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A focus on theory, measurement, and longitudinal associations

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

I WOULD not have been the person I am today without my primary school teachers. They taught me many valuable lessons during my formative years and played an important role in my career in Educational Sciences. Not only did I have the opportunity to complete my teacher training program under their supervision, they also offered me my first job as a teacher and helped me acquire a spot on the Educational Sciences graduate program. I consider myself fortunate to have had such amazing and deeply involved primary school teachers who have contributed—and continue to contribute to this day—to both my personal and professional growth.

There is little question that such high-quality teachers are the beacon lights toward which primary teacher education programs should tend. A number of researchers noted that supporting student teachers in developing a strong *teacher identity* is therefore an important avenue to consider (Beijaard, 2019; Meijer, 2014; Schutz, Hong, & Francis, 2018). Teacher identity entails what it means to be a teacher (Burke & Stets, 2009). It is linked to specific meanings and expectations for behavior that have arisen from countless interactions between human beings in a social system. Teacher identity, then, can be considered as the part of a student teacher that takes on, becomes, and preserves the role of a teacher (Burke & Stets, 2009). Teachers with a strong teacher identity have been suggested to display high-quality teaching skills and provide sufficient guidance in the socialization of children (Beijaard, 2019; Nias, 2002).

The development of a strong teacher identity may even be more urgent in light of today's educational climate of decreasing and persistent teacher retention, and pleas for quality teaching in especially urban school environments (Gaikhorst, 2014; Schutz et al., 2018). In the Netherlands, at the time of this writing at least 1,300 fulltime vacancies are open, most of which in urban contexts (Inspectie van het Onderwijs [Dutch Inspectorate of Education], 2019). Recent reports for 2028 published by the Dutch Education Union (De AOb; 2019) even prophesize that the number of unfulfilled vacancies will only increase in the years to come.

Specifically, retaining recently graduated student teachers is recognized as a serious problem (Gaikhorst, 2014). Statistics from the Dutch Department of Education (Onderwijs in cijfers [Education in figures], 2019) show that around 30 percent of this group left the profession within five years between 2012 and 2017. The literature indicates that a strong professional identity helps maintaining healthy optimism about the teaching profession and remaining in the profession longer (Nias, 2002).

One of the most prominent approaches to support teacher identity development that has been advocated in recent years is teaching student teachers how to deal with the *professional identity tensions* they experience during the process of becoming a teacher (Pillen, 2013). Professional identity tension is a feeling of conflict between one's own perceptions and understanding about teaching and education and actual practices. By reflecting on their own professional role and ideas about teaching and education, student teachers may be able to cope with professional identity tensions. Managing professional identity tensions correctly has been recognized as the key in developing a strong and stable teacher identity.

Despite the suggested link between professional identity tensions and teacher identity, caution is warranted as the field is still in the early stages of conceptually understanding and reliably and validly assessing these constructs. The field is still far removed from a clear understanding of how these two are longitudinally related to each other (Schutz et al., 2018). Appropriate quantitative instruments for measuring professional identity tensions and teacher identity are needed to further develop this field of research. Such instruments can help reveal patterns in teacher identity development in relation to professional identity tensions. Additionally, most of the research in this field has been conducted among (beginning) teachers in secondary education (Anspal, Leijen, & Löfström, 2019; Nias, 2002). Some have rightfully noted that when certain populations are underrepresented in research, inappropriate and inaccurate implications from the results are likely to be made (Stevens, 2009). A line of research that explicitly concentrates on the group of primary student teachers makes it easier for primary teacher education programs to interpret the results and, consequently, draw conclusions in light of their support of the professional development of student teachers.

Given the stage of knowledge in this area and available measurement tools at this time, the aim of this dissertation is (1) *developing reliable and valid measurement scales for teacher identity and professional identity tensions*; and (2) *producing an understanding of the development of the relationship between teacher identity and professional identity tensions across time in the context of primary teacher education*. Outcomes of this dissertation can be used by researchers and teacher

education programs. The former might use them to generate similar approaches for measuring and discussing teacher identity and professional identity tensions in contexts other than primary teacher education. The latter can, for example, use the insights from this dissertation to design more effective approaches that stimulate the professional development of their students, so that the chances that they develop healthy optimism about the teaching profession and stay in the profession longer after their graduation increase.

To better understand teacher identity and professional identity tensions, the following section of this introduction provides an overview of key concepts from identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Next, various challenges related to measuring teacher identity and professional identity tensions are discussed as well as empirical research on the relation between these two constructs. The section is closed with a description of how the different conceptual issues, measurement issues and empirical issues will be dealt with in the various studies of this thesis.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

TEACHER IDENTITY

Similar to recent research (e.g., van der Want et al., 2018), ideas from identity theory are used to understand the nature of teacher identity. Unlike other theories that have been applied to understand this elusive construct (e.g., Erikson's theory of identity; Friesen & Besley, 2013), identity theory is specifically suitable for understanding profession-related identities and explicitly supports quantitatively measuring teacher identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). Since the original work of Stryker (1968), different versions of identity theory have been discussed, each with a specific emphasis (Burke & Stets, 2009). One version (Serpe, 1987) focuses on how contexts affect an individual's identity and behavior. Whereas another version (McCall, 2003) concentrates on how identities are preserved through personal interactions. This dissertation mainly uses the ideas of identity theory of Burke and Stets (2009).

According to identity theory individuals are capable of looking at their identity as an 'object' and define, classify, and understand it. This is also known as the 'reflexive' ability of an individual (Burke & Stets, 2009). At the heart of this idea lies the relation between identity and 'the self'. The latter is the sum of all identities an individual has in life. This entails that besides having a teacher identity, student teachers also hold other identities (e.g., football player identity, and mother identity). The number of identities individuals possess depends on the number of positions and roles they have in life. The self, which is the consciousness of

the individual, organizes and manages the identities individuals hold. The reflexive ability of an individual makes it possible to question various identities, including his or her teacher identity. Moreover, various triggers can activate a particular identity to function as a basis for interaction. These triggers are manifested in the 'natural' context (e.g., students in the classroom) but also if individuals are physically located outside the 'natural' context of a particular identity (e.g., reflecting about being a teacher with peers during a party). In this vein, questions about teaching and the profession are considered as triggers that can activate the professional identity of student teachers.

Teacher identity, from an identity theory point of view, already exists before a student teacher him/herself exists (Burke & Stets, 2009). This means that student teachers not only construct a teacher identity based on self-generated thoughts, but also based on pre-existing societal notions of what it means to be a teacher. Put another way, forming a teacher identity is the result of engaging in an "ongoing and organized context and learn[ing] about the organization through socialization" (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 34). What this indicates is that during the process of becoming a teacher, student teachers learn what it means to be a teacher through social engagement. Given the importance of social structures, it can be contended that teacher identity is learned through experiences, among others, as a student in the past and experiences during formal teacher training.

Student teachers' teacher identity can be defined as a socially acknowledged and connected *set of meanings* sketching the contours of the professional role of a teacher. From this perspective, each meaning of the set of meanings is a part of what teacher identity entails. Generally, meanings can take on any form (e.g., beliefs, values, and attitudes) as long as they have the potential to influence teachers' actions and emotions.

Since identity theory does not focus on the identity of the teacher in particular, it remains unclear which meanings together form the set of meanings for the identity of the teacher. Therefore, this study sets out to synthesize the literature of quantitative instruments about teacher identity to find a shared set of meanings for teacher identity, which in turn forms the basis for the design of a quantitative instrument for assessing primary student teachers' teacher identity. Such an instrument, on the one hand, can help researchers to explore developmental patterns in teacher identity among primary student teachers and, on the other, may function for teacher educators as a pedagogical tool to provoke discussion with and among student teachers about their professional development.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY TENSIONS

Professional identity tensions is a relatively new construct, therefore much needs to be uncovered theoretically about its nature (Güngör, 2017). Evidently, developing a clear understanding is essential in the process of designing a reliable and valid measurement scale for professional identity tensions. In the past, researchers have compared professional identity tensions with the construct of dissonance, but have minimally explained this comparison (Güngör, 2017). To further clarify and advance this comparison, this dissertation uses the cognitive dissonance theory. This well-developed and substantiated theory might help to highlight the important characteristics of professional identity tensions. A broad range of literature on dissonance theory exists. In this dissertation the pioneering work of Festinger (1957), specifically, is used as a theoretical framework. His groundbreaking work is also used in a vast majority of studies on dissonance (Cooper, 2007; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2007).

Following Festinger's version (1957), dissonance is experienced when two or more related *cognitive elements* are inconsistent with each other. The elements can be "any type of elements" (Festinger, 1957 in Cooper, 2007, p.5), including feelings and attitudes. Furthermore, these elements can be of the same type (e.g., feeling versus feeling) or different form each other (e.g., feeling versus attitude). Experiencing dissonance is assumed to be psychologically uncomfortable (Festinger, 1957). A typical reaction to experiencing dissonance is engaging in cognitive and behavioral activities that handle (e.g., reducing, resolving, and avoiding) the accompanied negative emotions and feelings (Festinger, 1957). The degree of need to handle dissonance, however, is determined by the importance that individuals attach to the dissonance. Environmental variables (e.g., professional demands) in combination with personal characteristics (e.g., agency) guide to what extent individuals evaluate a situation as tensional (Festinger, 1957). In this sense, experiencing a dissonance is a subjective process as it depends on how individuals evaluate the situation that evoked the dissonance.

To this day, no multidimensional quantitative instrument for measuring professional identity tensions, based on the principles of a suitable theoretical framework, such as cognitive dissonance theory, and aimed at understanding the underlying construct, is available. This makes it relatively complex to interpret empirical results and compare them with outcomes of other studies. What is available, is the vignette-based questionnaire designed by Pillen (2013). She is the first to have measured professional identity tensions through vignettes, where each of the thirteen vignettes describes a particular situation that is related to a specific

professional identity tension. By means of a four-point Likert scale, student teachers are asked to evaluate the situations described in the vignettes.

To develop an instrument for measuring the professional identity tensions among primary student teachers, the vignettes of Pillen (2013) are transformed, in this dissertation, into quantitative multi-dimensional Likert-scale items based on the principles of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). In addition, tensions related to teaching in the urban school environment are added to the new measure. This instrument might be used to assess which and to what extent primary student teachers experience particular professional identity tensions. In the context of primary teacher education, this instrument can also be used as a reflective tool to initiate group discussion with and among student teachers regarding their development as a teacher.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY TENSIONS AND TEACHER IDENTITY

Slowly but steadily, enhancing the professional identity of student teachers and teaching them to deal with professional identity tensions is receiving attention by researchers and teacher educators (Güngör, 2017; Schutz et al., 2018). In the majority of the literature it is considered that teaching student teachers to deal with the professional identity tensions they experience in a proper way is an important step in developing a firm teacher identity. Experiencing tensions arouses a mental discomfort and instinctively forces to reduce, resolve or avoid the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). When tensions cannot be resolved or even increase (exponentially), student teachers may experience feelings of insecurity and exhaustion. In time, this might result in dropout during training or shortly after graduation (Pillen, 2013). An example can be derived from Pillen (2013). In her study, one of the beginning teachers interviewed experienced tensions between her relatively young age and maintaining emotional distance to her students. Being unable to resolve this tension in a satisfying way made this student teacher seriously doubt whether she was suitable to become a teacher.

To date, however, no empirical research exist that formally tests whether and how professional identity tensions and teacher identity are related to each other. Testing this link between both constructs can help to gain a better understanding of the presence, strength, and direction of the relationship between professional identity tensions and teacher identity among student teachers over time. For instance, there could be no relation between both constructs at all, there might merely be a reciprocal link, or the longitudinal relationship may in fact be the other way around: Teacher identity may contribute to the way student teachers interpret professional identity tensions. In this vein, there are some studies indicating that

specific teacher identity profiles provoke professional identity tensions (O'Connor, 2008; Pillen, Beijaard, & den Brok, 2013c; Trent, 2011, van der Wal, Oolbekkink-Marchand, Schaap, & Meijer, 2019). Specifically, a handful of researchers suggest that 'strong and stable' teacher identities evoke fewer and less severe professional identity tensions than weak teacher identities (Alsup, 2006). The aim of this dissertation is to contribute to the literature by addressing this relationship explicitly through a longitudinal design among student teachers of primary education.

CURRENT STUDIES IN THIS DISSERTATION

In summary, although many suggest that teacher identity development can be stimulated through professional identity tensions, no study has formally examined the existence of a relationship between the two constructs. Research in this area is still in the phase of understanding the nature of teacher identity and professional identity tensions and developing reliable and valid means to measure these constructs. The studies reported in the following chapters therefore have the purpose of helping the field forward by addressing these issues.

First, a review study identifies what components could collectively form the set of meanings of teacher identity (Chapter II). Previous reviews (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop 2004) have noted that teacher identity is an elusive construct that has been defined in various ways and sometimes not defined at all. Our review study provides an overview of components of teacher identity identified in quantitative measurement instruments and reports on the psychometric quality of these instruments. This is done by analyzing the content—label name and items—of twenty quantitative instruments about teacher identity published between 2000 and 2018.

Second, a measurement scale for assessing primary student teachers' professional identity is developed and validated. Identity theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and the conducted review study of quantitative instruments about teacher identity served as base for the design of this instrument (Chapter III). Although several measurement scales exist, none of them measure teacher identity directly (e.g., Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000; Canrinus, 2011). Consequently, no comprehensive score of teacher identity can be calculated that represents the strength of student teachers' professional identity. The, in this dissertation, newly developed Teacher Identity Measurement Scale (TIMS) aims to remedy this situation.

Third, a measurement scale for assessing primary student teachers' professional identity tensions is constructed and validated (Chapter IV). This is done by transforming the

existing vignettes of Pillen (2013) into multiple items measuring different types of identity tensions along the principles of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). The resulting Professional Identity Tensions Scale (PITS) is the first quantitative multi-dimensional instrument for measuring professional identity tensions in general.

Fourth, the relation between professional identity tensions and teacher identity is examined (Chapter V). The question if and how teacher identity and professional identity tensions are related to each other is not only theoretically important but also practically as courses are designed on the basis of this assumption. Analyzing longitudinal data that has been collected with the two newly developed instruments among primary student teachers, this research attempts to provide some answers to this relation.

Finally, the main findings of these studies are discussed, followed by the implications of these findings for research and practice (Chapter VI).