

The professional identity of undergraduate students during their academic studies: A case study in Greece

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies how undergraduate students of preschool education perceive their professional identity during their studies. Written affirmations of the study participants (n=46) reflecting on their educational experiences within the framework of an experiential approach in the kindergarten were collected. The qualitative data analysis revealed two significant findings: Firstly, the professional identity is shaped in correlation to the period of undergraduate studies, which can be analyzed in three non-standard time phases (past, present, future) that are discriminated depending on practical-experiential exercises (past and present) and on the completion of university studies as well as the subsequent career path (future). Secondly, it became apparent that the students' opinions about their identity are presented through a self-referential approach (relating to their own work as educators) or through hetero-referential approaches (relating to other individual from the school environment).

KEYWORDS

Professional identity, undergraduate students, early childhood education, practicum, educational experience

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent travail met en cause les attitudes des étudiants de premier cycle de l'enseignement préélémentaire à l'égard de leur identité professionnelle tout au long de leurs études. L'analyse qualitative des données recueillies au moyen des avis reconsidérées (des réflexions) écrites des participants à l'étude a mis en valeur deux résultats importants: la première remarque porte sur la formation de l'identité professionnelle effectuée par rapport au déroulement de leurs études qui s'étendent en trois phases atypiques (passé, présent, futur). Celles-ci se distinguent par la participation aux travaux pratiques vécus (passé, présent), l'achèvement des études et leur débouché (futur). En deuxième, il est à remarquer que les attitudes des étudiants à l'égard de leur identité sont exprimées au moyen d'une approche autoréférentielle (ils prennent position en tant qu'enseignants eux-mêmes) ou d'approches hétéro-référentielles (en se comparant avec d'autres personnes de l'entourage scolaire).

MOTS CLÉS

Identité professionnelle, étudiants de premier cycle, enseignement préélémentaire, stage, expérience didactique

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Educators' professional identity defines how each educator is recognized both by themselves and by others while it serves as a framework which enables them to perceive and shape their image as to how they are, how they act and how they understand and become conscious of their work and their position within society (Gee, 2000; Sachs, 2005).

The professional identity is in correlation with educators' opinions and perceptions of their profession, and they play a key role not only in the way educators teach or develop professionally but also in their adopted attitudes towards educational changes (Chong & Low, 2009; Ye & Zhao, 2019). It is founded on a set of beliefs which the individual has formed about the teaching process as well as about their capacity as an educator (Yuan & Lee, 2016). As it has been established, those beliefs are under constant shaping and reshaping through the experiences the individual builds (Chong & Low, 2009). Furthermore, it is argued that individuals' experiences tend to be impacted by the attitudes and expectations either already formed or during their training (ibid). According to several researchers (cf. Beltman et al., 2015; Day et al., 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Flores, 2020; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2016; Izadinia, 2013; Luehmann, 2007; Walkington, 2005), the development and formulation of educators' professional identity begins early on in undergraduate training with practical exercises being an integral part of it, and with their contribution to the future professional progress of educators recognized on principle. The undergraduate university syllabus is considered of essence in educators developing a professional identity (Anspal et al., 2012; Fotopoulou, 2020; Izadinia, 2013). It is through the syllabus and their practical training that they have the opportunity to grasp the profession of the educator (Abednia, 2012; Goodnough et al., 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

In addition, according to Flores and Day (2006) identity is defined as a varying and dynamic process that encompasses acquiring meaning and redefining the values and the experiences of an individual. Furthermore, the educator's identity is associated to a great extent with the personal element, and it refers to the way that the individual perceives the concept of the educator and of their own self as an educator (Yuan & Lee, 2016). Consequently, the educational experiences, the knowledge and the personal involvement and action of undergraduate students in the course of practical training are important factors which contribute, formulate and give meaning to their professional identity during their academic studies. Thus, practical training of undergraduate students has an exceptional role to play in the professional identity of the future educator and is intertwined with its building up (Huang et al., 2022; Leeferink et al., 2019).

As Flores and Day (2006) point out, the professional identity of undergraduate students, which has been termed as "pre-teaching identity", results from the image they themselves had of their educators, their initial beliefs about what makes a good educator and certain indirect theories about the teaching practice. This pre-teaching identity evolves through processes of reflection as undergraduate students delve into and become more aware of the way they function as teachers, blending in the teaching experiences they gain in the course of their academic studies as well as their active role in the school and classroom background (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005). Sutherland et al. (2010) also point out the involvement of reflective processes and remark that interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences through reflection leads to a deeper understanding of their role as future educators.

Both the professional identity of young teachers and its formulation during their undergraduate period are said to be of utmost importance for their subsequent professional career (Chong & Low, 2009; Hong et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of the study is to investigate and illustrate the educational experiences of undergraduate students as regards the conditions or those data in which or through which they find and understand their professional identity within the framework of their practical training. More specifically, we state the following research questions:

- How do undergraduate student teachers perceive the impact of the teaching experience in the classroom on them?
- How is their teaching experience related to them as educators?

METHODOLOGY

The study took place in the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education (hereinafter referred to as: DESECE) of Patras University. To refer briefly to it, DESECE of the University of Patras, located in the city of Patras, in West Greece, is a public university, subject to the supervision of the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. Studies here are free of charge and last eight semesters which lead to graduation. Graduates are eligible to work in public or private preschool facilities in Greece.

The sample of the research is composed of 46 fourth-year-students in DESECE of the University of Patras, registered in the elective course of the undergraduate academic programme associated with the practical training of the students.

More specifically, it is an elective course of the semester whose academic lectures are supported by workshops and by practical traineeship in kindergartens in the city of Patras. Students' visits take place on specific days of the week according to an organized programme. They are to visit the pre-school facilities in pairs of twos and take turns on the role of the teacher and the assistant teacher per visit. The content and the subject matter of the workshops are drawn upon the course lectures aiming to prepare participant students for their practical training in kindergartens by analyzing and processing each subject of the theoretical lectures from a methodological and experiential perspective. Through this threefold setup, the design and the implementation of the specific course are founded on the premise of connecting practice to theory in a direct and experiential way for the students which reflects the broader aims of the study programme of the Department (DESECE, 2022).

The sample was selected on the basis of the following reasons. Firstly, included are students in the final year of their studies therefore they have completed a significant part of their academic education, both in terms of their theoretical and of their practical training, as opposed to students of earlier study years. Secondly, part of the academic lectures of the elective course in question deal with teachers' professional identity. Thirdly, the specific elective course is optional, therefore all the students who opted for it are considered to have done so seeking to delve deeper into the themes that the course discusses. Finally, as mentioned above, the course is accompanied by traineeship in kindergartens, thus enabling participant students to experientially approach its subject matter, while accessing at the same time the theoretical background of the course.

In conclusion, as far as the objectives of the course in question, the participant students make up a sample sharing a common teaching framework. Therefore, it has been estimated that the individuals making up the sample have adequate knowledge and experience and these qualities allow for an in-depth study of their professional identity. Also, the non-obligatory nature of the course, in line with the undergraduate study programme of the Department, underscores the conscious choice of the sample to participate in the given course which

combines theoretical and experiential approaches. Students' participation in the research paper was optional and would not in any way affect their final grade in the course. The number of the individuals participating in the study was the all the students registered in the course.

Regarding the demographic profile of the sample, all 46 individuals are female undergraduate students in the fourth year of their studies. Consequently, the criteria referring to the gender and the year of studies of the sample are not applicable in the data analysis.

The research material was collected utilizing the methodological tool of written affirmations of the participant students reflecting on their educational experiences within the framework of an experiential approach in the kindergarten.

In line with the requirements of the course, students were initially asked to mention convictions, experiences and personal events relative to their previous experience from the school environment and what they had made of those in relation to their own self as potential teachers. This reflective narrative approach was implemented in the course's workshop, with the participation of all the students in the course. It took place at a time preceding the students' programmed visits to kindergartens and verbal speech was employed aiming to allow participants to spontaneously express their personal experiences and motivate them in their entirety to involve themselves in discussing responses so that the narrative affirmations of personal events would serve as a springboard and an introductory framework for the training practice about to follow. This specific narrative approach of reflecting on experiences was selected to be conducted in oral speech on purpose aiming to allow for spontaneity on one hand and in order to serve as a stimulus thus contributing to the training practice planned to be assigned without, however, posing any limitations to the methods the student would choose to work with.

The decision to choose self-reflections as a data selection methodology tool was taken on the grounds that, as relevant bibliography maintains, personal reflections in writing enables students to fully understand in essence and in depth the way they function as teachers. Data collection from this methodological angle of the students writing their self-reflections also helps with their professional identity being formulated since they respond by interpreting and re-interpreting their experiences. Similar findings have been found in the works of other researchers as well (cf. Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2019; Walkington, 2005). The process of introspective reflection reinforces the students assuming their role as teachers while at the same time it leads to the evolution and formulation of their professional identity (Walkington, 2005). As for the methodology regarding outlining and analyzing their experience at school and the thoughts and contemplations derived from it, a targeted preparation in the workshop had preceded.

The method to process and analyze the data of the research was the technique of content analysis, which enables the researcher to systematically explore the text and arrive at a systematic coding of written speech (Kiriazi, 2011). As a reference unit used to classify data was each specific topic expressed in a sentence, in a paragraph or in a part of the written text (Kiriazi, 2011, pp. 281-292). Classification categories to process and analyze findings in the research data were not determined beforehand; instead, they emerged from a qualitative analysis of the responses to the question. At first, there were two readings of the written accounts and then they were broken down in sections by a series of themes and categories associated with the identities of the participants in the study within particular contexts, along with the potential reasons behind the formulation of those identities. Afterwards, any emerging categories were re-examined to find correlations with the conceptualized context adopted in the present study of how educators' identity is formed. The principal criterion for their organization was the rules of exhaustion and of mutual exclusion (Vamvoukas, 2010, pp. 274-275).

The question to the students was posed as follows: *“As part of your visits to the kindergarten, you approached the daily routine of a teacher experientially. Having just*

completed your training practice, choose and write down a teaching experience which you think had an impact on you as a teacher. You are to describe the relevant experience analytically, as well as the conditions and the surrounding details, why you have chosen/assessed it as important and how it is related to you as an educator”.

In total, there were 46 written self-reflective student responses collected. After thorough investigation and analysis, twelve (12) responses were excluded from the total data research material for not fulfilling or observing the research criteria (e.g.: they were off topic, they were lacking in or unclear in content, there were violations of code of conduct). Therefore, 34 responses were finally utilized since they focused on the research question and met the methodological requirements and the research criteria.

The findings are presented in the next section and the system of categories for analysis that emerged is presented along with certain indicative excerpts from the written self-reflective responses of participant students.

FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis of the responses focused on the one hand, on what students had learned and how their teaching experiences had affected them, and on the other, the way they themselves grasped the concept of a professional identity through these experiences. The responses analysis showed that the students understand and approach themselves as teachers through specific dimensions.

The time frame of undergraduate studies along with the predominant objective goal for academic training is seen to function on the side as an impetus that plays a key role in shaping a professional identity. Throughout students' responses it was established that their reflections expressed references and approaches in past, present and future time, despite the fact they were all attending the same academic year and the time frame within which their personal experience took place was clearly defined and confined in terms of time (dates and frequency of kindergarten visits). This common feature, a time projection in past, present and future with an exclusive reference to the context of their studies articulate three time phases/three dimensions. Data processing related to the time variable showed that students' thoughts and experiences with an association to identity can be grouped in three time phases:

1. First Phase (past): Students' initial perceptions regarding their identity.
2. Second Phase (present): Active perceptions of students about their identity.
3. Third Phase (future): Students' perceptions of their future identity.

First Phase (past): Students' initial perceptions regarding their identity

In further analysis, phase one coincides in time with the start of academic studies and seems to complete when students start to actively participate in the practical training courses in the kindergarten. The initial perception or impression students have of themselves as a teacher and the profession they are to follow is reflected. This early perception seems to be confirmed or defined anew through acquired experiences. This is a relatively short-lasting stage and as such it produced a rather small number of responses (3 references).

Therefore, it appears that this first stage involves an initial image students already have of themselves as educators and of the profession they have decided to follow. This early impression is under formulation so reflections as well as experiences have a complementary function and corroborate this image. Indicatively it is noted: *“I was once again certain that I had made the right choice of the profession that I will follow”* (S12).

In one case the experiences were found to be in contrast to the original image the student had: *“The situations I dealt with in the school helped me formulate my professional identity as*

a teacher and they affected my perceptions regarding the kindergarten pupils, since what a teacher really experiences in real conditions is totally different from what they were probably imagining” (S27).

Second Phase (present): Active perceptions of students about their identity

The second phase is identified in the present of the academic studies and its distinction from the previous one lies in that students’ contemplations and thoughts about a professional identity are exclusively related and centered in on their undergraduate studies focusing on an experiential angle in the school context and experience they gained through it. The phase in question seems to coincide in time with the students’ participation in the training practice which is an integral part of their undergraduate studies. Their active participation in the training-experiential practice constitutes an indeterminate milestone in time between the first and the second phase, with the latter appearing in the majority of the responses (25 references).

As seen through the analysis of students’ responses, active perceptions of their identity can be further distinguished in three subcategories:

2a. *perceptions of themselves functioning as teachers* (self-referential approach),

2b. *perceptions of the school teachers* (hetero-referential approach),

2c. *perceptions of the pupils in class* (hetero-referential approach)

(2a) more specifically, the first subcategory (self-referential approach) has to do with their thoughts and reflections regarding their own identity in the role of the class teacher. For instance they point out:

“It was a cause to put myself to test, to learn to deal with situations and incidents, to regulate emotions and I also learned that I am not to quit if I really like what I am doing. I felt satisfied with myself because I didn’t give up [...] and most importantly I fulfilled the responsibilities to the kindergarten as I was supposed to” (S17), “[...] this incident had a major impact on my self-perception as a teacher. Although I was totally disappointed at the beginning, [...] and I considered myself incapable of becoming a kindergarten teacher, things changed along the way. I made more effort and I set new goals and accomplished them” (S20), “[...]I learned that we are never to be complacent in our knowledge, or that we know enough and we don’t need to learn something more, instead as teachers we should always enrich our knowledge” (S23). “The way I continued to work after that incident had a positive impact on the way I saw myself as a teacher, my fears regarding what I could accomplish and whether I was good enough as a teacher in relation to the teaching process, my relationship with kids: all this was improved. I came to appreciate my skills better and this gave me motive to try even harder for the best I could offer to myself as a teacher and ergo to the kids” (S39), “...the incident troubled me and it still does since I have not got the experience yet nor the suitable knowledge and methods to deal with such situations” (S43).

(2b) the second subcategory (hetero-referential approach) has to do with their thoughts and reflections regarding their own identity in association with the teachers in the school community. Indicative excerpts:

“[...] regarding the kindergarten teacher and her comment that she liked the prevailing peace and quiet in full class and [...] asking the right questions, I found it satisfying that I am handling it well up to that moment and it empowered me to continue at the same pace. I felt that my endeavor to put the activity into practice as best as I could so that kids can understand me was rewarded or more” (S12), “The kids treated me like their young teacher. They see the age difference between me and their own kindergarten teacher. However, this made it difficult sometimes for me to put my work into practice since kids didn’t take my words seriously. Nevertheless, the kindergarten teacher encouraged me in my effort to accomplish my program

successfully, which pleased me and inspired me” (S27), “[...] her opinion of me counts a lot because it comes from an experienced person. Her remarks made me feel good and ready to continue the hard work that I’ve chosen to do” (S37), “To many it may seem a simple thing, the comment of the kindergarten teacher on an activity, but for me it meant the world. It created in me a more positive attitude and psychology so that I treat myself as a teacher and not see only the negative things but to be aware of the positive ones as well. [...] it made me realise that I can become a good kindergarten teacher” (S38).

(2c) finally, the third subcategory (self-referential approach) has to do with the students’ thoughts and reflections regarding their own identity in association with their pupils: They mention for example:

“[...] in addition, I realised that in order to address such incidents you need to know your class pupils and all their idiosyncrasies and you should find ways to deal with them without disrupting the cohesion of the class” (S01), “[...]I realised that as a teacher I haven’t learnt yet how to control the kids’ tantrums, so when there is agitation in the classroom the main feeling that overwhelms me is fear that things may get out of my control” (S07), “[...]the specific incidence [...] rewarded and reassured me of my work and made me reflect mainly about what I have offered in the classroom as well as about how I can improve myself so that not only kids will be happy with me but also I with myself” (S36).

Third Phase (future): Students’ perceptions of their future identity

The third phase involves students’ perspectives about the future and contemplations about their professional identity as teachers concerning the completion of their studies and their transition to their work environment. Students are aware of and approach their function as educators upon completion of their academic studies. This third phase taking place during their studies is not distinguished in any subcategories and it involves thoughts relating with their identity as professional teachers in the future upon completion of their formal obligations. Indicative examples: *“[...] This incident generally made me upset. However, since the previous week I had taken on the role of the teacher, I should deal with it as befits this role because I will certainly have to face various difficulties, either similar to the aforementioned or of a completely different nature” (S17), “[...]I learned that we are never to be complacent in our knowledge, or that we know enough and we don’t need to learn something more, instead as teachers we should always enrich our knowledge” (S23), “[...] the specific incidence had an effect on my perceptions as a teacher in the future. It made me realise how big the responsibility is and also to be aware that in the future as a kindergarten teacher in a respective class I will have to resolve a similar problem by myself, which is rather a difficult situation and certainly a great responsibility. Of course, I knew from the start about the responsibility that a kindergarten teacher bears but it was after this incident that I realised how big this responsibility is. It made me reflect that no matter how hard we try to grasp the meaning of being a teacher through theory, the true dimensions of difficulty and the teacher’s responsibility only become apparent under real work conditions” (S30).*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study and the analysis of the research data showed that, during their academic studies, undergraduate students gain educational experiences through which they start developing their professional identity perceiving themselves as a teacher. In a parallel manner, their identity as professionals is evolving, is being formulated and re-defined within the context of their undergraduate studies. These findings are in line with the respective ones found in Greek and

international bibliographies (for instance: Beltman et al., 2015; Flores, 2020; Huang et al., 2022; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2010).

However, what additionally emerges in the present research paper, highlighting the evolutionary nature of a teacher's identity as a professional, is that the time frame of undergraduate studies constitutes a dynamic framework. In the duration of their studies students realise the impact and the influence of their training experiences on their identity as professional teachers through a process which already takes place while they are undergraduate students and this dynamic framework can be distinguished in three phases. The first phase includes thoughts and reflections of students which are traced back to the start of their academic studies and before their experiential approach to the training practice. The second phase seems to begin in time with the students' participation in the training practice which is an integral part of their undergraduate education. The third phase includes students' thoughts as to how they identify and describe their identity as professional teachers in the future.

The three phases are in a linear path in time, in conjunction with the course of academic studies. They are not formally defined but rather founded on personal experiences through which undergraduate students contemplate, reflect and redefine their professional identity in light of hands-on educational experiences. It is worth noting that this is a referential approach which takes place exclusively through acquired knowledge both on a theoretical and a practical level in the context of the training as the academic syllabus defines it.

The diversity of responses with respect to temporal references constitutes a valuable finding that proclaims and confirms the formulation and development of undergraduate students' professional identity during their academic life. At the same time, it highlights the overall contribution and impact academic programmes have on launching the formulation of their identity as professionals. The evolutionary nature of identity is revealed by the process of conceptualizing professional identity through this temporal reference in three phases.

Furthermore, it was established that two characteristic features of the academic study programme function as time milestones serving to define and delineate the three phases from each other. The first is the students' participation in the training practice, which is the temporal defining line between the first and the second phase. The second feature is associated with completion of studies with getting the university degree upon graduation being a distinctive point of reference and which sets apart the second from the third phase. These are two milestones, each of them with particular significance for students according to their responses, which could contribute to understanding the complexity of professional identity as it is formulated during an important stage of its development: the time period of undergraduate studies.

In accordance with the aforementioned findings, the following conclusions can be established. Firstly, the professional identity is composed, redefined and evolved during undergraduate studies. This finding also reveals that the period of time mandated in the undergraduate studies is perceived not as a static framework but as a dynamic one. Secondly, during their academic studies undergraduate students acquire and develop teaching and educational skills and experiences and they start perceiving themselves as teachers ergo their identity as professionals as they become aware of the elements responsible for its formulation. In addition, the contribution of school kids and school teachers to getting university students to realise their professional identity is outstanding. Functioning as potential teachers and through their interaction and their communication with the kindergarten teacher and the pupils, undergraduate students identify their strengths and their possible weaknesses and assess as well as reflect on their overall status as teachers in the future. Both the kindergarten teacher and the pupils are seen as points for feedback which reveals the students' personal desire to improve in their profession. These findings in several cases resonate respective ones found in Greek and

international bibliographies (cf. Flores, 2020; Hahl et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2022; Ifanti & Fotopoulou, 2010; Sutherland et al., 2010).

For reasons of research ethics, however, it should be pointed out that these findings transpire from a specific sample therefore, it would not be realistic to draw generalized conclusions with a universal validity. To that end it would be useful to expand and validate the research with samples comprising diverse features. The present study constitutes a tool to be used for comparative research which will help reveal either similarities, thus validating its findings, or differences that can lead to further research. Such comparative research may help generate a deeper and more substantial understanding of the dynamic nature of a teacher's professional identity as it is formulated in the duration of their academic studies.

A methodological approach of data collection through written reflections of participants in the study, in which students interpret and reinterpret their experiences, serves in itself to help them structure their identity as professionals. Respective findings are found in the work of other researchers as well (cf. Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2019; Walkington, 2005). An interesting idea for future research would be in the direction of applying a blending approach where, alongside written reflections, there would be reflective dialogues or individual interviews which would enable students to give feedback.

In conclusion, the present paper revealed that, on the one hand the professional identity of undergraduate students is formulated and evolved in the duration of their academic studies, and on the other it corroborates that undergraduate students perceive their professional identity through their training experiences. It is especially interesting that, while the participants in the study were in the fourth year of their studies, their perception of their identity as professionals goes back to three time phases related to the given frame of time of their undergraduate studies. This finding serves to reveal the research point of view that teachers' professional identity is not static or invariable but rather that it is under formulation and evolution throughout the entire professional career path of an educator, which already starts with undergraduate training and is evolved within it. The fact that undergraduate students early on realise their role as professionals and visualize themselves as professional teachers is a valuable finding in order to comprehend their professional evolution and development as it is pointed out by Thomas and Beauchamp (2007, 2011).

Despite its limitations, the present study offers findings which can provide an initial framework for further research. They can serve as a springboard to generate new research considerations and questions aiming to reveal other aspects of the professional identity of undergraduate students thus contributing to a deeper approach and understanding of how the professional identity of undergraduate students in education sciences is formed.

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