



Who and how? Preservice teachers as active agents developing professional identities



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The identity development of eight preservice teachers over a two year period.
- An investigation into the different forms of agency in identity development.
- Exploration of preservice teachers' activity within their own development.
- Seeking understanding of experiences that support identity awareness.
- Critical consideration of the mediating role of identity-agency as a theoretical concept.

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of an ongoing action research project with preservice class teachers in Finland. The study aims to better understand the forms agency takes in preservice teachers' professional identity development. Through the dialogical analysis of student assignments, this study outlines how student teachers are active within their own development and the way in which experiences are drawn on as preservice teachers exert their identity-agency. The results of this study provide a relational picture of identity development highlighting the way in which identity-agency is contextualized, potentially nourished by the relationships between self and other and dependent on experience.

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1. Introduction

The study reported here is part of an ongoing action research project with preservice class teachers in Finland. Over the last three years we have been developing a programme specializing in foreign language pedagogy for younger learners drawing on the Deweyan cycle of action-reflection-action (Dewey, 1910) and the pedagogical sensibility of Bakhtin (see Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2015). Two key aims of this programme have been to support preservice teachers' *identity development*, that is investment in becoming and being a teacher, and *agency*, that is the capacity to participate and be responsible for their own learning. As we have developed the programme, we have

systematically collected data to better understand the participants' identity development during the first two years of teacher education. Our particular interest in this paper is the agentic nature of preservice teachers' identity development as they actively form and reform their ideas of self and belonging as well as notions of language and pedagogy. Although the participants do not yet see themselves as professionals, their developing professional identity is not an 'empty space,' it is 'already over-populated with competing contents' (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015, p.24). We operationalise this interest by drawing on sociocultural and dialogic theories and by using the notion of 'identity-agency', that is, the agency individuals invest in the development of their professional identity (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, & Hökkä, 2015). By doing this, we aim to contribute to understandings of 'identity-agency' and suggest practices for supporting preservice teachers identity development within teacher education.

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2. Conceptualising the agentic nature of identity development

A significant body of literature exists outlining teachers' professional identity currently understood 'as a work history-based constellation of teachers' perceptions of themselves as professional actors ... [which] encompasses the individual's current professional interests, views on teaching and on the students' learning, and future prospects ...' (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 3). Empirical studies conducted at different points of teacher careers, including teacher education (Haniford, 2010; Lim, 2011; Timotštsuk & Ugaste, 2010), induction (Czerniawski, 2011; Hamman, Gosselin, Romano, & Bunuan, 2010; Hong, 2010; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) and educational reforms (Ketelaar, Beijaard, Boshuizen, & Den Brok, 2012; Lasky, 2005; van Veen & Sleegers, 2006; van Veen, Sleegers, & van de Ven, 2005), have indicated that identity as a concept helps to understand teachers' professional development, attitudes towards educational reforms and the ways in which teachers make sense of everyday work in schools. This literature has defined identity as an ongoing phenomenon with moments of greater and less stability intrinsically related to the wider social context (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Rodgers & Scott, 2008).

Drawing on the dialogic theory of Bakhtin, the encounter between self and other has been framed as a dialogic process with multiple voices constantly negotiating *who I am* (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Burns & Bell, 2011). Building on this understanding, individual teachers, when forming and reforming their professional identities, are constantly facing not only their own expectations, beliefs and demands but new expectations, beliefs and demands present in the environment that also affect their identities. Developing a professional identity can therefore be seen as an extremely social and context-dependent process that cannot be understood without taking into account the context where it takes place and the role of an individual in making sense of this environment.

To better understand the interplay between individuals' identity development and the social context, the focus has shifted away from looking at identity as an isolated concept towards looking at how identity is linked with individuals' professional agency within a community. Professional agency is understood as the capacity to influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect one's work (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). When exercising professional agency, individuals draw on their own values, experiences and beliefs as well as socially present expectations, beliefs and demands. As individuals consider how and why to act, the negotiation of who they are is maintained (Duff, 2012). In this way, professional agency can be seen as a resource in the development of professional identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Vähäsantanen goes so far as to say that, '[t]he exercise of agency forms professional identity and establishes its maintenance and transformation' (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p.15). This notion of professional agency has been divided into two significant forms of agency. The first form of agency is with respect to participation in the work community, the second form of agency is the capacity to use experiences and participation in the development of professional identity. It is this second form of agency that has been specifically identified as identity-agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2015).

3. Identity-agency within teacher education

As noted above, participation within a community does not directly determine identity; rather, individuals are active in using agentic experiences in the making of their professional identity. The meaning of participation and agency is then defined by the person him/herself (Heikkinen, 1999; Ricoeur, 1986) rather than being something given from the outside (Emerson, 1996; Holquist,

1990). Indeed, identity development is a process that individuals invest in and actively form (Beijaard et al. 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013) in professional contexts, including teacher education (e.g. Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). The relationship between agency and professional identity suggests that within the teacher education context, preservice teachers' professional identity cannot be developed without the possibility for agentic action. In other words, the *who* cannot develop in isolation from the *how* of the educational community. The *how* of this community includes different perspectives, expectations and roles (Beijaard et al. 2004), different forms of participation, opportunities for autonomous and responsible action (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Moate, 2014) and theories of education. The *how* of the immediate community, however, is not isolated from the broad array of experiences that inform preservice teachers' notions of what it is to be a teacher prior to formal studies (Taguchi, 2007) nor what they aspire to be once qualified (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). It is this array of past, present and potential experiences that forms a resource preservice teachers can draw on as they exert their identity-agency.

Interest in the concept of identity in educational research has led to a surge of interest within the context of teacher education (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009), shifting the focus away from predetermined pedagogical contents towards supporting preservice teachers in reconsidering and actively developing professional identities (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). To support the development of professional identity in teacher education, participants have been guided to question and reform beliefs around education: what does it mean to be a student, a teacher, to abide by pedagogical principles? Pedagogical portfolios, the guided use of action research (Freese, 2006), the sharing of autobiographical stories (Le Fevre, 2011) and metaphors (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) have been used to guide preservice teachers to consider their identities in a more profound way. In this study, autobiographical writing tasks are used to encourage the participants to reconsider their experiences and to exert their identity-agency (Bruner, 1994; Tedder & Biesta, 2007).

Teacher educators need to better understand why or how identities are constructed in order to be able to support the development of preservice teachers' professional identity development. In Kayi-Aydar's (2015) study the preservice teachers sought to distance themselves from their teacher mentors as one way of reframing their own professional development. On this basis Kayi-Aydar suggests that teacher educators should pay attention to relational and oppositional identities to better understand the 'why and how' of professional identity development (2015, p.101). Within the decentralised, autonomous context of Finnish teacher education, Lanas and Kelchtermans (2015) found opposition to be a minimal feature in the professional development of their preservice teacher participants. Nevertheless, within the Finnish context existing normative ideas were seen to limit the development of professional identity to meeting the expectations of others. These findings suggest in addition to the *how* of a community influencing the development of the *who*, it is also the way in which preservice teachers draw on and make sense of their experiences, i.e. identity-agency, that has significant implications for professional identity development.

To better understand the exercise of identity-agency, in this study, we do not only look at how the preservice teachers develop who they are in their narrative accounts but also what experiences the participants draw on in doing so. We specifically focus on how preservice teachers define who they are by actively working on their experiences (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). These experiences come from their current situation in the community as well as their earlier personal histories within and beyond formal education

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