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## **Chapter 5**

### **Identity-agency in progress: teachers authoring their identities**

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#### **Abstract**

Teachers' professional identities have been widely recognized as the key resource through which teachers make sense of their work. Despite this recognition, few studies have offered a longitudinal perspective on the processes involved in teachers' identity development. In this chapter I will offer an advanced conceptualization of the ways in which teachers author their identity development processes. I use examples from two longitudinal research projects on pre-service and in-service teachers' identity development to illustrate the teachers' efforts to maintain and develop their professional identities, and identifies two agentic dynamics in professional identity development: renegotiation and defense.

Keywords: identity, identity-agency, agency, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers

In this chapter I focus on a challenge that teachers all over the world face every day: how to negotiate between different roles, expectations, interests and demands as professionals in the face of changing circumstances and changing relationships. I aim to provide a more thorough understanding of the ways in which teachers face these challenging situations and, in response, develop their identities, (i.e. the conceptualizations they have about themselves as professionals) (Vähäsantanen, 2015). The chapter is based on the results of three earlier studies, in which I examined pre- and in-service teachers' identity processes longitudinally.

Teacher identity has been a topic of intensive educational research in recent decades (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Behind the rising interest can be seen a tendency in research towards a more holistic conceptualization of teacher development. As a concept, teacher identity implies a sensing, knowing, and purposeful subject that is self-involved in the development processes (Beijaard et al., 2004). Current professional identity theories, however, also recognize the fact that teachers are not independent of their environment:

their identity development is closely linked to the affordances of their social and physical environment (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011; Pappa, Moate, Ruohotie-Lyhty, & Eteläpelto, 2017).

The research on teacher identities and identity development has shown that identities are central in understanding teacher socialization, the development of their expertise, and their relationships to pupils (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons 2006; Hong, 2010; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2011). Although the centeredness of teachers' identity development is recognized and there is extensive empirical evidence of teachers' identities at different stages in their careers (Timotštsuk & Ugaste, 2010; Haniford, 2010; Hong, 2010; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011), few longitudinal studies have offered a longer-term view of individual teachers' identity development (see, however, Barkhuizen, 2016). There is therefore a need for sound, empirically based, models of teachers' identity development that could inform teacher education. To better understand the temporal dimension and changes over time in teacher identities, and how teachers author their identities in pre- and in-service conditions, I combine the results of three longitudinal studies (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013, 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). The three primary studies are based on two different longitudinal data sets: a ten-year study following five in-service teachers and a two-year study of six pre-service class teachers. I offer an advanced conceptualization of the ways in which the participants author their identity development processes.

### **Identity development and identity-agency**

To produce a comprehensive picture of teachers' identity development, I use a narrative approach (Barkhuizen, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990). This approach is compatible with socioculturally inspired identity theories in that it recognizes identity as a social, multiple and discontinuous phenomenon (Beijaard et al., 2004; Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). This conceptualization holds that individuals can have various even contradictory conceptualizations of themselves and that these conceptualizations are socially constructed (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). It also includes the idea of individuals as agentive in affecting the construction of their

identities (Beijaard et al., 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). The special focus of the narrative approach is on this agentic activity of the individuals in making sense of their experiences. When conceptualized this way, identity also includes striving towards stability, continuity, and individuality (also Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Consequently, the narrative approach, along with some other recent approaches, denies the idea of a completely decentralized identity (also Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, Eteläpelto & al. 2013) and concentrates on the ways in which identity is maintained and negotiated in the flux of sporadic, surprising, and even traumatic events (Crossley, 2000a; Polkinghorne, 1996). With its focus on individual activity, a narrative framework is well suited for researching the individual side of teacher development. It also provides a methodological lens for exploring and understanding the contradictory forces of multiplicity and unity, discontinuity and continuity, and sociality and individuality.

Teachers' narrative identity as it is understood here is connected with professional agency, "individuals' socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112), in at least two important ways. First of all, an individual's agency in a particular environment is crucial to identity development (Vähäsantanen, 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In other words, professional identity is constructed as 'a history based constellation of teachers' perceptions as professional actors' (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 3). When individual student teachers or teachers act within a certain community, they draw upon their beliefs, ideas, and former experience when making decisions about ways to participate and to connect with others. This participation and the flux of relationships potentially challenge their former beliefs and identities and encourage a discussion of who they are and who they want to be as professional actors (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). Secondly, agency is connected to the very nature of narrative identity development (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Identity development is a process to which individuals actively invest in and which they themselves actively form (Beijaard et al. 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä 2015&

Paloniemi, 2013). The narrative activity in which experiences are organized, drawn on and chosen as meaningful for teacher identity is therefore a process of human agency. This particular form of agency I call *identity-agency* (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, & Hökkä 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016) and it is the activity of using personal experiences and participation in a community in developing professional identities (cf. Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, & Hökkä, 2015). As part of the identity development process, identity-agency is understood to play a mediatory role between environmental influences and individual identities. When facing an event, new information, theory or relationship that potentially challenges teachers' current understandings as professional actors, teachers can either reconsider their professional identities in light of this new experience or defend their original ideas of themselves against this influence (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Identity-agency is the mediator that helps to understand the relationship between social environment and individual identity.

Having now theoretically justified the capacity of individuals to author identity development, I will now further elaborate this concept by suggesting a theoretical model to understand the role of identity-agency in teachers' development and by using illustrative examples from my own three previous empirical studies to show identity-agency in practice.

### **Identity-agency: a model**

The role of identity-agency in teachers' identity development can be described as mediatory, operating between the environment and teacher identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013, Ruohotie-Lyhty 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). In the conditions created by the particular environments in which teachers work, teachers exert their identity agency to organize and interpret their experiences and further to develop their professional identities (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate 2016; Eteläpelto et al. 2013). Teachers are continually deciding either to renegotiate their identities or to defend their original conceptualizations (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013, Ruohotie-Lyhty 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). When opting for renegotiation, they

adopt the expectations and tasks typical of their environment as part of their professional identities. When opting for defense, they refuse these environmental influences. These decisions vary in the effect they have on teachers' ability to feel agentic in the working community in which they find themselves. Studies on top-down pedagogic reforms show that teachers who do not align with new expectations often feel their agency in the workplace threatened (Vähäsantanen, 2015). This can lead to ambivalent agency in the community and teachers being forced to accept certain tasks against their will and without personal investment (Vähäsantanen, 2015). In contrast, finding a satisfactory match between environment and identity allows teachers dynamic agency in the community (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2016; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Although teachers can, in a conflict situation, seek solutions outside themselves by attempting to affect the specific environmental conditions they find problematic or by changing workplaces, identity-agency remains a central means for teachers to attenuate professional tensions and achieve the necessary conditions for professional development. I illustrate this role of identity-agency as a mediator in Figure 1.

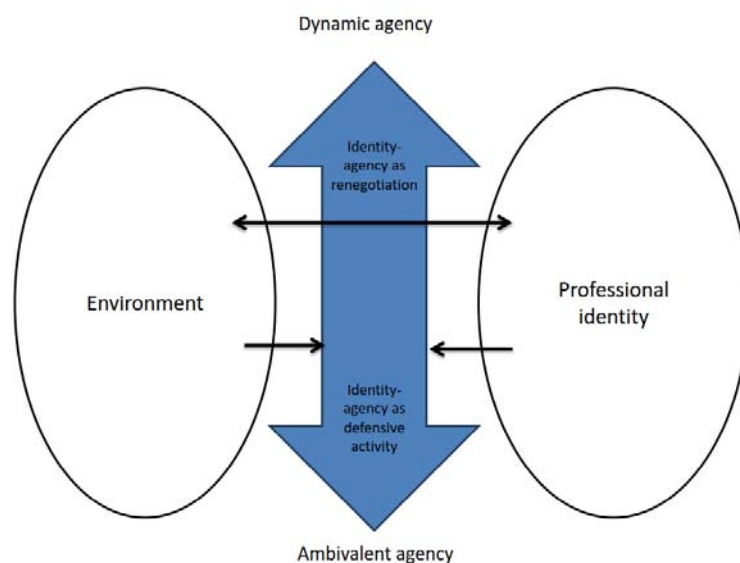


Figure 1. Identity-agency in authoring professional identity

Having introduced the role of identity-agency in teachers' identity development, I will now present some empirical examples of this activity in practice. The illustrative examples provided are from my longitudinal studies into pre-service and in-service teachers' identity development (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013, Ruohotie-Lyhty 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). Two of the original studies (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013, 2016) utilized data from a 10-year longitudinal research project on newly qualified teachers' development. We followed a set of six language teachers (all female) during their first decade in the profession. The data of the third original study (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate 2016) was generated as part of a project following the development of six pre-service teachers. Among their course assignments, the students (4 female and 2 male) wrote three essays reflecting on their experiences and identities over a two-year period. Both of the studies have been conducted in the Finnish educational context, which emphasizes teacher autonomy and agency (Sahlberg, 2011).

### ***Identity-agency in practice: authoring identities***

In what follows, identity-agency as renegotiation and identity-agency as defense are illustrated with examples from the narratives of pre-service and in-service teachers. I first demonstrate the ways in which teachers author their identities by renegotiating them in order to add to them or to transform them. Second, I demonstrate how teachers can exert their identity-agency in defending their original identities. Along with each example I will give some examples of how teachers' identity-agency is connected with their agency in the community.

### ***Renegotiating identities: additive development***

Identity renegotiation is here defined as a process in which teachers develop their identities to better match the environmental conditions and to develop professionally. Ideally, teachers exert their identity-agency as professionals in a working environment in which new challenges and changes match their expectations and values as teachers. This kind of identity development can include accepting new pedagogical convictions or new responsibilities as part

of their professional self-understanding as well as developing their self-efficacy as a teacher. In such contexts, teachers do not feel they have to give up their original ideas about being a teacher, although they can report significant changes in the ways in which they perceive themselves as professionals (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013; 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate 2016). Teacher professionalism is in these cases enriched by contextual development opportunities.

My three studies all included several examples of situations where the teachers' original identities were sufficiently in line with the social environment to allow these kinds of developments to take place. In these cases, the teachers' identities can be characterized as a maturation process with additive elements: they developed their conceptualization of themselves as professionals as they took up their responsibilities in the work community and new pedagogical convictions.

A typical case that illustrates this kind of identity renegotiation is that of Marie who, at the end of her first year as a pre-service teacher, reported changes in her pedagogical beliefs as a result of getting to know the Jolly Phonics method of pronunciation teaching, and her determination to learn more about this method to be able to use it in her teaching:

Jolly Phonics convinced me. I found them fascinating and practical - even for my own pronunciation and language learning. However, I will go through the book of Jolly Phonics I bought in order that I would know more about this learning method. Even though my knowledge of Jolly Phonics is very little and overall in Finnish schools it is still in its infancy, I really feel of being able to give something useful to my students-to-be with the help of Jolly Phonics. In fact, I am a bit shocked we never used them when I was in the school. What a great loss!

In this example, Marie excitedly and enthusiastically reports learning a new pedagogical approach that she feels gives her the possibility of being the kind of teacher she wants to be. This possibility also encourages her to be active in her studies. Her identity-agency takes the form of



renegotiation as illustrated in Figure 1, in which match between self and environment is maintained through accepting new conceptualizations of teaching as part of her teacher identity. In my study of pre-service-teachers, this kind of identity development was facilitated by the Finnish teacher education environment, which the student teachers experienced as allowing them to develop their teacher identity rather freely. Embracing some of the pedagogical models present in the teacher education environment and adding them to their pedagogical repertoire also increased the pre-service teachers' self-confidence.

Compared to pre-service teachers, in-service teachers produced fewer narratives in which developing a suitable professional identity was described as easy. In my studies, in-service teachers expressed conceptualizations of themselves as teachers that were less fluid and open to change. In-service teachers also reported that their immediate responsibilities and duties severely curtailed the possibilities they had of defining their identities themselves. Whether smooth additive developments were possible in the first place was dependent on how similar the teachers considered the expectations of the workplace to be to their professional self-conceptualizations. One example in my study (Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013) was Suvi, a 25-year-old foreign language teacher, who initially felt that her expectations coincided well with what she encountered in the school. Before entering full time teaching, she had considered the teacher-pupil relationship to be the foundation for any kind of teacher activity. After two years of teaching she said that her starting point had been right and had made it possible for her to embrace more roles and duties inside the school:

Another important thing (this year) was to realize in a pedagogical and educational sense that the work is getting increasingly smooth and easy and also that besides teaching I can see and understand more things inside school. By this I mean that I have learned more than just to take care of my own teaching: I have learned to concern myself with bullying, to educate the pupils, to communicate with them better and more effectively and to

cooperate more closely with their parents. [...] During this year I feel I have found my place between teaching and education better.

Although Suvi did not consider herself to be the same teacher she had been when starting in the profession two years before, this identity renegotiation had taken place without any major crises. For Suvi, her initial identity had given her purposeful agency in the community, which had helped her to increase her professional self-efficacy and develop her repertoire. A prerequisite for this type of development was a perceived match between the teacher's own identity and their designated identity in the work place (see also Vähäsantanen, 2015).

*Renegotiation identities: transformative development*

In cases where the teachers originally reported a considerable mismatch between their identity and what they felt was expected of them, the renegotiation of identity as illustrated in Figure 1 was experienced as more demanding. Tension between the original identity and the environment caused teachers a significant emotional load and led to uncertainty about their professional competence. Taina, a newly qualified foreign language teacher, described these tensions and their consequences on two different occasions as follows:

I would like to be more a language teacher, but somehow I feel that in secondary school I'm more, well I don't feel I'm an educator, but somehow I do something other than what a language teacher does. (The work) is sometimes so frustrating. You cannot really do anything else but nag; you cannot really do your own job. I mean the job you thought you got teacher education for.

For Taina, the wider educational responsibilities that every teacher must accept did not match her original idea of being a subject teacher. Feeling forced to accept a general educational role was frustrating and alienated her from her everyday professional practice.

Typically, teachers in my studies were not originally willing to change their conceptualizations of themselves as teachers even in cases where significant tensions were reported. However, in the course of the longitudinal studies (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013; 2016), several in-service teachers reported that although they had initially refused to renegotiate their identity, they had had significant emotional experiences that had pushed them into taking a new direction. In this process their professional mission was reformulated to allow more purposeful agency in their environment. In comparison with the additive development described above, this process was more demanding and had greater emotional intensity for the in-service teachers. The following two narratives from Saija, a teacher of Russian and Finnish as a second language, depicts a teacher who underwent a significant change as a teacher during her first nine years in the profession. In her fourth year interview she still considered grammar-oriented teaching to be essential, although several times she also expressed a tension between her traditional idea of herself as a language teacher and the real life language skills her pupils wanted.

But yes, it is in practice a necessity that if I'm going to teach the language, and especially if some of my students are going to take the matriculation examination, like they do, that we have to go through (the grammar). It can't be avoided.

In an interview five years later, she said that she felt her identity as a traditional, grammar-focused teacher had completely changed after she started working with illiterate learners of Finnish. She narrated this encounter and its consequences as follows:

When suddenly I had those illiterate students there, and I really couldn't go on in the same way as I'd been going before. I had to find something different, like move completely away from the old way of doing things. If I don't have any of these tools, then how can anyone learn? So then you have to go through quite a deep process at that point. And it was quite heavy and depressing in a way, but a lot of pretty fun things came out of it.

For Saija, the encounter with illiterate students forced her to find a resolution to the tensions that had been typical of her work. As a consequence, she made a conscious decision to find new ways of approaching her work and assumed a different pedagogical role. Although painful, this taking of a new direction was described in the teachers' stories as successful in that it defused professional tension, and it was felt to be a professionally significant way of developing as a teacher. As illustrated in Figure 1, identity-agency mediated in these cases to restore a balance between teacher agency and professional demands to allow dynamic agency. For participants who reported these kinds of change, the process also offered the possibility of further additive identity development, with increasing responsibility and increasing professional confidence in their careers.

### *Defending identities*

Defending identities illustrated in Figure 1 is defined here as the process in which teachers refuse to renegotiate their identities in situations where they experience a mismatch between themselves and the environment. Although identity renegotiation seemed to be essential to teachers' ability to dynamically respond to environmental challenges, my studies also included several examples of teachers practicing their identity-agency by refusing any changes to their identities. This kind of identity authoring was found in all of the three original studies.

As mentioned above, in my study the student teachers expressed a greater sense of freedom in developing their professional identities compared to the in-service teachers. They felt it was possible to determine which features of the designated identity (Billet, 2006) available in their environment they would accept and which they would reject. What they typically rejected of the new ideas that were offered to them were those features of identity that were in clear conflict with their individual experiences or preferences and those whose practical benefit was not made clear (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). In their narratives they authenticated their original positions by recurring to former experiences and generalized these to apply to teachers'

professional practice on a larger scale. This is evident in how Annie, a pre-service teacher, reasoned why it was unnecessary for her as a Finnish teacher to think about the role of the English language in her teaching:

In my point of view and according to the discussions we have had during this course, the overall situation in Finland is very different compared to some other countries. Every Finn is capable of speaking and understanding English. In Finland there is no economic or social division. Every child has the right for proper education and the quality of education is roughly the same in every school.

Although rejecting new ideas or possible identities can be seen as partially limiting student teachers' professional identity development, it was also a necessary part of their development. To be able to invest in certain essential features of teaching, pre-service teachers had to choose a clear direction for their development. In these cases, they used their identity-agency to block environmental influence on themselves as illustrated in Figure 1. They could make these choices rather freely, without their environment pushing them towards a predestined model of being a teacher. Therefore refusing to renegotiate their identity did not posit the same kind of threat to their satisfaction and professional confidence.

The in-service teachers' narratives in my studies also included several passages in which teachers authenticated their original position in order to defend their original subject teacher identities. They used their identity-agency to reject the ideas, tasks, and responsibilities that were suggested to them in their environment for inclusion in their professional identities. They also created boundaries for their professional identity by defining certain features of professional practice as irrelevant to their own identity, and they judged themselves incapable of some forms of professional practice that were typical of the designated identity in the work place. Especially difficult for the teachers was the contradiction between the innovative models of teacher education that they felt they were expected to apply and the resources available in the school

community. Although willing to authenticate their original identity in the work community, the in-service teachers did not feel they had many opportunities to influence the content and direction of professional practice that were expected from them. Although they had the authority to decide their teaching methods, the educational role of the teacher in the school context put considerable demands on them. Maintaining their original professional identities therefore demanded more identity work from them than it demanded from the pre-service teachers. In-service teachers who wanted to protect their original professional identities reported that they were able to maintain their agency by keeping a distance from their pupils and colleagues and downplaying the importance of their professional identities in their life. Tuuli was an example of a teacher who did not report an identity change during the ten-year research period. In her fourth year interview she stated her identity clearly as follows:

Interviewer: What are you to your students?

Tuuli: Hopefully the teacher. And it's been like that all the time until now, although I'm maybe a little less formal than others, though they aren't looking for a friend or anything like that. I'm quite happy about that, I am, at least.

Typical of Tuuli was the ability to separate the personal from the professional, which allowed her to keep things in proportion and maintain a balance between her sense of herself and any setbacks she encountered at work. In the tenth year interview, Tuuli's conceptualization of herself as a subject teacher had not changed. In this interview, she also stated that her identity as a professional was not the identity she wanted to prioritize.

But what I've realized is that I don't take the work so seriously anymore, because, well, I have a family and if the teachers' meetings, for example, last longer than expected, I'll leave (laughing). I mean, my priorities are clear.

The pressure for change to the professional identity was connected not only to the beginning phase of professional careers; also changes in the place of work, in relationships and

family situations gave rise to the need for professional renegotiation. Situations in which teachers did not have the resources or capacity to renegotiate their identities, but felt forced to assume new duties, severely threatened teachers' professional commitment, job satisfaction and the development of their professional capacities (cf. also Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011).

### **Discussion**

In this chapter I have sought to highlight the ways in which teachers are active in authoring their professional identities at different stages in their careers. To do this, I have used the results of my previous studies (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; 2016) to develop a model of the ways in which teachers author their identities through their identity-agency. The illustrative examples showed that the underlying dynamics of identity development were similar for pre-service and in-service teachers. However, the conditions and significance of the teachers' identity-agency differed to some extent in pre-service and in-service contexts.

The novel aspect of this chapter is that I highlight the role of identity-agency as both a renegotiating and a defensive capacity. I showed that pre- and in-service teachers used their identity-agency both in renegotiating the relationship between institutional demands and professional identity and in limiting interaction between the social and individual domains. For in-service teachers, the ability and willingness to renegotiate their identities, however, appeared to be a crucial way to develop professional competence, beliefs and job satisfaction. It was reported that resisting identity renegotiation demanded additional action from in-service teachers if they were going to be able to withstand the emotional and social pressure for change. These forms of agency could not, however, fully suppress the emotional and professional load caused by the mismatch between professional identity and the environment.

In this chapter I point to the significance of identity for understanding teachers' professional development, wellbeing, and professional agency (f. ex. Vähäsantanen, 2015). Rather than simply identity, I underline the role of identity-agency in negotiating a match

between self and environment. This match does not mean assimilation into the social environment, but the ability to find a constructive balance between one's own aims and the needs of the workplace. In considering the significance of the results for the development of pre- and in-service teachers, identity-agency has an important role as a dynamic for either renegotiation or defense. Teacher education programs have been criticized for not supporting student teachers enough in the formation of their professional identities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). However, the examples in this study show that pre-service teachers are able to author their identities at least in the culture that prevails in teacher education in Finland, where student teachers are allowed and indeed expected to develop their competences rather freely (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). Nevertheless, these identity development processes might not fully prepare students for the development of their identities in the context of work life, where opting for renegotiation between self and environment was experienced as crucial for professional agency. Adequate focus on pre-service teachers' micro-political literacy and sociological understanding at large might offer a valuable medium for supporting the active identity work of pre-service and in-service teachers (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002).



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