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All Roads Lead to Rome: Developmental Trajectories of Student Teachers’ Professional and Personal Identity Development

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This article introduces new perspectives to the domain of teacher identity research that help to conceptualize integration of the “personal” and “professional” subsystems of self during processes of learning to teach by students or beginning teachers. Using pedagogical dilemmas, we focus on the dynamics of the professional identity of 26 final-year student teachers in the course of a major pedagogical placement of the studies. We specify how students handle ambivalent situations, and whether they use the professional position, the personal position, or form a coalition between positions to solve the dilemmas. Following, we present seven developmental trajectories of student teachers’ professional identity; differences are noted between pedagogically experienced and inexperienced students.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that student teachers need to explore their identity (see for example, Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Beijaard, 1995; Korthagen, & Vasalos, 2005). As Kelchermans (2009) explained:

The first domain in the personal interpretative framework of teachers is their conception of themselves as teachers. . . . Their sense of self is very prominent in their accounts about their practice (a practice enacted by them as singular person). This again reflects and illustrates the interpersonal character of teaching and its impact on the sense of self teachers develop (p. 261).
However, many authors (e.g., Bohl & Van Zoest, 2002; Danielewicz, 2001; Grossman & McDonald, 2008) pointed out that in existing university programs student teachers are not sufficiently prepared to deal with their emerging professional selves. Alsup (2006) explained, “Overall, the role of the university teacher education program seems to be to provide knowledge about learning theories and pedagogical approaches, not help the new teacher develop an identity” (p. 4). Alsup acknowledged that in many programs issues related to professional demeanor, dress, and communication are touched upon; however, she noted, what is neglected are “aspects of identity development that involve the integration of the personal self with the professional self, and the ‘taking on’ of a culturally scripted, often narrowly defined, professional role while maintaining individuality” (p. 4). As research shows (Alsup, 2006; Danielewicz, 2001), these shortcomings are related to an unsuccessful entrance of student teachers into the profession.

Contrary to the practical concerns outlined above, research in teacher professional identity has traditionally focused on either the professional or the personal variation of identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). The first tradition focuses primarily on studying the development of occupation-related “professionalism”: that is, the development of attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary in the teaching profession (e.g., Berliner, 2001). Despite that teachers share a particular social identity, there is not one kind of teaching culture, and every teacher develops, to some extent, a unique teaching style (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). The second tradition of research in teacher professional identity focuses on teachers’ “personality.” The interaction between the two variations is often overlooked.

It is only recently that the interplay between the two aspects has become a focus of scientific research in the teacher education domain (see, e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Rather than focusing on one of the aspects described above, the coordination of these two domains is currently of main interest. In order to further understand how the two aspects relate to each other and, respectively, how the two research traditions could be synthesized in further studies, conceptual tools are needed that would explain how the personal and professional selves are being negotiated in the course of becoming a professional. This article draws on theoretical notions that bring new perspectives to the theoretical discussions in the domain of teacher identity research. Moreover, we aim to test the theoretical assumptions and collect empirical evidence on how student teachers’ professional identity develops during their studies.

**Dialogical Becoming**

Becoming professional always occurs within a socio-cultural context. Consistent with the socio-cultural perspective, the person–culture dialogue leads to the construction of (professional) identity through the use of cultural material. As the semiotic mediational perspective states, the social surroundings offer semiotically mediated cultural material that persons borrow to create their personal cultures (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007). The exchange of semiotic materials between person and social environment that results in adaption and creation of meanings can be explained with the constructive processes of internalization and externalization that both are involved in the reconstruction of the intrapsychological worlds (Valsiner, 2001). Internalization is a constructive process that enables one to take social (external) messages into the personal level, contributing to the creation of personal meanings. Externalization is a process of analysis of subjective materials during their transposition from inside to outside of the person and
the modification of the external environment. Both of these processes are constantly in action and feed mutually into each other (Valsiner, 2001). Once a social message regarding the professional role expectation (e.g., a teacher must be a good listener) has been internalized by a student teacher, it starts to act as a semantic entity that guides student identity formation and the emergence of the different subsystems (personal and professional) of self, which are not identical and need to be coordinated when persons assume the professional role (Kullasepp, 2011).

The dialogical self theory (DST; Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) helps to further understand how these systems (according to DST, referred to as personal and social positions; professional being a type of social position) are coordinated at an intrapsychological level. According to this theory, the self is a system of relatively autonomous I-positions between which a self fluctuates. These I-positions have emerged through different historical, cultural, and institutional experiences and social relationships. Thus, it is also expected that the migration of a group of students into a new socio-cultural environment of a new institution (e.g., attending classes, formal settings of professional placement) feed into the creation of the new I-position (I as a professional).

In case of the acceptance of the multiplicity and discontinuous nature of identity, a question arises: How can a multiple self still be experienced as a single and permanent person? (Salgado & Hermans, 2005). To answer this question, Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) showed how personal continuity of self is assured by self-narration. Through dialogues within a self and with others, meaningful experiences are organized into one narrative structured system (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). As such, the process of narration can be understood as a reflective practice that aims to bind knowledge with experiences and make sense of them as a whole (Procee, 2006). Exploring the relationship and fit between I-positions (e.g., “I as myself” and “I as a teacher”) could therefore aid prospective professionals in overcoming the ambivalence between I-positions and support students in creating a “coalition of professional and personal positions” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) necessary for a successful adaption of a professional role.

Research Question

In the current study on the professional identity development of student teachers, we focus on the following research question: How do final-year student teachers coordinate personal and professional subsystems of the self when solving ambivalent work situations? As expected, ambivalence within one system causes tension, which the system aims to reduce. Adjustment or nonadjustment to situations can occur by taking a professional (reasoning is based on internalized professional role expectations) or a personal (arguing is external to role-prescribed reasoning) approach to a problem or by forming a “coalition” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) between the positions. Moreover, following the DST premise that conflicting voices cohere in a self through synthesizing and dialogical relations, it is expected that, with the progress of studies and work experiences, teachers’ handling of ambivalent conditions of entering the professional role shows more extensive elimination of tension and growing presentation of “coalition” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) between personal and professional positions.
METHOD

Design

The present study is located within the framework of idiographic science, which emphasizes the uniqueness of developmental phenomena (Molenaar, 2004). The selected cases for the study were expected to reflect different entries into the profession. We focused on the developmental dynamics of the professional identity of student teachers, who followed the leisure-time manager/teacher curriculum in an applied higher educational institution in Estonia. Two groups of students were differentiated: those with extensive pedagogical experience and those with limited experience in the field.

The study concentrated on intrapsychological changes over a 10-week period. This period was chosen because during that time student teachers with limited pedagogical experience would have carried out and completed their major pedagogical placement (8 weeks). Pedagogical placement is considered important in teacher training. Besides providing opportunities to develop skills needed in the profession, the placement experience (at least 8 hours per semester; Sweitzer & King, 2004) supports connecting theory and practice, advocates a better understanding of the professional domain, and helps to develop one’s personality (Sgroi & Ryniker, 2002; Sweitzer & King, 2004).

Our aim was to find out which dynamics take place in students’ professional and personal identity during the pedagogical placement. Changes in the students’ psychological functioning initiated by the internalization process (Vygotsky, 1978) were expected, because the pedagogical placement acted as a new and challenging environment presenting new relations (formal and informal) and professional activities, which through personal experiences contribute to the construction of new meanings.

Another group of students who had extensive pedagogical experience did not carry out a formal pedagogical placement. This group of students was included in the study because we aimed to find different developmental dynamics among these students in comparison to the other group of students. Most of these students worked as teachers or leisure-time managers during these 10 weeks.

Participants

The historically structured sampling (HSS; Sato et al., 2007) method was applied to form a sample. HSS concentrates on specific events or states that are considered as equifinality points (EFP); for example, a suitable sample can be a cohort of students who follow the same curriculum or placement period. HSS is in line with the trajectory equifinality model (TEM; Sato et al., 2007), which emphasizes the idea of equifinality, meaning that the same state may be reached from different initial conditions and in different ways in the course of time. Thus, similar directions of identity formation were expected to be found in our study. All final-year students who followed the leisure-time manager curriculum in an applied higher educational institute were invited to participate in the study. Data was collected from 26 students (all female). The group, who had limited pedagogical experience and carried out a pedagogical placement, consisted of 15 students (average age = 24 years, minimum = 22, maximum = 40). The other group consisted of 11
students (average age 39 years, minimum = 30, maximum = 51) with extensive pedagogical experience.

Data Collection

To chart the dynamics of individual trajectories into the role, the Double Direction Theme Completion (DDTC) questionnaire (Kullasepp, 2008) was applied. The DDTC is an extended version of the traditional sentence completion task (Symonds, 1947) that provides the temporal profiles of the coordination of personal orientations and professional roles.

In the current study, the questionnaire consisted of nine dilemmas. Most of the dilemmas were adopted from Kullasepp (2008). Relations (with colleagues, students, acquaintances) associated with the leisure-time management profession served as a basis for selecting the dilemmas. Based on these relations, typical situations were chosen that would activate the inner dialogue between “I as a person” and “I as a professional.” For example, in case of a dilemma related to “providing confidential information to third parties,” the student was triggered to identify how she communicated about the tension between the professional role and the personal domain. Second, the student was invited to indicate how she solves ambivalent dilemmas—whether she presents a professional or personal position, or reports about a “coalition” between the positions. Given that a leisure-time manager is an actor in the constructed dilemmas, we expected that students would provide solutions to the dilemmas in the second- or third-person perspective. We interpreted these perspectives as projections of students’ I-positions, given that these were constructed based on their interpretation and understanding of the situations.

The other eight dilemmas were “could not help a student although really wanted to,” “could not distance from work issues,” “asked to organize an event after work for colleague’s acquaintance,” “organizing event for youth with different value system,” “no place for a friend’s child in a training,” “working with an unpleasant colleague,” “students do not participate in an event even though everything is financed,” and “organizing an uninteresting event.” The relevance of the dilemmas was approved by a leading teacher educator of the leisure-time manager/teacher curriculum. Data were collected before and after the pedagogical placement.

Data Analysis

Student answers to the questionnaire were analyzed by two experts. The employed procedure of consensual validation of data analysis was described by Eisner (1991). In brief, the procedure can be understood as investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970) carried out for quality assurance of the analysis procedure. The analysis procedure consisted of several steps.

First, 464 answers were analyzed based on consensus. Regarding each answer, first, communication about the tension between the I-positions was identified. Regarding the tension, three codes were distinguished: reporting negatively orientated tension, reporting positively orientated tension, and communicating no tension. Second, the I-position used to solve each dilemma was identified and coded. Regarding I-positions, four codes were distinguished: professional, personal, coalition between professional and personal, and unknown. The latter was assigned when researchers could not determine a certain position or a coalition between positions. Principles for assigning other codes are explained in the results section.
Second, one researcher controlled the internal coherence of the categories by judging whether all individual answers in the category share similar characteristics. Consequently, 33 coded I-Positions out of 464 (7%) were marked as a questionable member in a category.

Third, two researchers discussed the coding of questionable fragments. For the majority of the fragments a consensus was reached; single cases where experts disagreed were coded “unknown.”

Finally, regarding each student, a within-case analysis was carried out to identify different trajectories of professional and personal identity development. We distinguished whether students presented certain types of I-positions (personal, professional, unknown), or a coalition between them, in a stable matter or differently while comparing the answers collected before and after placement. Regarding stable reporting of positions, three types were distinguished: stable professional dominance, stable personal dominance, and stable mix of positions. In cases where students reported different I-positions in two data collections, we interpreted this as a change in the identity trajectory. Regarding the latter, four developments were identified: professionalization (reporting of a professional position had increased and was predominant across solutions to nine dilemmas during the second data collection), personalization (reporting of a personal position had increased and was predominant across nine dilemmas during the second time), strong fluctuation between positions (I-positions had changed; however, the changes could not be assessed in a clear way), and growing coalition between positions.

RESULTS

General Findings

Below we present some of the most significant general findings about how the two groups of students solved the nine dilemmas in terms of which I-positions were chosen and how they dealt with tension.

Dominance of Professional Position When Solving Dilemmas

Regarding the group with limited pedagogical experience, we can point out two dilemmas (“organizing an event for a youth with a different value system” and “no place for a friend’s child in a sports team”) that, in comparison to the other dilemmas, were in most cases solved using a professional position during both data collections. Below we provide illustrative examples of solving this dilemma.

Student A marked: “Being in a bad situation because as a leisure-time manager she has to follow certain directives, acts, and good customs.”

Student B pointed out: “Feeling exploited because one should not accept such requests.”

Regarding the pedagogically experienced group, we noted that a dilemma that was approached by students mostly from a professional perspective during both data collections was “providing confidential information to third parties.” Below we present typical examples of solving this dilemma.

Student C marked: “Hesitating because the truthfulness of the information has to be controlled first.”

Student D pointed out: “Uncertain because one must always assure that trust is not misused.”
Regarding the dominance of professional positions, we observed that a professional approach to the task coappeared with the application of moral imperatives (e.g., must, should not, is forbidden) that regulate one’s experience in an ambivalent situation. Moreover, we could identify that semiotic regulators were related to the content of the work (e.g., rules, customs). It was also obvious that the domination of the I-position (“I as a professional”) in the inner dialogue was reached through diverse considerations and resulted in different experiences (e.g., feels confused, bad, exploited). Furthermore, the data illustrated that the same situation had different meanings for different students; for example, whereas one was confused and did not know what to do, another knew what to do (e.g., she must refuse).

**Dominance of Personal Position When Solving Dilemmas**

A dilemma that was in most cases solved using a personal position by both groups was “asked to organize an event after work for a colleague’s acquaintance.” Below are typical examples of solving this dilemma.

Student E marked: “Depends how and who is asking. Maybe she [a leisure-time manager] is happy to help.”

Student F pointed out: “Feels positive because helping a person in need brings a good feeling.”

Contrary to the professional position, we saw that the personal position tended to contain less semiotic regulators that oblige or forbid a person from behaving in a certain manner. Personal settings and functioning outside the official role of teacher moved certain topics into focus (e.g., types of relations that the teacher had with the person, benefits that one could gain like good mood or money).

**Tension in Inner Dialogues**

Regarding the tension in inner dialogues, the data revealed that, in general, students reported about negatively oriented tension more often than positively orientated feelings (e.g., feels good, assertive) when solving dilemmas. Negative tension (e.g., feels helpless, fear, insecure, sad, bad, feckless, disappointed, despondent, used, exhausted, uncomfortable, confused) was prevalent across all nine dilemmas. The overall dominance of negative tension in the answers needs further attention and will be discussed later.

**Coalition Between the Professional and Personal Positions**

We also expected to detect a presentation of coalition between professional and personal positions while analyzing students’ solutions to the dilemmas. We found two somewhat different circumstances that can refer to a coalition between positions while solving dilemmas. First, in some cases we could identify that a student had eliminated tension between positions and voiced a third position that allowed mediating cooperation between the original opposing positions of professional and personal. For example, such positions as “I as analyst,” “I as investigator,” “I as help provider,” and “I as warlord” had been called into action to solve the dilemma. Below, is an example of using a third position while solving the dilemma “having to organize an event with a colleague who is unpleasant”: 

Student G indicated: feels oneself as an investigator, since she [a leisure-time manager] is looking for good characteristics in that colleague (and definitely finds).

Second, in other cases we found that tension between the opposing positions had been eliminated by a developmental opportunity that a student had detected in a complicated situation. Below we provide illustrative examples of the latter phenomenon. These answers were formed to the dilemma “organizing an event for youth whose value system is different from the leisure-time manager/teacher’s value system.”

Student H pointed out: curiosity, since a new domain of action provides new possibilities for development.

Students I pointed out: desire to learn, owing that she [a leisure-time manager] is interested to learn more about their values and is willing to organize the event with the help of the students.

Student J pointed out: curiosity, since the emerging point of contact can be very interesting and educative.

As shown, in these solutions students stressed the prospective gains that could be reached by cooperation between positions. However, it must be noted that regarding all dilemmas a certain position (professional or personal) was more often presented in the solutions than the coalition of positions. As expected, coalition of positions was somewhat more often presented by students with an extensive pedagogical experience.

Developmental Trajectories

We found that the observed trajectories of professional identity can be divided into the following two larger groups: changes in direction and maintaining direction, which we will discuss in more detail.

Changes in Direction

The most often appearing trajectory representing change in identity construction was professionalization. The trajectory entailed that after the pedagogical placement students applied a professional voice more often in solving ambiguous situations than before the placement. This trajectory was found only among the pedagogically inexperienced group. Changes were reported regarding all nine dilemmas. Professional voice increased most often in solving the following two dilemmas: “providing confidential information to third parties” and “organizing an uninteresting event.” Below are a few examples of how students answered before and after placement regarding the latter dilemma.

Student K wrote before the placement: “might not give all energy and commitment in organizing this event owing to the fact that it is unpleasant for her [for a leisure-time manager] or does not fit with her aims and values.”

After the placement: “[a leisure-time manager] is less motivated because she is not competent in that topic.”

This example illustrates that the preplacement answer is based on personal beliefs and the postplacement answer is informed by role expectations. We can see that personal values are the
reason for not giving all her energy when engaging in a professional task; after the placement, the motivation is attached to competencies.

The second trajectory, personalization, was found in both groups. This trajectory entailed that after the placement, students applied the personal voice more often than before the placement. For example, the dilemma “no place for a friend’s child in a sports team” was solved by one student as follows:

Student L reported before the placement: “feels bad because nepotism is disapproved of.”
After the placement: “faced with a difficult decision because a good friend asked.”

Here we see that the first answer is dominated by professional rules, whereas the second admits that it is not easy to uphold the rules from a personal perspective.

The third trajectory was associated with strong fluctuations between positions. Students associated with this trajectory reported many changes (seven or six); however, the changes were not associated with a particular I-position. The fourth trajectory in the category was called growing coalition between positions. Two pedagogically experienced students showed this trajectory. Regarding these students, the coalition between the professional and personal I-positions increased in one-third of the dilemmas when comparing the two data collections. For example, the dilemma “students do not participate in an event although everything is financed” was solved by one student as follows:

Student M reported before the first data collection: “feels incapable because she [a leisure-time manager] cannot find the right motivation.”
During the second data collection: “feels oneself as a warlord or Witty-John because she [a leisure-time manager] has to implement a new strategy—being sly.”

Here, we can observe that in the second answer a third (new) position is used that seems to be associated with reducing the negative tension (e.g., feeling incapable as reported during the first data collection) between original positions and contributes to the role adjustment.

**Maintaining Positions**

We also found that students presented I-positions in a stable manner (stable dominance of professional position, stable dominance of personal position, and a stable presentation of a mix of positions). “Mix of positions” entailed that students presented rather equally professional positions, personal positions, and coalitions of professional and personal positions.

Regarding the pedagogically experienced group, the dominance of professional, personal, and mixed positions was equally presented. This finding, similarly to other findings for this group, illustrates that older and more experienced students tend to show more diversity in their answers, which could be explained by the differences of individual life histories and biographical details, as suggested by dialogical self theory.

**DISCUSSION**

This article contributes to recent trends in teacher identity research (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Leijen, Kullasepp, & Agan, 2010) by introducing new perspectives to the theoretical discussions
in this domain of research. Drawing on the concepts of “internalization” and “externalization” (Valsiner, 1997), which contribute to the reconstruction of the personal culture of an individual, and DST (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), which enables focusing on the result of person–institution dialogue at an intrapsychological level, we endeavored to study the developmental dynamics of the self-system in student teachers as an arena of inner dialogue between two different subsystems: I as a person and I as a professional. Below, we summarize the main findings of the empirical study.

In accordance with socialization in a professional community and the internalization of social messages related to role expectations (Valsiner, 1997), we found that the temporary profiles of the coordination of different I-positions in some pedagogically inexperienced student teachers after the pedagogical placement displayed a tendency toward professionalization in solving ambivalent dilemmas, in comparison to before the placement.

Moreover, we expected that because voices cohere in the self through synthesizing and dialogical relations over time (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), a more extensive elimination of tension between personal and professional positions appears when becoming more experienced through pedagogical practice. Unexpectedly, we could not trace a trend in successful handling of negative tension. Communication of negative tension prevailed across dilemmas in both groups before and after the placement. The extensive communication of negative tensions could be related to the relatively modest presentation of coalition of professional and personal positions in the current study. Cases in which students succeeded to present such coalitions displayed an effective elimination of tension and a tendency to focus on new possibilities and prospective gains.

This directs us also to implications for teacher education. Rather than being merely introduced to profession-related expectations and prescriptions, student teachers need opportunities for voicing their personal I-positions and exploring the prospective coalitions between the personal and professional positions. For example, students can be guided in reflection assignments (e.g., Leijen, Lam, Wildschut, & Simons, 2009; Leijen, Valtna, Leijen, & Pedaste, 2011) to explore their personal positions and question the possible relationship and fit between the personal positions and socially prescribed professional role expectations. Establishing these coalitions should be a key pedagogical aim in teacher training, as students could more effectively integrate the personal and professional subsystems of self that is necessary for a successful entrance and functioning in a teaching profession, as pointed out by Akkerman and Meijer (2011) and Leijen, Kullasepp, and Agan (2010), and further explained by Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010).

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