

Dominant or underrepresented: How social position and program context impact teacher candidates' professional identity formation

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BACKGROUND

Teacher identity is an integration of becoming and being a teacher simultaneously, hopefully culminating in coming to see oneself as a professional and effective teacher. This development is not isolated but shaped by the context of one's teacher education program. Teacher candidates (TCs) bring their individual identities—such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender—into their professional journey, which influences both their personal teacher identity and how they are perceived within the teaching community (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Sachs, 2005). Teacher education programs, whether through coursework or practicum, act as spaces for both learning and unlearning, where TCs are positioned according to their personal and sociocultural backgrounds. TCs must navigate the balance between assuming a culturally scripted professional persona, driven by dominant educational discourses, and maintaining a sense of self, including connections to their own communities.

Underrepresented groups in the teaching profession include low-income families, first-generation immigrants, First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples, people with disabilities, racialized individuals, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities (Airton & Martin, 2022; Falkenberg, 2015; Holden & Kitchen, 2018; Wang & Shulruf, 2013). Unsurprisingly, research with TCs from different communities underrepresented in the profession shows that the impact of teacher education—including coursework, practicum and the relationships developed within them—falls very differently upon those who are not who the profession has come to expect (Bellini, 2012; Chassels, 2010; Russell, 2021; Sokal et al., 2017; Vavrus, 2009). By contrast, Canadian teacher education researchers have pointed out the over-representation of white, female, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender and heterosexual TCs in most programs, thereby making them **the dominant group** (DeLuca, 2015; Holden & Kitchen, 2017, 2018; Solomon et al., 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at a mid-sized, publicly funded university in Ontario, Canada, within a faculty of education that served both primary-junior (K-8) and intermediate-secondary (grades 9-12) teacher candidates (TCs) (N = 11), hereafter referred to as Ontario U. Participants were enrolled in a consecutive teacher education program.

Data collection occurred in three phases over the span of the program, with each TC participating in three semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author. The interviews were held via Zoom, audio-recorded, and lasted between 60-75 minutes. The first interview took place in Term 1, the second at the start of Term 3, and the third at the end of Term 4, allowing for an exploration of how TCs navigated their professional identity development throughout the program.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How do teacher candidates negotiate the process of professional identity formation, or, come to see themselves as 'real teachers' – or not – while learning to teach?

- How is this negotiation affected by various components of their teacher education program, such as coursework, peers, and school practicum?
- How do teacher candidates' identities and social positions affect their evolving sense of professional identity?

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SOCIAL POSITION IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS?

HOW CAN WE ENSURE TEACHER CANDIDATES FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS THRIVE IN OUR PROGRAMS?

WHY ARE PRACTICUMS SUCH HIGH-STAKES EXPERIENCE?

LET'S CHAT!

SAMPLE AND SITE

Given that teacher education programs are designed mainly with a dominant culture TC in mind – a reality that is visible to only those aware of their own non-belonging such as the underrepresented participants in my study – TCs were purposively sampled from two groups:

Group 1: Dominant Group (N=6)

TCs reflecting the prototypical image of a teacher:

- White
- Heterosexual
- Cisgender
- Able-bodied
- Canadian-born, and/or
- Parent who is or has been a teacher or administrator in Canadian public school

Group 2: Underrepresented Group (N=5)

TCs statistically underrepresented in teaching:

- TCs with disabilities
- Immigrant TCs
- Racialized TCs
- 2SLGBTQI+ TCs
- Did not have parents who are teachers or administrators in Canadian public school*

Except 1 TC (Parents were teachers on a reserve in an Indigenous community)

TIMELINE AND TOOLS



FINDINGS

The dominant TCs demonstrated their competence in the d/Discourse of the program through their successful mutual engagement with the program and its different stakeholders. The TCs shared knowing how to navigate the program and their future in the profession from their Term 1 interview to Term 3 interview. Instead, their time in the program ended up reinforcing their already learned and accessed knowledge and skills.

TCs from the underrepresented group identified the dominant d/Discourse of the program based on the feedback and messages they received from the coursework, professors, interactions with Associate Teachers (ATs), TCs, students, etc. Some of the key instances highlighted by the TCs were silence from the professor and TCs when KKK was written on board, lack of accommodation in the program by the program administrators, comments supporting the suitability of teacher education program for TCs without financial constraints, etc.

The dominant TCs self-evaluated their competencies as well as claimed to have established themselves as teachers directly or indirectly through the legitimacy they experienced during their practicum placements: for example, the stamps of approval the TCs received from ATs who claimed the TCs to be 'good teachers' only seven months into the program, being placed on a supply teaching list without completing the program, turning down work opportunities since they were sure of future placements or critiquing a guest speaker or professor for their lack of knowledge of what is applicable and appropriate preparation for classroom practice.

For underrepresented TCs, professional identity formation was a constant negotiation wherein 'teacher identity' was assigned to the underrepresented TCs by others, if at all. The negotiation to become a teacher and successfully be identified as a teacher was driven immensely by external recognition and others' perception and acceptance of them as teachers more than their own. As a result, for some TCs from underrepresented group professional identity was not just a titular qualification but also defined by embodying the image, mannerisms as well as the acceptance as teachers in the classroom by parents, teachers, students, and principals.

PATH FORWARD

Differentiated practicum support: Faculties of education to be more mindful and intuitive in their practicum placement pairings of ATs and TCs. Sharing such a pivotal learning experience with ATs who have navigated the same teacher education programs as well as the profession will provide the TCs with a safe space,

Recognition of Intergenerational (white, etc.) teacher privilege: there is a need to study the impact of parents and family with core membership on the replication of the teacher population. Assess gaps in programs as well as the hidden curriculum that plays a role in the teacher education program's preparedness—or lack thereof—for TCs from underrepresented communities.