



Māwhai: Webbing a professional identity through networked interprofessional communities of practice



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Professional identity development in teacher education.
- Networking across different communities of practice.
- Interprofessional learning 'with, from and about' different disciplines.
- Positions professionals for life-long and life-wide learning.
- Practice more confidently across disciplinary boundaries.

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ABSTRACT

Professional identity is a frequently used term in teacher education although there is little consensus of what it means for practice. Drawing on research in the fields of professional identity development, communities of practice and interprofessional practice, this article presents a framework for interprofessional identity development that supports effective practice within and across different disciplines. The Māwhai framework, which translates as both 'web' and 'net', enables professionals to 'web' interprofessional identities through 'networks' of interprofessional practice. The framework is first described and then evaluated using data from three cohorts of professional educators.

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1. Professional identity development

The global movement around teacher accountability has spurred increased interest in teachers' influence on student outcomes, the training and retention of effective teachers, and teachers' professional identity (Hsieh, 2015). Essential to teacher performance, commitment and retention is having a strong sense of professional identity (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005). Professional identity is a frequently used term with a variety of meanings and a lack of consensus (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Hsieh, 2015). It is often conceptualised in the literature as a process of 'becoming' and 'belonging' rather than a fixed identity state (O'Connor, 2008;;

Wenger, 1998). In their meta-analysis of existing research on professional identity, Beijaard et al. (2004) identified four key features of professional identity that involved: an ongoing process of interpretation; incorporating both person and context; multiple identities; and being active in the ongoing process. Aligned with this, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) views professional identity development through a "personal interpretive framework" (p. 260) where professionals refine and enact their stories of themselves over time and through their interactions with other people and contexts. He goes on to describe five components of professional identity: self-image; self-esteem; job motivation; perception of the task; and perspective of the future. These five elements are inter-related and dynamic and are continually influenced by the person, their values and their contexts. Canrinus, Helms-Lorenz, Beijaard, Buitink, & Hofman (2012) operationalise the term professional identity as the combination of one's satisfaction with their job, ongoing commitment to the occupation, sense of self-efficacy and

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levels of motivation.

Professional identity development is a complex and forever changing phenomenon (Sachs, 2001) as individuals engage in a dynamic process of reflection, interpreting and reinterpreting their own practice, biography and context (Beijaard et al., 2004). This process of building a professional identity involves critical thinking (Beijaard et al., 2004) on moral, emotional, cultural and political issues (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) as well as on the individual's philosophy, values, motives and emotions (Vloet, 2009). Professionalism is often associated with the concepts of autonomy, responsibility and knowledge. Professionals use their autonomy to make informed decisions by applying a specialised body of knowledge to specific situations. In order to act responsibly when using their autonomy to make these decisions, professionals use the collective values and codes of ethics developed by their professional communities (Furlong, 2000). Vloet (2009) extends this within-person view and posits that professional identity develops at the intersection of an individual's personal and cultural identity, the communities of professional practice that they belong to, and the identity ascribed to the profession by self and others at any given time (Doecke, 2006; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Wenger, 1998). Competence and experience are held in tension as individuals locate themselves in terms of where they have come from, where they are and where they could be in relation to these communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

2. Professional identity development within communities of practice

As Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor (2014) note, becoming a professional is not so much approximating better and better a reified body of knowledge, but rather it involves “developing a meaningful identity of both competence and knowledgeability in a dynamic and varied landscape of relevant practices” (p. 23). Professional identity is not just about gaining the specific knowledge and skills to make informed decisions, but a process of ‘becoming’ a particular kind of person through ‘belonging’ to a professional community (Wenger, 1998). Learning is no longer seen as the acquisition of knowledge, but as becoming a person within a social landscape whose dynamic identity reflects and shapes that landscape (Wenger-Traynor & Wenger-Traynor, 2014).

Development of professional identities, therefore, is a social process that occurs when individuals engage in dialogue and co-construct knowledge (Doecke, 2006) within communities of practice. Participation in a community of practice has tangible benefits, such as support with problems, collective solution-finding and professional development, but, as Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) indicate, some of the greatest value lies in the intangible outcomes such as “the relationship they build among people, the sense of belonging they create, the spirit of inquiry they generate, and the professional confidence and identity they confer to their members” (p. 15).

Communities of practice are complex adaptive social systems with their own collective identities that focus on professional practice. In line with social systems theory, these communities of practice develop as individuals share their professional knowledge and skills within the group (Moeller, 2011). As these multiple perspectives and skills are shared, tension is generated. This tension has the capacity to either fragment the community or generate the innovation and creativity needed to develop new knowledge, new forms of practice and develop a collective identity (Moeller, 2011). As this collective identity develops, the community of practice develops its own structures, ways of establishing identities, processes for dealing with conflict, language, forms of communication, and maintenance of boundaries (Weingart & Stehr, 2000). This

collective identity allows the group to co-construct meaning, shared understandings and mutual accountability, and to develop shared resources and ways of undertaking practice (Wenger, 1998) and collective action (Hardy & Williams, 2011). The development of a collective identity also defines the community of practice through its membership in terms of skills, knowledge and its relationship within the wider historical and cultural context (Wenger, 1998).

Through participation in the shared context of a community of practice, professionals can develop their own professional identities, and that of the community. Professionals however do not necessarily belong to only one community and can, and do, contribute to the on-going collective identities across different communities (Wenger, 1998). As they share and reflect on their skills and knowledge, integrate their learning, and refine and develop their practice in the different communities of practice, they build not only their own professional and interprofessional identities, but also contribute to the collaboration within and between communities (Kupers, 2008; Wenger, 1998).

3. Professional identity development within interprofessional communities of practice

The process of developing collaboration within and across communities requires breaking down the barriers between professionals who practice in different areas. Interprofessional practice in this context involves professionals working within and beyond the education sector in ways that intentionally disrupt silos of knowledge and practice. Working interprofessionally provides the opportunities for professionals to develop confidence about themselves, their disciplinary knowledge and skills (Clark, 2011; Petts, Owens, & Bulkeley, 2008), their own professional identities and roles (Wall & Shankar, 2008), and the contribution they make across communities. When educators and other professionals work in interprofessional ways, there is increased accountability, professionals feel more competent and the outcomes are more positive (Barr & Low, 2011; Author, 2012). The more professionals have previously engaged in interprofessional activities, the more open they are to explore other perspectives, and to engage and work in interprofessional ways (Engberg, 2007; Stokols et al., 2010). This has implications for teacher education and professional development programs, as when professionals from different areas learn *with*, *from* and *about* each other interprofessionally, they develop a shared understanding of their different areas, which facilitates their practicing together. Thus interprofessional learning facilitates interprofessional practice, which is key to providing collaborative communities for integrated inclusive education practices. Research has found that a supportive relational learning space helps to develop these interprofessional relationships and promotes the trust and openness necessary to co-construct and try out new knowledge and practice (Brown, 2004; Kupers, 2008; Wilber, 2000).

This paper explores this notion of providing supportive relational spaces within a teacher education and professional development programme to facilitate professional identity development within and across professional communities. Although teacher education programmes generally outline goals for teachers in terms of professional identity development, few studies have looked at the process by which teachers come to develop their professional or interprofessional identity (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011). This article draws on these understandings of professional identity development in proposing a framework whereby professional educators in specialised roles can, through a university programme, develop their interprofessional identities through networked communities of practice.

The framework described in this article aims to enable educators

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