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Pre-service teachers looking for their professional identity

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Abstract

In the context of world dynamic, deep changes proposed by the new educational policy, becoming a teacher is an act of courage. Some of our previous studies have analysed the values that aimed teachers from different generations. Present study was interested to focus to the process of becoming teacher, building professional identity for his profession during educational path. For this purpose, we have analysed the way that our students, pre-service teachers (for preschool and primary school children), have chosen their educational (and professional) path, which were significant persons that have influenced their development and what aimed them for teacher career choose and if (and how) they have developed during studies their professional (pre)identity. Other results are also discussed.

Keywords: (pre-service) teacher; professional identity; connect

1. Interconnection and professional identity. Conceptual delimitations

Contemporary world is dynamic and often, lately, chaotic. In addition, people are interconnected, being linked with unseen ropes. Therefore, it is easy to understand that world dynamic has effects on everybody and everything.

There are big and obvious changes in contemporary world; and there are minor changes – but these changes, in time, will reveal possible big effects. For example, world wars have produced unimaginable changes to the whole world; and even are localised in a specific area, we can see that wars affect a spread area of population. The extension of women engagement has irremediable affected families' lives – couples' lives and children's lives until today.

We are living today as a huge network where people are irremediable interconnected. Information is not an issue anymore; internet facilitated information transmission with an unimaginable speed and almost everywhere. People could meet people and stay connected with beloved ones even if distances between them are infinite.

In this world, children, Z generation / "hic et nunc" generation[1], born between 1995 and 2015, are aware of these connections, of global problems (war, terrorism, organised crime etc.) and become more socially responsible, accepting social, religious, cultural etc. diversity.

They are (or should be) prepared to become systemic citizen[2] and understand *systemic citizenship* (that is not the equivalent of losing national identity but understanding that their actions have effects on entire world, smaller or bigger, sooner or later).

Moreover, since their early childhood are living with the feeling of "together", happy to work as a team, flexible, with a higher level of self-esteem and still superficial, and egocentric.[3] School organization offer the opportunity (or the challenge) to work with / near persons from different generations, with different learning and working styles, born and raised in different worlds, with different social and communication abilities, attitudes to work, to families and balance between work and personal life.

Working groups could be more productive than individuals. The group develops important collective values (like cooperation, belonging etc.), motivate the members and offer them security.[4]

In addition, before that teacher have the opportunity to work in a teachers' team, as a part of a school organization, they need guidance to develop their professional pre-identity through pedagogical practice, by practical exercise, and reflection.

Professional identity of teachers "is a key driver which could affect how primary and secondary teachers teach, how they develop professionally and how they approach educational changes (Cardelle-Elawar, Irwin & Sanz de Acedo Lizarraga, 2007; Cheung, 2008; Day, 2002; Young & Erickson, 2011)".[5]

Building professional identity for future teachers are not an easy process, and more, is important that policy makers to be aware of the importance of this *professional pre-identity* that is vital for debutant teachers. Profession identity construction for teachers[6] is a dynamic process; *reflexivity* (and the reflexive practice) is important for current decisions of teachers during their activity.

Other specialists were interested to analyse the process of professional identity of future teachers. Their analysis yielded following conclusions:

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[1] Elena Bonchiș (coord), *Generația Z (Z Generation)*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2021, p. 70.
[2] Peter Senge (coord.), *Școli care învață. A cincea disciplină aplicată în educație (The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization)*, Editura Trei, București, 2016, p. 498.
[3] Elena Bonchiș (coord), *op.cit.*, p. 71.
[4] Petru Vîrgă, *Solidaritatea în organizați (Solidarity inside Organizations)*. În: Eugen Avram, Cary Cooper (coord.), Psihologie organizațional – managerială. Tendințe actuale, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2008, p. 425, 426.
[5] Lee Ai Noi, David Kwok, Karen Goh, *Assessing Teachers' Professional Identity in a Postsecondary Institution in Singapore***,** The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education - October 2016 Volume 6, Issue 4, p. 38, https://www.tojned.net/journals/tojned/articles/v06i04/v06i04-04.pdf, accessed in May 2021.
[6] Emil Păun, *Pedagogie. Provocări și dileme privind școala și profesia didactică (Pedagogy. Challenges and Dilemmas about School and Teaching Profession)*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2017, p. 143.

i) The process of teachers' professional identity construction is based on comparing and contrasting different experiences and culminates in the construction of new identity positions;

ii) this process must involve experiences that call into question existing meanings of self;

iii) future teachers must engage in productive dialogue with other significant actors in order to identify and recognize the value of certain positional objects; and

iv) certain subjective learning experiences have a greater impact on the reconstruction of identity positions."[7]

So, we are aware that building professional identity is a continuous process based on the experiences, observation and reflection about our internal changes.

In this context, we were interested to continue previous works considering the profile of our candidates for teaching profession and their becoming during university studies. Therefore, we have found that Z generation candidates for teacher profession (kindergarten and primary school) have a high level of self-esteem than the candidates from Y generation[8]. In addition, considering the reasons for choosing teaching career, we have found differences between teachers born in 40s-50s and those born in 70's. So, teachers with more than 30 years' experience invoked as main reasons their aim for a higher social status, a high mission, family (make them proud and helping to gain a better social image in the community). Instead, teachers with less than 30 years' experience mentioned as reasons their family model, and the challenge of working with children (the energy that kids offer).[9]

Present study intends to analyse the evolution of our students (future teachers) internal change as an effect of their mental and practice experiences.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Purpose of Study

Sometimes, the process of building professional (pre-)identity could be facilitated by the opportunity to be close to a professional model; so, building professional identity for future teachers could be easier for those students (future teachers) that have met in their families' professional models that influenced their choices. It could be easier to understand the teaching profession "backstage" by living side by side with a professional teacher. We aim to identify if (and how) our students have been influenced by family models (that are professionals in didactic field) or other significant adults to choose this educational and professional path, how they relates to the teaching

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[7] Jorge Chavez Rojas, Jaime Faure Ñiñoles, Juan Pablo Barril Madrid, The construction of teachers' professional identity: An analysis of subjective learning experiences, *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 2021, DOI: 10.1080/02619768.2021.1905627.

[8] Alina Mărgărițoiu, Simona Eftimie, *The Effects of Self-Valorisation Culture on Z Generation' Self-Esteem*, In: Jus et civitas, 2/2021, pp. 83-91.

[9] Simona Eftimie, Alina Mărgărițoiu, *Social factors with influence on teachers' educational path*. In: Vasile, Cristian (coord), Education and Psychology Challenges, TKS Conference volume, Petroleum – Gas University of Ploiesti Publishing House, 2019, pp. 24-31.

profession, and how their training as students in primary and preschool education specialisation have developed their professional pre-identity during studies in university.

Objective 1: to identify the path of their education / career choose (background of their education, significant persons that have inspired them choosing didactic career, moment of decision etc.);

Objective 2: to found out if our subjects have mentioned in their journals / self-descriptions their new social position (teacher) / experiences that have changed them as a sign of their (new) assumed identity;

Objective 3: to analyse their reasons for choosing this specialisation (teacher for primary and preschool children).

2.2. Participants, procedure and methods

We have designed our study as a qualitative one, our focus being on analysing the content of documents (self-characterization, journals, and social-biography) produced by our students from preschool and primary school teaching specialization during seminar activities.

A limit of our study was that our sample was not a representative one, but a spontaneous group of future teachers, students in their final year as students for licence in education sciences (primary and preschool teaching level specialization). The subjects involved in our study were 62 students, all women, aged between 20 and 41 years old, which are living (and some of them working) both in urban (39 subjects) and rural area (23 subjects). We have to mention that, considering the exclusive representation of feminine gender, another limit of our study is the absence of male perspective considering the issues approached.

3. Research data

Considering the objectives of our study, here are some of the main results about professional identity of our students, future teachers.

Objective 1 was to identify the path of their education / career choose (background of their education, significant persons that have inspired them choosing didactic career, moment of decision etc.).

An interesting result was that almost all our subjects have been graduated a high school with *theoretical or vocational profile* (technologic, economic, administrative, philological etc. - and that is not linked with education field); only one subject has graduated pedagogic studies during high school.

As we could expect, subjects with ages between 26 and 41 years old have larger experience – they have graduated another profile in university or have established other priorities (founded their own families and / or getting engaged) and discovered / postponed their need to complete their education later and fulfil their dream of becoming teacher.

The most significant persons that have been mentioned as support / inspiring models for their education were family members (parents, grandparents), then teachers (primary and preschool teachers and secondary school teachers).

Objective 2 was to found out if our subjects have mentioned in their journals / self-descriptions their new social position (teacher) / experiences that have changed them as a sign of their (new) assumed identity.

Surprisingly, we have noticed an interesting result about this issue. We have analysed the differences between subjects aged between 20 and 25 years old (considering that category as less mature, with less experiences in assuming a job or a family responsibility) and those aged between 26 and 41 years old (most of them being already licenced in another specialization, married / with children).

So, we have found that 2/3 (26 of 40) of our younger subjects (aged between 20 and 25 years old) have the tendency to relate in their journals / self-characterizations / social biographies experiences that are not connected with teacher profession or their education in faculty. This situation indicate to us that they have not developed their professional pre-identity as we could have expected. Their notes were mostly about their childhood and relations with parents and less recent experiences that could made them reflexive about their new competences, new professional relations / communities that could indicate us signs of their professional pre-identity.

Instead, almost 2/3 (13 of 22) of older subjects (aged between 26 and 41 years old) have insisted in their documents on descriptions of their experiences in working with (their own) children, their positive experiences with their teachers that have inspired then in choosing this profession. Here are some testimonials from their journals:

- "This specialization helped me more to discover and develop myself. Now I feel that I am on my way that fulfil me." (student, 38 years old, married, with two children)
- "After graduation (my first specialization has been management, because I didn't believe that I could pass the exam for admittance to education sciences – this was an unhappy choose that demonstrated me that I haven't appreciated myself, my intellectual capacities), I have been working as assistant manager, and then I immigrated to Spain. When I turned 35, I have decided to return to Romania and fulfil my dream to become primary school teacher. I am still fighting for my dream but I have learned not to quit." (student, 38 years old, divorced).

Objective 3 was to analyse their reasons for choosing this specialisation (teacher for primary and preschool children).

The most frequent mentioned reason was their *love for (working with) children*: "I always wanted to work with children, since childhood." (student, 23 years old, rural area)

We also found out that some of our subjects have had *previous experiences as preschool / primary teacher (engaged / voluntarily or randomly)* and these experiences motivated them to want to be obtain a certification in this field:

- "My love for pupils, for education, for teaching profession come from my happy childhood, full of smiles and also from my voluntary activities with children." (student, 23 years old, rural area, married);

- "I have the opportunity to work with children and I have realized that is so beautiful to be surrounded by so many sincere and full of love souls." (student, 28 years old, urban area, primary school teacher is her second specialization);
- "I was student in Bucharest – Philological specialization - Romanian – French. One day, a friend invited me to assist her to an activity in primary school. It was difficult for me to admit that my choice was wrong, but I found the power to give up and start a new stage." (student, 21 years old, urban area).

Another reason for choosing to become a teacher was *following models* of professionals from their lives. Here are some testimonials from our subjects' journals:

- "I love children, I love this profession, I always wanted to be like my preschool and primary teachers." (student, 21 years old, rural area);
- "When I met my former primary school teacher, my soul is smiling of joy." (student, 26 years old, urban area);
- "She (my primary school teacher) helped me in the most difficult times of my life when I was sick (…). I am sure that I owe her my wish to become a teacher." (student, 27 years old, rural area, primary school teacher is her second specialization)

Another motivation for some students is *assuming a mission / a social responsibility* by becoming a professional in education field: "I want to become a primary school teacher, to do my job as good as I can, to be another kind of teacher, a modern one, dedicated to my mission." (student, 21 years old, urban area)

In addition, we have identified some unsatisfied social needs to our students; because of their poor conditions as children, they have mentioned their *motivation to show gratitude to parents / to become "somebody"*:

- "I want to become a teacher to reward my parents." (student, 21 years old, urban area);
- "I have a passion for education and I want a career in a respectable field and becoming a professional in education." (student, 23 years old, urban area);
- "We were poor, but eager to learn; since childhood, I have promised to myself to learn and become somebody, to demonstrate that we (me and my brothers) could become somebody in this life." (student, 21 years old, rural area).

Therefore, we could notice an interesting profile of our pre-service teachers: their educational / professional path was mostly a dream, a childhood wish and not especially orientated to a teacher profession, most of them have a social motivation for their choice (love for working with children / assuming a social responsibility / overcoming their social status / making their parents proud of them). In addition, it is interesting (and alarming for us) that most of them do not mentioned their status as students in education sciences and pre-service teachers and focus in their descriptions on their social relations with families or on their experiences as pupils and not as pre-service teachers. In addition, none of our subjects has mentioned their status as part of a professional community (their teachers, mentors, colleagues etc.). These observations could indicate a low level of pre-identity of our subjects' new professional status.

4. Research conclusions

Career change starts with internal change, considers Herminia Ibarra[10]. Therefore, this idea is applicable for teaching career, too. From our analysis, results that most of our subjects have chosen their educational / professional path without previous sustained reflection and most of them do not mentioned in their descriptions significant internal changes because of their classes and experiences. A possible explanation of this result could be the fact that the duration of faculty (3 years of studies) is too short for expected personal changes or for the internalization of knowledge and values that would give them a professional identity in the field of education.

The most significant persons that our subjects have mentioned as support for their education were family members, then teachers. Unfortunately, today teachers seem not to have anymore the power to influence nowadays pupils' generation, as they used to do in the past; also, we could see how mass media systematically denigrate the image of today teacher.

More, as Professor Gabriel Albu noticed[11] many teachers are demotivated, because their only motivation is the security feeling that they have a job (that helps them to survive) and/or a certain feeling of power. For the most precarious and the most evident understanding, being a teacher means meeting pupils, everyday confrontation with them, teaching (what the curricula impose), examining, and evaluating pupils' performances.

But our study results indicated that our candidates and students consider teaching profession a chance for an easy access, easy to perform, a better profession, socially appreciated, that offer time both for family and profession; and most of them are not belonging to families that have members that have been practiced this profession.

In addition, we could find the difficulty and the beauty of teaching profession, the paradox/challenge of combining change and routine, teamwork and taking risks, the need for recognition and the preference for not assuming responsibility for decisions.

In conclusion, the results of our research show that:

- There is no continuity in their educational / professional path (most of them not even tried to pass the exam in order to be accepted in Pedagogic High school);
- Often choosing a faculty specialisation is randomly (*I could be accepted or not* is the main reason and not the awareness of the responsibilities / difficulties of this profession / wish to become a teacher knowing what profession involve);

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[10] Herminia, Ibarra, *Identitatea profesională. Strategii neconvenţionale pentru redefinirea carierei (Professional Identity. Unconventional Strategies for Career Redefining),* Editura Curtea Veche, Bucuresti, 2011.

[11] Albu, Gabriel, *Educația, profesorul și vremurile: eseuri de pedagogie socială (Education, Teacher and Times: Social Pedagogy Essays).* Editura Paralela 45, Pitești, 2009, p. 255

- We are surprised to notice that most of our subjects haven't mentioned (in their descriptions) experiences / evolutions / competences developed during studies / being part of a community of professionals in education field;
- We also have noticed differences between older and younger students considering their maturity about approaching / reporting to the teacher profession.

In conclusion, we consider that the development of professional pre-identity for teacher is a vital process, for a more effective integration in school organization. We recommend that high schools /universities to consider a better organization of the process of career orientation. Before choosing teaching career, we need to develop specific criteria for selecting future teachers. It is important that our candidates to experience working with children / pupils as a precondition for admittance to education sciences specialization (for example, being a bachelor from a Pedagogic High school or having experience as voluntary in institutions for education or social protection for children etc.) so that our candidates to be aware of their future specialization / profession.

More, if policies allows, we consider important increasing the duration of the licence studies. Students, future teachers, should be involved in experimental / practice activities (that facilitate real interactions with pupils / parents and school communities, helping them being reflective about their need to develop some competences and connecting them with teachers' community). Moreover, developing a community culture in the university and values would give our students a professional identity in the field of education as future teachers.

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Profesori în formare în căutarea identității lor profesionale

Rezumat

În contextul unei lumi dinamice, schimbările profunde propuse de noile politici educaționale, a deveni profesor este un act de curaj. Unele dintre studiile noastre anterioare au analizat valorile spre care au tins profesori din generații diferite. Prezentul studiu s-a focalizat pe procesul de devenire a profesorilor în formare, construirea identității lor profesionale de-a lungul parcursului lor educațional. În acest scop, am analizat felul în care studenții noștri, viitori profesori în învățământul primar și preșcolar, și-au ales parcursul educațional (și profesional), care au fost persoanele semnificative care le-au influențat dezvoltarea și ce i-a determinat să aleagă cariera de profesor și dacă (și cum) și-au dezvoltat de-a lungul studiilor (pre-)identitatea profesională. Alte rezultate sunt de asemenea discutate aici.