

Early Influences on Teacher Identity: Perspectives from the USA and Northern Ireland

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Abstract : Teacher identity has been recognised as a crucial field of research which supports understanding of the ways in which teachers navigate the complexities of professional life in order to grow in competence, knowledge and practice. As a field of study, teacher identity is concerned with understanding: how identity is defined; how it develops; how teachers make sense of their emerging identity; and how the act of teaching is mediated through the individual teacher's values, beliefs and sense of professional self. By comparing two particular, socially constructed learning contexts or 'learning milieu', one in Northern Ireland and the other in the United States of America, this study aims specifically, to gain better understanding of how teacher identity develops during the initial phase of teacher education. The comparative approach was adopted on the premise that experiences are constructed through interactive, socio-historical and cultural negotiations with others within particular environments, situations and contexts. As such, whilst the common goal is to 'become' a teacher, the nuances emerging from the different learning milieu highlight variance in discourse, priorities, practice and influence. A qualitative, interpretative research design was employed to understand the world-constructions of the participants through asking open-ended questions, seeking views and perspectives, examining contexts and eventually deducing meaning. Data were collected using semi structured interviews from a purposive sample of student teachers (n14) in either the first or second year of study in their respective institutions. In addition, a sample of teacher educators (n5) responsible for the design, organisation and management of the programmes were also interviewed. Inductive thematic analysis was then conducted, which highlighted issues related to: the participants' personal dispositions, prior learning experiences and motivation; the influence of the teacher education programme on the participants' emerging professional identity; and the extent to which the experiences of working with teachers and pupils in schools in the context of the practicum, challenged and changed perspectives on teaching as a professional activity. The study also highlights the varying degrees of influence exercised by the different roles (tutor, host teacher/mentor, student) within the teacher-learning process across the two contexts. The findings of the study contribute to the understanding of teacher identity development in the early stages of professional learning. By so doing, the research makes a valid contribution to the discourse on initial teacher preparation and can help to better inform teacher educators and policy makers in relation to appropriate strategies, approaches and programmes to support professional learning and positive teacher identity formation.

Keywords : initial teacher education, professional learning, professional growth, teacher identity

Conference Title : ICTLTE 2024 : International Conference on Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : April 04-05, 2024