From Student to Teacher: Renegotiating Professional Identities

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Introduction

As preservice teachers (PSTs) enter student internships, they bring their preformed professional identities and their understanding of "good teaching." Often, they find that their preconceived expectations of good teaching are at odds with their own practices (DiCicco et al., 2014; Nghia & Tai, 2017). PSTs often imagine their experiences as enjoyable but fail to recognize the challenges of the profession (Beltman et al., 2015). When these inconsistent influences on identity converge, the PSTs enter dialogue with themselves and others to construct a new identity that can incorporate the mismatched identities (Hallman, 2007). These identities are constantly in flux and renegotiated with new experiences and internal and external dialogue (Golzar, 2020; Yuan et al., 2019). PSTs also bring their personal experiences linked to demographic identities, such as gender, race, and ethnicity, to their professional identity formation (Allard & Santoro, 2006).

As PSTs progress through their internship, they further imagine themselves as professionals rather than students (Chong & Low, 2008). In doing so, they form tentative identities somewhere between students and practitioners. These are "not stable entit[ies], but a way of explaining and justifying their experiences to themselves and using this justification to monitor and direct their own professional development" (Sutherland et al., 2009). PSTs, therefore, negotiate between the conceptualized identities they have formed and their own experiences.

However, when PSTs begin their professional roles, they yet again build upon the identity formed in their internship to establish tentative professional teacher identities. Though PSTs struggle to transition their identities into instructional leaders and partners, they are quickly thrust into those roles as professional teachers (Coward et al., 2012). Like their PST identities, these professional identities are "dynamic, ever changing, and malleable construct[s]" (Golzar, 2020). Many factors influence this renegotiation. Classroom practices serve as loci for identity formation, but identity formation reciprocates the role in determining practices (Kaya & Dikilitas, 2019; Morgan, 2004).

While much scholarly attention has been paid to both PSTs and professional teacher identity formation, little research has been done to understand the transitory nature of identity when PSTs are hired in the same institution where they completed their internship. One of the commonly purported benefits of student internships may be how PSTs may network professionally with administration and faculty at a school with the hopes of acquiring a position at that school. If hired, they have experience in the school culture, having previously developed relationships. Their authentic knowledge and experience foster connection but places new teachers in a unique, and potentially uncomfortable, social position (Sutherland & Markauskaite, 2012). Their former cooperating teachers become their colleagues, and their successes and failures are known. They may also feel pressure to perform at a higher level than their fellow colleagues who are new to

the school. New teachers must navigate negotiating reforming a professional identity in a space they already know but in a new context. This case study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does student internship and first year placement in the same school relate to teacher identity formation?
2. How do student teaching experiences relate to professional identity formation?

Research Methods

To address the research questions, qualitative data were collected from two participants through a total of four in-person interviews, consisting of two interviews with each participant. For this case study, it was imperative that participants had similar education and professional experiences for us to explore their shared experiences. Both participants were enrolled in the same teacher education program (TEP) in a Southeastern university. The participants' student internships were at the same rural-fringe middle school in the small city where their TEP was located. Participants were then hired at the school of their student internship and placed on a new instructional team consisting of just the two participants. These overlapping factors provided the ability to gain consistent insight into their experiences and identity formation.

Data Collection. The first interview took place early during the participants' second semester as professional teachers. The final interview took place after the last day of school, providing participants the opportunity to reflect on the entire school year.

During the interviews, participants were asked to discuss their student teaching experiences. Participants were encouraged to discuss dialogue, whether internal or external, during their internship and how it related to constructing professional identities. They were also asked to share how they relate to their former cooperating teachers now that they are colleagues (of the four cooperating teachers, three remained at the school). At times, the participants were encouraged to define themselves in limited words. We wanted participants to isolate key markers of their tentative identities and to mark changes and consistencies.

Data Sources. This study combines data from four, 60-minute interviews. The two participants were first-year teachers, who recently graduated from the same TEP. Both participants were placed at the same school and the same instructional team for their first year. Tasha, the first participant, is a Black woman from Central Kentucky. She taught English, language arts, and mathematics. Ethan, the second participant, is a White man from Southeastern Kentucky. He taught science and social studies. The participants were given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

The data were analyzed through a data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2013). We initially recorded and transcribed the interviews. After an initial reading of the transcripts, we recorded memos and emerging ideas. Then, after discussion of similar concepts, applicable data were coded into overarching themes. Through a phronetic iterative approach, parallels and connections between the literature and identified themes were then analyzed through the lens of dialogism (Tracy, 2020).

Conceptual Framework

This exploration of the development of professional teacher identity, as it relates to previously held PST identity, rests upon dialogism, a conceptual framework in the interpretivist paradigm of social constructivism (Yuskel, 2009). This methodology prioritizes dialogue as the center locus and vehicle through which identities are negotiated. This study valued both internal dialogue, "the phenomenon of mutual interchange between I-positions," and external dialogue (Batory, 2010, p. 46). This framework is appropriate for our study because the dialogue between I-positions is a helpful model for understanding the interchange of previous identities (those of PSTs) and emerging identities (those of professional teachers). The context-dependent nature of identity is important for the study, as the context of our participants changed greatly. The study's understanding of context rests on the theory of *figured worlds* (Holland et al., 1998). Inside the figured world of a middle school setting, our participants entered "spaces of authoring" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 45). The cultural norms of their school and the participants' experiences are seen in constant dialogue, which we see as their spaces of authoring, along with their I-positions to form tentative identities.

Findings

Initial Descriptions. The interviews began by asking the participants to describe themselves as a PST. Tasha described herself during her internship as naive, flexible, and exhausted. Similarly, Ethan said he was scared, nervous, and tired. Both participants centered their initial identities of exhausted/tired on the unpaid nature of student teaching internships. Ethan explained,

> If you're paying to put yourself through school, like I did, you have to make a living so that you can put food on the table and have a roof over your head. So, the entire six months I student taught, as soon as I left school, I literally put my [business omitted] clothes on in my truck and drove straight to [business omitted] and worked until 11:30 or midnight. Ethan also said, "I would just yawn all the time. I was just so tired; I could not catch a break. And even on the weekends, I didn't get Saturdays or Sundays off. I had to be at work at 5:30 in the morning.

Tasha noted,

> I had to be here all day, every day, and still have bills to pay at home. So, leaving a full-time job with no pay, and then having to go to work, and be right back here again to do it all over again… that was tough. I wish there was a way to not have it be like that.

Tasha described herself as naive. She explained that she,

> forgot that these are middle schoolers who will lie, sneak, and come up to me asking me what I think is just a random question. Then they say, "Thanks for giving me the answer to that question," on an assignment.

She often felt that her students were trying to "pull a fast one" and trick her. Ethan described himself as nervous because, "You don't want to mess up anybody's classroom. I was more nervous when I went into Ms. Clarkson's classroom, because it's a tested subject. So, if I tell the kids something wrong, I've not only messed up the kids, but I've also ruined it for her."

At the end of their first year of teaching, some identities had been reshaped. Tasha described her new teaching identity as adaptable, personable, and consistent. Ethan, however, still felt like his

PST identities. He described himself as a first-year teacher who is determined, but still scared and tired.

Through analysis of these interviews, three major themes emerged. The two participants acknowledged inconsistencies between their expressed identities and their anecdotes, explanations, and examples. The participants also acknowledged internalized feelings of infantilization, despite becoming professional educators. Finally, the participants acknowledged isolation in the school due to being new teachers, because of their grade level and team placements, and their racial identities.

Inconsistent Identities. The first major theme to emerge was the inconsistencies teachers expressed between their reconstructed identities and provided anecdotal evidence. Often participants would express a marker of their identity but negate that marker with almost opposite examples. Ethan said his most notable accomplishment was,

> being able to juggle two subjects in your first year. That may not seem like a big deal to someone who has been doing it for 20 years, but like, I really feel now that I'm fully prepared to go into the sixth grade and teach all social studies and all science.

However, when asked about his most notable struggle, he said teaching two subjects. Ethan feared that he was never on pace with others or prepared. He said,

> I would be caught up with Ms. Henry and Ms. Needle (my content partners), then I felt like I'd just fall right back behind. Obviously, it's something I'm doing, because they are able to stay on their own path. But I'm falling off my path.

Ethan prided himself on being able to teach two subjects, but when asked about the process, he provided only examples of failures. Though his perseverance is significant, he centered his achievements on failures.

Tasha described herself as "consistent." When asked to explain what she meant, she said, "It was really hard some days to come to school. But I still showed up." Tasha then shared situations when she was not consistent. She said, "There's still procedures that I want to be in place on the first day that I don't have or didn't have at the beginning of the year." Having to adjust her classroom management during the year highlighted her flexibility but marked a change in consistency. She also spoke about behavioral issues, in which a lack of consistent identity markers as a professional were influential in relationships with students. As the track coach, she said she was "too friendly with the team." She said she treated them like her sisters, and at times felt that they were too comfortable with her. Next year, she wants more unified professional behaviors with students to avoid these problems.

Tasha also said she was content with her job. However, she immediately followed that with, "I could go for some changes, but it is what it is." She was asked, "Are you content with your content (subject area)?" to which she said, "No." She also said, "I need another teammate next year. Yeah, it just didn't work." When pressed for areas of contentment, Tasha said her relationships with students were what brought her the most contentment.

Internalized Infantilization. In addition, participants expressed self-infantilization connected to their former status as a teacher intern. What is referred to as internalized infantilization is due to the frequency of the word "baby" in discussion. Often the participants used childlike language to describe themselves as PSTs and professional teachers. Tasha described her PST identity as "a deer in the headlights. I didn't know what to expect." She said, "I wasn't really familiar with being in the classroom." Her professional experience was similar. She said,

> I think I felt like a baby. I think I'm the youngest teacher in the school and I don't know. I just felt like a baby the entire year, even though everyone treated me as an equal - as a professional.

Tasha noted that her colleagues were treating her as a professional equal, yet because of her age, she still felt too young to be considered equal. Tasha was also conscious of her experiences as an intern the previous year. She remembered her successes and failures and was fearful her colleagues would also remember them. She said,

> I know that she (her former cooperating teacher) saw me teach, and she knows what that looked like. Whatever she was thinking, and I assume she was being honest when she was critiquing me on how I taught, I still feared what she wasn't saying. Maybe she was thinking, "Tasha's not gonna' make it. This is not gonna' be good for her."

In addition to the fear of what her former cooperating teacher had previously or currently thought, Tasha also noted that she would prefer for her teaching practices to remain private. She said, "I don't like people potentially having that one up on me - of knowing what I would be like as a teacher." In addition, when discussing her participation in staff meetings, Tasha struggled with the jargon of public education. She said,

> I felt very naive again. I would come into meetings and teachers would be saying, "ARCs" and "ESSR" and all the abbreviations and in my head, I was like, "I have no idea what you all are talking about." I felt that way for most of the year.

She said she would look to the faces of other new teachers and wonder, "Are you as clueless as I am, or am I even further behind?"

When asked if she felt like a professional teacher or still a student she said,

> A little bit of both. I hate when I don't know the answers to something. Students will come to me and ask me things, and I respond, "I don't know. Go ask another teacher." I sometimes still felt like a student. It was really weird adjusting to being *the* adult..the authority figure.

In these ways, Tasha retained her infantilized PST identity.

Ethan shared similar feelings of being young and inexperienced. When discussing why he doesn't participate often in discussions during staff meetings, he said, "I really think the conversations that take place at work are all about experience. The more experience you get, the more advice you can give. It's almost like until you become wise about teaching, you can't actually participate." Despite his close working relationships with his former cooperating teachers he said, "When they met me, I was a baby."

One congruent detail of significance was how Tasha and Ethan related to their fellow colleagues, both professionally and personally. In the school where this study took place, it is common for faculty to refer to one another by their first names. This cultural mark is practiced regardless of

students being present. Neither Tasha nor Ethan felt comfortable using first names for their colleagues. When asked why, Tasha explained, "They're still my elders. I was their student." When asked whether he would ever use his colleagues' first names in a private setting, Ethan said, "I'll never do it. It's disrespectful, because I had her as a cooperating teacher. It's weird, but I still view her as superior." However, when asked if he were to work at another school if he would use first names for colleagues, Ethan said yes, "because they're not seeing you as a student." Tasha and Ethan had internalized the identity of "student" during their internship, and despite a year of professional teaching, they struggled to emerged from this self-view.

Isolation. Participants noted feelings of isolation from their colleagues in connection to age/experience, racial membership, and their team placements. Tasha was critical of seeking help from her colleague, Ethan. She said, "I felt like I couldn't go to my teammate and ask for help if I needed it. Because what can he provide when he's in the same boat as I am? It's just two naive people bunched together." Despite these interviews being individual, Ethan used a similar analogy. He said, "I'm off on my own island. Me and Tasha are on our own little boat rowing against the current." He was concerned about how he connected to his colleagues at faculty meetings saying, "Me and Tasha sit together, and nobody sits with us. We just sit there with our mouths shut waiting for everyone to finish talking." This was in connection to his belief that he didn't have the experience to fully participate. He was also concerned that their placement as teammates set them apart from other grade level teams. He said, "It really feels like we're separated [from other teachers] even though we share the same team leader. Technically, we're on our team, but we're a part of the other team." In their grade level, there were two teams: one team consisted of four experienced teachers, the other team was Tasha and Ethan. Ethan was encouraged by a staff member to eat lunch with his fellow grade-level teachers to better fit in with the school culture. He said, "Mrs. Hensley wanted me to get out of my comfort zone and hang out with the other teachers more to build a better relationship. Now, I eat lunch with them, but I typically don't say a word. I just sit there and eat lunch."

Tasha felt a sense of isolation due to her race. During the first interview, she didn't speak much to racial dynamics in the school, but during the second interview she began with "and don't even get me started on being Black here." She is one of two African American teachers at the school. The rest of the faculty are White. In discussing why she felt isolated, she said, "I felt like people felt like they needed to walk on eggshells sometimes." She continued, "I felt like sometimes they really didn't know how to take me, or they were scared that they were gonna' say something that would offend me." Tasha said her racial membership kept her from genial connections with faculty. In how she related to her students, Tasha had a varied discussion. She noted "cultural shock" on the first day of school due to the predominantly White student body. She said, "The cultural shock was crazy to me. I knew that I'd be one of few Black people based on the classes I student taught last year… seeing so many blonde haired and blue eyes… I thought that was a rare thing." She also remarked that the cultural differences were notable in her lessons:

> I feel like being Black in a White school hindered me a little bit, because I would try to find things that would relate to the kids, and like I don't relate to them. We don't go home and listen to the same music. We don't even watch the same TV shows. The way I talk is different than what they're used to.

She also said, "There are phrases that are so very common in the Black community that the students don't know what I'm talking about most of the time. My kids don't know because most are not Black." This isn't to suggest that Tasha experienced isolation from all her students. She said, "I feel like I can relate a lot to the Black students. I feel like they really, really clinged to me, because they've never had through all their school years a Black teacher." Tasha recounted a story from the fall semester during a "Back to School" event. She said she had multiple parents approach her:

> They exclaimed, "Finally a Black teacher." I was really glad that I could be that Black teacher for my Black students. Honestly, people want to say so badly that race doesn't matter, color doesn't matter, but it does. It does. It sucks when there's never someone around that looks like you. I felt that in college. I feel like that at this school.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how student internship and professional teaching in the same location relate to professional teacher identity formation. In addition, we were particularly interested in how internal and external dialogue are the vehicles through which these identities are negotiated. The study's findings highlight significant areas of continuity and change between PST identities and professional teacher identities. The continued location where the participants completed their internship allowed an in-depth look at identity negotiation. As our participants renegotiated their identities, three main themes emerged: inconsistent identities, internalized infantilizations, and isolation.

The inconsistencies in our participants' identities align with the dialogical perspective on identity formation. "The sense of identity doesn't come from a single 'Me' but is embedded in a complex set of elements, and emerges from multiple experiences" (Batory, 2010, p.48). When our participants negated their descriptive identities of "content" or "fully prepared" their internal manifestations were competing. The complex dialogue between experience and the malleability of identity was externally audible. Through this process, our participants were engaging with the living voice in the act of speaking (Wegerif et al., 2023). Another central tenet of dialogism is the "immense difficulty of seeing ourselves soberly, from the outside as another person might see us" (Emerson, 2002, p.57). It is not that our participants were incorrect in their self-descriptions, but rather that their idealized selves contrasted with their lived experiences. Tasha wanted to be content in her job, but when pressed, she struggled to find areas where she felt truly content. Ethan wanted to be a teacher who could manage multiple content areas but consistently expressed his struggles.

Tasha and Ethan both called themselves babies multiple times to refer to their PST selves and their professional selves. In addition, they both acknowledged the strangeness of being "the adult" in the room. While researchers have shown that TEPs often fail to adequately prepare PSTs for this transition (Cherubini, 2009), this study brings to light how participants internalize this failure. Neither participant explicitly connected or blamed their TEP, but rather they referred to themselves as babies, deer in headlights, and children.

The isolation Tasha experienced as a Black teacher in a predominantly White institution aligns with research on teachers of color. At times, PSTs of color express a divide between their White peers (Amos, 2016). While teachers of color were only 20% of the teacher workforce in 2015, the number of Black teachers in the nation had fallen from 8% to 6.7% between 1987 and 2015 (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Tasha's expressed isolation from faculty members was that they were afraid to speak honestly and openly with her, and she connected it to her race. Tasha also felt that a cultural and linguistic divide between herself and her students impacted her instructional methods and language. However, she acknowledged the unique way in which she was able to foster warm authentic relationships with her Black students (Leverett et al., 2022).

This case study is limited in the small size and the uniqueness of the participants' placements. The placement on the same team may have contributed to a larger sense of isolation. The study is also limited by the relatively few interviews. Another limitation is the retrospective nature of the interviews. The interviews took place after the participants had finished their internships. Their understanding of their past identities had certainly been renegotiated by the time the study began.

We challenge the preconceived notion that student teaching in a school allows for ease of transition into professional work. Both participants were critical of this transition. The participants frequently explained that their student internship impacted them in continuing to feel like babies, and to feel isolated from their colleagues. More research in the transitory nature of identity from PST to professional teacher is warranted. To further this research, larger studies could incorporate participants from multiple schools and regions as reliable sources of data. In addition, we encourage TEPs to aid their graduates through pre-exit conferences and increased mentorship.

Conclusion

This study reports how new teachers renegotiated their professional teacher identities during employment in the same institution where they conducted their student teaching internships. They expressed inconsistent identities, internalized infantilization, and isolation. Contributing influences on these themes were placement on the same instructional team, fear of past mistakes being remembered by colleagues and administration, respect for colleagues, and race. While student internships are important for PSTs to develop their pedagogical foundations and network for future employment, we recommend further applied research on supporting new teachers. We also encourage school administrators to support new teachers with adequate placement and supportive mentors.

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