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Contexts which shape and reshape new teachers' identities: A multi-perspective study

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Abstract

This paper presents the major findings of a longitudinal study of teachers' professional identities in the early years of teaching. It analyzes key influences upon the ways in which new teachers' identities are shaped and reshaped over time. Through their own perceptions, analyses of the school cultures in which they work and their pupils' views it reveals how the interplay between contextual, cultural and biographical factors affects their teaching practices. Teachers' personal and professional histories and pre-service training, alongside issues of school culture and leadership, emerge as stronger mediating influences (than previous literature suggests) in determining the kinds and relative stability and instability of professional identities which teachers develop in the early years of teaching and thus the kinds of teachers they become and their effectiveness.
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1. Becoming a teacher: the importance of identity

In this paper, we examine the ways in which the identities of a cohort of new teachers were shaped and reshaped over the first 2 years of teaching. Their beliefs, their values and their learning experiences are explored, as well as their views of the challenges of teaching, learning and being an effective teacher in different school settings.

Learning to become an effective teacher is a long and complex process. Research has highlighted its multi-dimensional, idiosyncratic and context-specific nature (see, for instance, Braga, 2001; Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Flores, 2001; Hauge, 2000), which entails an interplay between different, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives, beliefs and practices, which are accompanied by the development of the teachers' self. Most of the studies of new teachers highlight the sudden and sometimes dramatic experience of the transition from student to teacher. Many researchers have emphasized the reality shock or abruptness which confronts new teachers as they take on the full responsibility of their roles as schoolteachers (Huberman, 1991; Lacey, 1977; Lortie, 1975; Veenman, 1984; Vonk, 1993). For some, feelings of isolation, mismatch between idealistic expectations and classroom reality and lack of support and guidance have been identified as key features which characterize their

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lives (Flores, 1997; Huberman, 1991; Veenman, 1984). For others, the early years in the profession have been described as a less negative and less traumatic experience. The existence of 'easy' or 'painful beginnings' (Huberman, 1989) seems to be related to coping with difficulties in particular school cultures and feelings of professional fulfillment (Alves, 2001). Both the influence of the school context and the personal background experiences during pre-service education are identified as important variables to be taken into account in the assessment of early teaching experiences. Reporting on a story of first year success, Hebert and Worthy (2001) found that the most influential elements were: (i) a match between expectations, personality and workplace realities; (ii) evidence of impact; and (iii) using successful strategies to manage student behavior and enter the social and political culture of the school.

Vonk identified two distinctive phases in beginning teachers' professional development: the *threshold* and the *growing into the profession*. The *threshold* period encompasses the first year of teaching during which new teachers are confronted for the first time with the full teaching responsibilities and they experience the well-known 'transition shock' (Veenman, 1984). The phase of *growing into the profession* is characterized by the acceptance of beginning teachers by their pupils and colleagues. During this period new teachers tend to focus their attention on the improvement of skills, methods and competencies (Vonk, 1989). Similarly, Lacey (1977) distinguished three phases in the process of becoming a teacher: the honeymoon, the crisis, and the failure or getting by. In so far as beginning teachers fail to meet their expectations (and school demands) they enter a period of (re)discovery of themselves as teachers trying to cope with the daily requirements of their work.

It is clear from these studies that coping with the demands of teaching and its inherent tasks entails a continuing process of analysis of one's own beliefs and practices. The first few years of teaching may be seen as a 'two-way struggle in which teachers try to create their own social reality by attempting to make their work match their personal vision of how it should be, whilst at the same time being subjected to the powerful socializing forces of the school culture' (Day, 1999, p. 59). Few previous studies, however, identify explicitly the importance of identity as a mediating force between structure and teacher agency (Giddens, 1991). We understand identity, then, as an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences. Becoming a teacher involves, in essence, the (trans)formation of the teacher identity, a process described by Sachs (2001a) as being open, negotiated and shifting. She states that: 'for teachers this is mediated by their own experience in schools and outside of schools as well as their own beliefs and values about what it means to be a teacher and the type of teacher they aspire to be' (2001a, p. 6). Drawing upon the notion of identity as an organizing principle in teachers' lives, Maclure (1993, p. 312) contends that it "should not be seen as stable—something that people *have*—but as, "something that they *use*, to justify, explain and make sense of themselves in relation to other people, and to the contexts in which they operate" (original emphasis).

A sense of professional identity will contribute to teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction (Day, Stobart, Kington, Sammons, & Last, 2003) and is, therefore, a key factor in becoming and being an effective teacher. To create, and maintain identity, entails a 'continuing site of struggle' (Maclure, 1993, p. 313), which is located in a given social and cultural space (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Sachs, 2001b); and it is dependent upon teachers' views of themselves and of the contexts in which they work as, during the early years in the profession, they develop their professional identities by "combining parts of their past, including their own experience in school and in teacher preparation, with pieces of their present" (Feiman–Nemser, 2001, p. 1029) which is associated with 'a sense of purpose for teaching and being a teacher' (Rex & Nelson, 2004, p. 1317).

2. Identity and emotions

The implication is that identity is influenced by personal, social and cognitive response. In addition to the literature on career phase, there is a growing body of literature which points to emotion as a significant and ongoing part of being a teacher. For example, the emotional climate of the school and classroom will affect attitudes to and practices of teaching and learning. Teachers (and their students) experience an array of sometimes contrasting emotions in the classroom. In a review of empirical research, Sutton (2000) found that love (as a social relationship) and care, job satisfaction and joy, pride, excitement and pleasure in students' progress

and achievements are among the most commonly cited positive emotions. Because of their emotional investments, teachers also inevitably experience a range of negative emotions when control of long held principles and practices is challenged, or when trust and respect from parents, the public and their students is eroded. In a study of Belgian teachers, Kelchtermans (1996) reported on teachers' feelings of *vulnerability,* engendered when professional identity and moral integrity are questioned either by policy changes, parents, inspectors, or colleagues in the light of unrealistic expectations or their failure to help students achieve higher standards. In England, Jeffrey and Woods (1996) found *professional uncertainty*, confusion, inadequacy, anxiety, mortification and doubt among teachers when they investigated primary school teachers' responses to an OFSTED inspection, associating these with 'dehumanization' and 'deprofessionalism'. Other negative emotions are: frustration; anger exacerbated by tiredness, stress and students' misbehavior; anxiety because of the complexity of the job; guilt, sadness, blame and shame at not being able to achieve ideals or targets imposed by others.

Teaching calls for and, at its best, involves daily, intensive and extensive use of both emotional labor (e.g. smiling on the outside whilst feeling anything but happy on the inside) and emotional work which enables teachers to manage the challenges of teaching classes which contain students with a range of diverse motivations, personal histories and learning capacities. However, too much of the former leads to a disengagement with the complexities of teaching and learning, and a loss of trust by students; and too much investment of one's emotional self may lead to personal vulnerability, feelings of inadequacy at being unable to engage everyone in learning all the time and, in extreme cases, overwork and breakdown.

3. Identity and socialization

Literature on teacher socialization has also highlighted the complex and interactive socializing factors which influence upon new teachers' views of teaching and of themselves as teachers. The 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975) during which students have observed their own teachers teaching, the impact of initial teacher training program, the influence of significant others (namely relatives and former teachers) and the ecology of the classroom are some of the major socializing agents identified in the literature (Jordell, 1987; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). The strength of each of these socializing factors varies according to one's own personal and professional path and to the workplace conditions. Lortie (1975) argued that the experience of the 'anticipatory socialization' throughout the period of schooling has a powerful influence in the process of becoming a teacher. He referred to one's own personal predispositions which stand at the heart of what he termed a 'self-socialization' process. Conversely, other studies have stressed that early experiences at the workplace are crucial in teachers' socialization, mainly the structural factors such as the ecology of the classroom and the school norms and regulations (Jordell, 1987). Bullough (1997) argues that 'midst the diversity of tales of becoming a teacher and studies of the content and form of the story, two conclusions of paramount importance to teacher educators emerge: prior experience and beliefs are central to shaping the story line, as is the context of becoming a teacher' (p. 95).

In research conducted in Belgium, Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002), adopting an approach which combines the narrative-biographical and the micro-political perspectives in the study of teacher socialization, identified five categories of professional interests: material, organizational, social-professional, cultural-ideological and self-interests. Based on the idea that teachers' actions are oriented by professional interests, they concluded that micro-politics play an important role in teachers' views of their early teaching experiences.

4. The study

This paper discusses ways in which the professional identities of 14 new teachers were shaped and reshaped in their first 2 years of teaching in different school settings, through the interaction between personal, professional and contextual factors. It explores how their (taken-for granted) assumptions and values about teaching and being a teacher were challenged in two school settings and the ways in which professional and cultural environments affected them.

Most of the teachers worked in elementary schools (10–15 year olds), whereas 6 teachers taught both elementary and secondary students. Apart from teaching, a large majority of them (11 out of 14) was expected to undertake other roles at school, amongst which performing a pastoral role and being

the subject leaders were the most common. As a consequence of the teacher recruitment policy and teacher surplus, most of them (11 out of 14) were teaching in schools very far away from their homes (average 250 km), in their second year, which required them to work (and live) in a very different and unknown region of the country. A brief look at schools' characteristics shows that most of the beginning teachers (10 out of 14) worked in rural and isolated settings, located in very poor catchment areas, where dropout rates were high. Only two new teachers taught in urban schools, and two teachers worked in suburban schools. Rural schools were, on average, small (e.g. with 33, 39 and 40 teachers on their staff, e.g. 188, 360, 240 students) and the vast majority of their staff was young. One teacher worked in a rural small primary school (with 10 students) and she was supported by a co-ordinator teacher and by another teacher for students with special learning needs. It also should be noted that, apart from teaching, in their second year, most of the teachers (9 out of 14) were expected to take on other roles at school, such as subject leaders and pastoral tutors, in some cases more than one.

The purpose, time demands and overall procedures of the research project were explained to all the teachers. The schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria: type of school (rural, inner-city and suburban) and size (large, small and medium). Findings from previous research (Flores, 1997) and official data (namely schools' characteristics and location) obtained from the local education authorities were the two main sources of information for sampling purposes. Teachers were recruited according to the following characteristics: having undertaken an Integrated Model of Teacher Training degree in a public university and being in their first year of teaching without prior teaching experience. The model presupposes that the subject area (e.g. English, Biology) and the pedagogical component are distributed simultaneously throughout the course. The latter encompasses subjects such as History and Philosophy of Education, Psychology of Development, Sociology of Education, Curriculum Development, Educational Technology, and Methods of Teaching. It is a 5-year course including 4 years of full-time study at university and 1 year of teaching practice in a school. All of the teachers were teaching for the first time and their subjects included Physics and Chemistry (7), Languages (3), Math (1), Biology (1), Physical Education (1) and Music (1). Nine of them were female and five were male teachers. Their ages ranged between 22 and 28 years old. The vast majority of them changed schools at the end of their first year of teaching due to national policy. All were followed up in their second year of teaching in order to examine further their process of learning and professional development in their new school contexts.

4.1. Data collection and analysis

A combination of sources and methods of data collection was used. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with the new teachers (at the beginning and at the end of each school year). In order to obtain further details about school culture and its influence on teachers' development a questionnaire was also devised based upon preliminary findings from the first set of interviews. The questionnaire was administered to all staff in each of the schools ($n = 18$ in total) involved in this research project at the end of each school year ($n = 627$). Pupils ($n = 891$) were also asked to write a short essay in which they described the ways in which their teacher changed (or did not change) over time. The annual report, a formal document which teachers have to write at the end of every school year, which requires the approval of the executive council of each school, was also used as a data source. It provided access to new teachers' perspectives about their experiences at school in so far as it should reflect their overall evaluation of their work during each school year. At the end of the study, all new teachers were also asked to write a report in which they looked back on their first 2 years of teaching and reflected upon their experiences, and evaluated their participation in the research project.

All the interviews (which lasted approximately an hour and a half each) were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were returned to participants to be checked for accuracy, and to have comments and/or supplementary information added. In the process of analysis, an inductive approach was used, and substantive themes were defined as they emerged from the data. The overall principles of 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were applied. The process of data analysis was undertaken according to two phases: a vertical analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in which each of the respondents'

interviews was analyzed separately. A second phase was then carried out through a comparative or horizontal analysis (cross-case analysis) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this phase, the method of 'constant comparative analysis' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to look for common patterns as well as differences. This process was undertaken iteratively and adjustments in the coding process were made where necessary. A case record was also kept for each of the respondents over the 2-year period and an overall analysis was undertaken at the end of the research. This enabled checking for recurring themes and regularities as well as contrasting patterns both in each teacher's accounts and across teachers' responses. A wealth of data was generated from the reports and the four interviews conducted with each of the new teachers over a 2-year period. The discussion of all the results arising from the data collected over time is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses upon new teachers' experience as first and second-year teachers by their views of teaching and of themselves as teachers in two contexts of teaching and their implications for the (re)construction of their identities over time.

5. Findings

Data are presented according to three main influences upon the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of their professional identities: (i) *prior influences* (which examines teachers' past experiences as pupils); (ii) *initial teacher training and teaching practice* (in which we look at motivations for entering a teaching degree and teachers' overall assessment of their formal professional learning experiences as well as their implications for the formation of their identities); (iii) *contexts of teaching* (which analyzes the process of learning, socialization and professional development both in terms of *classroom practice* and *school culture and leadership* and their effects on the reconstruction of teachers' identities in changing contexts of teaching).

5.1. Prior influences

5.1.1. Past experiences as pupils

Prior experiences as pupils seemed to play a strong mediating role in the identities which new teachers brought into their first school teaching experience. Former teachers, who provided positive or negative models of teaching, were also seen as an important socializing factor (Knowles, 1992; Nimmo, Smith, Grove, Courtney, & Eland, 1994). Looking back on their school-days, the participants recalled both the negative and the positive episodes which marked their lives as pupils. Most of them referred to the teachers they admired and, in some cases, who had influenced their career choice. Flexibility, motivation and fairness associated with their personal characteristics (the teacher as a person) were recurrent features throughout their accounts.

> I think those teachers who made a difference always have a great influence on us. I can remember my Math's teacher while I was in Year 8, because his classes were happy, pleasant and he was good fun… (NT13, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)
>
> There were a few teachers who had a great influence on me. They were extremely competent, but they knew how to talk to students… they were easy to talk to… they looked at the students as they were, and they didn't judge them according to their faces or to their social background. (NT10, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

In both negative and positive cases described earlier, the 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975), during which new teachers observed many styles of teaching, seemed to have played an important role in the way in which they constructed their identities, shaping, in some cases, the way in which they responded to practical situations as new teachers.

> Maybe the experience of my former teachers during my secondary education helped me to behave the way I do, because they did exactly what I am trying to do now. Actually, there was this teacher of Chemistry who I admired a lot and who I try to follow as a model. (NT4, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)
>
> When you are teaching, you always remember your own experience as a student… I mean, when I am in the classroom, I always remember the classes I used to have. (NT14, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)
>
> In my classes I try to avoid the same kind of interaction that my teachers used to have when I was a student. (NT3, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)
>
> Regarding the classes, I tried to create an image of what went wrong when I was a student, and I

have tried to change that. I mean, now I try to do the opposite to what the bad teachers did during my schooling experience. (NT8, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

This confirms earlier research (e.g. Knowles, 1992; Lortie, 1975) which points to the major role of beliefs and ideas prior to entering teaching, in the ways in which prospective and beginning teachers approach classroom practices and think about themselves as teachers. The personal experience of being a pupil, whether positive or negative, seemed to be influential in the ways in which the participants in this study viewed themselves as teachers. It is interesting to note that former teachers (and their teaching) were seen as a 'frame of reference' in their making sense of teaching, both as pre-service and as trainees, and in their understanding of themselves as teachers.

5.2. *Initial teacher training and teaching practice: lost at sea?*

Teaching was not the first choice for most of the teachers involved in the study. By and large, teachers involved in this research project fell into three main categories: (i) those who decided to become teachers because they viewed teaching as a stable and secure job (10 out of 14); (ii) those who entered the profession owing to non-related teaching reasons (the 'destiny' or a way of expanding the subject knowledge) (2 teachers); and (iii) those who joined teaching because they felt a personal strong commitment to become teachers (2 teachers). In other words, the large majority of the teachers cited extrinsic motivations (employment opportunities and the influence of 'significant others' such as former teachers and relatives who were teachers too) for entering a teaching degree. Only two teachers referred to personal factors inherent in teaching itself (the desire to teach and to work with children).

Well, my intention was to do Law, but I didn't have the (required) high marks to apply for a place at university and I decided to become a teacher. I thought I would have better opportunities to get a job if I did a teaching degree even though I had never thought of becoming a teacher while at school. (NT14, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

Teaching was absolutely a personal choice. I don't know if the fact that I always was a good student had influenced my choice. I usually helped other students and I used to teach my cousin for her examination and she was able to get through it because of me, she said… Since then my motivation to become a teacher was even stronger… I mean, I always enjoyed teaching very much. I enjoyed observing my teachers teaching and the only thing that used to come to my mind was 'I would like to become like them one day!'. (NT7, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

Pre-service teacher education seemed to have had a relatively weak impact upon the way in which new teachers approached teaching and viewed themselves as teachers. The classic and widely cited gap between theory and practice was a recurring theme throughout their accounts (Flores, 2000; Hauge, 2000; Hobson & Tomlinson, 2001). Reflecting upon their experiences as student teachers at university, the majority of the teachers spoke of the inadequate preparation provided to them in order to deal with the complex and demanding nature of their daily job in schools and in classrooms.

I believe that at the university (I am now thinking as a teacher), I didn't get the best preparation… because I think that they didn't prepare us well enough to teach. There are many difficulties and doubts… maybe we didn't get much experience as student teachers and we are now facing many obstacles. (NT10, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

What I was taught at the university was… utopia… at that time we weren't aware of what a real school was like at all. We didn't know exactly what the reality was like. We thought that it was like we were told. But then we get there [schools] and we realize that those theories just cannot be put into practice. (NT9, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

As a consequence, there were both inner and practical tensions between the awareness of the 'pedagogical theories' learned at university (which emphasized issues such as constructivism and individualization) and the management of the complex and demanding reality of the classroom, which called for on-the-spot management as well as pedagogical decisions in order to teach and deal effectively with the students. Throughout their accounts teachers referred to the gap between 'ideals' (as student and as student teachers) and

the 'real world' of schools and classrooms (as teachers). Facing a 'new' situation (being a teacher in a school for the first time), not feeling well-prepared to handle the duties required of a teacher, and realizing the gap between university and school, were salient issues in their depictions of their teaching experiences described with feelings of 'being lost'.

> You get to the school and you come across a very different reality… You start your teaching practice and you feel lost, because you aren't used to this kind of situation, you don't know the dos and don'ts of your new role… (NT9, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)
>
> You leave the university and suddenly you are in a classroom full of students and you have to teach them. I mean, it really happens too suddenly! You have to deal with a sort of barrier… (NT4, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

Feeling (and behaving) like a teacher was depicted as being both a rewarding and a challenging experience. Most of the teachers (9 out of 14) described their first teaching experiences (i.e. teaching practice) as being sudden, tiring and stressful. Issues such as heavy workload, bureaucratic work, lack of support, wide variety of tasks to be performed and assessment procedures of their performance were recurrent features in their accounts. Added to the shift from being a student to being a trainee at school was the mismatch between beliefs and practices. Using the concept of 'social strategy' suggested by Lacey (1977), most of the teachers seemed to have adopted a 'strategic compliance' attitude in so far as they tended to follow their supervisors' perspectives about how to teach, maintaining at the same time personal reservations about them. In other words, they 'adapted strategically' (Vonk, 1993) to the situational and institutional constraints of their role: being a trainee whose performance was being assessed.

> Sometimes you had to work against your own beliefs… they were the supervisors and they were assessing you… I had to teach according to other people's perspectives… Now I teach my way and not according to other people's ideas… (NT14, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

However, five teachers reported that teaching was a very positive experience. They enjoyed their job, especially because of the good relationship with the students and the supportive atmosphere at school. They also stressed the autonomy and freedom to teach and the teamwork amongst trainees and supervisors as positive features of their teaching practice:

> It was a positive experience. I realized what a teacher has to do, in terms of teaching, but also the extra-curricular activities. The supervisors provided the support we needed, but, at the same time, we had the freedom to teach according to what we considered to be the best. One of my supervisors told us that she was there to help us, but teaching was our job… (NT11, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

For most teachers, teaching went far beyond mere instruction, to encompass also the socialization process, as well as the whole development of children. Several metaphors were reiterated throughout their accounts to illustrate this point, the most common of which were the teacher as the possessor of multiple roles, as an *educator*, as a *model*, as a *guide* and as a *friend*:

> I see myself as having two roles: I am a teacher but a teacher is also an educator. I cannot see my job differently… because my job goes beyond instruction, there are also values and attitudes. (NT5, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)
>
> Being a teacher is not only about knowledge. It's about paying attention to the students' needs and, at the same time, trying to improve their knowledge and skills… as a teacher you are a sort of guide of students' learning… but you are also expected to look after them. I mean you have to pay attention to the students' background, and try to understand their behavior… (NT11, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

Caring for the students and helping them to deal with their own difficulties were also crucial features in their depictions of their role. The personal element in teaching was also highly valued by the teachers to whom being a teacher (as a result of their teaching practice) was a rewarding experience. Interestingly, teachers who felt a personal commitment and desire to enter the teaching profession and who recognized the influence of 'significant others' (former teachers and/or relatives who were teachers as well) valued highly their training at university and their teaching practice at school. They also reported that positive experiences as pupils had

given them a broad understanding of their role as teachers. As earlier research has demonstrated, the role of intrinsic motivation needs to be taken into account in attempts to foster teacher recruitment and retention (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1997; Kyriacou, Hultgren, & Stephens, 1999).

5.3. The impact of contexts

Due to teacher surplus and teacher recruitment policy (which occurs mainly at the national level) in Portugal, novice teachers have to move from one school to another during the first years of teaching. As first-year teachers, the participants in this study were given a post in a new school. They described this at the beginning of the first year of teaching, both as a challenging and rewarding experience. Feelings of enthusiasm and, at the same time, anxiety and fear of assuming all the complex and demanding tasks inherent in teaching emerged in their teachers' accounts as they portrayed the transition from teacher/trainee to full-time teacher. Their depictions of their first year of teaching were detailed and full of references to their (high) expectations and to the challenges and constraints they encountered. They highlighted the mismatch between their (initial) beliefs and images about teaching and the roles they were expected to perform as first-year teachers.

5.3.1. Classroom practice

The process of learning from the first teaching experiences impacted upon new teachers' understanding of teaching and of their identities as teachers and the ways in which they behaved professionally. Overall, they reported that their interaction with the students in the classroom produced a more defensive and custodial attitude for their teaching, both in their pedagogical strategies and at the personal level. These resulted in an increasing self-confidence and a more positive evaluation of their performance. It seemed that they were beginning to made sense of themselves as teachers in terms of their ability to exercise control.

Once they had graduated, the first teaching experiences were to bring about the realization that teaching was more demanding than they were expecting, that they lacked the knowledge to undertake all the tasks and duties required of them as teachers, and that they did not feel supported at school—another crisis of identity. Teachers identified a variety of learning situations related to their day-to-day practice of teaching. The novelty and the variety of tasks to be performed, associated with a curiosity in relation to their new professional settings, was referred to as a challenge by new teachers who were eager to learn their new roles and take on their new responsibilities as full-time teachers.

> I think the most striking experience was dealing with so many and varied activities and with students. I had to face a great variety of situations and I had to adapt to them and learn from them… (NT5, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)
>
> It has been a very tough year, there were loads of new tasks to do and new roles to perform for which I wasn't well-prepared. It has been a very tiring year. For instance, the pastoral role has been a very demanding job. It requires much of your time… (NT2, Interview 2, End of Year 1)
>
> Last year as a trainee I had support from my supervisors and from other teachers at school. This year I was on my own, and I wasn't used to such a heavy workload… and suddenly you have to face all those students. At the beginning I had to face several problems in dealing with them, I mean… trying to define my position and their position inside the classroom. (NT12, Interview 2, End of Year 1)

As a result of a better knowledge of the students in the classroom context and the ways in which they reacted to their teaching, new teachers emphasized that they adopted a more cautious attitude in order to avoid disciplinary problems, which lends support to earlier work (Brekelmans & Wubbels, 1999; Vonk, 1984; Vonk & Schras, 1987).

> I think this year I am a bit stricter (in order to become less strict at the end of the year) than I was last year. Last year I had to deal with disciplinary problems because I was too flexible with them [students] from the beginning of the year and then it was too late to sort out the problems. (NT14, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)
>
> At first I had a stricter attitude towards students because of my experience from last year. But then I realized that they [students] were different and my relationship with them is now very different. (NT4, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)

Related to this was the recognition of the importance of the setting up of rules inside the

classroom from the first day on in order to create a workable and pleasant learning atmosphere. Teachers highlighted the ways in which they have learned from their students in the classroom. Getting to know the students and the ways in which they behave in the classroom were said to be of paramount importance for new teachers as they became more knowledgeable about their attitudes and responses, which enabled them to deal with classroom management more effectively.

> I have learned that students are not exactly what you think they are. You have an idea about how students are and behave, you get here and you realize that they are quite different from what you were expecting. (NT3, Interview 2, End of Year 1)
>
> Now I am more aware of their [students] willingness to participate in the classroom activities. I can tell whether or not I am able to motivate them. (NT4, Interview 3, End of Year 2)

Although new teachers admitted that flexibility, responsiveness and diversity were key elements in good teaching, they also emphasized the difficulty in dealing with students effectively. They acknowledged that disciplinary problems were still prevalent during their second year of teaching, despite their greater knowledge of students and of the classroom setting. In fact, this relates to teacher change, in so far as, as the teachers themselves recognized, there was a shift in their teaching from a more inductive and student-centered approach towards a more 'traditional' and teacher-centered one (even if their beliefs pointed to the opposite direction), owing to problems associated with classroom management and student control. The dilemma between providing students with a pleasant learning environment, which was associated with issues of flexibility and responsiveness to their needs, versus keeping order in the classroom, was at the forefront of the teachers' responses.

> You have to be very careful with the students, otherwise they go too far. The more you are flexible, the more they cause problems inside the classroom. (NT2, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)
>
> I became stricter and more demanding. I even tried new strategies and activities inside the classroom, but the thing is there is nothing you can do about it. It's useless. They just don't care… (NT9, Interview 2, End of Year 1)
>
> I think that sometimes classes go wrong… because of my trying hard to have a better relationship with them [students], sometimes they go too far and I get upset for letting them go that far. (NT10, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

Concerns with student control in the classroom gave rise to the shift from a more inductive and student-centered approach to teaching towards a more teacher-centered and task-oriented one, in which routines prevailed, despite the broader and constructivist perspective held by the teachers when they talked about good teaching and being a teacher at the beginning of their first year of teaching. The tension between (ideal) beliefs about good teaching and (real) practices is well illustrated in the following quotations:

> Sometimes I forget that I am an educator and I focus on the content to be covered and on the syllabus. This has to do with the students, because whenever I try to organize a different activity, they take advantage of that and they mess around. And then I don't feel like doing it again, so I lecture them and classes become boring. I feel unmotivated… Students do not respond to my teaching… and I start to work according to a set of routines and I become a boring teacher… (NT5, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)
>
> I feel a bit frustrated. I think that I am now a more traditional teacher, a teacher who lectures the kids… Basically I lecture them, I make them do some exercises and I assess their work. (NT10, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)

This 'traditional' (in their own terms) way of approaching teaching was driven by a similar pattern in which three main and linear tasks were followed: lecturing/explaining new topics, students working on their own and assessing their work, leaving behind issues of flexibility, individuality and the process of learning itself. These findings lend support to earlier work (Vonk & Schras, 1987) which has also identified an increasing emphasis on a more traditional approach to teaching experienced by new teachers. In other words, most of the new teachers (10 out of 14) perceived that they became more traditional and teacher-centered. Some of them reported on the way in which their beliefs and views of teaching and being a teacher were

challenged and revisited as a consequence of their making sense of the 'real world' of teaching in different contexts. In fact, in their accounts, it is possible to identify a contradiction between *what it is* and *what it should be*. When they described the teacher's role and good teaching, issues of flexibility, care, responsiveness to students' learning needs, and the use of a variety of methods were recurring features. However, the way they taught went against their initial (ideal) beliefs. Embedded in their practices and in their understanding of their job was a permanent dilemma, which is clearly highlighted in the following quotation:

> Sometimes I am not what I want to be as a teacher or what I think I want to be as a teacher… (NT5, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)

Implicit in this tension is what Keddie (1971) terms the educationist and the teacher contexts, the former being related to 'how things *ought* to be', the latter being described as 'the world of *is*' (p. 135, original emphasis). In other words, teachers' views as educationists may be contradicted in their practices as teachers.

However, other teachers (4 out of 14), according to their own perceptions and to the perceptions of their students, improved over time and became, in many ways, better teachers. Overall, they became less strict in their relationship with students and more flexible in their classroom performance. In other words, a process and student-centered view was prevalent, in which issues of responsiveness to students' learning needs and abilities, diversity and motivation were of paramount importance. They became more and more concerned with the pedagogical and moral aspects of their job. To quote two of them:

> My perspective about teaching has changed… and I think I have changed my behavior as a teacher. I mean I used to be a student in a private school where there were very strict rules. So, I was used to behaving according to very strict rules, not only at the school, but also at home. Therefore, I became very strict too… Now I realize that I have to be more flexible, I mean I cannot be too strict in relation to students, and that's why I think I have learned a lot, and I have changed a lot too… You have to pay attention to their needs and act accordingly. (NT7, Interview 2, End of Year 1)

> I have changed the way I address students. Now I try to have a closer relationship and I try to move around the classroom, so they can feel they are supported. I try to follow the way they solve worksheets… (NT13, Interview 2, End of Year 1)

Overall, most of the participants highlighted that they became more aware of their responsibility as teachers. They stressed that they learned how to become 'professionals', but, at the same time, they emphasized a deepening of knowledge of themselves as 'persons'. They identified a wide range of learning experiences, varying from practical ways of dealing with their day-to-day tasks to the learning of the 'nitty-gritty' of teaching (Vonk, 1993), and to a deeper understanding of themselves both as 'persons' and 'professionals'. This had implications for the (trans)formation of their professional identity as they became more aware of the nature of their job and their new role at school which, in most cases, conflicted with their view as student teachers.

5.3.2. The effects of school culture and leadership: from creativity to compliance

There was a clear consensus amongst new teachers about the powerful effect of the changing contexts of teaching on the process of learning the 'language of experience' (Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000). Nevertheless, this occurred mainly in isolation (especially during the second year of teaching) with a growing focus on the classroom setting. In their accounts, they stressed that they learned 'while doing' and 'by performing the tasks' required of them.

> You learn how to do things by doing them. (NT1, Interview 1, Beginning of Year 1)

> I think you learn how to perform all the tasks required of you as a teacher by actually doing them. (NT13, Interview 2, End of Year 1)

> Now I am not as talkative as I was last year with some of my colleagues, because of the problems I had last year. It was my first year of teaching and at first I trusted everybody, then I realized that I had to sort out things on my own… (NT11, Interview 3, Beginning of Year 2)

> You talk and you give your opinion and you get upset, I mean I got upset several times this year, because I've tried to do what I thought was the best thing to do… But I realized that the best for you to do is not to bother and let them [staff and school administration] go… and this way you

> don't get upset and nobody gets upset. (NT8, Interview 4, End of Year 2)

Perceptions of school culture and leadership impacted upon the ways in which new teachers learned and developed over time. By and large, balkanization and competition amongst teachers, the 'normative' and bureaucratic side of teaching, the existence of 'vested interests' and unwritten and implicit rules at school affected negatively new teachers' attitudes and practices, which became less progressive and innovative. As a result, learning became more and more a lonely process as identity became both bounded (by the culture) and boundaried. Little importance was attached to colleagues as influencing elements in learning at work. When this was the case, the participants referred to young colleagues, former colleagues at university and colleagues teaching the same subject. The lack of support and guidance from school leaders (headteachers reported the lack of provision of an induction program) and from colleagues led to the emergence of idiosyncratic coping strategies as they came to acknowledge the complexity of teaching.

Most of the teachers reported on the ways in which they became socialized into the school culture by adopting its norms and values. Using the concept of 'social strategy' (Lacey, 1977), most of them, according to their own accounts, tended to adopt an attitude of 'strategic compliance' as time went on. As they became aware of the way in which schools operated, most of them claimed that they adopted a 'step-back' and more compliant attitude (Lacey, 1977). They described the way in which they started to comply with the norms and values of the workplace, despite the fact that they did not match their own beliefs and values. Conservatism and compliance emerged in their accounts as characteristics of their identities, replacing their initial enthusiasm and, in a sense, their proactive attitude (emphasized at the beginning of the first year of teaching). This shift was described as a gradual process as they got to know the way in which schools (and their colleagues) operated. Individualism, low morale and commitment amongst teachers, the existence of 'vested interests' and the excessive bureaucracy within teaching were recurring themes referred to by teachers to account for the loss of idealism, the emergence of routines and sense of 'giving up'.

> In terms of your work in school, the best for you to do is 'do what other people do', I mean, that's the way things are. I am aware of people who tried to work against the odds and… I mean, when you work in a school like this one which lacks organization, they [headteacher and her team] can do whatever they want to, there is too much pressure on you, even in bureaucratic terms… And teachers as colleagues in the same profession are not supportive of one another, they just criticize your work and they don't work as a team… (NT12, Interview 4, End of Year 2)

A minority (4) did not follow these patterns. Two teachers—in one case despite the negative perception of school culture and leadership—maintained their enthusiasm and optimism. Interestingly, both had given intrinsic motivations for entering teaching. They stated that they were still committed to teaching as a career in which, they assumed, they could make a positive contribution, especially for the benefit of their students. The need to adapt to different contexts and to become more flexible in teaching according to the students' own pace and learning needs were key issues in their accounts.

> Despite everything, my self-motivation is still there, although I experience more and more difficulties. But I think that improvement is possible, you can't create an idealistic idea and stick to that idea for good, I mean, you have to adapt to different contexts… I would like to give my best, but I realize that it doesn't depend only on myself wanting that change to happen. But I know that I can change something for my students and I can see the result of my trying hard. And it's all that I need to feel that change is possible, that there are good things in teaching, that there is a positive perspective in teaching despite the huge amount of things which work against you… (NT11, Interview 4, End of Year 2)

Two other teachers seemed to have 'recovered' their lost idealism and optimism during their second year of teaching. They emphasized that the less positive experience of their first year of teaching (and of their teaching practice) led them to feelings of disenchantment and disappointment. Teaching in a different context, however, was to bring about a very positive and rewarding experience, due especially to student motivation, commitment and achievement and positive perceptions of school culture and leadership.

> This year I could realize that the idea that I had created during my teaching practice and last year

> that students were not motivated and that there was a distant relationship amongst teachers wasn't true in every context. Now I can say that there are some schools and some contexts where you can find a good atmosphere like in this one… and this makes you feel like working here… (NT4, Interview 4, End of Year 2)

Not surprisingly teachers who taught in schools in which there was supportive, informative and encouraging leadership and effective working relationships amongst staff were more likely to reveal positive attitudes toward teaching. However, personal biography also played a significant part in explaining both similarities and differences amongst teachers, and particularly the ways in which they made sense of their teaching and learning experiences in two different school settings.

6. Conclusions

The research has highlighted the powerful interaction between personal histories and the contextual influences of the workplace. Teachers who worked in collaborative cultures were more likely to develop and to demonstrate positive attitudes towards teaching. This corroborates earlier work which has shown the connection between 'natural' and 'spontaneous' collaborative working relationships and cultures, and the provision of supportive and more meaningful development opportunities for new teachers (Cole, 1991; Williams, Prestage, & Bedward, 2001) and the effects of workplace conditions on teacher morale, commitment and retention (Weiss, 1999). However, the key role of personal biography in mediating the making sense of teachers' practices and their beliefs about themselves as teachers—and in reshaping teacher identity—also emerges from the data.

The identities of the new teachers in this research had been strongly personally embedded at the beginning of their teaching careers, but destabilized by the negative school contexts and cultures in which they worked.

The meanings, values, images and ideals of what it meant to be a teacher with which they entered teaching were challenged and, for many, teaching became more routine, more rule governed and less creative. The influence of workplace (positive or negative—perceptions of school culture and leadership) played a key role in (re)shaping teachers' understanding of teaching, in facilitating or hindering their professional learning and development, and in (re)constructing their professional identities. Despite the strong connections between personal biography and stable sense of identity, it is clear that in most if not all cases, history was mediated by context.

For these new teachers, then, identities were deconstructed and (re)constructed over time according to the relative strength of the key influencing contexts of biography, pre-service programs and school culture (see Fig. 1).

The findings suggest that the relatively weak influence of pre-service programs might be strengthened by a stronger focus upon opportunities to experience and reflect upon personal biography and the cultural contexts of schools in order that the tensions between them might be better understood. Induction processes, also, need to focus upon the development of teachers' construction of identity through exploring of links between personal

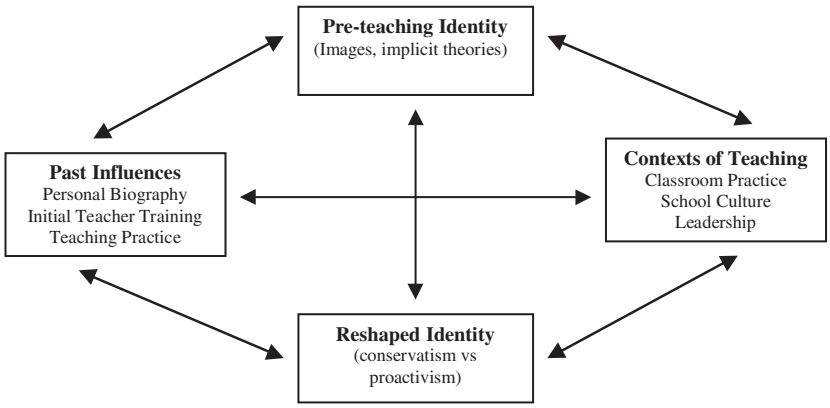


Fig. 1. Key mediating influences on the formation of teacher identity.

biography, reflective practice in the classroom, student feedback, peer support and increased awareness of continuing professional development within supportive school cultures. Whist it may not be possible to change policy of placement at national level, the action proposed may further a debate about relationships between schools and higher education and their joint responsibilities for ensuring that new teachers have and are able to sustain and put into practice a set of values which represent aspirations for a passion for high quality teaching and learning.

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