Who do you think you are?
Nurturing Preservice Teacher Identity in a World of Increasing Globalisation and Emergent risks

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Abstract

The process of becoming a teacher integrates and distils past and social experiences, and episodes in life that result in a cumulative history. This history can shape the identity of student, teacher and preservice teacher to ultimately become part of the broader context of education.

Increasingly, we see students entering the teaching profession from diverse backgrounds that include a cross-section of vocational, cultural and international contexts and circumstances. This is largely representative of today’s mobilized communities that have been shaped and defined by a globalized marketplace.

In this article I discuss issues of identity of preservice teachers in light of trending globalization, and the increasing imperative for teachers to be reflexive practitioners. Using Ulrich Beck’s theory of reflexive modernization provides a framework that can link these preservice teacher identities with globalization, modernization and emergent risk societies. In identifying risk societies as a deterioration of previously valued social norms, Beck suggests that individuals and risk societies are enmeshed together. Ironically, these evolving societies must still provide for the needs of its individuals, who, in turn exercise increasing choice in their future.

Maintaining identity in these uncertain environments can collide with overall wellbeing. For the preservice teacher an erosion of identity can exaggerate feelings of disempowerment and discomfort. Overcoming this is largely dependent on the preservice teacher’s efficacy, reflexive practices, and a capacity to continue.

Keywords: teacher education, globalisation, risk, identity, practicum
Introduction

This study has a dual purpose: (1) to identify challenges inherent in preservice teacher placements and (2) to examine the extent to which identity may be compromised for preservice teachers amidst a diversity of backgrounds, contexts and educational settings.

Framed within the literature review the paper is organized as follows: First, some of the challenges that preservice and practicing teachers face in developing and maintaining their identity are explored. Second, a theoretical framework provides a foundation to examine challenges in initial teacher education as often perceived by students. Next, results of this study are presented. The last part of the paper offers some discussion and conclusions based on the research findings, and offers a set of considerations for future research for preservice teachers.

Literature Review

What Identity?

Self-identity, more than merely an inherited trait, is an ongoing reflective, constructive process, an effort that we continuously work and reflect upon. (Giddens, 1991). Giddens writes that “A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor - important though this is - in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going” and suggests that individual’s identities are the product of continuous integration with events happening in the external world. Identity, he suggests, is the product of continual immersion in a world that is continually changing. In today’s neoliberal and globalised world the individual is now also offered increasing freedom to choose what they want to do and who they want to be. However, while there is increasing freedom to make choices this often comes at a price. In many cases we must know of the traps to look out for and be ready to negotiate how our choices might best suit our needs and circumstances. These negotiations, says Giddens, can be costly, both physically and psychologically.

Identity of teacher/pre-service teacher

In today’s world where rapid change is ever-present, identity cannot be static; identity is shifting, ambiguous, and the result of culturally available meanings and the way in which these are practiced in everyday situations (Kondo, 1990). For teachers this is typically affected by their own culture, their experiences in and outside of schools and their overarching beliefs and values about education.

Teachers’ professional identities are rich, complex and dynamic. (Wenger 1998, Sachs 2001). As Wenger suggests this richness and complexity should be nurtured in supportive communities where there is respect, mutuality and communication. These elements are key to the development of any individual. Professional teacher identity, however, may not come automatically to all teachers. It will typically be the result of negotiated, lived and practiced engagement in an education community. These emerging identities may be challenged, and will often be the subject of discussion in the broader community. Ultimately the identity will reflect the contribution of teachers’ work and their experience in the eyes of themselves and others. Wenger’s (1998) five dimensions of identity illustrate the interconnectedness and
interdependence of teacher identity with the educational community and suggests that this can be well formed via negotiated experiences, community membership, targeted learning trajectories, a network of multi membership; and finding the relationships between local and global socio-political linkages that intertwine in educational practices. Wenger describes these fundamental elements of identity as products of the constructive learner. These products inform the continuous meaning of the experiences and discourses that help to shape our lives. Ultimately we start to see identity and practice begin to mirror each other.

A teacher’s professional identity may be perceived as an outcome of pedagogical skills with something that emerges or morphs into place after some classroom experience. Often seen as stereotypical, this identity may, however, demonstrate multiple professional identities. Teachers may belong to a generic category of teacher but levels of granularity will emerge giving further definition to their identity. For example, a primary teacher may also identify with subject specializations as well as year level. A secondary teacher will have methods expertise and each will bring experiential expertise and discourses that further shape their identity. In these situations the professional identity also serves bureaucratic, management and recruitment purposes that provide an additional layers of meaning to the generic labelling of the teacher.

Teacher identity is continually shifting, and over recent decades has been largely responsive to public sector conditions. The ‘designer employees’ (Catherine Casey, 1995) of the 1980s and the entrepreneurial professional of the 1990s (Menter et al., 1997) responded to crises in accountability, industrial action and workplace culture. The emergence of neoliberal practices, or putting education into the market place, promoted education as a commodity, providing the public a range of products to select from. In this context, teachers and schools were expected to respond competitively (Menter et al. 1997) with bureaucracies encouraging compliance and policy-governed ‘designer teachers’. These teachers were expected to perform at high levels of efficiency and effectiveness. Entrepreneurial teacher identity that followed saw individualism emerge; yet reservations were held about the value this would bring to education. As Andy Hargreaves (1994) observes ‘individualism is primarily a shortcoming, not a strength, not a possibility; something to be removed rather than something to be respected’.

A subsequent revision of teacher professionalism across the public sector has brought significant consequences for teachers’ work and their professional identity with the emergence of controlled and regulated features, in teaching contexts in NZ, UK, USA and Australia over the last decade (Codd, 2005). The rise of teacher professional standards in these countries could be viewed as being more concerned with standardization of practice rather than quality, although a search for quality is that which is publically voiced. For some, the introduction of teacher standards and the national curriculum function as systems of control and bring standardised language and monocultural values of learning to the educational arena. Ironically, the globalised nature of learning and education today demands flexibility and an affordance to acknowledge the identity and diversity of its constituents. (Marginson, 1997, Sachs, 2001). In a measured and performative culture of teaching and learning, the individual and the strength of an entrepreneurial identity do not readily fit. Professional identity then becomes, as Sachs (2001) describes, a set of attributes that
are imposed upon the teaching profession either by outsiders or members of the teaching fraternity itself. As Sachs (2001) suggests, teacher professionalism or identity, is being re-identified. It now appears to be a consequence of teacher deskilling while concurrently intensifying their work. Demands on teachers are increasing; resourcing is decreasing; yet pressures of accountability and expectations of maintaining high standards prevail.

In essence, the moral consciousness of the teaching individual is in question. Embracing education reforms and performative approaches, inclusive of teacher standards, is concerning if this is to be at the expense of the individual. Education reform can be instrumental in reforming teachers, but in doing so there should be some caution around potentially changing what it means to be a teacher with these changes having the capacity to alter one’s social identity (Bernstein, 2000).

**Theoretical perspective**

**Risk society – Individualisation/ reflexive modernisation**

As highlighted by Beck (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the biography of the individual is inextricably connected to risk societies. They propose that the disintegration of previously valued social forms, including social status, gender and family, directs pressure and expectations from the newly emerging societies onto that individual. A decline in social order, inclusive of nationalism, class, ethnicity and the traditional family, highlights a need for the development of individual identities (Beck, 2002, Herriot & Scott-Jackson 2002). The development of such identities, uniqueness, behavioural style or assembled biographies is crucial as these biographies can maximize new certainties. While teacher identity can be rich and complex and charged with enthusiasm (Sachs, 2001), it can be counterbalanced between confidence and conflict. For example, the biography and background that a preservice teacher brings to teaching can be influenced by relationships with the class and the mentoring teacher. As the relationship with the mentoring teacher may involve ‘power over’, rather than ‘power with’ the preservice teacher, or power-distance or deference as practiced in some cultural groups (Hofstede, 1986), the development of a sound relationship is imperative.

It is Western capitalist cultures that typically form today’s risk societies. (Giddens, 2002). Within these societies are the individuals who move in and across such worlds. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe the nature of these individuals and introduce a concept of “individualization” that illustrates fifteen interconnected notions to counterbalance the unchecked world of the risk society. These notions centre largely on a need to develop one’s own biography to succeed in these environments. In some cases, the discarding of loyalties, provide a mechanism for liberation and empowerment (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Herriot & Scott-Jackson, 2002) and open a window of opportunity for the individual to develop new values. These may represent a major shift from the previous values of dependability and integrity promoted by organisations. These authors suggest that individuals can better adapt to change than can social institutions. Herriot and Scott-Jackson (2002, p. 252) propose that a ‘disloyalty’ to others and to organizations is becoming more highly valued, additionally noting that previous values of dependability and integrity are less valued now than personal values of ambition and social attractiveness.
They suggest that organisations must undergo change in order to offer increased interdependence, liberation and empowerment for individuals.

The ever-changing contexts of uncertainty combined with educational restructurings result in a complexity for teachers’ professional identity. It follows that teacher identity must be negotiated and re-established on a constant basis. (Codd, 2005, Melucci, 1996). Typically, however, the privilege of voice and the autonomy of behaviour are often sanctioned by their employing authorities.

**Emulation – transference**

The work of Deborah Britzman (Britzman, 2003) has explored the struggle for student voice and the challenges of establishing an identity. She suggests that teaching must be situated within one’s biography, present circumstances, deep commitments, affective investments, social context, and conflicting discourses about what it means to learn to become a teacher. With this understanding, teaching can be reconceptualised as a struggle for voice and discursive practices amidst past and present voices, lived experiences and available practices. The tensions among what has preceded, what is confronted and what one desires, shape the contradictory realities of learning to teach. (Britzman, 2003)

Identifying the challenges facing a student signals a need for mentors and teacher educators to work collaboratively and productively with the more difficult and uncomfortable aspects of pre-service teachers’ learning. (Bloomfield, 2010).

A focus on the formation of identity of the pre-service teacher and attention to the needs and issues being faced can be addressed. A typical but unconscious expectation of the teacher is transference. The act of transference may be instrumental in the way in which the student reacts, performs or interacts in the classroom. It is generally shaped by an expectation of the teacher for preservice teachers demonstrate teaching practices as an emulation of themselves, or even a replay of their own teacher training requirements (Britzman, 1986, Groundwater-Smith, 2011). Acknowledgement of transference presents an opportunity to review a traditional outlook where of role models ensure the success of students. Such practices do not do the work of pedagogy, and do not typically provide for the development of the ‘identity’ of the individual. To address these issues may require a heightened awareness of personal identity and could be addressed for students through institutional studies (Knowles & Sudzina, 1992). Provisioning for this may have its own set of challenges with a common limitation of teacher education institutions to focus on rules and procedures related to recruitment, course content, granting of credit. These can create additional impediments and challenges that can act as dysfunctional constraints for harnessing succession within the profession.

For the most part student teachers only focus on the their own performance as teachers. Given the power triad of university lecturer/supervisor, supervising teacher/mentor and student teacher, this outcome is mostly predictable. If reflective, collaborative practice is to reach its potential, the mentor/student teacher relationship needs, at least, to function at a collegial level.
The degree to which pre-service teachers assume the identity of a teacher is in part, determined by their efficacy and their capacity to continue, when faced with uncertainty (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). The role of the mentor teacher is a significant factor for pre-service teachers, particularly in the situated dimension. Personal variables of the pre-service teacher and the mentoring teacher include all personal aspects of self and are culturally based and often with cultural constraints. Dimensions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance have a tendency to tend to amplify each other, yet together they can result in a move away from individualism towards collectivism (Hofstede, 1986, Vitaliy et al, 2012).

Challenges with increasing system accountability in education, paralleled with increasingly diverse groups of students, landscape the teaching conditions for teachers—from a monoculture to a multidimensional culture in all classrooms. Hence aspects of situated complexity add additional demands to pre-service teacher’s efficacy. Adopting an identity in these environments has an impact on the wellbeing of pre-service teachers and mentoring teachers that addresses Beck’s concept of risk (Beck, 1992).

**Identity and assessment in practice for preservice teachers**

The practicum represents a the time in which a preservice teacher is introduced to the requisite teacher standards, as well as a time in which they must begin to demonstrate a level of proficiency (Lawler, 2008). These learners can bring expertise across a range of areas that reflect past experiences and, in many cases, serve to reinforce the innermost identity of the individual. Such identities can be unexpected and wide-ranging.

The role of the mentor, assessor, coach and guide is pivotal in shaping teacher identity. Making judgments in professional experience occurs in diverse contexts that are temporary, variable and difficult to replicate because personalities, classrooms and contexts are unique. For mentor and preservice teachers, the social and qualitative nature of education brings with it a degree of inexactness or difficult-to-measure outcomes that are subject to wide ranging interpretation. Personalities, local school cultures and the subjective nature of assessment (Britzman, 1986, Martinez, 1998) can play a crucial part in providing an accurate evaluation of preservice teacher development. It is within these types of context that the aforementioned regulatory standards hold value. Overcoming the subjective nature of assessment and evaluation of teaching practices can provide parity, transparency and clearly defined overarching goals for preservice teachers. Aligning one’s own philosophy and practices to these standards is where identity may become compromised.

The competing realms of truth and philosophical beliefs force teacher education students into a choice. This has the effect (Britzman 1991) of sometimes forcing students to become someone they are not. Trying to take a position which may clash ideologically with one’s professional role can cause a situation of great discomfort or what Giddens (1991) calls existential anxiety. In a somewhat contrasting perspective Bakhtin, however, (1986) has suggested that persons are caught in a perpetual incompleteness of identity (perhaps because the self is saturated) and that this represents the becoming of a person.
Successfully locating preservice and practicing teachers in educational settings today calls for a revision of the identity of the teacher, the attributes and skills that they bring and an acknowledgement of the increasing demands in their work. (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, Sachs, 2001). To disregard this may result in any possible autonomy within teaching profession commencing a downward spiral towards a globalised, accountable and competitively driven perspective. In particular, preservice teachers are increasingly influenced by the emergence of risk as they embrace diverse, globalised and mobile societies.

**Research Methodology**

This research project stems from a qualitative PhD study and employs constructivist approaches.

Ten preservice teachers studying at various Australian universities were interviewed, and one academic Chief Investigator (CI) participated as interviewer in this study. Endorsing universities were approached to assist with publicizing information that would generate student interest in the project. All participants were teacher education graduates who had completed professional experience and course work and were willing to offer their reflections and comment on their experience. The data sources collected in the research consisted of open-ended interviews, using a phenomenological approach, based on the lived experience of the individual. These interviews, or more specifically the participants’ narratives, were transcribed and returned to the participant for verification. Qualitative analysis software (NVIVO) was used to assist in the breakdown, coding and preliminary analysis of the interview data.

Once a sufficient number of common themes or tendencies of discourse were identified these were grouped in terms of demographics, cultural dimensions and common perspectives. Statements were also grouped or coded to provide insights into the range of feedback, reflective comment and outlooks.

**Findings**

The students interviewed came from various locations around Australia and brought with them a variety of perspectives, cultural backgrounds and life experiences. An initial review of the interviews or narratives elicited the following information, *(Figure 1)* although this information was not explicitly requested.

Interestingly, in a culturally and traditionally feminine profession, the larger number of respondents was male. A second area of interest lies in the age demographic. While ages and age ranges were not identified, the data revealed that mature aged students outnumbered what has been traditionally a pathway for school leavers. In today’s uncertain times the teaching profession appears to offer a degree of job security, financial security or familiarity in revisiting a ‘known’ area. Perhaps for some, the notion of revisiting an educational space, a space where they have experienced success as learners themselves, there is a tantalizing expectation that things may remain the same?
Preliminary Findings - demographics

Figure 1

Of these two cohorts the females shared comments and feedback that reinforced the power discourse in the classroom setting.

‘She just wanted me to please her’ and ‘I was badgered by a teacher and there was not need for it’ were comments that seemed to elevate the power of the teacher and do little to provide opportunity for collaboration and the reciprocity of learning.

Attempts to make sense of the classroom needs and the vagaries and desires of the teacher again reinforced a ‘power over’ relationship. The mature age students felt confronted and disempowered with comments such as: “I did not understand what she was after” and “None of my previous knowledge and experience seemed to count”.

Interestingly, only one of the students expressed positive comment and indicated that his time in the school was successful. This male student had commenced his initial teacher education course directly after high school and had no other life experiences to bring to the classroom. He indicated that he was happy to follow the lead of his teacher and shadow to her practice. His presence with of little consequence of threat and his identity was ready to mould.

Those preservice teachers who ventured far from their comfort zone, either being of non-Australian heritage or travelling to an unknown or familiar locations for their professional experience were bringing to life some aspects of Becks individualization. The students are seeking to develop their own biographies, to take the risk and to make active choices with regard to their future. Challenges and hurdles that they faced and have overcome, ultimately serve to reinforce and strengthen their identity.

Nine out of the team respondents indicated that they were requested to complete additional time to satisfy the requirements of their professional experience. In each case the reflections of these students were heartfelt, and indicated a drive to succeed. Comments such as “… was so disorganized but expected me to do everything the way that she did” and “… was never really sure what I was expected to do” have clearly
created some anxiety at the time, but were not considered insurmountable. Again this is a clear connection to Beck’s suggestion that individuals are open to change and can adjust to change more readily than institutions, or even those who may be institutionalized.

A more common response made a link with being valued.

‘… there just wasn’t time to spend one-on-one with my mentor teacher’

If finding time to work with a preservice teacher is too difficult, then a reasonably strong message around valuing the input of that individual, their strengths and their aspirations is passed on. One widespread image is clearly one with the teacher is the transmission of knowledge and all skills with a teacher is all knowing and the transmission is into empty vessels. In many respects this demonstrates persistence in traditional stereotypes remains the popular cultural image, and perhaps extends to sharing knowledge with the preservice teacher.

Discussion

Communities of practice provide the context and conditions for teachers to develop an identity. They facilitate values of respect, reciprocity and collaboration. Communities of practice and an identity are interdependent as each nourishes and supports the other. If the purpose is to revitalize teachers’ sense of themselves professionally and personally, then this must be nurtured for those who are entering the profession. Importantly this can be achieved individually and collectively, from within and from outside the profession. Communities of practice provide opportunities for this to occur that are strategic and well as practical.

The search for renewed teacher identity, inclusive of all who are working in this field may be viewed as an attempt to change the public perception of the role and purpose of teachers and teaching. Academies, institutions and workplaces may wrestle with notions of professional identities in these times of rapid change and political agendas. It is the teachers and pre-service teachers, however, those at the heart, in the classrooms, at the coal-face, who must address not only these issues of uncertainty, but must also have a clear and articulated sense of what it means to be a teacher in contemporary society.

Conclusion

In essence teachers demonstrate a concern for the welfare of others and `the common good’, the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities and prepare learners for successful interaction in social settings and institutions.

Redefining teacher professional identity requires a dual approach; an effort to shed the shackles and reminders of the past, making way for transformative attitudes; and simultaneously overcoming unwarranted domination of individuals or groups over others. If preservice teachers and teachers can construct and maintain their own reflexive self-narratives, with robust connections to their social, political and professional agendas, strong identities can be forged, embedded and reinforced for lifelong learning.

These self-narratives provide a link for a collective professional identity and can be openly shared, debated and contested by others. Critical self-narratives about
professional identity at the individual and collective level have clear emancipatory objectives. Given that there is no ‘one size fits all’ pedagogy in the daily lives and practices of teachers, the necessity for reflective teaching becomes paramount. By collecting data about one’s own practice, it becomes possible to seek improvements in teaching and pedagogy. The idea of reflection as epistemology can nestle within the broader parameters of pedagogical content knowledge for all teaching.

Reflection has come to mean many things to many people and the term has been appropriated and used in many different ways. The importance of reflection is not however, how much we reflect but the kinds of questions that we ask ourselves. It would be of great benefit, for example if schools and the teachers within have a broad mission to transmit the best of culture and to eliminate those practices that are unjust and oppressive. In this way the identities of learners in the school and the broader education community can all be fostered and respected.

In particular, preservice teachers are increasingly influenced by the emergence of risk as they embrace diverse, globalised and mobile societies. Students from a range of backgrounds, experiences and beliefs, are entering a profession that theoretically supports professional integration and migration, yet are simultaneously required to comply with the practices of an often culturally homogenous mainstream workplace (Collins & Reid, 2012). We see this regularly evidenced when prior qualifications, classroom experiences and overarching intentions are questioned.

New times and new conditions require alternative forms of teacher professionalism and teacher identities to develop. As Furlong et al. (2000) suggest: We need to ask fundamental questions about who has a legitimate right to be involved in defining teaching professionalism. Do state control, teacher accountability overrule the right to the development of own professional identity? How can these impediments be overcome to provide enabling practices for preservice teachers or those who are electing to join this profession?
References


