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Teacher Identity and Investment: First Year Language Teacher Students

Investing in their Future Profession

Anne Pitkänen-Huhta, Maria Ruohotie-Lyhty and Päivikki Jääskelä

Abstract Professional identity is central in understanding the socially embedded and personally experienced character of teachers' professional development. Particularly in the early stages of identity construction, we need to focus not only on the past and present but also on the images of the future in order to support identity construction during education. This study investigates how student teachers approach their future work as language teachers and how they perceive the ways in which they can invest in their futures. As part of a broader project, data were collected from 61 student teachers during the first semester in the language teacher education programme and it comprised visualizations of student teachers' future work and verbal descriptions of factors facilitating or hindering the dream of their future profession. The focus here is on the verbal descriptions. Becoming aware of student teachers' future goals and the ways in which they are planning to reach their dream provides valuable insights into the processes needed to support student teacher development.

Keywords: teacher identity; investment; envisioning; language teachers; teacher education

1 Introduction

Professional identity is central in understanding the socially embedded yet personally experienced character of teachers' professional development and engagement in professional practices (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013). The centrality of identity has also turned the interest of teacher education institutes to questions of identity construction during pre-service training. Teacher education programmes are recognized as places for reflecting on and challenging established ideas of the teaching profession. Furthermore,

students are expected to become aware of the need of identity construction and receive tools for the analysis and development of their identities when they start working as teachers.

Reflection on the past and present has been used as a medium of affecting the identity construction of pre-service and in-service teachers. However, focusing on the narratives of the future and the students' imagined identities is also important for identity construction (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Examining how student teachers imagine their future reveals how they are willing to invest in their professional development (Barkhuizen, 2016) and how realistic their ideas of investment are. Becoming aware of students' future goals and the means of reaching them can provide valuable insights into the processes needed to support student teacher development.

The importance of future goals has been studied in connection to language learner identities. Learners' commitment to language learning is mediated by their ideal L2 (second language) selves (Dörnyei, 2005). The ideal L2 self projects into the future, to how learners see themselves as language users in future imagined communities (Norton, 2001; Xu, 2012). The concept of investment (Darwin & Norton, 2015; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Norton, 2000) has been used to concretize a person's possibilities and willingness to put effort into their own development in the circumstances constrained by social, cultural and historical factors (Darwin & Norton, 2015; Kim, 2014). Fewer studies have, however, addressed the question of investment related to future language teacher profession.

This study thus aims to fill this gap by investigating how student teachers approach their future work through expressions of investment in their futures as language teachers.

Theoretically the study is anchored in the intertwined concepts of teacher identity, envisioning as an aspect of identity construction, and investment. This study extends the previous analyses for the data collected during language teacher education on 61 first-year student teachers'

visualizations of their future work (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020) with analyzing the student teachers' verbal descriptions related to the visualizations. These descriptions reveal the student-perceived factors facilitating or hindering their dream of their future profession, thus indirectly indicating their willingness and ability to invest in their futures. We provide answers to the following research questions: (1) In which ways do student teachers perceive they can invest in their professional future? and (2) How are the student-described forms of investment related to their visions of the professional future?

2 Identity and Investment

Since 1990's, the concept of teacher identity has received growing attention in research (Block, 2007; Duff, 2013). This is connected to the interactional nature of teaching and learning, in which both teacher and learner identities are central (Varghese et al., 2005). In the same vein, the practices of language teacher education have been examined from the perspective of identity construction (Barcelos, 2016; Barkhuizen, 2009; Kalaja, 2016; Trent, 2013).

Although there are several approaches to identity (e.g., narrative theory, Barkhuizen, 2016; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013; poststructuralist perspectives, Varghese et al., 2005), recent approaches agree on some characteristics concerning the concept of teacher identity. First, identity is seen as particular ways of looking at the world, i.e., "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world" (Norton, 2013, p. 45) or more specifically, as a means of making sense of one's professional practices (Barkhuizen, 2016). The concept of identity is also perceived to have process-like characteristics, related to how the relationship to the world is expressed in terms of identity being "structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2013, p. 45). Accordingly, identity is

simultaneously in the state of “being” and “becoming”, constantly affecting the teachers’ actions and views of the profession and shaped by the flux of professional practices. Second, identity is seen as the relation between personal and social aspects (Duff, 2013). However, individuals are not mere products of their environment, but agentic participants in their identity development (Sade, 2009).

The concept of investment ties teacher identities to the future possibilities (Darwin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013). Investment as a construct was originally used in relation to language learning and language learners by Norton (2001, 2013) to highlight “the socially and historically constructed relationship between language learner identity and learning commitment” (Darwin and Norton, 2015, p. 37). Investment also means acquiring a range of symbolic and material resources that increase the learner’s cultural capital and social power (Darwin & Norton, 2015; Bourdieu, 1991). Investment is thus inherently tied to the post-structuralist understandings of teacher identity construction: identities and investment are dynamic, fluid, and in a constant state of change.

There have been a fairly large number of previous studies on teacher identities using the concept of investment (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Dunn & Downey, 2018) but few on student teacher’s identity construction and investment. However, Mora et al. (2016) examined the learning trajectories of Mexican novice language teachers drawing on the concept of investment. Comparison of teachers born and educated in Mexico and those who had returned to Mexico for their studies after spending their childhood in the US revealed a difference in investment which was related to the teachers’ personal life-histories.

3 Envisioning as an Aspect in Identity Construction

As pointed out above, orienting towards the future is an important component of identity (Barkhuizen, 2016; Norton, 2013). This is especially relevant during teacher education, as students are reaching towards an anticipated future. A key character of their development is the way in which they imagine their future tasks and roles as language teachers. People orient to the future with hopes and desires (e.g., Kanno & Norton, 2003) but also with fears (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016).

There is a growing body of research on teacher and student teacher identity construction (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Kalaja & Melo-Pfeifer, 2019; Kalaja & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2019; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013), also those focusing on student teachers' visions of their future. Recent examples relevant to the present study include Barcelos (2016), Kalaja and Mäntylä (2018), Brandão (2019) and Pinho (2019). Barcelos (2016) examined narratives of language teacher students longitudinally. She found that negative features relating to teacher profession hindered teachers' identity construction and made them question their future profession. Kalaja and Mäntylä (2018) examined student teachers' expectations of the future by asking them to envision a classroom of their dreams. The authors found great variation among the students and concluded that the variation is due to both the stage of their studies and their experience of teaching English. Brandão (2019) examined how student teachers imagined their future in teaching EFL in Brazil and found that how the student teachers make sense of their past experiences as pupils and their present status as student teachers is strongly shaped by their idea of the professional future. Pinho's (2019) study on one student teacher's self-image as an EFL teacher revealed that experiences are strongly context bound.

The present study complements earlier studies with its focus on investment in relation to envisioning the future profession. We draw on, firstly, the concept of identity as socially and

personally constructed and connected to future desires and fears and secondly, on the concept of investment, as connecting to future visions and allowing us to extend our focus beyond the individual to the contextual and social elements of teacher identity construction. The study seeks answers to the following research questions: (1) In which ways do student teachers perceive they can invest in their professional future? and (2) How are the student-described forms of investment related to their visions of the professional future?

4 Method

4.1 Context and Participants

The participants were 61 Finnish foreign language teacher students (ca. 20 years old), who had just started their studies at the University of Jyväskylä in a language teacher education programme. In contrast to many other teacher education programmes in Finland, the courses of this programme specialize in language teaching from the very beginning of studies. These practices are introduced to accompany the professional identity construction of student teachers throughout their studies. Data consist of students' responses to a course assignment in "Becoming a language teacher" course in their teacher education programme. A written consent was obtained for the use of their responses as research data. The present study connects to a larger project examining agency in the professional identity construction of language teacher students (Jääskelä et al., 2021; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020).

4.2 Data Collection

In the course assignment, the student teachers were asked to envision their professional future in 10 years' time. To better understand the key elements connected to language teachers' work, we

drew on the Method of Empathy Based Stories (MEBS) (Wallin et al., 2018) and asked the student teachers to visually produce two alternative images of their future: their desired job and its antithesis. In the original form of the method, the participants produce two alternative storylines altering only one central feature of the story, often either success or failure connected to the phenomenon in focus (Wallin et al., 2018, p. 4). We asked the student teachers to contrast the desired and feared professional future and write a description of the image as well as a reflection on how realistic the two futures were and what might facilitate or hinder their dream. In terms of investment, we examined student-reported ways of influencing one's future, i.e., what facilitates and/or hinders the dream. The instruction for the task was as follows (translated from Finnish):

Visualize yourself at work ten years from now in two images. In one image you are in your dream job, in the other you are at work that is not your dream.

Write a short text in which you describe what your images portray, how realistic the two futures are, and *what facilitates or hinders your dream*.

We have previously analyzed the visual data and the first part of the student teachers' verbal description, i.e., what their image portrays (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020; Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2021). In this chapter, the previous results serve as a point of reference for further analyses. Here we focus on the latter part of the verbal descriptions, i.e., how investment was expressed in student teachers' reactions to the part "*what facilitates or hinders your dream*". We explore, first, in which ways the student teachers believe they are able and willing to invest in their professional dream and second, which other factors student teachers bring out in the realization of their dream.

4.3 Orientations to future profession as a point of reference for the present study

In our previous study (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020) focusing on the visual data, we discerned two different orientations to the future profession: *nature of work oriented* view and *status oriented* view to language teacher profession. Majority of the participants (45 out of 61) represented the *nature of work orientation*, where the content, relationships and conditions of teachers' work constructed the main tension between desired and feared professional futures. Typical of these envisioned futures was a rather detailed description of the places, emotions and artefacts that were connected to desired and feared futures. In the pictures and accompanying texts, the student teachers described their future work in terms of progressive pedagogy, extended collaboration with colleagues and agreeable physical environment.

A minority of 16 participants envisioned their desired and feared professional futures in terms of the *status* of the profession. In the visualizations and verbal descriptions of the images of this group, the teacher profession was presented as providing a certain status in society. The tension created between the desired and feared professional futures was built between appreciated and less-appreciated social positioning. Typically, the content of work was not clearly described. In contrast, the main themes were linked to stereotypical descriptions of teaching and the envisioned professional future was very briefly described. Some of the participants only mentioned their willingness “to become a teacher”. Some of them, however, provided some additional explanation, such as comparing teachers’ work with the feared professional status.

After analyzing the visualizations, we wanted to understand more thoroughly the ways in which these student teachers believed they could reach and how they invested in reaching their dreams. This became the research task for the present study.

4.4 Data analysis

To answer our first research question, we analyzed the verbal descriptions by following the basic principles of content analysis (Patton, 2015). The categorization was inductive, i.e., we formed the categories based on what we saw in the explanations. The categorization was refined through several readings of the data as well as cross-coding by two of the researchers.

For our second research question, we analyzed these results against the findings of our previous study (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020). The categories of investment established by the content analysis were cross-tabulated with the two orientations to work revealed in our previous analyses of the visual data, i.e., *the nature of work* and *the status* orientation to the future profession. To learn if there are any statistical associations between investment and the categorization of the participants in *nature-of-work-oriented* and *status-oriented* future visions, the number of respondents for each classified category was first calculated using cross-tabulation. After that the chi-square tests and the values of the adjusted residuals were used to examine associations between the factors of investment and the groups of orientations to work.

5 Findings

5.1 Factors Facilitating and Hindering the Envisioned Professional Futures: Different Types of Investment

Different types of investment could be detected when the student teachers reflected on the factors facilitating or hindering their desired or feared professions and the probability of the two alternative futures. Five types of investment were detected in the analysis: (1) student teachers' own volition, (2) motivation and personal characteristics, (3) hard work, (4) getting a degree, and (5) external conditions. A student teacher's description could include any number of these categories, ranging from one to five categories. There were also two student teachers who had not included any description or did not mention anything that could be seen as investment. The following two descriptions (translated from Finnish by the authors) are examples of a short description where only one factor came out.

I can facilitate my dreams coming true by studying and concentrating on studies properly. If I give up, it's very likely that I end up in a job that does not correspond to my dreams.

I myself influence my dreams coming true.

The first one was categorized as "getting a degree" and the second one as "student teacher's own volition".

In the following example, the student teacher has written a lengthy description, which includes all five detected factors facilitating and/or hindering the dream:

Finishing my degree can facilitate my wishes coming true. Being self-directed at school but also at work can help in getting a job. If one wishes to gain qualifications, one has to work for it. Having a good combination of subjects [in your degree] can be useful in finding work. Energetic, positive and diligent attitude take you far in life! I believe firmly in my qualifications in the future and in finding a job. Of course, if there is a serious shortage of money and I have to find a job, it may be that I end up in my detested job, because one has to work in life. I'm not picky either.

This student teacher mentions the MA degree as a facilitating factor as well as one's own self-initiation, hard work, and a positive attitude. The student teacher also mentions an external condition, i.e., lack of money that might push one to a feared job.

Table 1 presents the overall distribution of the descriptions across the five categories. Four of the categories were fairly equal in size and only one (hard work) was clearly smaller than the others.

Table 1: The overall distribution of the categories of investment

CATEGORY	N
Student teachers' own volition	27
Motivation and personal characteristics	25
Hard work	10
Getting a degree	31
External conditions	26

Student Teachers' Own Volition

In this category, the participants of the study described the ways in which their own volition could support them in reaching their professional dreams. In these descriptions, the student teachers referred to their own will as well as their current choices and their future activity as members of the work community. They also often perceived their own activity as potentially

reversing the negative influence of the environment. The words *I*, *me*, and *myself* appear often in these examples.

The future of my dreams is not fully in my own hands, but I can myself influence the variability in my work. I can facilitate the plan by examining/asking about/discussing new possibilities and ideas. It is also important that I take the students and their opinions into account.

I believe that my dream job can be reached, if I myself take part in developing the future and reach for my dreams boldly and not giving up when facing small setbacks.

In these examples, the participants describe some of the ways in which being an active member of the working community can help them in reaching the cooperative learning culture at work. They also refer to teacher autonomy in being able to decide themselves the working methods and practices in the class and believe this could support the fulfilment of their dream.

Motivation and personal characteristics

In this category, the student teachers highlighted the significance of their own motivation and attitude in reaching their dream job in the future. They described possessing the necessary characteristics that are needed to reach their dream. The following example illustrates the type of answers in this category:

Skills and knowledge are of course needed, but the most important thing is motivation and attitude, with which one can have results.

In this example, the type of motivation and attitude are not directly expressed, whereas some participants were more explicit about the type of characteristics that they possessed. One of the student teachers refers to their own work experiences as something that will help them in finding a dream job:

My wishes coming true can be facilitated by my experiences as a teacher [in a specific school for the Deaf], my work experiences in development co-operation.

For this student teacher, the previous experiences as a teacher in certain schools as well as experiences of working in developing countries increase the probability to do the kind of work the student teacher wants in the future.

Hard Work

In this category, the participants named hard work as something that is needed to reach the dream. Hard work could be related to studies or to finding a job or to just being hard-working. Being lazy was associated with negative future expectations. Differently from the volition group, the actions that hard work entailed were not described in detail. The following two examples illustrate this category:

I know, however, that with hard work and diligence I can reach my dream, up to a point.

If you wish to gain qualifications, you have to work for it.

In this example, the student teacher sees that the dream can be reached if one just works hard for it and is diligent.

Getting a Degree

The student teachers in this category identified getting a degree as the necessary precondition for success in finding their dream job. Their investment was straightforwardly connected to their studies, whereas failure was a consequence of dropping out of studies. The following two excerpts provide typical examples of this category:

My teacher-future is hindered by quitting studies and facilitated by continuing my studies.

My dream coming true is facilitated by completing my degree.

In these examples, the quality of the studies was not opened up, as the main thing appeared to be just to complete studies to get a degree. In some examples, however, student teachers linked some qualities to the ways in which they wanted to conduct their studies, as in the following example:

I can facilitate my dream coming true by studying my Finnish-as-a-second-language studies well.

In the examples in this category, the quality of investment was mostly described in very general terms and very briefly.

External Conditions

In the final category, the investment was not dependent on the student teachers themselves but on some external conditions, which appeared to be beyond one's own volition or activities. Many of these concerned the future job situation or various societal or political changes.

In addition, funding for schools as well as structural and political changes influence the future of work.

It is difficult to estimate the likelihood for these options to come true, as political decisions, one's own choices as well as the general atmosphere in the area where one ends up working influence these.

In the above examples, the student teachers see that their future is dependent on the funding for schools, on political changes and decisions or the general atmosphere in the future location of work. Some of the examples were indirectly related to one's own activities as well, as in the next example:

If I stayed in a place where there's not much work for language teachers that could prevent my dream from coming true. A facilitating factor could be the fact that I would be open to different options and would be ready to live in a place where I could find work.

In this example, the student teacher sees that their future is dependent on the job situation in the area where they live, but this was also related to their own activities in that they should be open to moving to another location. The following example is also related to external conditions but now they are related to health or skills. The student teacher in this example feels that the dream may not come true if a serious illness hinders them from working as a teacher:

If there were something that would prevent my dream from coming true that would probably be lack of jobs matching my profession or lack of professional skills or something related to health. For example, if I would get a serious illness which would prevent me from working as a teacher.

Through the qualitative analysis of the student teachers' descriptions of the factors facilitating and hindering their desired or feared future profession, we learned that the student teachers saw both internal and external influences on their future. They saw that they could invest in their future by their own persistent actions and with the right attitude and motivation. If they just want something and are active in pursuing the dream, they can reach it. They also saw that merely getting the appropriate degree would guarantee the desired future as a teacher. Many also saw that some influences are beyond their own hands in external conditions, such as funding for education, job situation or personal health.

5.2 Investment in Relation to the Orientation to Work

To answer our second research question, we present the results of the statistical analysis of the associations between the factors of student teachers' investment described and categorized above and their two orientations to the future profession. We wished to see if the student teachers' investment was related to how they saw their professional future. The analysis was done by cross-tabulating the categories of investment and the categories of the two orientations to work. The five factors. i.e., (1) student teachers' own volition, (2) motivation and personal

characteristics, (3) hard work, (4) getting a degree, and (5) external conditions, were cross-tabulated with the two categories of orientations to work (*nature of work* and *status of work*).

In the analysis, all the categories of investment were cross-tabulated with the two orientations to work, but only one factor (category of investment) showed a statistically significant difference between the two orientations to work. This was the “getting a degree” category. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the association between “getting a degree” and the orientation to work. The association between these variables was significant $\chi^2(1, N = 61) = 11.68, p = .001$. Those who had a status orientation to future work were more likely to say that getting a degree facilitates their dream rather than those who had a nature of work orientation to work. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Cross-tabulation of “getting a degree” and orientation to future work

Orientation to work		Getting a degree		Total
		Not mentioned	Mentioned	
Nature of work	Count	28	17	45
	Expected count	22.1	22.9	45
	Standardized Residual	1.2	-1.2	
Status of work	Count	2	14	16
	Expected count	7.9	8.1	16.0

	Standardized Residual	-2.1	2.1	
Total	Count	30	31	61
	Expected count	30.0	31.0	61.0

None of the other factors (categories of investment) showed any statistically significant differences between the two orientations to work. It was also examined whether there was a difference in the number of factors in any one description and the orientation to work, but none was detected. We can thus conclude that there is an association between the student teachers' investment in terms of *getting a degree* and their orientation to future work. In other words, those student teachers who orient to their future work mainly to gain the status of a teacher are more inclined to invest into their future through getting a degree than those who orient to their future work in terms of its nature. Getting a degree leading to the teacher profession is logical of course and this kind of “technical” investment is in line with the orientation to the future in terms of gaining a specific social status in society. For the nature-oriented group the other factors – both internal and external – seemed to be more important investments in reaching their desired professional future.

6 Discussion

This study examined how student teachers approach their future work as language teachers, how they perceive the ways in which they can invest in their futures and if there are associations

between their orientation to future work and their investment. This study adds to the body of research on teacher identity development (Barkhuizen, 2016; Dunn & Downey, 2018) and investment (Darwin & Norton, 2015) by focusing on student teachers and their visions of the future profession.

Our analyses showed that student teachers see both internal and external influences on their professional futures with the internal ones gaining more prominence. We identified five factors in student teachers' description of aspects that can facilitate or hinder their desired futures. These were (1) student teachers' own volition, (2) motivation and personal characteristics, (3) hard work, (4) getting a degree, and (5) external conditions. Four of these categories can be seen as internal factors and only one comprised of external factors. The student teachers thus have differing ideas about how they can influence their own future and these findings are in line with earlier studies examining student teachers envisioning their futures (Barcelos, 2016; Brandão, 2019; Kalaja & Mäntylä, 2018; Pinho, 2019). In line with Barkhuizen (2016) and Dunn & Downey (2018)), some student teachers' accounts point towards investing in their future profession by their own actions and strong will. However, some participants in our study felt that getting the degree is enough or that there are external conditions which are beyond their control and they cannot influence their future. Sometimes the student teachers seemed quite firm that one's own volition is central but this was then mitigated by saying that the job situation or personal health can hinder the dream coming true. These different forms of investment are related to different perceptions of identity construction: identity construction is either strongly in the possession of the individual or it is a by-product of their studies or constrained by external conditions (Sade, 2009).

The results further indicated that there was not much difference in student teachers' investment when contrasted with their orientation to the future profession either in terms of the nature or status of work. Only one factor – getting a degree – was associated with the orientation in that those orienting to the status of a teacher thought more often that getting the degree was important (and often enough) in reaching their dream. This might be related to the fact that these student teachers were first year students just beginning their studies and their professional future might not have been very clear yet. But it may also be that not all student teachers are able to reflect on the nature of their future work, especially at the beginning of their studies.

As to the theoretical implications, we found the combination of identity, investment and envisioning useful in shedding light on the beginning student teachers' identity construction, and thus our study complements the findings of earlier studies both in terms of investment (Mora et al., 2016) and envisioning (Kalaja & Mäntylä, 2018). The concept of investment helps in understanding how future visions mediate professional identity construction and how it is related to acquiring “a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power” (Darwin & Norton, 2015, p. 37). Student teachers invest in their professional futures differently, anticipate gaining different kinds of symbolic and material resources (degree, knowledge, resilience) and thereby gain different kinds of cultural capital. However, even though student teachers might vision their futures in very different terms, their ideas and willingness to invest does not necessarily depend on their vision of the future profession. This has important implications for teacher education.

7 Conclusion

This study was conducted with 61 students in a specific context of teacher education in one university in one country. Despite the limited context, the study offers implications for teacher education and teacher identity research more broadly. The process of envisioning can potentially reveal the varying starting points student teachers have when entering teacher education programmes and can thus offer support to different kinds of students. Envisioning can also reveal how differently student teachers see their possibilities and volition to invest in their future profession. As Brandão (2019, p. 210) notes: “It is important for us, language teacher educators, to be aware of how student teachers imagine the profession, together with the experiences, expectations and anxieties that go with it.” A nuanced idea of the teaching profession may not necessarily connect to richer investment. It is crucial to take this into account in teacher education, as teacher educators can then support students’ conscious development beyond success in studies, which may lead to the development of a rich and nuanced understanding of the future profession. Further studies are needed to get a deeper understanding of the process of envisioning and investment and development of teacher identity longitudinally in teacher education and in different socio-political contexts of teacher education.

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