The construction of infant and primary school teachers' identity during their initial professional development and first years of work (Identidoc)

Summary, main results and contributions

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Interés y relevancia del tema

Educators who are currently beginning their professional career at any level of the educational system and who will likely have to work during the next thirty to forty years will be taking part in the education of individuals who, with the permission of prophets and doomsayers, will live part of their lives in the 22nd century. That long but simple statement causes a bit of vertigo as well as a good amount of reflection on the part of we educators who were trained in the 20th century, are working in the 21st century, and are responsible for preparing people to build a tomorrow that is already today (Millán and Sancho, 1995). This is the starting point of our research groups' interest in exploring how men and women who have graduated from teacher education programs with specializations in infant and primary education learn to be teachers, and how they establish and position themselves as teachers during their university studies and the first years of their professional life. This first item of interest forms a network that is composed of a set of nodes, which are as follows:

1. *The difficulty of introducing and consolidating changes that lead to improvement in education*. The knowledge accumulated in the last fifty years of educational reform has allowed us to see the apparent difficulty of changing the ideas and representations of

what it means to teach, to learn, to evaluate and to assess; of the conceptions of childhood and youth; of what characterizes good educational practice, etc. (Sarason, 1990; Cuban, 1993). This difficulty is found not only in teachers of all levels of the educational system but also in those who are involved in the system: those in charge of education policy, teacher trainers, administrators, families, etc.

2. *The difficulty of accounting for the technological, economic, cultural and social changes that surround us*. In particular, the development and proliferation of digital information and communication technologies, increasingly versatile and ubiquitous, is transforming every aspect of society. More specifically, it is changing both the ways of producing, accessing and evaluating information and students learning processes and predispositions. Aspects that are not being taken into account properly in the field of education. Thus, the trend seems introducing these flexible technologies into rigid and inert scholastic contexts that have compartmentalized and fragmented timetables and curricula, visions of knowledge that value fact over process or creativity, evaluations that tend to reward mere memorization, etc. (Sancho and Alonso, 2012).

3. *The insufficiency of the initial teacher professional development*. Teachers, and indeed any person who works today, have to continue learning and professional development throughout their professional life. At the beginning of their career, teachers tend to resort to the educational practices they internalized when they were schoolchildren (Rivas and Leite, 2013) and, to a lesser extent, to the lessons they learned during their university studies. Nevertheless, as noted by one of the teachers who participated in a study (Analysis of the impact of social and professional changes in the work and lives of teachers. Ministry of Science and Innovation. BSO2003-02232) on how teachers in primary and secondary education faced cultural, social and educational changes throughout their professional career and how the changes influenced their teaching practice:

> It's clear, and you are aware that what you expect from your university studies is this, a degree, but it's from then when you have to begin to learn. That's what you see now with some hindsight, but at the time you first resort to what you've been taught (Sancho, Martínez and García, 2011: 163).

4. *The importance of the first professional experiences*. A core issue that emerged from the above-mentioned study was the value of the welcome that beginning teachers received and the experience that they had in the first schools they taught in.

> I always think that, if I had arrived there and I had found myself in, I am not going to say a 'hostile environment', but maybe a little coldness, apathy, neglect… well, that would have been passed on to me, and I would have thought: "Oh, so this is how it is" (Sancho, Giambelluca and Ibáñez, 2011: 183).

5. *Growing international interest*. Over recent years there has been an increase in the studies on the situations, processes, experiences and positionings that are linked to how to teachers construct and negotiate their identity and how they learn to be teachers (Maclure, 1993; Clandinin and Connelly, 1995; Gee, 2001; Sachs, 2001; Sfard and Prusak, 2005; Flores and Day, 2006).

This set of factors signaled to us the need to describe, analyze and to interpret the ideas, representations and experiences related to the professional identity of infant and primary education teachers. We think that those that are linked to their initial professional development period and the first years of working in schools are especially relevant.

In addition to increasing our understanding of the subject, in this study we also aim to provide guidelines for educational policies, for initial and ongoing teacher professional development programs, for teachers themselves and for preschools and primary schools. These two lines will contribute to the development of a teaching profession that is able to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

For the researchers in the Basque Country, participating in a study that has allowed us to explore how people learn to be a teacher has been especially relevant. This exploration has not only benefited us as educators and researchers, but also to our institution. Especially because of our perception that initial teacher professional development was primarily based on a conception of teaching and learning that relied on transmission, memorization and lacked questioning, which ultimately did not foster and in fact hindered the development of future teachers.

The objectives of the study

As we have advanced, the main aim of this project is to describe, analyze and interpret the ideas concepts, representations and experiences that are related to the professional identity of infant and primary education teachers, especially those that are linked to teachers' initial professional development period and their first years of working at schools. Our specific objectives are the following:

1. Contribute to research-based knowledge about the complex processes that go into the construction of a professional identity as infant and primary school teachers during the initial teacher professional development period and the first years of working in schools.
2. Describe, analyze, and interpret the interdependence of the discourses, representations, experiences and practices that are experienced during initial professional development by infant and primary school teachers and its impact on their process of building a professional identity.
3. Describe, analyze, and interpret the interdependence of the discourses, representations, experiences and relationships in the infant and primary schools with the process of constructing a professional identity during the first five years of working in a school.
4. Carry out a comparative analysis of the similarities, differences, overlaps, complementarities and obstacles found in the processes of constructing a professional identity in infant and primary school teachers.
5. Engage in a systematic dissemination of the study's process and results, using all available means and involving all stakeholders, from the educators themselves to the international scientific community and including teacher educators and policymakers.
6. Provide results that are backed with evidence from research and that can inform and contribute to decision making to: (a) policymakers and those who are responsible for the practices that relate to initial and ongoing teacher professional development; (b) schools that welcome new teachers; and (c) new teachers themselves during a critical

period in their professional life.

Methodology

Our methodology combines a narrative perspective with a set of data collection methods and techniques that are well suited for our exploration of the dimensions outlined above and for reaching the objectives of our study. From a constructionist positioning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008; Gergen & Gergen, 2004) the formulation of our research question and an analysis of the available literature on the topic have led us to select three basic information collection techniques: interview, ethnographic observation and discussion group.

The Barcelona group

- 9 biographical narratives that were the result of micro-ethnographic techniques2 (workplace observations, interviews, document and artifact analyses, etc.) from 7 primary education teachers women and 2 men, who work in the autonomous community of Catalonia and who had between one and five years of work experience in public and charter schools.
- 9 discussion groups in several other autonomous communities (Catalonia, Basque Country, Madrid, Galicia, Castilla-León, Andalusia, Cantabria, La Rioja and the Balearic Islands); participants were 49 teachers with the same characteristics as described above.

The Basque Country group

- 13 biographical narratives that were the result of micro-ethnographic techniques (workplace observations, interviews, drawings, group murals, document and artifact analyses, etc. – Le Baron, 2006) from 5 infant teachers with one to five years of work experience in public and charter schools, and 8 university students in the Infant Education degree program at the University of the Basque Country.
- 4 discussion groups in several other autonomous communities (Navarra, Madrid, Castilla-León, Catalonia). Participants were 16 teachers with the same characteristics as above.

Main results: Professional identities in search of meaning

All the infant and primary school teachers who collaborated to one degree or other in this study are aware that they are *becoming* rather than *being* teachers. During their one to five years of work experience in a world that is changing at high speed, they have dealt with challenging conditions, negotiated with their dreams, doubts and certainties and discovered that they as well as education are still evolving. The participants in this research have had the opportunity to discuss and make sense of the question: How do you learn to be a teacher? Our collaborators say that prior to this nobody had ever suggested exploring this complex question or *accompanied* them in such an exploration. This process has made them aware of the importance of questions to be asked repeatedly and of the answers that come from their inquiry process. In the following paragraphs we summarize the most relevant dimensions of

their *becoming* as teachers.

Childhood dream (vocation) vs. Discovery and commitment

The belief persists that a dedication to teaching is the response to a *vocation*, to a *calling*, that those who have certain *gifts* receive. The immediate consequence of this belief is that teachers, particularly those in infant and primary education, *already have* what is needed to teach and that they do so regardless of what the work conditions are. However, this *primeval desire* of wanting to be a teacher is not common among many of the participants in this study. What our research shows is that people's desire to teach and their reasons for choosing to dedicate themselves to a career in teaching come out of a wide range of life experiences. Thus, the construction of a responsible and committed teaching identity does not always begin with a desire to go into teaching that can be more maternal than professional. Such a starting point is often based on a romanticized idea of childhood and of school that can put teachers in positions of extreme emotional and cognitive fragility, making their own learning more difficult. For this reason, what is important does not seem to be how the decision to go into teaching is made but rather it is an individual's predisposition, which is also socially conditioned, to engage in critical dialog within a context and draw what are hopefully positive conclusions from those experiences.

Building caring relationships with students

Many people decide to work in education because they feel the need to communicate with other people, because it is a field where people work with people, not machines. The participants in our study place special significance on the opportunity that their work gives them to *relate to people* and with students in particular. Their desire to dedicate themselves to people does not come from a feeling akin to *religious vocation*, but rather from the satisfaction that comes from interacting with students who, due to their young age, tend to be wrapped in a layer of affection. They also express their desire to *do something for others*, to contribute to the improvement of society through caring for others. This is a recurring theme that raises a host of questions and reflections, even more so when working with students with special educational needs or with heterogeneous classes, which is true of all classes. That the dimension of caring involved in teacher-student relations must be taken into account in the process of learning to be a teacher leads to a number of questions in a profession in which a majority are women, especially in infant education where it is difficult to find men. One of them is the interrogation of how to create and maintain a caring relationship, one which does not involve only affection or approval, but also pushes and challenges students intellectually and emotionally. This pedagogical positioning requires knowing/learning how to do (explicitly or implicitly) and a constant learning how to be.

Going from and beyond the context and experiences of students

Another facet of their professional identity that worries and engages our participants is going beyond the students' circumstances, trying to transcend what they know and what they are. In this their experiences as school and university students are the starting point. They act based on what they experienced from their teachers, the curricula and the learning contexts that allowed them to learn and discover things from and about themselves, the others and the world surrounding them; they also act based on what hindered and halted their learning. In

this regard they talk about to the importance of challenging stereotypes, of going beyond the prejudices of class, sex, ethnicity, religion, etc. They also highlight the shortcomings of their professional development that make it difficult for them to understand and respond to student conditions and configurations. With respect to this aspect, and in deep connection with the following dimension, they express the need for continuous professional development, whether formal or informal, which enables them to improve their professional background.

Mentoring/collaboration, or the lack thereof

In the process of forming their professional identity, they highlight the importance of mentoring and collaboration during their initial professional development and at work. In general, they experience it as something that they lack, as a need that goes unmet and that makes it difficult for them to become the kind of teacher they would like to become. Not all people experience the professional situations that reveal their lack of professional development in the same way. Some seek out a group to continue learning, while others become frustrated and disconnect. There are also cases of *castrated* mentoring. Sometimes the programs that schools use when welcoming new teachers try to get the new people *adapt to* their new post in education. Some schools does not wonder, question, or see if improvements can be made, and if they offer new teachers the opportunity to make contributions or voice their own concerns.

The importance of educational foundations

The teachers who participated in this study have pointed out the scarcity of sound pedagogical ideas during their initial professional development and in the schools where they work. In general, they have difficulty relating the ideas regarding pedagogy that they learned at university and that guide their practice to the trends in educational thought and to their respective authors. They feel that they have been given *recipes* rather than conceptual frameworks and some assert the importance of further study. In fact, sometimes they enthusiastically point out ideas and authors that have inspired and excited them and that serve as models for them.

Concerns and challenges

Along with the above-mentioned dimensions that inform the process of constructing a teaching identity, we must be mindful of the series of concerns and challenges that our collaborators must deal with.

Working conditions

In recent years, Spain, like many other countries, has moved from a context in which there was little unemployment among infant and primary school teachers to one in which there is great job instability. Where graduates once began working as soon as they graduated, many now have trouble finding work. We found teachers who have been sent to twenty different schools to work as a substitute teacher, all in a single school year. There are teachers who wait every morning for a call telling them which school to go (this tends to be the case in charter schools). There are others who have passed the public examination required to teach in public schools up to three times and still do not have a teaching post. Some are only hired part-time and yet they are responsible for tutoring an entire form. The question is, if the process of constituting a teaching identity is full of instability, uncertainty, certain disappointment,

a high degree of submissiveness in order to accept things as they are, what could be its effect on their commitment to, the meaning of and their involvement in the work?

The teaching (non-)career

In the majority of countries, and certainly in Spain, teaching is not considered as a *real* profession. From the moment a teacher finds a *permanent* position, the work conditions and the salary that come with it are virtually the same for everybody (the only increases are for seniority and/or taking on administrative duties). One of the fears repeatedly voiced by the participants in our research is *being like some of their colleagues in twenty years' time, when retirement is still a long way off*. They dread the prospect of becoming like those teachers who are bitter, lack enthusiasm, and lack meaning; they see these teachers in their schools and they reject them. They see those teachers as a counter example, as a model that they must move away from.

De-professionalizing educational policies

Educational policies in recent years have been in constant flux, and they are often contradictory. In this context new teachers feel insecure. They are uncertain about what they can or not do and whether they are authorized to put their own ideas into practice. The policies speak of autonomy, responsibility and performance accountability. However in practice they are full of (self-)imposed prescriptions and internal and external merely bureaucratic audits. The set of forces that arises from this situation tends to be neutralizing, which creates a certain inertia that hinders or prevents new teachers from being fully engaged in improving their schools.

The gap between professional development and practice

Our analysis of the data collected in this study indicates that the issue isn't the fact that there is a gap between theory and practice, since the theory is supposed to help us understand the phenomena that we deal with in practice. What our participants are referring to (and complaining about) is that in professional development programs they are told what *should be* or what *shouldn't be done* and of the significance (or lack thereof) that this has on their practice. There are occasions where teachers would like to do something different, but they don't know how to go about it and they don't have good models or *know how*.

The tendency to repeat patterns/models and practices

Becoming a member of a community of practice, such as the one teachers find in their schools, elicits different reactions and positionings from new teachers, although often the culture of the institution promotes isolation more than it does cooperation. The participants of our study have positioned themselves within their schools and reacted in various ways: submission and acceptance, dialogue about what they see as being positive or negative, insightful learning, rebellion, resistance, and confrontation. At different times and under various circumstances we find a combination of some or all of these reactions. Whatever the case, the tendency of schools as institutions to hamper (or encourage) the freshness of newcomers may lead those newcomers to lose their drive to innovate, if they have it, but overall to minimize their perceived need to go on learning.

The solitude of teaching

Teaching remains a tremendously solitary endeavor. Teachers are surrounded by people—

their students, colleagues, their families—and yet they have few opportunities to exchange ideas or collaborate. Few teachers have the opportunity to take part in a mentoring or buddy systems. Many schools hold coordination meetings, but usually what ends up happening is limited to agreeing on what topics are going to be taught and what materials will be used. Once the meeting is over, teachers return to the *accompanied* solitude of their classroom.

The insufficiency of cultural experience

Our study's teacher participants feel that they are not up to date on many things, and they wonder what they have to do. The big problem right now is that the cultural universe is so large and our ability to learn is so limited that it is difficult, if not impossible, to be aware of everything that contemporary culture produces. How are we to teach in today's world if we are not educated ourselves? By teaching only what is written in textbooks or in materials available on the web? These questions do not have simple answers, but perhaps they will make us, especially those of us who are teacher educators or responsible for educational policies, think about our own cultural background and about how to promote cultural development in our teachers and in ourselves. Whatever the case, this concern breaks with the image of the teacher as a *transmitter of knowledge* and points to a reformulation of the idea of the teacher as somebody who *knows* and *teaches what needs to be known*. At the same time, it raises the importance of recognizing that teachers do not know everything and that they have to keep learning.

The need to continue learning

Closely related to the previous point is the fact that teachers are aware that they will have to engage in continuous learning if they do not wish to become outdated, something they believe to have happened to some of their colleagues at their schools. They believe that they should be on top of changes in technology, of the ways to learn and teach, and of the very meaning of knowledge. However, what they cannot see is how this learning can be guaranteed. This situation also requires the involvement of teacher educators and those responsible for the educational policies that, in their focus on teaching and legislating, forget about learning.

The need to review the initial and ongoing professional development of teachers

In the course of investigating how teachers constitute their teaching identity, upon seeing the results we can't avoid wondering how we as teacher educator form ourselves, what our educational models are and why they end up being of such little relevance or influence. In studying others we also turn our lens onto ourselves. While this study has allowed us to rethink ourselves, in general, none of the university or educational reforms or any of the currently proposed professional development systems afford the same opportunity.

Conclusions

The analysis and interpretation of the data we have collected have allowed us to draw a complex and dynamic image of the challenges in professional development and professional practice that face teachers who are beginning their careers currently and to get a glimpse into how they are forming their teaching identities.

The project has allowed us to take a deeper look at idea of teaching identity as a proce-

ss of *self-construction*, woven from ongoing interactions with other individuals – each one with their biological, biographical and social *backpack* – educational policies, colleagues, power structures and power relations found in schools, students and families. In general, their most rewarding experiences, as well as their most painful ones, were in the context of their relationship with students. This is because the teaching profession, due to its dimension of caring and being responsible for others, carries a great emotional load (Hargreaves, 1998; O'Connor, 2008; Marchesi & Díaz, 2009) that can either be a source of energy that keeps them moving forwards or stop them in their tracks.

The study has allowed us to show that a teacher's work is of increasing difficulty and complexity. In part, this is because the changes in the educational system (a significant increase in the number of Infant and Primary Education graduates) and the cuts in investment (fewer teachers for more students) are making it increasingly difficult to find a teaching post, and at the same time the work itself is becoming increasingly precarious. Other factors are changes in the notion of what childhood means, in the representation of knowledge, in the social demands put on schools, in information and communication technologies, etc. These are putting an end to the myth of the *easy job* with a reduced working schedule and long vacations. New teachers who have been *lucky enough* to find a teaching post and make a commitment to it have to bring many hours of work and emotional effort to their profession and their professional development. To all that, it should be added that, in general, they do not feel recognized or supported by society.

Finally, carrying out this study has shown us that the process of constructing a teaching identity in the current climate will include, as it has in the past, the need to fight for social recognition of teachers' work. Teachers will need to discover and go more deeply into the dimensions of their practice as a political action and commitment. They need to find active ways to resist against the authoritative method of imposing a form of management that negates autonomy and collaboration in schools and limits their educational dimension. They need to expand the scope of their professional development and find ways to create community and combat isolation. Moreover, as they have begun to do in other countries, they need to explore ways to make the complexities of the teaching profession more visible to the public (Sancho & Correa, 2013; Hernández & Sancho, 2013).

Discussions like the one that appeared recently in an article in Spanish newspaper *El País* (http://sociedad.elpais.com/sociedad/2013/03/13/actualidad/1363202478_209351.html) help maintain the belief that to teach just knowing the subject or a set of definitions is enough (Hernández and Sancho, 1993). This is what those who are responsible for the teacher professional development curricula (politicians and teacher educators) seem to understand about, in this case, primary education, where a lot of weight is placed on classical subjects: mathematics, language, experimental sciences, etc. These are subjects that include the term "teaching of", or "teaching methods of" but that, in the experience of the participants in this study, become mere teaching of these disciplines following the traditional methods.

The teachers who took part in this study recognize the importance of undergoing initial professional development, but they point out that they were not *taught to teach* and they were in no way prepared to face the complexity that is inherent in teaching in the modern world. It was only during the period of internship at school that they began to glimpse, in some small measure that their job at a minimum consisted of:

• Understanding educational legislation and how to comply with it.

- Becoming part of a community, often without being aware that there is one, in which there are established positions and relations of power.
- Establishing a teaching-learning relationship with a heterogeneous group of children that will allow for and facilitate their learning and development.
- Ensuring that this group, which will be different each year, develops their potential to the greatest possible extent through learning the whole range of curricular content and does so at specific times and moments.
- Finding a way to assess the progress of the students and using the most appropriate methods and tools.
- Accepting, listening to, and as far as possible, responding to the emotional states of students that affect their ability to learn.
- Establishing relationships of collaboration and responsibility with students' families in order to add to or amplify but not subtract from their learning process.

The monograph "Aprender a ser maestra, hoy", Cuadernos de Pedagogía, 436, published in 2013, tackles many of the issues addressed in this and other sections of this document.

Recommendations

The gap between results and contributions of educational research and the policies and practices that shape the purpose and meaning of education has been repeatedly pointed out (Broekkampab & van Hout-Woltersb, 2007; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2009). School education, in this case of children between the ages of 3 and 12, who have the right and obligation (from ages 6 to 12) to attend school, takes place in a framework made up of educational legislation and educational practices. As we have observed, over the last forty years, educational legislation in Spain does not appear to be based on research-based knowledge, but rather it is built according to the worldviews of those who govern – in the recently approved LOMCE (Organic Law on the Quality Improvement of Education), we find the penultimate evidence of this statement. Furthermore, inertia and *what has always been done* often underlies teaching practice rather than the results of research on the characteristics of schools and teaching that promotes the learning of all students and on what now we know about how individuals learn (or don't) throughout their lives.

All of the above explains the caution with which we are proposing recommendations for education. But it also highlights the importance of making recommendations and place them within the three nodes of the educational system that have direct influence on the processes and outcomes of infant and primary education.

The first node is made up of the state Ministry and the regional ministries who have the power to create and implement educational policies. For them, our research shows a clear need to:

- Analyze the effects of the policies of access to teaching and take into account the impact that instability, uncertainty, a certain disappointment and a high degree of submissiveness in accepting *how things are* may have on the constitution of teaching identity and, in turn, in the commitment, the involvement and the meaning that teachers give to and find in the work.
- Consider the consequences of the fact that teaching does not exist as a profession, a

situation which leads to working conditions and salary being the same for all, regardless of their involvement or the quality of their work. This situation tends to slow down professional development and can lead to a certain inertia and stagnation as years pass by.

- Reconsider the educational policies that lead to de-professionalization, the ongoing changes in legislation and the resulting contradictions that increase the insecurity of new teachers. It is difficult for them to understand what they can or not do and whether they are authorized to put their own ideas into practice.

The second node consists of the entities responsible for the initial and ongoing teacher professional development, and with whom we'd like to share the following concerns:

- The need to review the deep gap between initial (and even ongoing) professional development and teaching practice. It is not so much the disconnection between theory and practice, since the theory is there to help us understand and guide the practice. What we are speaking of is that in the teachers professional development activities they are told what *should be* or what *should be done* or the lack of significance that this has for their practice.
- The urgent need to consider the cultural education of teachers who feel that they are not up to date on many things and they wonder what has to be done. The cultural universe of today is so large and our ability to learn is so limited that it is difficult -if not impossible, to be aware of everything that contemporary culture produces. Hence, it is crucial to consider how to best approach teachers' need to be current in contemporary culture in initial and ongoing teacher professional development.
- The importance of reviewing the perspectives on learning and knowledge that underlie the professional development practices themselves and that are held both by teacher educators at universities and at schools. It's also important to introduce updated visions of knowledge and learning and the influences of the social, economic, political, cultural and technological changes in education. We need to make them and ourselves aware of the need to for lifelong learning.
- The desirability of exploring with students in teacher education degree programs or teachers working at schools how they incorporate or resist teaching routines and inquire into the emotional dimension of becoming teacher, into the fears and satisfactions associated with the type of teacher that they would like to become.

The third node is the schools that welcome new teachers. We also want to share the following concerns with them:

- The importance of providing mentoring programs that allow newcomers learn to develop their capacity to be, their autonomy and their agency. Such programs could generate situations that elicit reflection from all faculty on how their practice evolves and how it could improve. But above all that prevent the transmission of instructions regarding the standardization of assessment, the standardized protocols to follow and the uniformity of what should be taught and how.
- The need to lessen the solitude of teaching, not only for new teachers but also for veteran teachers, through the articulation of relationships and effective exchange and coor-

dination systems. By creating communities of practice teachers can exchange and share not only from the professional domain, but also from the social, cultural and personal domains.

Finally, highlight the effort we have put into this research to demonstrate the value that the teaching profession has for individuals and society in a particularly complex, volatile, uncertain and ambiguous world (Sancho & Hernández, 2011).

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