

The Emerging Identities of Student Teachers in Handicraft and Home Economics in Estonia

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Teacher education plays a central role in the formation of their professional identity. Although the field of teacher identity studies is broad, there has been little research on handicraft and home economics (HHE) student teachers in particular. This qualitative study, which was undertaken in an Estonian university, focuses on identity formation among five such student teachers during their first year of teacher education by applying a narrative method and thematisation to quantitatively analyse the participants' writings. Theming the data shed light on the developmental aspects of first-year learning and revealed the existence of three types of student teacher: gentle practitioner, self-developer and dewy-eyed beginner. The results demonstrate a need for flexibility in teacher education programmes, including supportive and purposeful encouragement, because of the students' varying backgrounds and experiences and the individual nature of teacher identity formation.

KEYWORDS: STUDENT TEACHER IDENTITY; TEACHER STUDIES; HANDICRAFT; HOME ECONOMICS

Introduction

Becoming a teacher is not only a matter of education; many societal factors affect the general perception and prestige of the profession (Bergmark et al., 2018), and these same factors influence a potential candidate's decision to enter teacher education. Once enrolled, the programme's efficacy in shaping students' identities as teachers so that they satisfy the demands of the relevant educational system becomes a key issue. Because the process of becoming and being a teacher is significant, identity studies have come to represent an extensively researched area in the field of teacher education (Izadinia, 2013). Knowing more about how teachers' identities are formed and the various factors that influence this during initial teacher education will enhance understanding of the process of becoming a teacher.

The identity development of class (Anspal et al., 2012), music (Ballantyne et al., 2012) and many other types of teacher (Ballantyne & Grootenboer, 2012; Hall, 2010) has been explored, but studies on prospective teachers in home economics or crafts are less common. The present study therefore focuses on student teachers of handicraft and home economics (HHE) which is taught as one subject in Estonian schools. With an awareness that context influences identity development (Flores & Day, 2006), the aim is to expand general understanding about identity formation among student teachers in different subject areas. This information will be valuable for the development of effective teacher education programmes, specifically for supporting student teachers throughout their educational journey (Estola, 2003) and for planning more fluent learning paths for them (Ahonen et al., 2015). To reveal how Estonian student HHE teachers form different identities, this study analyses their own writing by using narrative methodology (Clandinin & Caine, 2008) to collect their stories and interpret their personal experiences of the first year of the two-year master's programme.

The Formation of Identity in Teaching

Becoming a teacher requires developing at both the personal and the professional level (Meijer et al., 2011), and this development can be seen as the formation of identity as a teacher. A review of identity studies among Dutch teachers by Beijaard et al. (2004) reveals the complexity of the concept and identifies four vital features of professional identity development in teaching:

1. It is a dynamic and ongoing process. In addition, Walkington (2005) highlights the dynamic nature of student teacher identity through the continuous formation and reformation of beliefs about teaching and being a teacher. Bullough (2008) states that students' personally and culturally embedded self-conceptions are resistant to change, as change requires self-study, which is why teacher education must be "long and intense" (p. 229).
2. It implies both person and context. One side of identity formation among student teachers is personal; it relates to an individual's own experience of learning and the meanings they create through the education process (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Flores & Day, 2006). The other side is a socially constructed negotiation of the meanings (Wenger, 1998) that are contextually situated and only understandable in that context. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) further suggest that community heavily impacts new teachers whose identities are relatively tentative.
3. It is formed of various sub-identities, as related to these different contexts and relationships (Beijaard et al., 2004). During their studies, student teachers are often facing dilemmas, tensions and struggles between what they desire and what is possible in reality (Beijaard et al., 2004; Pillen et al., 2013; Rogers, 2011). For example, in addition to the general context of teaching in the outside world, common media portrayals of teachers can also influence how they perceive their identity (Estola, 2003).
4. It is related to agency. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) define agency in teaching as directed work-related phenomena in which a teacher exerts influence, makes choices or takes a stance in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identity. In teacher education, agency can be developed during teaching practice in schools.

Adding to the studies that emphasise contextual factors, Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) draw on research that shows that the choice of subject may also affect identity since some disciplines have particular teaching cultures. In some humanities, such as art or music, the dilemma of being both artist and teacher is also present (Ballantyne & Grootenboer, 2012; Hall, 2010).

It has been widely established that HHE teachers should emphasise a broader understanding of the subject rather than having a narrow focus on practical skills such as cooking and sewing (Paas & Palojoki, 2019; Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008; Hjalmskog, 2013). In Estonia, HHE is firmly rooted in history and tradition. Although the aims of the subject have evolved in line with societal and curricular changes, there is a great deal of work to do in terms of gaining general acknowledgement of HHE's importance (Paas & Palojoki, 2019). Discussions about the status of these subjects have occurred in other countries (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008; McGregor, 2010; Owen-Jackson & Fasciato, 2012), and these debates may themselves influence a student teacher's emerging professional identity given its connection to social context and relationships.

The Challenges of Teacher Education in Estonia

Educational systems in many countries, including Estonia, are struggling with ageing teaching staff and a shortage of young teachers. There are many reasons for this, including the diminished prestige of the teaching profession and its low income compared to other intellectual disciplines (Keskula & Loogma, 2017).

Teachers' education is also relevant to this situation since the qualification status of those already working in teaching is critically important to educating new teachers. Student teachers acquire their experience and understanding of the subject from being involved in everyday school life and will work with qualified teachers as their supervisors during practical modules. This role of supervisor during training is therefore significant in supporting the formation of the student teacher's professional identity.

At the moment the most common way of becoming an HHE teacher in Estonia is to complete training at a teacher education institution, following either the integrated/concurrent or the consecutive model (Sarv, 2014). In the consecutive model, students complete a two-year teacher-training master's course after obtaining a BA in their subject specialisation. After completing their subject degree, therefore, graduates could enter professions or subjects other than teacher education. This also means that some student teachers complete their subject studies without a teaching career in mind (Löfström et al., 2010). One consequent challenge is how to lock promising candidates into teaching earlier and to provide them experience of teaching practice.

A range of backgrounds can be seen among entrants to HHE teacher education. Owen-Jackson and Fasciato (2012) investigate student teachers in design and technology, which covers HHE subjects, in England and find young, freshly graduated students as well as experienced professionals of other fields beginning their postgraduate training having already achieved partly relevant subject expertise. Likewise, incoming Finnish student teachers in home economics have been found to be heterogeneous in terms of age and other background factors, for example vocational education as a cook (Soljanto & Palojoki, 2017). Changes in the age of student teachers can also be seen in the current statistics, In Estonia, those who complete teacher education are, on average, slightly over 30 years old (Selliöv & Vaheer, 2018). This heterogeneity forms a challenge for teacher educators since they have to recognise and acknowledge the various backgrounds of student teachers in order to support their process of becoming a teacher.

Research Questions

The research questions that this study aims to address are as follows:

- What experiences of identity formation do Estonian student HHE teachers have during the first year of their teacher education?
- What kinds of identities emerge in these stories of becoming a teacher?

The study was conducted in an Estonian university where teacher education is a main area of both research and teaching. We focus on first-year master's student HHE teachers.

Methodology

Narrative research in teacher education

The use of narrative research in education studies has been expanding since the late 1980s (Clandinin, 2016; Elliott, 2005). Cortazzi and Jin (2006) note the importance of narrative approaches for four core reasons: First, it focuses qualitatively on participant experience and the meanings they give to it. Next, a narrative perspective is concerned with representation and voice, and, third, it is characterised by an emphasis on both personal and professional qualities. Finally, it allows the research activity itself to be explored as a story (pp. 27-29).

More specifically, according to Clandinin (2016), narrative enquiry relies on a Deweyan view of personal experience grounded by two criteria, namely interaction and continuity. It is able to connect to the research space through dimensions of temporality, place and sociality (Clandinin, 2016; Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Moreover, the meaning of an experience is never detached from the environment in which the individual acts; as Chase (2005) states, experiences are socially constructed forms of action. Since teaching is a highly contextualised social practice (Battey & Franke, 2008), the process of becoming a teacher involves feeling connected to the teaching community of practice and becoming part of it (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The process of learning is also about becoming a certain kind of person, of forming an identity (Wenger, 1998).

In terms of representation, the narratives that are collected as research data focus on the experiences of certain groups, often minorities, whose voices might otherwise be unheard (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). Narratives in teacher education research can therefore be said to represent different levels of experience, such as in initial teacher education, to pay attention to both the individuals and the group to hear their personal stories about their studies and lives (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007; Schultz & Ravitch, 2013).

The third reason for the importance of narrative research relates to the personal and professional qualities it can reveal that other methodologies may fail to emphasise (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). Learning processes of becoming a teacher are fundamentally nonlinear and unpredictable, and a narrative approach can provide more possibilities to understand the importance of subjective meaning making of social influences during teacher education (Bold, 2012).

Lastly, narrative research enables investigators to present their studies as stories. In teacher education specifically, stories of becoming (Blair, 2013; Estola, 2003) and being a teacher (Anspal et al., 2012; Søreide, 2006) are a useful means of representing participant experiences in a coherent and meaningful way. In our study, a narrative methodology is appropriate to acknowledging the individual experience and meaning of becoming a teacher and enables a deeper understanding of the relationship between personal perspective and social context.

Participants

All first-year students in HHE teacher education at the time of data collection were asked to participate in the study ($n = 7$). They had previously graduated from the HHE undergraduate degree at the same institution but not in the same year. This group had recently completed their first year of the master's course in which the emphasis is on pedagogical approaches, subject didactics and observing classroom practices through short school visits. During these school visits (six days per autumn and spring term) student teachers are also in front of the classroom to some extent, although not taking the entire responsibility of a teacher.

Participants varied in age from their early 20s to nearly 60. Most had earned a different degree or gained work experience in another professional field before beginning their HHE subject studies; only one had entered university directly from high school. There were two working teachers in the group, one with over 20 years of experience. This created a remarkably diverse backdrop for studying the emergence of teacher identities that would enrich the research data with a range of perspectives reflecting these different individual experiences.

Ethical issues

The first author held a dual role as both lecturer and researcher, conducting studies with participants who were also students and supervisees. It was therefore essential to address the particular ethical issues that could arise. To minimise the influence of the teacher-student power relationship, participation in the study was voluntary, and those who chose to participate were given no special reward. Guidelines from the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019) were followed throughout the process. Information about the study was provided openly, and matters of anonymity, confidentiality and written informed consent were addressed explicitly to reduce any possible misunderstanding. The student teachers agreed freely to participate in the study and were aware of their right to withdraw at any time.

Data collection

The data for this study was the participants' stories of being first-year students on the HHE teacher education programme. To guide them, eight prompts were provided: How would you describe yourself at the beginning of your studies and now? What has changed? What was your view of being an HHE teacher before your studies? What is your understanding of being an HHE teacher now? What important moments in the first year most changed/supported your understanding of being a teacher? How do you imagine next year? Where do you want to develop as a subject teacher? Describe what you need to study further as a teacher and why these areas are important to you.

Participants received these guiding questions via email in June 2018 and five of the seven student teachers submitted their stories (Table 1; not their real names). Those who withdrew participation did so for personal reasons, including maternity leave and a lack of time to make substantial contributions. The final age distribution therefore shifted to between 20s and 40s as the most experienced teacher withdrew.

Table 1 Participant Description

Participant	Age (years)	Background experience
Anneli	42	Working teacher
Kadri	44	No teaching experience
Piret	42	Short-term substitute teaching experience
Triin	38	Past teaching experience; currently not working as a teacher
Maria	23	Directly from high school, no teaching experience

Data analysis

The stories or *field texts* collected represent the participants' reflective understanding and need to be understood as describing the relationships between different aspects of their experience (Clandinin, 2016). Data was entered in Atlas.ti (Version 8) software to identify common thematic elements across participants and the reported events (Riessman, 2006).

The stories were recorded in Estonian, and so the first author handled the initial reading, coding and categorising (Friese, 2016). It was then necessary to translate the data into English, ensuring that nuances of expression were maintained, to facilitate further analysis and discussion of the themes with the co-author. The thematisation was aimed at capturing the meanings behind the codes in each of the categories designating the challenges of becoming a teacher.

Besides these categories and themes, a typology of narratives was created (Riessman, 2006). Initially, this involved creating a condensed coherent story for each participant and devising a descriptive name for it. If similarities were perceived in three or more stories, these were combined into one "type". Established types differed greatly in terms of previous experience. This is how three narrative types were formed, in which one varied more significantly from the other two. It comprised writings from student teachers, who shared a love of handicraft and self-development, and had already studied and worked in another area, with one also having a short period of teaching experience in a different subject.

The stories contributed by the participants enabled a narrative description of several discernible identities in first-year student HHE teachers. To verify the story types, they were shared and discussed with the participants, and approval was received (Clandinin & Caine, 2008).

Results

Experiences of becoming a teacher

The participants' narrated experiences of their first year of teacher education capture the process of becoming a teacher. Their reflections on the personal changes they perceived are highly individual in light of their varied backgrounds and experiences as former school and university students, as mothers and, in one case, as a working teacher.

Studying teacher education was generally perceived as an opportunity for personal development and reflection. Participants recognised self-awareness during their studies:

There was a lot of looking inside yourself, self-analysis and self-discovery. In everyday life, we do not do this very often, so I am pleased that we were forced to do so (Kadri).

During such self-discovery, several of the student teachers described nuanced possible futures; different feelings, such as confusion and concern about content or pedagogical knowledge, emerged in their reflections on being a teacher or student practitioner during their studies:

I am not as competent as I should be (Kadri)

Feeling insecure in front of the class (Piret)

and

I need to work with professional language (Piret)

are just some examples. All participant stories shared the idea “I have lot to learn about teaching”.

The first year of teacher education provided the participants with opportunities to become aware of the complexity of the teaching profession and associated activities. Their visions of a teacher’s role expanded with reference to various aspects, including lesson planning, student motivation, availability of resources and taking responsibility as a teacher.

Now I can see that the handicraft and home economics teacher has a lot of freedom, but also more responsibility, more choices, but also the boundaries set by the economic situation of the school. (Triin)

The most altered area of understanding was around the nature of HHE as a subject. By comparing the contemporary version of HHE they encountered in their first year with their previous school experience of it, participants became aware of its broadened content and shift in emphasis from thematic teaching to learning outcomes. For example:

In contrast to my personal school experience when only the subject content was important ... for example, home economics meant just cooking, or at least I understood it that way. (Piret)

They noticed that this change of focus creates a contradiction as teachers in HHE have to constantly justify the importance of the subject to “outsiders”, including parents and students, to be recognised and valued.

Narrative typology

The stories written by the student teachers revealed three types of identity after their first year of teacher studies, namely the gentle practitioner, self-developer and dewy-eyed beginner. These types were derived from the participants’ experiences, but they do not correspond to any of the individuals; these descriptive names are metaphors, for example, “dewy-eyed” reflects the inexperienced student.

The gentle practitioner

The working teacher in this study is represented by the gentle practitioner; her love of making things and cooking attracted her to teaching HHE several years ago. The gentle practitioner strives to learn and gain experience that is relevant to her work. As an educator, she seeks answers to questions relating to daily school life, such as how to motivate her students and help them master different skills. During her time in education, she has noticed that the role of subject teacher has changed and become more complex, and she is often required to justify the need for HHE, especially to parents.

She is particularly gentle and caring, perhaps even too much so. She is aware of the importance of self-assertion, but managing the intense first year of the master’s and balancing her personal life, work and studies has caused significant stress.

I just wanted to learn and gain new knowledge and experience. Of course, I overestimated my abilities. In the last three years, I have lived beyond my physical and mental resources. Continuous stress, fatigue and apathy have made my studies difficult. (Anneli)

The gentle practitioner aims to finish her studies and acquire qualification so that she can continue working in schools.

The self-developer

The self-developer (narrative compiled from three writings) focuses on handicrafts and learned about home economics during bachelor studies. At first, she did not intend to become a teacher, but the influence of others led her to teaching; it was not her dream but was somewhere in the back of her mind. For the self-developer, learning is a goal-oriented activity that involves self-discovery and continuous self-analysis. She is particularly self-aware in the process of becoming a teacher, but she knows this awareness needs time and experience. The following three excerpts demonstrate this awareness.

It’s probably the feeling that the more you know, the more you realise how little you actually know. (Kadri)

These are the moments when I realise that I don't know anything about being a teacher and there is still a lot to learn. (Piret)

I can't be someone I am not, but I still don't know exactly who I am. (Triin)

A self-developer is critical of herself and wants to give her best. For this reason, concerns arise about being incompetent, inadequate, soft and insecure. Nevertheless, she notices opportunities for additional learning.

This academic year has completely changed her understanding of the subject and of teaching. Her initial understanding was based on her own school experiences and on those of her children. She values the potential and creativity of the subject but feels that the freedom a teacher has can itself be a challenge with responsibilities.

Dewy-eyed beginner

The dewy-eyed beginner represents the youngest student teacher in this study. She was doubtful about continuing at the master's level and indecisive about her choice of subject. Being inexperienced, she believes acquired knowledge will be necessary in the future but is less so at the present time.

The dewy-eyed beginner wants to become a teacher because it involves continuous learning and self-development. However, she is currently unaware of her specific needs or the so-called holes in her development as a teacher because she has no practical experience in front of a class. A bowl metaphor was used to describe the beginner's experience of the first year:

At the moment, I feel like a bowl in which all the necessary components have been put and are waiting to be mixed. And after tasting, you will understand what is missing. (Maria)

The master's had, however, already expanded her understanding of the nature of the subject teacher:

I thought before that a handicraft and home economics teacher doesn't have a lot of homework (to control students' writings, etc.). But when I started learning [in the master's programme], it turned out that it is the same amount [as other teachers], if not more. (Maria)

Discussion

The results of this study outline the experiences of student HHE teachers in their first year of teacher education in an Estonian university. In this first year, the emphasis is on theoretical studies that are intended to prepare students for independent practical experience in the next academic year. They can also be seen to have begun developing as teachers and their perception of subject teaching evolves through short visits to schools. Similarly, Anspal et al. (2012) describe how first-year teaching students explore their motives for becoming teachers and relate them to previous school experiences as well as their perceptions of the different roles and competencies associated with the teaching profession. Their work also emphasises the positive but somewhat naïve perspective of beginners which the present study also identified in the insecurity of the youngest participant.

There is a need to understand the variety of adult learners to better meet their needs (Barnett, 2013), and the three types of emergent identity that unfold in the participants' stories reflect the differing needs of student HHE teachers in Estonia. In particular, the narrative of the gentle practitioner conveys a preference for practical knowledge and skills to manage everyday teaching; the self-developer wants to reflect on personal growth and engage deeply with her studies to acquire experience; and the dewy-eyed beginner aims to capture an overall impression of herself in relation to learning and teaching. Furthermore, the metaphor of the bowl, in which learned pieces of information are ingredients waiting to be mixed, provides a pictorial view of a young student teacher who has encountered a broad area of pedagogical studies and finds herself confused. These three narratives demonstrate the complexity of becoming a teacher in the formation of understanding about the self and the profession (Walkington, 2005); the interrelation of what one says, does and how one relates to others (Kemmis et al., 2014).

Our findings support the concept that identity is formed by attributing meaning to personal experiences of learning (Flores & Day, 2006) and under the influence of context (Lave & Wenger,

1991) which, in this case, is teacher education and short school visits. The three types of teaching student described show three different paths to becoming an HHE teacher in this setting. As Izadinia (2013) argues, teacher education programmes should recognise the prior experience and learning of the students and give them a voice in the training process. It is particularly important in our subject area to acknowledge the differences in student background to provide individually meaningful tools (such as digital or handwritten diaries) that support the development of professional teacher identity.

While Estonian student HHE teachers may come from many areas related to textiles or food, their readiness and motivation to acquire the content knowledge that a subject teacher needs are explored during the application process (Paas, 2015). This study focuses on the first of two years of master's study and provides identity paths based on those early experiences of the student teachers. However, the nature of identity development is dynamic and perceptions about teaching are likely to form and be reformed throughout the education process (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Moreover, identity is a negotiated experience and a learning trajectory (Wenger, 1998) which in this context means learning to build an identity as a teacher. These initial experiences are important for continuing the teacher studies and for self-discovery about one's abilities and potential challenges in the specific subject. However, we should also be aware that student HHE teachers' perceptions of the subject are also likely to have been influenced by their own school teachers (Dewhurst & Pendergast, 2008).

Having engaged first-year students in this study, we may reasonably predict that they will make deeper discoveries about themselves and teaching as they progress through further phases of their studies, and that this will contribute to their ongoing identity development. Additionally, Walkington (2005) indicates that observational visits to schools give student teachers significant insight into how much work teachers do and how much management and preparation occur outside of the classroom, especially in practical subjects such as HHE. Through this, early, idealistic views of teaching are replaced with more realistic comprehension (Anspal et al., 2012).

These student teachers' first-year experiences are at the very beginning of their identity development, and the teaching experience they will gain in the subsequent year will be crucial for them to confirm or challenge their developing identities in real school context (Ballantyne et al., 2012). Therefore, there is a need for further research to explore how second-year experiences affect the student teachers' expectations of the profession and how their ideas about the nature of HHE will correspond with a real school environment.

This study indicates how the background heterogeneity of student teachers creates different starting positions in their pedagogical studies, as we have shown in our results. These differences require teacher education to be adequately flexible to serve various types of student in supportive and purposeful ways and to meet the learning needs of all students (Barnett, 2013). Flexibility can be achieved by taking account each student teacher's educational and work experience by planning individual learning paths for those who are working in the school while they are studying, and for those who have freshly started their teacher education. Applying digital technology and blended learning can be good tools for achieving this (Jonker et al., 2020).

The first year of teacher training challenges a student's capacity for self-management, develops their understanding of themselves and expands their comprehension of the teaching profession and their subject. They are required to reconcile sometimes conflicting knowledge from their past experiences, for example what they learned at university, with what they observe in school visits. Each student teacher carries their past experiences throughout their studies, and this will influence their learning trajectory, the following year's teaching practice and their future career as a teacher.

However, it is important to bear in mind the possible limitations of the study. Using stories as representing the student teachers' experiences may itself be a limitation given that this retrospective view relied on their ability to remember activities and feelings over the course of the year. To mitigate this, guiding questions were applied to concentrate on particular aspects of their past experiences and future perspectives. Nevertheless, such narratives are dependent on the context of both storyteller (student teacher) and audience (researcher) and are not intended to represent truth but "how experience is endowed with meaning" (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 165). As a consequence, the results of this study are not representative of or generalisable to all students in this subject area. Another limitation is the size of the group which was determined by the low number of student HHE teachers in their first year of study at this particular university and their voluntary participation.

Conclusion

Though based on a small student group, we conclude that teacher education should be more responsive to the development of teacher identities by acknowledging students' previous experiences. Instead of converging all forms of teacher education, there should be more individualised paths that allow divergence at a systemic level. Although the structure of teacher education in Estonia is unlikely to change anytime soon, we should nevertheless work to find the most effective ways of preparing new teachers through the acquisition of necessary competencies during their two years of study.

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