Developing a Professional Identity

Context

Teacher professional identity development is a dynamic process. Student teachers "pre-teaching identity" period (Flores & Day, 2006 p. 260) involve their own views and perceptions of how, and what, forms a good teacher as well as learning new theories of teaching (Flores & Day, 2006; Tsybulsky & Muchnik-Rozanov, 2017). According to research, personal, social, and cognitive aspects influence teachers' professional identity development (Flores & Day, 2006; Korthagen, 2017). In this assignment two interconnected tasks are described. They are called "The Journey Plot" and "Student Teacher Identity Development". However, the tasks could be performed separately in different courses.

One of the learning goals in the course *Teachers' professional identity and development* (10 ECTS) at the University of Helsinki, is to motivate the student teachers to develop a research-based view on the teacher profession. In addition, the teacher students enhance their pedagogical expert role by developing their critical thinking as lifelong learners and reflective practitioners. An aim of the course is also to explore pedagogical research, both individually, and in collaboration with peers, to create a deeper understanding of the relation between theory and practice. The course has, during the academic years 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 included face-to-face sessions and online sessions, individual work, and group work. The course is a compulsory component of advanced studies at the master's level and co-taught by four teacher educators.

Journey Plot Task

Capturing the journey in this visual task is useful for the student teachers since it is done both individually and, in collaboration with peers. Through the journey plot, the student teachers create a deeper understanding of how different phases of their life have an impact on the development of their professional identity. When the student teachers reflect, understand and reinterpret their practices, a refined professional identity can be developed (Sutherland et al., 2010).

Implementation

In the first part of the course, the aim is to introduce theoretical frameworks for a research-based understanding of teacher identity development in the teacher profession. One task connecting to this is to conduct a visual task called "The Journey Plot" (Turner, 2015). The work sheet (illustrated below) is distributed to the students to help them structure their thoughts. The student teachers are asked to mark the most significant positive as well as negative experiences during their studies on a diagram.

highs

lows

time
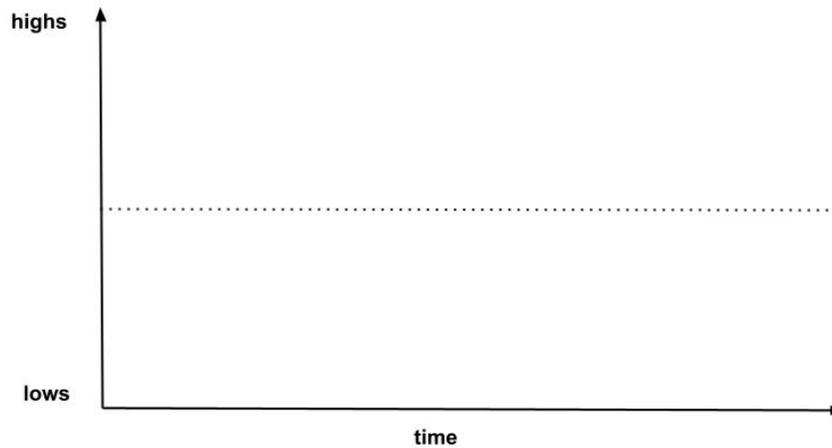
The model is slightly adapted from Turner's (2015) Journey Plot diagram.

The assignment allows the student to reflect on how their own professional identity have been influenced from the beginning of their studies until now, by marking the experiences (+/-) on the journey plot work sheet.

After the students have worked with the work sheet, individually or in pairs, the teacher educator leads the discussion of the various experiences.

After completing the task, the students keep the sheets of their journey plots. A recommendation is to save them since they could be useful later on in the course.

Student Teacher Identity Development Task

Context
Compared to the Journey Plot task, student teacher identity development displayed in narrative reflections as described in this example is more complex. Furthermore, the narrative reflection ties well with course content that the student teachers at the Master's level work with in the course on advanced qualitative methods, normally studied in the prior semester. Herein lies the innovative element in our context: This exercise connects the visualization of teacher identity development, systematic reflection, and qualitative research methods in a way that makes it easier for students to grasp and relate to. Thus, the assignment proposes an opportunity to reflect on explicit moments in the students' life, their beliefs, and learning theories in an understanding of their own experiences (Elliott, 2005).

The aim of this practice is to remind student teachers that identity is seen as a dynamic, ongoing process in the research (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Leeferink et al., 2019). In addition, this task is motivated by the fact that stories are a powerful means of increasing an understanding of identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Implementation

1. The student teachers are asked to read the article *Understanding teacher identity: an overview of issues in literature and implications for teacher education* by Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) and reflect on its content.

2. After reading the article, the students are asked to formulate a personal narrative, i.e. a short reflective text, of their professional development from the beginning of the education until present day. No further guidelines are provided since the teachers in the course wishes that the student teachers write freely from

their own perspective. However, the personal narratives should build upon a research-based understanding of teacher identity development in the teacher profession related to the individual student teacher's path of development.

3. The student teachers submit the writing task to one of the lecturers. Each student teacher is given individual formative response to their text by the same lecturer.

Reflections on benefits and challenges from a teacher educator's perspective

Our aim as teacher educators is to help student teachers in learning to reflect so they learn how to cultivate this pre-teaching identity. The students are motivated to reflect on both positive and negative experiences, which is done in an interactive way together with peers. The student teachers have been excited to tell others about their experiences and during the two recent academic years (2019-2020, 2020-2021) there has been a vivid discussion in the classroom (or in Zoom).

In the course evaluation, the course teachers have noticed that the theoretical frameworks have helped the students to structure their own thoughts, since the concept of professional identity is sometimes perceived to be difficult to grasp. This is important feedback, since this means that the student teachers are aware of the connection between theory and practice. The Journey Plot task and the narrative reflection task are not the only assignments in the course. The student teachers also have other assignments in which they deepen their thoughts about the connection between theory and practice with visual methods, such as a Pecha Kucha presentation as a final assignment in the course. However, they have worked well as preparation, especially when it comes to develop student teachers' reflection in cultivating their pre-teaching identity and in communicating their understanding of their own role as future teachers.

References

Beauchamp, C., Thomas, L. (2009). Understanding teacher identity: an overview of issues in the literature and implications for teacher education, *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39*(2), 175-189, DOI: 10.1080/03057640902902252

Elliott, J. 2005. *Using Narrative in Social Research*. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches. London: Sage.

Flores, M. A., Day, C. (2006). "Context That Shape and Reshape New Teachers' Identities: A Multi-Perspective Study." *Teaching and Teacher Education, 22*, 219–232.

Korthagen. F. (2017) Inconvenient truths about teacher learning: towards professional development 3.0, *Teachers and Teaching, 23(*4), 387-405, DOI:10.1080/13540602.2016.1211523

Leeferink, H., Koopman,M., Douwe Beijaard, D., & Gonny, L. M. Schellings, G.L.M. (2019). Overarching professional identity themes in student teacher workplace learning, *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(1), 69-89, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2018.1527762

Tsybulsky.D., Muchnik-Rozanov, Y. (2019). The development of student-teachers' professional identity while team-teaching science classes using a project-based learning approach: A multi-level analysis. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 79*, 48-59.

Sutherland, L., Howard, S., & Markauskaite, L. (2010). Professional identity creation: Examining the development of beginning preservice teachers' understanding of their work as teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(3), 455-465.

Turner, G. (2015). Learning to Supervise: Four Journeys. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *52* (1), 86–98.

Contact

Solveig Cornér, solveig.corner@helsinki.fi

Erika Löfström, erika.lofstrom@helsinki.fi