(Re)construction of a Teacher´s Professional Identity from his Initial Training: Autobiographical Narration

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Abstract: This autobiographical article shows how the initial teacher´s training plays a crucial role in the reconstruction of his professional identity. Over this period, the teacher begins to analyze, observe and reflect on what he does and how he does it. This study revolves around three key issues: a) the importance of initial training in the quest for a more fully human education; b) the importance of initial training in the quest for coeducation; c) the importance of initial training for teacher educators. The conclusion is clear: a teacher´s professional identity is strongly determined by the initial stages of his formation, which enable him to build, develop and apply his pedagogical knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study is aimed at describing the process of (re)building professional identity as a teacher being covered from their Initial Training stage. The reason for choosing such stage is that it is the beginning for the teacher to analyse, examine, observe and reflect upon what they do and their way of doing it. That is, Initial Training is the vehicle allowing the teacher to find out their own identity in a critical and reflective way [1, 2].

To this end, and on the understanding that teaching identities may be interpreted from a narrative approach [3-6], autobiographical research will support the answer to the question all this study is about: *Which is the role of Initial Training in developing teaching professional identities?*

Not surprisingly, the identity created at such stage and leading to the creation of the professional identity corroborates that these first approaches to the profession are the most important ones in shaping the teaching identity [1, 4, 7]. Even in a negative sense, these first approaches can lead to dropping out the studies chosen [8].

If we intend to understand something so personal as the teaching identity, we should first get to know the teacher as a person [9, p. 297]. In fact, within the educational sphere, personal and professional identities are inextricably linked [10-12]. Furthermore, for an educator the identity is infused with an exchange between their personal experiences and the socio-cultural context in which they work on a daily basis [11, 13, 14]. Nonetheless, before tackling this issue, we feel it would be appropriate to begin by conceptualising the term 'identity', since it has various dimensions (personal, professional, social and cultural) and, therefore, it has been dealt with in different fields (philosophical, psychological, sociological, historical and anthropological) [15]. It is a term holding various social and psychological categories interacting with each other [16, p. 10].

In general terms, the identity is just a set of personal and professional experiences and events shaping a person. According to Taylor, identity means:

> *"The implicit definition of oneself which a human being can be able to create during their conversion into an adult and keep on refining along their life". My identity is what I am" [17, p. 10].*

From Taylor's view the identity answers the following question: That question depends on the specific time in life, as well as the personal, social and moral position of that person, and to whom that reply is addressed to.

In that sense, by specifying and understanding that teaching identity changes and evolves according to the time, the educational level, the context where the teaching takes places and personal aspects, we are approaching Devís & Sparkes' point of view, who understand it as follows:

> *"[...] something social, multiple, fragmented, changing, emerging, ambiguous, contradictory, contextual, relational and distributed over time and space" [18, p. 87].*

It is within the teaching field where the educator, whether a beginner or an experienced one, gradually shapes their identity along their working life and around two elements [15, 19]:

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1. The professional identity covering those thoughts one person has about oneself as a teacher and which it is shaped according to a set of dimensions self-esteem, self-image, job satisfaction, tasks' perception and future prospects.

2. The subjective pedagogical theory covering the full range of personal opinions, knowledge and values the teacher has towards teaching.

Thus, the identity being developed is *"the set of ways of being and acting shaped by the teacher over their professional life"* [15, p. 189].

According to Caballero [20], the teaching professional identity is built by interlinking several internal and external factors, including the following:

1. Internal or personal factors: The most important ones are vocation, teaching conception, knowledge, integration with the professional culture, self-concept and self-esteem.

2. External or social factors: The profession's prestige, the occupational group, the professional recognition and the interaction with peers.

Thus, if the statement that teaching makes sense within relationships with the others is correct, then the teaching identity will be built with social interacting places, where the self-image is gradually shaped under the other's recognition [17, 21-23]. That is, the teaching identity is not only built from the most technical aspects of teaching (monitoring of the class, knowledge of subjects, students' performances) but it can also:

> *"Be conceptualised as the result of the interaction between teachers' personal experiences and the social, cultural and institutional atmosphere where they take place on a daily basis."* [Sleegers y Kelchtermans, 1999, in 24, p. 47].

The *other elements* play a significant role in such identity's shaping [25], that is, those people who are relevant for the educator and those whom the educator share an emotional link with. This way, *"important appraisals, labelling and expectations when shaping different identifications"* [26, p. 42] take place in the daily interaction with others.

In light of the foregoing, it seems easy to understand that Initial Training stages and professional immersion cannot separate from each other when talking about teaching. Decisions taken by the educator are not only supported by their explicit professional knowledge but, mainly, by their way of thinking, feeling and acting, and all that is based on experiences, interpersonal relationships, beliefs and expectations developed along their life as a student, shaping their particular identity [27, 28]. All the foregoing is justified because identity cannot be built aside from those identifications the others make of a person. Professional identity is gradually shaped by an exchange between the assumed identity and that one vested by relationships with the others [29]. Such exchange allows us to understand *"the way the individual must consider, adjust and make commitments by modifying their environment in order to*

adapt it to their wishes, and also to accommodate pressures and limits of such circumstances" [16, p. 42].

Nonetheless, teaching identity does not mean belonging, but instead it is something that one has o has not. It means a series of needs, values, experiences, feelings and capacities built along the individual personal and professional experience, creating a sense of identity [27, 28]. This is an identity which does not only come from the mastering of external knowledge, but from a *"developed, and shaped one which is linked to life and to someone who is actually living"* [30, p. 63]. And along the whole process, Initial Training is essential, since it works as a reference in training educators able to evolve, learn from experience, reflect upon their practice and learn from it all [Perrenoud, 2010; Smith, 2007].

2. PURPOSES

Our aim is providing answers to the following goals: (a) to show how the teaching identity is gradually (re)built around a series of experiences and interpersonal relationships starting in their Initial Training stage; (b) to show how the teaching identity can be built and understood by means of autobiographical stories.

3. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The main character of our research is a PE teacher who has worked in Primary Education, Secondary Education and at University. The last three years his work has been focused on Primary Education stage.

While he firstly started studying a Degree in Chemistry because of different reasons [31], he changed and undertook the studies of PE Teacher Training in 2003, when he was already 25.

His personal circumstances and characteristics (he was older than the average), as well as the influence from some Initial Training teachers, were decisive in initiating writing short texts with autobiographical content as an analytical methodology for his teaching practice where he acts both as a researcher and the researched subject at the same time. Over the years, this autobiographical analytical methodology has become a custom, leading to different researches and to the presentation of his PhD dissertation, where he examines the way teaching identity is gradually shaped.

His life story, both personal and professional, emerged as soon as he approached the classrooms. Since the very beginning, the prospect of thinking and acting as an educator activated a research journey around his prejudices, fears, feelings and expectations. In this way, he began a process of subjective reconstruction of his life, taking at the same time into account the social context he lived in. An archetype of teacher that allows us to approach his life and professional development and, therefore, to who he is, how his actions, values, choices and ways of understanding education and teaching are and where they come from.

That's why we are convinced that our chosen teacher constitutes a significant and illuminating case. Furthermore,

his purposeful transparency might also stimulate other (future) teachers to write narratives as a means to (re)construct their lives by revisiting and questioning their experiences, teaching acts and decisions. In short, we present here a process of self-reconstruction that might help other teachers to confront and enrich their pedagogical praxis, and to weave a collaborative network of educational narratives and teacher's experiences. So, the reason for choosing this educator, is that we are confident that he represents what Initial Training means for the process of rebuilding teaching professional identity.

Instruments

The most used tool for writing autobiographical accounts is the classroom logbooks. According to Zabalza [32, p. 15] logbooks are *"the documents where teachers record their views about what is taking place in the classroom"*. Besides, they are useful as an instrument registering educational experiences aimed at being examined and shared afterwards [33].

There are different authors [32, 34-37] highlighting logbooks as a motivating tool for critical and reflective processing, helping to broaden thinking about events taking place in the classroom and allowing teachers to develop their own actions and ideas regarding teaching-learning processes.

Life stories have also been used as a way to collect data. They are an *"autobiographical account […] aimed at showing the subjective view of someone where both events and assessments of their own experience by such person are collected"* [38, p. 47]. It means a practical approach and it is focused on subjectivity of the events experienced [39-41]. We chose life stories since, according to Huberrman [42], they are useful for: 1) knowing a professional career and connecting to the teacher from their present and taking into account their professional career; 2) tracking events subsequent to initial stages of the professional practice; 3) giving a voice to the experiences developed by educators 4) knowing at which stage a teacher is in order to arrange a strategy for their training.

Researching Process

The daily use of classes as a tool for collecting data is prior to the PhD dissertation this study is part of. The first experience using this tool appeared at the Initial Training stage as a PE teacher in 2005. It was sufficient for the educator to check its usefulness for deepening his teaching, establishing his weaknesses and realigning his teaching from the observation and the analysis carried out. In this sense, the logbook means a training instrument, but also a researching one, since it is useful for collecting significant data and their reflection, analysis and systematization.

The educator continues systematically using this collecting instrument, having a total of three logbooks corresponding to Initial Training, four corresponding to teacher of Primary Education, one corresponding to teacher of Secondary Education and another one kept as a lecturer at the University. Each of these nine logbooks has approximately two hundred pages.

The general criterion is registering everything which seems relevant for improving both his profession and life in school. In this sense, both the professional identity and logbooks have been progressively evolved: at the beginning, he was mainly focused on curricular and structural issues of the class, while he is now more concerned about personal issues of his students and other issues as an educator, having a more self-expressive nature. It is increasingly becoming a constant reference to the students, to what each of them does and the way they develop, and there are also references to the teacher himself, to how he feels and he acts.

It highlights the daily and individual nature of these comments, where the most relevant aspects taking place in the classroom and in the school are detailed. We would like to point out that compiling individual data does not mean that their analysis is also individual. There is a researchers' triangulation: data have been interpreted and enriched by sharing it among several experts in Teaching PE and Pedagogy, increasing quality and validity of them by excluding the bias of a single researcher [18, 43].

Likewise, there has been a triangulation of data [44] since a different source has been used for information: the story of life. From the academic year 2009/2010 the leading role decides to improve his reflective routine by means of autobiographical stories under the belief that, by remembering and re(building) memories and experiences, one can deepen certain thoughts in order to address them from a different point of view.

This way, the biographical recreation by the subject provides the possibility of giving meaning to his ideas, actions and decisions. The story of life allows him to recognise the reason for certain situations by means of the story created by the leading role who in turn, needs to use a reflective practice in order to remember past experiences highlighting development in a logical order, as well as to interpret them according to the special features of the present (age, current beliefs, knowledge and expectations).

It is relevant to point out that the information analysis has been carried out in parallel with the research process. Over the time, different data, accounts, opinions, and narrations facilitating and deepening the teacher's experiences have been collected. This is a common practice in qualitative research (18), where *"collecting and analysing data go together"* [45, p. 158].

This type of analysis provides a starting point to arrange and give meaning to the research. The procedure followed is the following: 1) we take some ideas as the starting point and, by elaborating them, there appear emerging issues; 2) we take a second approach to the texts in order to give meaning to the ideas arising, to interpret them and to know something more about them; 3) we unify the data based on a classification of information, following an inductive-deductive criterion.

The categories established in the story of life are as follows: a) memories from the past as a student; b) memories about PE; c) access to the teaching world. Regarding the categories established in the classes logbook, they are focused on: a) relationships among the educational community members; b) the teacher's self-esteem and

thoughts; c) working motivations; d) readjustment of the teaching-learning process; e) aspects related to values education.

Ethical and Required Implications

Our research implies dealing with two ethical dilemmas: 1) the story of life and logbook provide a lot of information on the teacher's beliefs, something that can represent a vulnerability issue for him. By acting both as the researcher and the researched subject it is possible to think about ethical and moral issues of this research study, so that we tried to produce an honest, consistent and critical text allowing us to understand aspects of a life in a close and personal way. Besides, by acting both as the researcher and the researched subject we get rid of the bias where the researcher is the only one obtaining personal benefits and there is a balanced exchange between both [43]; 2) these instruments compile information and interpretation on other people. Thus, we inevitably start from the principle of respect for the other.

Furthermore, long-term collecting information, researchers' triangulation, checking with participants and verification of structural consistency, among others, do ensure the credibility of our work [46]. The catalytic validity referring to the extent the researching process redirects and motivates participants so that they analyse and understand reality in order to transform it [47] is also met in our work: by acting both as the researcher and the researched subject we can ensure that the study means an improvement to the teaching practice.

4. RESULTS

Three key issues underlying this research have been established: (a) the importance of the Initial Training in searching for a more human education; (b) the importance of the Initial Training in searching for the Co-education; (c) the importance of the Initial Training for a new professional stage: University. The reason for choosing such subject-matters is that they are the most relevant for the educator to understand and reconsidering how to (re)build their professional identity and how to understand education. Consequently, they are also the subject-matters shaping the way they are and they wish to be.

4.1. Initial Training Stimulates the Interest in a More Human and Socialising Education

In this particular case, the educator's personal story is built from influences coming from his environment [48], affecting his professional identity. As well as the teaching task, from the very beginning, the educator's personal and emotional involvement is required, which will be developed into his professional identity [49].

Thus, starting studies in Teaching at the age of 25, partly determines his reflective attitude and appetite for learning. This stage and willingness facilitate his concern for understanding some phenomena influencing the teaching-learning process and, especially, those allowing students to take part in. Being imbued with the scientific literature during his studies in Teaching opens up prospects for him in order to understand that, due to the subject we teach, a

pedagogical treatment of the body can (and must) be performed, shaping the kind of teacher we want to be:

PE must be useful for something else than just improving motor patterns. It must also provide the students with the possibility to apply everything they learn to their daily lives, by thinking and reflecting upon those factors determining motor skills (sport elitism, sexism in sport, discrimination on the grounds of body and/or skills, etc.) (Practice Logbook. February 2005).

In my daily work I would like to guide my students so that they can develop a critical turn of mind that lets them question the different approaches of our society, defending their own opinions from dialogue and respect, and choosing among all the possible options those that can benefit them more from an individual and social point of view (Practicum Logbook. March 2005).

It is an approach to the reality taking place in a school, during a Practicum, what makes someone realising that PE is not good or bad in itself, but it depends on the relationships among teacher, students and the social context where the profession is developed [50], as he explains in his own logbook.

At this stage, I could realise that PE can be very discriminatory and I became aware of the negative implications the teacher's passive attitude meant for the learning of the schoolchildren (Practicum Logbook. February 2005).

Some disciplinary techniques observed remind me of those used in a prison: How can we socialise by excluding? My first experience as a teacher made me understand that I must involve students into the sessions in order to facilitate their learning; that school is essentially a socialising space allowing students to learn how to become responsible persons, and this can only be possible when they lead their own learning process (Practicum Logbook. March 2005).

Thus, thanks to his Initial Training, this educator became aware of how school quite frequently reinforces and creates situations facilitating inequality among students [51-53]. To this day, this situation means that most of his efforts are oriented towards trying to find a more human and socialising education where all students are proactively and productively taking part in:

When I ask myself why I am studying and training to become a teacher and what the use of what I can do in a near future will be, I come to the conclusion that I will have to try to establish an atmosphere of trust, understanding and equality that lets all the students speak out and in which each one can feel satisfied and proud of being the way he/she is.. I suppose this is the main interest to which I will have to adjust in my job (Practicum Logbook. March 2005).

Therefore, it is the Initial Training that drives this necessary adjustment between his identity building and the

educational values supporting his teaching [5, 54]; it is also the reason for the belief that this profession implies an emotional and caring work towards the students [49].

4.2. Initial Training and the Search for the Co-education

We are convinced that the teacher's attitude towards the students is key to eradicate sexist and stereotypical behaviours. This can be even more obvious regarding Physical Education, since it is a subject where the hidden curriculum is at least as important as the explicit one [55]. This can demonstrate the importance of preventing stereotypical behaviours and providing students with gender equality environments [56, 57].

Our educator became aware of all this during his Initial Training stage by increasingly understanding the essential concepts of culture as the engine of the society and, consequently, the school as the social and symbolic space incorporating and shaping society [58]. At this stage he started to show his willingness to work on the equality of opportunity and treatment with the class:

> *I am becoming aware that school is sometimes based on a strong asymmetry between males and females. For this reason, I think that my lessons are more equal naming boys and girls constantly (…). I believe that I can be a fairer teacher and everybody will feel more equal if, from the beginning of my profession, I start representing women inside our language instead of only using the masculine genre as neutral. (Practicum Logbook. December 2005).*

Having not experienced sexist situations as a student, leading to an inability to understand and to put oneself in the shoes of those who actually experience them [59, 60] does not mean an obstacle for the teacher to understand that the teaching task demands striving for facilitating a fair atmosphere as well as the social integration of every schoolchild. This is due to the opportunity provided by his first approach to the classroom reality as a student:

> *I observe how relationships established among students provide and lead to discriminatory and sexist behaviours. […] I may tend to reinforce girls more than boys. It is possible that I encourage them to be more involved, to take part in the game. What I want is that they give up the idea that women aren't fit for physical exercise, although I don't know if, by doing so, I won't be despising the attitudes that girls reflect in the class or underestimating boys. (Practicum Logbook, March 2005).*

It is from this Initial Training stage that he is increasingly concerned about solving co-education within the classroom and perceiving real possibilities to intervene on behalf of gender equality in school:

> *With the older students, I am working on physical capacities and I am observing that girls are more reluctant to this type of contents than boys. (…) I strengthen the idea that girls can be as good as boys in this kind of tests, I give examples of dome sportswomen who have become successful in a world reserved to men and, little by little, they*

> *become more interested in the lesson (Practice Logbook, February 2005).*

> *In general, what I have intended to do in my lessons has been to offer flexible proposals and to work for the sake of all my students, not just for some of them. I have tried to evaluate the process they have followed during these weeks I have been their teacher without taking into account their achievement or quantifying. Thus, I have started to realize that I must pay attention and give response to mixed ability inside the classroom (Practicum logbook, March 2005).*

This is enabled by the *other elements*, in this case, his university professors:

> *Since I am still in touch with the professors from my Initial Training period, who are concerned about the Co-education issue and equality of opportunity, I can state that I am more sensitive towards the invisibility frequently surrounding schoolgirls in the Physical Education environment when developing my practice; also towards the need to use a non-sexist language within the classroom; and towards carrying out an analysis from the gender perspective of textbooks […] (Practice Logbook. March 2005).*

The Initial Training received in this sense has proven to be key to the development of the teaching professional identity, since it is reinforced by the fact that" *the set of attitudes, values and roles that students from Initial Training give to their profession will be subject to a range of changes and transformations in line with the socialising process taking place in their Initial Training"* [61, p. 48]. Thus, we can corroborate once more how teacher's work means an emotional and personal involvement leading to re(building) teaching professional identity [49].

4.3. Initial Training and Teaching at a new Professional Stage: University Lecturer

There is no need of any specific training to perform university teaching in Spain, or rewards which benefit those professors' motivation towards an innovative teaching practice [62]. This means that the status as a new university teacher requires supporting the practice by obvious references as well as some guiding or mentoring by other professionals [63-65], and it is not sufficient to just submit certain academic merits.

Our educator's stage as a university teacher involves taking those professors teaching him different courses during his Initial Training as references guiding his practice. It is therefore proved how one's self-identity is shaped according to interpersonal relationships and comparisons with professionalism, change, transformation and development prototypes [29] he is seeking to achieve:

> *There are some teachers I always have in mind when preparing sessions and carrying them out throughout my different educational stages. This is actually more visible as a university teacher. I take them into account as well as their way of acting,*

structuring the subject, explaining the lesson contents [...] (Lecturer's Logbook. April 2011).

Even though any teaching professional feel fortunate when having such good examples, this can also lead to obvious uncertainties and even give rise to some serious identity issues [66]. According to Imbernón:

"When the new professor joins a specific teaching situation, they get back to behaviours, attitudes and customs from close colleagues, which do not provide further innovation than that of other teachers. This creates real distress, since all that background comes actually from the internalisation experienced by the other teacher and does not correspond to the new professor's features, and it causes problems in accommodating and professionalizing the teaching practice" [67, p. 46].

These uncertainty feelings are endured at specific moments during their teaching, particularly during the first stages of the university lecturer's professional development [68, 69]. They are summarised in the following quotation:

I don't know whether attempting to do what I've seen others do, and trying to do it always better than I am able to, represents a constraint for my personal and professional growth. I might try and search for my own style, without leaving aside what I have experienced and learnt, but trying to find my own way to lead the classes (Lecturer's Logbook. April 2011).

The threat to self-identity reflected on the quotation above showing that university references can limit the self-identity development as an educator, is overcome when understanding that those same examples were shaping his reflective and researching capacity during his Initial Training. This idea supports the possibility that sharing experiences and opinions with other professionals enable the educator to build his own professional identity and improve his pedagogical practice [70], as it is shown in his Logbook:

Whilst it is true that most of my professional identity comes from my former teachers in university and during my traineeship, I am also aware, because of them, of the need to get continuous training, to read and to review updated scientific literature, to attend courses and to take part in innovation projects, [...]. This is how I become the teacher I want to be because I have the tools to search for myself (Lecturer's Logbook. April 2011).

The deep footprint by his teachers expressly influence his way of understanding and developing his teaching. But especially, they provide him with the chance to share ideas and experiences with other teaching professionals and the openness to research and new educational theories in order to try new pedagogical actions. This proves that the Initial Training stage can be key to (re)building the educator's professional identity [1, 11, 70, 71]. This way and according to Knowles [54, 72], early teaching models and prior teaching experiences are crucial in building a self-image as a

teacher, and something even more obvious at this stage as a university lecture.

CONCLUSION

When trying to answer the question made at the beginning (*Which is the role of Initial Training in developing teaching professional identities?*) and in the light of the results, we can observe that this is the main reference for the educator at an early teaching stage. That is, due to the Initial Training received the teacher can build, develop and implement his own pedagogical knowledge. At the same time, this is a stage where the passion for this profession is unveiled and an interest for effectively and responsibly exercising a more inclusive, human and socialising education arises. This intention remains effective over the time, fortifying the teacher's identity not only from a professional but also from a personal point of view.

We can therefore observe that the teacher introduced in this profession is influenced by the Initial Training received [1, 4, 7, 73], and in this case, the educator has received Initial Training he deems appropriate to the learning he is to teach when he dealing with the professional reality. This is the reason why we consider that some desirable Initial Training suitable to the reality in the classrooms, does not only soften problematic situations and the impact suffered when observing reality typical of inexperienced educators [74-80], but also provides the possibility to rebuild and redirect ideas when becoming more self-aware of their own teaching and their purposes. In other words: the Initial Training enables (re)building and (re)fining their professional identity, so that they are better prepared to provide a higher quality teaching.

In this search, the educator must get back not only to knowledge acquired as a student, but it is also proved that there are certain relevant models which become their pillar and shape their professional identity to a large extent [29, 81].

On the other hand, we feel that is important to point out that it is this Initial Training and models received what awaken the educator's interest in registering their thoughts and experiences in their logbook and story of life. It is therefore proved that professional identities can be built and understood from a narrative perspective [3-6]. Such situation advises that Initial Training means a stage able to raise the awareness of future educators towards their critical thought and to reawaken a professional identity oriented towards the sharing of ideas, experiences, new pedagogical actions and the analysis of their own practice, among others. It means an identity enabling not only new knowledge, but also the teacher's evolution from the expert educator's role to the expert trainee [2, 82].

We have shown an identity evolution influenced by a constant relationship with building/re-building and professional exchange, since the education keeps on growing as a person and, consequently, as a teacher [11, 49]. This is why we cannot forget the fact that both personal and professional identities, since they are indissolubly linked (Day *et al.*, 2006), *"are never completely acquired and there*

is always a search for oneself which is exposed to changes and questions" [22, p. 256].

As we have previously pointed out, we are convinced that choosing this case means an illustrative teaching model of what Initial Training is and what it implies in shaping professional identity during the educator's first years exercising the profession, although we have only represent the educational ideals, reality in the classroom and way of thinking of a particular person. This situation constrains the transferability of this research to a greater number of new teachers.

As a future research line, we will try to establish a link between the educator's professional identity and their gradual evolution as a human being. The close relationship between personal and professional aspects within a field like teaching seems to be relevant when understanding how the teacher evolves with their ideals, values, concerns and relationships with the students and with the profession itself.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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