldom used to teaching initial literacy and have not been trained in how to do it. That is not always the case in the Swedish context, where a number of SFI teachers have a background as teachers of the lower level of primary school, but like in other contexts (see Vinogradov, 2013), the teachers will often be little used to teaching literacy in L2 and/or to teaching adult learners.

Another challenge is that, since there is a lack of material adapted to the learners' different needs as emergent readers and resourceful adults, many LESLLA teachers have to adjust the teaching material themselves (Vinogradov, 2013, p. 20). Additionally, LESLLA teaching may include meeting learning needs and social needs that are not prescribed in the curriculum. The refugee and immigrant experience of the students, for example, means that the teachers often come to act as mentors or counsellors (Magro, 2008, p. 30). Together, these issues imply that the practice of LESLLA teaching, both in Sweden and elsewhere, is different from teaching in primary and secondary school and in other types of adult education.

Previous research illustrates how professional identity is formed by an interplay of different spheres of life, including those outside work and education, and that some of these spheres play a bigger part depending on the time and situation (Nyström, 2009, p. 65). Moreover, a worker can be linked to many professional communities, and the importance of these differs (Hökkä, Rasku-Puttonen,

& Eteläpelto, 2008, p. 60). Thus, professional identity formation is a complex process and this study sets out to explore that of the new LESLLA teacher. Of primary interest to this enquiry is how the professional identity is formed in the encounter with the new work practices. In turn, this is something which can inform teacher's professional identity in general.

1.1. Teachers' professional identity formation

Teachers' professional identity has become a separate field of research and the concept of it has been interpreted in many different ways (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 107). Some common features are that it is regarded as something that develops over time and is a matter of contextual as well as individual factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 177). The social features of teachers' identity are seen in how teacher development often evolves through teachers' interactions in schools and other communities enabled through conditions such as school culture and policy directives (Avalos, 2011, p. 12). At the same time, teachers actively use their previously acquired identities to learn, review and adjust to the classroom and the general school conditions. Buchanan (2015) shows how teachers draw on their pre-existing professional identities to interpret new norms and respond to them by their actions. In this process, the teacher's agency is central. Moreover, Widin, Yasukawa, and Chodkiewicz (2012), draw on Bourdieu to illustrate how the professional teacher identity of experienced teachers, apart from being related to material and non-material conditions, has to do with one's habitus - the tacit and biographically rooted dispositions one uses to orient oneself in a certain field. Depending on the habitus, the teachers may find it more or less easy to acculturate to new circumstances. In her study of language teachers, Rappel (2015, p. 324) points out that if teachers are to be able to combine their personal background with organisational and institutional agendas and objectives, it is essential that the work place practices are secure and stable. There must be an authentic communication based on trust in others and belief in oneself. Along the same lines, a study on LESLLA teacher development emphasizes that the opportunities to learn are structured in more or less effective ways. Through collaborative approaches, such as peer observations, study circles and lesson studies, which are easily accessible, the teachers can produce self-directed and school-based knowledge, and can overcome feelings of isolation (Farrelly, 2012, pp. 4–5).

Studies on teacher identity also focus on periods throughout a teachers' career that are particularly critical for identity formation. One of these is when a new teacher begins to teach (Avalos, 2011, p. 11). Another is in a reform context (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009), for example in the shift from traditional pedagogy to liberal pedagogy (Liu & Xu, 2013) or when new technologies are introduced, (Shelley, Murphy, & White, 2013).

Furthermore, Widin et al. (2012, pp. 23–24) reveal how experienced teachers continue to shape and reshape their teaching practice. Research on adult educators in general, however, shows a difference in focus between experienced and less experienced adult educators. The former tends to concentrate more on the relations with the learners and the educational context, while the latter focus on the subject and the teaching methods (Andersson, Köpsén, Larson, & Milana, 2013, pp. 111–112). Yet another study sees how the organisational structure of the work place influences its educators. It shows that they identified with their own subject matter and the teaching of it (Hökkä et al., 2008, p. 60).

1.2. Aims and questions

Even though the research on teacher identity formation covers

many areas, there has been less focus on how teachers transfer from one teaching practice to another, particularly when it comes to LESLLA teaching. Since identity is considered an important component of teacher development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 175), this study seeks to contribute to narrowing this gap in knowledge. The element of identity can provide knowledge for teacher educators and shed light on new teachers' learning (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 186). Also, it is useful for understanding how teachers learn when transferring to a new teaching practice.

The aim is to explore how the professional identity of already experienced teachers is formed when they begin to work in the LESLLA field of practice. Taking the perspectives of the teachers, the study seeks to answer following questions:

- How do the teachers present themselves when encountering new professional practices?
- What opportunities for learning afforded by the work place communities are brought up by the teachers?
- How do the teachers respond to these learning opportunities?

2. Theoretical framework

In this study, learning is viewed as a process which involves the whole person and the practices that s/he is part of. Another point of departure is that there is interdependence between the social context and the individual agency in this process.

2.1. Professional identity formation, participatory practice and negotiation

The study applies a perspective on professional identity as the core of the learning process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, and Clark (2006, p. 644) state: "Learning is not simply about developing one's knowledge and practice, it also involves a process of understanding who we are and in which communities of practice we belong and are accepted." Learning in such a holistic sense evolves through participation together with old-timers – people who have participated longer in the community. In that way, the newcomers become familiar with the functions, tasks and activities of the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They come to understand and engage with the underlying values of the practice, the explicit and implicit artefacts, and the embedded relations (Handley et al., 2006, p. 645). Such a participatory perspective, expressed in terms of a Community of Practice, has often been used for understanding workplace learning. It offers a way to see how professional identity is formed (Eteläpelto, 2008, pp. 234–237).

One of many criticisms of a situated learning perspective is its lack of focus on the individual. Instead of viewing identity formation as something completely social, it is stated that individual agency also plays a part in this process (Billett, 2006; Handley et al., 2006, p. 642). The agency, which includes the ability to make choices and act according to them, is linked to personal goals (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 123). It is about the actions people take and how these actions are believed to be in line with their construction of identity (Buchanan, 2015, p. 704). The individual agency becomes even more significant when considering that newcomers to a workplace are not blank pages. They bring knowledge, skills and understanding, which are used both directly in work assignments and indirectly to develop new knowledge and skills. Such prior abilities have structural features, and need to be recognised and deployed in the new context. They cannot simply be transferred (Hodkinson et al., 2004, p. 11). It is too simple to claim that newcomers bring skills and knowledge with them to a new location. Rather, the prior learning has formed the professional identity of

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