

Professional identity of university teachers: an overview of the current research

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Abstrakt This systematic overview study focuses on the research addressing the professional identity of university teachers in the previous decade (2010–2020). The research covers 5 studies, which were compared in terms of their focus and the variables based on which professional identity was explained, research methods, and main findings. The analysis showed that most frequently, the method of interview and “self” as an auxiliary variable were used to explain professional identity.

Klíčová slova professional identity, university teacher, professional development, andragogy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the concept of teacher’s professional identity (PI) has been receiving increased attention and became an important area of research (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Akkerman and Meijer, 2011; Beauchamp, Thomas 2009; Bullough, Baughman 1997; Korthagen, 2001; Olsen, 2008). Professional identity is an integral part of an expert’s personality and the process of identification with a profession begins when one consciously decides to pick it (Albert, Ashforth, Dutton 1999). Some research even considers this concept the key factor in the effort to understand the professional life of teachers including their career decision-making, motivation, efficiency, professional development, and attitude to the changes in education (Beijaard, Meijer, Verloop 2004; Day, Elliot, Kington 2005; Lasky, 2005).

The analysed studies have shown that strong and stable professional identity correlated not only with emotional well-being (Zembylas, 2013) but also quality of teaching (Agee, 2004; Beijaard, 2009), and even students’ academic performance (Robinson, McMillan 2006). A well-developed professional identity can increase the teachers’ belief in their career choice as well as their dedication to the job (Rots, et al. 2010).

Beijaard et al. (2004) have identified four basic aspects of PI in teachers: (1) PI is a constant process necessary for life-long learning; (2) PI involves an individual and a context – the teachers’ PI is not entirely unique – they are expected to think and behave in a professional way; (3) teachers’ PI consists of sub-identities, which

should be in a harmonious arrangement; (4) teachers’ engagement is an important PI element, i.e. they must actively work on their own professional development.

However, most of the analysed studies have only focused on primary and high school teachers. It is expected that university teachers’ PI will differ in a number of aspects, because universities and colleges require the teacher to combine multiple identities. Besides teaching, university teachers are also involved in research and take on different roles in projects, workplaces, expert groups, etc. Besides teaching, many of them work in the field. In this context, Kogan (2000) has explained that PI is an individual as well as social term; i.e. performance improves not only along with one’s expertise, moral and conceptual frameworks, but also thanks to the broad variety of tasks required by the respective communities and institutions. Therefore, the goal of this study is to map the current knowledge about university teachers’ professional identity. So far, they have been paid less attention than their counterparts working at lower levels of education.

1.1. The research problem and goal

A number of theoretical disciplines have addressed the question of teachers’ PI in terms of categories. Some researchers emphasize the social and cultural nature of identity, while others focus on its discursive and narrative aspects. However, most up-to-date approaches draw from the idea that identity is developed within a social context – it is dynamically changing rather than stable or fixed (Rodgers, Scott 2008). The consensus includes the idea that the teachers’ role becomes a part of their identity if an emotional bond is present (Akkerman, Meijer 2011). Although many authors consider university teachers’ PI an important topic, it has not yet been researched in detail. Based on the presented theoretical background, this study aims to identify recent studies focused on the topic and create an overview of their goals, research methods, and findings.

2. METHODS

In accordance with the goals, this research is of theoretical nature; it takes the form of a systematic overview study using qualitative

content analysis. The research sample consisted of studies selected based on the following criteria: (1) research (theoretical or empirical) focused on university teachers' PI; (2) the study was published during the last decade (2010–2020), i.e. current research; (3) the study was published in English (international impact).

The ScienceDirect database served as the source of material. It is a full text research database including (also) papers published in peer-reviewed journals many of which focus on social sciences. This platform was selected deliberately as the topic has not been paid much attention so far and the WOS and SCOPUS databases were expected to provide little to no material. The studies were searched for using *academic identity* as the key word.

The search based on these criteria resulted in 5 relevant studies (N=5). Their overview can be seen in Table 1, which shows their analysis in terms of focus (goals), research methods, and results.

3. RESULTS

The studies mostly shared the same goal: to investigate and analyse professional identity. Consistency can also be seen in the research method used, i.e. interview. The study by Abu-Alruza and Khasawneh (2013) was an exception as these authors aimed to create and validate a measuring instrument.

Most authors used the concept of “self” (self-image, self-knowledge, one’s own identity) to define identity. Nevgi and Lofstrom (2015) refer to Kelchtermans (2009) who has claimed that self-understanding is a product of all previous experience and thinking, and comprises five components: self-image, self-respect, task perception, work motivation, and the prospect of teachers’ future professional development.

Fitzmaurice (2013) has described how young academics develop identity – the process is influenced by their surroundings, which motivates them to achieve good results and appreciation. The interviews have indicated that it is very important for academics to become good teachers. Young academics have described interaction and discussion with students as of key importance. Therefore, it seems that young academics focus mainly on students. Vitrukh (2014) has investigated whether the teachers’ identity and outdated Soviet teaching approach have changed over time; the approach in question is teacher-focused and lacks in interaction with students who are expected to passively absorb and memorise the subject matter. This study has identified a shift and formulated three approaches, which can be summarised as subject-focused, student-focused, and “teacher as an expert”. A similar division can be found in Nevgi and Lofstrom (2015) who have categorised teachers into four groups (see Table 1). The academics who have secure positions or are making stable progress develop strong identities (groups 1 and 2). However, their respondents differed in terms of reflection type – group 1 included self-critical and reflective persons, while group 2 included persons who focused on developing a strong sense of expertise. To summarise the results, the academics whose careers steer towards development in education tend to have pragmatic opinions on the way good practice is applied in university teaching, they focus on improving the quality of university teaching on the institutional level rather than their own teaching practice (groups 3 and 4).

Abu-Alruza and Khasawneh (2013) have worked with four identity categories (own identity, skill-related identity, job-related identity, student-related identity). Their respondents have scored the lowest in the student-related identity values. Based on this,

these authors believe that faculty members should focus on developing their identity in relationship towards students, because it could help them achieve institutional success.

Dashper and Fletcher (2019) have investigated the identity of teachers teaching a new economics subject. Some respondents did not want to be referred to as “academics” – they worked in research but considered teaching the most important part of their job and perceived the term *academic* as archaic and outdated. Another group involved students who did not identify with the newly created subject but did identify with the field as such. These respondents were more inclined to the traditional approach and focused on research in their field. The last group included respondents with mixed attitudes.

To conclude, the identity characteristics in the analysed studies overlapped and it could be categorised as follows: (1) subject-focused identity; (2) student-focused identity; (3) field/research-related identity.

The results are presented in Table 1.

Author, year and methods	Research goals	Variables	Main findings
Martin Fitzmaurice 2013 interview	investigate the structure of academic identity through morals and identify how academics at the beginning of their career experience their role	moral values	At the beginning of their career, academics are influenced by their colleagues and institution. However, the identity development is significantly affected by individual values, virtues, and belief. The research has emphasized the importance of ethics and morals in young academics’ thinking and practice.
Jamal Abu-Alruza Samer Khasawneh 2013 self-designed questionnaire	create and validate a psychometrically reliable and appropriate PI measuring instrument (PIQ) to determine its level	Own identity. Skill-related identity. Job-related identity. Student-related identity.	The sample has shown high values pertaining to own identity and skill-related identity, moderate job-related identity values, and low student-related identity values.

Mariya Vitrukh 2014 interview	investigate and perform deep analysis on teachers in Ukraine	self-image, self-confidence, work motivation, task perception, prospect of professional development	3 teachers' approaches in education: 1) subject-focused, 2) student-focused, 3) "teacher as an expert".
Anne Nevgi Erika Lofstrom 2015 interview	examine how university teachers' identity develops	self-understanding, self-image, self-confidence, work motivation, task perception, prospect of professional development.	Teacher's identity: 1) self-renewing and reflective university teacher and researcher, 2) subject-oriented expert in pedagogy, 3) education innovator reflecting how university teaching can be improved, 4) education innovator focused on the research of university teaching without actually teaching.
Katherine Dashper Thomas Fletcher 2019 interview	Understanding PI teachers of specialised subjects within the new Events Management field		Three dominant narrative strategies: anti-academic, traditional academic, mixed professional

4. DISCUSSION

The number of accessible studies indicates that university teachers have been paid little attention so far. On the other hand, the studies consistently claim that well-developed and stable teacher's PI is beneficial not only for the students but also the respective institution. Many authors perceive PI as a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of experience (Beijaard et al. 2004; Kerby 1991) with the goal to answer not only the questions "Who am I right now?" but also "Who I want to become?" (Beijaard et al. 2004). It indicates that identity can be formed, improved, and developed.

Beijaard et al. (2004) analysed studies focused on teachers' PI but most of their material focused on primary and high school teachers. Upon comparison with the studies focused on university teachers, a significantly different approach to the PI concept can be seen. The studies focused on university teachers are less complex and their results often take the form of categorisations based on the respondents' practical focus (student, subject, research...). On the other hand, the research focused on teachers at lower levels of education formulate more difficult questions, e.g. they investigate whether there is an inverse correlation between PI and work satisfaction (Gaziel 1995), describe PI in teachers who work with

disabled students integrated in ordinary schools (Preuss, Hofsass 1991), or gender issues (Coldron, Smith 1999).

However, the methods used to research PI in higher vs. lower education teachers are mostly the same and interview is the most frequently used method. It may indicate that the concept is indeed multidimensional (Bačová 1998) and rather difficult to research. The studies share a similar understanding of PI as a concept as well. Most of them define PI as a constantly developing phenomenon, influenced by individual and social contexts, surroundings, students and their feedback, colleagues, institution, etc. Dashper and Fletcher (2019) have emphasized the social aspects of teachers' PI, specifically the potentially damaging social pressure. Knights and Clarke (2014) have pointed out that identity is always accompanied by doubts since it depends on judgement and validation provided by others, and it cannot be controlled or anticipated. According to Archer (2008), academics are under constant pressure to "produce" and achieve increasingly better results (e.g. more satisfied students, more publications in indexed prestigious journals), and are afraid of underperforming in some of these areas. The research focused on university teachers' PI often referred to the concept of "self", which is used as a variable to explain PI in studies focused on teachers at lower levels of education. Owens (2006) has defined "self" as a process drawing from self-reflection and identity as a tool used by individuals or groups to categorise and present themselves to the world.

It should be pointed out that the effort to improve quality of education is accompanied by significant increase in the social pressure and requirements for university teaching as a profession. Therefore, it is desirable to pay more attention to university teachers' PI – it is closely related to quality of teaching, research, and institutions.

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