



Positioning in identifying narratives of/about pre-service mathematics teachers in field practice



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study explores pre-service mathematics teachers' narrative positioning.
- Reflexive and interactive positioning contribute to formation of identity.
- Mentor teachers influence pre-service teachers' development of teacher identity.

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ABSTRACT

Research on identity development in mathematics teacher education has only given limited attention to narrative processes like indexicality, local occasioning, positioning and categorisation. In this article, we investigate how two pre-service mathematics teachers position themselves, and how they are positioned by a mentor teacher in mentoring conversations. Focusing on how pre-service teachers are positioned by a mentor teacher adds to present research on narrative positioning among pre-service mathematics teachers, and we argue that an increased focus on reflexive and interactive positioning is useful for the further development of research on identifying narratives in mathematics teacher education.

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1. Introduction

This study has a focus on pre-service mathematics teachers' development of professional teacher identity during field practice in teacher education. Learning to teach is thus regarded as developing a teacher identity – not only acquiring professional knowledge and skills (Haniford, 2010). An increasing number of studies investigate this development of professional teacher identity among becoming teachers (e.g., Brown & McNamara, 2011). Whereas traditional studies of teacher development often focus on developing knowledge for teaching, the focus in studies of identity development is shifted towards the teacher as an agent, and this often involves more dynamic perspectives of a continuous negotiation of “I-positions” (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015).

Identity is a complex construct, and identity research has been criticised for not clearly defining it (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009;

Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Graven, 2012; Sfard, 2008). In this study, we define identity in terms of narrative positioning, and we investigate pre-service mathematics teachers' identity development by combining two theoretical perspectives into a synthesised framework. First, we follow Sfard and Prusak (2005) when we consider identity as identifying narratives that are told about someone – by themselves, to themselves or about themselves (see also Lutovac & Kaasila, 2014). This is the main theoretical perspective we apply when approaching the construct of identity. Second, we include perspectives from positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; De Fina, 2011), when we focus on how pre-service teachers position themselves and are positioned by others in identifying narratives.

Through their identifying narratives, in-service teachers as well as pre-service teachers constantly negotiate and renegotiate their positions in different settings (Roth & Hsu, 2010). Previous studies in the Nordic countries have examined how teachers construct their identity through narratives with different approaches – both theoretically and methodologically. For instance, Estola (2003) investigated Finnish pre-service teachers' (auto)biographical

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stories and focused in particular on the moral aspects in their development of narrative identities. While also investigating narrative construction of identity, Søreide (2006) focused on how teachers position themselves and negotiate possible identities in her study of Norwegian elementary school teachers. A third example from the Nordic context is Skog and Andersson's (2015) study of Swedish pre-service teachers. Where Søreide (2006) and Estola (2003) focused on narrative identity construction, Skog and Andersson (2015) investigated the construction of identity in terms of positioning and power relations, but from a sociopolitical perspective.

The focus on narrative construction of identity and positioning has also been applied in studies outside the Nordic context. Positioning and language use have been investigated in several studies from South Africa, in a context where learning in multicultural classrooms is a common focus. An example is the study of Alexander, van Wyk and Moreeng (2014), who investigated South African pre-service teachers' narrative construction of identity in a mentorship school-based project. Their findings – based on analysis of interview data – indicate that participation in such a mentorship program supports the pre-service teachers' narrative identity construction and professional development. In a recent study in the U.S. teacher education context, Kayi-Aydar (2015) analysed pre-service teachers' narrative positioning through interviews and journal entries. Several “positional identities” were identified that appeared to influence classroom practice. A limitation of Kayi-Aydar's study is the lack of focus on the voice of the mentor teachers.

From this brief review of literature in the field, we suggest that clarifying the cultural context is important in research on teachers' development of (narrative) identity. We also observe that the connection between narrative identity and positioning is emphasised in several studies, but further clarifications about the main constructs in relation to theoretical perspectives seem to be necessary. In addition to this, we observe that investigations of pre-service teachers' construction of narrative identity should also include the voices of the mentor teachers. Accordingly, we aim at contributing to this field of research by approaching the following research question:

How do pre-service teachers position themselves, and how are they positioned by the mentor teacher, in mentoring sessions in field practice?

In order to answer this question, we use a case-study approach, and we analyse the identifying narratives of two pre-service teachers when they have a period of field practice in the same school.

2. A synthesised theoretical framework

Identity can be seen as a person's direct or indirect responses to the question: Who are you? There is more complexity to the identity construct than this, however, and at least three different levels of identity are often considered: personal identity, relational identity and collective identity. The individual or personal identity relates to how a person defines or constructs his or her identity. Relational identity is associated with the roles a person takes in interaction with other people, and collective identity refers to how people identify with certain groups in society (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). In a narrative approach to identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), these levels are strongly connected. In order to acknowledge the relational and situated process of pre-service teachers' storytelling, we combine Sfard and Prusak's narrative approach with insights from positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990). Central to

positioning theory in discursive practices is that individuals position themselves in specific ways, but they also simultaneously position others (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014). By combining elements from these two theoretical frameworks, we attempt to illustrate how pre-service mathematics teachers position themselves through reflective narratives in field practice. We have also included the mentor teacher's voice in considering and exploring his positioning of the two pre-service teachers. According to Kayi-Aydar (2015, p. 102), an exploration of mentor teachers' voices “would be helpful in better understanding the social interaction between interns and mentors, which is important for teacher identity”. Following this author, we suggest that narrative positioning analysis is important in order to understand how pre-service teachers' identities are constructed in narratives where they identify themselves to other pre-service teachers, to their mentor teacher(s), and to themselves.

2.1. A narrative approach to identity

In their review of research on teachers' professional identity in the period 1988–2000, Beijaard et al. (2004) found that the studies could be divided into three categories: 1) “teachers' professional identity formation”, 2) “the identification of characteristics of teachers' professional identity”, and 3) “studies in which professional identity was (re)presented by teachers' stories” (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 107). Our study ties in with the third category where teachers' identity is represented by their stories – or, more precisely, that the identifying stories *are* their identities.

We follow Sfard and Prusak (2005), who present a framework of identifying narratives that is inspired by Gee's (2001) suggestion to approach a definition of identity as “being recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’, in a given context” (Gee, 2001, p. 99). Sfard and Prusak regard identity as a person's own presentation of (identifying) narratives, and they suggest that “identities may be defined as collections of stories about persons or, more specifically, as those narratives about individuals that are *reifying*, *endorsable*, and *significant*” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 16). The reifying quality of narratives about individuals affirms repetitiveness of action connected to some verbs (be, have, can) and adverbs (always, usually, never). According to Sfard and Prusak (2005, p. 16), an endorsable narrative is labelled as true when “it faithfully reflects the state of affairs in the world”. The significance of narratives is related to the status and authority of the storyteller, and such narratives are often related to memberships in various communities.

Sfard and Prusak (2005) define identity as stories about a person. The stories differ, depending on who the storyteller and the recipients are. The following distinctions are made:

A_{AC} = an identifying story told by the identified person herself. This story we call A's *first-person* identity (1st P).

B_{AA} = an identifying story told to the identified person. This story we call A's *second-person* identity (2nd P).

B_{AC} = a story about A told by a third party to a third party. This story we call A's *third-person* identity (3rd P) (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 17).

Sfard and Prusak highlight one particular identifying story that comprises the reifying, endorsable and significant quality of narratives: the first-person's stories addressed to herself (A_{AA}). The ongoing conversations we have with ourselves are, “likely to have the most immediate impact on our actions” (Sfard & Prusak, 2005, p. 17). These authors further state that narratives about a person can be divided into two subsets, *actual identity* which expresses stories told in present tense about the actual state of affairs, and *designated identity* which expresses stories usually told in future tense. More

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